

Mythical 301

Chapter 301: The Compassionate Hearts of Parents

Cao Song was momentarily stunned as he listened to Tao Qian's words. He wondered if his ears were deceiving him. Tao Qian's words clearly indicated that he wanted to find a successor for Xuzhou, and from his perspective, his son Cao Cao seemed like a good candidate. He hoped that Cao Cao would govern Xuzhou well and treat the people kindly, while also taking care of his two sons.

Cao Song felt like his eldest son was truly destined for greatness, much like Emperor Guangwu of Han. Even before reaching Xuzhou, someone was already offering him territory, and not just any territory, but one of the most important grain-producing regions in the land. All that was asked in return was that he take care of Tao Qian's sons and ensure the Tao family line continued. This wasn't just a windfall; it was like a mountain of gold had fallen into their lap.

With control over most of Yanzhou, Yingchuan in Yuzhou, Nanyang, and now possibly Xuzhou, Cao Song saw that if these territories were consolidated, the Cao family was on the path to immense power.

When a noble family reaches its pinnacle, nine times out of ten, they set their sights on the ultimate position. Previously, the Cao family might not have had that qualification, but when Cao Cao gained control of a province, Cao Song started having aspirations. Now, with Tao Qian subtly hinting at handing over Xuzhou, Cao Song's thoughts shifted from aspirations to concrete ambitions.

"I wouldn't dare assume such a position," Cao Song responded cautiously. Although he sensed Tao Qian's sincerity, he knew that rushing into such an agreement could backfire. Even if Tao Qian was sincere, acting too hastily could destabilize the region, causing resistance from the local power holders. Such a scenario would be laughable if it occurred.

"Rest assured, Ju Gao. I, Tao Gongzu, am deeply aware of my declining years and diminishing energy. I can no longer bear the responsibilities of a provincial governor. Even if you don't help recommend a worthy successor, I fear I won't be able to continue for long," Tao Qian said, coughing twice, a faint flush appearing on his face.

"Please don't worry, Gongzu. When the time comes, I will certainly join you in recommending a wise and capable successor to ensure the safety of Xuzhou and the peace of the Tao family," Cao Song replied, not immediately agreeing to take over. He knew that taking things slowly would allow for greater benefits, even though the current offer was already very generous.

Hearing Cao Song's promise, Tao Qian felt more at ease and sighed. "Cao Bao, bring my two sons here to meet Ju Gao."

Soon, Tao Qian's two sons were brought over by Cao Bao. They bowed to Cao Song, one of them boisterous, the other shy and timid. "Nephews greet Uncle Cao."

Tao Qian waved his hand, signaling for Cao Bao to take his sons away. With a bitter smile, he turned to Cao Song and said, "Ju Gao, you must find this laughable. My two sons are not fit for leadership. Otherwise, I wouldn't need to go to such lengths. Even now, in my old age, I must find a path for them. Ju Gao, for the sake of our acquaintance, please help them in the future. Don't let my sons be cast out into the streets."

"That would never happen!" Cao Song declared righteously. "For the sake of that 'Uncle' they called me, as long as I, Cao Ju Gao, live, your sons will never suffer. Furthermore, my eldest son is a kind and filial man. When my time comes, I will surely instruct him to treat your sons as his own brothers!"

Cao Song had made up his mind. He even made a vow, for this was about securing the Cao family's legacy. If acquiring Xuzhou meant ensuring the Cao family's rise to power, Cao Song believed it was worth the promise.

"Thank you so much, Ju Gao. I am deeply grateful," Tao Qian said, stepping back and bowing deeply to Cao Song. As a father, this was the most he could do for his sons. Given his status, Tao Qian normally wouldn't need to bow so deeply to anyone, but for the sake of his sons, he did so.

Cao Song was startled. "Gongzu, please rise! You mustn't do this!"

Cao Song hurriedly stood up and helped Tao Qian to his feet. Although they had both been kneeling and drinking together, this deep bow from Tao Qian left Cao Song deeply shocked. Any doubts he might have had about Tao Qian's sincerity were now dispelled. Clearly, Tao Qian was willing to go to great lengths for his sons.

"The compassion of parents is truly touching," Cao Song said, grasping Tao Qian's arms and helping him up. "Gongzu, I, Cao Ju Gao, swear that if my family does indeed take over Xuzhou, I will treat your sons

as my own. Your descendants will be like the Cao family's own. As long as the Cao family has food, the Tao family will not go hungry!"

Cao Song's words were simple, but they were exactly what Tao Qian needed to hear. Tao Qian wanted nothing more than Cao Song's promise. Only with that vow could Tao Qian feel secure in handing over his greatest asset.

"Ju Gao, you're too kind..." Tao Qian wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. After years of struggle, Tao Qian realized that everything he had done was for his descendants. Upon seeing his sons, who only knew how to indulge in food and play, Tao Qian gave up any ambition for conquest. Instead, he focused on finding a reliable protector for them.

"Ah, we do everything for our descendants. I understand that all too well at my age," Cao Song sighed. "Our life's work is all for the sake of our children. When we see our descendants stray from the path, it breaks our hearts, but we still have to plan for them. Until you've become a parent, you don't understand how hard it is."

Tao Qian nodded, deeply moved. "Ju Gao, let's drink away our sorrows together."

With the assurance that his sons would be taken care of, Tao Qian drank freely with Cao Song. For years, his declining health had forced him to give up his favorite indulgence—wine. But now that he had secured his sons' future, he could drink without worry. Even if he passed away, he knew someone would take care of his sons.

Cao Song, on the other hand, was overjoyed that Xuzhou was practically in his grasp. The future prosperity of the Cao family seemed assured, and the thought of his descendants enjoying endless wealth and honor made him eager to share his happiness.

Thus, the two old men, both concerned for their descendants, drank until they were thoroughly drunk and didn't wake up until the next morning.

"Ju Gao, safe travels. I await your return," Tao Qian said, bowing as he stood at the city gate, seeing Cao Song off.

"Hahaha, Gongzu, this is farewell for now. I will return, and if I cannot, my eldest son will come in my place. You can rest assured," Cao Song laughed as he spoke, unaware that his words would prove prophetic.

"When that day comes, we'll share another drink. Cao Bao, escort Ju Gao on his journey," Tao Qian said, instructing his general, Cao Bao.

"Understood!" Cao Bao led his officers and over a thousand soldiers to escort Cao Song. After traveling thirty miles, Cao Bao left his subordinate Zhang Kai with five hundred soldiers to continue the escort, then slowly withdrew.

"Thank you for the escort, General Cao!" Cao Song said, bowing to Cao Bao from atop his horse.

"Zhang Kai, make sure you protect Lord Cao well!" Cao Bao shouted his instructions.

"From here on, we rely on you, General," Cao Song said to Zhang Kai with a smile.

"Please guide me in the future, Lord Cao," Zhang Kai replied with a bow.

Chapter 302: Idealists and Realists

Cao Song had no idea that his departure would lead him down a path of no return, and that his son would lose the opportunity to take control of Xuzhou in the near future.

At the same time, Liu Bei and his followers began the official ceremony of worship. Led by Liu Bei, they entered through the eastern gate and made their way towards the Jingling Hall.

This time, the people of Taishan abandoned their usual casual demeanor. Dressed in black hemp robes, they followed Liu Bei slowly towards the Jingling Hall. Naturally, Li You was among them.

Ju Shou observed the group closely, noting that Li You, who walked closely behind Liu Bei, did not fully integrate with the others. This observation eased some of Ju Shou's concerns.

None of the others, including Chen Xi, paid much attention to Ju Shou at that moment. The ceremony was significant, and Liu Bei's performance would leave a lasting impression on Ju Shou. As a self-made ruler, Liu Bei's charisma was crucial, and everyone was eager to see what Liu Bei would say and what promises he would make.

Ju Shou watched as Liu Bei slowly approached the altar in front of the Jingling Hall. His presence grew more imposing with each step, transforming from the hesitant Liu Bei who sought beauty but was too shy to ask into the true leader that Ju Shou had envisioned.

