

Mythical 411

Chapter 411: The Lu Family

For Liu Bei, this was a matter of vision and leadership, but for Guan Hai, it was a matter of life and death. The stakes were different depending on one's perspective. What Guan Hai was willing to gamble his life for was something that Liu Bei could decide with just a few words.

"How tragic it is that an era needs heroes to survive," Chen Xi remarked with a hint of disdain. "What kind of devastation must a people, a nation, or a group endure to rely on heroes to shoulder all their burdens? It's truly sorrowful."

Liu Bei sighed after hearing this. He had admired Guan Hai as a righteous man, but now, upon reflection, he realized that if the Yellow Turbans hadn't been pushed to such extremes, Guan Hai wouldn't have had to make such a sacrifice.

"The Yellow Turbans are just struggling to have enough to eat," Liu Bei said with a sigh. "Second Brother will handle this situation. Thinking back, every hero from history had their share of despair."

"Heroes are always forced into their roles. Whether driven by conscience or duty, heroes inevitably carry the heaviest burdens, which is why their stories often end in tragedy," Chen Xi added, sighing.

Liu Bei remained silent, reflecting on the path he had chosen. It seemed that he, too, was walking the path of a hero. Guan Hai could lay down the burden of the Yellow Turbans after this, but Liu Bei had even more on his shoulders. Could he ever put it down?

"A man only matures when he shoulders enough responsibility," Liu Bei said suddenly, the statement seemingly unrelated to the conversation.

Chen Xi and Jia Xu both sighed in agreement. It was true that the measure of a man's maturity could often be seen in the responsibilities he carried.

"Well, enough of that. I have my own responsibilities to bear, too. Providing for my family isn't easy, and my ideals are still far away. One step at a time, I guess," Chen Xi joked, intentionally lowering the tone of the conversation, which prompted Liu Bei to shoot him a sidelong glance.

"Zichuan, will we follow the same steps in Qingzhou as we did when we established Taishan?" Liu Bei asked, steering the conversation away from the Yellow Turbans.

"We'll start the same way, but there will be differences later on. Building cities is essential. Before I left, I already ordered a report to be sent to Chang'an, and we should receive approval soon. But I'm also planning to build ports along the eastern coast of Qingzhou," Chen Xi explained. "We can move the salt production facilities back from the islands in the East China Sea. There's no need to be so cautious anymore, and our middle-ranking officers will have more secure positions."

"Salt production? Oh, and those fishing grounds and dry goods you mentioned before can also be put on the agenda. Then there's sea transport—we could start training a navy. But we don't have the technology to build sea-going ships yet," Liu Bei noted, realizing the challenges ahead.

"It's not just sea-going ships; we don't have any shipbuilding technology at all. We don't even have the craftsmen to build ships, and skilled shipbuilders are extremely rare," Chen Xi replied with a sigh.

During the Three Kingdoms era, there were only a few notable families involved in shipbuilding: the Lu family of Jiangdong, the Gongsun family of Liaodong, and the Cai family of Jingzhou. These families monopolized everything from technology to blueprints, from material selection to craftsmen. Other families like the Zhang, Gu, and Kuai families had incomplete knowledge and techniques.

Chen Xi had once hoped to find the complete legacy of the Mohists, who were unmatched in manufacturing and technology. However, despite being a prominent school of thought in the Spring and Autumn period, the Mohists had been absorbed by other schools and then marginalized. After acquiring some of the Chen family's scattered resources, Chen Xi had managed to trace the Mohist legacy, but it was ultimately of little value.

By the end of the Spring and Autumn period, the Mohists had split into three factions, each taking their knowledge and establishing separate schools. However, they were eventually undermined by the powerful clans. According to the records Chen Xi found, one faction of the Mohists was absorbed by the descendants of the Qi nobility. It's unclear whether this was the Lu family or the Cai family, but both families had roots in the Qi and Lu regions, suggesting some connection.

The northern Mohist faction was wiped out during the chaos at the end of the Qin dynasty, and the southern faction seemed to have been dismantled.

As for the Gongsun family's shipbuilding techniques in Liaodong, they were confirmed not to be of Mohist origin. Based on the historical connections Chen Xi uncovered, the Gongsun family's techniques likely came from the Gongshu family, also known as the Ban family or Lu Ban's descendants, which differed fundamentally from the Lu and Cai families' methods. Unfortunately, the Mohists and the Gongshu family had a rivalry, leading to a split in the craftsmanship community—a true tragedy.

In short, Chen Xi realized that trying to find shortcuts to obtain the Mohist or Gongshu legacies was impossible. Acquiring their techniques for shipbuilding, cart-making, or other crafts was equally unlikely. Ma Jun, a master of Mohist mechanical arts, seemed to have learned from the Mohist tradition, but he was untraceable. In the end, the precious legacy of the Mohists had been divided among powerful clans and families, leaving only scraps behind, hoarded and passed down secretly.

"Aren't we already allied with the Lu family?" Liu Bei asked curiously.

"It's not the same thing. The four major families of Jiangdong are highly regional. They're willing to build ships for us because our relationship is balanced, and we're generous patrons. But to make them join us entirely? That's unlikely unless they're forced into a corner," Chen Xi explained, sighing. The four major families of Jiangdong were stubbornly tied to their homeland, content as long as they could live peacefully in Jiangdong, regardless of who ruled.

"My lord, Zichuan is right. The Lu family is indeed as he described—a family that refuses to leave its territory. The technology to build sea and tower ships is a closely guarded secret among these families. If they didn't see potential in us, they wouldn't even offer to sell us ships, let alone design them at a low cost," Jia Xu added, echoing Chen Xi's sentiments.

In modern times, such behavior from a powerful family might have angered someone like Liu Bei. But in this era, finding a family willing to design and build ships for you, even at a price, without demanding you stop changing your plans, was rare indeed. To Jia Xu, the Lu family's actions were a mark of good faith, despite the inherent monopoly and guarded knowledge.

"They only have four direct descendants—how is moving so difficult for them? I even promised them numerous benefits, including guaranteeing that one of their heirs, either Lu Xun or Lu Ji, would be as successful as Xu Shu, and ensuring that the next generation would produce someone no less talented than Xu Shu," Chen Xi lamented. He recalled that Lu Kang and Lu Xun were one of the few father-son pairs enshrined in the Temple of Martial Excellence.

Chapter 412: In the End, Someone Must Take Responsibility

Jia Xu was stunned, while Liu Bei stood there, mouth agape, unsure of what to say. Although Fa Zheng was often treated as a mascot in Taishan, and despite his occasional eccentric behavior, even Liu Bei would sometimes find tasks for him to sharpen his skills. There was no denying that Fa Zheng was a genius. After all, if he weren't a genius, why would so many people bother to find challenging tasks for him to tackle?

"I think it was your words that scared off the Lu family. Even if they had initially considered moving, your unrealistic promises might have made them reconsider," Jia Xu said, exhaling in frustration. "Be careful with your promises. Sometimes, speaking too ambitiously can have the opposite effect."

"What I said was true. You haven't met Lu Xun yet, have you? Before meeting Kongming, did you think there could be someone that smart in this world?" Chen Xi sighed. "Lu Xun may be slightly less talented than Zhuge Kongming, but he's still a prodigy."

Jia Xu and Liu Bei exchanged glances. Both had met Fa Zheng and Zhuge Liang. When Jia Xu first encountered Fa Zheng, he immediately recognized his potential as a prodigy. But after meeting Zhuge Liang, Jia Xu noticed that Zhuge Liang's temperament was far superior to Fa Zheng's, and even his intelligence surpassed Fa Zheng's. Zhuge Liang truly was a genius, making Jia Xu realize that he had previously underestimated what true talent looked like.

