

Mythical 421

Chapter 421: Signs of an Empire's Collapse

These words weren't unfounded. Rebuilding a family was something Chen Xi had no clear ideas about. Although he was now a prominent figure in the Chen family, he had no clue how to create a new family. The only thought he had was to first have a few children to bring joy to his life. As for the foundation, heritage, and wealth needed to establish a family, those weren't issues.

He could easily take a pile of books from the library and have a couple of generations study them to establish a family tradition. The heritage of the Yingchuan Chen family was also his, and as for wealth, a noble family really didn't need much beyond maintaining appearances.

"..." Zhuge Liang remained silent. When his brother, Zhuge Jin, split from the family, he only left him a letter without mentioning anything else. Zhuge Jin didn't want him to return to the Zhuge family either. Choosing freedom, Zhuge Liang decided to pursue everything with his own mind and hands.

"Zijian, how long until we reach Donglai?" Chen Xi asked Hua Xiong. To save time, they had taken a direct route; otherwise, they should have gone to the State of Qi first and then taken the official road to Donglai.

"About ten more days. We're just passing through Langya now and will soon enter Beihai. If we're lucky, we might encounter the troops welcoming the strategist," Hua Xiong estimated the distance and speed, considering their relay of horses for the urgent message.

"It's unlikely. I just hope Lord Xuande will send the military orders directly to Gan Xingba at Donglai Port," Chen Xi sighed. "My biggest worry is that the messenger won't be able to get the message to Lord Xuande in time."

"I heard that Fa Xiaozhi was transferred by Lord Xuande from the State of Qi to Beihai, temporarily managing Jia Wenhe's administrative duties. If the message reaches Fa Xiaozhi, it should safely get to Lord Xuande," Zhuge Liang said with a frown. To be honest, Fa Zheng had caused Zhuge Liang quite a bit of trouble while Chen Xi was away.

"Fa Xiaozhi staying in the government office to handle administrative matters? That's unlikely," Chen Xi sighed. "The biggest issue in Beihai right now is the resettlement of the Yellow Turbans. If Fa Xiaozhi

wants to prove his abilities to his father, do you think he'll obediently handle government affairs? Finding Fa Xiaozhi is even less likely than finding Lord Xuande."

Zhuge Liang thought of Fa Zheng's personality and sighed silently. Fa Zheng wasn't the kind of person to follow rules. When Liu Bei handed over the administrative duties of Beihai to him, he surely gave Fa Zheng a lot of leeway since Chen Xi had already planned the main tasks. Fa Zheng just needed to follow the steps.

But obviously, such tasks wouldn't showcase Fa Zheng's abilities. Eager to prove himself to his father, Fa Zheng likely took his father to the countryside. As for where they were now, who knew?

The three sighed, and Hua Xiong finally gestured to continue their journey towards their destination. Whether the orders would reach Liu Bei or not was now up to fate. If the orders didn't arrive in time, Chen Xi would have to personally board the ship and join Gan Ning in Lujiang. After all, Gan Ning was still overseeing patrols, escorting, and transporting grain as per Liu Bei's instructions on the Donglai Peninsula.

Traveling in silence for more than a hundred miles, they entered Beihai County. The hot weather suddenly intensified. Looking up at the sky, Chen Xi sighed in frustration. The clear, cloudless sky offered no respite from the blazing sun.

"Set up camp. We'll continue our journey at night. It's too hot to travel during the day," Chen Xi sighed. "This weather is unbearable."

"Strategist, you shouldn't complain about the weather. We're still fortunate in Taishan, Qingzhou, and Xuzhou. In Yanzhou, Sili, Yongzhou, and most of Yuzhou and Bingzhou, as well as parts of Jizhou, there's a severe drought with almost no harvest. At least we get some rain from time to time here, even if it's not much. We won't have a famine," Hua Xiong lamented as he set up the camp.

Chen Xi sighed but said nothing. He had already confirmed his exact spiritual talent. Asking Zuo Ci would have revealed it sooner... but oh well.

Achieving this much was already an extreme effort. Expecting perfect weather in such a disastrous year was almost impossible.

"This drought is affecting too many places," Zhuge Liang frowned. "The old saying is true: after war comes natural disaster."

"..." Chen Xi frowned. How should he respond to that? Although it didn't seem to have a direct connection, it did appear to be true.

"There wasn't much snow last winter, and now we have a severe drought. Next, there will be a locust plague," Chen Xi sighed.

"What! A locust plague?" Hua Xiong rushed to Chen Xi, forgetting even formalities.

"Zijian, let go of me first. I already have a plan for dealing with locusts. I remember writing about locust prevention methods before. Don't worry, our area won't be too affected. After all, Zilong ordered deep plowing in winter," Chen Xi reassured Hua Xiong, patting his hands off his clothes.

"Will that really work?" Hua Xiong quickly let go of Chen Xi but still looked worried.

"Yes, it will. And we still have some rain here. Even if there is a locust plague, it won't be severe. Plus, locusts are edible. We have over a million chickens and ducks in Taishan," Chen Xi smiled. "I've been preparing for this for a long time. Don't worry, it's not a big issue."