"Light the incense!" Zuo Ci commanded as Liu Bei crossed the threshold, instructing his disciple. After the sacrificial offerings were arranged, Zuo Ci handed the incense to Liu Bei. "Please offer the incense, Lord Xuande."

With a calm expression, Liu Bei placed the incense in the censer and looked up at the towering memorial stone. After a moment of contemplation, he stood up, and the civil and military officials followed suit, placing their incense into the censer.

The scene was silent and solemn. Soldiers clad in armor inserted incense sticks into the censers outside the altar. The only sounds were the faint clinks of armor, and the atmosphere grew heavy with reverence. Even Ju Shou, who had been indifferent earlier, was affected by the atmosphere, his expression becoming more serious. Observing from a distance, Zhuge Liang and others also gazed solemnly at the massive black stele, while even Sima Yi, who had previously scoffed at the ceremony, fell silent, his attention fixed on the stone.

"The world is in turmoil, and the Han Dynasty is in decline. As a member of the Han imperial family, I, Liu Xuande, vow to safeguard the Han Dynasty and bring peace to the land. Soldiers are the instruments of expansion and defense, the foundation of the nation. The stability of the Han Dynasty and the prosperity of the nation are ensured by your protection. The peace of the realm and the strength of the people depend on your efforts!" Liu Bei declared, bowing deeply towards the great stele before turning to bow to all the soldiers below the altar.

At Liu Bei's bow, the entire assembly of soldiers knelt in unison.

"I, Liu Xuande, will keep my word. The deceased shall enjoy their honor, and the living shall receive their due. Anyone who dares to deprive the living of their rights or tarnish the honor of the dead shall be punished by death! Every year, at this time, as long as I live, I will hold this ceremony. If I am not here, I will still perform the rites. For the brave men who have shed their last drop of blood for the Han family, I

will not allow their families to be mistreated! Heaven and earth bear witness to what I have said today!" Liu Bei spoke calmly, resolved to overcome any difficulties that might arise.

"May everyone under my rule have shelter, medical care, work, and rewards for their labor. May the young be educated and the elderly supported. I, Liu Xuande, will strive for this tirelessly!" Liu Bei shouted. "From today onwards, all children of appropriate age in Taishan and Qingzhou will have access to education. I thank the Zhen family of Jizhou and the Mi family of Xuzhou for providing the necessary funds for this endeavor!"

"Lord Xuande is truly benevolent!" The chaotic shouts of the soldiers gradually unified into a single, resounding declaration. All the soldiers had seen the latest benefits posted, and their greatest fear was that these promises would turn out to be empty. But today, Liu Bei stood atop the altar and swore before heaven and earth that he would follow through on his words.

Ju Shou, standing at the administration area of the altar, felt a wave of awe as he looked up at Liu Bei.

"Zhuge Liang, are you certain you want to stay in Taishan?" Zhuge Jin asked, noticing the determined look in Zhuge Liang's eyes, though he already knew the answer.

"I will stay here. His dream and my ideals are very similar. We share too much in common. A society where the elderly are cared for and the young are educated—that's the kind of world sages have long dreamed of. I choose to believe that Liu Xuande can make it a reality," Zhuge Liang said resolutely. "Tell our uncle that I won't be going to Jingzhou. Rather than waiting for my destined lord like a recluse, I would rather put my faith in Liu Xuande, who stands before me now!"

"Zhongda, what do you think?" Sima Lang asked, his right hand gripping the window frame tightly, his knuckles white from the tension that revealed his own sense of awe.

"The world cannot be conquered by benevolence alone. Where there is light, there is always darkness. Liu Xuande's path is doomed to fail," Sima Yi said as he stared at Liu Bei. Despite his outward calm, Sima Yi felt a spark of temptation in his heart. That brilliance, that warmth—it was like a flame, beckoning him like a moth to the fire.

"Zhongda, what's wrong?" Sima Lang asked, puzzled as he watched Sima Yi slowly walk towards the door.

"I'm leaving Taishan. Liu Xuande's path is doomed to fail, but that light—it's washing away the shadows. I don't want to lose my life for an unrealistic ideal. If I stay any longer, I fear I too will become obsessed with this fantasy. A world where the young are educated and the old are cared for—such a world only exists under the rule of sages. But Liu Xuande is no sage!" Sima Yi cast one last glance at Liu Bei standing atop the altar, then turned and walked away without looking back.

Sima Yi descended the tavern stairs and gulped down a cup of wine, his eyes glinting coldly.

"Only darkness can highlight the light. Since light is destined to fail, I will preserve its dignity. Liu Xuande, don't disappoint me. If you fail to live up to your words today, you'll end up with a reputation as reviled as Wang Mang's," Sima Yi muttered to himself, then walked out into the world alone.

"Zhongda, where are you going?" Sima Lang called after him as he descended the stairs, seeing Sima Yi stepping out the door.

"I'm going to find my teacher. I need to study for a while longer and then seek out a lord who can accomplish great things. Liu Xuande's way won't succeed!" Sima Yi replied, not even turning his head as he strode towards the gates of Fenggao.

Chapter 303: The Aristocratic Families

The cheers of the people and the shouts of the soldiers made one thing clear to Ju Shou: Liu Bei had truly won the hearts of the people in Taishan, which posed a significant threat to Yuan Shao's ambitions.

"Lord Xuande is serious about this. Zizhong, it's time to pay up—I can't hold out any longer," Chen Xi turned and said to Mi Zhu.

"A mere few billion coins? The Mi family will cover it all," Mi Zhu replied, feeling deeply grateful the moment Liu Bei publicly acknowledged the financial support of the Zhen and Mi families. For a family just starting out as an aristocracy, reputation was everything, and investing a modest sum in education could earn them immense prestige.

Scholars were the most precious group in this world, and they also cherished their reputations the most. If the Mi family funded education for just five years, the first generation of students would emerge, and

the Mi family, despite its mercantile origins, would no longer be looked down upon. If anyone tried to tarnish the Mi family's name, countless scholars would rise to defend them. Whether they were merchants or not would no longer matter—what mattered was their virtue!

However, when Mi Zhu thought about how the Zhen family had contributed even more, he felt conflicted. Was his investment too small? Why did the Zhen family always have to be involved in everything? Whether it was setting rules, forming trade associations, or now, funding education, the Zhen family always seemed to be in the picture.

That's why, when Chen Xi jokingly asked Mi Zhu, Mi Zhu immediately responded by pledging that he could cover the costs of all the academies in Taishan and Qingzhou. After all, the potential for gaining a good reputation was enormous.

Chen Xi paused for a moment, then smiled. "Zizhong, some things are not meant to be monopolized. Remember the Chen family's downfall and how it led to the plight of merchants across the land. Even today, wealthy merchants are often accused of having ulterior motives when they engage in charitable acts. If they don't, they're deemed heartless. I'm sure you're well aware of the hardships involved."

Mi Zhu froze, cold sweat soaking through his back. He had only focused on the prospect of elevating the Mi family to aristocratic status, without considering the potential dangers. Merchants were shunned in this era for a reason. During the Spring and Autumn period, merchants were not marginalized, but during the Warring States period, laws restricting merchants began to emerge, largely due to the Chen family's excessive influence. The Chen family had played the game too well, accumulating wealth and eventually buying control of the state of Qi. Over generations, they essentially purchased the loyalty of the people and, eventually, the state itself. In the end, even the Zhou king had no choice but to recognize Tian He as the Duke of Qi.

Since that event, merchants had faced harsh treatment. Any wealthy merchant was constantly under scrutiny, often targeted by the state. Even minor acts of charity by merchants were viewed with suspicion, seen as attempts to manipulate the populace. That's why, in many historical records, when roads were damaged or bridges collapsed, people would turn to merchants for repairs. The authorities would often demand that a particular merchant pay for the repairs—not to extort them, but to give them face. Of course, there were instances of genuine extortion, but most of the time, being asked to pay for public works was a form of recognition.

"Thank you for the advice, Zichuan," Mi Zhu said, bowing slightly in gratitude.

