

Mythical 311

Chapter 311: Xi Zhicai's True Ability!

In an instant, Xi Zhicai felt at ease, convinced that this trip to Taishan had been well worth it! He had already secured one talent, with two more on the verge of joining him, and one more still awaiting his capture.

After finishing his conversation with Zhuge Jin, Xi Zhicai realized that the more he spoke with him, the more he found Zhuge Jin to be an extraordinary individual. Zhuge Jin's insights often resonated deeply with Xi Zhicai, sparking new thoughts and ideas.

"Ziyu, since we've agreed, I'll send someone to Xuzhou to fetch you when the time comes," Xi Zhicai said with satisfaction, clearly impressed with Zhuge Jin.

"That sounds good. Once I've taken care of family matters, I'll head to Yanzhou. When that time comes, I'll count on you, Brother Zhizai, to recommend me," Zhuge Jin replied earnestly. "I hope you won't mind my presence then."

"Hahaha, I'll be sure to roll out the red carpet for you!" Xi Zhicai laughed heartily.

After chatting a bit more with Zhuge Jin, Xi Zhicai decided it was time to seek out the last spiritual talent in the city for a late-night discussion.

As they left the inn, Xi Zhicai noticed that Dian Wei, who had been following him, was making grumbling noises, clearly expressing his dissatisfaction.

"Erlai, if something's bothering you, just say it. Do you really think I'd mistreat you?" Xi Zhicai teased, clearly in a good mood. "Or are you hungry again? I remember ordering you ten pounds of pork ribs and twenty large steamed buns. Didn't you just finish eating? Are you really looking for another snack?"

"It's not that I'm hungry. I just don't understand why you're treating that scrawny young man so well," Dian Wei said, puzzled. "I don't see what makes him special. He didn't seem any different from the people I've heard talking in taverns."

"Hahaha, Erlai, you're thinking about this? He's no ordinary man. His talents are enough to govern a nation. Those students you heard in the taverns can't compare to him," Xi Zhicai laughed. "This man's wisdom is all within him. He may seem ordinary, but his strategies are invaluable. These two are true prodigies. Now, let's go meet the last genius! I hope we can return fully loaded."

"Why didn't you just tell him that you were staying in Taishan? Why say that?" Zhuge Jin asked his younger brother, curious after confirming that Xi Zhicai had left.

"It's just caution," Zhuge Liang replied simply, not offering further explanation. Zhuge Jin didn't press the issue, understanding that being cautious when away from home was prudent. While one should not harbor malicious intent, it was wise to remain vigilant.

"Cao Mengde, huh. It wouldn't hurt to see for myself. Perhaps he truly is a worthy lord," Zhuge Jin mused, recalling what Xi Zhicai had said. He decided it would be worth visiting Chenliu in person—better to see with his own eyes than rely on assumptions. "In the meantime, let's spend our remaining days in the library. But I do wonder why Brother Boda left so early."

"They're different from us," Zhuge Liang said succinctly.

"Sometimes, I wonder if it's better to spread our family knowledge or keep it close, ensuring that even if the family falls, it can quickly rise again," Zhuge Jin sighed, reflecting on the role of noble families.

"I don't know, but I want to see what happens if we do share our knowledge," Zhuge Liang said, his excitement evident.

Meanwhile, Xi Zhicai and Dian Wei headed towards the location of the last solitary spiritual talent. As they approached, Xi Zhicai sensed a faint but unusual spiritual energy, reminding him of Xiahou Yuan's awakening of his army formation talent. He couldn't help but wonder if there were more rare types of talents.

Having encountered many awakened talents, Xi Zhicai had gathered some knowledge. He deduced that spiritual talents were only found in top-tier intellectuals who had fully formed and unwavering worldviews.

As for military talents, Xi Zhicai had less experience, but he suspected that only top-tier warriors—those who had achieved "inner qi release"—could awaken such talents. He wasn't sure how the awakening process worked, though.

These unusual talents led Xi Zhicai to speculate that some people might possess multiple talents, perhaps in different forms. The idea made him shudder.

Now, sensing a new, faint spiritual talent, Xi Zhicai was intrigued. This could confirm his theory that some individuals could have multiple talents—a discovery worth pursuing.

Confident in his deduction, Xi Zhicai eagerly anticipated recruiting another top-tier strategist.

"Knock, knock, knock!" Without hesitation, Xi Zhicai knocked on the door. After a moment, a little girl with a three-ringed bun poked her head out and asked, "Who are you?"

"I am Xi Zhicai, strategist under the Governor of Yanzhou, Cao Mengde," Xi Zhicai replied with a smile, bowing to the young girl.

"Oh? Oh! I remember who Cao Mengde is. Come in." The little girl scratched her bun. "Yang Lian, entertain the strategist while I go find my sister." She then ran off toward the back yard.

Moments later, a graceful young woman appeared before Xi Zhicai, leaving him momentarily stunned by her elegance. Though he quickly composed himself, he couldn't help but blush slightly.

However, as Xi Zhicai greeted her, he noticed that the faint spiritual talent he sensed earlier emanated from this young woman. Moreover, he heard her refer to Cao Mengde as "my senior brother."

"My lord has been well, but he misses you," Xi Zhicai said, spinning a tale. He had no idea who this woman was, but it didn't matter—Cao Cao's intelligence network probably didn't bother tracking a random woman. Knowing Liu Bei's wife's gender was sufficient.

Seeing a blush spread across the woman's face at his words, Xi Zhicai realized he had a chance. He continued spinning his story, implying that Cao Cao had been pining for her and that it would be best for her to return to Yanzhou, where Cao Cao could protect her.

As for the trouble it might cause Cao Cao if he succeeded in bringing her back, Xi Zhicai was confident that Cao Cao could handle it. After all, bringing back a woman with a spiritual talent would be worth any hardship!

Chapter 312: Are They Really Not Brothers?

Xi Zhicai's words were flawless as he engaged in casual conversation while analyzing Zhuge Liang's spiritual talent. He was more interested in the young Zhuge Liang than Zhuge Jin. Meanwhile, Cai Yan genuinely believed that Xi Zhicai had been sent by Cao Cao to find her, so she let her guard down quickly. The two soon became acquainted, and Xi Zhicai easily extracted Cai Yan's identity.

"Miss Cai, I must confess, I still don't know how you came to be in Taishan. I recall my lord mentioning that you were supposed to be married into the Wei family," Xi Zhicai said awkwardly. After all, he had just claimed that his lord was missing Cai Yan, only to find out that she was already promised to someone else. Flirting with a married woman...

"My father passed away due to Dong Zhuo's tyranny, and I observed mourning for three years, so I never joined the Wei family. However, Zhongdao has since passed, so it seems I won't be able to marry into the Wei family after all," Cai Yan said with a faint expression of sorrow.

"Fortunately, before my father died, he had many friends who took care of me. When Uncle Li left Chang'an, he brought me to Taishan and arranged for me to manage the library here. So, I've been well taken care of. But how has my senior brother been?" Cai Yan asked, her mood lifting slightly as she thought of Li You, who had discreetly handled all her needs.

Xi Zhicai had no reason to doubt that someone had taken care of Cai Yan. After all, Cai Yong, being a respected scholar, had many friends. It wasn't surprising that some of them were capable of assisting her.

