

Mythical 391

Chapter 391: Mi Zhu's Plans

"Zizhong, don't think I'm just humoring you. This is truly Zichuan's evaluation. If you don't believe me, you can ask Zichuan when he returns," Lu Su laughed heartily, quickly noticing Mi Zhu's awkwardness.

"Well said, well said," Mi Zhu responded, feeling quite pleased. If his younger brother could receive such high praise from Chen Xi, perhaps there were things he didn't know about him.

Chen Xi hadn't been speaking randomly. Mi Fang, despite being neither particularly skilled in literature nor martial arts, had shown remarkable loyalty. He had followed Liu Bei during his most difficult times, and even when Cao Cao appreciated him and offered him the position of Governor of Pengcheng, Mi Fang had remained steadfast, continuing to follow Liu Bei, who was then in a dire situation. From this perspective, Mi Fang demonstrated that he was more loyal and dedicated than many others.

Moreover, for over a decade, as Liu Bei wandered from place to place without a stable home, Mi Fang never abandoned him. From this angle, describing Mi Fang as resilient and steadfast isn't an exaggeration.

However, the incident in Jingzhou significantly tarnished Mi Fang's reputation. Historical records suggest that Mi Fang and Guan Yu had a strained relationship, but looking at how Guan Yu treated Mi Fang, it becomes clear that this wasn't entirely due to a lack of communication between them.

Given Guan Yu's sense of loyalty, he treated the old comrades who had stuck with Liu Bei from the beginning with brotherly affection. Historical records indicate that Mi Fang's offense at the time was failing to prepare military supplies. In most other situations, this would have been a capital offense. "The army marches on its stomach" is no joke, yet historical accounts suggest that Guan Yu merely reprimanded Mi Fang and sent him back to continue gathering supplies.

It's important to remember that Mi Fang was both the Quartermaster General and the Governor of Nanjun. For those familiar with the map, they know that Nanjun was a key rear position. It's likely that Guan Yu placed Mi Fang there to protect him, as no one could have predicted that Jiangxia Commandery would fall so suddenly, leaving Nanjun surrounded.

It's also worth noting that being Quartermaster General was a lucrative position, especially when one had powerful backing. Guan Yu entrusted this position to Mi Fang, and even after a major mistake, he only scolded him lightly—a far cry from Guan Yu's usual harshness. From this, it's clear that Guan Yu valued old ties. The problem was that Guan Yu's stern demeanor and serious face intimidated Mi Fang, who already feared Guan Yu and rarely communicated with him. Naturally, when Guan Yu rebuked him, Mi Fang was terrified. Later, when Fan Zeng defected and Mi Fang found himself besieged and outmatched, he ultimately surrendered.

In summary, this was a tragedy of misunderstandings, compounded by a series of unfortunate events.

Because of this complex situation, Chen Xi believed that Mi Fang could be reformed—perhaps by assigning him a new leader. For instance, Gan Ning would be a good match. Despite his tendency to engage in risky and unconventional activities, Gan Ning wasn't intimidating or overbearing. He often acted foolishly and would likely get along well with someone like Mi Fang, a wealthy second-generation heir. After all, Gan Ning didn't look down on anyone, and even earned the respect of nobility despite his humble origins—a rare feat.

"So Zichuan already has a plan for him?" Mi Zhu felt much more relieved.

"Zichuan's idea is for Zifang to report to Gan Ning. After all, Gan Ning needs to do business with the natives, and Zifang, though not skilled in business according to you, has absorbed enough knowledge over the years to handle trade with the locals easily. He's also literate and knows some martial arts, which makes him a good fit for the navy," Lu Su said with a smile. As Chen Xi had suggested, Mi Fang wouldn't be needed in naval battles.

"Gan Ning," Mi Zhu pondered. The robust figure of Gan Ning came to mind—a formidable general who commanded the navy, was easy-going, and got along well with others. Indeed, as Lu Su said, this seemed like a good arrangement. "That sounds good. I'll inform my brother and have him report to Gan Ning's navy. He's been causing trouble at home, and it would be good for him to start his career and settle down."

"But what about your household?" Lu Su asked. Unlike other noble families, the Mi family had only risen in the past three generations. Mi Zhu's father had been just a regular merchant, but under Mi Zhu's leadership, the family had quickly become one of the top five wealthiest families. Mi Zhu had three siblings—himself, Mi Fang, and their sister Mi Zhen. If Mi Fang joined the navy, that would leave only Mi Zhen at home.

"I'll send Zhen'er to Madame Cai. She can learn music, chess, calligraphy, painting, poetry, needlework, and tea ceremony with Cai's daughters. I hear the Zhen family's two girls are also learning from Madame Cai, so it would be good for Zhen'er to have some company," Mi Zhu said, clearly having already thought through how to handle his sister's education.

"Oh, then I'll leave that to you," Lu Su replied, avoiding further involvement. Arranging for someone to join Cai Wenji's circle wasn't something just anyone could do.

"This won't trouble you, Zijing. My sister is already close friends with Miss Cai, and with Zifang and me gone, she'll definitely want to stay with the Cai family," Mi Zhu replied, well aware of his sister's personality. Outwardly, she was the perfect lady, but behind closed doors, she was a completely different person. Having lost their parents at a young age, Mi Zhen had been doted on by her older brother. It was a miracle she hadn't turned out spoiled.

"You should also keep an eye on Yang Hu. He has a reputation," Lu Su cautioned, referring to Yang Hu, who had previously eloped with Cai Wenji.

"No way!" Mi Zhu's eyes blazed with protective fury. It was clear he adored his sister, though it was equally clear that his earlier parenting methods had been less than ideal.

"Do as you see fit. I seem to recall Zichuan mentioning starting a girls' class, with Cai Wenji helping to teach. Though it's still in the planning stages, as you know, other girls can go to Manxiang Tower to learn music, chess, calligraphy, and painting, but our daughters and sisters certainly cannot. So Zichuan suggested this alternative," Lu Su said, glancing at the ceiling.

"No problem, it's just a little money," Mi Zhu replied, unfazed by the cost. As long as his sister could be educated to the same standard as Cai Wenji, mastering poetry, etiquette, music, and the arts, he was more than willing to invest. Despite her age, Mi Zhen still behaved like a child, and Mi Zhu often worried about how she would ever get married.

When he had tried to position Mi Zhen as a lady-in-waiting during the New Year, it wasn't just for appearances—he had been looking for a suitable match. But when he saw Liu Bei treating her like a niece, he realized she still needed a few more years. Most girls her age were already of marriageable age, but Mi Zhen still had a ways to go, leaving Mi Zhu with no small amount of concern.

"Well, that depends on your sister then," Lu Su said, quickly handing off Chen Xi's troublesome task to Mi Zhu. He had little interest in getting more involved with Cai Wenji. "By the way, I've noticed that Madame Chen has been spending a lot of time with Cai Wenji lately. Any idea why?"

Chapter 392: The Unusual Assassination Attempt

Chen Xi looked at Tao Qian, with his graying hair and frail figure supported by a cane as he came to greet Liu Bei, and sighed quietly. Time spares no one.

"Greetings, Lord Tao," Liu Bei said, bowing along with Chen Xi and the others.

"There's no need for such formalities, Xuande," Tao Qian replied, his body hunched as he leaned on his cane, returning Liu Bei's gesture as he had done years ago at the Battle of Hulao Pass.

Though he seemed like a candle flickering in the wind, he still retained the blood of a warrior. Perhaps the recent killings had rekindled memories of those fierce battles, despite his body no longer being able to keep up.

"Lord Tao," Liu Bei said, reaching out to support him, clearly sensing that Tao Qian did not have much time left.