"No need to thank me. Your wealth is still crucial for Lord Xuande's foundation. And with the Zhen family taking the lead, you won't have much to worry about," Chen Xi replied nonchalantly. He wasn't worried about Ju Shou hearing this conversation and holding a grudge against the Zhen family. Ju Shou was well aware that the Zhen family had paid a hefty price—twenty billion coins—for peace.

The other aristocratic families believed this because the Luoshui Merchant Guild, a close second to the top five merchant families, publicly declared itself a Zhen family asset. It was widely known that this guild frequently provided large loans and offered discounted prices, making it plausible that the Zhen family had such vast reserves of wealth. In reality, this was all part of Zhen Mi's dowry.

Ju Shou understood this as well, so he never considered that the Zhen family and Liu Bei had reconciled. As for the Zhen family's presence in Fenggao, Ju Shou saw it as nothing more than a business venture. For merchants, as long as there was money to be made, even sworn enemies could work together. However, Ju Shou didn't believe that any amount of profit could compensate for what the Zhen family had suffered in Qingzhou—it wasn't just about money.

"I suppose I've been too eager," Mi Zhu admitted with a wry smile. "Zichuan, you probably don't understand the kind of pressure I'm under."

"The glory of an aristocratic family, the hope of bringing honor to your ancestors, the blessings of future generations—these are all things worth striving for," Chen Xi replied without turning his head.

"Zichuan, you really do know everything, don't you!" Mi Zhu exclaimed, surprised that someone born into an aristocratic family like Chen Xi could understand the struggles of someone who had always lived a life of privilege.

"Don't worry, Zizhong. The money you've spent won't be wasted. Just from what Lord Xuande said earlier, in the future, whenever your family sells something in Taishan or Qingzhou, even if your prices are slightly higher, the people will still choose your products. Once the news of your contributions to education spreads, your business will flourish even more," Chen Xi said, glancing at Mi Zhu before turning his attention back to Liu Bei.

"What?" In this era, where there was no advertising, Mi Zhu, who relied on the reputation of his products, couldn't comprehend the importance of spreading the word.

"I mean, aren't you envious of how people give Zilong gifts wherever he goes? You could have that too, as long as people know you're Mi Zizhong," Chen Xi said, still focused on Liu Bei.

"To live like General Zhao—now that would be a great joy in life," Mi Zhu said with a touch of envy. Who wouldn't be envious of Zhao Yun, who could walk down the street and receive gifts from beautiful women and never had to pay for anything? The people of this era were still very sincere.

"You'll get there. Zilong gave them the soil they need to survive, and you've given them hope for development. In a few days, I'll send you something you can hang in your main shop. Your business will improve," Chen Xi replied with a smile.

"Thank you, thank you," Mi Zhu said, bowing in thanks.

Meanwhile, Zhuge Jin, observing Fa Zheng standing in the front row beneath Liu Bei, remarked, "That young man is probably even younger than I am, yet he already holds the position of Chancellor of Qi. In Taishan, it seems that talent is not judged by age."

"Fa Xiaozhi," Zhuge Liang whispered the name to himself.

"Chen Zichuan is only about the same age as I am. Truly a prodigy. Kongming, I know I have no hope of surpassing him, so our family's future rests on your shoulders," Zhuge Jin said with a laugh. "Kongming, I'll ask you one last time—are you sure you won't return to Xuzhou?"

"I plan to visit Chen Zichuan. I won't be returning to Xuzhou. If our uncle asks, tell him that 'Kongming has found someone who shares his ideals and no longer wishes to wait for some destined opportunity,'" Zhuge Liang replied without turning his head. "But, brother, are you sure you don't want to stay with Lord Xuande? His dream aligns with your ideals."

"Kongming, we're part of an aristocratic family. If you choose freedom, someone must bear the responsibility. If we both pursue our own paths, who will shoulder the burden of the Zhuge family? Our family has been in decline for too long. In our generation, there is a chance for resurgence. The family won't allow the best of us to join a single faction—they've invested too much in us. Aristocrats have their own rules," Zhuge Jin said, patting Zhuge Liang's shoulder.

"Thank you," Zhuge Liang said, looking at his brother.

"The next time we meet, don't let personal feelings interfere with your duty. We are the Zhuge family," Zhuge Jin said calmly. He glanced back at Liu Bei. "He will be a good lord, but he is not the right one for me."

Zhug Jin quietly packed his belongings, leaving Zhuge Liang alone. The responsibility of answering to the Zhuge family would fall on his shoulders alone.

Chapter 304: When Sima Lang Meets Xi Zhicai

Amid the continuous cheers of the people in Fenggao, Sima Yi and Sima Lang left the city. Initially, only Sima Yi planned to leave, but Sima Lang, concerned about his younger brother traveling alone, decided to accompany him. They exited the city gates and let their horses carry them in a random direction, with no specific destination in mind.

Not long after they had set out, Sima Yi heard a familiar voice calling from outside the carriage. He paused for a moment and said, "Brother, stop the carriage. My teacher is here."

"Your teacher? Hu Gong?" Sima Lang was surprised but quickly stopped the carriage. Soon after, they saw a scholar riding toward them on horseback.

"Student Sima Boda greets Hu Gong," Sima Lang said respectfully before his younger brother could even bow. He then turned to glare at Sima Yi, who stared at Hu Zhao.

"Haha, no need for formalities, no need for formalities. Zhongda, you've improved—much less arrogant than before," Hu Zhao said with a hearty laugh. "Are you surprised to see me in Taishan? Haha, let me tell you, when Chen Zichuan was sweeping through Yuzhou, your teacher was a guest in Runan. I ended up being packed up and sent to Fenggao."

Hu Zhao didn't care whether Sima Yi was listening or not. He continued talking to himself. "At the time, I was quite frustrated—after all, I am a renowned Confucian scholar, and here I was being bundled up and shipped off. But once I arrived in Fenggao, I realized this place isn't bad at all. It's much better than that little hill I used to live on."

"You came to Fenggao of your own accord, and you probably took advantage of Chen Zichuan's offer for convenience," Sima Yi said with exasperation, knowing his teacher too well to believe he could ever suffer a loss.

"You can't put it that way. It was really dangerous at the time. But I must admit, after spending a few months here in Fenggao, I have to acknowledge that Liu Xuande has remarkable character, ambition, and virtue. So, how about joining me in serving Liu Xuande?" Hu Zhao laughed heartily, yet there was no sense of discord in his demeanor, despite referring to Liu Bei, a man of his own age, as a "youngster."

"Zhongda, as your friend, let me ask you—do you think Liu Xuande is suitable for me?" Sima Yi asked calmly, staring at Hu Zhao.

"No, he isn't," Hu Zhao immediately rejected his own earlier suggestion.

"Then why did you recommend him to me?"

"I was moved by Liu Xuande's ideals. I was already quite proud of having successfully educated a small group of people in Luhun Mountain, but here is a ruler who wants to educate the entire populace of the world," Hu Zhao said, shedding his usual playful demeanor. His eyes revealed a deep sense of admiration.

"Then why do you intend to leave?" Sima Yi asked, bowing respectfully to Hu Zhao before continuing his question.

"Because it's impossible. I taught you everything I know because you're as realistic as I am. If something can't be done, it can't be done. We won't indulge in unrealistic dreams. We only focus on what we can achieve. In this chaotic world, overly ambitious dreams can drag you down," Hu Zhao said solemnly.

"Boda, you should go on your journey alone. I'll take Zhongda to travel the world. His mindset is now mature enough to inherit my teachings," Hu Zhao said, glaring at Sima Lang. Although Sima Lang was Sima Yi's older brother and had always shown great respect for Hu Zhao, the latter had never been particularly kind to him.

"Zhongda, don't trouble Hu Gong," Sima Lang said, not arguing further. He gave his brother some brief advice and then rode off, leaving the carriage for Hu Zhao and Sima Yi.

After Sima Lang left, Sima Yi sat down on the ground next to Hu Zhao. "Teacher, I've awakened my spiritual talent."

"Oh? As expected of Zhongda," Hu Zhao replied calmly, though he was inwardly very pleased. After all, he himself hadn't awakened his spiritual talent until he was seventeen or eighteen.