He also noted Cai Yan's positive feelings toward Cao Cao. Throughout their conversation, her responses to anything related to Cao Cao were clear and consistent, leaving no doubt in Xi Zhicai's mind.

Although their conversation was brief, Cai Yan quickly grasped the essence of what Xi Zhicai was saying about Cao Cao's situation. Xi Zhicai couldn't help but admire her keen intellect. Many of her thoughts sparked new ideas for him, leaving him impressed with her insight. Her extensive reading of Chen Xi's revolutionary books had clearly influenced her thinking.

Xi Zhicai couldn't help but feel that if Cai Yan had been born a man, she could have been a renowned statesman. However, as a woman, her fate was different. Still, given her relationship with Cao Cao, Xi Zhicai couldn't help but consider the possibility of arranging a union between them. She seemed like the perfect match—elegant, talented, and with a history with his lord.

Yet, Xi Zhicai hesitated due to her reputation as a widow and the unfortunate events in her past. After much contemplation, he decided to report this encounter to Cao Cao and let his lord decide. Cai Yan was talented but carried an air of misfortune. It wasn't his place to make the final decision.

As Xi Zhicai prepared to leave, Cai Yan didn't try to stop him. As a widow, she had always maintained her dignity and purity. She never allowed any man, other than elders, to be alone with her. If her sister hadn't been present, she wouldn't have let Xi Zhicai into her home, even if he was a subordinate of Cao Cao.

After Xi Zhicai left, Cai Yan's younger sister, who had been following her, giggled. "Sister, it seems Brother Cao still has feelings for you."

Before she could finish, Cai Yan flicked her on the forehead, causing her younger sister to tear up slightly. "Hmph, I told you before that Wei Zhongdao was unreliable, but Father insisted on marrying you to that sickly man. Now look at you, stuck in this situation. It's just ridiculous."

Cai Yan glanced at her muttering sister and said nothing. She couldn't help but think back to the days when her father, Cai Yong, was still alive. If only she had resisted more, perhaps even taken inspiration from Sima Xiangru and Zhuo Wenjun's love story, things might not have turned out like this. Every time she thought about it, she envied her younger sister.

After all, Cai Yan's younger sister had eloped with Yang Zhi, even before she was of age. Cai Yong, unable to bear the shame, had no choice but to send her off with a dowry. Now, she had settled down and even given birth to a brilliant son, Yang Hu. However, history didn't record much about her due to her scandalous past.

Back then, Cai Yong had planned to marry his younger daughter to one of his five disciples. But Cai Yan's sister found none of them appealing—Wang Can was too mature, Gu Yong too dull, Ruan Yu too conservative, Lu Cui too rigid, and as for Cao Cao, she had no interest in being her sister's replacement. So, she packed her bags and left, quickly getting together with Yang Zhi, much to Cai Yong's fury. That was why she was married off so young, before she even turned fifteen.

Meanwhile, Xi Zhicai arrived at the last location of spiritual energy he had detected, only to find himself standing in front of the residence of General Liu Bei. Seeing the large characters for "General of the East," Xi Zhicai immediately realized whose house this was.

Xi Zhicai resigned himself to his fate. He had already come this far, so he decided to proceed. Stepping forward, he was quickly stopped by the guards at the gate. With a bow, he addressed them, "Please inform General Liu that Xi Zhicai, a subordinate of Cao Mengde, has come to visit."

The two guards were momentarily surprised before they returned his bow. "Sir, please wait a moment. I will inform our lord."

Soon, one of the guards returned and respectfully invited Xi Zhicai inside.

As Xi Zhicai entered, he was immediately confronted by a massive figure standing in the middle of the path. He stopped in his tracks, confused. Turning around, he glanced at Dian Wei, noticing that the two looked remarkably similar—equally large and equally rugged.

"Are you sure they aren't brothers?" Xi Zhicai mused to himself.

Chapter 313: Winning Won't Be So Easy!

"Mr. Xi, you may enter, but this one cannot," Xu Chu said as he politely gestured to Xi Zhicai while blocking Dian Wei's way.

"And why can't I go in?" Dian Wei growled, glaring at the equally massive figure across from him. He felt the urge to smack the guy twice for stopping him. "I'm here to protect my strategist! How can I ensure his safety if I don't go in?"

"Hmph, with me here, not even a fly can get in!" Xu Chu pounded his chest with pride, producing a series of thudding sounds.

"With you here?" Dian Wei snorted and marched up to Xu Chu, poking him in the chest. What had appeared to be solid muscle sank in like soft fat.

Xu Chu glanced down at the dent in his chest and was momentarily stunned. He then looked up at Dian Wei, his eyes burning with anger. "So, you're tougher than you look. Let me have a try!"

Xu Chu poked Dian Wei's chest with his finger, but it felt like stabbing an iron plate—his finger couldn't make a dent at all. He looked up at Dian Wei and saw a mocking grin.

Noticing Xu Chu's surprised expression, Dian Wei bared his teeth in a grin. "Try harder if you want. Heck, I'll even let you take a punch. With your skills, protecting others? Pfft!"

Xu Chu's anger flared. Relying solely on his physical strength earlier, he now gathered his inner energy into his finger and jabbed it hard at Dian Wei's chest. This time, Dian Wei's muscles actually dented under the force.

Both men paused, momentarily shocked—Dian Wei by the fact that this chunky guy had managed to dent his iron-like muscles, and Xu Chu by the realization that the man before him could take his inner-energy-infused strike and only dent slightly. Was this really a human body?

Dian Wei cracked his chest and stretched his back, a series of cracking sounds emanating from his body. "Kid, you're not bad. But wherever my strategist goes, I go. That's my lord's order. So if you keep blocking me..." Dian Wei twirled his giant halberd threateningly.

"This is Taishan. It doesn't matter who your lord is; you can't bring your weapons into Lord Liu's territory," Xu Chu growled, his aura surging. He demanded that Dian Wei put down his weapon, but Dian Wei simply tightened his grip on his halberd, glaring at Xu Chu with bull-like eyes.

"You dare tell me to put down my weapon? My lord has never asked me to do that, and you want me to? You're asking for it!" Dian Wei roared, slamming his halberd into the stone-paved path, shattering the solid stone into dust.

Xu Chu drew his large saber, enveloping it in a dark aura. Anyone could see that this opponent was formidable. Typically, any warrior who approached would hand over their weapons to Xu Chu. But this was the first time Xu Chu had encountered someone like Dian Wei, who had no intention of relinquishing his weapon.

As Liu Bei's personal guard, Xu Chu was resolute. He couldn't allow someone as dangerous as Dian Wei to approach Liu Bei with a weapon. However, he seemed to have forgotten that Dian Wei viewed him as a similar threat—a beast, just like himself.

Xi Zhicai stepped aside to watch the show. He wasn't concerned about what might happen. In fact, he found it more suspicious if they weren't being monitored, considering this was Taishan. Xi Zhicai had faith in Dian Wei's combat abilities. As long as Dian Wei wasn't defeated, there was nothing to worry about. He knew that if the situation got out of hand, someone would intervene.

While admiring Liu Bei's opulent residence as dusk fell, Xi Zhicai couldn't help but believe some of what Ju Shou had said. This level of extravagance must have been built on burning money. Even Dong Zhuo might not have been this lavish.

