

Mythical 291

Chapter 291: A Fortuitous Encounter

"Brother, was that absent-minded fellow just now Chen Zichuan?" Sima Yi asked his elder brother with a frown. "If it weren't for the astonishing spiritual energy he unconsciously exuded, I almost wouldn't have recognized him. He seems somewhat different from when we last saw him."

"Indeed, that was Chen Zichuan. Compared to the last time we saw him, it seems he was deep in thought today, his attention elsewhere," Sima Lang nodded. The Chen Xi they had previously seen, brimming with confidence and wisdom, seemed much less sharp today.

"I didn't expect that merely inquiring with our Sima family's merchants in Fenggao would lead us straight to Fan Liang's residence. Father's cultivation of these people has been quite effective," Sima Yi said calmly, trusting in the abilities of his family's servants. His father, Sima Fang, had long laid the groundwork for the family's survival by spreading influence through merchants across the land.

"Yes," Sima Lang agreed with a nod. "Let's meet with Master Fan, and then we should be able to borrow books from the library."

"That would be the safest approach," Sima Yi nodded, fully endorsing his brother's plan.

"Please deliver this to Master Fan and inform him that Sima Boda and Sima Zhongda of the Sima family from Henei have come to visit," Sima Lang said with a smile as he handed over a visiting card to the doorman. His spiritual talent subtly influenced the doorman, fostering a sense of trust.

"Please wait a moment, young master," the doorman responded respectfully, bowing to Sima Lang. Unlike the indifferent treatment typically shown to scholars seeking official positions, the doorman's attitude was notably polite as he quickly went to inform Fan Liang.

Fan Liang looked at the visiting card, feeling puzzled. The Fan family had little interaction with the Sima family, although he had met Sima Lang a few years ago and had been addressed as "Uncle," partly due to his connection with Chen Xi.

"Invite them into the guest hall. I'll change my clothes," Fan Liang instructed the old butler, signaling that the Sima brothers were to be treated with due respect. Sima Lang was not like the other scholars seeking official positions. After all, his father, Sima Fang, held a high-ranking position and had connections across the land. There was no need for Sima Lang to come here for favors, so there was no concern about causing trouble for Chen Xi.

The old butler personally welcomed the Sima brothers inside. "Please wait here, young masters. The master will be with you shortly." After instructing the maids to serve tea and refreshments, the butler withdrew respectfully.

"Haha, Boda, it's been a long time since we last met in Luoyang. How time flies! How is your father?" Fan Liang greeted them warmly as he entered, noting the aura of prosperity surrounding the two brothers.

"Greetings, Uncle. My father is in good health," Sima Lang said as he and Sima Yi rose to salute. Without elaborating further, he simply conveyed that his father was well, subtly implying that all else was unimportant. "My younger brother, Zhongda, has been engrossed in his studies at home, so I brought him out to travel and broaden his horizons. Passing through Taishan, we heard of your daughter's upcoming wedding and came to join the celebration. This is my younger brother, Zhongda. He may seem a bit reserved, so please don't take offense."

"Please, have a seat. Since you call me Uncle, I gladly accept it. I imagine you're not here just for my daughter's wedding, but rather for the Chen family's feast. After all, your Sima family and the Chen family share a common ancestry, and it's only natural for you to visit when passing through," Fan Liang said with a smile, understanding Sima Lang's explanation.

In Fan Liang's view, the Sima brothers had likely come upon hearing that Chen Xi was from the Chen family of Yingchuan, and as distant relatives, they had come to pay their respects. After all, the Fan family and the Sima family didn't have much of a connection, but the Chen family of Yingchuan and the Sima family of Henei had close ties, as their ancestors were from the same clan.

In the world of noble families, distant relations were not a problem, but lack of any connection was. Years ago, when Sima Yi's grandfather, Sima Jun, was appointed as an official in Yingchuan, he found it difficult to manage due to the many prominent families there. However, after discovering a shared ancestor in the Chen family's genealogy, their relationship improved. Since then, the ties between the Chen and Sima families had strengthened, leading to frequent exchanges between the two clans.

This was why Fan Liang found it unsurprising that Sima Lang had come to attend the wedding. It was customary for noble families traveling through unfamiliar lands to visit their relatives, and it was expected that they would be hosted with meals and hospitality.

Sima Lang and Sima Yi instantly understood that Chen Xi was indeed a legitimate descendant of the Chen family from Yingchuan. Despite any family disputes, Fan Liang's words confirmed that the Chen family shrine was located in Yingchuan, making everything else logical.

"Uncle, please forgive us. My brother and I heard that Chen Zichuan is a member of the Chen family from Yingchuan, but we haven't seen him within the clan before. At the very least, we should have some impression of our peers," Sima Lang said with a wry smile. "So, we came here to confirm it with you first. If we were wrong, Longwen would never let us live it down."

"Hahaha, don't worry. Zichuan is indeed from the Chen family of Yingchuan. Although there have been some disagreements with the main clan, distant relatives like yourselves shouldn't face any issues," Fan Liang laughed. He understood the situation well, knowing that family disputes were common among noble families. The ancestors of the Sima brothers, such as Sima Rangju, had successfully split off from the Chen family.

In noble families, splitting off from the main branch was acceptable, as long as it was done successfully. If not, it would simply be seen as a failure.

"With that assurance, we won't disturb you any longer, Uncle," Sima Lang said, now confident that they could blend in at Chen Xi's feast without attracting attention. As long as they didn't stand out, they would be safe.

"Hahaha, wait a moment. Let me give you each a pass. Fannu, bring me two of the borrowing permits that Zichuan gave me," Fan Liang instructed the butler. "I don't have much to offer, so I'll treat you with Zichuan's resources instead. Please don't be modest. The library in Fenggao contains some remarkable works. Since you're on a journey, don't neglect your studies."

Sima Lang and Sima Yi exchanged a glance, then bowed to Fan Liang. "Thank you, Uncle. We've long wished to enter the Fenggao library but had no means of doing so. Today, we finally achieve our goal."

Chapter 292: A Wild Encounter with Fate

In Jingzhou, Pang Tong was feeling frustrated after learning that Zhuge Liang had declined to become his uncle's disciple. Without saying a word, he packed his bags and prepared to leave Jingzhou. He casually packed the so-called "ten thousand volumes of wisdom" that Pang Degong had intended to teach him, which amounted to just a couple of hundred pages of books.

In short, Pang Tong was determined to compete with Zhuge Liang to the very end. No matter what, he wanted to see who would come out on top. He had heard that Zhuge Liang had already understood his own talent, while Pang Tong was still unclear about his own. Naturally, this left him dissatisfied. Zhuge Liang, who was two years younger than him, had already awakened his talent, which deeply hurt the pride of Pang Tong, who had always considered himself superior.

Now, Pang Tong found himself staring at a Daoist priest. Although he had encountered mountain bandits and thieves after leaving Jingzhou, a strategist with over ninety intelligence points naturally had some means of self-defense. After traveling and learning basic spiritual attack techniques, dealing with common ruffians wasn't a problem. However, this time, he had come across a rather unusual person.

"Interesting, very interesting," the Daoist circled Pang Tong, inspecting him from head to toe with curiosity. "How strange. Why is it that when I look at you, I see my own death? This is quite amusing."

"Why do you say that, sir? You appear to be in excellent health—how could death be near?" Pang Tong responded with a cheeky grin. After all, it was never wise to offend a Daoist in the wild, and Pang Tong knew this well.

"I didn't say it was today. I'm just saying that I see my death in your presence. Quite strange, really. I always thought I'd live long enough to become an immortal, yet here you are, and my death is near." The Daoist, Zixu Shangren, continued circling Pang Tong.

"Young man, you're heading to Xuzhou, aren't you? Although it's strange that I see my death when I look at you, I'm actually happy to see a different future. I'm in a good mood today. Tell me, what do you want to learn? What do you want to know? I can help you out. But don't go to Xuzhou—if you do, you might not make it back." After circling Pang Tong a few more times, Zixu stopped in front of him and stroked his beard.

"Hmm?" Pang Tong hesitated. Whether or not this old man actually had the ability to see the future, anyone who could foresee their own death and still be happy about it was definitely not normal. Pang Tong's eyes gleamed with thought. "I, Pang Tong, ask you, sir, to tell me about my spiritual talent," he said, spreading out his immense spiritual energy with a look of pride.