"I met a boy with the same courtesy name as yours. He's twelve years old and already possesses spiritual talent, with a mental capacity equal to my brother's. This world truly has its share of geniuses," Sima Yi said, his tone devoid of emotion as he spoke to Hu Zhao.

"The world is vast, and there are bound to be a few prodigies," Hu Zhao said after a long silence. "Perhaps I still haven't seen enough. Come, Zhongda, I'll take you on a journey across the world for one to three years. I'll teach you everything I know, and then the rest will be up to you."

As Hu Zhao casually dusted off his Confucian robe, Sima Yi also stood up and nonchalantly patted himself off before getting into the carriage. They picked a random direction and prepared to set off.

While sitting in the carriage, Sima Yi's mind wandered to the serene demeanor of Zhuge Liang.

Meanwhile, Sima Lang had traveled no more than fifty li westward before encountering two carriages. Seeing the group of around a hundred soldiers and the sturdy man leading them on horseback, even without a banner, Sima Lang could guess whose entourage this was.

However, before Sima Lang could move aside, he heard a voice call out from one of the carriages, "Boda, long time no see!"

"Er'ao, stop the carriage!" Chen Qun shouted toward Dian Wei, and soon the entire group halted.

"Well, if it isn't Changwen! It's been a while. You're here for your cousin's wedding, right? I must say, you're sneaky. If I hadn't gone to the Fan family to confirm, I wouldn't have known that Chen Zichuan is

also from the Chen family. I ended up leaving my family's heirloom jade pendant as a wedding gift when I left," Sima Lang said with a smile as he greeted Chen Qun. He then began to complain, clearly very familiar with him.

"It's a long story," Chen Qun replied with a wry smile. "Boda, let me introduce you. This is my lord's advisor, Xi Zhicai."

"You're the one who pacified Yanzhou, stabilized Nanyang, and defeated Yuan Shu—Xi Zhicai? I'm Sima Lang of Henei. It's an honor to meet you, Advisor Xi," Sima Lang said, bowing to the frail, slightly sickly-looking man before him.

"No need for such formalities. Since you're a friend of Changwen, feel free to call me by my courtesy name," Xi Zhicai said, stroking his beard as it trembled slightly.

Chen Qun was visibly surprised. Xi Zhicai, who was usually curt with others, was now showing such respect to his friend. Could there be something more to this?

Chen Qun glanced at Xi Zhicai curiously but didn't interfere. He, too, wanted to see what Xi Zhicai was up to.

Xi Zhicai had no intention of letting Sima Lang go. Anyone with spiritual talent, regardless of what kind, was a strategist worth knowing!

Xi Zhicai's words left a favorable impression on Sima Lang. With his friend Chen Qun by his side, it didn't take long for Xi Zhicai to convince Sima Lang to join them in the carriage. Together, they headed back toward Fenggao.

Chapter 305: History Always Needs Pioneers

After Xi Zhicai fainted that day, Chen Qun was so frightened that he immediately ordered someone to report to Cao Cao. Although Xi Zhicai had exhausted his spiritual power, he only suffered from a loss of vitality. He survived and regained consciousness after resting for a night. By then, Cao Cao's personal guard, Dian Wei, had already arrived with a letter from Cao Cao.

"Erlai, why aren't you protecting the lord? What are you doing here?" Xi Zhicai asked as soon as he woke up and saw Dian Wei standing before him.

"The lord requests that the strategist return to Chenliu," Dian Wei replied in his deep, gravelly voice.

"No need to return to Chenliu. Tell me the rest of the lord's message," Xi Zhicai said, shaking his head. He knew Cao Cao well enough to understand that if he was being called back, it must be because Cao Cao knew there was no way he could avoid this journey.

"The lord said that if you don't wish to return, he has ordered me to accompany and protect you," Dian Wei said, scratching his head with a somewhat naive expression.

Xi Zhicai sighed. He understood that, in Cao Cao's eyes, this journey was undoubtedly dangerous and must be for the sake of the Cao family's future. Cao Cao hadn't asked Xun Yu or the others about Xi Zhicai's mission because he trusted him completely. This trust made Cao Cao even more reluctant to let Xi Zhicai face any danger. Now, having suffered a significant blow before even reaching Taishan, Cao Cao couldn't help but suspect that this journey would be perilous.

When Cao Cao received Chen Qun's letter, he thought quietly for a moment before sending Dian Wei to protect Xi Zhicai. After all, Dian Wei was his strongest warrior, and Cao Cao trusted that if Dian Wei was by his side, Xi Zhicai would be safe.

Thus, Dian Wei took charge of the group. After the previous incident, Chen Qun adamantly refused to share a carriage with Xi Zhicai. As a result, the journey slowed considerably under Dian Wei's careful protection, which prevented Xi Zhicai from encountering Sima Yi, the one who had unknowingly drained him.

Xi Zhicai had already acquired Sima Lang's talent. Although he hadn't fully tested its effects, he knew Sima Lang wasn't the one who had inadvertently harmed him. Once in the carriage, Xi Zhicai warmly engaged Sima Lang in conversation, offering him drinks. High-ranking as he was, Xi Zhicai's affable demeanor quickly won over Sima Lang, who began to think that perhaps serving Cao Cao—who had defeated Yuan Shu and ruled over a province—might not be such a bad idea.

Chen Qun, who had originally hoped Sima Lang would join Cao Cao's service, also did his best to persuade him. After all, they shared the same bloodline, and it didn't take long for Sima Lang to agree to meet Cao Cao.

In truth, Sima Lang had always favored Cao Cao. Compared to Liu Bei's somewhat rigid personality, Cao Cao's willingness to use any means necessary suited him better. After all, every noble family had its dark side, and there were times when bending or even breaking moral boundaries was necessary.

Sima Lang shared his observations from his time in Fenggao, particularly emphasizing Liu Bei's military and popular support, the discipline of his troops, the prosperity of the city, and the abundance of books in the library. Xi Zhicai listened with growing concern.

Before coming to Taishan, Xi Zhicai had thought that his side was evenly matched with Liu Bei's. However, after entering Taishan, he clearly felt the difference. Taishan was much wealthier than Cao Cao's territory, and the roads were in much better condition. He often saw groups of people carrying tools, heading out to work on infrastructure projects.

In Taishan, Xi Zhicai didn't witness the heartbreaking scenes of people selling their children that he had seen in Yanzhou during the harsh winters. Here, as long as someone was willing to work, they could find food. The infrastructure teams were always hiring, and there was no shortage of opportunities to earn a meal.

When Sima Lang mentioned Liu Bei's efforts to promote education and teach literacy to children, Xi Zhicai was momentarily stunned. Coming from a humble background, he knew what such an initiative meant for the common people. However, he quickly suppressed the tremor in his heart and calmly said, "Human efforts have their limits."

"Yes, it's a dream—one that cannot be realized," Sima Lang replied, closing his eyes. "But even so, hearing such grand ambitions makes us all feel a certain respect for Liu Xuande. No one, not even the sages, has ever truly uttered those words."

Chen Qun remained silent. Liu Bei's grand vision had left him shaken. After all, he had once harbored similar dreams—perhaps the simplest yet most challenging dream: to ensure that everyone in the world had enough to eat.

Chen Qun thought of Chen Xi, whom he had never met, and sighed. He had been just as naive in the past, thinking the world could be easily changed. But after experiencing so much, he had matured.

The three of them exchanged glances and smiled, each reflecting on their past selves. It was only through failure that one grew mature. Even Cao Cao had started with fervent ideals, only to later realize that force was necessary to forge the path he believed was right.

In history, Liu Xuande had been known for his indomitable spirit, ultimately establishing his own realm. However, with each failure, he gradually tempered his sharp edges and became more rounded. At the beginning, he had been willing to give up his official post and whip a corrupt official rather than allow the official to exploit the people. Later, he became capable of accepting those he once despised, like Lu Bu. After taking Jingzhou, Liu Bei learned to control his emotions. By the time he entered Shu, he had mastered concealing his true feelings—until the deaths of Guan Yu and Zhang Fei rekindled the impulsive youth who had once flogged an official.