Just as Xu Chu and Dian Wei were on the brink of clashing, a middle-aged man with a scholarly aura and short beard stepped out. "Zhongkang, what's going on here?"

"Lord Li, just give me a moment to take down this brute, and I'll report to you," Xu Chu said loudly after glancing at Li You.

"What did you just call me?" Dian Wei roared, raising his halberd to strike.

"Stand down, E Lai!" Xi Zhicai finally put on a stern face and ordered Dian Wei to stop. "This is Lord Liu's residence—such behavior is unacceptable."

After scolding Dian Wei, Xi Zhicai turned to Li You with a smile and bowed. "I am Xi Zhicai, strategist under Cao Mengde, the governor of Yan Province. I have come to visit Lord Liu of Taishan. However, I must say, this is not how guests should be treated."

"Hahaha," Li You chuckled, his eyes gleaming. "Yet, sir, your actions hardly befit a guest either, appearing here in such a confrontational manner."

"My lord and Lord Liu are both loyal subjects of the Han, working for the empire. Treating me this way hardly seems appropriate for a guest," Xi Zhicai replied with a smile.

"Surely you've heard the saying, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do'?" Li You countered with a smile. "But since we're discussing hospitality, how do you explain that brute of a guard bringing such a threatening presence into my master's residence? Still, let's overlook this matter. Zhongkang, stand down."

"E Lai, feel free to relax here. Lord Liu will guarantee my safety; you need not worry," Xi Zhicai said to Dian Wei before turning back to Li You with a respectful bow. "May I have the honor of your name, sir?"

"I am Li You, courtesy name Wenru. It is a pleasure to meet you, Master Xi," Li You replied calmly, already scheming how to deceive this man.

In an instant, Xi Zhicai realized that Ju Shou had been duped by Li You. Through his spiritual talent, Xi Zhicai could clearly sense Li You's talent. It was obvious that Ju Shou had been tricked to death—quite literally. If anyone was going to fall into a trap, it would be Ju Shou. After all, who else but Li You could pull off such a scheme?

But what did it matter to Xi Zhicai if Ju Shou was tricked? A strong Yuan Shao was far more of a threat than Liu Bei's relatively small-scale operations. Quickly piecing everything together, Xi Zhicai decided to feign ignorance, intending to later relay his findings to Ju Shou. His plan was to support Taishan's schemes against Yuan Shao, allowing them to weaken Yuan Shao as much as possible.

Once Yuan Shao was sufficiently weakened, Xi Zhicai planned to position himself as a victim and seek an alliance with Yuan Shao to fight back against Taishan. This, he believed, would best serve Yan Province's interests.

Having made up his mind, Xi Zhicai put on a clueless expression and followed Li You to meet Liu Bei. He was fully prepared to cooperate with whatever plan Li You had, all while secretly plotting to increase the damage to Yuan Shao.

Li You, unaware of Xi Zhicai's intentions, wouldn't have been too surprised if he had known. In the world of intrigue, having one's schemes uncovered was a common occurrence. Did Xi Zhicai really think they didn't have backup plans? Liu Ye's contingency plans were already in place...

Chapter 314: Why Didn't You Mention Your Efficiency Earlier?

After returning home, Chen Xi's steward presented him with a letter and a jade pendant. "Master, today a scholar came by, claiming to be a distant relative of yours. He learned of your upcoming marriage while passing through and left this jade pendant. He said that the rest of the details are in this letter."

Chen Xi took the bamboo tube, opened the wax seal, and pulled out the silk cloth. He was puzzled. A distant relative he didn't even know about? And why did they leave in such a hurry? According to the etiquette of this era, if a relative visited, they should stay for at least three months, or it would be considered disrespectful.

"Uncle Chen, do you recognize this person? Why didn't you insist on them staying?" Chen Xi hadn't read the letter yet and asked with some confusion.

The steward thought for a moment before responding, "The man did resemble you somewhat, but I hadn't seen him before today. I did try to persuade him to stay, but he seemed in a hurry. After leaving the letter, he immediately left in a carriage."

"Oh, I see," Chen Xi replied, a bit helpless. "Well, if we see him again, we'll host him properly. Let me read the letter."

"To my younger brother Zichuan, I am Sima Boda of the Sima family in Henei. Although we have not met, our families are old acquaintances, our ancestors shared close ties..." Chen Xi's eyes widened in shock after reading just the opening lines. Sima Boda—this name was well known, and even more famous was his younger brother, Sima Zhongda, who later became the formidable figure who outlasted Zhuge Liang.

Connecting the dots quickly, Chen Xi rushed out of the house, but after a few steps, he stopped in frustration.

He had just missed Sima Yi and his brother, which was incredibly frustrating.

Chen Xi was deeply troubled. It wasn't just about waiting for opportunities; during the late Han period, famous ministers and generals were always on the move, so it was hard to predict where they might be. It was like when he knew that Pang Tong was a member of the Pang family, and sent Jian Yong and Liu Yan to Jingzhou with instructions to "grab him if possible." But who knew where Pang Tong was at that time? He certainly wasn't with the Pang family!

"Forget it, forget it. Bad luck," Chen Xi muttered, feeling dejected. "Uncle Chen, could you notify Mi Zizhong for me? I need the guest lists from the past ten days."

"Yes, Master," the steward replied, bowing as he left to carry out the task.

Chen Xi shook his head, trying to cheer himself up.

Feeling a bit more at ease, Chen Xi decided that from now on, he wouldn't take any chances. He planned to write down the names of all the famous ministers and generals over the age of ten who might still be wandering around.

He wasn't going to make the list public, but at least the core staff in Mi's establishments—like the shopkeepers—had to memorize it. They would need to report any such individuals they encountered. Whether Pang Tong was in Jingzhou or had wandered off to Yizhou, as long as he stayed in a Mi family's inn, they'd find him. Chen Xi had no intention of missing another opportunity like this.

Before long, the steward returned with the paper and brush, and shortly after, Mi Zhu arrived with a cart full of bamboo slips.

Chen Xi stared at the pile of bamboo slips in disbelief. This was just the record of people staying at Mi's inns in Fenggao for the past ten days. If he considered all of Han China, the number would be overwhelming. No wonder Mi Zhu's business was so profitable—this was a reminder of how much wealth was generated by the five major merchant families.

"Zichuan, these are the guest lists for the current ten-day period, along with some records of those who dined at our establishments," Mi Zhu said as he pointed to the cart.

"Could you help me pick out the people with the surnames Sima and Zhuge from this mess? This is ridiculous—so much information, and in such a hurry too!" Chen Xi sighed. In previous months, the ten-day reports had only contained a few dozen names, and none of them were familiar to him.

"We've already sorted them out," Mi Zhu said with a smug smile. "Every day, all inns in Fenggao—whether owned by our family or others—send us the names of anyone with those surnames. At the end of every ten-day period, we compile the lists. The records from the entire Taishan area are also gathered and sent to me. At the end of each month, I receive the complete list for all of Qing Province, which I then pass on to you."

Chen Xi was stunned as if struck by lightning. He had clearly underestimated Mi Zhu's efficiency. Now that he thought about it, there weren't many people with the surnames Sima and Zhuge. Each ten-day period yielded only a handful of names, and by the end of the month, there were only about a hundred. How had he not realized this earlier?