"Hahaha, no need," Tao Qian laughed, though there was a distinct sadness in his voice, the kind that comes with the twilight of a hero's life. "Come with me. You, Chen Zichuan, I recognize. And this must be the strategist who planned the trap for Cao Mengde, Jia Wenhe."

"Wenhe greets Lord Tao," Jia Xu said calmly as he bowed.

"Xuande, let your Danyang soldiers camp outside the city with your troops. You and your advisors come with me," Tao Qian said, nodding at Jia Xu before addressing Liu Bei. This was an obvious sign that he intended to hand over military control to Liu Bei.

"Lord Tao, you should see a physician," Liu Bei suggested, supporting Tao Qian while giving Hua Tuo a meaningful look.

"No need. I know my own body well enough. Saying it's terminal wouldn't be an exaggeration. I once thought Cao Mengde and I shared the same ideals, but alas..." Tao Qian's voice trailed off, clearly disappointed. Yet compared to when Cao Cao shattered his beliefs, he had clearly come to terms with it.

"Wenhe, don't you think something seems off?" Chen Xi whispered. "Even though Tao Qian has taken out most of the disobedient families in Xuzhou, it shouldn't be this quiet. Apart from the guards from the Tao family, Chen Deng, and a few of Tao Qian's retainers, there are barely any other families here."

"If Lord Tao were to die now, who would benefit the most, and for whom would it be the biggest problem?" Jia Xu muttered as he gazed at the city walls of Xiapi.

"You mean someone might be plotting to kill Tao Qian at this moment?" Chen Xi frowned. If Tao Qian were to die now, Liu Bei could still take over Xuzhou, but his reputation would suffer, and it would give many people an excuse to act against him.

"Don't worry. I've made arrangements. With Zilong and Zhongkang by his side, not even a rain of arrows could harm Lord Tao," Jia Xu said calmly. "Although I don't know who's stirring the pot behind the scenes, this could be an opportunity for us."

Although the conversation between Chen Xi and Jia Xu was whispered, and they were some distance from Zhao Yun and Xu Chu, both men had sharp ears. Upon hearing Chen Xi's concerns, they subtly moved closer to Liu Bei.

With a sudden "thunk," several large, black bolts were fired toward Tao Qian and Liu Bei. Zhao Yun and Xu Chu immediately intervened, using their internal energy to deflect the projectiles. Zhao Yun then drew his sword and leaped toward the city wall, but as he was in midair, a rain of arrows descended on him and the group below.

"Zilong, be careful!" Liu Bei shouted, finally realizing what was happening.

Zhao Yun swiftly moved several feet in midair, dodging all the bolts. Then, with a sweep of his sword, he sent a flurry of sword light toward the soldiers operating the ballistae, killing them instantly.

Chen Xi casually opened his folding fan and waved it at the incoming arrows, creating a gust of wind that redirected many of them. The remaining arrows were deflected by Xu Chu, who swung his large sword, knocking them down.

Then Xu Chu charged at the black-clad troops emerging from the city gate. With powerful, sweeping strikes, he cut down dozens of them, disregarding their tight formations. The Tiger Guards followed, swiftly defeating the assassins and capturing several after killing nearly a hundred.

Jia Xu picked up one of the arrows, frowning as he examined the dark blue tip. "Poisoned—lethal stuff. But this isn't what I expected. I knew something would happen, but this isn't how I predicted it."

Inside the gate, a hidden Taoist, along with Zuo Ci's disciple Ah Zui, quietly observed the battle, silently assessing the strength of Liu Bei's forces.

The Taoist couldn't hide his excitement as he realized he might have found a way to restore the honor of his fellow "immortals."

After carefully considering the forces of Cao Cao and Liu Bei, the Taoist decided against further testing their strength for now.

With one last glance at Zhao Yun, he withdrew his gaze and, with Ah Zui, quickly vanished from sight.

"Zilong, are you hurt?" Liu Bei asked, inspecting Zhao Yun as he descended from the city wall.

"I am unharmed," Zhao Yun replied calmly, though he slightly furrowed his brow, sweeping his internal energy across the city gate as if sensing something amiss.

"Apologies for the disturbance, Xuande," Tao Qian said, unfazed by the assassination attempt. Instead, he even managed a playful comment. However, a cold glint flashed in his eyes as he spoke. The families of Xuzhou really didn't understand the situation. Whether or not they had been provoked into action, Tao Qian, who had already accepted his impending death, had no intention of showing mercy. "Xuzhou is plagued with troublemakers—no matter how many we kill, there are always more."

With that, Liu Bei and Tao Qian, seemingly indifferent to the recent assassination attempt, calmly led their entourage towards the government office in Xiapi.

"Wenhe, what were you saying earlier?" Chen Xi asked as they followed behind.

"Something isn't right. This situation is vastly different from what I predicted, which means someone else is pulling the strings. But if they've intervened, why stop after just probing us? It doesn't make sense," Jia Xu replied, his expression darkening.

"If it were Cao Mengde or Yuan Benchu, they wouldn't be satisfied with such a half-hearted attempt. What's the point of this? This attack feels more like a test than an assassination," Li You whispered.

"Let's not dwell on it too much. We can pin this on Cao Mengde and move on. We'll create the conditions we need—just eliminate a few more of these families," Chen Xi said calmly. "We don't need to fixate on this incident. Sometimes, it's better to let things slide than to insist on making a point."

Chapter 393: Taking Over Xuzhou

As Chen Xi had predicted, after Tao Qian and Liu Bei arrived at the government office, Tao Qian had Liu Bei take a seat beside him, sitting as equals. After some hesitation, Tao Qian ordered Chen Deng to summon the major families of Xuzhou.

"Xuande, what do you think of Xuzhou?" Tao Qian asked with a smile as he poured a cup of wine for Liu Bei.

"Xuzhou is indeed one of the most prosperous lands in the realm, incomparable to most other regions," Liu Bei replied truthfully. "However, it is a flat plain, difficult to defend without strong troops and capable generals."

"You've grown wiser, Xuande, no longer just seeing things from one perspective. My Xuzhou is wealthy, but it cannot compare to the thriving Taishan. When you first arrived in Taishan, it was impoverished, lacking both manpower and resources. Yet, in just three years, Taishan has surpassed Nanyang to become one of the most prosperous regions in the land," Tao Qian said, a trace of nostalgia in his eyes. Time had changed everything.

Back at Hulao Pass, Liu Bei had been nothing more than a man with a royal lineage but no official rank. Now, Liu Bei commanded tens of thousands of elite troops and governed five million people, becoming a renowned warlord in the central plains. Meanwhile, Tao Qian was a man nearing his end.

"This is all thanks to Zichuan's abilities," Liu Bei said with a hearty laugh. "Without Zichuan, I, Liu Xuande, would not have achieved such smooth progress." With that, Liu Bei raised his cup to toast Chen Xi.

"Without Xuande, I, Chen Zichuan, would not have had the opportunity to put my knowledge to use," Chen Xi replied calmly, then muttered to himself in a voice only he could hear, "Only you, Xuande, would allow me such freedom."

Tao Qian observed this scene and sighed quietly. The harmony between ruler and minister was the true foundation for maintaining a lasting legacy.

Chen Deng entered with the leading figures of the Xuzhou families, his expression neutral. It was clear that some of them were uneasy upon seeing Liu Bei and Tao Qian together. However, no one mentioned anything for the time being.

After the families had paid their respects to Tao Qian and Liu Bei, Tao Qian did not immediately address the offenses of the family heads. Instead, he calmly continued the banquet with Liu Bei. Soon after the meal and entertainment ended, Tao Qian ordered the Xuzhou seal to be brought to Liu Bei.

