

Mythical 321

Chapter 321: Hua Tuo

"Ah!" Chen Qun, who had been shoved aside, immediately saw the silver needles embedded in Xi Zhicai's head and broke down. "Seize this assassin!" Chen Qun was beyond furious. If Xi Zhicai were killed in his presence, there would be no way to explain this to Cao Cao.

"Stand aside! If you delay for even the time it takes to brew a cup of tea, not even the gods can save him," retorted the elderly man who had tossed Chen Qun aside. Despite Chen Qun being a strong young man in his twenties, he was no match for this small old man. As Chen Qun lunged forward, the old man easily kicked him away.

"Elder, where is my medicine box?" Hua Tuo asked from outside the room. Just as he had entered the inn, someone had called out for a doctor, and his strong sense of duty led him inside. Upon arrival, he found someone who was practically dead, their vital essence nearly extinguished, and barely holding on to life. Whatever had happened to cause this must have been catastrophic, but Hua Tuo didn't care about that. Saving lives was his responsibility. So, without hesitation, he quickly inserted three silver needles to prevent the patient's life force from slipping away any further.

"Master, please calm down!" Liu Yan hurried over, carrying a medicine box like a dutiful assistant. "Oh, isn't this Changwen? Long time no see. Wait, wait, stop! He's saving a life here. With Master Hua on the job, the man on that bed is as good as saved. Changwen, stop!"

As soon as Liu Yan entered the room, he saw Chen Qun preparing to have Hua Tuo surrounded and subdued. He called out to Chen Qun and squeezed his way inside. During the journey from Yongzhou, Liu Yan had witnessed Hua Tuo's medical miracles and knew they couldn't afford to lose him.

"Weishuo?" Chen Qun was confused for a moment, then remembered who Liu Yan was. "You say he's a doctor? Silver needles in the crown of the head—how is that medicine? He's trying to kill him!"

"I've never seen a doctor as skilled as him," Liu Yan replied, handing the medicine box to Hua Tuo. "I worked hard to bring this doctor here. You have no idea how incredible his skills are. Rest assured, as long as he's involved, the man on that bed won't die. Trust me, just relax."

Although Chen Qun hesitated, he still ordered the guards to step back. "Weishuo, are you sure he can do it? Zhicai has already coughed up blood twice, and even though I don't know much about medicine, I can tell his time is almost up."

"Don't worry. He's not dead yet, is he?" Liu Yan, now full of confidence in Hua Tuo, reassured Chen Qun. "Back in Yanzhou, he revived a man who was practically a corpse. This is nothing compared to that."

"That man wasn't dead; I've said it many times," Hua Tuo interrupted without turning around.

"Don't mind him. To this old master, there's no such thing as a life he can't save. When we were in Yanzhou, I took him to a tavern. While we were eating, a beggar came dragging his father's body, ready to bury him. The man had no breath, no heartbeat, and his body was already cold. Yet, Hua Tuo brought him back to life," Liu Yan explained, still marveling at the memory. That experience had made him truly believe in Hua Tuo's abilities.

"He wasn't dead; his heartbeat and pulse were just faint," Hua Tuo said as he carefully inserted another needle, briefly explaining to Chen Qun between treatments.

"You see? Truly skilled people like to downplay themselves," Liu Yan shrugged.

"The situation is stabilizing. Get me paper and ink," Hua Tuo instructed as he began removing the needles one by one. He then turned to Liu Yan and spoke.

"Doctor, how is Zhicai?" Chen Qun asked, watching as Hua Tuo gently laid Xi Zhicai flat on the bed. Although Chen Qun wasn't a doctor, he could tell that Xi Zhicai's face looked much better now than it had before. Earlier, it seemed like the end was near, but now it appeared he might hold on a little longer.

"I can only say that he won't die. He's suffered two major injuries, the first weakening his vitality, and before he could recover, he sustained even greater damage, affecting his very foundation. However, his life is no longer in immediate danger," Hua Tuo explained as he wrote out a prescription.

"When will Zhicai regain consciousness?" Chen Qun asked, finally able to breathe a sigh of relief. As long as Xi Zhicai wasn't dead, things could be managed.

"Waking up is only a matter of time. He's very determined, likely due to some unfulfilled desire. I misspoke earlier; if you had rushed over, he might have stopped breathing or his heart might have stopped beating, but otherwise, he would have been fine," Hua Tuo's explanation left Chen Qun bewildered.

"You see? This old master's views on life and death are completely different from ours. Who knows, he might even be able to reattach a severed head," Liu Yan joked with a hearty laugh. "But your friend here really has it rough. The old master usually heals people with ease, but this time, even he sounds uncertain."

"Thank you, sir," Chen Qun exhaled deeply. Knowing that Xi Zhicai could wake up eventually was a great relief. Earlier, he had looked like he was at death's door, but now he was actually fortunate to have survived.

"I can't say exactly when he'll wake up. Just take good care of him," Hua Tuo said as he handed the prescription to Chen Qun. "If he's lucky, he'll wake up in a month. If he's unlucky, he might wake up just before he dies."

Hua Tuo seemed to have no sense of taboo, but Chen Qun's face darkened at the remark. It was as if he had taken a step into paradise only to be kicked back down into the depths of hell.

"Pay up," Hua Tuo said, noticing the awkward silence between them. When neither of them moved, Liu Yan sighed and spoke up.

"Huh?" Chen Qun was caught off guard. "Go, fetch a hundred gold coins for Master Hua as compensation."

Hua Tuo took the money without a word of complaint, slinging the coins over his shoulder and heading for the door. Before leaving, he casually remarked, "If he wakes up or his condition worsens, come find me. I'll be next door."

"Ahem, Changwen, don't take offense. He's like that. If you're poor, he doesn't charge a thing and even pays out of his own pocket. But for people like us, well, it's his way of 'robbing the rich to help the poor,'" Liu Yan explained, trying to prevent Chen Qun from harboring any grudges against Hua Tuo.

"What's there to be upset about? Spending a hundred gold to save Zhicai's life is well worth it," Chen Qun replied with a smile. "Those with abilities make the rules; that's always been the case."

"I'm glad you understand. If there's any issue, just look for him. I just got back to Taishan and need to report to Zichuan. By the way, is Zichuan really a member of your Yingchuan Chen family?" Liu Yan asked, changing the subject as he prepared to leave.

"Yes, he is from our Chen family," Chen Qun replied without elaborating, merely nodding.

"Oh, well, I'll take my leave. If your friend has any more health issues, be sure to find Master Hua. Aside from his high fees, his skills are top-notch. And don't even think about using guards to intimidate him. He's a special guest we invited to Taishan," Liu Yan warned with a final nod before departing.

Chen Qun watched Liu Yan leave and sighed. The Liu Yan he had once looked down upon was now a renowned scholar across the land. It seemed that in Taishan, everyone could find their place.

After some thought, Chen Qun decided to buy a few maidservants to care for Xi Zhicai. The guards, after all, were too rough, and even something as simple as changing the bedding had been a hassle. A few maidservants with decent looks would only cost forty or fifty thousand coins, which was a small price to pay for peace of mind.

However, as Chen Qun stepped out of the room, he felt as if he had forgotten something important. He paused to think, but nothing came to mind. Little did he know that due to the series of distractions and his own mental strain, Chen Qun had completely forgotten about Xi Zhicai's final request.

Chapter 322: Leading Troops? What Kind of Idea is This!

Chen Xi, Jia Xu, and the others were discussing how to handle the situation in Xu Province. Although "no war in winter" was generally an unwritten rule during this era, considering Cao Cao's personality, everyone, including Jia Xu, could only sigh and admit that there was a 90% chance of a battle breaking out if something happened.

"Zichuan, is there a problem with your deployment plan?" Lu Su asked, staring at Chen Xi's troop deployment map with some confusion. "This setup almost seems like you're assuming Xu Province is

bound to lose. Three thousand elite troops from Danyang, with half of them being seasoned veterans from the Western Liang campaign and the rest also experienced soldiers from the suppression of the Yellow Turban Rebellion— even if Tao Gongzu is old and weak, and his generals are relying on instinct rather than strategy, it wouldn't be so disastrous as you're predicting, right?"