"Just read them to me—reading them out loud will be faster. I can't believe I underestimated your efficiency. If I had known you were this effective, I would've asked for daily reports!" Chen Xi groaned, resting his head in his hands. This situation was beyond frustrating.

Chapter 315: Zhuge Kongming

"Zhuge Fu, checked in on November 11th..." Mi Zhu began reading from the bamboo slips. "Sima Lang, checked in on November 12th..."

As Mi Zhu continued reading, Chen Xi found himself growing drowsy. Aside from the names Sima Lang and Sima Yi, which caused him some heartache, none of the names really registered.

"Zhuge Jin, checked in at Mi's Inn on November 11th," Mi Zhu read, just as Chen Xi was on the verge of falling asleep. The familiar name jolted him awake. Before he could ask, Mi Zhu continued, "Zhuge Liang, checked in at Mi's Inn on November 11th."

"Stop!" Chen Xi was suddenly wide awake. He grabbed the bamboo slip, staring at the two names. After a long pause, he slammed the table, ignoring the pain in his hand, and laughed. "Hahaha, losing one thing and gaining another! Let's go, we must meet these two talents!"

Ignoring the shocked expressions around him, Chen Xi rushed outside. The carriage was already waiting, and he was determined not to miss this opportunity. Losing Sima Yi was a setback, but finding Zhuge Liang? Liu Xuande's luck was truly impressive!

After a few steps, Chen Xi realized something and awkwardly turned to Mi Zhu. "Zizhong, which inn are these two staying at?"

"Flip the bamboo slip over; the location is engraved on the back," Mi Zhu replied quickly.

Chen Xi flipped the slip and found the engraving in the bottom right corner. "Central Inn?" he murmured, his thoughts turning to the coincidence. Sima Yi and Zhuge Liang, staying at the same place on the same day—were they destined to meet? He wondered if there had been any sparks between them, like Sima Yi taking advantage of his age to outmatch the young Zhuge Liang.

In Chen Xi's mind, Zhuge Liang was still young and couldn't be too much of a prodigy just yet. Over time, the two-year age difference might even out, but for now, he doubted Zhuge Liang could overpower Sima Yi. As for their spiritual talents, Chen Xi guessed that Sima Yi might have already awakened his, possibly the one that caused everyone to be affected last time. As for Zhuge Liang, he still seemed too young.

Besides, the Sima brothers had sent a gift for his wedding, so Chen Xi felt a bit obligated to side with Sima Yi. After all, when Zhuge Liang grew up, he'd probably bully Sima Yi quite a bit. If Sima Yi didn't take advantage now, he might never get the chance again.

"Zizhong, let's hurry over there. If we let these two slip away, we'd be fools!" Chen Xi urged, excitement evident in his voice.

"Let's go, let's go!" Mi Zhu responded with equal urgency. He grabbed Chen Xi and rushed towards his carriage. If Chen Xi said these two were more talented than Fazheng, they had to be worth it. Losing them would be a disaster for Liu Bei's cause.

Once in the carriage, Mi Zhu urged the driver to go as fast as possible. Normally composed, Mi Zhu was now throwing caution to the wind, driving at breakneck speed towards Central Inn. It seemed like he wouldn't even stop if they hit someone—he'd deal with that later, once Zhuge Liang was secured.

"Hey, be careful! If Bo Ning catches us speeding like this, we'll be in trouble!" Chen Xi clung to the carriage window, a bit alarmed by the reckless pace.

"We'll deal with that after we've met these two," Mi Zhu replied, unfazed. "If Bo Ning comes after us, I'll just turn myself in later. Worst-case scenario, I'll pay a fine. It's worth it if we can secure these talents."

"Don't worry; they're not going anywhere," Chen Xi said, finally relaxing as he adjusted to the wild ride.

"You've already let two get away, and now you're saying these two won't run?" Mi Zhu shot back, glaring at Chen Xi. "Tell me what happened—how did two Fazheng-level talents slip through your fingers?" He clutched his chest as if he were about to faint from the shock.

Chen Xi explained the situation as best he could, and Mi Zhu's glare deepened. "Zichuan, if you knew their names, you should have let me handle it! My family's business spans the empire. Finding a scholar isn't easy, but it's a lot better than just sitting around waiting!"

Chen Xi could only offer a wry smile and a shake of his head. "Once you meet these two, you'll understand why I acted as I did."

The carriage sped through the city, nearly getting stopped by the guards several times. However, Chen Xi's reputation and Mi Zhu's insignia were enough to let them pass, even at such a reckless speed.

"We've arrived, Master," the driver announced as they reached Central Inn. The journey had been swift but smooth, and they were there in no time.

"Good." Mi Zhu jumped out of the carriage, not bothering with the usual formalities. He was too eager to meet the talents Chen Xi had mentioned.

"Welcome, Master! Welcome, Sir Chen!" The innkeeper, spotting Mi Zhu and Chen Xi, rushed to greet them.

"Let's go inside," Chen Xi said, scanning the dining hall. None of the patrons matched Zhuge Jin or Zhuge Liang's descriptions, so he headed towards the rooms.

Just as they were about to continue searching, a young man in fine clothing descended the stairs. His refined demeanor and bright eyes immediately caught Chen Xi's attention. This had to be him—Zhuge Liang!

Chapter 316: Some Things Can't Be Forced

Chen Xi was initially overjoyed, but his brow soon furrowed. "Kongming, since your brother, Zhuge Ziyu, knows why I'm here, why didn't he come down?"

Seeing Zhuge Liang come down alone, Chen Xi already knew what had happened, but he still asked, unwilling to give up.

"We are a noble family, and in this generation, there are not many outstanding individuals," Zhuge Liang replied with a bow, his words revealing all the helplessness of their situation.

"May I meet him?" Chen Xi asked, feeling somewhat resigned. Being part of a noble family not only meant holding onto knowledge and unending glory but also shouldering a responsibility that someone had to bear.

Zhuce Liang shook his head slightly. "I consider myself no weaker than my brother. He has chosen his path, and I have chosen mine."

Zhuge Liang's demeanor reminded Mi Zhu of Lu Su's benevolence and Chen Xi's wisdom. His calm expression and composed tone, neither humble nor arrogant, left Mi Zhu astonished. Chen Xi was right—this young man might surpass Fazheng in talent.

"Then so be it," Chen Xi said reluctantly. "Will you stay here, or move to live with us?"

"I will leave. Once I'm gone, my brother will also return to Xu Province, Langya," Zhuge Liang replied calmly, showing no confusion or sorrow at parting from his family.

"Alright, from now on, you will assist me in handling governmental affairs. If I am ever unavailable, you can find someone else to help," Chen Xi said, looking at Zhuge Liang.

"Very well. I also need a lot of practical experience. But are you so confident that I can handle it?" Zhuge Liang's eyes flashed with a hint of curiosity.

"If things go wrong, they go wrong. We've all been through it. I just had a setback myself," Chen Xi said nonchalantly. "Mount Tai can handle a few bumps. I believe any losses will be compensated for elsewhere, so it's all fine."

This was how Chen Xi treated Zhuge Liang. With others, he would have been more cautious before saying such things, or at least taken the time to educate them. But with Zhuge Liang, there was no need. As a symbol of wisdom through the ages, once Zhuge Liang made a mistake, he wouldn't make the same one twice. Except for overworking himself or occasionally misjudging people, everything else was minor.