Sun Qian, accompanied by his mentor, Kang Chenggong (Zheng Xuan), followed Zhao Yu, who carried the Xuzhou Governor's seal. Seeing this, Jia Xu and Li You exchanged glances, both relieved. With this esteemed figure present, even if Tao Qian were to die on the spot, no one could tarnish Liu Bei's reputation. Sun Qian might not stand out much, but his actions were always flawless.

Tao Qian was surprised to see Zheng Xuan, but then a smile appeared on his face. "Kang Chenggong, to have you here in person is a great honor. Could I ask you to bear witness to my and Xuande's agreement? This will silence any rumors in the future." Tao Qian then ordered a seat to be prepared and personally placed it to his right, inviting Zheng Xuan to sit.

Chen Xi smiled inwardly. It seemed that informing Zheng Xuan about the plan to enlighten the people had allowed Sun Qian to persuade him to come out of his scholarly seclusion.

"I came here specifically to witness this event. I also wanted to meet the Liu Xuande who vows to bring enlightenment to the people," Zheng Xuan said bluntly, though his words clearly favored Liu Bei.

"Kang Chenggong, you flatter me. I, Liu Xuande, also long to see such a world. Since the ancient sages have strived for this goal, and I now see a glimmer of hope, why wouldn't I give it my all?" Liu Bei responded with a hearty laugh, bowing respectfully to Zheng Xuan.

In the Han dynasty, civil and military affairs were not strictly separated, and a gentleman was expected to master the six arts. Zheng Xuan, being the pinnacle of such learning, naturally understood physiognomy. Observing Liu Bei's broad and benevolent features, he laughed, "I hear that Xuande has a college, but no headmaster. May I recommend myself?"

"If Kang Chenggong is willing, I will gladly prepare a place for you," Liu Bei said, delighted and sincerely welcoming the offer. He had long been in need of a great scholar to preside over Taishan College.

"Good, good, good!" Zheng Xuan nodded in approval, then turned his attention to Tao Qian.

Tao Qian picked up the Xuzhou Governor's seal, gently stroking it. "Xuande, I wish for you to become the Governor of Xuzhou."

"Lord Tao..." Though Liu Bei had anticipated this, he was still taken aback when Tao Qian directly offered him the symbol of Xuzhou's authority. He hesitated, unsure of how to respond.

"Xuande, do not refuse. I, Tao Qian, am already at the end of my strength. Before I die, I want to find a successor who shares my ideals. Though I was initially displeased with you for attacking Yuan Gonglu, I now see that I was wrong in my judgment when choosing a successor," Tao Qian said frankly, with the candor of a man nearing death.

"Xuande is humbled..." Liu Bei said with a wry smile. The situation with Yuan Shu was complex, but even without Cao Cao's schemes, Liu Bei would not have allowed Yuan Shu to achieve his ambitions easily.

"Cao Mengde is a man with both good and evil within him. Though he has done good, he cannot suppress his violent tendencies. However, his determination is unwavering. I wonder if he will change

after this. It's a pity—I once believed he was the most suitable candidate," Tao Qian shook his head, pressing the seal into Liu Bei's hands. At this point, there was no need to hide anything, and Liu Bei would not hold it against him.

"Take it. Whether you believe that virtue or ability makes one deserving, or that the Han Dynasty's lands belong to the Han, you, Liu Xuande, are the most suitable candidate. Do not decline. Take care of my two sons and the people of Xuzhou. Do not let them suffer again. As for my ideals, let them rest," Tao Qian said with a hearty laugh. As death approached, the only thing he could not let go of was his two sons.

"I will not fail your trust, Lord Tao!" Liu Bei hesitated briefly but accepted the Xuzhou Governor's seal. As Tao Qian had said, whether by virtue, talent, or even lineage, he was the most suitable candidate. As he took the seal, Liu Bei solemnly declared, "As long as I live, I will protect the Tao family!"

"With your promise, I can rest easy. Before this, I had already sent a letter of recommendation to Chang'an. Soon, you will receive the Emperor's official appointment," Tao Qian said, knowing there was no need for lifelong promises. Who could guarantee what would happen after Liu Bei's lifetime?

On the other side, Zheng Xuan acted as a scribe, recording the entire event in detail. He then signed his name, ensuring that anyone attempting to challenge Liu Bei over this matter in the future would have to contend with Zheng Xuan's reputation. This made it unlikely that anyone would use this as a pretext against Liu Bei.

"Congratulations, Lord Xuande!" Chen Xi said with a smile, rising to his feet. The entire government office soon echoed with congratulatory voices, and many of the family heads seemed visibly relieved. Tao Qian's oppressive rule had been a constant source of fear for them.

Chapter 394: The Changes Are Still Too Small

Tao Qian also congratulated Liu Bei, then claimed that he was feeling unwell and had someone help him leave the hall. In reality, he was handing over the reins to Liu Bei, allowing him to manage the aftermath of the situation.

"Everyone, since I, Liu Xuande, have accepted the seal of the Governor of Xuzhou and you recognize me as such, I ask that you listen to my words," Liu Bei said, standing up and raising a cup to the crowd before downing it in one gulp.

"Please speak, Lord Xuande!" Chen Deng was the first to step forward. As Tao Qian's old minister and the representative of the foremost family in Xuzhou, he naturally had to take the lead at this moment.

"I am new to Xuzhou and still unfamiliar with many matters. I ask that you all continue to maintain the operations of the Xuzhou government. As for Cao Ju (Cao Cao), and the assassination attempt in Xiapi, I do not wish for further bloodshed. However, should anyone repeat such offenses, I will show no mercy!" Liu Bei spoke gently to Chen Deng, then turned his gaze sharply to the gathered family heads, lingering on a few of them.

"Lord Xuande is benevolent," Chen Deng bowed his head, and the other Xuzhou figures all echoed, "Lord Xuande is benevolent." Clearly, the family heads, who had been trembling with fear over the possibility of further executions, were relieved after hearing Liu Bei's words.

After that, the banquet proceeded joyfully, and Liu Bei spent the night at the Xuzhou government office. From that night onward, Xuzhou belonged to Liu Bei.

In the large residence of the Feng family in Xuzhou, Chen Xi sat in the main seat. This residence had been granted to him by Liu Bei after the Feng family had been wiped out during Tao Qian's earlier purges. With no one left to claim it, the estate had been given to Chen Xi as a secondary residence.

"Public Servant, I must thank you for your efforts this time," Chen Xi said to Sun Qian.

"Zichuan, you jest. If you hadn't asked me to invite my teacher as a witness, I might have forgotten this could be used as proof," Sun Qian smiled. "My teacher has a favorable impression of the Lord, which is why he agreed to become the head of the academy in Taishan."

"But without your invitation, Kang Chenggong wouldn't have come," Chen Xi shook his head. "Have you found the information I asked you to investigate?"

"Jibo's information is somewhat uncertain, but Sun Bofu is indeed a capable general. As for the details you wanted regarding those from Jingzhou joining Sun Bofu, there are only a few," Sun Qian replied, still a bit puzzled.

"Tell me," Chen Xi frowned.

"There is Liao Gongyuan, Wen Zhongye, and another who is uncertain and still young. His name is Pang Shiyuan, a nephew of Pang Degong," Sun Qian listed the now-obscure figures.

"I see," Chen Xi nodded, his expression unreadable in the dim light. "How is Xu Yuanzhi?"

"Still studying at Lumen Academy, but he has yet to show any remarkable achievements," Sun Qian shook his head. Despite Chen Xi's special instructions, Sun Qian had kept an eye on Xu Shu, but so far, Xu Shu had only shown average performance.

"Hahaha, you've underestimated him, Public Servant," Chen Xi laughed heartily. "Xu Yuanzhi may not have earth-shaking talents, but he is far from ordinary. He's merely biding his time. In one to three years, he will undoubtedly soar."