Liu Ye, along with others including Zhuge Liang, also stood up to examine Chen Xi's deployment plan. Their consensus was that unless Tao Qian completely lost his mind, there was no way his entire army would collapse so completely. These were battle-hardened veterans— even if they lost, they wouldn't be routed that badly.

"There's a saying, 'better safe than sorry,' Kongming. You should understand the concept of being prepared for all contingencies," Chen Xi said, looking around at everyone before finally resting his gaze on Zhuge Liang. He figured this was the only person who might side with him; the others definitely wouldn't believe him.

"Being prepared is reasonable, but it's not necessary to go this far. While you were discussing earlier, I was looking at the map as well. Based on your troop deployment, General Guan and General Zang stationed in Licheng, Military Advisor Guo, the garrison forces in western Qingzhou, the central forces under General Yu, and the naval forces along the coast— are you planning to sweep all the way to the sea within three months when spring arrives?" Zhuge Liang pointed to the map, avoiding Chen Xi's question and instead asking about something else.

"Yes," Chen Xi nodded, "That's our pre-established strategy. I'm sure someone as intelligent as you can understand why."

"In terms of manpower, you could have swept through Qingzhou this year, but you're holding back because you can't govern the area, right? You lack the necessary grain, officials, farming tools, seeds, and housing. Even if you take the land, you can't manage it, which could lead to chaos. You're planning to take the area quickly and then ensure it's stable by next spring, right?" Zhuge Liang said confidently, becoming more certain as he spoke. On the other hand, Fazheng's gaze became more malicious as he saw Zhuge Liang's confidence grow. He was already planning how to test this bright young mind and enjoy a little satisfaction from outsmarting him.

"Exactly," Fazheng said with interest. "He's right, isn't he, Zichuan? The brighter he is, the more fun it'll be to challenge him."

"Pretty much," Chen Xi nodded, smiling. "If we don't take the land, it's not our responsibility. But once we do, we have to govern it. We can't afford to support over a million people for six or seven months. That's why I'd rather open porridge kitchens to make them grateful than conquer the land only to be cursed for our trouble. But after this, we won't face this problem again. Once we fully control Qingzhou and have our strategic reserves, natural disasters won't have much of an impact on us."

Jia Xu glanced at Chen Xi with a look of understanding and seemed to feel a kinship with his pragmatic approach.

"Save yourself first before saving others. There's no point in trying to help others if you can't even help yourself," Fazheng said nonchalantly. "Besides, no one could push Zichuan into such a corner anyway."

"Yes, except for the early stages, we won't face such difficulties again. From now on, we can afford to be as benevolent and righteous as we like," Chen Xi laughed, letting go of his earlier somber tone.

Chen Xi knew that his philosophy was somewhat similar to Cao Cao's— both prioritized saving themselves before helping others. However, he couldn't accept how Cao Cao would often cross the line, using self-preservation as an excuse to harm others. Chen Xi wasn't willing to go that far.

"A noble person helps others without harming them," Zhuge Liang said nonchalantly. To him, there was nothing wrong with what Chen Xi was saying. As long as they weren't harming others to save themselves, it was still a virtuous act.

"Alright, alright, let's not dwell on this. I think I've done pretty well so far. I just hope Su Shuang and Zhang Shiping bring back plenty of cattle and horses from the northern tribes. It's a long journey, but when we launch the campaign in spring, we'll need their livestock for the summer planting season," Chen Xi waved his hand dismissively.

"Can herds of cattle really be used for farming?" Zhuge Liang asked curiously.

"As long as they're harnessed correctly," Fazheng replied casually.

"Oh," Zhuge Liang nodded, though it was unclear if he fully understood.

"Back to Xu Province. Based on your troop deployment, Zichuan, Qingzhou's campaign seems unshakable, so we'll have to rely on others for the rescue effort," Fazheng said with a smile, turning his attention to Zhuge Liang.

"I lean toward sending reinforcements. I'm from Xu Province and understand it better than you do. Tao Gongzu is indeed capable, but he's old and weak. When the time comes, the troops will likely be led by the younger generation from the aristocratic families. However, the Chen and Zhao families don't get along with Tao Gongzu, leaving only the Cao family. Cao Bao, in particular, is highly regarded by Tao Gongzu." Zhuge Liang paused at this point, meeting Fazheng's gaze. He had already noticed the unhidden malice in Fazheng's eyes.

"Cao Bao?" Fazheng, who had studied under Jia Xu, knew quite a bit about notable figures from various places. Cao Bao's name had come up several times in connection with Tao Qian. But from what they had gathered so far, Cao Bao seemed more like a scholar than a strategist.

"If it's him, wait— he just arrived!" Jia Xu started to speak but then noticed Liu Yan entering the room with a strange expression.

Everyone turned or looked up at Liu Yan. Those who understood the situation sighed inwardly. Putting Liu Yan in charge of an army— the outcome of that was all too predictable.

"Weishuo, you're back. Let me ask you something— do you think you could lead an army of 30,000 elite troops into battle?" Chen Xi asked directly.

"There's no way! If there's one thing I'm good at, it's knowing my own limitations. I can handle bragging and spreading rumors, but leading an army? No chance! Three thousand soldiers wouldn't be enough for me to lose— whose bright idea was this?" Liu Yan shook his head vigorously.

Chapter 323: A Carefree Approach and Early Preparation

Everyone silently turned to look at Fazheng.

Following their gaze, Liu Yan stared at Fazheng. "Oh, Fazheng, it was you who came up with this crazy idea? With Fengxiao not around, you're already causing trouble. Who's this kid anyway? Why is there another child in our government office? He's even younger than Fazheng!" Liu Yan asked curiously, noticing Zhuge Liang's youthful face.

"Stop calling him a child. Age doesn't determine one's abilities. Despite his youth, he's extraordinary," Chen Xi explained, turning to Zhuge Liang. "Kongming, don't mind him. He has a loose tongue but a good heart. If you need to find someone or something, he's your guy. His friends are everywhere."

"Liu Yan, Liu Weishuo, huh? If Zichuan speaks so highly of you, you must be very capable," Liu Yan responded with a proud smile before composing himself. "I hope you can forgive me, Brother Kongming."

Liu Yan had always been self-aware and never attempted tasks beyond his capabilities. He had a good relationship with Chen Xi and the others, and was known for being friendly and generous. As such, Chen Xi and the rest didn't mind Liu Yan's unfiltered speech— they were all close friends, so as long as it didn't create a bad impression in public, it was fine.

"Zhuge Kongming from Langya in Xu Province greets Brother Weishuo," Zhuge Liang said solemnly, bowing to Liu Yan.

Though Zhuge Liang might not have known everyone else's names, anyone who could read or write in the land knew of Liu Yan. His reputation was widespread, particularly due to his contribution to papermaking, which alone was enough to ensure his name would be remembered for generations. Furthermore, Liu Yan was known for his generosity, integrity, and self-awareness, traits that made him highly respected among scholars and the gentry.

"No need for such formality," Liu Yan laughed heartily. He then looked around the room. "So, what's everyone up to? Planning another battle?"

"No, just discussing how to easily conquer Qingzhou," Chen Xi replied casually. "Jianhe hasn't returned from the south yet, but you've come back so soon."

"Things are chaotic in the south, making it harder for Jianhe. For me, it was just a matter of visiting Yuan Benchu and Gongsun Bogui in the north, then delivering letters to various county governors while traveling to Yongzhou. I must say, there's no place like our Taishan. By the way, I'm out of money," Liu Yan said, summarizing his journey and comparing his situation to that of Jian Yong.

"Zijing," Chen Xi called to Lu Su. Lately, Lu Su and Liu Ye had been handling the year-end accounts, so Chen Xi no longer had the authority to withdraw funds from the treasury without their approval.

"Tell me how much you need, and I'll approve it. But didn't we just give you three million coins?" Lu Su asked, curious after recalling the last time they allocated funds to Liu Yan.