Instantly, Zixu saw countless possible futures collapsing and reviving, until the entire future became a chaotic mess. His eyes lit up with excitement. Years ago, he had seen several possible futures in Li Ru and had guided him as a result. But this young man was even more extraordinary. Even when Pang Tong restrained his spiritual power, different futures emerged. When he fully unleashed it, the future vanished entirely!

No future— or rather, a future shrouded in chaos. This meant that this young man standing before him was one of the creators of future events. The direction of the future would be heavily influenced by this young man's choices. As such, nothing in his future was certain—everything was for him to shape.

"Hahaha! Your name is Pang Tong? Good, very good," Zixu laughed as he rapidly calculated Pang Tong's abilities, his talent working furiously. After a long while, Zixu looked at Pang Tong. "Young man, you are the most talented, most potential-filled strategist I've ever encountered. You may very well be the most talented and promising strategist in the world. You don't have a spiritual talent that resembles magic or divine power like others do, but you possess a foundational strength far beyond theirs!"

Under Zixu's explanation, Pang Tong quickly understood his spiritual talent. If Zhuge Liang's talent allowed him to activate the spiritual talents of all his allies, then Pang Tong's talent allowed him to absorb and accumulate the attributes of all his enemies!

Perhaps the degree of accumulation wasn't high, and as his intelligence increased, each enemy strategist would add fewer attributes to Pang Tong. But even so, it meant that for every strategist added to the battlefield, Pang Tong's attributes would grow stronger. Every point above 100 in attributes was a qualitative leap, while for his opponents, it was only a quantitative change. Pang Tong's attributes, however, would undergo qualitative transformations...

In simple terms, if Zhuge Liang specialized in skill-based strategies, Pang Tong directly focused on attribute enhancements. He abandoned all skills for pure overpowering strength! After all, if his raw strength outmatched his opponents' skills, then skills didn't matter.

Because of this, Pang Tong wasn't afraid of strong opponents. Even if he faced a dozen Sima Yi's, he could absorb their attributes and add them to his own. Once his spiritual energy maintained these attributes, even Sima Yi's talent couldn't counter Pang Tong's overwhelming strength. A fully powered Pang Tong would certainly make Sima Yi realize the true might of his enemy!

In summary, Pang Tong's ability thrived on strong opponents— the stronger they were, the stronger he would become. And if his enemies were weak, he could easily crush them. The only enemies Pang Tong despised were those who were neither weak nor strong enough to provide him with attributes worth absorbing.

Unfortunately, when he later faced Zhang Ren during his campaign in Shu, Zhang Ren was just strong enough to disrupt Pang Tong's usual overconfidence. Accustomed to dominating weaker minds and thinking that failing to absorb attributes meant his opponents were weak, Pang Tong underestimated Zhang Ren and paid the price.

Looking back at his encounters with Cao Cao and Zhou Yu compared to his encounter with Zhang Ren, it was clear that Pang Tong excelled when facing top strategists. But with Zhang Ren, Pang Tong had clearly misjudged his opponent, assuming he was a pushover.

Pang Tong quickly realized that his talent was best suited for facing numerous enemies or for turning the tide in battles where he was outnumbered. Compared to Zhuge Liang's spiritual talent, his own was not inferior, and in some areas, it even surpassed Zhuge Liang's. Although Pang Tong had some doubts about how Zixu had deduced this, he decided it would be worth testing out in the future.

"Thank you, sir, for your guidance," Pang Tong said, grateful regardless of whether the information was accurate or not. After all, the old man's words made sense. When Pang Tong had activated his talent and set Zhuge Liang as his rival, he had felt his own thought processes suddenly sharpen.

Pang Tong's mind raced. He knew he was talented, but whether he liked it or not, it seemed he was still slightly behind Zhuge Liang. That meant he could extract a lot of attributes from Zhuge Liang...

From that moment on, Pang Tong resolved to become both a rival and a companion to Zhuge Liang. As long as he could gain attributes from Zhuge Liang, he was confident that he would no longer fear him.

Pang Tong had no idea that in history, he had indeed encountered Zixu, forming a connection with him. However, the Zixu in that world had not been as ruthless.

Even more unknown to Pang Tong was that in history, it was due to this connection with Zixu that, when Pang Tong later entered Shu, Zixu sensed destiny drawing near and began giving strange advice to Zhang

Ren and Deng Xian. Zhang Ren's sudden enlightenment led him to eliminate Pang Tong, and the rest was history.

Zixu successfully removed a major player of great destiny but was subsequently backlashed by fate. A few days later, Zhuge Liang arrived with a massive army, and Zixu, already weakened by the backlash, was ultimately caught in the ensuing conflict and perished alongside Pang Tong. This fateful connection was, indeed, strange beyond words...

Chapter 293: A Letter from Cao Cao Arrives in Xuzhou

After Zixu's explanation, Pang Tong finally understood his spiritual talent. Although he could gain boosts from his opponents, there were physiological limits to human abilities, meaning it wasn't truly possible to infinitely stack enhancements.

"So, what exactly is the extent of this ability?" Pang Tong now found this Daoist quite agreeable—he answered every question, though his mind seemed a bit off. But then again, Daoists aren't like normal people.

"Let me put it this way: your current intelligence and thought processes are already approaching the human limit." Zixu stroked his beard as if remembering something. He then pulled out a book from his robe, noticing the strange look Pang Tong gave him. "This is a book I 'borrowed' from the Qingzhou Library. It's said to be based on Chen Zichuan's lectures on arithmetic, and it includes a method of quantification."

Perhaps unsettled by Pang Tong's gaze, Zixu handed over the book. He almost got caught by Zuo Ci when he took it.

It's worth mentioning that Zixu and Zuo Ci, though both following the Dao, were not the same type of people. Zixu had no interest in seizing earthly power like Yu Ji; he was merely curious about whether he could alter the future.

That's why Zixu had been searching for individuals capable of creating alternate futures. When he encountered Li Ru previously, he noticed that Li Ru's future had become more complex, which pleased him. After all, if Li Ru could avoid his death, it showed that fate was not set in stone. Zixu was satisfied with this outcome.

If someone destined to die could alter their fate, it proved that destiny was not fixed. A future filled with chaos had value in being shaped; if everything was predetermined, Zixu figured he might as well live a life of complacency.

Because of this, Zixu didn't fear death. What he cared about was the results of his research. In the Qingzhou Library, he came across the concept of "science," and he found that it matched well with his pursuits!

Now, Zixu had replaced his old motto, "Heaven's Mandate," with "For Science!" To him, Pang Tong was a valuable research subject. Whether he lived or died was secondary; as long as he achieved his research goals, it was worth it. Life had become dull, but science was an exciting endeavor...

"So, if I'm already at the limit, doesn't that make my talent useless?" Pang Tong put away the book and grumbled with a sour expression.

"Listen carefully, and you'll understand. Let's quantify it: ninety-nine is the human limit. You're probably around ninety-seven. A hundred is the threshold between human and divine. Your physical limits might allow you to bear around a hundred or so, but how much exactly is uncertain. Generally, the higher your base, the more you can handle, but a twenty percent increase might be the maximum," Zixu said, showcasing the arithmetic knowledge he had recently acquired.

"Oh, I see." Pang Tong nodded, indicating he understood.

"However, pushing that twenty percent limit would be a heavy burden on you. Let's put it this way: at your level, a ten percent increase in power would already give you the upper hand in a one-on-two fight, and you could even hold your own against three opponents in the short term," Zixu warned. He didn't want Pang Tong to push his limits to the extreme, as that would place too much strain on him. To Zixu, Pang Tong was too exceptional to face situations that would require a one-on-three fight.

Zixu was completely unaware that in this era, powerful strategists were no longer rare. It wouldn't be surprising if Pang Tong had to face five opponents at once! Well, considering Pang Tong's rather unfortunate appearance, perhaps such a scenario wasn't too far-fetched...

Thinking back, it seemed that Chen Gong also had a rough time. Based on Zixu's calculations, if the physiological limit was a twenty percent increase, then with his ninety-two or ninety-three intelligence, Chen Gong must have been pushing his limits in those infamous battles. He likely forced his intelligence to around a hundred and ten to barely fend off the collective onslaught of Cao Cao's strategists, depleting all his resources in the process.