Sun Qian seemed doubtful, but Chen Xi did not press the issue. After some casual conversation about the affairs in Qingzhou and Xuzhou, Chen Xi saw Sun Qian off, then began pondering some matters on his own.

Chen Xi silently contemplated Liu Bei's current strength and the power he would eventually amass. The more he thought about it, the more something seemed off. The comparison between their group and the historical figures of Cao Wei felt eerily similar.

Rubbing his temples, Chen Xi realized he needed to rethink his next moves. If the changes he had made so far were still too small, then he might have to take more drastic actions. His goal was to end the chaos of this era as quickly as possible—at least to bring peace to the Han Dynasty. As for other places, they could continue to fight for as long as they wanted.

Chen Xi sighed. He had noticed this pattern early on, and it was this realization that gave him the confidence to support Liu Bei. If fate was truly unchangeable, no matter how powerful one's abilities, then there would be no point in resisting. If that were the case, he might as well peacefully await the three kingdoms' division.

Chen Xi was clearly frustrated.

It seemed that the world still had some hope for salvation, otherwise, it wouldn't be correcting itself in such strange ways. This also meant that Chen Xi's efforts hadn't bent the course of history enough. If he could twist it far enough, history might veer onto a new path, and the world would have no choice but to abandon its attempts at self-correction, allowing Chen Xi to lead it into a new era.

Chen Xi sighed as he pressed his fingers to his temples. The thought of this possibility made him feel conflicted.

His furrowed brows reflected his internal struggle. After comparing the battles in Xuzhou and recent intelligence with history, he concluded that it wasn't that he wasn't trying hard enough. Rather, it seemed that he needed to push the world beyond its breaking point before it would truly change.

"The road ahead is long and arduous; I will continue to search high and low," Chen Xi recited aloud.

What he feared most was that all his efforts would be in vain. If the tides of history were truly unstoppable, and everything he did would eventually be crushed, then he would have already chosen to retreat. Fortunately, the evidence he had gathered suggested that he simply hadn't exerted enough force yet.

Chapter 395: First, Secure Military Control

"Zichuan, I didn't expect you to have such refined interests," a voice with a hint of amusement came from beyond the wall just as Chen Xi finished his recitation and was about to head back to sleep.

"Lord Xuande," Chen Xi opened the door and smiled at Liu Bei, who stood there with Li You and Xu Chu. "It seems that you too enjoy the night's tranquility. Please, come in," Chen Xi gestured, and a servant led Liu Bei and the others to the main hall.

"I didn't come with the intention of leisure; it's just that Xuzhou's affairs force me to act," Liu Bei said with a bitter smile as he sat down casually. Accepting Xuzhou had indeed propelled his power to new heights, but with that came the heavy responsibility of governing the province.

"Lord Xuande, are you contemplating how to deal with the Xuzhou aristocratic families? Fearing that if you take strong action, Xuzhou might descend into chaos, yet also knowing that allowing them to

remain entrenched would waste all of Tao Gong's efforts?" Chen Xi sighed. Sometimes, being too rigid could lead to breaking.

"Indeed. The aristocratic families in Xuzhou have deep roots. Although Tao Gong executed many of them, it only deepened their enmity. If I continue on Tao Gong's path, even if I succeed, the backlash could plunge Xuzhou into turmoil, which is not what I want. Yet, letting these families remain entrenched would mean that Tao Gong's hard work was in vain," Liu Bei sighed again and gestured toward Li You.

"Zichuan, Xuzhou's military system differs from that of Taishan. If we directly integrate the Xuzhou troops or attempt to reorganize them for fairness, there will be a significant drop in combat effectiveness during the adjustment period," Li You said calmly. While he could solve the problem, it would still be somewhat inappropriate, which is why he discussed it with Liu Bei before coming to consult Chen Xi.

"For now, we should put aside the issue of Xuzhou's military system. What does Lord Xuande think of the structure of the Danyang troops?" Chen Xi pondered the military system and then thought of the Danyang troops, who had managed to mitigate much of the confusion associated with reorganization.

"The system isn't without merit, but the biggest problem is that they tend to fight as independent units. While this looks coordinated because they are elite soldiers, such a system applied to regular troops would undoubtedly weaken combat effectiveness due to the fragmented command structure," Liu Bei said seriously, clearly having given the Danyang troops' structure some thought.

"Lord Xuande is missing a point. The Danyang troops' structure works because they're recruited from the same village, so the commander's first responsibility is to ensure his village's success. Additionally, because they're all from the same place, they're familiar with each other's abilities," Chen Xi explained, shaking his head. The Danyang troops' unit structure was inherently regional.

"Regional cohesion can lead to unity but also to infighting," Li You frowned, recognizing the age-old dilemma that regionalism posed.

"Disband and reassign them, building a control structure like the Xiliang troops!" Li You didn't hesitate to suggest his previous creation.

"No," Chen Xi immediately rejected the idea. Li You's hierarchical military structure was highly stable and well-structured, but it would stifle initiative at the lower levels. For Li You, who needed to maintain military purity, it worked perfectly. However, implementing this system in the Central Plains would be a disaster.

Liu Bei, having never heard of the Xiliang control structure, looked at Li You and Chen Xi with curiosity.

"Ahem, the absolute control structure works like this: first, you select three to five senior officers, and each of them selects three to five deputies. Those deputies then choose mid-level officers, and so on, down the ranks. In battle, if a lower-level officer falls, the nearest officer from the same level takes over, and after the battle, a higher-ranking officer assigns a replacement," Li You explained, somewhat embarrassed. He hadn't designed this system with Central Plains soldiers in mind—it was meant for the Xiliang troops and their auxiliaries.

"This method seems sound," Liu Bei nodded in approval, though he wondered why Chen Xi opposed it.

"The Xiliang troops can operate this way because every one of them is a low-ranking officer in charge of several auxiliary troops. If a Xiliang soldier dies, assigning a replacement is simple. But in the Central Plains, where all soldiers are Han Chinese, direct appointments will cause discontent. Here, officers must be promoted from within," Chen Xi explained, acknowledging that the Xiliang system only worked in Xiliang.

"I see," Liu Bei nodded, understanding that the greatest threat to military effectiveness was disunity, making such a system unsuitable for the Central Plains.

"Lower-level officers are essential," Chen Xi said with a sigh. "The Danyang troops' flexibility and their ability to continue fighting even after a commander falls are remarkable. From that perspective, we must establish lower-level officers."

"Wu leaders, squad leaders, and company leaders—these positions need clear rankings so that if an upper-level officer falls, there's someone ready to step in. Also, let's double the number of officers and reserve officers. In times of need, we can draw from the reserves to form new units for defense," Chen Xi suggested, laying out the essence of a strategy that emphasized rapid mobilization.

Li You and Liu Bei exchanged glances, recognizing how clever this approach was. Fully staffed with officers, even the agricultural soldiers could quickly be turned into a defensive force.

"How about this: we'll select lower-level officers directly from the current troops. It doesn't matter if it's through competition or other means—if they win, they take the position. Lower-level officers don't need intellect, just bravery and the ability to command respect. For mid-level officers, let's have the current mid-level officers recommend promising lower-level officers for training," Li You proposed after some thought.

"That works," Liu Bei agreed.

"That should ensure cohesion," Chen Xi nodded. "I suggest establishing a structure similar to that of the Danyang troops."

"Let's hear it," Liu Bei seemed eager to hear Chen Xi's thoughts.