"Well, I encountered a lot of refugees along the way, so I gave away all the money. I also gave some to those leaving, encouraging them to come to Taishan. I don't know how many will actually make it," Liu Yan sighed, reflecting on the desolation caused by the ongoing wars among the warlords across the Han Dynasty's territories.

"You're just adding to our burden," Fazheng groaned, slamming his head onto the table. "I was wondering why there's been such an influx of refugees lately— over 17,000 according to border control reports. Luckily, with all the road construction happening, we've managed to put them to work."

"This is actually a good thing," Chen Xi nodded. "Weishuo, you did well. I'll make sure you get more funding for these activities. By the way, you seemed in a hurry just now. Is there something urgent you need to report?"

Liu Ye also looked at Liu Yan. "Did you find that important person? Zheng Hun, Chai Yu, Hua Tuo, Pu Yuan, Ma Jun?" Liu Yan, known for his elegant demeanor, usually exuded the aura of a refined gentleman. His current disheveled state suggested he had significant news.

"Who did you find?" These individuals were notoriously difficult to track down, so finding any of them would be a considerable feat.

"Hua Tuo, Hua Yuanhua— a true miracle worker," Liu Yan said with pride.

"He's in Taishan?" Chen Xi's face lit up with joy.

"Yes, he's at the inn right now!"

"Take him to the strategic reserves warehouse, specifically the medicinal storage. Tell him that if he's willing to teach medicine at the Taishan Academy, he can freely use any of the herbs stored there," Chen Xi said with excitement, finally seeing the fruits of his prior preparations.

"Tell Hua Tuo that if he agrees to train over a hundred medical students, we'll publish his medical texts for free. Moreover, if he needs any rare herbs, Taishan's government will help gather them for him, so he won't have to risk traveling to dangerous places. We can even provide him with the materials he needs for his experiments."

Lu Su, flipping through his documents, pulled out a sheet detailing the arrangements for Hua Tuo. He read aloud the key points, then motioned for Chen Xi's official seal before stamping it on the document and handing it to Liu Yan.

"Weishuo, if Hua Tuo has any other requests, let us know, and we'll do our best to accommodate him," Lu Su said, placing the document back down without noticing the admiration in Zhuge Liang's eyes. The ease and foresight with which Lu Su handled the situation resonated deeply with Zhuge Liang's own ideals.

"You guys are really something— always so well-prepared," Liu Yan said, glancing at the document before tucking it away.

"Zichuan, are you sure that doctor is that important?" Fazheng asked, puzzled by Chen Xi's enthusiasm. Zhuge Liang also looked at Chen Xi, and aside from Liu Ye, the others seemed doubtful as well. Allowing access to strategic reserves was no small matter, and such privileges weren't granted lightly.

Chapter 324: The Foundation of Medical Care Begins!

"Let me explain. I've been dealing with these tedious matters lately." Liu Ye sighed as he pulled out a comparison report on the cost of medicinal herbs, emergency medical care, and the expenses for compensating the families of fallen soldiers. The report also compared soldier survival rates and combat effectiveness.

"Pass it around and take a look," Liu Ye said as he handed his data, which he'd been compiling since April, over to Jia Xu. "I must admit, Zichuan has great foresight. Some things can indeed be resolved purely through statistical methods. I didn't understand why Zichuan asked me to record this before, but now, Wenhe, you'll see for yourself."

"Are you sure your statistics are correct? A squad with just one medical soldier reduces the casualty rate by this much? And this recovery rate— is it really that exaggerated?" Jia Xu was stunned. He hadn't realized the impact until he saw the data.

"We've been able to accumulate veteran soldiers and build elite units. Haven't you noticed anything unusual?" Liu Ye pointed outside to the patrolling city guards. "In a year, we can gather twice as many veterans compared to not deploying medical soldiers."

"Let's pass this measure. I'll have my intelligence network allocate more resources to this," Jia Xu said after confirming the accuracy of the data. A battalion of battle-hardened veterans versus new recruits—that's a decisive victory.

After speaking, Jia Xu handed Liu Ye's report to Lu Su. "You should take a look too. This medical soldier system needs to be refined. If necessary, we might even elevate doctors out of the 'artisan' category and into a new ranking."

"Is this really true?" Lu Su quickly scanned the data, his face showing shock as he turned to Liu Ye.

"Do you think I'd make a mistake in statistical analysis?" Liu Ye replied with a bitter smile. "Zichuan was right— sometimes, a small detail can make a significant difference."

Chen Xi casually smirked. He could mention that even in the age of modern warfare, the British had found that adding medical soldiers to a unit during World War I reduced casualty rates by 42%. That was an era of heavy artillery and bullets, with far more direct fatalities than in the cold weapon era. On battlefields of this era, many died not from direct wounds but from untreated injuries.

In ancient Chinese battles, casualty figures often included both the dead and the wounded. A large portion of the casualties were soldiers who were injured but couldn't be treated and eventually died. If injured soldiers could be treated and saved, the numbers of those who could return to battle would increase significantly.

Chen Xi's methods, such as disinfecting wounds with alcohol, stitching injuries, bandaging with linen, and administering herbal remedies, could save about half of the injured soldiers. And while his techniques weren't flawless, and many died due to delayed treatment, they still saved countless lives.

"You should all take a look at this. According to the statistics, an excellent doctor can train apprentices, significantly reducing battle losses. Wenhe, have your intelligence network gather all known external remedies for knife and arrow wounds from across the Han Dynasty. Collect any effective treatments," Lu Su said as he passed the data to Fazheng and addressed Jia Xu. He recognized the importance of what he was seeing.

"Indeed, Wenhe, gather all related remedies," Chen Xi added after hearing Lu Su's words. He quickly realized that this was the simplest and most effective approach.

Fazheng and Zhuge Liang exchanged glances after reading the data, both showing shock in their eyes. With this strategy, Lord Xuande's forces would grow increasingly formidable.

"When it comes to treating external wounds," Liu Yan looked up at the ceiling, "Doctor Hua is highly skilled. I remember him once performing surgery to remove necrotic tissue from someone's abdomen and saving their life. He has many effective treatments for various wounds."

"Jackpot!" Chen Xi grinned mischievously, and the others in the room shared in his excitement. This was excellent news.

"We need to find out what herbs his treatments require. Whatever he needs, we'll stockpile it. If his remedies are particularly effective, we'll add them to our strategic reserves," Chen Xi said, turning to Liu Yan.

"I'm not sure about the specifics," Liu Yan admitted, shaking his head. "But it shouldn't be too difficult to obtain. I've never seen him use any rare or expensive herbs. While he charges high prices for wealthy clients, most of the herbs he uses can be easily gathered. It shouldn't be a problem."

"Zijing, issue an order to summon all skilled herb gatherers in Taishan to Fenggao. Tell them we'll cover their food and lodging, and they'll receive a daily stipend of thirty coins," Chen Xi instructed Lu Su.

"Oh, that's doable. We have a few thousand skilled gatherers. What do you need them for?" Lu Su asked curiously.

"Once we get the prescriptions, we'll start cultivating the necessary herbs. Relying solely on wild gathering isn't sustainable, especially in times of war. It's better to cultivate them ourselves and prepare in advance," Chen Xi explained.

"I think your approach might not work," Liu Ye said after everyone stared at Chen Xi. "I've never heard of cultivating medicinal herbs. Aren't they naturally occurring? Cultivated herbs might not have the same potency as wild ones."

"We won't know until we try. If we can cultivate trees, why not herbs?" Chen Xi replied nonchalantly.

"That makes sense. We won't know until we try," Zhuge Liang chimed in. Though he appeared refined on the surface, he was full of youthful arrogance and wanted to confirm things for himself, even if it meant proving others wrong.

"Alright, let's give it a shot," Lu Su agreed, having seen enough of Chen Xi's innovative ideas to know not to dismiss them lightly.

The others had no objections. This was a minor matter that didn't concern them directly. If Chen Xi wanted to experiment, they were fine with it. Even if he didn't succeed, it wouldn't be a significant loss. Given Chen Xi's track record, they figured it was worth the attempt.