"Zichuan!" Mi Zhu signaled with his eyes but saw no reaction, so he called out to Chen Xi in a low voice.

"Kongming, you stay here. I need to speak with Zizhong about something. The promises I made to you won't change," Chen Xi said with a smile, knowing what Mi Zhu wanted to discuss. He, too, hesitated about Zhuge Jin but ultimately decided against it.

"Zichuan, are you really going to give up on the older one upstairs? This Zhuge Kongming shows such maturity at such a young age. In a few more years, he won't be any less talented than Fazheng. How can we let such a genius fall into someone else's hands?" Mi Zhu said grimly, clearly frustrated with Chen Xi's decision.

To Mi Zhu, securing talent like Zhuge Liang was crucial for building an empire. After seeing Zhuge Liang, he realized that Zhuge Jin, also hailed as a genius by Chen Xi, should not be allowed to slip through their fingers either. He had to be kept within their grasp.

"I'm afraid that's not possible," Chen Xi replied helplessly.

"Why not? We can force him to stay. With so many of us here, we should be able to persuade him," Mi Zhu said angrily, seeing this as Chen Xi's failure to act.

"First of all, we can't hurt him, right? We can't harm him, and we need to treat him well, both because of his talents and because of Kongming. You agree with that, don't you?" Chen Xi shrugged.

"I'll take care of all that," Mi Zhu said, patting his chest confidently.

"It's not that simple. Because of Kongming, we can't harm his brother. If we imprison him, sooner or later there will be a lapse, and Kongming will help him escape," Chen Xi sighed. "This would go against his brother's wishes. And if we restrict Kongming, we'll push him away. You wouldn't want to kill his brother, would you?"

Hearing this, Mi Zhu's expression became conflicted. He realized that trying to imprison Zhuge Jin after recruiting Zhuge Liang was impossible. Killing Zhuge Jin wasn't an option either. Not only would Liu Bei never allow it, but it would also discourage other talents from joining them. This would go against Liu Bei's interests.

"Are we really just going to let him leave?" Mi Zhu asked bitterly.

"That's how noble families operate. But we've already secured the finest talent. Just treat Zhuge Ziyu with respect, ensure his safe departure, and send him on his way," Chen Xi said with a smile.

These ancient noble families excelled at hedging their bets, never putting all their eggs in one basket. After Chen Xi's marriage, more and more noble families would begin to support Liu Bei. Soon, Liu Bei would attract many scions of these families.

Although Chen Xi knew that the talents coming to Liu Bei would not be the best, they would still be capable individuals, more than qualified to serve as county or district officials.

Even if noble families despised Liu Bei, they would still hedge their bets. If Liu Bei had a chance to unify the realm, these families would ensure they had some connection to him. That way, even if the most talented generation failed, as long as a branch of the family survived with its knowledge intact, it could rise again—it would just be a matter of time.

"Letting him go like this—I can't accept it!" Mi Zhu's eyes burned with anger. "After seeing Zhuge Kongming, I know you weren't exaggerating. If someone like him ends up working against us, it would be better to eliminate the threat now!" A cold glint appeared in Mi Zhu's eyes.

"Zhuge Kongming is the essence of the Zhuge family. His brother is excellent, but not as much as him. Leave room for others, and don't expect perfection. Securing Zhuge Kongming is already a stroke of luck. Let's end it here," Chen Xi said firmly.

Chen Xi glanced at Mi Zhu. He didn't want Mi Zhu, who was usually kind-hearted, to come into conflict with Zhuge Liang for Liu Bei's sake. With Zhuge Liang's abilities, any hostile move from Mi Zhu would be detected, making things difficult for Liu Bei. It would be better to treat Zhuge Jin with courtesy and deal with the situation later.

Mi Zhu sighed deeply. He knew he had been impulsive. Capturing the brother and killing him was not something a benevolent ruler could do. And Liu Bei was exactly that kind of ruler. Even knowing that Zhuge Jin might oppose them in the future, Liu Bei would still choose righteousness and cut any ties that bound them.

"Well, let's hope you're right. I hope Kongming really is the finest of the Zhuge family," Mi Zhu said, trying to dispel his thoughts.

"I know you're thinking of the bigger picture, but some things just can't be forced," Chen Xi said with a sigh. When he saw Zhuge Liang come down alone, he realized why Sima Lang and Sima Yi hadn't wanted to show themselves to him.

Chapter 317: Different Paths Can't Be Pursued Together

"Different paths can't be pursued together!" Chen Xi said with a bitter smile as he escorted Zhuge Liang. "Some people act out of responsibility, some for power, and others for ideals. No wonder the ancients said, 'A true confidant is hard to find.'"

Zhuce Liang, though he felt something, did not respond to Chen Xi's words. He simply followed Chen Xi onto the carriage, while Zhuge Jin, sitting on the second floor, quietly watched the scene unfold. Placing his wine cup down, he realized that part of what Chen Xi had said was directed at him.

As the carriage slowly drove away, Zhuge Jin raised his cup towards it from afar and said, "Kongming, I hope you succeed. You're not just choosing your own freedom; I'm not carrying just my own responsibilities. May the Zhuge family rely on you in the future!"

Setting his cup down heavily, Zhuge Jin's previously uncertain gaze became resolute once again. He entrusted freedom to his younger brother, while he would bear the responsibility.

"Have you met Sima Zhongda?" Chen Xi asked after getting into the carriage, sweeping away his earlier frustration. He was curious whether Zhuge Liang, who had lived next door to Sima Yi, had ever interacted with him, and if so, who had come out on top.

"Sima Zhongda?" Zhuge Liang recalled the name vividly. Besides Pang Tong, Sima Yi was the first peer who had exerted such immense pressure on him.

"Yes, he's two years older than you and lived right next to you," Chen Xi described. He felt a bit disappointed. Hadn't the Prime Minister and Grand Commandant met? It seemed unusual that nothing noteworthy had happened.

"Oh, that guy... he's very capable," Zhuge Liang remarked calmly, as if he were merely talking about some insignificant passerby.

"Wait, you interacted with him?" Chen Xi immediately perked up. The idea of a young Zhuge Liang and a young Sima Yi crossing paths excited him. Zhuge Liang's indifferent tone suggested that something had indeed happened.

"Two days ago, he caused some trouble. I wasn't in the best of moods, so I decided to confront him. However, he didn't take losing very well," Zhuge Liang said with a slight side glance.

"Details, details!" Chen Xi's interest was fully piqued.

"The first game of Go, he was careless and lost. In the second game, he claimed to be fully focused but still lost. Then, in frustration, he unleashed his spiritual talent to intimidate me, but ended up getting scared himself when I countered with my own spiritual power. We played another round, and though it

was rushed, he lost again," Zhuge Liang recounted with a calm demeanor, though his expression carried a trace of pride.

Chen Xi propped his head on his hand, realizing everything had come together. Sima Yi had apparently thrown a tantrum after losing, unleashing his spiritual talent, which diminished Zhuge Liang's and everyone else's spiritual talents in Fenggao City, except for Chen Xi's. It seemed that even the famously patient Sima Yi had moments of pettiness—perhaps due to his youth.

On the other side, Mi Zhu was in shock. He realized that the intelligence and mental fortitude of this child before him surpassed his own, despite his lack of life experience and governance skills.