"Disband and reorganize the troops. For now, don't mix Taishan soldiers with others—just focus on selecting lower-level officers. As for the Xuzhou troops, remove those who don't meet the standards and reorganize them similarly. For mid-level and lower-level officers, draw from the Taishan troops who have distinguished themselves in battle and promote them by half a rank to a full rank within the Xuzhou troops. Military authority must be absolutely secure from top to bottom," Chen Xi explained calmly, thus ensuring control over the Xuzhou troops.

Chapter 396: Governing Xuzhou Again

Li You sat slightly behind Liu Bei, and upon hearing Chen Xi's proposal, a look of realization appeared on his face. It was clear that Chen Xi's intention was for Liu Bei to firmly grasp control of the military. Perhaps Liu Bei hadn't even noticed that his military authority had become somewhat dispersed.

"This is indeed a good plan. The Taishan soldiers have fought alongside me, enduring years of hardship. It's time they were given a chance," Liu Bei nodded, agreeing with Chen Xi's suggestion.

Liu Bei wasn't just generous to the veterans who had followed him; he also treated the soldiers who had served him for many years quite well. Although this decision warranted careful consideration, Liu Bei approved it without much thought, showing that even a person as virtuous as him couldn't always treat everyone equally.

"Lord Xuande, you can personally select a group of soldiers from the lower ranks. However, try to focus on selecting orphans or soldiers who have brothers or family members," Chen Xi pointed out, understanding the importance of stability. In this era, people were deeply attached to their ancestral lands, making it difficult for them to leave for extended periods.

"This will be easy," Liu Bei said with a smile. "With the vast number of soldiers in Taishan, selecting three to five thousand soldiers and lower-ranking officers shouldn't be difficult."

"Good, then I'll leave it to you to handle the selection," Chen Xi said calmly. "As for the aristocratic families of Xuzhou, let's give them a chance. Right now, we need stability. We don't want to throw Xuzhou into chaos over them."

Li You slightly shook his head. While he agreed with Chen Xi's overall goal, his advice to Liu Bei was quite the opposite.

Indeed, from the current situation, it didn't seem wise to eliminate the Xuzhou aristocratic families. They had been reduced to frightened birds by Tao Qian's earlier purges, and any slight disturbance could provoke a desperate retaliation from them. This could severely damage Xuzhou.

However, Li You believed that the hidden dangers posed by allowing the Xuzhou aristocrats to remain outweighed the potential chaos. He considered it more realistic to break the current framework of Xuzhou, destroy the power of the aristocrats, and rebuild from scratch. After all, even if the aristocrats launched a desperate counterattack, they wouldn't take Xuzhou's millions of people with them. At worst, the market would collapse, and the people would suffer. The financial losses would be immense, but for Li You, it was bearable.

In his eyes, Chen Xi excelled at construction. Without the aristocrats acting as a hindrance, Chen Xi could rebuild everything within a year. And after that, the aristocrats wouldn't be able to regain their influence for at least a decade.

A year of chaos in exchange for a decade of unstoppable development—Li You had no doubts about pushing the Xuzhou aristocrats to their doom by creating the illusion that they could manipulate Liu Bei, only for them to destroy themselves, thus preserving Liu Bei's reputation for benevolence.

"I also don't want more killing in Xuzhou. Without the aristocrats, it would be hard to stabilize the common people," Liu Bei agreed with Chen Xi's view. Having come from humble origins, Liu Bei had seen firsthand how local aristocratic families could solve problems that even the government struggled with.

Chen Xi nodded, realizing that Liu Bei shared his perspective. For now, the Xuzhou aristocrats could still be useful. Wiping them out entirely would cause too much damage, and there was no need to rush. It was better to let them gradually fade away rather than provoke a backlash.

A cold smile briefly crossed Chen Xi's face.

"Lord Xuande, while continuing the bloodshed in Xuzhou is indeed inadvisable, simply letting the aristocrats off the hook is even worse. I suggest transferring all officials from Xuzhou to Qingzhou and bringing Qingzhou officials here. The Xuzhou aristocrats should be willing to give us this small concession," Chen Xi said with a gentle smile.

Li You instantly grasped Chen Xi's intent.

The officials in Qingzhou were mostly scholars recruited by Liu Bei during his most difficult times. These scholars were loyal to Liu Bei, having been treated with great respect when invited to serve him. During the chaos when millions of Yellow Turban rebels spread across Qingzhou, these scholars refused to surrender, even without military support, showing their dedication to their land and Liu Bei.

Bringing them to Xuzhou would ensure that they would carry out Liu Bei's orders without hesitation, and the Xuzhou officials, stripped of their local support, would be kept in check by Taishan's watchful eyes, preventing them from making any bold moves.

Moreover, these loyal officials occupying key positions in Xuzhou would automatically suppress the power of the local aristocrats. With Liu Bei holding the military power, the aristocrats wouldn't dare to resist, knowing they lacked both political and military strength.

"This method is excellent," Liu Bei quickly realized the merit of Chen Xi's plan. "But the Xuzhou aristocrats won't agree so easily."

"Their agreement isn't the issue. What matters is our decision. Wenhe has enough evidence to ensure they make the right choice. We've already declared amnesty, but they must pay a price for it. Aristocrats always understand pragmatism," Li You said, smiling.

"Zichuan's proposal makes a lot of sense. It will also allow the new factions in Qingzhou to challenge the weakened local powers in Xuzhou," Li You recalled recent reports from Qingzhou, finding even more satisfaction in Chen Xi's plan. Instead of letting internal conflicts fester, it was better to direct that energy toward the Xuzhou aristocrats, benefiting the overall situation.

"Yes, that's exactly the idea. It's also a test. Allowing local aristocrats to dominate their regions for generations has made them more loyal to their families than to the Han court. This trend must be curbed. Let's see how this plays out," Chen Xi sighed.

In truth, Chen Xi didn't have high hopes for the Qingzhou officials continuously battling the Xuzhou aristocrats. Most likely, after several clashes, they would reach a balance. However, the time gained would weaken the aristocrats enough to prevent them from threatening Xuzhou again.

Officials without local roots rarely outmaneuvered established aristocrats, a lesson repeatedly taught by history. This was why Chen Xi prioritized securing absolute military control—to provide a solid foundation for the incoming officials, allowing them to fight the aristocrats with confidence.

Chapter 397: The Virtue I Acknowledge

The reason aristocratic families can dominate their regions is due to holding local official positions. People are inherently influenced by relationships, and under the Han Dynasty's ideals of filial piety, it's considered natural for officials to benefit their families. As a result, local aristocratic families become increasingly entrenched and effective at managing their regions. This situation remains harmonious during peaceful times, but when turmoil arises, it becomes difficult to manage.

To say that people respect local aristocrats more than the Han court might be an exaggeration, but it's not uncommon for people to revere local families more than the central authority.

"Let's treat Xuzhou as a test. We cannot allow the aristocracy to grow unchecked in their local regions, as that goes against the interests of the Han Dynasty and the people. In ancient times, vassals resided in Chang'an and governed their territories remotely to prevent them from gaining too much power. We can't let the aristocrats easily usurp the authority of the Han court," Chen Xi said coldly.

By adopting a detached, third-party perspective, Chen Xi could maintain objectivity. Fortunately, when it came to discussing aristocrats, he naturally viewed them from an outsider's perspective.

"It should indeed be this way. Some matters must be dealt with early, just like commerce. If you hadn't pushed for it forcefully, Zichuan, we might have missed the opportunity to implement it later when stability is restored or even after uniting the land," Li You said, bringing up commerce—a topic that even he had once doubted, but reality had proven otherwise.

"Yes, Lord Xuande, the timing is crucial. I've had many ideas in my mind that I wanted to implement, but I haven't had the right opportunity. We need to create a significant internal shift first!" Chen Xi said, sounding frustrated. The phrase "unprecedented and unproven" had often blocked him from putting his ideas into action.