"If Lu Xun is as talented as you say, then the value of the Lu family rises even higher. Middle-level talent can be nurtured, but at the highest level, in addition to proper training, one needs inherent talent," Jia Xu sighed. "Still, you shouldn't have made such grand promises. Moderation is key."

"Is Lu Xun truly as gifted as Kongming?" Liu Bei asked, still somewhat skeptical. He admired Zhuge Liang more than Fa Zheng, given that Fa Zheng's eccentric personality often made comparisons unflattering. Although Liu Bei was tolerant of Fa Zheng, direct comparisons often revealed the differences.

"Even if he isn't exactly like Kongming, with similar education, he wouldn't be far behind," Chen Xi sighed. Lu Xun's unfortunate circumstances during his childhood had forced him into hiding, which hindered his development. With proper education, he might have rivaled Zhuge Liang. However, his temperament remained uncertain.

"Send another invitation and try to persuade them to join us. The border between Yuzhou and Yangzhou has been unstable lately," Jia Xu suggested after some thought. From any perspective, Jia Xu believed it was necessary to invite the Lu family.

"I've already instructed Xingba and Ziyi to head to Lujiang to replace their ships once they finish their duties in Qingzhou. I also told Xingba to pass along a few words to the Lu family. If they're willing to come, they will; if not, there's nothing more we can do," Chen Xi replied. He had already briefed Gan Ning on the matter.

"That should suffice. If everything goes as expected, the battle in Qingzhou should conclude within a few days. It will likely be easier than the last time a million Yellow Turbans emerged from Qingzhou. Guan Hai truly is a righteous bandit," Liu Bei said, nodding as his thoughts returned to the situation in Qingzhou, where he couldn't help but admire Guan Hai's character.

"Don't worry. General Guan will draw blood with three strikes, but the result will be the same as at Hulao Pass. Once General Guan declares him dead, who will know otherwise amidst the dust and chaos? Prepare a coffin, place Guan Hai inside, and he can start a new life under a different identity. Righteous bandits like him are rare," Chen Xi said nonchalantly.

"This matter will certainly catch the attention of the other warlords. But on the bright side, the previous incident with Zang Ba will be completely overshadowed. The Black Mountain Bandits will be easier to handle now," Jia Xu sighed. With this incident serving as concrete evidence, it would be impossible to dispute the claim that Liu Bei had orchestrated the Yellow Turban uprising from Qingzhou. Guan Hai's actions had turned this into reality.

"Sometimes, a moment of righteous bravery can turn many cowards into heroes," Chen Xi said with a smile.

"I see you're quite ruthless too. The Yellow Turbans of Qingzhou and the Black Mountain Bandits are both part of the Yellow Turbans, yet while the Qingzhou Yellow Turban leaders sacrifice themselves for their cause, the Black Mountain Bandits feel no shame?" Jia Xu sneered at Chen Xi. The political opportunities presented by this situation were numerous.

Guan Yu was now only a day's journey from Beihai, and the Yellow Turban camp was filled with cheers. Guan Hai, having received the news from Liao Hua, was completely at ease. He was satisfied with the terms and was now ready to take on the mantle of the former leader's honor, no longer merely a leader in name only.

"Great Leader, we have two days' worth of grain left. Why not let everyone have a feast today?" Guan Cheng joked, looking at Guan Hai, who sat at the head of the table.

"If we let everyone eat to their heart's content, we won't have enough to last even today. We'll stick with two buns per person," Guan Hai said calmly. "I've gathered you all here because I have something to tell you. I don't want you to act rashly after the fact, so I'm giving you a day to process it."

"Great Leader, what could we possibly do that would be rash?" Jiang Gong laughed heartily, slapping his chest. The other leaders joined in with teasing remarks.

"Brothers, settle down," Guan Hai's deep voice cut through the noise, and the leaders immediately quieted down, finding places to sit and listen to what he had to say.

"I've negotiated with Taishan. After our surrender, we'll get everything we're entitled to. Those who want to serve in the army can take up military positions as captains or sergeants. Those who don't want to fight can open up land for farming alongside the other brothers. Taishan will treat you fairly, without prejudice," Guan Hai calmly relayed the promises made by Guan Yu. The Yellow Turban leaders cheered at the good news.

Seeing the joy in the tent, a smile appeared on Guan Hai's face as well.

"But what about you, Great Leader?" There were always sharp minds among any group. While most of the leaders were celebrating, Sima Ju and Huang Shao exchanged bitter glances, and Guan Cheng knelt down.

"Someone has to take responsibility for this. Just as the former leader chose death to protect the million Yellow Turbans, it's now my turn. I'm telling you this now so that you won't do anything foolish afterward, and don't harbor any resentment toward Taishan on my behalf," Guan Hai said calmly. Though his words were spoken softly, they struck the joyous leaders like a thunderbolt.

Chapter 413: Making This One Choice

Before Guan Hai revealed the truth, the entire tent was filled with joyous celebration. But after he spoke, the tent fell into a dead silence, and everyone stared at Guan Hai with stiff expressions.

"Great Leader... please say that again..." Jiang Gong, already believing what he had heard, knelt on the ground, asking with a trembling voice.

Guan Hai repeated his words, and the Yellow Turbans looked at him with bitterness in their eyes. "Commander, there's still time. You should leave before the Taishan army arrives. With your strength, you can survive anywhere."

"If I leave, what will happen to you? So stop saying foolish things. Watch over the brothers for me. Du Yuan, after I die, take care of the brothers and make sure they don't act recklessly," Guan Hai said, glancing at the leader Chen Mao who had spoken up and then turning his gaze to Du Yuan.

"Commander, there's still time to escape," Sima Ju muttered. "The situation with the former leader has happened once before. They'll believe us. You don't have to do this."

"Sima Ju, I've always thought of you as the most rational. But where could I go now? Abandon the Yellow Turbans? Join another lord? That's impossible," Guan Hai replied. His mind wasn't as sharp as Sima Ju's, but he understood this situation better than anyone.

"Must the future of the Yellow Turbans always require someone to sacrifice themselves?" Jiang Gong asked bitterly. "Why does it have to be this way?"

"No reason. I just think it's worth it," Guan Hai said, his tone weary like that of an old man who had seen through life's hardships. "Now go about your business. This matter is settled. I'm not informing you; I'm ordering you. Don't do anything foolish. The future of our women, children, and the elderly depends on your behavior."

Guan Cheng knelt on the ground, bowing three times to Guan Hai before silently standing up and leaving the tent. He had heard the unwavering determination in Guan Hai's voice.

Sima Ju and Huang Shao, too, bowed with tears in their eyes before leaving the tent. Soon after, the other Yellow Turban leaders followed suit, some even weeping uncontrollably. The Yellow Turbans had never wanted to be bandits, but they had been forced into it by circumstances. Now, as they tried to escape this fate, they could only watch as one hero after another sacrificed themselves to drag the Yellow Turbans out of this prison.

Guan Hai sat alone in the empty tent, sighing quietly. He couldn't help but reflect on his past, realizing that since he became a Yellow Turban, he had done nothing but fight to protect them.

"Alas," Guan Hai exhaled deeply. Looking back on his life, he found that he hadn't accomplished anything significant.

"Hunger pangs..." Guan Hai muttered as he heard his stomach growl, sighing again. "The only regret I have is that I can't die on a full stomach. Hahaha!" Guan Hai burst into a somewhat maniacal laugh.

After laughing for a while, Guan Hai felt a wave of desolation. Just then, he heard a commotion outside the tent. He frowned slightly and called out, "Guan Cheng, let Yuanjian in. Don't block him. We're brothers; don't disgrace yourselves. This is my choice, and it has nothing to do with Yuanjian. You'll need to get along after I'm gone. Don't give anyone a reason to laugh at you."

Guan Cheng and Du Yuan exchanged a fierce glare with Liao Hua before reluctantly letting him through. The other leaders also suppressed their anger and made way for Liao Hua.