In retrospect, it was a testament to the strength of Cao Cao's advisors. Had Chen Gong faced anyone else, he might have successfully turned the tide single-handedly. At that time, only Cao Cao's faction had such a formidable group of strategists. If this had happened under Yuan Shao, even Yuan Shao might not have been able to withstand it. Sometimes, picking the wrong opponent is a tragedy.

"Thank you, sir. May I ask your name? I, Pang Tong, will find a way to repay your kindness someday," Pang Tong said sincerely. He now felt a certain fondness for Zixu. After all, he had just left home and already encountered someone who helped him solve his problems.

"Hahaha, there's no need for that. If we're fated to meet again, we will. Pang Shiyuan, do what you need to do—I have high hopes for you." Zixu laughed heartily and patted Pang Tong on the shoulder. Then, in a display of showmanship, he transformed into a swirl of purple petals and gradually disappeared, leaving only a parting phrase echoing in the air: "Pang Shiyuan, follow your path!"

Pang Tong stared blankly at the spot where Zixu had vanished. Had he just encountered a real immortal? Then he thought about Zixu's eccentric nature. "Sir, come back—I need to learn that trick!" he shouted.

On the other side, Zixu, having just reformed his physical form, almost stumbled when he heard Pang Tong's distant call. This kid...

Casually shedding his purple robe—it was too attention-grabbing—Zixu resumed his wandering. He continued his quest to find individuals capable of altering destiny. His research must go on. Nan Hua believed in power, Zhang Jiao in himself, Zuo Ci in the Dao, Yu Ji in fortune, and Nan Hua, who had once believed in fate, now thought perhaps he should believe in science...

In Xu Province's Langya Commandery, Cao Song, holding the letter his eldest son had sent, couldn't help but feel a wave of emotion. He glanced over at his second son, a sense of pride welling up within him.

Back then, Cao Song had favored his second son, Cao De, over his eldest, Cao Cao, who was short and unattractive. But now, Cao Cao had defeated Yuan Shu and established himself as a major power in the Central Plains, ruling over a vast territory with tens of thousands of soldiers. Whether Cao Song had favored him in the past or not, his son had become a formidable warlord.

Looking at his beloved second son, now a great scholar, Cao Song felt even more satisfaction. Although Cao De wasn't skilled in warfare, he was handsome and excelled in education. Thanks to him, the children of the Cao and Xiahou families were united, and there was no question of brotherly strife!

It was unfortunate that Cao De's death had been such a significant loss for Cao Cao. Cao De had been a great scholar in his lifetime, but more importantly, he had been a unifying force for the children of the two families, fostering a deep bond that endured even after his death.

Cao De's guidance had helped forge the brotherhood between cousins like Cao Ren, Xiahou Dun, Xiahou Yuan, Cao Hong, Cao Chun, and Cao Xiu. While Cao De may not have been responsible for their talents, he had undoubtedly solidified the familial ties that held them together around Cao Cao. One need only look at the infighting that plagued the Cao family later on to understand how important Cao De had been—his death had truly been a tragedy.

With one son ensuring the family's prosperity and another ensuring its unity, Cao Song felt immensely satisfied. Now, he was prepared to take out his savings to help strengthen his son's position.

Money, after all, had little meaning if it wasn't put to use. Now that the brothers were united, Cao Song was confident that the Cao and Xiahou families would not fall into decline. With that assurance, Cao Song was eager to fully support his son!

Chapter 294: This Is Fate!

Cao Song was immensely wealthy. According to historical records, he spent a fortune—over a hundred million coins—just to buy the position of one of the Three Excellencies. Typically, one could earn back the cost of such a purchase within three months by taking advantage of the position, but Cao Song wasn't too aggressive about it. Within a year, he had recouped his investment, and in the years that followed, he easily made tens of millions more.

In short, Cao Song decided to pack up everything and set off with over a hundred carts filled with money, grain, and other supplies. Naturally, this slowed down his journey significantly, making it unlikely that he would reach Yanzhou, Chenliu within a month or two.

"Zixiu, Anmin, you two should take your younger brothers and go on ahead. I'm sure Mengde and the others are eager to see you. Your uncles and I will follow slowly with the supplies." A convoy of over a hundred carts wasn't easy to manage, and the journey had been dragging on for days. After traveling for more than ten days without even reaching Donghai, the younger generation of the Cao family had grown restless. Understanding this, Cao Song decided to send them on ahead with a group of guards.

"Yes, Grandfather!" Cao Ang responded excitedly, and soon, he, Cao Pi, and their younger cousins, including Xiahou Shang and the others, rode off with three hundred cavalry guards, leaving the convoy behind.

"Little Bazi, why didn't you go with them?" Cao Song asked curiously when he noticed that ten-year-old Xiahou Ba had stayed behind. Unlike his brothers and cousins, Xiahou Ba had chosen not to leave.

"Grandfather, you gave most of the guards to my brothers. Don't you need guards yourself?" Xiahou Ba shook his head. Despite his young age, he had already shown signs of being far more capable than his older brother Xiahou De and cousin Xiahou Mao. As the talented son of Xiahou Yuan, Xiahou Ba was already demonstrating great promise.

"Hahaha, Little Bazi, don't worry. Nothing will happen to me here in Xuzhou. Your uncle is a hero who defeated Yuan Shu, and Xuzhou is a prosperous region. There won't be many bandits or thieves around. Once we reach Donghai Commandery, as long as Tao Gongzu isn't a fool, he'll definitely send troops to escort me to Yanzhou. If anything happens to us here in his territory, your uncle won't let him off easily." Cao Song laughed heartily, his confidence evident.

"Oh, I see." Xiahou Ba scratched his head, still not entirely sure, but reassured that his elders wouldn't be in danger.

"Now, Little Bazi, do you want to stay with your grandfather, or go catch up with your brothers and cousins?" Cao Song asked, clearly fond of Xiahou Ba.

"Hmm..." Xiahou Ba hesitated, looking a bit embarrassed.

"Go on, go on. You'll feel restricted staying with us." Seeing Xiahou Ba's expression, Cao Song understood and had a horse brought over. He also sent a dozen guards to accompany Xiahou Ba as he rode off to catch up with his brothers and cousins.

It was this decision by Cao Song to send away the younger members of the family that would ultimately save many of the Cao clan's bloodline. Otherwise...

Meanwhile, Zhuge Liang and Zhuge Jin used the connections left behind by their father, who had once served as an official in Taishan, to make their way to Li You. It didn't take long for Zhuge Jin to impress with his talents, and soon both brothers found themselves in the Taishan Library.

"Zhuge, my young friend, would you be interested in serving here in Fenggao?" Li You was quite pleased with the capable young scholar Zhuge Jin. As for whether he was a bit too young—barely in his late teens—Li You wasn't concerned. After all, Fa Zheng had been put to work when he was only sixteen, thanks to the efforts of Guo Jia, Jia Xu, and Chen Xi. If a young man was talented, Li You had no qualms about bringing him on board.

"Sigh, I feel that I am too dull to achieve great things. I don't deserve such praise from you, sir," Zhuge Jin replied earnestly, with such sincerity that even Li You believed him. Thus, he didn't press further but instead encouraged Zhuge Jin to return to Fenggao after completing his studies. He emphasized that Fenggao was a good place to be.

In other words, although Li You admired Zhuge Jin, he could tell that the young man had a desire to live as a recluse, so he didn't push too hard. Additionally, Li You's mind was busy with work, and he wanted to get back to his tasks, which led him to miss some of the subtleties of Zhuge Jin's words. In the end, Zhuge Jin successfully dodged further recruitment efforts.

Had Li You known that Zhuge Jin possessed a spiritual talent, he wouldn't have cared about whether the young man wanted to be a recluse or not. He would have ensured Zhuge Jin stayed—either by convincing him or by force, if necessary.

Thanks to the spark of inspiration Zhuge Jin had provided, Li You found his own wisdom heightened. He started noticing details he had previously overlooked, making his work even smoother.

When Sima Lang and Sima Yi entered the library through the proper channels, they found Zhuge Jin and Zhuge Liang already browsing the shelves.