Mi Zhu's heart ached even more when he heard that a child of similar ability had once been staying at his establishment, lost his temper over a game of Go, unleashed his spiritual talent, and then left.

"Hey, hey, hey, Zizhong, what's wrong?" Chen Xi anxiously patted Mi Zhu, who was clutching his chest and twitching.

"My heart hurts..." Mi Zhu finally managed to say. "He's even more monstrous than Fazheng. He's more brilliant than you. How could we let them slip away? Ah, I want to go back and grab Zhuge Ziyu too."

Mi Zhu had completely abandoned his usual elegant demeanor, and he didn't even care that Zhuge Liang was present. He was in a state of utter despair.

"Alright, alright. Those two who left are distant relatives of mine, but unfortunately, their departure was inevitable due to differences in paths. So, there's no point in losing your mind over it," Chen Xi said with resignation. He had come to terms with it—Sima Yi and Sima Lang not visiting his home already spoke volumes. Their paths were simply different.

After calming Mi Zhu down, Chen Xi shifted his focus back to Zhuge Liang. He was convinced that Zhuge Liang wasn't exaggerating—Sima Yi had indeed lost three matches in a row! It seemed that whenever the Prime Minister and the Grand Commandant met, their battle prowess became somewhat skewed.

If Sima Yi had nullified Zhuge Liang's spiritual talent and still lost, it could only mean that the gap between them was too large for spiritual talents to bridge. Or perhaps Sima Yi's spiritual talent didn't

enhance his abilities directly. After all, most spiritual talents, when activated, boosted cognitive functions—even Lu Su's talent, which had nothing to do with intellect, still enhanced his thinking ability.

"So, Kongming, do you think Zhongda's spiritual talent has any weaknesses?" Chen Xi asked with a smile.

"It doesn't distinguish between friend and foe," Zhuge Liang replied succinctly, leaving the rest for Chen Xi to interpret.

Chen Xi was taken aback by Zhuge Liang's answer—this wasn't the typical behavior of a twelve-year-old. Truly, Zhuge Liang's wisdom was almost otherworldly.

"Do you have evidence?" Chen Xi asked curiously.

"My brother and Sima Boda also lost their spiritual talents. Sima Zhongda can't control who his power affects," Zhuge Liang replied calmly.

"Thank you," Chen Xi said, now understanding that Mount Tai had gained an advantage. After all, his own talent couldn't be nullified.

Meanwhile, Xun Yu was entirely unaware that his plan had been thwarted and was still carefully handling Li You, trying to convince him that he genuinely wanted to send a woman to Liu Bei.

"Brother Zicai, let's consider this settled," Li You said with a hearty laugh.

"Of course, of course! I'll write to my lord about this right away—oh no, I'll write the letter right here and now to inform him. He will certainly relieve Lord Xuande from his difficulties. Brother Wenru, rest assured," Xun Yu said with feigned joy.

Outside Liu Bei's main hall, Xu Chu and Dian Wei were glaring at each other, ready to pounce at any moment. If not for their strict orders as personal guards, they would have already started fighting. Despite their restraint, the tension between them had escalated to the point where they were practically fuming, itching to give each other a good beating.

"Let's go, Evil Lai," Xun Yu said calmly as he left the hall, seeing Dian Wei still facing off against Xu Chu. From his estimation, it would only take another day or two to fully decipher Zhuge Liang's spiritual talent, so he planned to return to the inn and focus entirely on the task. The wedding and intelligence matters would be handed over to Chen Qun.

"Wait a moment, Strategist!" Dian Wei said as he approached Xu Chu. "You're Xu Chu, right? You dared to challenge me earlier. Meet me outside the city, and I'll show you what real strength is!"

"Name the place, and I'll be there!" Xu Chu said, lifting his head with pride as he glared back at Dian Wei.

"You just wait! You'll get your challenge tonight!" Dian Wei slung his twin halberds over his back and stormed off, already preparing to leave this arrogant brute bruised and battered by morning.

Chapter 318: When the Embodiment of Wisdom Encounters Millennia of Knowledge

Xizhi Cai smiled and bowed to Li You, who didn't mind the gesture. As long as they remained in Taishan, Xu Chu would be safe. There would certainly be a crowd of onlookers, and even if Dian Wei were as strong as Lu Bu, he couldn't withstand so many people. If he dared to kill, Dian Wei would never make it back.

After watching Xizhi Cai leave, Li You turned his gaze to Xu Chu. "Do you think you can beat him? According to the intelligence from Yanzhou, even Lu Bu couldn't gain the upper hand in a melee against that guy."

"Don't worry, Chief. The other guy may be strong, but when it comes to raw power, I, Xu Zhongkang, fear no one!" Xu Chu said, flexing his fists. "I'll make sure he ends up battered and bruised."

"Alright, just don't kill him. Beating him half to death is fine, though. You'll both recover quickly. Do you need me to have Generals Zhang and Hua stand by to support you?" Li You asked, recalling Zhang Fei's description of Xu Chu's strength and Lu Bu's comments about Zhang Fei's power. Xu Chu seemed reliable.

"No need. Just have General Zhang protect our lord. I'll make sure that guy understands true strength," Xu Chu said with a hearty laugh.

On the other side, Xizhi Cai was asking Dian Wei a similar question and received the same response. Dian Wei assured him that he would definitely treat his opponent like a punching bag.

"That fat guy may be strong, but he's definitely no match for me," Dian Wei said confidently. He had absolute faith in his own strength.

"Alright, just don't kill him," Xizhi Cai replied nonchalantly. He already understood that his opponent was on par with an internal energy expert. For someone of that level, external injuries wouldn't be a big deal as long as they were well-fed and still breathing.

After returning to the inn, Xizhi Cai helped Dian Wei write a challenge letter, using ancient seal script so complex that even Xizhi Cai had to look up some of the characters. Once finished, he had Dian Wei send it off.

When Xu Chu received the letter, he couldn't recognize a single word on it. To him, it felt like a taunt about his intelligence, mocking him for being uneducated and illiterate.

"Chief Li, can you help me read this challenge letter?" Xu Chu asked, scratching the back of his head in embarrassment.

"Sure." Li You, who was about to head home, was a bit puzzled by Xu Chu's request but quickly understood the situation. "You can't read it? I thought your family had a private tutor. Didn't you study when you were younger?"

Opening the letter, Li You nearly spat out blood. This was clearly a display of intellect, showing off that the writer was well-read.

"It says: Tomorrow morning, five miles outside the eastern gate, a one-on-one duel. If you're afraid of losing, feel free to bring your friends. Dian Wei. I know you probably can't read what I wrote, but seeing your size, it's obvious you're not the sharpest tool in the shed. I won't insult you any further." Li You translated the message with some effort, though the meaning was clear enough.

Xu Chu's face turned as dark as coal. He grabbed the bamboo slip and crushed it into powder.
"Tomorrow, I'm going to beat him so badly he won't be able to take care of himself!"

"Alright, Zhongkang, do your best. Consider this a day off to relax," Li You said with a sigh, patting Xu Chu on the back.

By the time Chen Xi finished introducing Zhuge Liang to all the civil and military officials in Taishan, night had fallen.

"Welcome home, Master," the Chen family steward greeted as he opened the door and bowed.

"No one else came by, right? From now on, this young man will be staying with us. Treat him as a distinguished guest," Chen Xi instructed. He didn't want to take advantage of Zhuge Liang; after all, as a childless nobleman, he saw little difference between being called "Master" or "Young Master."