Zhuce Liang observed Chen Xi with curiosity. This situation, where Chen Xi's words were accepted without question, puzzled him. These were all highly intelligent individuals, yet they readily followed Chen Xi's lead. Still, this dynamic sparked some envy within Zhuge Liang— he wondered when he might command such respect and authority.

"Weishuo, when you have time, bring Doctor Hua over. We'd like to meet him, and he can check everyone's health while he's here. We don't want anyone falling ill unexpectedly," Chen Xi said to Liu Yan, feeling a sense of relief as he realized they were finally laying the groundwork for proper medical care.

Chapter 325: A Pure Man's Way of Communicating—Fist to Fist

While Chen Xi and the others were busy strategizing on how to deal with the upcoming challenges, outside Fenggao City, the brawl between Xu Chu and Dian Wei had reached a fever pitch.

Xu Chu's entire body was enveloped in a dark, black aura of inner energy. Every muscle was taut as he exchanged blows with Dian Wei. When Dian Wei punched him, Xu Chu would retaliate with a kick. If Dian Wei kicked him, Xu Chu would respond with a headbutt.

Similarly, Dian Wei wasn't having an easy time either. Xu Chu's immense strength landed heavy blows on Dian Wei's body, causing dull thuds with each hit. In this close-range, no-holds-barred, fist-to-fist combat, Dian Wei was also feeling the strain.

Neither of them dodged, and they didn't use their weapons—this was pure, unadulterated hand-to-hand combat. The damage they caused wasn't extensive, but they did manage to flatten an area over a hundred meters wide, lowering the ground level by a couple of meters.

By now, Dian Wei's physical advantage was starting to show, but Xu Chu's determination was unmatched. He gritted his teeth, refusing to make a sound as he continued to clash with Dian Wei. The two human-shaped beasts fought on without pause, delivering punches strong enough to pulverize an ordinary man.

"Thud!" Dian Wei's fist landed squarely on Xu Chu's face, and as Xu Chu's head snapped back, he retaliated with a punch to Dian Wei's head. Both staggered but didn't make a sound. They immediately leaped back at each other to continue the battle.

"Gurgle..." Xu Chu's stomach let out a loud rumble. Embarrassed, he said, "Dian, if you have the guts, wait for me to eat lunch, and we'll continue in the afternoon. I'm going to beat you down today."

The moment Xu Chu spoke and his energy leaked, he felt the full force of his body's soreness. It was the first time he'd fought someone to this extent. Even Zhang Fei hadn't pushed him this hard. In a purely physical brawl, Xu Chu knew he could outlast Zhang Fei, but Dian Wei was a different beast. After a morning of fighting, Xu Chu realized his muscles were definitely damaged, and if they continued, he would lose. Dian Wei's muscles felt like steel plates—despite the prolonged fight, his power and speed hadn't diminished at all. The most shocking part was that Dian Wei hadn't even used his inner energy.

"Hmph, I'm hungry too. Let's eat, and then we'll continue in the afternoon. If I don't beat you down, I won't be called Dian Wei!" Dian Wei responded with a menacing grin.

Dian Wei had never met someone who could take as much punishment as Xu Chu. They had exchanged hundreds of blows that morning, and although they hadn't used weapons, this kind of relentless hand-to-hand combat was rare. Seeing Xu Chu invite him for a meal, Dian Wei, being straightforward, didn't hesitate to accept. He appreciated Xu Chu's rough yet genuine personality.

"Let's see who beats who!" Xu Chu grumbled, unwilling to concede. Although he knew he might not win, he figured eating and taking a break might give him an edge in the afternoon. Plus, the short daylight hours in November meant they wouldn't have much time to fight after lunch.

After walking a few steps, Xu Chu turned back and said, "Dian, I'll be fair. To avoid you saying I didn't eat enough if you lose in the afternoon, come with me to drink the medicinal soup we warriors use."

Dian Wei scratched his head, realizing that Xu Chu wasn't a bad guy after all. After a morning of fighting, Dian Wei was also starving, and he appreciated Xu Chu's gesture. With his straightforward nature, Dian Wei agreed without hesitation. He liked men who were straightforward and bold like Xu Chu.

"Is there wine?" Dian Wei asked.

"There is, and it's the best wine! We'll eat, and then we'll fight again!" Xu Chu grumbled, still dissatisfied with how things had turned out.

Xu Chu took Dian Wei to a restaurant reserved for warriors with large appetites. They found an extended table and sat down. Xu Chu shouted, "Waiter, bring twenty roasted chickens, two baskets of steamed buns, two whole lambs, and a vat of wine!"

"Right away!" The restaurant, designed for warriors who could eat a lot, always kept a large stock of food. Warriors like Zhang Fei could easily consume a bucket of rice without any issue.

The food was quickly brought out, and Xu Chu and Dian Wei devoured everything like a whirlwind.

"More! Bring me another round!" Dian Wei roared after downing several bowls of the strong liquor distilled by Chen Xi. He suddenly found Xu Chu much more agreeable—perhaps the earlier animosity was just a misconception.

“Waiter, another vat! I’m off duty today, so there’s no risk of interfering with my duties,” Xu Chu shouted as he picked his teeth with a chicken bone.

“This food and drink are great, but they’re a bit slow. They took so long just to bring the wine,” Dian Wei grumbled as he picked his teeth.

“You can’t blame them for that. We’re both personal guards for our lords. How can we afford to get drunk while on duty? Even though I can use inner energy to evaporate the alcohol and sober up, my combat strength would still drop,” Xu Chu offered a different perspective.

“...” Dian Wei was silent for a while before agreeing, “You’re right. We can’t get drunk while protecting our lord. We’re their personal guards.”

“By the way, why didn’t you use your inner energy this morning?” Xu Chu asked. After the morning’s fight, the two had grown closer.

“I’ve trained my inner energy into my muscles,” Dian Wei said, flexing his muscles proudly. “I don’t need to worry about inner energy recovery anymore. Punching with raw strength feels so much better.”

“You can do that?” Xu Chu was shocked. Muscle recovery was much faster than inner energy recovery, which explained why Dian Wei’s punches hadn’t weakened at all despite the long fight.

“I wasn’t always this strong. I had to flee after killing someone once. While being chased, I broke through to the level of refining qi into steel, and that’s how I survived. But later, I encountered a flying tiger in the mountains, and it almost killed me,” Dian Wei recalled, a hint of fear in his voice.

“And then?” Xu Chu asked curiously.

“I killed that tiger,” Dian Wei boasted proudly.

“...” Xu Chu’s mind couldn’t keep up with Dian Wei’s sudden leaps in conversation, and he was momentarily at a loss for words.

Seeing Xu Chu's expression, Dian Wei laughed heartily. "That tiger wasn't that tough. When my inner energy was full, I could beat it. But that tiger had a lot of inner energy—it took me a while to wear it down. In the end, I chased it for three days and nights before finally killing it by the river. Then I made tiger soup and ate it. Thinking about that meat..." Dian Wei began to salivate, and Xu Chu, seemingly lost in Dian Wei's story, also imagined the taste of the meat.

Chapter 326: Yizhou and Zhuya

Xu Chu and Dian Wei, two brutes, got more and more engrossed in their conversation, completely forgetting their original intentions. Naturally, they didn't find it odd that a tiger with inner energy existed; according to Dian Wei, its meat was particularly chewy!

Speaking of chewy meat, we can't overlook what Gan Ning and Taishi Ci are currently up to. After they used unorthodox methods to escort Liu Yu out of Zhuo County that day, they swiftly headed south, avoiding capture by Gongsun Zan. Once they boarded the large ship, they immediately set sail without hesitation.

Gan Ning and Taishi Ci only managed to save Liu Yu. As for Liu Yu's wife, children, and parents, they simply couldn't do more. In their minds, as long as Liu Yu was alive, Gongsun Zan wouldn't go mad enough to wipe out his entire family. After all, there's a saying: "Punishment shouldn't extend to one's family."

As for how Gongsun Zan ultimately dealt with Liu Yu's family, Gan Ning and Taishi Ci, who were already aboard the ship and far from shore, had no idea. Nor did they have the time or interest to worry about such minor matters. Their focus was now on catching a giant fish, a kun, as a gift for Chen Xi's upcoming wedding.