Yet, despite all his changes, Liu Bei never raised his blade against the common people. Whether out of genuine benevolence or mere pretense, even in his final days, Liu Bei never resorted to the massacres that Cao Cao and Sun Quan had committed. He remained steadfast in his beliefs.

Unfortunately, Liu Bei never managed to fully instill his ideals in the people, and in this lifetime, the setbacks he faced had been mere minor inconveniences. Thus far, he remained the same forthright Liu Xuande—quick to speak his mind, unafraid to confront those who wronged him, and always ready to admit his mistakes.

In this life, the world hadn't taught Liu Bei to be more cunning. Instead, with Chen Xi's guidance, Liu Bei had developed even grander ideals and found the strength to pursue them.

He firmly believed in Chen Xi's words: "If you know something is right but cannot achieve it, does that mean you should pretend to be ignorant and continue down the wrong path, growing further and further from the original road?"

"No, even if there is no result, I will point the way. History always needs pioneers," Chen Xi had answered his own question. "Besides, how can you know whether something is difficult or easy if you've never tried it?"

Chapter 306: Xi Zhicai's Thoughts

When Xi Zhicai entered Fenggao, his first impression was one of awe, followed by a sense of the city's prosperity. The reason for this was that upon entering Fenggao, Xi Zhicai activated his spiritual talent and immediately sensed several other spiritual talents within his range.

Through the barrier of the carriage, Xi Zhicai's eyes seemed to pierce the heavens, focusing on the vague, swirling spiritual energies above. Once again, he felt a sense of helplessness, much like when he had encountered Xun You's spiritual talent. He could sense the talent's presence but felt like a tiger facing the sky, unable to grasp it—completely incapable of replication.

Silently gazing upward, Xi Zhicai felt resigned. His greatest concern was that the owner of this spiritual talent might be like Xun You—a person who, once they activated their talent, never deactivated it. This would leave him perpetually frustrated, able only to observe the talent without ever being able to replicate it.

Recalling his past experience with Xun You, Xi Zhicai silently prayed. He hadn't intended to reveal his spiritual talent to anyone, but after analyzing Xun You's talent and realizing its usefulness, he had no choice but to confess to Xun You about his abilities. Xun You had kept his talent active for three long months, leaving Xi Zhicai no chance to replicate it. Eventually, he had to come clean.

From that moment on, Xi Zhicai understood that certain unique talents were challenging to replicate. However, as long as they were talents, he could replicate them—albeit with difficulty. For example, with Xun You's camouflage talent, Xi Zhicai could only replicate it while Xun You's talent was active.

Similarly, Xi Zhicai could detect Chen Xi's talent, meaning he could replicate it. But since Chen Xi's talent was a passive one, Xi Zhicai had only one chance to replicate it—when Chen Xi first awakened his talent. Afterward, there would be no other opportunities, though this limitation had spared Xi Zhicai's life.

At present, Xi Zhicai was focused on analyzing the spiritual talent above, hoping to replicate it when it reactivated. Unfortunately, this type of talent, which couldn't be easily replicated, made the analysis process slow and laborious.

Returning his gaze, Xi Zhicai calmly observed a gathering of spiritual talents. However, instead of the concentrated area, he was more interested in the three talents that were clearly outside the range of the altar—intellectuals who hadn't yet joined Liu Bei's camp. They were his targets.

Xi Zhicai's arrival in Fenggao was poorly timed, so he didn't receive the same reception as Ju Shou. A group of city guards merely escorted him to the guest quarters, informing him that Liu Bei would meet with them after the sacrifices concluded. Xi Zhicai, however, had no complaints about this arrangement.

"Changwen, Boda, I'll handle the alliance negotiations with Taishan," Xi Zhicai said with a smile, taking the lead.

"Understood. I also need to pay a visit to Chen Zichuan. Boda, will you accompany me? After all, you did leave your family heirloom as a gift," Chen Qun replied calmly.

"If Chen Zichuan isn't around, you probably just plan to deliver a letter and return, right? Do you really need to drag me along? That's not very considerate," Sima Lang responded without hesitation.

"Fine, stay here, then. I'll go see Chen Zichuan and take care of some other matters," Chen Qun chuckled. "They say Taishan is prosperous. Now that I'm here, I should see it for myself and compare it to Nanyang's former glory."

"I think you'll be in for a surprise," Sima Lang replied with a smile.

Sima Lang had already explored Fenggao in the past few days and knew that the city's prosperity wasn't merely comparable to Nanyang but had surpassed it in many ways. His keen eye had discerned the cleanliness, wealth, and orderliness of Fenggao. Such prosperity was rare, and he understood that Liu Bei's confidence in his education initiatives stemmed from this foundation. However, Sima Lang also believed that replicating Fenggao's success elsewhere would be nearly impossible. Just as there was only one Chen Zichuan, there was only one Fenggao—a miraculous city, born of unique opportunities, talent, and fortune.

Since miracles couldn't be replicated, it meant that Liu Bei's grand plans for education would likely remain unfulfilled. Many things were destined to be.

After resting for a while, Xi Zhicai took Dian Wei along to seek out the top scholars who clearly weren't part of Liu Bei's camp. His plan was simple: if they were unaligned, he'd deceive and recruit them. If they already had an allegiance, he'd see if he could sway them. From the beginning, Xi Zhicai had come to Qingzhou with the intent to recruit talent.

"Greetings, Lord Ju," Xi Zhicai said, stopping in his tracks when he recognized Ju Shou. His initial instinct was to leave immediately, not wanting to waste time, but before he could slip away, Ju Shou called out to him, forcing Xi Zhicai to turn back and offer a respectful bow.

"Zhicai, it's been a long time," Ju Shou greeted him with a smile, pouring a cup of wine. He glanced at the robust figure behind Xi Zhicai, whose waist was girded with hand axes and who carried two large halberds. Ju Shou narrowed his eyes. "This must be General Dian, famed for his battle against Lu Bu at Wancheng. Truly worthy of the title 'Ancient Evil Lai.' Come, General, let me offer you a cup."

Dian Wei laughed heartily, shifting both halberds to his left hand, then accepting the cup with his right. He drained it in one gulp, set the cup down, and scratched his head. "What do you mean, not defeated? Lu Bu was too fierce. When he flew into the air, I couldn't even reach him," Dian Wei said without reservation.

Ju Shou frowned slightly. From Dian Wei's words, he could infer a lot. The man wasn't defeated by Lu Bu; he simply couldn't reach him.

"Haha, as expected of General Dian," Ju Shou remarked, impressed. He had witnessed Lu Bu's ferocity firsthand—an unparalleled warrior who could defeat Yan Liang and Wen Chou in fifty moves. Yet here was a man who could hold his own against him.

"Lord Ju, have you gained anything from this visit?" Xi Zhicai asked with a smile after seating Dian Wei. He wasn't concerned about Ju Shou's political maneuverings.

"Taishan's prosperity rivals that of Nanyang. This Liu Xuande will undoubtedly become a threat to my lord. However, for now, his wings aren't fully grown, and my lord hasn't yet secured the north. He can't afford to look south. Otherwise, he wouldn't let Liu Bei grow stronger," Ju Shou replied bluntly. "What's more, Taishan is the gateway to Xuzhou. Without it, there's no access to surplus grain."

Xi Zhicai sipped his wine in silence. He knew all too well that Ju Shou was referring to his lord, Cao Cao. Currently, only Cao Cao had truly stabilized his situation in the central plains, while Liu Bei was still entangled in endless expansion in Qingzhou.

Yuan Shu was preoccupied with relocating his capital to Shouchun and fending off Liu Biao's counterattacks. He should be grateful that Cao Cao wasn't attacking him.

Liu Bei's campaign to open up Qingzhou dragged on due to his methodical approach. Many Qingzhou Yellow Turbans were spending the winter working in infrastructure projects. Come spring, Liu Bei would surely launch a major offensive, which would require even more resources to rebuild Qingzhou. Meanwhile, Xuzhou's Tao Qian was too old and weak to meddle in the affairs of the world.