"Hahaha," Li Ru chuckled awkwardly. The last time they had a significant internal debate, Chen Xi had come out on top.

"Unproven by history, huh?" Liu Bei understood the frustration in Chen Xi's words. "Let's do it, Zichuan. Don't worry. As long as no one can prove you wrong, I'll support you! What's there to fear? I trust your vision, Chen Zichuan, and I believe even if things go awry, you can clean up the mess!"

"Thank you, Lord Xuande." Chen Xi casually cupped his hands in gratitude. "No matter how well-timed my proposals are, it's not easy to push through unprecedented policies. Honestly, it's already a miracle that you managed to implement universal education. Yes, it truly is a miracle."

Li You glanced at Chen Xi and sighed, realizing that apart from Liu Xuande, no one else in this Han Dynasty would dare proclaim the need for universal education to the world.

"Lord Xuande is truly virtuous," Li You sighed before Liu Bei could respond. No matter what others thought, Liu Bei's declaration was, in Li You's eyes, a cause worth dedicating a lifetime to. Although their ideals differed, they ultimately led to the same goal. In fact, Liu Bei's concept of benevolence encompassed Li You's aspirations.

"Virtue? I find myself increasingly confused about virtue these days. I once believed that the nine virtues of the Zhou vassals, as preached by Duke Yao, were the highest form of virtue. But now that I sit as a

regional governor, I understand why Zichuan told me that the nine virtues of a vassal are not enough!" Liu Bei shook his head, pondering the nature of virtue.

"The nine virtues of a vassal are insufficient?" Li You was taken aback and turned to look at Chen Xi. Where did that idea come from?

"The nine virtues of a vassal, even when perfected, only make one a flawless individual. But do we need flawless individuals?" Chen Xi casually replied. He had initially mentioned this to Liu Bei when he noticed Liu Bei restricting himself with unnecessary formalities, suggesting that his time would be better spent on more important matters. Little did he expect Liu Bei to take this notion to heart.

"Vassals, huh? When I stood on the altar in Fenggao, looking down at the people flowing like a river, seeing their smiling faces, knowing that the once-starving people of Taishan were now well-fed and clothed, watching children play on the stone-paved streets, observing the busy spring planting and the joyful harvests in autumn—I realized that this is what my virtue should reflect," Liu Bei said, a glow of righteousness emanating from him.

"I enjoy raising dogs and fighting cocks. I'm not particularly capable, and I can't always be fair and just, nor can I guarantee that I won't get angry at times when I shouldn't..." Liu Bei laughed at himself. "I can't embody all of the nine virtues of a vassal, but I believe that helping the people live better lives is more important than any other virtue."

As Liu Bei spoke these words, Chen Xi, Li You, and even the silent Xu Chu felt a surge of inspiration, as if Liu Bei had undergone a spiritual transformation.

"My virtue, Liu Xuande's virtue, is for the people of the world. If the people say it's good, then that is my benevolence. If they praise it, that is my virtue." At that moment, Liu Bei radiated a grand righteousness, a spirit dedicated to the well-being of the people.

Chen Xi and Li You exchanged glances, both seeing the astonishment in each other's eyes. It was as if Liu Bei had awakened a power similar to a spiritual gift, a force that now surrounded him.

Meanwhile, in Yanzhou's Shanyang Commandery, where Cao Cao was resting after setting up camp under Le Jin's protection, he suddenly awoke and looked towards Xuzhou.

Cao Cao sensed a force opposite to his own. While his power was rooted in unwavering belief, in strengthening his and his followers' conviction, Liu Bei's newly awakened power sought to find like-minded people, to inspire others with his vision, and to strive together toward a common goal. The more people who resonated with Liu Bei's ideals, the greater the benefits they would gain, with negative effects being greatly diminished.

Cao Cao didn't need others' approval—he pursued his own will, leading his followers to conquer the world. But Liu Bei needed comrades; he couldn't achieve his ideals alone. Only with like-minded allies could he accomplish his goals.

"Congratulations, Lord Xuande," Li You and Chen Xi said in unison, having both guessed what had just occurred when Liu Bei opened his eyes.

"When I stood on the altar in Fenggao, I felt a sense of excitement, but it was unclear. Seeing the displaced people of Xuzhou filled me with anger, but I couldn't express it. When I arrived in Xiapi and saw the smiling faces of the people of Xuzhou, I finally understood what my virtue is," Liu Bei murmured, as if speaking to himself.

Chapter 398: Resettlement

"I've found too many things I can't do, but I've also found brothers who share my aspirations and are willing to work with me to restore the Han Dynasty. After meeting Zichuan while I was staying under Gongsun Zan's banner on the way to Hulao Pass, I realized that fate had decreed I would not walk this path alone," Liu Bei murmured to himself. "Heaven's mandate ensures my path is not solitary!"

"Even if we fail, there will always be people to follow. Besides, we are walking a righteous path—no one can defeat us," Chen Xi said calmly.

Liu Bei's journey is difficult, but even if he were to fall, there would always be others continuing in his footsteps. The banner of restoring the Han Dynasty would not be dropped; in history, even after Liu Bei's defeat, Zhuge Liang picked up the banner. After Zhuge Liang's death, Jiang Wei took it up, and so on, never faltering.

"Even if I fail, I will rise again. I, Liu Xuande, will never surrender," Liu Bei's gaze was as calm as water, yet his resolve moved Chen Xi deeply. Through the turning of time, Liu Bei's will remained unchanged.

"How could we fail?" Li You smiled as he looked at the two capable men before him. "With the full support of our people, how could we fail?"

"How could we fail?" Chen Xi echoed, understanding that Li You was hinting at something deeper. At this point, they could only advance, with no room for retreat. Especially after their victory over Cao Cao, they could not afford any signs of weakness. If the other warlords sensed vulnerability, another great battle would be unavoidable.

"Let's continue discussing Xuzhou. What should we do with the captured Cao troops?" Liu Bei pressed down the restless feeling in his heart and asked.

"Why not relocate them to Mount Tai for labor reform?" Chen Xi suggested, puzzled. He hadn't been involved in the battle against Cao Cao and thus hadn't seen the captives who had already been sent to the area near the East Sea, close to Mount Tai.

"The Cao troops are fiercely loyal to Cao Mengde (Cao Cao). Although some are dissatisfied with him due to his grave-robbing, most remain loyal, similar to how our soldiers are loyal to us," Li You explained calmly, even providing the reasoning behind it.

"Have the captives tried to escape?" Chen Xi frowned, realizing that Cao's soldiers likely felt gratitude to Cao Cao for lifting them out of poverty and hardship. Additionally, their families were still in Yanzhou, giving them further reason to try to return.

"Yes, several have attempted to flee. While we've recaptured many, a few hundred have successfully escaped. I've already ordered more troops from Mount Tai to strengthen security, but this isn't a sustainable solution," Li You said with a smile. However, the cold glint in his eyes when he met Chen Xi's gaze revealed a deadly intent.

"How many are willing to stay?" Chen Xi quickly dismissed Li You's notion of killing them all. Setting aside the bad omen of killing prisoners, the impact of slaughtering over forty thousand able-bodied men would be far-reaching, and Chen Xi couldn't even fathom the consequences.

"Of those who hold grudges against Cao Mengde, there are over six thousand, but less than half are willing to stay. The remaining thirty thousand or so don't have strong feelings about Cao Mengde's actions," Li You replied, somewhat helplessly.

"Let's first accept those willing to stay and strengthen security for the rest. Right now, we can't let them return to Yanzhou," Chen Xi said calmly, signaling that Li You could use some unconventional methods if necessary.