However, after Liu Yu quoted classical texts to them, they abandoned this idea. The phrase "a big fish signifies a dream of kingship" carried an ominous connotation that was entirely unsuitable as a wedding gift, especially for a marquis. It seemed more like a curse than a blessing.

Ancient people took such prophetic sayings seriously. Thus, although Gan Ning grumbled about it, he gave up on the idea of gifting a kun to Chen Xi. After that, Liu Yu was left behind in the cabin, cared for by a few clever soldiers. Gan Ning and Taishi Ci began contemplating what kind of gift they should bring to Chen Xi instead.

Heading south, they passed through Qingzhou. Gan Ning sent Liu Yu to Beihai, entrusting him to Kong Rong to be safely escorted to Mount Tai. Unbeknownst to Gan Ning and Taishi Ci, Kong Rong, adhering to the Han dynasty's etiquette for dealing with nobles, ignored Liu Yu's desperate pleas and directly sent him to Chang'an...

After sending Liu Yu off, Gan Ning set sail again, leading his crew at full speed toward Yizhou. This was a strategic location that Chen Xi had specifically instructed Gan Ning to secure. Not only was it a preparation for a future attack on Yangzhou, but it was also intended to facilitate trade with the local tribes in Jiaozhou!

Now, Gan Ning was on his way to find a suitable gift. Since a kun was off the table, Gan Ning decided that, as a straightforward man, he should choose something equally simple and fitting.

For many people in the Central Plains, Jiaozhou was a desolate place, unfit for habitation. But Chen Xi knew that it was an excellent place to grow crops. Even with slash-and-burn agriculture, the locals wouldn't starve. That abundance of food formed the basis of trade.

While the Central Plains might suffer from food shortages, places where rice could be grown twice a year were a different story. Chen Xi planned to engage in trade that would benefit Qingzhou greatly by exploiting this disparity—exchanging luxury items like glass beads for boatloads of grain, for example.

That region held many things considered rare treasures in the Central Plains. A bit of barter could greatly enrich Qingzhou. After all, during the Eastern Han period, Jiaozhou extended deep into what is now central Vietnam, a place where rice could be harvested three times a year. While the rice might not taste great, its yield was abundant.

In summary, Chen Xi had instructed Gan Ning from the very beginning to establish relations with the local tribal leaders in Jiaozhou. His plan was to provide them with tools to improve their farming and then trade luxury items for their surplus grain.

Those tribal chiefs, though primitive, held absolute power within their territories, ruling over thousands or even tens of thousands of people, forming tiny kingdoms of their own.

Chen Xi's suggestion to Gan Ning was to provide these chiefs with simple tools that would bring them closer to civilization, encouraging them to grow more grain. They would then trade that grain for luxury

goods—like exchanging a glass goblet for a load of ivory. Chen Xi didn't care about the disparity as long as the tribal chiefs were willing.

Because of this, Gan Ning had already established a small, yet well-supplied, outpost on Yizhou, where food and fresh water were readily available, thanks to the local tribes.

Upon reaching Yizhou, Taishi Ci was astonished by the size and strategic location of the island. He looked at Gan Ning with newfound admiration. Truly, as the commander of the navy, with the power of life and death, Gan Ning had the vision and courage to establish a supply base here. With such a large territory, the navy would have a significant advantage in future operations against Yangzhou.

"Brother Xingba, I'm truly impressed," Taishi Ci said with deep respect. Gan Ning's boldness, ambition, and insight made Taishi Ci feel like he was worlds apart from him.

"Haha, no need for admiration. Let's load up on food and water quickly. Next, we're heading to Zhuya County!" Gan Ning laughed and said, "This place is just a transit point. There were originally a few thousand residents here, but I've already conquered them. Now they're working hard to grow crops. It's a pity, though—if we could bring in thirty thousand more people, we could grow enough food here to feed a hundred thousand people in just one year."

"Huh?" Taishi Ci was left speechless.

"Don't be so surprised. Rice grows really well here, and you can harvest it two or three times a year," Gan Ning explained with a sigh. "Wait until you see Zhuya County. That place has no shortage of food. I still don't understand why Emperor Yuan abandoned it back then."

Chen Xi, had he been there, could have answered Gan Ning's question: the emperor never left the capital, and matters of the empire were often governed by assumptions. Unfortunately, reality was far more complex than theoretical knowledge. A place where rice could be grown three times a year—yielding more than twice the usual amount—was more than enough to keep the starving population fed and the emperor's throne secure.

Yet despite such fertile lands, the emperor dismissed them as nothing more than fanciful tales, ultimately abandoning Zhuya County entirely. Later on, Jiaozhou barely registered in the emperor's mind, mostly serving as a place for exiles.

By the time the state of Eastern Wu emerged, no one bothered to visit southern Jiaozhou personally. They merely ruled it from afar, imagining it as a desolate land filled with uncivilized tribes and plagued by smoke and disease.

It wasn't until Gan Ning first arrived in Zhuya County and traded a set of green porcelain for dozens of large pearls with a local tribal leader that he finally understood what Chen Xi meant when he said these tribal chiefs were no different from emperors.

"Let's go! Set sail for Zhuya at full speed!" Gan Ning shouted, knowing they had little time left before Chen Xi's wedding.

Chapter 327: The Young Overlord's Yangtze River Journey

Zhao Yun was carrying two large wild geese he had caught in the south. To marry in winter posed a problem—the ceremony required a pair of live wild geese, which were difficult to obtain. Expecting Chen Xi to shoot two live geese from the sky was unrealistic, so Zhao Yun was tasked with this.

Fortunately, Zhao Yun didn't have many tasks, so he rode his Night Illumination Jade Lion south and brought back the two live geese. As for the bandits on the Yangtze River who thought they could cause trouble, upon seeing someone riding a horse on the water, they wisely chose not to intervene—unless they were completely foolish.

Speaking of which, ever since Sun Ce had traversed the Yangtze River, the number of bandits there had significantly decreased. Even the Lu family, who usually paid protection money, didn't know whom to give it to anymore.

However, as Zhao Yun returned, walking his horse on the river, a grand ship blocked his path.

"Who dares to obstruct my way?" Zhao Yun demanded, spear in hand, as he stared down three figures: two handsome men and a burly warrior.

"We are Sun Bofu, Zhou Gongjin, and Zhou Youping of Jiangdong, under General Yuan Gong's command," the trio announced, bowing slightly.

"What business do you have with me?" Zhao Yun asked, sizing up the three. He could sense that two of them had reached the level of internal energy manifestation. The young man named Sun Bofu seemed to have just reached that level, while the other, Zhou Youping, seemed about as strong as Gan Ning.

What concerned Zhao Yun the most was the man standing on Sun Ce's left, Zhou Gongjin, whose sporadic flashes of spiritual energy made Zhao Yun feel uneasy.

"We are on our way back to Shouchun via the river. Upon seeing you galloping effortlessly across the water, our hands itched for a challenge. Would you do us the honor of a spar?" Sun Ce asked, his face filled with pride.

Sun Ce, currently exuding an aura of dominance, had broken through to internal energy manifestation after his previous encounter on the Yangtze River, where he was ambushed by Zhou Tai and Jiang Qin. During the ensuing battle, Sun Ce achieved a breakthrough and subsequently won over Zhou Tai and Jiang Qin. With their help, he united the bandits of the middle and lower Yangtze River, forming a navy.

Not long after, Sun Ce, with Zhou Yu's aid, defeated Wang Wei and Wen Pin at Jiangxia, killing Wang Wei in battle and capturing Wen Pin. It didn't take long for Wen Pin to be won over by Sun Ce's charisma. Although Wen Pin had previously been separated from his comrade Wei Yan, he felt that Sun Ce, who treated captives with respect and showed great potential, was someone worth serving.

After Yuan Shu's defeat and relocation to Shouchun, Sun Ce was summoned back to take up a position. Along the way, Sun Ce encountered Liao Li in Jiangxia, and the two immediately hit it off. Sun Ce brought Liao Li to meet Zhou Yu, who was astounded by Liao Li's far-sighted vision, declaring him a strategist of great potential. Persuaded by Zhou Yu, Sun Ce appointed Liao Li as Jiangxia's chief administrator to handle matters in his absence.