"Yuanjian, what's the matter?" Guan Hai asked as he yawned, still seated at the head of the tent. Hunger always made him sleepy, even with his inner strength.

"General Guan sent one hundred dried chickens, a cart of dried lamb, three sides of dried pork, one side of beef, and a cart of strong liquor," Liao Hua said, his head lowered, unable to meet Guan Hai's gaze. The light emanating from Guan Hai left him in awe.

"Bring in the brothers. Let's eat together. Although it's supposed to be my farewell meal, there's no need to waste it," Guan Hai said with a pleased expression. He had just lamented not being able to die on a full stomach, and now Guan Yu had sent him food and drink. He had no more wishes left unfulfilled.

No Yellow Turban leaders entered the tent. Guan Hai sighed, had Liao Hua bring the food and drink inside, and then silently began to eat alone.

Among the Yellow Turbans, a leader's secret was everyone's secret. With over seventy leaders, it was inevitable that the entire force of over a million Yellow Turbans would know the next day. Being

commoners, they had the virtue of gratitude. Although they didn't know how to repay Guan Hai, early the next morning, Kong Rong, who had been hiding in Beihai, heard the sound of wailing coming from outside the city walls.

Guan Hai was annoyed. He just wanted to wait quietly for his heroic death, but the mournful cries of a million Yellow Turbans outside were driving him crazy. Death was already complicated enough. Did they really have to cry?

Guan Hai sat in his tent, feeling frustrated.

As his mind opened, Guan Hai still revered the former leader but no longer felt the same awe. At least now, after making the same choice, he had earned the right to make light of the former leader's deeds.

Unable to stand the noisy atmosphere outside any longer, Guan Hai was about to curse aloud when Guan Yu arrived. At exactly 9:00 a.m., Guan Yu's forces reached the gates of Beihai. His army was small, just over two thousand cavalry, but they carried a large coffin. Guan Yu called for Guan Hai by name, demanding his presence.

When Guan Yu hadn't arrived, Guan Hai had been patiently waiting. But now that Guan Yu was here, Guan Hai didn't immediately rush out to meet his fate as he had planned. He felt an unexpected wave of sorrow. Even the bravest warrior would find it difficult to face death head-on, no matter how justified their reasons. Guan Hai's resolve remained strong, but the emotions of the moment weighed heavily on him.

Guan Hai replayed the joys and sorrows of his life in his mind, a tear sliding down his cheek. Then, with calm determination, he stood from his seat, grabbed his long spear in one hand and the unfinished jug of strong liquor in the other. Taking a deep drink, he walked out of the tent with a steady gaze.

Chapter 414: The Yellow Turbans Submit

Guan Hai walked out of the tent, carrying his long spear with a calm expression. The Yellow Turbans who had been gathered outside instinctively made way for him, silently watching as he moved forward. The crowd followed him as he made his way toward the camp's exit.

Mounting the red horse that Guan Yu had sent, Guan Hai pulled the reins and charged out of the camp.

The Yellow Turban leaders hurried to follow him. Just a few hundred meters ahead, Guan Yu and his cavalry were waiting.

"Guan Hai, you truly are a man of your word," Guan Yu remarked. From a distance, he could sense the strong inner energy emanating from Guan Hai, comparable to that of Hua Xiong. As Guan Hai galloped closer, Guan Yu recognized him as the man Liao Hua had described.

When Guan Hai reached about a hundred paces from Guan Yu, he pulled his reins and respectfully cupped his fists. "General Guan, I've heard of your exceptional martial skills. I, Guan Hai, also possess considerable inner energy. I hope the General will grant me the honor of a duel and show me your strongest technique."

"Very well!" Guan Yu's phoenix eyes opened slightly as he assessed Guan Hai. He admired men of integrity, especially those like Guan Hai who faced death with such calm determination. This demeanor resonated deeply with Guan Yu, solidifying his resolve to spare Guan Hai.

Raising his Green Dragon Crescent Blade, Guan Yu stroked his beard with his left hand. "Guan Hai, I have a technique called 'Green Dragon Crescent.' With this move, I once cleaved through the walls of Le Ling. Be cautious."

With that, a dragon's roar echoed as a burst of green energy erupted from Guan Yu's body. The blade emitted a blinding light, and a dragon spirit emerged, its mouth gripping the blade's edge while its body coiled around the long handle. The gentle spring breeze suddenly halted, and a suffocating pressure enveloped the area within a kilometer of Guan Yu.

"This is my might, Guan Hai. Prepare yourself!" Guan Yu shouted, spurring his horse forward, his blade leaving a long trail of afterimages as he charged at Guan Hai.

On the other side, Guan Hai, though determined to die, wanted to test his strength in this world. He summoned all his inner energy and thrust his spear forward with all his might.

[Good!], Guan Yu thought, laughing inwardly. His greatest fear was that Guan Hai would simply surrender or seek death without resistance. Guan Yu wanted to save Guan Hai without revealing too much, and this confrontation provided the perfect cover.

Guan Hai's spear, as if guided by fate, deflected Guan Yu's powerful strike. The ground beneath them split open, creating a trench nearly a hundred meters long as debris and rocks flew into the air.

The battlefield was instantly shrouded in dust and smoke, obscuring the view for most of the Yellow Turban leaders.

Despite missing his target, Guan Yu remained undeterred. He circled back and swung his blade again. Guan Hai, once again seemingly blessed by divine intervention, deflected the blow. The ground around him fractured further, with deep fissures radiating outward from the impact zone.

The dust and debris now completely enveloped the battlefield. Without a strong wind to clear the air, no one could see what was happening.

"Guan Hai, brace yourself for my final strike!" Guan Yu's voice boomed from within the dust cloud. Another dragon's roar followed, and a massive green energy blade erupted from the cloud, accompanied by a thunderous crash. Then, all went silent.

Somewhere within the Yellow Turban ranks, someone began to cry, and soon the entire camp echoed with the mournful cries of "Farewell, Great Commander."

As the dust settled, only Guan Yu remained standing on the battlefield, his horse calmly beside him. Guan Hai lay motionless on the ground, his spear still embedded in the earth. The red horse stood solemnly next to its fallen master.

At that moment, Wei Yan and Guan Ping, who had been prepared by Guan Yu, quickly carried a massive coffin onto the battlefield. They carefully placed Guan Hai's unscathed body inside and sealed the coffin. Oddly, the bottom of the coffin had two ventilation holes—what could that mean?

"Yellow Turbans, hear me! My lord, Liu Xuande, honors the loyalty of Guan Hai. From this day forth, your past transgressions are forgiven, and you shall once again be citizens of the Han Dynasty! However, should you dare to rebel again, there will be no mercy!" Guan Yu's voice thundered across the battlefield, reaching the ears of the hundreds of thousands of Yellow Turbans. Their cries of grief soon turned to laughter and tears.

"General Guan, may we be allowed to mourn our Great Commander?" Du Yuan, having removed all his weapons, knelt before Guan Yu. Even with his sharp mind, Du Yuan couldn't imagine that Guan Hai might still be alive.

"Granted," Guan Yu said, glancing at Du Yuan. Perhaps because he had saved a righteous man, Guan Yu was in a good mood. His tone, though authoritative, lacked its usual coldness. "Guan Hai will be enshrined in the Jingling Temple. You may pay your respects there as well."

"Thank you, General," Du Yuan said solemnly, bowing deeply to Guan Yu.

Guan Yu sighed and cast a glance at the massive coffin. He knew that Du Yuan's bow was not for him but for Guan Hai, whom Du Yuan believed to be dead. Just like with Zang Ba, the former leader's spirit would live on, worshipped year-round. It seemed Guan Hai would now receive the same honor.

What followed mirrored the aftermath of the former leader's sacrifice. Under Guan Hai's immense influence, the Yellow Turbans peacefully accepted Taishan's governance, patiently awaiting aid. While not entirely content, they were no longer easily swayed by outside forces.