In the north, Yuan Shao and Gongsun Zan wouldn't stop fighting until one of them was dead. Guo Si and Li Jue in Yongzhou didn't have the courage to extend their reach into the central plains and were content with their small skirmishes in Xiliang. Only Cao Cao had truly stabilized his situation. It was inevitable that he would seek further expansion, and taking Taishan to fully occupy Yanzhou and then annexing Xuzhou would be the best course—without Liu Bei, of course!

Chapter 307: Some Things Are Destined!

After the sacrificial ceremony, Liu Bei, as usual, took Li You to oversee the military training, while Chen Xi led a group of civil officials to handle the aftermath. However, upon returning to the administrative hall, Chen Xi was surprised to see that Qu Qi, who was supposed to be studying agriculture in the greenhouse, was sitting there, calmly sipping tea.

"Hey, Hanmou, what brings you here?" Chen Xi greeted with a smile. Behind him, a group of civil officials, all dressed in black, also greeted Qu Qi. Everyone had met this miracle worker who had boosted Qingzhou's agricultural production.

"You guys are moving too fast," Qu Qi said with a wry smile.

"Huh?" Chen Xi didn't quite catch that as he sat at the head of the table, signaling for tea, pastries, and fruits to be served. They had work to do.

"I said, you're moving too fast. Governor Liu announced it too early. Promoting education can certainly win the hearts of the people and earn the praise of scholars, but have you considered this: just because they recognize your benevolence doesn't mean they won't clash with you. Qingzhou is strong, but not that strong yet," Qu Qi explained with a bitter smile. "You're essentially cutting off the foundation of the aristocratic families."

"What do you mean by that?" Chen Xi asked, massaging his temples in frustration. "Even if some people notice, they won't be able to stop it in the short term. And the widespread use of printed materials benefits the aristocracy too. Only a few will truly recognize the threat. Our greatest advantage is that paper is cheap and can be widely distributed. By the time they realize what's happening, the students from the lower classes will be able to compete with them. Plus, the benefits we offer will make them overlook this minor issue."

"You're too confident. The ones who can cause you trouble are always the top figures. Those families who can't see the problem might not even realize you've sold them out. Yes, the spread of paper benefits them, but its low cost benefits the lower classes even more!" Qu Qi frowned.

"But 99% of the aristocratic families only see the benefits," Chen Xi replied indifferently. "Most of them believe their bloodlines are superior to the commoners. They won't kill a potentially beneficial plan just because it might fail."

"And how do you plan to address the issue of teachers and the ongoing costs each year? Don't think I haven't thought about it. There are at least 200,000 children of school age in Qingzhou and Taishan. Even if one teacher handles five students for three years..." Qu Qi paused, then added, "By the way, your 'Thousand Character Classic' is pretty good." He complimented Chen Xi before returning to his serious tone.

Now, everyone, including Jia Xu, turned their eyes toward Chen Xi. After all, he had confidently stated that the issue would resolve itself in time.

"There's no easy solution. We'll have to rely on our resources. As for the tens of thousands of students, they don't all need to learn poetry, classics, and rituals in-depth. I've already said it will only be basic education," Chen Xi replied calmly. "By next year, we'll have fully consolidated Qingzhou and expanded our territory to the coast. Then we can open sea trade with Jiaozhou. The natives there aren't lacking in food."

Qu Qi frowned. He had visited Jiaozhou before and knew the area wasn't exactly hospitable. The malarial climate was harsh, but maritime trade had too many uncertainties.

"Gan Xingba has probably already been to Yizhou. If we use that as a staging post, there shouldn't be any major issues," Chen Xi added with a smile. "I sent Gan Ning to scout out a suitable island long ago."

"With that in place, you might just manage to scrape by with the resources and manpower. But now, I have to ask you the most crucial question," Qu Qi said, his tone serious.

"Go ahead, I'm listening," Chen Xi replied nonchalantly.

"What do aristocratic families mean to you?" Qu Qi asked.

"They're powerful families, rooted in bloodlines and centered around power, influence, prestige, and wealth—families that have existed for generations. And even if they decline, they can rise again more easily than ordinary families," Chen Xi said, somewhat uncertainly.

"And what is a noble?" Qu Qi pressed.

"An upper class that stands above others," Chen Xi replied casually. Then he paused, looking at Qu Qi. Around the room, the other officials also furrowed their brows, realizing what they had overlooked.

"It seems you've understood now. The aristocracy evolved into the aristocratic families. Their goal is to return to being nobility, to share the world with the emperor and divide the land among themselves," Qu Qi explained, scanning the room.

"Do you think the top families—the ones that have retained their noble glory for generations—will allow the lower classes to have the same opportunities as them? They won't. They are destined to sit at the top, looking down on the commoners," Qu Qi said with a smile, addressing Chen Xi and the others.

"Blessings and curses, all are from the emperor..." Chen Xi muttered to himself.

At that moment, Chen Xi finally understood why the aristocracy evolved into the aristocratic families, why the aristocracy became the scholar-gentry class, and why the nine-rank system came into existence. It had all been predestined!

Class structure was too important for the nobility. The scholar-gentry was just another form of nobility. From birth, their place in society was determined. The upper ranks had no room for the lower classes, and the lower ranks could never rise to become aristocracy.

"Indeed, generation after generation enjoys endless wealth and glory, just as the Zhou kings divided the land among the feudal lords. Nobles will always be nobles, their descendants blessed for hundreds of years. Compared to Liu Bei's current actions, which are severing the hopes of these families, the enmity is deep, and the allure of their promises is strong!" Chen Xi acknowledged Qu Qi's words with a heavy heart.

Chen Xi had to admit that the aristocratic families' vision was incredibly enticing for the families themselves. As for the common people, they had no part to play in this game.

Chen Xi believed Qu Qi's words more than his earlier speculations because history had shown that Qu Qi's predictions were accurate. The nine-rank system had indeed solidified the foundations of the scholar-gentry class!

"So, we're now fully at odds with all the top aristocratic families?" Jia Xu remarked, realizing he had been naive. Perhaps it was because no one in the room had come from a high-ranking noble family that they had missed this.

"Pretty much. But the good thing is that Chen Zichuan is still on your side. You guys are really lucky. Chen Zichuan has already proven his abilities, and I've heard that Cao Mengde sent his advisors to congratulate you. I'm betting it's nine out of ten that it's Chen Changwen," Qu Qi said, with a look that said they had been very fortunate.

"Thankfully, the Chen family is influential. Even though I've branched out, I'm still seen as a prominent figure in the family. Most of the top aristocratic families will be watching my every move. As long as I don't act recklessly, they'll believe this hasn't harmed their foundations," Chen Xi said, wiping a cold sweat from his brow. Today's events had been a close call.

"However, after this, many top strategists from the aristocratic families may abandon Liu Bei. Although you're a figurehead, you don't fully represent the Chen family. The threat of Liu Bei's actions still exists, and they'll seek ways to restore their former glory," Qu Qi said helplessly.

"They'll acknowledge Liu Bei's benevolence because he has a status comparable to theirs. But they will never allow the lower classes to rise and compete with them. They can pity the commoners, but they will never give them the chance to stand on equal footing," Chen Xi said with a bitter smile.

Chapter 308: The Fearlessness of Youth

"I think within our group, we need to bring in a strategist from a long-standing noble family; otherwise, we simply lack perspective in this area," Lu Su said with a wry smile.

As for the idea that top strategists from noble families might abandon Liu Bei, Lu Su didn't worry too much about it. Not to boast, but the group assembled here was already sufficient to conquer the world. As for governing it, if they succeeded, talents would naturally emerge. Besides, there were top strategists from humble origins too, and they could be recruited when the time came. Still, hearing Qu Qi's talk of endless blessings for future generations, Lu Su couldn't help but feel a bit envious.

For a society like China's, where everything is done with future generations in mind, noble families needed a way to preserve their power. If this generation succeeded, ensuring blessings for their descendants for countless generations to come was worth the effort for many noble families.

As Lu Su spoke, everyone turned their gaze toward Qu Qi. They realized that Qu Qi might be well-suited for this role.