"Brother Boda, Brother Zhongda, you're here too," Zhuge Jin greeted them with a smile.

"Ziyu, since you arrived earlier, have you found any books of interest?" Sima Lang replied with a smile so warm that even Zhuge Liang could feel its sincerity.

"Brother Boda, using your spiritual talent to win people over isn't a good thing," Zhuge Jin huffed, realizing what was behind Sima Lang's warmth.

"All right, all right," Sima Lang replied, retracting his spiritual influence, though still smiling. "Have you found anything that catches your eye?"

"Move, move! Don't block the way!" A voice called out.

"Dare I ask—" Sima Lang began.

Faced with Sima Lang's friendly demeanor, even the previously feisty Cai Er became a bit shy. "I am Yang Cai of the Cai family, a manager here. These books are new military texts and miscellaneous strategies."

"May we take a look at them?" Sima Lang politely asked, bowing slightly. Meanwhile, Zhuge Jin kept a careful eye on Cai Er. Earlier, when he had been browsing, he noticed that the library contained mostly classic texts. The real military and strategic books were in Cai Yan's possession and required her approval to borrow.

"Um..." Cai Er hesitated, considering that these were not particularly important books. "Well, you can take one quickly, but don't let my sister catch you."

Zhuce Jin quietly followed Sima Lang and picked a book from the pile. Of course, he didn't forget to express his gratitude. "Brother Boda, your spiritual talent is truly impressive."

Sima Lang smirked but didn't say much. He led his younger brother to a quiet spot, not expecting too much from the books he had acquired—after all, Cai Er wasn't someone with access to highly valuable texts. But, at the end of the day, a book is a book, and it's better to have something to read than nothing.

Interestingly, the books Cai Er had with her were actually the result of Chen Xi's random musings, based on future theories. In this era, a text of ten thousand words could be considered a book, and Chen Xi could easily dictate a hundred thousand words in a day, with Fan Jian taking notes. It gave Fan Jian something to do, and after a bit of editing, each lecture became a book filled with wisdom...

Given that two thousand years of accumulated wisdom could be casually sprinkled into his talks, some of the ideas in these books were indeed startling. But in reality, Chen Xi had been half-joking when he produced them. The books were full of contradictions, and he couldn't be bothered to revise them. They were meant to inspire the people of this era, not to be masterpieces of literature.

Chapter 295: The Prosperity of the Literary Path Is Coming

Sima Yi and Sima Lang sat down with their books to read. As they started, both frowned. The books they were used to reading were concise and profound, carefully crafted due to the laborious nature of writing on bamboo slips. Every word was precious, and the authors rarely added unnecessary details. Any ambiguity was left to the reader's interpretation, which often led to different schools of thought and interpretations, sometimes causing debates and even splits.

Chen Xi, however, wouldn't allow such things to happen. And now that books weren't being written on bamboo slips anymore, there was no need to be so concise. As a result, these books were filled with what they perceived as unnecessary content, much to the dismay of the Sima brothers. Zhuge Liang and Zhuge Jin, who were reading nearby, were similarly displeased. They weren't familiar with the concept of "filler," but if they were, they'd certainly be outraged at how much "fluff" these books contained. They'd probably curse the author for diluting the content and wonder if the author had "watered down" the books to make them this way.

Despite their discomfort, all four of them were book lovers and forced themselves to finish reading the books. In the end, they came to a consensus: the books were quite good, but the author had deliberately added too much filler, which made them frustrating to read. It was easy to miss the important points if you didn't read carefully.

"Opposition and unity," Sima Yi murmured to himself. The concepts he had learned from this book could be summed up in this one phrase.

"All things follow a pattern of logic," Zhuge Liang said, closing his book with a look of awe. "Once you grasp the underlying patterns, everything becomes simpler."

"Thick and thin, black and white, opposites yet unified," Sima Lang echoed, feeling as though something was missing but deeply moved nonetheless.

"The internal and external, direct and indirect, essential and non-essential, necessity and chance, all these various connections," Zhuge Jin sighed as he closed his book. "This library truly lives up to its reputation as a national treasure."

The four didn't bother reading any more books. They needed time to process the shocking revelations they had just encountered. They knew the content of these books was profound and genuine, far beyond the wisdom of the books they had read before. Aside from the unnecessary filler, there was nothing wrong with the material. However, they suspected that the reason these books were deemed "less important" was precisely because of the filler. It seemed that great talent sometimes went hand in hand with eccentricity.

"Kongming, what do you think?" Sima Yi asked, turning to Zhuge Liang, who was still deep in thought.

"Stripping away the filler, the book I read encompasses everything I've ever studied," Zhuge Liang replied with admiration. "What about yours?"

"Mine is the same. I admire the author who wrote such a book, even if he sometimes adds irrelevant content," Sima Yi said with a wry smile. "I wonder whose private collection this came from."

"You four seem to have finished your reading. I'll be taking those books now," Cai Er announced cheerfully as she approached them. "These books can't be taken out of the library. Do you want to copy them?"

"No need, I've already memorized it," Sima Lang replied, bowing slightly in gratitude. He understood that without Cai Er's help, they wouldn't have had the opportunity to read such valuable works.

"..." Cai Er was momentarily stunned. She had always envied her elder sister's photographic memory, and now four people with the same ability had appeared before her.

"By the way, Cai Er, you mentioned these books are only of moderate quality. Could we possibly see the higher-quality ones?" Sima Lang inquired, instantly capturing the attention of the other three. If what they had just read was considered mediocre, they were eager to find out what the top-tier books contained.

"Oh, the higher-quality ones? Didn't you notice all the filler in these books? If you remove that, what you're left with is the higher-quality content. It's all Chen Zichuan's fault—he said authors get paid by the word, so the books have become bloated like this," Cai Er grumbled in frustration.

Actually, this was just something Chen Xi had mentioned offhand—paying authors based on word count for the books they produced.

Lately, Fan Jian had been busy recording books for Chen Xi, and as a result, she didn't have much time to edit. This led to an abundance of filler in the books, which hadn't been streamlined into concise, profound statements. To Cai Er, it seemed like the author had lost his mind and was trying to scam people.

That was why Cai Er's admiration for the author had diminished significantly. Though she acknowledged that the material was excellent, even with the added fluff, the stark contrast between the concise books she had previously read and these watered-down versions made her feel like she was being cheated.

"So, this was written by someone alive today?" Sima Lang asked, shocked.

"Yeah, by someone who has no sense of integrity anymore. If they had just written properly, they would've gained the admiration of many. But instead, they had to pad their books with nonsense, forcing me to go back and edit them into something respectable," Cai Er complained bitterly.

Sima Lang was left speechless. A person of such talent was struggling for money? Just by reading this one book, he could tell the author was a true genius!

"Who knows? Maybe the person just loves money," Cai Er replied dismissively. Her admiration for the author had completely turned into disdain for the unnecessary filler.

"Cai Er, could you tell me where this person lives?" Sima Lang asked respectfully. Meeting such a remarkable individual would be the regret of a lifetime if he missed the chance.

"I don't know where he lives. No one in Fenggao does. And who knows how he even gets his money," Cai Er responded, clearly frustrated by the mystery surrounding the author. As a devoted admirer, she felt powerless.

Seeing Cai Er's expression, Sima Lang realized she wasn't lying. This person was indeed a recluse, someone who didn't want to be found.

"Sigh, to think I might never meet such a great person," Sima Lang lamented. The other three nodded in agreement, sharing his regret.

"Enough with the sighing. The library is about to close. If you stay here any longer, the city guards will come to chase you out. My sister can summon five squads of them at any time," Cai Er warned them.

"Thank you, Cai Er," the four of them said in unison as they bowed. "We'll leave now."

Once outside the main entrance, Sima Lang struck up a conversation with Zhuge Liang. Before long, they reached an agreement: they would each transcribe the books they had read and exchange them to further expand their knowledge.

"Zhongda, what do you think of Taishan?" Sima Lang asked.

"It's a treasure, but not suitable for me. I need to travel the world and find my true lord. Liu Xuande is not the one for me," Sima Yi sighed. "Such a pity about these books. I bet you're feeling the same way, brother."