In May of 193 AD, Guan Yu successfully pacified Qingzhou and began reclaiming the land. Fields were remeasured and redistributed to the poor, while towns and villages were rebuilt according to new standards. Large numbers of newly subdued citizens entered a period of labor in exchange for food.

New cities were established, canals dug, wastelands reclaimed, residential areas built, and roads paved. Following Chen Xi's plans, vast resources were poured into Qingzhou, once again depleting the strategic reserves that had been stockpiled.

However, back in Taishan, Chen Xi, surveying the now-empty warehouses, felt much more at ease. The resources accumulated over two years had been fully invested, and once the summer harvest came in, there would be no more concerns about food shortages in Liu Bei's territory for the foreseeable future. Finally, they could begin preparing to conquer the rest of the land.

As Chen Xi stood in the light rain, he quietly extended his hand. He had confirmed his suspicions—his spiritual talent was likely as he had once guessed. Within a few states, only Liu Xuande's domain had been spared from the great drought. Though not a perfect year, it wasn't a disaster either.

Chapter 415: Yuan Shao Enters the Fray

The submission of the Yellow Turbans meant that Liu Bei no longer had any internal threats. However, for the other warlords who received this news, there was only silence. Guan Hai's act of righteousness shocked them all and left them with the feeling that Liu Bei might be a reincarnation of Emperor Guangwu, Liu Xiu.

In the past, Emperor Guangwu had similarly risen from a declining royal family, rapidly gaining momentum as people from all directions flocked to his banner, eventually uniting the empire. Liu Bei seemed to be repeating this process—first with the million-strong Yellow Turbans emerging from Qingzhou and submitting after their leader bowed before him, then with Guan Hai's sacrifice, all leading to the complete capture of both land and hearts.

Land itself wasn't the crucial issue; it was the hearts of the people that mattered. When Yuan Shao received this information, it gave him a massive headache. At their level, acquiring territory was easy, but winning over the people's loyalty was the real challenge.

Take Yuan Shao's conquest of Youzhou, for example—it had gone smoothly in terms of military victory, but how many of Youzhou's people truly submitted to his rule? The most significant portion of Yuan Shao's efforts was spent suppressing internal rebellions. Even after accepting Jizhou from Han Fu under Ju Shou's strategy, the rebellion of Guan Chun and his group had still erupted.

This was the case even within Yuan's own domain, which would have faced even greater turmoil without the influence of his family's long-standing presence. Meanwhile, in the newly conquered territories of Bingzhou and Youzhou, rebellions kept breaking out—one day here, another day there—since the regions had been brought under Yuan's control.

In Bingzhou, however, the rebellions were fewer compared to Youzhou. Xun Chen's approach of teaching Guo Yuan and Gao Gan how to win the people's loyalty had made a significant difference. Bingzhou's populace could be won over by a simple method—war.

This "war" wasn't directed against the people of Bingzhou but against the nomads in the north. Xun Chen's method, honed through centuries of conflict between the Han people and the nomads dating back to the Spring and Autumn period, involved stoking this ancient hatred and rallying the people behind Yuan Shao's army as heroes of the frontier.

Though it was a bloody method, it was effective. The people of Bingzhou now accepted Yuan Shao's rule, with only occasional rebellions. Xun Chen had even implemented a law allowing rebels to redeem themselves by fighting the nomads in the north and earning the recognition of the border people, which made the region relatively easy to manage.

As for agricultural development, Xun Chen had entirely abandoned it. Without sufficient seeds, tools, or scientific farming methods, there was little chance of success in the short term. When Xun Chen and Tian Feng devised the plan for conquering Bingzhou, they concluded that raiding and pillaging would yield quicker results than farming. With five to six million nomads to the north, they reasoned, they could both train troops and loot resources.

This strategy had worked for Gongsun Zan, who had forged his White Horse Cavalry through such raids. Surely, Yuan Shao's army could create their own elite cavalry, the Bingzhou Wolf Riders. After all, cavalry was an invaluable asset.

Training cavalry from scratch, however, was no small feat. As Xun Chen and Tian Feng noted, it wasn't as simple as acquiring horses and suddenly having a cavalry force. Most of Liu Bei's mounted troops were more akin to infantry on horseback, with only a few commanders truly capable of leading cavalry in battle.

In short, Xun Chen and Tian Feng had harnessed the enmity between the Bingzhou people and the northern nomads, transforming Yuan Shao's army into heroes of the frontier. This had led to large numbers of Bingzhou men joining the army, particularly those skilled in horseback riding.

The rest wasn't their problem. Raiding and pillaging were the professional skills of many military commanders. In no time, Yuan Shao's forces had amassed one or two cavalry corps.

All of this served to highlight that Yuan Shao had invested considerable effort in winning over the people of Bingzhou. In contrast, Youzhou, still haunted by Gongsun Zan's legacy of repelling nomads, remained a thorny issue.

This disparity made Yuan Shao particularly resentful of how easily Liu Bei had pacified Qingzhou.

"Gongyu, how are Yuanhao and Youru progressing in dealing with the Black Mountain Bandits? We started subduing them earlier than Liu Xuande began with the Qingzhou Yellow Turbans, yet he's

already won over the people of Qingzhou. Do we have any good news on our side?" Yuan Shao asked Du Ji, clearly displeased. The loss of the ten thousand shi of grain to the Yellow Turbans was already something Yuan had stopped fretting over.

"Unfortunately, the situation with the Black Mountain Bandits hasn't improved much," Du Ji replied with a bitter smile. He had just reported this to Yuan Shao the previous day, and at the time, Yuan had advised taking it slowly to avoid leaving any loose ends. But now it seemed that Liu Bei's success had rattled Yuan Shao, who was itching to compete with him.

Yuan Shao exhaled slowly. "I've been too hasty. War isn't something that can be rushed; impatience only leads to mistakes. But am I just supposed to watch as Liu Xuande continues to expand?"

"You are wise, my lord," Du Ji said with a bow. "I have here a secret letter from Liu Xuande's close advisor, Li Wenru."

"Wise? Hmph!" Yuan Shao snorted, then asked, "Li Wenru? I don't recall hearing that name before. What does he want? And what's in his letter?" Yuan's instincts told him this could be an opportunity.

Du Ji signaled to Xu You, who was in charge of intelligence. Xu You stepped forward and recounted all the information he had gathered over the past few months, making Yuan Shao smile from ear to ear.

"Ziyuan, why didn't you share such good news with me sooner?" Yuan Shao playfully chided Xu You, having grown up with him and feeling no need for excessive formalities.

"Since Gongyu returned from Taishan, he's been cautious, fearing a trap. He instructed me to investigate thoroughly, so I refrained from troubling you, my lord. But after six months of observation, we've confirmed that Li Wenru can be trusted and used," Xu You replied with a smile.

Du Ji's caution had indeed tested Xu You's patience. He had been confident three months earlier, but Du Ji had insisted on continued observation. After another three months of careful scrutiny, they finally concluded that Li You could serve as a valuable asset in undermining Liu Bei from within.

"We must be careful with such matters. If there is any deceit, the consequences could be disastrous," Du Ji maintained his cautious stance. However, he acknowledged that Li You was a formidable figure,

having managed to maintain his facade flawlessly. As the official in charge of household registration, Li You had a keen awareness of which of Yuan Shao's spies were active in Yizhou, and most of them had unknowingly fallen into his traps.

Chapter 416: Cao Cao, Lu Bu, and Yuan Shu

The household registration system Chen Xi implemented, which was inspired by the Ming Dynasty, was too advanced for this era. Even though Ju Shou and Xu You were both among the most intelligent of their time, neither had considered that all the intelligence their subordinates had gathered was false information deliberately fed to them by Taishan.