"Chen Changwen, the head of the Chen family in Yingchuan, is here," the steward said, noticeably excited.

"Oh, just give me his visiting card. I'll greet him when he arrives. I also have some matters to discuss with him," Chen Xi said. If Chen Qun didn't show up, it would openly reveal the conflict between them. Although their differences were not deep-rooted—Chen Xi sought freedom while Chen Qun pursued power—showing respect was important, especially after Chen Xi had demonstrated his capabilities. If Chen Qun didn't attend the wedding, it would cause a stir.

"Do you prefer to stay in the outer courtyard or the inner courtyard?" Chen Xi asked Zhuge Liang.

"What's the difference?" Zhuge Liang inquired, puzzled.

"The outer courtyard has only male servants, except for the steward's wife. The inner courtyard is all women, except for me," Chen Xi explained, offering a comment that left Zhuge Liang speechless.

"Whichever is fine," Zhuge Liang replied, a faint blush crossing his face.

"Alright, then stay in the inner courtyard. I'll give you a private residence," Chen Xi said casually before turning to the steward. "Assign Kongming ten maids. Make sure he has everything he needs—clothes, food, lodging, and access to books. He can borrow any volumes he needs from Cai Zhaoji's collection."

Then, turning to Zhuge Liang, Chen Xi added, "Just to be clear, you can look, but no touching. At least not for the next two years."

Zhugue Liang, who had been composed until now, suddenly felt embarrassed. "Haha, just kidding. We have too many maids at home. Occasionally, people send more over, and now we could form a whole squad," Chen Xi said with a wry smile.

Whenever a general returned victorious, they would present Chen Xi with a few maids. Combined with the ones Liu Bei had gifted him, Chen Xi finally understood why ancient officials often had dozens of concubines. At this rate, it wouldn't be surprising if his household staff exceeded a hundred by next year. However, Chen Xi found it hard to treat these women as mere playthings, as his moral and ethical values, formed over decades, hadn't been completely eroded.

For this reason, Chen Xi had long told the maids in his household that any who found a suitable match and wished to marry would receive a dowry from him. However, so far, none had taken him up on the offer. Perhaps it was because there wasn't much work in his household, and the maids enjoyed a lot of free time. Since neither Chen Lan nor Fan Jian troubled them, and they had plenty of time to rest, they preferred staying rather than leaving. Chen Xi couldn't bring himself to send them all away, so he provided them with books and had Chen Lan or Fan Jian teach them whenever they had time.

"Hmm, they all know how to read. If you need them to copy or write something, they can help. Besides borrowing books from Cai Zhaoji, you can also look through my collection of miscellaneous books," Chen Xi said with a smile.

Zhugue Liang had no idea what Chen Xi's "miscellaneous books" were, but when he received them that evening, he was shocked. The writing style, the verbosity, the radical ideas—were these really written by Chen Xi?

For the first time, Zhugue Liang realized that a person's wisdom could be so eccentric. One book extolled the virtues of hard work, while the next argued that talent could overshadow even ninety-nine times the effort. One book praised the benefits of unification, while another championed the advantages of diversity. After reading a few, Zhugue Liang decided he couldn't continue; if he did, he feared Chen Xi's unconventional thinking might start to influence him.

Chapter 319: Trouble Arises...

Early in the morning, after finishing breakfast, Zhuge Liang came over with a few books in his hands, only to find Chen Xi groggily using a spoon to sip porridge.

"Oh, Kongming, come join me for breakfast," Chen Xi said, motioning for a maid to bring Zhuge Liang a bowl as well. The food in this household was pretty much the same for everyone.

"Did you write this book?" Zhuge Liang asked, not touching the food, and instead placing the handwritten manuscripts on the table.

"Success and Diligence? Talent and Hard Work?" Chen Xi yawned and scratched his unkempt hair. Recently, Fan Jian and Chen Lan hadn't been staying at the Chen residence, and technically, during the day, they weren't supposed to be here either. The custom was to live separately before marriage, and since no one was around to manage him, Chen Xi had become quite lax with his hair grooming.

As for the maid who was supposed to help Chen Xi with his grooming, she was completely at a loss with him. Although the master was easygoing, what he said went. If he didn't want you to comb his hair, even if you begged, he wouldn't let you.

"Yes, I wrote it," Chen Xi replied honestly. He had indeed written it, borrowing from his knowledge and jotting it down during moments of boredom.

"Can you tell me if these theories are correct?" Zhuge Liang asked, clearly struggling with the conflicting ideas in the books.

"They're all correct," Chen Xi replied casually as he continued sipping his porridge. He wasn't fully awake yet, and he was missing the routine of being woken up and having his hair done for him.

"But the content of these books is contradictory!" Zhuge Liang was clearly frustrated. It was already late in the morning, and Chen Xi still seemed half-asleep, showing no sign of getting to work.

"Chen Yue, go to Jian'er's room and fetch the book titled Contradiction: Opposition and Unity," Chen Xi instructed one of the nearby maids, not in the mood to explain further.

"What is that?" Zhuge Liang asked, intrigued.

"It's a book that will help you understand," Chen Xi replied nonchalantly, then picked up his bowl and started shoveling porridge into his mouth. Normally, by this time, Fan Jian or Chen Lan would have arrived.

"Here it is," the maid handed the book to Chen Xi, who then passed it to Zhuge Liang.

"This book, despite its many revisions and contradictions, is called Contradiction: Opposition and Unity. Some concepts in it can only be understood through reflection," Chen Xi explained as he handed over the book. Meanwhile, he started tying up his hair, realizing that he would have to manage without someone to do it for him until the wedding.

"Master, let me handle that," the maid, Chen Yue, offered, noticing Chen Xi struggling with his hair.

"Alright, alright, it's become a hassle lately," Chen Xi sighed, giving up on doing it himself.

The book wasn't very thick, and by the time Chen Yue had finished tying Chen Xi's hair, Zhuge Liang had already read through it.

"Any questions?" Chen Xi asked.

"No more questions. Right and wrong are relative, depending on the person," Zhuge Liang replied, looking somewhat conflicted. Though the new book was riddled with errors, he could still sense the underlying correct theories. This left him unsure of what to think.

"Just treat those books as a way to pass the time," Chen Xi said casually. However, Zhuge Liang, ever the cautious one, couldn't bring himself to take such a relaxed attitude toward knowledge.

"Do you want to join me at the government office or head to the library to read?" Chen Xi asked offhandedly.

"I'll go and learn how to handle governmental affairs," Zhuge Liang decided after a moment's thought. He could always study books later; gaining experience in governance seemed more pressing.

As Chen Xi led Zhuge Liang to the government office, Dian Wei was already heading out with his large halberd, while Xu Chu was gearing up with his large blade. Both were eager to give the other a good thrashing.

By the time Chen Xi and Zhuge Liang actually reached the government office, it was nearly midday, much to Zhuge Liang's frustration. In his mind, a diligent official should wake up early and work tirelessly to maintain order, sleeping later than a dog and rising earlier than a rooster. The leisurely pace at which Chen Xi approached his duties was almost unbearable for him.