"If we let them go, then our battle will have been for nothing. If Cao Mengde recruits them again, we'll be in trouble," Liu Bei sighed. But he also couldn't stand the idea of mistreating the captives, leaving him at an impasse.

"Hmm, I have a place in mind," Chen Xi said, thinking of a remote location that would be perfect for labor reform.

"Let's hear it," Liu Bei said curiously.

"Send them here," Chen Xi said, pointing to a location on a map that marked the sea off the coast of Yangzhou. "This area has a large, isolated island. Xingba (Gan Ning) is planning to develop it. We can send the most stubborn captives there. After a few years, things should settle down. Plus, the island can serve as a strategic base in case we need to launch an assault on Yangzhou."

"Xingba's fleet can only transport five thousand men at a time. It would take eight trips to move all forty thousand captives. He'll be busy all year," Li You remarked, frowning. If such an island existed, it would indeed be a suitable place to send the captives. After a few years, they could be brought back once they'd been re-educated.

"Xingba doesn't have much else to do at the moment. His navy is still a work in progress," Chen Xi shook his head. "Once the captives are on the island, even if they want to escape, it would be nearly impossible. We can also stop supplying them and make them farm the land themselves."

"Will this island's location be exposed? Based on what you said, this island seems to have more strategic importance than just holding captives," Li You asked, concerned. Compared to long-term strategic plans, resettling captives seemed like an unnecessary risk.

"It won't be. There are many islands at sea. Even if they suspect we found a large island, they wouldn't have the precise sea charts needed to locate it, let alone realize its strategic value in relation to

Yangzhou," Chen Xi assured him. After all, the sea was filled with countless islands, and hiding thousands of captives there wouldn't raise any suspicions.

"Then let's proceed with this plan. We can't afford to return these captives," Liu Bei agreed with Chen Xi's suggestion. He wasn't naive—while he wouldn't kill prisoners, he also didn't want to waste resources feeding a group of idle men. Chen Xi's plan seemed like a fitting solution.

"It's a bit of a waste, but it's far better than the alternative of spending money to maintain a bunch of idlers. If we sent all forty thousand back, people like Xun Wenruo (Xun Yu) would be heartbroken. Let's prepare a document explaining that we've relocated the captives to an overseas island, so no one can accuse us of killing them," Chen Xi said, shaking his head.

Honestly, Chen Xi would have preferred to incorporate these forty thousand men into their own forces, rapidly boosting their strength. But he knew that these captives couldn't be integrated without proper re-education.

"Once we return to Mount Tai, we should form a new army. The weapons and equipment from Cao's troops will be perfect for us," Liu Bei sighed. "After reorganizing Xuzhou's forces, we should transfer a regiment from Mount Tai. Xuzhou's soldiers can't be fully trusted. It seems that, apart from the elite from Danyang, the other troops in Xuzhou are more like auxiliary forces..."

Chapter 399: The Chen Family of Xuzhou Buys Peace

Chen Xi smiled bitterly. Could he say that Xuzhou had been too peaceful? There hadn't been any wars for three whole years, and the Xuzhou troops were mainly used for maintaining public order—how could they have any real combat power?

"Re-select the Xuzhou troops, and those who don't meet the requirements should be dismissed with appropriate severance pay," Li You said, also clearly frustrated with the Xuzhou troops. They couldn't continue using the military camps as retirement homes, as had been the case during Cao Bao's time.

"Eliminate all the officers who are taking pay for troops that don't exist! We've given the Xuzhou aristocratic families face, but they shouldn't push their luck," Liu Bei said, nodding in agreement.

Unlike other generals in this chaotic era who sought to expand their forces by any means, some in Xuzhou were guilty of doing the opposite—padding their payrolls with ghost soldiers. Troops that were

supposed to number five thousand might actually consist of fewer than three thousand, and even the elite Danyang soldiers had nearly been hollowed out by Cao Bao. What could be said about the other units?

After a brief conversation with Chen Xi about the situation in Xuzhou, Liu Bei left him in peace. He assigned an additional guard unit to stay at the Feng residence, and then he and his entourage quickly departed.

The movements of Liu Bei did not escape the notice of the Xuzhou aristocrats. Seeing that Liu Bei was staying in Xuzhou City rather than in the military camp outside eased their concerns considerably. Their greatest fear was that Liu Bei would say he forgave the past, only to plot against them behind the scenes. If that were the case, the Xuzhou families would have no choice but to fight to the death.

The next morning, Liu Bei formally assumed control of Xuzhou's governance. He appointed Chen Deng as the Grand Administrator of Guangling, Zhao Yu as the Grand Administrator of Xiapi, and put Li You in charge of overseeing Xuzhou's affairs, with Chen Deng and Zhao Yu assisting him. Beyond that, no further appointments were made, which reassured the Xuzhou aristocratic families.

Chen Deng greeted Chen Xi and Jia Xu with a wry smile. His father had been right—this matter wasn't going to end so easily.

"Greetings, Lord Chen, and General Jia," Chen Deng said respectfully, bowing deeply before inviting them into his home.

"Yuanlong, what are your thoughts on the current situation in Xuzhou?" Chen Xi asked after taking a sip of tea.

"Xuzhou is wealthy, but its military is weak. To govern Xuzhou effectively, we must first strengthen the military to protect the territory," Chen Deng said calmly.

"Oh, that makes sense," Chen Xi replied blandly, curious that Chen Deng hadn't mentioned the aristocratic families. But his curiosity didn't extend much further.

"And how do you propose we strengthen the military?" Jia Xu asked, casting a glance at Chen Xi, who had fallen silent and was merely smiling while subtly applying pressure.

"Unify recruitment standards, standardize pay and benefits for soldiers, and eliminate unqualified personnel from the Xuzhou forces. We can recruit new soldiers and train them according to General Yu Wenze's methods," Chen Deng said, though there was a hint of resignation in his tone. Implementing such changes would significantly weaken the influence of Xuzhou's aristocratic families, including his own Chen family, within the military.

"This method is sound. Yuanlong, you will select suitable officers from Mount Tai to train the Xuzhou troops," Jia Xu nodded, tossing the pre-arranged condition to Chen Deng.

Chen Deng was momentarily stunned, and then a surge of joy welled up within him. This was an opportunity for the Chen family to establish ties with the military. Although this opportunity would be limited by Liu Bei's control over the military, it would still bring significant benefits to the Chen family. As for the impact on the other Xuzhou families...

With this thought, a cold gleam flashed in Chen Deng's eyes. The Xuzhou aristocratic families had already been left in disarray by Tao Qian's actions. Now, with this opportunity, the Chen family could rise above the others and become the most powerful family in Xuzhou. The chance was right in front of him—would he seize it or let it slip away?

Chen Xi sipped his tea, leaving the decision up to Chen Deng. How he handled it was his own business and had nothing to do with them. However, both Chen Deng and his father, Chen Gui, had spent their lives thinking of their family's future, so it would be hard for them to ignore such an opportunity.

Jia Xu maintained a neutral expression, but his thoughts were cold and calculating.

Chen Xi's face briefly displayed a mocking smile.

This was Chen Deng's greatest weakness—not his intelligence, but his tendency to be blinded by the desire to uplift his family.

"Thank you, Lord Chen and General Jia, for your kindness," Chen Deng said, his expression unchanged, but clearly, he had already made his decision.

"After all, Yuanlong, you've helped us so much. We're merely returning the favor. Xuzhou will need your efforts to prosper, and the wealth of your family will be vital," Chen Xi said with a smile, lightly tapping the table with his fingers.

"Lord Chen, you jest. How could I dare not give my all?" Chen Deng said solemnly, though cold sweat ran down his back. Chen Xi's words had unnerved him.