In summary, Li You and Lu Su were overwhelmed with work, and the new household registration system was initially cumbersome. As a result, it was only fully implemented in Taishan County, with Qingzhou still in the gradual process of adopting it.

However, even this incomplete household registration system was enough to disrupt Xu You's carefully constructed intelligence network. Xu You had been investigating Li You, but because there were no previous records of Li You, all he could investigate was Li You's activities after arriving in Taishan.

Li You rarely left Taishan, and the agents Xu You could mobilize were all within Taishan's borders. This allowed Li You to release false information, with Lu Su secretly identifying the agents, effectively mapping out Xu You's entire intelligence network.

When Jia Xu received this information, he handed over control of the intelligence network to Lu Su. Lu Su then used Xu You's investigation of Li You as an opportunity to infiltrate the network with spies. Jia Xu was now waiting to take over the entire intelligence network of Jizhou. Xu You's overconfidence in his methods would eventually lead to Lu Su gaining full control over his higher-level intelligence.

After reading Li You's secret letter, Yuan Shao frowned deeply. "Gongyu, you're too cautious. What harm can a few luxuries and women do? If we can corrupt Liu Xuande, who in the world will be able to stop me? Unfortunately, this Li Wenru has already been pushed to Xuzhou by Chen Zichuan and the others. Chen Hanyu and Chen Yuanlong are both famous ministers, and with Chen Zichuan's pressure above them, Li Wenru may have no path to advancement left. Such a pawn may be wasted."

Yuan Shao's words carried a hint of frustration, but he did not overly blame Ju Shou. He still recognized Ju Shou's cautious nature. However, this time, they had missed a great opportunity. He could only

lament that Chen Zichuan and his group were not easy to deal with. When an opportunist appeared within their ranks, they quickly seized the chance to eliminate him, leaving no trace.

"Lord, just because Li Wenru has no options left doesn't mean we don't. We can use this opportunity to bring Li Wenru fully to our side," Xu You said, stroking his beard with a satisfied smile. Chen Hanyu and Chen Yuanlong might be famous ministers, but they were too focused on their own small domains. For someone like Xu You, who had a broader vision of the world, this presented many opportunities for manipulation.

"Gongyu is right. Not only should we bring Li Wenru over to our side, but we should also elevate him from a mere incompetent courtier in Liu Bei's camp to someone capable of solving Xuzhou's problems. This way, once Li Wenru returns to Taishan, he will be even more reliant on us to maintain his position, and his influence on Liu Bei will grow," Ju Shou said with a smile. He and Xu You had already devised a plan to help Li You return to Taishan.

"Hahaha! Gongyu, Ziyuan, if not for you, I might have missed this golden opportunity! Very well, I entrust this matter to both of you. As for corrupting Liu Xuande and creating division between him and his advisors, that plan should also move forward. We have no shortage of luxuries and women in Jizhou!" Yuan Shao laughed heartily. He wasn't foolish—after being reminded by Ju Shou and Xu You, he quickly realized that proving someone's capability was as simple as getting them to accomplish something significant.

"We won't let you down, my lord!" Ju Shou and Xu You said as they bowed to Yuan Shao. They were confident that assisting Li You in dealing with Xuzhou's issues would be a relatively simple task. Their goal was to do it in such a way that it left no trace of the hidden dangers lurking behind the solution.

At the same time, Lu Bu and Cao Cao also received news of the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou surrendering. While Lu Bu dismissed the news with disdain, the exhausted Cao Cao could only sigh with envy.

Originally, whether it was the Yellow Turbans moving out of Qingzhou or the eventual conquest of Qingzhou, it was Cao Cao who was supposed to benefit. He had selected 300,000 able-bodied soldiers from the over 2 million Yellow Turbans, who were now known as the Qingzhou Army. Although leaving behind the elderly, women, and children had caused discontent among the Yellow Turbans and some discipline issues, no one could deny the importance of these 300,000 troops to Cao Cao.

In this timeline, however, Liu Bei had seized the initiative. With ample supplies and early action, Liu Bei had gained much more than Cao Cao had in history. Liu Bei accepted not only the strong men but also the elderly, women, and children, with figures like the leader Xuangu and the chieftain Guan Hai acting as guarantors. This ensured that Liu Bei didn't face the same resistance that Cao Cao had when some Yellow Turban leaders refused to surrender, leading to prolonged conflicts that resulted in the deaths of many notable leaders.

Cao Cao, for example, had to spend years suppressing leaders like Qu Gong, Sima Ju, Jiang Gong, and Huang Shao, with both Xiahou Dun and Xiahou Yuan leading repeated campaigns against them until they were finally subdued around 196 AD. The losses were considerable.

But now, Liu Bei had effectively absorbed the entire Yellow Turban force in Qingzhou. With 300,000 Qingzhou soldiers at his disposal, he only needed to make a few selections, and many of the leaders who historically resisted Cao Cao had now been preserved.

Among these Yellow Turban leaders, it might not be easy to find someone who could reach the level of internal energy dissipation, but a force of 60 or 70 Refining Qi into Steel (Refining Qi into Gang) masters was enough to intimidate many.

Moreover, these leaders had experience commanding troops. While they might not lead thousands of soldiers, any one of them could easily command 500 troops, meaning Liu Bei now had an abundance of middle and lower-level officers with just a little bit of training.

"Liu Xuande seems to be the chosen one by fate. First, it was Xuangu, then Guan Hai. To think I once believed it was just a scheme by Liu Xuande—now I realize that even among the Yellow Turbans, there are heroes," Cao Cao murmured as he stood on the city wall, watching Lu Bu's troops retreat in the distance. Behind him stood Dian Wei, his loyal bodyguard.

"My lord, you should return to the government office and rest. There may be another fierce battle tomorrow. If the drought lasts another ten days or so, we will win this war without needing to fight," Xun Yu advised as he coughed, bowing to Cao Cao. The battle against Lu Bu had turned into a full-scale retreat to Chenliu, where Cao Cao barely managed to hold off Lu Bu's attacks thanks to the city's high walls and deep moats.

Cao Cao sighed. He had finally managed to stabilize the situation, largely thanks to Du Xi's daring raid, which cut off Yuan Shu's supplies. By taking advantage of the rising spring floods, Du Xi had been able to

deliver a devastating blow to Yuan Shu, allowing Cao Cao to free up some of his remaining forces in Wancheng to reinforce Chenliu and hold back Lu Bu.

Chapter 417: Trouble Arrives

With this battle, Yuan Shu suffered a severe setback. The reason for Yuan Shu's loss wasn't due to the number of soldiers killed, but rather because his son, Yuan Yao, was overly excited during the battle and got injured while charging into the fray. After Du Xi flooded the region by diverting the Yu River, Yuan Yao couldn't escape quickly enough, and his wound became infected. Since then, he has been burning with fever.

Yuan Yao was Yuan Shu's only son, and with his son's condition worsening, coupled with the considerable losses of his army, Yuan Shu decided to withdraw to Shouchun. Along the way, he fed his son various potent tonics, including ginseng and lingzhi, and made donations to temples to pray for his son's recovery. However, Yuan Yao's condition showed no signs of improvement.

In hindsight, it's evident that ancient doctors were often unreliable. It wasn't wise to indiscriminately feed potent tonics like thousand-year-old ginseng and lingzhi to a patient.

Had it not been for the internal energy that Sun Ce infused into Yuan Yao, the boy might have succumbed to the tonic-induced overload. It's hard to say whether Yuan Yao was fortunate or unfortunate.

Furthermore, Yuan Shu, out of love for his son, threatened to kill any doctor who couldn't cure him. This made the doctors hesitant to try any treatment that didn't involve tonics. In the end, feeding potent tonics to someone with a severe infection was a terrible idea, but Yuan Yao's survival so far could be considered lucky. This situation demonstrates that Yuan Shu was surrounded by incompetent doctors.