"Indeed, Liu Xuande is truly blessed by fortune," Sima Lang sighed, glancing back at the library. "With such treasures here, the flourishing of the literary path is near!"

Chapter 296: The Luxury-Loving Liu Xuande

As the sun set, a carriage escorted by nearly a hundred soldiers, carrying numerous carts of gifts, entered Fenggao.

Inside the carriage, Ju Shou opened the window to gaze at the tall city walls of Fenggao, the stone-paved streets, the bustling thoroughfares, and the thriving businesses. He compared it to the scenes he remembered from his time in Luoyang. Fenggao now had the air of an imperial capital, something that left Ju Shou with a deep sigh.

Ju Shou couldn't help but compare Fenggao with his own proud domain, Bohai, and in the end, he could only sigh with resignation.

"Ju Gong of Jizhou, I am Hua Zijian, here on orders to greet you," Hua Xiong announced, leading a squad of elite soldiers and bowing to Ju Shou's carriage.

"General Hua, your courtesy is too much," Ju Shou replied, stepping out of the carriage and returning Hua Xiong's bow. "I am honored to be received by such a distinguished general."

"Ju Gong is too kind," Hua Xiong replied, gesturing with a hand for Ju Shou to proceed.

As they rode together, Ju Shou took in the prosperous surroundings and casually began probing for information. "Fenggao is indeed flourishing. I wonder, is there some secret to this prosperity? As fellow citizens of the Han, shouldn't all lands be equally fortunate, instead of some prospering while others suffer?"

Hua Xiong, though not the sharpest, could sense something was off about Ju Shou's question. "That's something for the strategists to handle. We martial men can only follow orders. Among us, perhaps only Zilong could truly understand such matters. The rest of us simply do as we're told," Hua Xiong replied straightforwardly, giving a nod to Zhao Yun, a man he felt too exceptional to be jealous of.

"Zhao Zilong?" Ju Shou stroked his beard thoughtfully. "He's known as one of the finest generals in the land. I've heard he's been working as a colonel in charge of agricultural settlements. I wonder when he'll lead cavalry across the battlefield. The White Horse Volunteers are renowned for their skill."

Hua Xiong felt that Ju Shou's words carried hidden meanings, but with his limited wit, he couldn't grasp the subtleties. Feeling a bit irritated, he shot Ju Shou a glance.

“Hahaha, no need to be so serious, General,” Ju Shou laughed, shifting his focus to the scenes around him. He had come with the intent of forming an alliance with Liu Bei, but both sides knew it was merely a pretense. A clash between them was inevitable.

As they approached Liu Bei's residence, Ju Shou noticed squads of twenty City Guards marching by, carrying large shields and exuding auras of experience. This immediately caught Ju Shou's attention. As a former strategist who had seen battle, he knew what such soldiers represented. He saw ten such patrols on the way to Liu Bei's residence, all of them equipped and trained to the same high standard. This made Ju Shou realize just how formidable Liu Bei's forces were and how seriously he took his own protection.

When they finally reached Liu Bei's residence, the sight of it in the setting sun left Ju Shou speechless. He stood at the gate, stunned, unable to move.

“Ju Gong, please enter!” Hua Xiong called out, his heart secretly laughing. He knew Chen Xi had specifically instructed him to bring visiting strategists and officials to Liu Bei's new residence to shock them. After all, even the generals were stunned when they first saw it.

“This... this is Liu Xuande's residence?” Ju Shou asked in disbelief as he gazed at the grand structure before him.

“Yes, our lord had this residence built. Lady Zhen estimates it cost around a billion coins, and that's not even counting the interior decorations, which probably far exceed that amount. I have no idea what our lord was thinking,” Hua Xiong grumbled, though the words were fed to him by Chen Xi.

Ju Shou was overwhelmed by the opulence of the building. He had heard tales of Liu Bei's residence being as splendid as a heavenly palace but had dismissed them as exaggerations. Now, seeing it in person, he finally understood. So much for being a man of benevolence and virtue—how many commoners could have been saved with all that money!

As Ju Shou stepped inside, he was immediately greeted by the rich aroma of wine. The scent was so strong it seemed to permeate the very ground.

“What’s that smell?” Ju Shou asked curiously.

“Our lord loves wine, but he’s vowed not to drink too much. Afraid he won’t be able to resist temptation, he buys top-quality aged wine and pours it out in the courtyard, ensuring he can always smell it without drinking it,” Hua Xiong explained, his tone filled with disdain. “All that fine, century-old wine, just wasted!”

The intoxicating aroma made it impossible for Ju Shou to doubt the explanation. The scent clearly belonged to the finest wine, and it had been poured out just to satisfy such a ridiculous whim. A ruler who couldn’t even control his own desires—how could he be a great leader? Ju Shou silently added another mark against Liu Bei in his mind.

Seeing such extravagance firsthand, Ju Shou couldn’t help but begin viewing everything through a lens of skepticism. His initial perception that Liu Bei was a man of lavish tastes had taken root, and from there, everything else seemed to fit.

“Ju Gong, it seems our lord is busy. Why don’t we head inside?” Hua Xiong suggested as they reached the main door, still without a sign of Liu Bei. He wore a wry smile, seemingly helpless.

Ju Shou marked yet another strike against Liu Bei as he noticed the lavish white carpet beneath his feet—though it seemed far larger than any bear skin he’d ever seen.

“What is this?” Ju Shou asked, puzzled.

“It’s a carpet. Our lord finds the ground too cold in winter, so he ordered all the wool from this year’s sheep shearing to be collected and used to create this single rug. It’s incredibly soft and warm. They say it took the wool of tens of thousands of sheep to make it,” Hua Xiong sighed. “I hear this carpet alone required the wool from over ten thousand sheep.”

“Ten thousand?” Ju Shou was shocked. “How could that be possible?”

"Why not ask any merchant involved in wool production? See if I'm exaggerating or understating," Hua Xiong retorted.

In truth, this carpet was indeed made from the wool of over ten thousand sheep, but for Chen Xi, it was a profitless venture. Since wool was scarce and not particularly valuable to other merchants, Chen Xi simply intercepted it during the spinning process, creating a luxury item at no cost to him.

Ju Shou made a mental note to verify this information later, then nodded and continued following Hua Xiong inside. Whether it was his imagination or not, Ju Shou felt lighter and warmer just walking on the carpet.

Chapter 297: Following the Ancestors' Footsteps

Sitting across from Li You, Liu Bei looked at the advisor, dressed in a green silk robe, and asked with a troubled expression, "Wenru, do we really need to do this?"

"Among the three great failings, being without descendants is the greatest. While Lady Gan is virtuous and modest, prudent and dignified, she remains childless. I urge you, Xuande, to consider this carefully," Li You advised with a smile. "The back chambers are empty. Please, Xuande, fill them with a few more companions."

"But isn't it a bit too blatant to let other lords' ministers know about this?" Liu Bei said, half amused, half exasperated.

"Food and sex are human nature. These are important matters of propriety. How can this be improper? Moreover, for the sake of the people under heaven, Xuande, you need to do this," Li You countered, pulling out his trump card. Liu Bei found it hard to argue against the phrase "for the sake of all under heaven."

Seeing that Liu Bei was wavering, Li You pressed further, "By exchanging momentary personal honor for the early stability of the people under heaven, and gaining beautiful women in the process, Xuande, it's not a loss for you. Don't hesitate."

Liu Bei smiled wryly. He simply couldn't out-argue Li You and could only nod in agreement. "Since that's the case, I leave it to you, Wenru. But if possible, please leave me some dignity."

"Of course, of course," Li You replied with a warm smile. He knew that as long as it was for Liu Bei's good, even if Liu Bei got angry later, it would only be a minor issue that would blow over in a few days.

"Master, please wait. I will go and welcome Ju Gong on your behalf," Li You said with a smile. From this point on, every step had to be taken carefully. If they played their cards right, Ju Shou might notice Liu Bei's apparent shortcomings and report back to Yuan Shao, causing Yuan to underestimate Liu Bei. While delivering a fatal blow to Yuan Shao was wishful thinking, at the very least, it would buy Liu Bei more time to develop, minimizing the damage to the northern fertile lands when the time for battle came.