"Don't look at me. While I am indeed a descendant of a noble family with a thousand-year history, I don't have your wisdom. This time, I only had an advantage in perspective. I'm far from your level," Qu Qi said helplessly. Seeing everyone still staring at him, he sighed and added, "How about this: when it comes to matters involving noble families, if I notice anything, I'll let you know. As for other things, I'm really not the best fit."

"That would be for the best. But now that I think about it, the ideology proposed by these noble families is incredibly tempting. I hadn't heard of it before, and it seems no one else here had either," Chen Xi said, nodding. Then, recalling Qu Qi's talk about the power noble families sought, he sighed and asked, "So which families oppose this idea?"

"The proposal was abandoned, but not a single family openly opposed or voiced an opinion on it. In fact, I personally didn't like the proposal; otherwise, I wouldn't have shared this with you," Qu Qi said with a smile.

"As a group of vested interests, it's unreasonable to expect them to deny their own goals. Their aim has always been to solidify and enhance their status. At most, they might give a little back to the lower

classes to earn gratitude, but that's it," Chen Xi said mockingly. He now had a clearer understanding of the situation. Aside from a few reformists and those betting on Qingzhou, the top figures would likely prepare to entrench the aristocratic class.

"Honestly, I'd like to see endless blessings for generations too," Chen Xi hadn't even finished speaking when Fa Zheng jumped in, setting himself up for trouble. But before Chen Xi could take issue with him, Fa Zheng continued, "But I can't guarantee my descendants won't fall into decline. If that's the case, I'd rather blaze a bright path for them now!"

Fa Zheng had enjoyed the benefits of his father's status, but compared to a life of duties he despised, he trusted in what he could achieve with his own hands.

Fa Zheng believed that rigid social structures didn't necessarily mean a better future for descendants—it was also a form of constraint. For example, Fa Zheng didn't like the idea of marrying the daughter of the Wang family just because it was a good match. But realistically, not marrying her wasn't an option!

Given his own experiences, Fa Zheng felt that instead of rigid structures, it would be better to leave his descendants with hope and opportunities—to rely on their hands and wisdom to forge their own paths. The phrase from Liu Bei, "Not based on age, not based on birth, but solely on talent and virtue," resonated deeply with him.

"A saint's virtue may last five generations before it is severed. I won't concern myself with what happens to my descendants. We are here today because of that principle—'Not based on age, not based on birth, but solely on talent and virtue.' When we weren't in this position, we longed for fairness. So why, now that we've reached this position, should we monopolize it forever? Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire!" Fa Zheng stood up and slammed the table, passionately shouting at everyone present, his youthful spirit not caring about consequences.

"Suddenly, I think Fa Zheng makes a lot of sense," Lu Su sighed, recalling Yuan Shu's invitation. A man of mediocrity who held a position of power, while he had to content himself with reading books at home. "I also want to see what kind of people these thousand-year noble families can produce."

"My Liu family still stands; how can we allow petty people to act so brazenly?" Liu Ye said with authority.

"Fairness has always been the justice I aim to uphold!" Man Chong declared with a stoic expression.

"I also need to leave a path for future generations," Jia Xu said with a gentle smile, though his eyes glinted with a chilling intent. Noble families had suppressed the lower classes for two hundred years; there was no way he would let them continue forever. Even if his own Jia family became a noble family, he wouldn't allow such things to happen!

"We can't allow such things to happen! My Mi family will fully support Liu Bei's cause to sweep away these petty people!" Mi Zhu, with his usual scholarly demeanor, now carried a cold sharpness. How else would his Mi family have a chance to rise to prominence?

"Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire," Sun Qian said solemnly.

"It seems none of us have changed our goals," Chen Xi said with a smile. "As long as we stay united, I firmly believe we won't lose to anyone!"

Everyone present nodded solemnly. Then, under Chen Xi's lead, they turned their gaze to Fa Zheng. "Young man, just now you were talking about your descendants and all that? Have you even grown all your hair yet?"

The teasing and banter made Fa Zheng blush with embarrassment. His earlier confidence was quickly swept away, and he was so frustrated that he wanted to challenge Chen Xi right then and there. With Guo Jia absent, it seemed Chen Xi had taken over the role of teasing him!

Chapter 309: Hidden Motives

Despite everything, Fa Zheng's passionate words reignited the resolve of those present. They were all determined not to let the lofty ambitions of the noble families crush their own pursuits.

"For the sake of our descendants, for the common people, let us nail them to the pillar of shame!" Liu Ye stood up and shouted.

"Let's nail them to the pillar of shame!" Everyone present stood up and echoed his words. The fervor of youth is not easily extinguished, especially when surrounded by like-minded friends.

"I really want to go head-to-head with those top strategists from the ancient noble families. Let's see how much their thousand years of heritage surpasses mine!" Jia Xu opened his intricately carved black fan with a chilling smile as he looked at everyone. "Our lord's path is aligned with Wenru's oath, and he shares the same purpose as all of us!"

Chen Xi had been most concerned that Jia Xu might be reluctant to confront the top noble families, but he hadn't expected Jia Xu to express his opinion so resolutely.

Perhaps because everyone was watching him, Jia Xu smiled and said, "I am best at preserving myself, but I'm living well here. Leaving would mean finding a new lord, and that's not easy. If I can't integrate into the noble families' circle, I'll never gain their recognition. So why should I humble myself? We may not lose!"

"Oh, Wenhe is very confident! We definitely won't lose to those people!" Chen Xi stood up solemnly. "Everyone, no matter what happens, trust that I will provide you with a stable rear base! Qingzhou will be the starting point of Lord Xuande's grand enterprise!"

"I'm also quite adept at military strategy," Lu Su said with a smile. "I want to see how these so-called noble strategists measure up against me. The road ahead is tough, but I'll endure it with you!"

"The road to kingship is never smooth!" Fa Zheng said excitedly. "I'll take care of my peers!"

Everyone present had their eyes burning with determination. Each of them had their pride, and once they spoke up, they would push forward with all their might.

On the other side, Li You didn't care about what had happened today. After the Battle of Hulao Pass, he understood that as long as the lord remains unwavering, the final contest will be one of strength. Liu Bei's resilience gave him confidence—if he's not afraid of death, why not fight for his ideals? Besides, they might not lose. Who's afraid of whom?

"Lord Xuande, three emissaries from Cao Cao—Xi Zhicai, Chen Changwen, and Sima Boda—have entered Fenggao. Among them, Xi Zhicai and Chen Changwen are renowned strategists. As for Sima Boda, he is the eldest son of the Sima family from Henei," Li You briefed Liu Bei on the unusual situation.

"I can understand why Chen Changwen is here, but Xi Zhicai is one of Cao Mengde's earliest and most important strategists. Why is he here...?" Liu Bei pondered for a moment before speaking. He had heard of the Sima family but wasn't familiar with them.

"I've already sent people to keep an eye on Xi Zhicai, but it's unlikely we'll gather much intelligence. Based on the information we have, that burly man is most likely Cao Cao's personal bodyguard, Dian Wei. This high-profile move could be both an attempt to spy on our military and a way to conceal their true strategic intentions," Li You calmly explained the situation to Liu Bei.

"No way to gather relevant intelligence?" Liu Bei frowned. "Have our spies in Yanzhou obtained any information?"

"No, most of our spies are too low-level to access such information. Even if we had higher-level spies, they wouldn't have the qualifications to get close to this kind of intelligence," Li You shook his head.

"I suggest we stick to our original plan and try to extract information from Xi Zhicai. He's already met with Ju Gongyu, and while they are still allies, they might exchange some information. If so, Xi Zhicai might form a biased opinion, which could work in our favor for deeper interactions," Li You continued, persuading Liu Bei to put on an act.

After pondering for a moment, Liu Bei agreed to Li You's suggestion. He remained wary of Cao Cao, and understanding his strategic intentions was crucial. Among all the warlords, only Cao Cao and Yuan Shao posed a significant threat. Between them, Liu Bei found Cao Cao even more dangerous due to his unpredictability.