However, it's understandable. In this era, doctors were considered lowly professionals, and the trust wealthy families had in them was minimal. When they fell ill, they'd rather donate money to temples and reluctantly consult doctors they looked down upon, leading to a vicious cycle where medical practitioners had no real standing.

Sitting in the administrative hall of Fenggao, Chen Xi felt quite pleased when he received the reports. Everything seemed to be going well, except for the fact that Cao Cao hadn't died. But the news about Yuan Yao left Chen Xi puzzled. According to his memory, Yuan Yao should have lived until the establishment of the Wu Kingdom, yet now it seemed that he was on the brink of death.

As for the intelligence on Sun Ce, aside from the mention of the two Qiao sisters, there wasn't much new. However, what surprised Chen Xi was that they weren't daughters. According to the deathbed instructions of Qiao Xuan to Cao Mengde, "I entrust my family to you, and my daughters as well," Cao Cao was supposed to be the original match...

In this era, it wasn't uncommon for prominent figures to entrust their daughters or female relatives to trusted friends, often as concubines. Qiao Xuan's intentions were clear.

Given this, it seems Sun Ce and Zhou Yu might have taken something that was intended for Cao Cao. Years later, when Cao Cao learned the truth, perhaps his famous quote about "taking the two Qiaos from the southeast" might have been his expression of rage.

Of course, all of this was just Chen Xi's wild imagination. What concerned him more was why Sun Ce and Zhou Yu decided to attack Lujiang. Shouldn't attacking Yangzhou be the more strategic move? Conquering Yangzhou would allow them to turn around and force Lujiang into submission. This move seemed illogical—was there some hidden scheme?

"Zijing, what do you think of this?" Chen Xi's mind was a bit clouded, but he instinctively asked Lu Su, who was still handling household registrations beside him.

"What?" Lu Su looked up and took the document Chen Xi handed him. "Attacking Lujiang? The Lu family? This isn't good!"

"The Lu family? I completely forgot about them!" Chen Xi's somewhat foggy brain suddenly cleared up. "The Lu family is crucial to us. We can't let Sun Bofu and Zhou Gongjin take them down!"

"Quickly send word to Lord Xuande, and instruct Gan Ning to lead the navy and bring the entire Lu family to Qingzhou," Chen Xi said urgently. Then, as he glanced at the date on the intelligence report, his face turned grim. "It's too late! Zijing, you write the orders, and we'll send them as fast as possible to Beihai. We must ensure Lord Xuande receives this information. I'll head to the Qingzhou port myself to instruct Gan Ning to go to Lujiang!"

After handling affairs in Xuzhou, Liu Bei returned to Taishan with urgent news from Guan Yu. Guan Hai was sent to Gan Ning, and later to Yizhou, along with Cao Cao's captives. However, with Qingzhou newly

acquired, and although the people's hearts had settled, Liu Bei still needed to demonstrate his benevolence to win their trust.

Chen Xi, meanwhile, had stayed behind to take care of Chen Lan and Fan Jian, so he hadn't gone to Qingzhou. Liu Bei didn't press him either, leaving Chen Xi in charge of overseeing the affairs of Qingzhou, Taishan, and Xuzhou. Liu Bei, accompanied by Jia Xu, went to Beihai.

Chen Xi hadn't been to the administrative hall for the past five days, and when he finally did, he was hit with this major issue! Military matters were urgent, and it wasn't just about protecting Lu Xun. While Lu Xun could likely find his own way out, the true value of the Lu family lay in their shipbuilding technology. If they lost that, it would significantly raise the difficulty of future campaigns against Jiangdong.

It wasn't about underestimating or overestimating Lu Xun, but the fact that the Lu family's greatest asset was their shipbuilding knowledge. Without that, the challenge of attacking Jiangdong would increase significantly.

"That's the best we can do. But Zichuan, be cautious with this decision," Lu Su reminded him. He understood the urgency but added a word of caution. Taking command of the military without proper authorization could leave a lasting negative impression on one's lord, a concern for any leader.

"Don't worry. Just make sure the order reaches Beihai. I still have Lord Xuande's sword, so as long as you can send the order ahead, everything will be fine," Chen Xi assured him. He was aware of the risks but felt the situation warranted swift action.

"Alright, I'll write the order now," Lu Su said, casting a glance at Chen Xi before picking up a scroll to write on. After some hesitation, he added his own name to the document. He and Chen Xi had been friends for a long time, and he knew Chen Xi had little interest in power.

"Good. Once you've finished, send it to Beihai as quickly as possible. I'm off to gather the troops," Chen Xi said before dashing out of the hall. If it weren't for his five-day break and his assumption that nothing significant would happen, this mess might have been avoided. Who could have predicted that it would take over ten days for the intelligence from Lujiang to arrive?

After a few steps, Chen Xi turned back and handed over his seals and credentials to Lu Su. "Zijing, you'll handle the administration of these two provinces while I'm gone. This might take some time. Once Ziyang and the others return, proceed with the plans as discussed."

Chapter 418: Going Home

Chen Xi hastily wrote the order, stamped it with his seal, and placed it on the desk before rushing out. If he arrived too late and Lujiang had already fallen, and if only Lu Xun and Lu Ji escaped, it would be a tragedy.

Leaving the administration hall, Chen Xi quickly jumped into a carriage. Liu Bei's sword and his presence were essential, so he couldn't afford any mistakes. He ordered the driver to hurry to the Chen family residence.

"Master, what urgent matter has arisen?" the old housekeeper asked as Chen Xi burst through the door. Without waiting for a response, Chen Xi hurried toward the inner courtyard, leaving the housekeeper behind.

"I have urgent business and will be gone for a while. Make sure to inform Jian'er and Lan'er; I won't be able to tell them myself," Chen Xi called out as he passed through the outer courtyard. He knew that if he stopped to explain, their sad, disappointed looks would only make things harder for him.

He rushed through the corridors, grabbed Liu Bei's sword from his study, and was about to leave when a voice called out from behind.

"Husband, what is the rush?" It was Fan Jian, who appeared at the door, curious about why her usually calm husband was in such a hurry. "Weren't you the one who always said, 'Even if Mount Tai collapses in front of me, I remain calm, and even if a deer passes by on my left, I won't flinch'? What changed today?"

"I have urgent matters that may require me to leave for three months!" Chen Xi sighed, feeling guilty. He had just gotten married two months ago, then left for nearly three months, and now, after only five days back, he was leaving again. How could his newlywed wives, Fan Jian and Chen Lan, accept this?

"Husband..." Fan Jian protested, dragging out her words.

"This time, it's really urgent," Chen Xi said apologetically. Just as he finished speaking, three more people arrived—Chen Lan, Mi Zhen, and Zhen Mi.

"Greetings, Lord Chen." "Husband." The three of them greeted him politely, curious about why Chen Xi had returned from the administration hall so early.

"Forget the formalities. Were you three planning to go with Jian'er to Madame Cai's for lessons?" Chen Xi glanced at them, his gaze lingering on Zhen Mi for a moment, and then asked knowingly.

"Madame Cai told us to take a day off," Mi Zhen replied. Unfortunately, Madame Cai had canceled classes today, allowing them to enjoy some leisure time.

Chen Xi was speechless. He had hoped that the three of them would take Fan Jian along and give him some peace. But today's situation left him in a bind. "Well, since that's the case, why don't you all go shopping with Jian'er? Anything you want, just put it on my tab. I have some urgent business to attend to, so I must leave now."

As he spoke, Chen Xi waved his hand and quickly made his way through the central courtyard. "Lan'er, Jian'er, you both stay home. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Chen Lan's face turned pale, but she still gave him a polite bow. "I wish you victory, husband."

"Lord Chen, take me with you," Mi Zhen suddenly called out, chasing after him. Since her family wasn't around, she had been staying with Madame Cai, who had taken her under her wing. However, Mi Zhen found herself growing bored with the constant lessons in the arts.