"Don't worry, Yuanlong," Chen Xi's smile deepened. "Regarding the assassination attempt at the gates of Xuzhou, has there been any progress? Although Lord Xuande has declared that past grievances will be forgiven, we must remain cautious. The fact that even military-grade ballistae were used suggests that the Xuzhou military requires a more thorough inspection."

Chen Deng easily detected the sarcasm in Chen Xi's tone, and his expression darkened slightly. He now understood why his father had advised him to relinquish those dangerous items.

"Lord Chen, the ballista incident has been traced back to a group of military craftsmen. They have all been detained, and their confessions have been secured. Here are the documents and contracts they signed," Chen Deng said, retreating briefly before returning with a wooden box. He opened it, revealing a stack of neatly arranged paper contracts.

"Good. Send any finished ballistae to the military camp. I doubt these craftsmen made only a few," Chen Xi said, picking up the documents and casually flipping through them before storing them away.

The fact that Chen Deng had handed them over indicated that the Chen family had decisively abandoned these potentially dangerous items.

"The finished ballistae have already been delivered to the government office, awaiting inspection," Chen Deng said, his head bowed, showing no signs of resentment.

When it's time to act, one must act decisively. Keeping ballistae within the Chen family was indeed an excellent way to intimidate other families, but it was also a tremendous liability. Recognizing this, Chen Deng quickly adjusted his mindset, despite his initial reluctance.

Chen Xi and Jia Xu exchanged knowing smiles. As they had predicted, the Chen family of Xuzhou was sensible. Perhaps they had realized that keeping such dangerous weapons would do them more harm than good, so they had exposed them during the Cao Song incident to buy peace for the future.

Chapter 400: Plotting Against Jizhou Again

Tao Qian didn't hold on for long. A few days after Liu Bei successfully took over Xuzhou, Tao Qian passed away in his sleep. Liu Bei personally handled the funeral and warned the Xuzhou aristocrats that if anything happened to Tao Qian's two sons, he would make the Xuzhou families pay the price.

The Xuzhou families tacitly accepted this, as they sought peace rather than confrontation with the authorities.

After that, Chen Xi and the others didn't stir up the Xuzhou families too much. They merely announced their plans to restructure the Xuzhou military, something the local aristocrats neither had the power nor the desire to oppose.

Liu Bei had already made concessions in previous matters, but if the issue of military power was also compromised, he would not hesitate to take a harder stance.

In the eyes of the Xuzhou families, this was all part of the game. As long as the game had rules, they were content. Liu Bei's rules, though not particularly lenient, were far better than Tao Qian's indiscriminate killings.

Thus, the Xuzhou families were more than satisfied, especially when Liu Bei announced that he would return to Mount Tai, leaving Xuzhou's affairs in the hands of Li You for the time being. He also left Zhao Yun and Chen Dao to guard Guangling and Xiapi, to recruit and train Danyang soldiers, and to defend against Yuan Shu in Yuzhou. This decision delighted the Xuzhou families, including Chen Deng.

"Father, is Liu Xuande really just leaving like this?" Chen Deng asked his father, Chen Gui, as he stood atop the city gate tower, watching Liu Bei's entourage depart.

"Yes, just like that..." Chen Gui's beard trembled as he too found himself puzzled by Liu Bei's actions. Though Liu Bei had left behind the famous Zhao Zilong and Chen Shuzhi, as well as Li You as acting governor of Xuzhou, it was still quite different from what Chen Gui had expected.

"Just like that?" Chen Deng echoed, confusion written all over his face. "It shouldn't be this way!"

Meanwhile, as Liu Bei rode his horse, he too was puzzled. Hadn't they agreed to weaken the Xuzhou families before leaving? Why were they returning to Mount Tai so soon? And why had Li You, his advisor, stayed behind?

"Lord Xuande, now is the time for us to firmly grasp military power before addressing other matters. With Wenruo in charge, you don't need to worry—everything will be fine," Chen Xi reassured him.

Jia Xu gazed silently at the sky, thinking that if Li You didn't stir up some bloodshed in Xuzhou, he might as well change his surname. Chen Xi had deliberately left Li You, the "harmless" advisor, behind to stoke the flames among the Xuzhou aristocrats.

"Master, you must trust Wenruo. He will govern Xuzhou well," Jia Xu said, though the hint of a smile on his face made it clear he was mocking the Xuzhou families.

"It's not that I don't trust Wenruo. It's just that it feels premature to leave before things are settled. And Chen Xi's idea of rotating officials hasn't even started yet. Has Chen Xi really become this easy to deal with?" Liu Bei sighed.

"We don't need to rush. Step by step, Wenruo will find the right moment to implement these plans. What we seek is control of Xuzhou, not shared governance with the aristocrats. Wenruo will successfully handle this," Chen Xi said with a yawn. This was Li You after all—though he had no public achievements to his name, his record behind the scenes was already towering.

"I suppose. Without Wenruo, things feel a bit strange," Liu Bei admitted. He had grown accustomed to Li You's presence, where many matters were effortlessly handled. Without him, Liu Bei found the absence unsettling.

"Oh, I'll find someone else for you later," Chen Xi sighed. "Getting used to Li You does make one complacent. He's like the ultimate secretary—handling administrative, military, and political affairs with ease."

"Forget it. Leave Wenruo's position open until he returns. Since you say it won't take long, we'll wait," Liu Bei said, waving his hand. He really didn't want anyone else taking Li You's place.

Chen Xi glanced back at Xuzhou City with a smile.

Li You had requested to stay. Originally, Chen Xi had planned to hand the position to the relatively unknown Lu Su, promoting him from his role as the Chancellor of Mount Tai to govern Xuzhou. However, when Li You volunteered, Chen Xi quickly agreed and, together with Jia Xu, recommended him to Liu Bei. Compared to Lu Su, Li You was more inconspicuous, yet equally capable and experienced. He would have no trouble dealing with the Xuzhou aristocrats who might try to undermine him.

Chen Xi wore a look of sympathy that made Jia Xu roll his eyes. Stroking his beard, Jia Xu said, "Chen Xi, I can't help but feel that Wenruo has more in mind than just dealing with the Xuzhou aristocrats."

"He's probably trying to mislead Ju Gongyu of Jizhou. I remember he mentioned something about a scheme against Ju Gongyu," Chen Xi replied, shaking his head.

"Oh, now that you mention it, I'd forgotten. With Wenruo away from your side, Ju Shou might think we've been pushing for this. And with the current situation in Xuzhou, Jizhou's intelligence network could easily conclude that we're trying to sideline Wenruo, leaving him no way back to Mount Tai," Jia Xu nodded in agreement.

"Exactly. Chen Yuanlong and Chen Hanyu are both renowned ministers, and with local aristocratic support and the favorable conditions we've given the Chen family, Jizhou might believe we're using them to isolate Wenruo and block his advancement," Chen Xi said.

If you're going to play the game, play it all the way. With multiple strategies in place, and Ju Shou's preconceived notions, Liu Bei's situation in Jizhou would become more concrete. Then, all Li You had to do was hint that he still had influence in Liu Bei's camp, and the game could continue.

"This plan is tricky. Are you sure Wenruo can trick Jizhou into giving us the strategy we need for governing Xuzhou?" Jia Xu sighed. The success of this plan hinged on Li You's performance.

"It should work. Jizhou is currently consolidating its own forces and is reluctant to start a large-scale war. If they see an opportunity to weaken us, they won't pass it up. More importantly, if they believe they can dismantle Xuande Gong's power from within, I think Yuan Benchu wouldn't mind giving it a try," Chen Xi reasoned.

"Then let's think of something for our lord to do that will surprise everyone," Jia Xu suggested, furrowing his brow. "That way, we can emphasize how crucial Wenruo is to Jizhou. Any ideas?"