"Li Wenru of Mount Tai greets Ju Gong of Jizhou. Lord Xuande invites you in, while General Hua is asked to remain outside," Li You said with a tone of a close servant to the emperor, addressing Ju Shou and Hua Xiong.

Ju Shou smiled and returned the greeting with a bow, already making some guesses about Li You's status. Someone who could speak to Hua Xiong, one of Liu Bei's top generals, in such a manner had to be a favored minister—and an extremely favored one at that.

Hua Xiong was initially taken aback by Li You's orders, but since it was Li You, he said nothing more and simply turned around to leave.

Ju Shou noted Hua Xiong's brief hesitation and inferred even more from it. Clearly, Li You's status was higher than Hua Xiong's, and Hua Xiong had expected to be allowed inside but was stopped by Li You without protest. This was getting interesting.

What Ju Shou didn't know was that Li You held a special place in Hua Xiong's eyes. Aside from Liu Bei, Li You was the only person who could speak to Hua Xiong in such a commanding tone. And unlike Liu Bei's broad acceptance of orders, Li You's commands were ones Hua Xiong would rationalize into reason, no matter how unreasonable they initially seemed. Hence, this wasn't Chen Xi deceiving people, but rather Li You being genuine—deceiving Ju Shou in the process.

"Li Wenru of Mount Tai, I have long heard of your name," Ju Shou greeted with a deep bow.

"Hahaha, receiving such praise from Ju Gong is an honor I hardly deserve!" Li You replied, though in practice, he accepted Ju Shou's bow with an air of satisfaction, internally cursing as he did so.

Ju Shou, always a cautious man, noted how many things had begun to suggest that Liu Bei was not the benevolent ruler the rumors painted him to be, nor was Mount Tai as harmonious as it was said to be. Yet, as a strategist, he knew he had to remain careful.

"Lord Xuande, Ju Gong of Jizhou and long-serving official of Yuan Benchu has arrived," Li You announced as he led Ju Shou through a door, revealing Liu Bei sitting behind a large crystal table, using a crystal teapot and cups to brew tea. The sight made Ju Shou's heart skip a beat!

Seeing Liu Bei casually handling the luxurious items, Ju Shou could tell this wasn't an act—it was a sign that Liu Bei had grown accustomed to such extravagance. Ju Shou began to think that his previous fears of Liu Bei had been unnecessary. The man playing with that teapot had clearly fallen into a life of luxury, losing his ambition in the process.

Li You, observing Liu Bei's actions, was pleased. At first, Liu Bei had been hesitant to touch the tea set Chen Xi had prepared. But after accidentally breaking a few pieces during a tea session with Chen Xi, Liu Bei had become indifferent. When one treats precious items with indifference, it exudes a certain carefree aura, and to Ju Shou, it seemed like Liu Bei had grown too used to a life of comfort.

"Ju Gong of Jizhou greets Lord Xuande," Ju Shou said, suddenly snapping out of his daze and bowing hastily to Liu Bei. "I was so mesmerized by the sight of such rare treasures that I lost myself for a moment. Please forgive my rudeness, Lord Xuande."

"Hahaha, Ju Gong, what do you think of my residence?" Liu Bei asked with a laugh.

"It is supremely luxurious, unmatched by anything in this world," Ju Shou replied truthfully. "It seems as though it was crafted by the heavens. May I ask how much it cost to build?"

"Hahaha, just a trifle," Liu Bei laughed heartily before adding, "But despite having such a grand residence, I have no heirs. As a descendant of King Jing of Zhongshan, I find my rear chambers empty. Building such a magnificent palace has brought shame to my ancestors!"

Ju Shou immediately understood Liu Bei's implication. What was King Jing of Zhongshan known for? Liu Sheng, a man who fathered 120 sons—a legendary figure of extraordinary fertility, someone who enjoyed music and beauty day and night. Liu Bei was clearly a reflection of his ancestor! The bloodline ran true!

This time, Ju Shou had no doubts. This wasn't something one would say lightly in front of an external minister. Once word got out, Liu Bei's reputation as a lover of indulgence would be set in stone. But if Liu Bei was merely following in the footsteps of his ancestors, what could be said?

Ju Shou, smiling, promised Liu Bei that when he returned to Jizhou, he would ask Yuan Shao to send some beauties over to Liu Bei to solidify the bond between their two households. Liu Bei eagerly agreed to Ju Shou's proposal for a truce and the return of Le Ling and other territories, expressing disdain for Gongsun Zan, who had intended to kill his clan brother—such actions were unforgivable.

Indeed, when Liu Bei learned that Gongsun Zan had planned to execute Liu Yu, he had harbored resentment toward Gongsun Zan. After all, Liu Yu had been a great help to Liu Bei, and they were of the same clan.

Back when Liu Bei submitted a petition, Liu Yu had lent his support, which made Liu Bei think that Gongsun Zan had gone too far. However, despite his anger, Liu Bei hadn't cut off the grain supplies to Gongsun Zan.

Since Liu Yu hadn't been killed, only frightened, Liu Bei had penned a letter full of grievances, hoping to make Gongsun Zan see reason. As for the outcome, it was clear to Li You and the others that Gongsun Zan had only become more extreme.

After finalizing the alliance, Li You escorted Ju Shou out and instructed the City Guard to take him to the inn in Fenggao. Turning back, Li You prepared to console Liu Bei. After all, Liu Bei had just made a fool of himself today. Although Liu Bei did have a taste for luxury and enjoyed pastimes like dog racing and cockfighting, he had never intended to emulate his ancestors in every way! So this "following the ancestors' footsteps" business felt rather embarrassing to Liu Bei.

Chapter 298: Reputation and Virtue, Others Will Write Them for You!

After Ju Shou left, Li You entered the room again and couldn't help but give Liu Bei a thumbs-up. "Xuande, I can guarantee that this time, Ju Gong will be thoroughly confused by our deception!"

"My good reputation is ruined. I'll be labeled as someone who indulges in women," Liu Bei said with a look of frustration. "Without reputation, how can I attract talented people?"

"Xuande, you need not worry. The ancient Guan Zhong once said that pursuing dominance has nothing to do with indulgence or entertainment," Li You replied with a smile, dismissing the concern that Liu Bei's reputation for indulging in women would cause any real trouble.

Seeing Liu Bei's continued troubled expression, Li You's face grew serious. "Words are often false, and only personal experience can be trusted. Wise people don't comment on things they're not proficient in, nor do they make judgments without solid evidence. If someone believes in baseless rumors, such a person would not and could not cause us any trouble."

"But my reputation, which I've worked so hard to build, is now gone. I'm afraid that no noble families will want to join us anymore. Every noble clan cherishes its reputation, and with this reputation, none of them will look up to me, Liu Xuande," Liu Bei said with a bitter smile. He wasn't just worried about losing his reputation—he feared losing talent.

"It's as if there have been many noble families joining us all along," Li You retorted. "Xuande, let me ask you this: from the time we first established Mount Tai until now, how many noble families have truly joined us?"

"Well, there are a few," Liu Bei replied awkwardly.

"And how many of them are capable of holding down a territory on their own?" Li You pressed on.

"None," Liu Bei hesitated before answering.

"Then what is there to regret? The very best strategists may be hard to cultivate, but with some effort, we can produce batches of those just a step below them. As for noble families, those with true vision won't care about their lord's private virtues," Li You stated firmly, looking directly at Liu Bei.

Liu Bei was silent. His power had grown significantly, yet not a single prominent noble family had come to serve him. This made Liu Bei wonder if there was something wrong with him. Having come from a

humble background, Liu Bei had always yearned for the recognition of the powerful families he once admired. Even now, despite surpassing them, he still longed for their acknowledgment.

"Xuande, noble families are nothing more than fair-weather friends. Defeat Yuan Shao, secure the North, and set your sights on the Central Plains. With control over the two major horse-producing regions and the three largest grain-producing areas in the North, our strength will be enough to command respect from the entire world. At that point, reputation and virtue won't matter. Our strength alone will bring all the noble families to their knees before you! Reputation and virtue—others will write those for you!" Li You passionately urged.