The more time Mi Zhen spent learning under Cai Yan, the more restless she became. Although she excelled in music, chess, calligraphy, and painting, her playful nature made her eager for excitement. Cai Yan's composed and mature demeanor added pressure, forcing Mi Zhen to follow Cai Yan's instructions obediently.

As Mi Zhen tugged on Chen Xi's sleeve, he felt a headache coming on. The girl before him was nothing like the mature and composed Mi Zhen he knew from later years. Her personality reminded him a bit of Sun Shangxiang's—perhaps it was because she had never experienced hardship.

Chen Xi turned to face the four women. Except for Zhen Mi, who remained calm, the other three were all eager to join him. "No, absolutely not."

"You're so stingy," Mi Zhen pouted, clearly displeased. "Can't you guarantee our safety?"

"I can, but no," Chen Xi replied. Taking women to the battlefield was something he couldn't do. Even if it wasn't a big deal, if the commander-in-chief didn't follow the rules, how could he expect his soldiers to?

"Why not?" Mi Zhen asked, even more dissatisfied.

Chen Xi, no longer in a rush, explained, "Because you're a woman."

This was a strong reason, and Mi Zhen, with her limited understanding of the world, couldn't argue against it. She shot a frustrated glare at Chen Xi.

"Alright, now that you understand, stop bothering me. I have to go." Chen Xi waved them off. If he took Mi Zhen along, Mi Zhu would surely give him a murderous look upon their return.

"No way!" Mi Zhen ran back to Zhen Mi, dragging her along as she returned to Chen Xi. Pushing Zhen Mi forward, she said, "Look how cute Mi'er is. I'll give her to you if you take me along."

Chen Xi sighed, covering his face with one hand as he looked at the blushing Zhen Mi. "You... step aside. Absolutely not."

"Hmph! What if I insist on going?" Mi Zhen challenged.

"You're not going," Chen Xi sighed. "And don't even think about sneaking along. Once I leave, I'll station ten teams of city guards to keep an eye on you. If you try to convince my wives to join you, I'll ask Madame Cai to give you extra lessons on women's conduct. Zhen Mi, keep an eye on Mi Zhen for me."

"Oh, alright," Zhen Mi responded softly, her face still flushed. Compared to Mi Zhen, Zhen Mi was truly a model of good behavior.

"Traitor," Mi Zhen grumbled, displeased with her friend's betrayal. "Hmph! I heard my brother say... mmph mmph..."

Before Mi Zhen could finish, Zhen Mi, now composed, covered Mi Zhen's mouth and bowed to Chen Xi. She then promptly dragged Mi Zhen away.

"You three stay home and behave. I'll be back soon," Chen Xi called out to Chen Lan and Fan Jian, who both bowed in silence as they watched him leave.

As Chen Xi walked away, he shook his head slightly. The initial shock of meeting Zhen Mi in Jizhou had faded. Although she was still beautiful, the aura that had once captivated him was no longer as strong.

Chapter 419: What I Care About is You...

Chen Xi turned right after leaving the house, and before he could exit the inner courtyard, he encountered Zhuge Liang, dressed in his scholarly robe with a calm expression, exuding an air of wisdom and confidence.

"Kongming, you're not studying in the courtyard. What brings you here?" Chen Xi asked, calming himself. He had always treated Zhuge Liang with leniency.

"To learn is to apply. I heard you have urgent matters, and I wish to assist," Zhuge Liang replied with a slight smile, making him quite likable.

"Don't call me Chen Hou; that's too distant. Just call me Zichuan. I'm heading to Qingzhou. Are you coming along?" Chen Xi raised an eyebrow, puzzled by Zhuge Liang's decision, given his preference for peace and quiet.

"I heard that the Qingzhou Yellow Turbans have been pacified. What I've learned may finally be of use. May I offer my services?" Zhuge Liang's calm demeanor remained unchanged, his composure almost infectious to Chen Xi.

"Bringing you along is fine. Although you're a bit young, there's a precedent of Gan Luo becoming prime minister at twelve. You, Zhuge Kongming, won't be any less capable. Since you're willing, let's go. But we might not end up in Qingzhou," Chen Xi nodded. Unlike the group of young women, he imposed little restraint on Zhuge Liang, letting him pursue what he enjoyed.

"Thank you," Zhuge Liang cupped his hands in gratitude.

Chen Xi nodded, taking Zhuge Liang along amidst envious gazes from Mi Zhen and the other girls. Little did Chen Xi know, Zhuge Liang's true motivation for joining him was to escape the constant harassment from that group.

Since Chen Xi and Li You had left for Xuzhou, Zhuge Liang's ordeal had begun.

Besides Chen Xi and Zhuge Liang, the Chen family inner courtyard had no other males. Originally, Chen Xi had kindly allowed Zhuge Liang to live there, but after Chen Xi's departure and the arrival of Mi Zhen, Zhen Mi, and the others, Zhuge Liang's peaceful days ended. Without Chen Xi's presence to restrain them, even the maids became more spirited, leaving Zhuge Liang little peace.

Moreover, with Li You gone, Zhuge Liang couldn't retreat to his residence as before. Bound by propriety, he couldn't request to move out until Chen Xi returned, making the past few months rather trying. To avoid another three months of torment, Zhuge Liang decided that following Chen Xi was the better option—after all, traveling and experiencing the world was more beneficial than staying put.

"Zichuan, judging by the sword at your waist, you're preparing to mobilize troops? At this time, those with the ability wouldn't start a war, and those without wouldn't dare. Our internal affairs are stable, so has something gone wrong elsewhere?" Zhuge Liang inquired, his sharp eyes quickly assessing the situation.

"With Xuande Gong away, only I can mobilize the troops. We need to head to Qingzhou's port and order Gan Xingba to intervene in Lujiang. The Lu family is in trouble," Chen Xi sighed.

"The Lu family of Jiangdong?" Zhuge Liang asked, puzzled. "What connection do they have with us?"

As Chen Xi explained the situation to Zhuge Liang, he also considered contingency plans for possible complications. His oversight had already delayed the intelligence by five days, which could mean Lujiang had fallen by now.

"I see... As you've often said, 'The warmth of affection can be a hero's downfall.' This time, you really overindulged," Zhuge Liang's strict nature made it difficult for him to tolerate such mistakes.

"No helping it; you're not married yet, so you wouldn't understand. What's done is done—let's focus on resolving it. Hopefully, it's not too late. If things go wrong, we may have to face Sun Bofu in battle," Chen Xi sighed. Sun Ce, without Zhou Yu, was easier to handle, but with Zhou Yu by his side, he was a force to be reckoned with—a true protagonist archetype.

"Sun Bofu? Not Yuan Gonglu?" Zhuge Liang, who had been focused on his studies, seemed a bit unclear about the current state of affairs.

"Yuan Gonglu's subordinate is Sun Bofu. But compared to Yuan Gonglu, Sun Bofu is a true hero, and I hold him in higher regard," Chen Xi explained the relationship between Yuan Shu and Sun Ce in detail before summing it up.

"In that case, the best way to deal with someone like Sun Bofu, who values loyalty, is to force Yuan Gonglu to corner him, leading to a split between them. With Yuan Gonglu's resources, it might be possible to defeat Sun Ce before he fully matures," Zhuge Liang suggested, clearly eager to test his abilities.

It was evident that Zhuge Liang, who had been studying strategies and governance at home, was now eager to make his mark on the world.

"That might work, but not if Zhou Gongjin is involved. With Zhou Gongjin in the picture, this strategy could backfire. Let's just say that Yuan Gonglu lacks the talent to counter Sun Ce, even with his resources. Ji Ling, though a good general, is fighting a losing battle," Chen Xi said thoughtfully, careful not to dampen Zhuge Liang's enthusiasm.