Continuing their journey, they crossed paths with Gu Yong, who had resigned from his post. Sun Ce and Gu Yong found common ground, and Gu Yong decided to abandon his original plans to visit his sister, Cai Yan, in Taishan, and instead pledged his loyalty to Sun Ce.

Further down the river, they encountered Yu Fan, who had quarreled with his father over the I Ching. After a deep conversation with Zhou Yu, Yu Fan was so impressed by Zhou Yu's profound knowledge that he immediately decided to join them.

Not long after, they encountered Dong Xi and Ling Cao, who had come seeking fame. After a delightful conversation, the two warriors swore allegiance to Sun Ce, calling him their lord.

Sun Ce seemed to be on a roll, constantly encountering capable individuals, almost all of whom joined him under Zhou Yu's influence.

However, not everyone was swayed. There was one person they met who remained unconvinced by Sun Ce's charisma and Zhou Yu's wisdom. This individual was still on the ship.

"Ah, so we've encountered another internal energy master on the river? You two must be extremely lucky, running into three such experts on the Yangtze, and two of them have joined you already. Amazing," said a voice. Pang Tong, who had overheard the conversation, stepped out and saw Zhao Yun, marveling at the coincidence.

Pang Tong had initially planned to head to Taishan but had a change of heart after a fateful encounter with Zixu, who warned him that a visit to Taishan might lead to entanglements in Xu Province, possibly even costing him his life. Considering Zixu's mysterious nature, Pang Tong decided to head to Jiangdong instead.

That was when he ran into Sun Ce's grand ship on the river. Sun Ce, seeing such an odd-looking man, decided that it must be fate and invited Pang Tong aboard. Pang Tong, whose personality leaned toward the eccentric, was intrigued by Sun Ce's straightforward approach and promptly abandoned his small boat to join Sun Ce's journey.

Sun Ce, ever the curious character, treated Pang Tong as a guest. Over meals, ancient people often enjoyed boasting and comparing accomplishments, leading to discussions on world affairs. What followed was a heated debate between Zhou Yu and Pang Tong, neither of whom could gauge the other's depth.

Zhou Yu, knowing how formidable he was, was particularly impressed by Pang Tong. Even Liao Li, with his extraordinary foresight, had his limits, which Zhou Yu had quickly assessed after a few days. But Pang Tong was different, making Zhou Yu feel as though he was dealing with an enigma. This thrilled Sun Ce, who concluded that his father's spirit must be guiding him toward great talents.

Thus, Sun Ce grew increasingly eager to win over Pang Tong, paying little heed to his odd appearance. For Sun Ce, ability mattered more than looks. Standing alongside Zhou Yu, both handsome men could use someone unattractive to highlight their own charms. Sun Ce, therefore, treated Pang Tong with great respect, despite not having received a definite answer from him. Still, Pang Tong seemed content to stay aboard and accompany them to Shouchun, which reassured Sun Ce.

Chapter 328: Destiny in Every Peck and Sip

Zhao Yun stared at the group in front of him with a hint of caution. If it were just Zhou Tai and Sun Ce, he wouldn't hesitate to fight. However, with the addition of Zhou Yu and that notably ugly young man, Zhao Yun found himself holding back.

For a warrior, seizing the right moment was everything. Missing that opportunity meant that even the most skilled generals would become wary of the abilities of top strategists.

Noticing Zhao Yun's hesitation, Sun Ce couldn't help but feel a surge of joy. Recently, many civil officials and military generals had pledged their allegiance to him. Naturally, he interpreted Zhao Yun's hesitation as a sign of admiration for him.

"Warrior, would you care for a spar? The flowing waters of the Yangtze bring us together by fate, and I find myself itching for a match. Would you grant me this opportunity?" Sun Ce laughed heartily, his tone brimming with the enthusiasm of a combatant eager to test his skills.

"Very well, General. You may attack at will," Zhao Yun nodded, appreciating Sun Ce's respectful tone.

"Warrior, would you prefer to leave your wild geese on my ship? Holding such things might hinder your performance, no matter how skilled you are," Zhou Yu intervened with a smile just as Sun Ce was about to thrust his spear forward. He knew Sun Ce was keen on recruiting this formidable warrior.

"No need. These geese are for a friend's wedding, so you may attack without reservation," Zhao Yun replied calmly, his eyes deep and unreadable. He had no desire to get entangled with the Sun family.

"Then let us begin!" Sun Ce, completely missing Zhou Yu's hint, felt a surge of irritation when he saw Zhao Yun still holding the geese. He lunged forward, spear in hand.

Clang! A loud clash rang out as Sun Ce was sent flying backward. In that brief instant, the others could barely make out Zhao Yun's movements—he was simply too fast.

"Impressive!" Zhou Tai exclaimed, staring in disbelief at Zhao Yun's composed expression. He had barely managed to catch a glimpse of Zhao Yun's spear move. What shocked him even more was that Zhao Yun hadn't wasted a single ounce of energy.

Sun Ce, who had been repelled by Zhao Yun's spear, flipped in mid-air and landed with a stomp on the river's surface, creating a large depression in the water. Then, he charged at Zhao Yun again, his body enveloped in a golden aura.

"Too slow," Zhao Yun remarked with a smile. In this world, challenging him in terms of speed was asking for trouble. No one had ever been faster.

With a light touch of his spear against Sun Ce's, Zhao Yun sent him hurtling back into the river with even greater force.

Watching the 17 or 18-year-old Sun Ce, Zhao Yun felt a pang of nostalgia. At that age, he hadn't yet reached such a level. Although it was clear that Sun Ce had relied on external forces to boost his power, internal energy manifestation was still a significant achievement in any era—a state where defeating Qi Refining masters was effortless. There was no such thing as surpassing levels in this world.

Splash! Sun Ce spat out a mouthful of blood, staring at Zhao Yun in shock. Since reaching this final stage of martial cultivation, it was his first time facing an opponent of such overwhelming strength.

"Sun Bofu, you're quite skilled, but there's no need to imitate Lu Bu. Every martial artist on the path of internal energy manifestation has their own journey and beliefs. While he may be hailed as the strongest, following his path will only prevent you from surpassing him," Zhao Yun said calmly, losing interest in further combat with Sun Ce.

The situation was simple: Sun Ce was a formidable internal energy master, but unlike seasoned veterans like Yan Liang, Wen Chou, and Hua Xiong—who had spent years at the peak of Qi Refining before breaking through—Sun Ce lacked the same depth of experience. His sudden surge in power after reaching this level was impressive but couldn't compare to those with years of accumulated strength.

However, Sun Ce's advantage lay in his youth. With time and continued training, he would reach impressive heights before hitting any major bottlenecks.

Startled by Zhao Yun's words, Sun Ce aborted his attack and settled on the river's surface. Not many could stand on water like Zhao Yun, and Sun Ce realized he had much to learn.

"Bofu, return to the ship for now," Zhou Yu called out, sensing Zhao Yun's identity from his words.

"Zhou Gongjin greets General Zhao," Zhou Yu said with a bow. There weren't many warriors capable of defeating Sun Ce so easily, and fewer still who could identify Sun Ce's emulation of Lu Bu. Among those who fit the description, only one wielded a silver spear while riding a white horse—Zhao Yun.

Zhao Yun returned the bow without denying it. "I trust you won't try to stop me, so I'll take my leave."

"Safe travels, General Zhao," Zhou Yu said with a sigh, realizing there was no way to persuade him to stay.

With a slight smile, Zhao Yun sheathed his spear, tugged on the reins, and swiftly rode off across the water.

"What a shame that such a mighty warrior doesn't serve me," Sun Ce muttered, still drenched from the river. "You held back when we sparred, didn't you, Youping?"

Zhou Tai scratched his head and laughed awkwardly. Could he really tell his lord that he didn't want to injure him during their practice bouts?

"I guess I'm not as strong as I thought," Sun Ce sighed.