"Secure the North, set our sights on the Central Plains, command respect from the world, and make the noble families kneel..." Liu Bei repeated Li You's words, his eyes initially dazed, but gradually growing determined. "This was the strategy Zichuan set out from the very beginning, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was our initial strategy," Li You confirmed with a nod. "Back then, it might have seemed like a fantasy, but now, the opportunity to implement it has arrived. Zichuan has always thought several steps ahead, guiding the course of history to where we are today. Now, as we draw closer to the final phase of the strategy, we must be more cautious than ever!"

"Can we really defeat Yuan Shao? We haven't fully secured Qingzhou yet, and the eastern part of the province is still desolate. I'm afraid Gongsun Bogui won't hold out for two more years. Can we really build up the strength to fight Yuan Shao in such a short time?" Liu Bei was no fool; he had gradually come to understand Chen Xi's overall strategy.

"We can! We will succeed," Li You said solemnly. "All of us have been preparing for this moment. That's why Chen Xi has been working to subdue the Zhen family. That's why he's been feeding the entire economy of Jizhou to them. When the time comes, as long as we can take Jizhou's capital, the Zhen family will have the strength to suppress any internal dissent within Jizhou!"

"The Zhen family and the Yuan family are already irreconcilable. There's a deep rift between the Zhen family and the other noble families in Jizhou. With the chance to become the top family in Jizhou and secure their legacy as a 'from-dragon' clan, the Zhen family won't pass it up. Internal conflicts, external pressures, and past grievances will force the Zhen family to act. They won't have any other choice," Li You explained. Chen Xi had always planned to play one group against another.

"So that's the plan," Liu Bei finally understood everything. He could now predict Yuan Shao's troop deployments. With Jizhou, Youzhou, and Bingzhou in mind, once Jizhou was taken and the connection between Youzhou and Bingzhou severed, Yuan Benchu would be as good as a fish on a cutting board!

Most importantly, there wouldn't be any need to station troops in occupied territories, and taxes could continue to be collected. The Zhen family's influence would stabilize Jizhou, and most importantly, Zhen Jiang was a woman...

Liu Bei fully grasped the intricate planning behind Chen Xi's actions. The importance of Zhen Jiang's role made sense now. No wonder Chen Xi had been so insistent on subduing the Zhen family, constantly asking Liu Bei if he had feelings for Zhen Jiang, and emphasizing her noble status as a suitable primary wife. The reason was all too clear.

"Even if Zhen Jiang is indeed beautiful, with an elegant and noble bearing, given the responsibilities she'll take on, I suppose I'd have to marry her even if she wasn't, right?" Liu Bei remarked with a wry smile. Only by marrying Zhen Jiang could Liu Bei truly secure control over Jizhou. And only by doing so would all the noble families in the North feel assured enough to submit to him.

"Exactly. At that point, Zichuan will rebuild the Chen family and, as the head of one of the top five noble families in the country, use his position to suppress the others. The status of the main family and the branch families is determined by power. When the time comes, Zichuan will have enough strength to claim the position of the main family head. This will cause hesitation among the noble families, and those with marriage ties will see their future secured under your rule!" Li You no longer cared about the noble families; according to Chen Xi's plan, they would all eventually return to dust. So why rush?

For the first time, Liu Bei heard Chen Xi's strategy in full detail. Even he was struck by its feasibility. Liu Bei sighed, stood up, and bowed deeply to Li You. "You and the others have worked so hard for me. Truly, I am foolish. Please continue to guide me, Wenru. Zichuan has never liked being tied down, yet for my sake, he has taken on the burden of dealing with all these noble families."

"I am unworthy," Li You replied, stunned by Liu Bei's bow, his expression showing slight emotion. "Xuande, as your senior advisor, it is my duty to fill in the gaps. I will continue to do so in the future."

"Thank you," Liu Bei said as he slowly sat back down. "A ruler's private virtue does not affect his ambitions. From today onward, I, Liu Xuande, will follow my ancestor's example: enjoy music by day and the beauty of song and dance by night, until the noble families are brought to their knees!"

Chapter 299: Ju Shou's Thoughts

In truth, Li You and the others were well aware that if they truly provided Liu Bei with a life of indulgence and luxury, he wouldn't be able to handle it for long. The purpose of this extravagant mansion was to give emissaries from other lords a misleading impression. Combined with Li You's carefully crafted narrative, it would create a preconceived notion about Liu Bei.

Once these emissaries returned to their own lords, Liu Bei could act as he pleased. With the current rudimentary intelligence methods, Chen Xi could easily ensure that every intelligence report from rival lords painted Liu Bei as someone who indulged in luxury.

Of course, women were just accessories. There was no shortage of beautiful women in Qingzhou and Taishan. If Liu Bei wanted, he could easily gather a large number of them, and they would even be delivered to him by others, including Chen Xi. However, although Liu Bei had an appreciation for beauty, he had not added many women to his household. Most were there for aesthetic purposes, and the only one he truly favored was Lady Gan. The rest were little more than maidservants.

This created a conflict of opinion. Chen Xi didn't see any problem with Liu Bei's behavior, but everyone else thought it was an issue. For a powerful faction, relying on a single leader wasn't enough; there needed to be a capable heir. Even if the heir wasn't extraordinary, there had to be one. This was vital for maintaining the strength of a faction.

Therefore, when Li You spoke earlier, it wasn't just to mislead Ju Shou. He was genuinely trying to help Liu Bei by encouraging him to expand his household. Although it seemed a bit underhanded, it was sincerely intended to strengthen Liu Bei's position.

Of course, they wouldn't actually let Liu Bei indulge to the point of ruin. Not only would Chen Xi be unwilling, but they were also concerned about spoiling him. History had shown that such indulgence could weaken even the strongest leaders. For instance, Sun Quan used luxury and women to essentially keep Liu Bei captive in Eastern Wu, causing Liu Bei to lose the desire to leave. This method of pampering could truly ruin a person if taken too far.

The next day, Liu Bei continued his fast, and Li You specifically invited Ju Shou to join Liu Bei in this religious observance. This was a genuine fast, and it left Ju Shou somewhat surprised, prompting him to reassess Liu Bei's character. After all, Liu Bei was a formidable leader who had built his power from scratch. Despite his love for luxury and women, he hadn't forgotten the hardships of his earlier struggles.

Ju Shou participated in the incense burning and prayers with Liu Bei, but his mind was focused on how to win over Li You and find ways to weaken Liu Bei. He wasn't concerned with the sincerity of the ritual, as it wasn't a sacrifice for their soldiers, so he didn't feel the need to be devout.

Meanwhile, Li You observed Ju Shou, fully aware of his intentions. He pretended to pray devoutly, all the while ensuring that Ju Shou sensed a sense of urgency. Li You wanted Ju Shou to believe that Liu Bei still held onto the discipline and resolve from his early days but was slowly being pulled toward decadence, held back only by Chen Xi's presence. Li You portrayed himself as the sycophant encouraging Liu Bei's descent into indulgence.

After finishing his prayers, Li You secretly glanced at Ju Shou, who had opened his eyes. Li You then gave Ju Shou a greedy look, as if he were eyeing a fat sheep, before quickly turning away and waiting for Liu Bei and Ju Shou to finish.

Ju Shou wasn't devout, so after muttering a few half-hearted prayers, he opened his eyes and noticed that Li You had finished long before him. This led Ju Shou to assume that Li You had also skipped parts of the ritual, confirming his belief that Li You was not a devout man and likely a schemer under Liu Bei.

Li You, seeing Ju Shou had finished, gave a slightly embarrassed smile. He then stood up quietly from the soft lamb wool rug and silently retreated from the hall.

Ju Shou, following Li You's lead, rose quietly and exited the main hall, where he found Li You sitting and waiting for him in a chair.

As Ju Shou approached, Li You smiled warmly and said, "Ju Gong, please have a seat." He gestured for Ju Shou to sit. "Try this tea. It's top-quality from the Chen family."

Ju Shou, not being particularly knowledgeable about such things, offered the customary compliment. After taking a sip, he put the cup down and said, "I noticed you left the hall so quietly, Wenru. Was there something you wanted to discuss with me?"

"Forgive me, Ju Gong. There are too many ears inside, and I feared being overheard. Only this spacious hall is suitable for conversation. Ju Gong, you've spent a day here in Taishan. What is your impression of Chen Zichuan?" Li You asked cautiously, glancing around to ensure no one was eavesdropping.