"Kongming, let me finish. Sun Bofu is much like Xiang Yu—not just in personality but in strength and ambition as well. And Zhou Yu... he's practically perfect: wisdom, ability, temperament, and even his wife. Sun Bofu is Zhou Gongjin's sworn brother, and they trust each other completely," Chen Xi said with a hint of helplessness. Sun Ce had significant flaws in his character, but Zhou Yu's presence more than made up for them.

"I see..." Zhuge Liang drew out his words, though he found it hard to believe that anyone could be so perfect.

"It's true. I'll show you their profiles when we get a chance, and you'll understand the havoc these two can wreak together," Chen Xi reassured him, acknowledging Zhou Yu's prowess.

Zhuce Liang fell silent. Before coming to Taishan, he had believed himself to be unrivaled in the world. But after arriving here, he realized how vast the world truly was.

Perhaps when he came of age, Zhuge Liang would indeed stand above all others. But for now, in this era of brilliant minds, he had yet to step onto the grand stage. And before him was one of the brightest stars of all.

"Don't worry about him. In another six or seven years, when you're his age, you'll shine even brighter. You are Zhuge Kongming, after all," Chen Xi said with a smile, noting Zhuge Liang's change in demeanor. Even without the famous "Three Visits to the Thatched Cottage" incident, Zhuge Liang's intelligence was undeniable.

Zhuce Liang sighed inwardly. The more time he spent with Chen Xi, the more awed he became by his vast knowledge. It was as if nothing in the world could escape Chen Xi's grasp, filling Zhuge Liang with a deep admiration. He hoped that one day, he too could command the world as effortlessly as Chen Xi seemed to.

Chapter 420: Family Split

Chen Xi wasn't aware of Zhuge Liang's thoughts. If he knew, he would probably laugh uncontrollably. Escaping all the world's schemes? Since the beginning, he had lost count of how many times he miscalculated. If it weren't for always preparing for things to go wrong, he didn't know how many times he would have failed by now. But perhaps it was this very mindset that made others think he was always prepared...

After that, the two didn't speak much, traveling eastward in an open carriage under Hua Xiong's protection. Meanwhile, Lu Su's secret letter and signed military orders were being sent to Beihai at the fastest possible speed.

Traveling swiftly, with hundreds of cavalry escorting them, they encountered no incidents and soon crossed Langya State into Qingzhou. On their way through Xuzhou, Chen Xi overheard many criticisms of Li You's inaction, and of course, many local noble families had once again started making trouble.

"Your Zhuge family moved, huh?" Chen Xi asked, puzzled. In this timeline, Cao's forces hadn't invaded Langya, so why would the Zhuge family move?

"Yes, the Zhuge family has moved. The Zhuge family is no more," Zhuge Liang sighed. He still found it strange that such a large family had been split in two because of his brother Zhuge Jin's anger.

"What happened? I was interested in your brother. If Cao Cao isn't an option, he can come to us—I'd warmly welcome him," Chen Xi asked, baffled. The Zhuge family had no reason to relocate.

Zhuce Liang sighed and explained the situation in detail. Essentially, Zhuge Jin had rebelled against the family's orders, refusing to join Cao Cao. He had said that anyone who wanted to go to Cao Cao could, but he certainly wasn't going.

Although the issue had initially been suppressed by Xun You, the local noble families who had taken note of the incident knew the truth. Afterward, Liu Bei's extensive promotion of the matter and Cao Cao's defeat led everyone to believe that Cao Cao was finished. Those famous scholars who had previously feared Cao Cao now openly praised Liu Bei, further tarnishing Cao Cao's reputation.

This was why, despite Cao Cao awakening his potential, no one came to join him. His reputation had been nearly destroyed. Even Sima Lang, who had already joined him, felt conflicted, and if not for his sense of duty, he might have left already.

On another note, after Chen Xi absorbed the split-off factions of the Chen family, some capable noble officials gradually joined Liu Bei. For example, Xun Yu's third brother, Xun Yan, and Xun Yue.

These two weren't any less capable than Chen Qun, but they had evidently not received support from the Xun family. The reason was that Xun Yue's political and legal philosophies were based on a principle of "teaching"—meaning that people needed to be educated before discussing politics and law; otherwise, it was all empty talk.

Xun Yan, on the other hand, had conflicting ideas with Xun Yu. Xun Yan didn't think much of Xun Yu's vision of selecting loyal and capable individuals to assist the Han dynasty and then returning power to the court after success.

Xun Yan's stance was, "By then, who would still listen to such instructions? Loyalty is merely a matter of insufficient incentives for betrayal. Instead of dealing with a power struggle later, why not install a Han relative from the start? Even if the Han dynasty is replaced, it's still an internal matter. What's the big deal about a dead emperor?"

So, Xun Yan nearly caused a rift in the Xun family with his ideas. Xun Yu absolutely couldn't tolerate such thinking!

In the end, Xun Yan and Xun Yue were effectively banished from the Xun family. But when Liu Bei's speech at the altar reached them, the Chen family didn't hesitate to allocate their own people who aligned with Liu Bei's ideology to join him.

As a result, the Xun family sent over these two banished figures, along with a group of Xun family members who shared their ideas. Large families like this inevitably had internal divisions.

When Xun Yue arrived, Liu Bei talked with him for an entire night and then assigned him to work with Man Chong on legal matters. Liu Bei found that Xun Yue had an even deeper understanding of the law than Man Chong. As for Xun Yan, Liu Bei sent him to manage Donglai in Qingzhou and help establish ports.

In short, with a shared ideology, Liu Bei now had quite a few competent noble officials at his disposal. It's remarkable how the noble families at the end of the Han dynasty were so complex that they even produced individuals who undermined their own foundations.

Perhaps it was because the large families had grown too powerful and no longer knew which direction to take. Xun Yue, with his ideas that threatened the foundation of the noble families, was somehow still tolerated.

Evidently, the Zhuge family was no different. Zhuge Jin adamantly refused to join Cao Cao. If it were just him, it might not have mattered, but with the Zhuge family's influence, he would have eventually been forced to join. Over time, he might have been softened.

But in the end, Zhuge Jin didn't just rebel against the family; he led a split. Zhuge Jin took half the family's influence and left with those who shared his views, determined to rebuild the Zhuge family. As for the original Zhuge family, who knew who would come out on top in the end?

This left Zhuge Feng and the rest in an awkward position. The two sides were evenly matched, so a family civil war was out of the question. That would just make the Xuzhou noble families laugh.

So Zhuge Feng and his faction decided to move the remaining family members to Jingzhou, where the Pang and Huang families were. They could thrive there. As for lacking talent, wasn't Zhuge Feng's son, Zhuge Dan, also a genius? If he wasn't as good as Zhuge Liang, he was still as capable as Zhuge Jin. It might take another five to eight years, but the Zhuge family could wait.

As Zhuge Liang recounted the story, Chen Xi couldn't help but think that Zhuge Jin was being unreasonable. If the family had split, why bother staying? He could have come to their side in Taishan. Even if he didn't want to, he could have stayed in Xuzhou as a prefect or something. What was the point of all this drama?

"So what's your brother's situation now? Where is he? And you, which side of the Zhuge family do you belong to?" Chen Xi asked curiously. Zhuge Jin was still quite valuable.

"He seems to have gone to Yuzhou, and there's talk of him heading to Sichuan. As for me, I belong to the Zhuge family, but not to either side," Zhuge Liang replied with a frown.

Chen Xi was taken aback. Zhuge Liang was ambitious. After the family split, he still wanted to rebuild it. Were all the noble families of this era like this? But it was a good thing, after all.

"If you're not aligned with either Zhuge faction, then work hard. I'm not lacking in wealth, but building a new family is something I'm still figuring out. If you're aiming for that, you're on your own," Chen Xi said with a smile.