"Don't be disheartened, my lord. Zhao Zilong has been training for many years. You're still young, and in a few more years, your strength will undoubtedly rival his," Zhou Tai said earnestly, dropping to one knee.

"I'm not that fragile. Lu Bu, Zhao Zilong—there will be a place for me, Sun Bofu, among them!" Sun Ce declared, rising to his feet and roaring toward the sky.

As he unleashed his inner energy to its peak, Sun Ce decisively discarded the aura he had imitated from Lu Bu. His energy levels plummeted, almost dropping him from internal energy manifestation, but his eyes shone with renewed determination. Zhao Yun's words had awakened something within him—Lu Bu may be the strongest, but that didn't mean Sun Ce couldn't surpass him. A warrior's path must be carved by his own hands.

Standing on the river, Zhao Yun gazed in Sun Ce's direction, sensing that the young warrior had shed the sharp aura reminiscent of Lu Bu. He couldn't help but admire Sun Ce's decisiveness. Truly, Sun Ce was a man of heroic resolve—quick to make bold decisions without hesitation.

"Bofu, are you alright?" Zhou Yu asked, concerned as he noticed Sun Ce's pale complexion.

"I'm fine. Drop anchor and let's rest here for a while. I need to stabilize my strength before we continue," Sun Ce replied with a wave of his hand.

Neither Zhao Yun nor Sun Ce realized that this brief encounter had far-reaching consequences. Because of Zhao Yun's advice, Sun Ce had chosen to discard his previous cultivation, causing their ship to remain anchored. As a result, they missed the opportunity to recruit two key civil officials—Zhang Zhao and Zhang Hong—who would soon relocate to Yangzhou. Indeed, destiny is a mysterious thing, with every step leading to unforeseen outcomes.

Chapter 329: Chen Xi and Chen Qun

As Zhao Yun returned, waves of envoys from various warlords and prominent families began to gather in Fenggao. Whether they sought alliances or intended to place their bets, they all needed to meet Chen Xi during this time.

In the eleventh month of the third year of Chuping, Liu Bei's civil and military officials finally returned to Mount Tai before Chen Xi's wedding. Naturally, Chen Xi received so many gifts that his hands grew weary from accepting them.

After a year of undefeated battles, each official was wealthy beyond measure, and as Chen Xi held a high position under Liu Bei, none of the civil and military officials dared to be stingy with their gifts.

Additionally, with Mount Tai's flourishing commerce, though the operations were managed by the Mi family, the Zhen family, and Lady Gan, all major merchants knew that Chen Xi was the one who had initially set the rules. Therefore, anyone hoping to thrive in Mount Tai had to build connections with Chen Xi.

When Chen Qun's invitation was delivered to Chen Xi's residence, Chen Xi personally came out with his steward to welcome him. Had there been a mistress of the household, Chen Xi would have brought her along as well. Unfortunately, in recent days, both Chen Lan and Fan Jian had not been staying at the residence.

"Chen Qun, head of the Chen family of Yingchuan," Chen Qun introduced himself simply. He only carried the title of family head in this meeting.

"Ah, the Chen family of Yingchuan. I am Chen Xi, also of the Chen family," Chen Xi chuckled bitterly. "Seeing you now, I realize that this meeting has been long overdue. Please, come in."

Chen Qun entered the Chen residence with a composed demeanor, followed closely by the steward who quietly closed the door behind them.

"Please, have a seat. There's no need for formalities. It's a shame we haven't had the chance to meet sooner," Chen Xi said calmly. He was slightly surprised by Chen Qun's composed and courteous demeanor, especially since they were rivals within the family, both vying for legitimacy. Despite this, Chen Qun maintained his gentlemanly demeanor, reflecting the high standards of education within the Chen family.

"It is indeed a pity. A talent like you should have been nurtured by the Chen family. But it's of little consequence; after all, you still bear the name Chen," Chen Qun responded, also with a touch of lament. "There are some things I must tell you. You've proven your capabilities."

"If it's about solidifying the aristocracy, I already know, and I disagree," Chen Xi waved his hand dismissively. "You should be aware of what Lord Xuande said on the altar to the people. In that regard, our paths diverge. Anything else?"

Chen Qun's eyes flickered with a hint of surprise, but he didn't seem too shocked. "The resources of the Chen family are at your disposal now. You can represent the Chen family, and your actions will be followed by countless other families."

"So, what I'm doing now can be considered an experiment by the Chen family and other noble families?" Chen Xi said, looking at Chen Qun with a serene expression. "As expected, noble families are not monolithic entities. Even within the same family, there are different ideologies."

"Yes. Now, you can be a public figure for the Chen family, one of the symbols of the aristocracy. Your choices, whether right or wrong, will be followed by others. If what you're doing now is a minority opinion among the noble families, as you rise, those who share your views but were previously suppressed will now be used as pawns and sent to your side because you represent the Chen family," Chen Qun replied with a trace of irony.

"I knew it. Noble families are not a unified front. Just as there are a hundred different types of people, there are a hundred different views. Very well, tell those families that we'll take in those people here in Mount Tai," Chen Xi said with a shrug.

"When I heard Liu Xuande's oath on the altar, I thought you were planning to eradicate the aristocracy. But from your tone, it doesn't sound like the usual rhetoric from those who are extreme in their opposition. Care to share your thoughts? I'd like to hear them," Chen Qun asked with interest.

"After all, I was born into an aristocratic family," Chen Xi replied with a glance at Chen Qun. "What happened to those who took my family's property?"

"They've been reduced to servants. In a large family, one can never ensure complete cleanliness," Chen Qun replied flatly, as if this were a common occurrence.

"Even if the commoners win, they'll eventually become the aristocracy. So, there's no need to destroy the aristocracy over the actions of one generation. I'll just say this: if any aristocracy gets in my way, it's only natural to destroy them. But to specifically target aristocrats? I'm not that foolish," Chen Xi said nonchalantly.

"Throughout history, permanence has always been a paradox. When it's time for the aristocracy to fall, it will naturally fall. And when that time comes, someone will push them over the edge. But now, even

with universal education, and even with enough resources to make it possible, do you really think it will wipe out the aristocracy?" Chen Xi sneered.

Chen Qun's eyes narrowed slightly as he sipped his tea in silence.

"Afraid I'm trying to deceive you?" Chen Xi asked casually.

"After all, you, Chen Zichuan, are no simple character. If I'm not cautious, the family might be sold off without even realizing it," Chen Qun replied with a faint smile.

"Let's just go our separate ways and see whose approach is correct. Time will prove whether your idea of solidifying social classes is right or if my way is better," Chen Xi said. He had to admit that universal education combined with merit-based selection could indeed lead most aristocratic families to decline. However, it would also create families of generational elites who would persist.

Frankly, Chen Xi never intended to eliminate the aristocracy. His goal was to sift out the dregs and give the lower classes a chance to rise. If, in the end, the geniuses who emerge from the masses still can't compete with the aristocratic elites, then so be it. At that point, Chen Xi would no longer intervene.

Chen Xi was willing to allow aristocratic families to continue prospering, but only if they consistently demonstrated their worth. The idea of solidifying social classes and losing the drive to improve was something Chen Xi found unacceptable.

"Very well. Let's each test our own theories. Currently, the Yuan and Yang families are vying for the legitimate succession of the empire, one from the bottom up and the other from the top down. The Chen, Xun, and Cui families have all placed their bets. But I don't have much faith in the Yang family," Chen Qun said, moving on from the debate over right and wrong. He was here to relay a few matters and officially acknowledge Chen Xi's status.

No matter how much it frustrated him, the fact that the Chen family had produced someone like Chen Xi couldn't be denied. If he didn't acknowledge it, someone else would. Rather than have it undermine his authority as head of the family, Chen Qun chose to acknowledge it himself.

Every family head has moments where they are not free to act as they wish. To gain power, one must bear responsibility. To gain freedom, one must leave and start anew. This is why the noble families of the Qin and Han dynasties have endured for so long.