Chen Xi, noticing Zhuge Liang's dark expression, couldn't help but chuckle internally. He knew that Zhuge Liang's biggest flaw was his over-diligence, a trait that Chen Xi believed would eventually lead to his downfall. Therefore, Chen Xi's primary goal in reforming Zhuge Liang was to get him to abandon his tireless work ethic and learn to enjoy life more.

"Morning, everyone!" Chen Xi greeted as he entered. The usual crowd was already present, grabbing a bite to eat to start the day. Everyone had adopted Chen Xi's more relaxed approach to governance.

"You're early today, Zichuan," Fazheng, yawning and with his hair still messy, remarked. "So this is Kongming? Why not let him study under me?"

Chen Xi could tell at a glance what Fazheng was thinking. After being tormented by others for so long, Fazheng finally had a "junior" to take under his wing, and he couldn't wait to inflict some payback.

"Forget it. You haven't even finished your own training," Chen Xi replied casually. "Kongming, take a seat here. Help yourself to anything you like."

"Things have gotten interesting recently," Jia Xu remarked, glancing at Zhuge Liang. Unlike Fazheng's mischievous demeanor, Zhuge Liang exuded a calmness that made Jia Xu take him seriously. "Chen

Yuanlong sent us word that Tao Gongzu recently hosted a feast for Cao Mengde's father, and the two drank and made merry together."

"What did you say?" Chen Xi froze.

"Nothing much, just that it seems Tao Gongzu is losing faith in the alliance and is looking for a new backer," Liu Ye responded nonchalantly.

"Which general escorted Cao Ju'gao out of Xuzhou?" Chen Xi asked.

Fazheng paused, recalling the unusual behavior of Chen Deng, and said with a twitch in his eye, "You don't mean to suggest that there's a faction within Xuzhou plotting against Tao Qianzhi, do you?"

"Zhang Kai, a former Yellow Turban general! We won't be able to intervene in time," Jia Xu said, frowning. "However, this does present us with an opportunity. Cao Mengde is no weakling, and although Tao Gongzu still commands elite troops from Danyang, he's old and frail. If internal forces pressure him, there's a high chance he'll turn to us for support."

The strategists in the room all considered the situation thoughtfully. A clash with Cao Cao seemed inevitable, but they were confident. Liu Bei had the endurance, and Cao Cao couldn't outlast him. Chen Xi's ongoing strategic preparations were no joke.

"Prepare yourselves. We'll know the outcome within twenty days at most. The main issue with Xuzhou is its distance from Yanzhou. If not for Cao Cao's scorched earth tactics, Zichuan's wedding might have been jeopardized," Jia Xu said with a smile.

Chen Xi could only smile bitterly. Though Tao Qianzhi, with his Danyang elite troops, seemed unlikely to fall easily, the actions of someone like Cao Bao had taught everyone a hard lesson about the dangers of incompetent leadership.

Back at the inn, Xizhi Cai suddenly coughed up a mouthful of blood and collapsed onto his bed.

Chapter 320: Growing Distant

Meanwhile, in Chenliu, Yanzhou...

"Lord Cao, although Wenli has indeed made a grave mistake, he is still a renowned scholar and his intentions were ultimately for the benefit of the Han Dynasty. I beseech you to spare him!" Chen Gong rushed in as soon as he learned of Cao Cao's plan to execute Bian Rang, hoping to persuade him otherwise.

"Gongtai, this matter is not up for discussion. Bian Rang conspired with outside forces to seize control of Yanzhou. How can I not execute him?" Cao Cao glared at Chen Gong, his face dark and grim.

"Lord Cao, Wenli was merely momentarily confused, and his actions were not intended to seize Yanzhou!" Chen Gong argued fervently. "He merely sought to unite the various warlords to rescue the Emperor."

"Rescue the Emperor? Such matters are for us, the governors and provincial leaders, to handle. What he did wasn't rescuing the Emperor; it was conspiring with Yuan Shao!" Cao Cao fumed. Realizing that his tone toward Chen Gong might have been too harsh, he sighed and softened his voice, trying to soothe him. "The world is in chaos, and our power is not yet dominant. Only by securing our own position can we truly protect the Emperor."

Chen Gong was taken aback, feeling as though the Cao Cao before him was a stranger. He lowered his head, deep in thought, unsure of what was running through his mind.

"Gongtai, was there some issue with that previous matter?" Cao Cao asked, seemingly wanting to change the subject and avoid further discussion of Bian Rang.

"Lu Bu's might is unparalleled," Chen Gong muttered quietly.

"Indeed, Lu Bu is extraordinarily powerful, far beyond ordinary generals. Fortunately, I have warriors like Dian Wei under my command," Cao Cao remarked, praising his own men instead of showing any disappointment.

Chen Gong left Cao Cao's quarters feeling despondent. He couldn't understand why Cao Cao had become so petty. Where was the bold and heroic Cao Mengde of old?

Chen Gong's mind wandered to the straightforward Lu Bu, recalling their earlier meeting. A strange and indescribable feeling began to grow within him.

Chen Gong found himself unknowingly thinking about Lu Bu. He couldn't explain it, but ever since meeting Lu Bu, he had developed an admiration for him. Previously, he had been prepared to eliminate Lu Bu and take control of his troops for Cao Cao. However, after their encounter, Chen Gong silently abandoned his plan and instead shared drinks with Lu Bu. If not for this change of heart, Lu Bu would likely be dead by now.

Chen Gong reflected on these thoughts, and as his frustration with Cao Cao grew, so did his resentment.

The more Chen Gong dwelled on it, the angrier he became. He was deeply displeased with Cao Cao's actions in executing a loyal servant of the Han.

Back at his home, still brooding over recent events, Chen Gong wrote a letter and sent it to Lu Bu, instructing him to stay in Henei for the time being. Chen Gong was clearly conflicted, but after a while, he once again steeled his resolve.

Though his actions might have been questionable, Chen Gong consoled himself, thinking that his plan to pit two tigers against each other would ultimately weaken Yuan Shao. After all, he still harbored some doubts...

In contrast to his previous incident with spitting blood due to duplicating Sima Yi's talent, this time, Xizhi Cai's condition was far worse. If last time had damaged his vitality, this time it struck at his very foundation. As he lay on his bed, coughing up blood, Xizhi Cai knew that his days were numbered—perhaps he wouldn't even survive this ordeal.

Despite his frail state, Xizhi Cai did not lose consciousness. Instead, he forced himself to stay awake, struggling to push a porcelain pillow off the bed to create a loud noise.

Hearing the commotion from Xizhi Cai's room, the guards immediately rushed in. Seeing his ashen face and frail body, they were shocked. "Quick, get a doctor!" one of them shouted.

"Call... Changwen..." Xizhi Cai managed to utter with great difficulty.

Upon hearing that Xizhi Cai had once again spat blood, Chen Qun rushed to the rear courtyard. "Zhizai!" he cried out.

"Return... to Chenliu... Give... the letter... to... my lord..." Xizhi Cai, seeing Chen Qun, mustered the last of his strength to point to a white paper on the bookshelf. But before he could finish, his vision went dark, and his raised hand fell limp onto the bed.

"Zhizai!" Chen Qun shouted in panic, rushing to his side.

"Move aside! If you touch him now, he's as good as dead!" An elderly man with white hair and a youthful face grabbed Chen Qun's shoulder, pushing him aside. As he spoke, he swiftly flicked several needles toward Xizhi Cai.