Liu Bei had become more composed over time, treating these acts as a way to break the monotony. Occasionally playing a role didn't bother him. He even wondered if anyone really believed that he could switch between being a wise leader and a man driven by lust.

Meanwhile, Xi Zhicai and Ju Shou were casually chatting. Xi Zhicai knew Ju Shou's talent well—it was formidable if used correctly, but it could lead to his downfall if mishandled.

Ju Shou's talent allowed him to discern the course of grand strategies and amplify his side's advantages, but it also magnified weaknesses. This amplification was irreversible. Once Ju Shou started using his

talent to understand the broader picture, the effects would manifest. Xi Zhicai also knew that Ju Shou always thought his talent was just about discerning the grand strategy...

This talent was a double-edged sword. If used well, it made the strong even stronger. If mishandled, it could give the enemy a chance to turn the tables.

The most challenging aspect of this talent was that it was difficult to control. Unforeseen circumstances could cause unexpected advantages or weaknesses to emerge. As someone like Xi Zhicai, who avoided using abilities that could lead to his downfall, he would only use such a risky talent as a last resort.

"If that's the case, we could benefit from this," Xi Zhicai said with a sinister smile to Ju Shou.

"Exactly!" Ju Shou laughed heartily as he stroked his beard. Although he had already assessed Liu Bei's situation, his cautious nature required another person to test the waters.

"It seems Liu Xuande has some similarities with Dong Zhuo after all. Is it really a matter of one's background?" Xi Zhicai remarked with a smile, his face showing that he noted Ju Shou's words, though his true thoughts were unclear.

"There is indeed a resemblance," Ju Shou laughed. "Won't you also pay him a visit?"

"Of course, but as they say, 'Seeing is believing,'" Xi Zhicai replied with a smile, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with Ju Shou's assessment.

"Then I'll look forward to your insights," Ju Shou ignored the mockery in Xi Zhicai's words, remaining calm as he looked at his counterpart.

"Sure, sure," Xi Zhicai responded lightly. His true thoughts remained hidden, but it was clear that if he got the chance, he wouldn't hesitate to sabotage Ju Shou. After all, Yuan Shao, who controlled Jizhou and Bingzhou with ample supplies of food, horses, and soldiers, was a far greater threat than Liu Bei.

Chapter 310: Poaching Talents

After wasting a considerable amount of time with Ju Shou, Xi Zhicai finally found an opportunity to end the seemingly endless probing. He didn't take Ju Shou's words too seriously—Yanzhou's strategy didn't need any outside interference, and as for Liu Bei, Xi Zhicai would verify everything himself.

After leaving Ju Shou, Xi Zhicai immediately went after the two clustered spiritual talents he had sensed earlier. The ones near the government office were likely Liu Bei's subordinates, but there was still one spiritual talent lingering outside, and that was a prime target for Xi Zhicai to recruit.

Facing the concentrated spiritual talents near the government office made Xi Zhicai somewhat apprehensive. The presence of spiritual talents meant that Liu Bei's team of civil officials was incredibly strong.

As Xi Zhicai hurried towards the direction of the two spiritual talents, he began analyzing the spiritual energy of one of them.

When Xi Zhicai arrived at the Mi family inn and saw the brothers Zhuge Jin and Zhuge Liang, his first impressions were youth and surprise—Zhuge Jin's age was startling, but Zhuge Liang's was even more so.

Upon seeing Zhuge Liang, Xi Zhicai couldn't help but feel a surge of excitement. Even a fool could tell that someone so young with such abilities was bound to be extraordinary.

Having witnessed Liu Bei's remarkably talented team of officials, Xi Zhicai was already considering how to fill Cao Cao's talent gaps. These two unaligned geniuses were a golden opportunity. One of them, Zhuge Liang, even seemed like a natural prodigy.

Wasting no time, Xi Zhicai spent money to inquire about the Zhuge brothers' identities. After a short time, he had all the information he needed.

Quickly going through the collected information, Xi Zhicai formulated a plan. After tidying up his appearance, he approached the Zhuge brothers.

"May I ask if you are Zhuge Ziyu and Zhuge Kongming of the Zhuge clan from Langya?" Xi Zhicai greeted them with a smile as he bowed to Zhuge Jin and Zhuge Liang, who were in the middle of their meal.

"I am Zhuge Ziyu, and this is my younger brother, Zhuge Kongming. May I ask what brings you here, sir?" Zhuge Jin was slightly annoyed at being interrupted during his meal, but seeing the refined demeanor of the man in front of him, he didn't reject Xi Zhicai's approach.

"I am Xi Zhicai, a strategist under Lord Cao. I originally came to Qingzhou to establish an alliance with Governor Liu, but I didn't expect to meet the two prodigies whom my lord's father has praised so highly," Xi Zhicai said, not hesitating to embellish the truth. After all, they were all from Langya—knowing about them wasn't that far-fetched.

"Much honored, much honored," Zhuge Jin said, initially surprised to hear Xi Zhicai's name but quickly standing up to greet him respectfully. "Greetings, Master Xi!"

"Hahaha, no need for such formality. We can treat each other as equals. With your talents, praised by my lord's father, there's no need to stand on ceremony. You're no less talented than I am," Xi Zhicai replied with a laugh.

"Lord Cao's father? Oh, you must be referring to Cao Song, styled Ju Gao?" Zhuge Jin paused for a moment as he recalled the name. Given that both families were from Langya, it wasn't surprising that they had crossed paths before.

Xi Zhicai underestimated the extent of social interaction among noble families from the same region. It turned out that the Zhuge family had indeed visited Cao Song before, given that Cao Song had once held the high office of Three Excellencies, making such a visit reasonable for a former prefect like Zhuge Jin's father.

Zhuce Jin's tone made it clear that he had interacted with Cao Song before, which only increased Xi Zhicai's excitement.

"Indeed. My lord's father speaks highly of you two. I never expected to meet you here in Taishan. Would you consider joining us in Yanzhou? Lord Cao has always been eager to recruit talent," Xi Zhicai said eagerly, already imagining the triumph of bringing two top strategists back to Cao Cao.

Zhuce Jin seemed taken aback but scratched his head and said, "Lord Cao's offer is certainly flattering."

Hearing these words, Xi Zhicai felt that his trip to Qingzhou had already paid off. Not only had he picked up a high-IQ talent in Sima Lang on the way, but now he was also about to secure two more top-tier strategists. It seemed like a winning journey!

"However, I must first return to my family and seek the approval of the elders before considering anything further. But given my uncle's acquaintance with Lord Cao, I don't foresee any issues," Zhuge Jin said with a hint of resignation.

Zhuge Jin was aware of Cao Cao's standing, which wasn't much different from Liu Bei's. Acknowledging the praise from someone of Cao Cao's stature naturally inflated his pride, making him more inclined to consider the offer. Since his younger brother had chosen to follow Liu Bei, it seemed only reasonable for him to seek a different path. With Cao Cao showing such respect, Zhuge Jin thought it might be worth exploring.

Seeing Zhuge Jin's expression, Xi Zhicai knew that he had piqued his interest. After all, the strict protocols of noble families sometimes required such cautious consideration.

"Kongming, how about you? Would you like to join us in Yanzhou?" Xi Zhicai, not content with just recruiting Zhuge Jin, turned his attention to Zhuge Liang.

Zhuge Liang, in a childlike tone, replied, "Sure, if my brother goes, I'll go too. My uncle doesn't allow me to go out alone, so if you take my brother, I'll have to stay home."

Zhuge Jin's eyes flickered with a brief, unreadable emotion before he glanced at the slightly excited Xi Zhicai, who seemed oblivious to any hidden meanings.

As for his younger brother's response, Zhuge Jin, ever the mature one, didn't let his confusion show. Instead, he smiled warmly and said, "My little brother is still young. Without me, the family wouldn't be at ease leaving him alone. Since our parents passed away, I've always taken him along wherever I go."

With a gentle smile, Zhuge Jin patted Zhuge Liang's back, and Zhuge Liang looked up at his brother with wide, innocent eyes. It was a picture of brotherly love and harmony.