After sending Chen Qun off, Chen Xi's steward followed him closely until they almost reached the inner courtyard. Finally, the steward spoke up, "Master, you're a marquis now. Why didn't you take the opportunity to humiliate him?"

"Because it wasn't necessary. For someone who is proud, watching someone they once looked down upon gradually surpass them until they have to look up to them is more painful than any humiliation. Their pride will torment them forever," Chen Xi said calmly as he gazed up at the sky. "The facts will speak for themselves. Words are only needed when actions fall short."

Chapter 330: Everyone is Here

The day before the wedding, Jian Yong finally returned with Liu Biao's envoy, Yi Ji. Gan Ning and Tai Shici also arrived just in time, pulling a cart full of local specialties such as pearls, coral, and ivory. Along the way, they encountered Wu Anguo, who had just returned to Qingzhou after escorting Liu Yu to Chang'an.

If it hadn't been for Liu Yu's situation, Wu Anguo would have arrived in Mount Tai much earlier. However, due to concerns about potential dangers on the road, Kong Rong had no choice but to have Wu Anguo personally escort Liu Yu. After all, Yongzhou had become a chaotic mess.

When Liu Yu was finally delivered to Chang'an, he had become much calmer. However, seeing the ragged officials around him clearly left Liu Yu feeling conflicted. Nonetheless, Grand Commandant Yang Biao took him in, and after seeing Liu Yu off for several hundred meters, Wu Anguo quickly left the dangerous city.

After that, Wu Anguo raced to Mount Tai and managed to arrive in Fenggao just before Chen Xi's wedding. Being quite familiar with the likes of Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Hua Xiong, Hua Xiong personally greeted them upon their arrival.

"Hahaha, Anguo, Xingba, Ziyi, if you had been a day later, the strategist would have been furious!" Hua Xiong laughed heartily as he looked at the dusty trio.

"Hmph, we were busy getting gifts," Gan Ning replied, disgruntled. "Here, have one." Gan Ning pulled out a pearl the size of a small egg from his pocket and tossed it to Hua Xiong. "Wait until you see the gifts we prepared."

Gan Ning had fully embraced his lavish tendencies, which often left people stunned. Even Hua Xiong, who had seen many large pearls during his time in Yuzhou, was surprised by Gan Ning's casual gifting of such a precious item, especially since they weren't that close.

"Take it. It's not worth much," Tai Shici said with a wave of his hand. "Though it's large, it's really not valuable. In that place, every household has pearls. Only we country bumpkins think they're worth something."

Hua Xiong nearly spat out blood. A place where every household has pearls? This isn't just tempting me to go raid the place, is it?

"That's why I'm bringing a whole bushel of multicolored pearls," Gan Ning said proudly.

"Multicolored?" Hua Xiong's eyes nearly popped out.

"Yes, multicolored. The bushel is almost half my size," Tai Shici said, feeling that his once-refined self had become somewhat gaudy since joining Gan Ning. However, a whole bushel of multicolored pearls is indeed impressive.

As he spoke, Gan Ning took out a few pearls of different colors. "Maybe one day, I'll take you there too. What's considered cheap and expensive there is the opposite of here."

"Then it's settled. I'd love to visit a place like that," Hua Xiong laughed heartily, clearly intrigued by the prospect.

"Alright, let's get these gifts delivered first. Lend me a few men, Ganlan. Go to the Mi family and get me some gift boxes. They need to be delivered by today—tomorrow would be too late," Gan Ning said, glancing at the sun and then turning to Hua Xiong.

"No problem. The Mi family has been preparing gift boxes these past few days, so there's plenty available. Come with me. You can take a bath and tidy up. By the way, are you two delivering your gifts together or separately?" Hua Xiong nodded, knowing that if they didn't deliver the gifts soon, it would be too late. As colleagues, he intended to lend a hand.

After taking Wu Anguo to the Mi family's shop, they began packing the gifts. When Hua Xiong saw the dazzling array of treasures, he couldn't help but feel envious. Gan Ning really must have plundered that place, considering the bushel of multicolored pearls, even though the white ones made up over half of it.

"Take them away," Gan Ning said after packing the gifts and writing a gift list. He then had Hua Xiong's men carry the boxes towards Chen Xi's residence.

"Which small country did you raid?" Hua Xiong exclaimed, eyeing the nine ivory tusks, each over three feet long, the eight pearls the size of goose eggs, and the nearly eight-foot-long bright red coral. Having lived inland, Hua Xiong had never seen such things before.

"These items are precious there, but here... well, you know," Gan Ning chuckled after a bath, still dripping wet. "If we had more time, I could have looted more, but we had to hurry back."

"If you had kept looting, we wouldn't have made it back in time," Tai Shici said, casting a disdainful glance at Gan Ning. "If we were late, making up for it later with gifts would be pointless."

"Let's go, or we'll miss the timing," Gan Ning said after drying off with his internal energy and changing into fresh clothes.

"I'm ready too," Wu Anguo said with a sigh. Compared to Gan Ning's flashy gifts, the ones Kong Rong had prepared were much simpler: no jewels, but several rolls of bamboo slips from Confucius' time, two white jade bi-disks, a jade ruyi scepter, and a coiled dragon incense burner. All of these were ancient artifacts. In addition to these, there were one hundred pounds of gold and silver as backup.

In some ways, Kong Rong was the real rich man. As a descendant of the Sage, his family's heritage ran deep, so he could easily find a few valuable items to give as gifts.

In recent days, Chen Xi had become so accustomed to bowing and greeting people that his waist ached. Some people could be dealt with by the steward, but others required Chen Xi himself to greet them. Only now did Chen Xi realize that people like Guo Jia, who always claimed to be penniless, and Jia Xu and Li Ru, who wore the same green robe most of the time, were far from poor.

It's true that the official-oriented mindset of this era, and even afterward, meant that no matter how poor they were, they always had some money. As for where that money came from, Chen Xi couldn't be bothered to investigate. These matters were for Man Chong to handle. With his upright nature, Man Chong would fight tooth and nail with anyone who crossed his line, regardless of their status.

Chen Xi sighed as he glanced toward where Fan Jian lived. The envoys from Li Jue and Guo Si had acted differently than he expected. After arriving, they handed Chen Xi an imperial edict, officially appointing him as Marquis of Yingshang. Similar documents were also sent to Chen Lan and Fan Jian, though Fan Jian's reaction was less enthusiastic than Chen Lan's joy.

"It's been a long time, Strategist," Gan Ning said with a bow, dressed in fine robes. He then laughed heartily, "I hope my efforts didn't disappoint you! Hahaha!"

"Greetings, Strategist," Tai Shici said with a bow.

"Zichuan, since the Battle of Hulao Pass, we meet again," Wu Anguo said with a bow.

"I'm very pleased," Chen Xi said, smiling despite Gan Ning's boisterousness. He returned Tai Shici's bow before turning to Wu Anguo. "Yes, Anguo, do you have any thoughts about taking up a position here in Mount Tai?"

"Wenju asked me to stay and follow Lord Xuande's orders," Wu Anguo replied calmly. He wasn't Kong Rong's subordinate, but Kong Rong had saved his life, and he was willing to repay that debt with his own life.

"Excellent!" Chen Xi said, full of joy. Wu Anguo was a warrior who had held his own against Lu Bu for thirty exchanges before losing—his martial prowess was undeniable.

Chen Xi's steward took the gift list, and once again, he was shocked. He had already been stunned several times over the past few days by the various gift lists, but Gan Ning and Tai Shici's combined gifts still left him in awe.

"Nine three-foot-long ivory tusks, a bushel of five-colored pearls..." The steward's monotone voice echoed outside the Chen residence.

Chen Xi looked up at Gan Ning, who was smiling broadly. "So, you've already been to Zhuyi County? It seems that place is indeed worth doing business with."

"It's a unique business opportunity. Calling it a kingdom would not be an exaggeration. Just as you said, it could be the key to Qingzhou's prosperity," Gan Ning said, his playful demeanor replaced by seriousness.

"That place is only a temporary money bag, but it's sufficient for now. You've done well," Chen Xi said with a nod. "Be sure to arrive early tomorrow for the wedding. There are things you need to witness—don't forget."