"Brilliant beyond compare, perhaps unmatched in our time," Ju Shou replied, carefully watching Li You's eyes. When he saw the hint of disdain in Li You's gaze, Ju Shou felt reassured.

Li You quickly concealed his disdain and continued, "Ju Gong, I fear you haven't spoken your full thoughts. Regardless of Chen Zichuan's brilliance, the true master of Qingzhou and Taishan should be Liu Xuande, no?"

Ju Shou remained silent as Li You continued, "Chen Zichuan holds all administrative power in Qingzhou and Taishan. Sometimes, Xuande himself must seek Chen Zichuan's approval before making decisions. Is this the behavior of a mere minister? Moreover, Chen Zichuan has built alliances with several generals. I fear he may have ill intentions toward Xuande."

Ju Shou inwardly scoffed. After hearing Li You's words, he was convinced that Li You was nothing more than a despicable schemer. But such a schemer could be incredibly valuable to him. What he needed was division within Taishan—anything that would cause discord between Liu Bei and his advisors. After all, the strongest fortresses were always the ones that crumbled from within.

If he could transplant Taishan's renowned strategists and generals to his side in Jizhou, Ju Shou believed that peace in the realm would be within reach. Chen Zichuan's capabilities were evident in the prosperity of Fenggao, the harmony in Taishan, and the strength of its military. If he could lure figures like Lu Zijing, Liu Ziyang, Guan Yunchang, and Zhao Zilong to Jizhou, the Yuan family's dominance would be assured!

Chapter 300: Tao Gongzu's Thoughts

Ju Shou and Li You had a pleasant conversation, though both had ulterior motives. Ju Shou aimed to sow discord within Taishan, weakening this powerful force that threatened Yuan Shao, while Li You intended to calculate every move carefully to buy more time for Qingzhou to develop.

After seeing Ju Shou off, Li You returned to the hall, which was already filled with people, including Chen Xi and Wang Xiu.

"Li Wenru, you really made me the scapegoat, didn't you?" Chen Xi grumbled as soon as Li You walked in.

"You're the best at drawing fire. If you don't step up, who will?" Li You replied nonchalantly. "But it worked out well. Xuande's performance was spot on—showing both the grit and ambition of a rising lord while also revealing the internal conflict of a man from humble beginnings suddenly thrust into luxury, yet hesitant to indulge for fear of alienating his subordinates."

"You're just stringing people along," Liu Ye chuckled. "But I must say, it worked. You really played into their expectations. But let me ask you something, Chen Xi—how much did this mansion actually cost? You know, the one with the ridiculously expensive rugs?"

"The cost is real, I assure you. The best way to deceive someone is with the truth. Only genuine items can truly fool people," Chen Xi responded casually. He knew someone would ask about the extravagant rug.

Everyone present, including Liu Ye, Lu Su, and Sun Qian, grimaced at the thought. Tens of thousands of sheep's wool just for a single rug? That's an unimaginable expense, especially considering how valuable a single black sheep's pelt was in those days.

"Alright, alright. Chen Xi was just messing with you. It didn't actually take tens of thousands of sheep. It's just wool from that many sheep, and only the finest down. Other than being rare, it's not that valuable," Li Ru explained with a laugh, trying to ease the tension.

"Yes, it's made from the finest down of tens of thousands of sheep, but if we didn't need such a soft and dense rug, a few hundred sheep would suffice. Plus, they'll grow it back next year," Chen Xi added with a smile. "It's really not that expensive."

"It's just the initial shock that gets to you," Fa Zheng laughed. "I was pretty stunned when I first heard it too. Real, high-quality wool from tens of thousands of sheep... quite the shock."

Everyone laughed heartily at that, feeling more at ease with the idea of luxury.

"Tomorrow is the sacrificial ceremony for our fallen heroes. Are you all prepared? I expect many eyes will be on us. After all, Cao Mengde and Yuan Benchu are still allies, and they will certainly share information. We must be careful not to reveal our plans to Cao Mengde's side," Chen Xi said seriously.

"Xuande shows the tenacity and talent of someone who built an empire from nothing, but also the tendencies of someone from humble beginnings who suddenly finds himself in luxury and is concerned about the opinions of others. This contradiction in his character is what allowed us to deceive Ju Gongyu so effectively," Li You sighed. "The truth is always easier to believe than pure fabrication."

"Kung Beihai likely won't make it in time. We should discuss how to handle him after we fully absorb Qingzhou," Lu Su, ever the workaholic, quickly turned the conversation back to political matters.

"He's a grand scholar. Why not have him write books? We have many annotated versions of the Analects. Let him compile a definitive edition for the Kong family," Liu Ye suggested. After fully incorporating Qingzhou, there would be no place for someone like Kong Rong, who was more about reputation than actual governance. Keeping him around just to fill a seat would no longer be acceptable.

"What about Xuzhou? Our relationship with Tao Gongzu has already soured, especially after the whole mess with Yuan Shu," Lu Su said with a hint of frustration.

Although Liu Bei had never explicitly stated that he would join the Shumeng alliance, those who had supported him the most, like Gongsun Zan and Tao Qian, were members. Now, Liu Bei had toppled Yuan Shu, the leader of the Shumeng, making Tao Qian uneasy.

"Power attracts power. Tao Gongzu doesn't need to be a concern. His body is weakening, and his energy is waning. If he continues to face challenges, he won't have long left. His son is too weak to succeed him," Jia Xu said calmly. "This issue of heirs is indeed a serious problem."

At this, everyone except Chen Xi sighed in unison.

"I wonder when our lord will have a son," Lu Su sighed, then looked at Fa Zheng and added, "If he could be as smart as Fa Xiaozhi, that would be ideal."

Everyone, except Chen Xi, sighed again as they looked at Fa Zheng, who wore a smug expression.

"What are you all sighing about? There aren't that many geniuses in this world. Most people are average, like me—easily replaceable," Chen Xi said, looking at everyone with disdain before sharing his thoughts.

The room fell silent as everyone stared at Chen Xi. After a long pause, someone spoke up. "Since you claim to be of average talent and easily replaceable, perhaps you should take on the responsibility of raising our sons, ensuring they reach at least your level."

Everyone present burst into laughter, looking at Chen Xi with *schadenfreude*. Let's see you talk your way out of this one, they seemed to say. If you can produce another person as capable as yourself, we'll believe you.

"Congratulations, Chen Xi. Best of luck," they teased, clearly enjoying his predicament. Becoming Liu Bei's son's tutor would indeed be an honor, but turning that child into someone as extraordinary as Chen Xi? That was a tall order.

"Can I take back what I said?" Chen Xi muttered. While he believed he could mass-produce talented individuals, this era didn't have the conditions to support that kind of outcome.

"A gentleman's word!" Liu Bei laughed.

"A horse with a whip!" everyone chimed in together.

"Don't worry, Chen Xi. We'll all be here to supervise," Lu Su added with a smile.

Meanwhile, in Xuzhou, Tao Gongzu had been uneasy ever since Liu Bei had marched from Yuzhou and dealt a heavy blow to Yuan Shu. Though he felt conflicted, he didn't have the energy to deal with these matters anymore. His primary concern now was finding a strong protector for his son, lest the influential families in Xuzhou ruin him. After years of governing Xuzhou, Tao Qian understood the nature of these local elites all too well.

In Tan City, Tao Qian looked over the latest intelligence reports. Compared to the now-weakening Shumeng alliance, Tao Qian saw more promise in the rising Shaomeng alliance. Naturally, this brought Cao Cao into his view. Though he had been wary of Cao Cao before, he now saw him as a potential ally, especially since his main goal was securing his sons' future. As long as the person he allied with was powerful and capable, that was enough.

This is why Tao Qian was considering currying favor with Cao Song, using the wealth of Xuzhou as a bargaining chip to ensure his sons' safety. Liu Bei, on the other hand, made him uneasy. Years of political experience had taught him that sometimes, what's taken by force is valued more than what's given.

Everyone knew Xuzhou was wealthy, and Tao Qian intended to use that wealth to lure both Cao Cao and Liu Bei. Whoever could best ensure his sons' future would inherit Xuzhou. As for Yuan Shu, who Tao Qian had once considered an ally, he had been reduced to a mere afterthought—anyone could step on him now.