Speaking of raising chickens, the local farmers weren't raising them as fast as the government farms. The farmers were reluctant to slaughter them, focusing on hatching chicks instead, resulting in many small chickens across Taishan.

Seeing this, Chen Xi ordered the government to buy up the chicks. After all, they'd worked hard to keep Taishan clean and orderly; they couldn't let these little troublemakers mess it up. So they paid a good price—three chicks for five zhu of copper.

It turned out well. The government raised the chicks, ensuring the soldiers had chicken meat twice a month. Chen Xi realized that relying on the locals to raise chickens wouldn't work, as they were too reluctant to feed them properly. The chickens would never grow big enough in just a few years.

"Phew, that's a relief. I'd forgotten about the chickens and ducks we raised," Hua Xiong wiped the cold sweat from his forehead. The thought of a locust plague terrified him, having personally experienced one before. After the locusts passed, there wasn't a single green leaf left behind, and that was in the vast grasslands...

"Relax, relax. Locusts are just feed," Chen Xi said, shielding his eyes from the blazing sun.

A drought followed by a locust plague wasn't a joke, especially in the endless cycle of natural disasters during the late Han dynasty. Severe droughts almost always led to locust plagues. The collapse of an empire wasn't just due to corrupt officials and politicians. Every time, it was the relentless natural disasters and plagues that truly caused the empire to fall apart.

Chapter 422: Schemes

It's strange, but every time there is a prosperous era, natural disasters are extremely rare. Yet, every time there is chaos, natural disasters seem endless. Even though Chen Xi isn't entirely clear about the exact weather conditions of each year in the late Han period, he can guarantee that in this era, the more you hope a disaster won't happen, the more likely it is that it will.

This aligns with the ancient belief in the unity of heaven and man. When wise and mighty rulers bring about a golden age, natural disasters are nearly nonexistent, and the weather is favorable. But when a chaotic era arrives, with foolish and incompetent emperors, disasters come endlessly. Indeed, the emperor, as the Son of Heaven, truly seems to reflect the will of the heavens. This notion certainly has its merit...

Because of this, Chen Xi generally expects the worst from the weather in this era. However, despite this widespread drought, his spiritual talent still seems able to withstand it. It seems that no matter how bizarre the weather becomes, his spiritual talent can hold out.

While Chen Xi was marveling at the strength of his spiritual talent, Cao Cao was experiencing chest pains. Due to the ongoing drought and the sudden outbreak of locusts in Yanzhou, Lu Bu, unable to sustain his army without grain, was forced to retreat. While this was a relief, Cao Cao couldn't help but feel a pang of frustration because of Chen Xi...

Although Chen Gong was formidable, he could only just hold off Xun Yu and the others, especially when Cao Cao, furious after his defeat by Liu Bei, unleashed two vicious strikes with Xun You's unexpected

tactics. If it weren't for Chen Gong's extraordinary intellect and the strength of the Bingzhou Wolf Riders, Lu Bu might have been killed.

"You're saying that Chen Zichuan's spiritual talent can largely mitigate natural disasters?" Cao Cao asked, clutching his chest. After Lu Bu's retreat, Xun Yu finally felt comfortable enough to inform Cao Cao about Chen Xi's spiritual talent.

"It's not just mitigating disasters. Based on the information we have, Chen Zichuan's spiritual talent has reached a level where he can completely neutralize a drought of this magnitude," Xun Yu said with a bitter smile. Given the current situation, he had no choice but to believe it.

From Xun Yu's earlier analysis, Chen Xi's spiritual talent shouldn't be this powerful. With a disaster of this scale, Chen Xi's talent shouldn't be able to withstand it. But the reality was that Chen Xi had endured this widespread drought with little to no damage, and he hadn't even fallen into a coma. It didn't make sense.

Xun Yu didn't realize that his analysis was actually correct. Chen Xi's spiritual talent alone wouldn't have been enough to withstand the drought. While his spiritual reserves were vast, the amount needed to combat a disaster of this scale would have exhausted him in less than ten days, leaving him comatose.

However, over the past two years, Chen Xi had accumulated a significant amount of residual spiritual energy from his well-governed territories. In fact, the surplus energy he had received from millions of people had formed a protective shield around his talent, and even after enduring the drought, this shield wasn't completely depleted. Thanks to the mass support from the Yellow Turbans he recently absorbed, Chen Xi's rate of gaining spiritual energy had almost caught up with the rate of depletion. By the time the drought ended, he'd still have some residual energy left.

"To this extent?" Cao Cao muttered to himself. "No wonder Liu Bei has such well-trained troops and ample grain with just the territory of Mount Tai."

Then, a cold glint flashed in Cao Cao's eyes. "Is there any way to win over Chen Zichuan? If not, eliminating him would also suffice."

"Winning him over is unlikely. The incident in Xuzhou has made Chen Zichuan deeply resentful of you," Xun Yu sighed. Cao Cao also sighed, as the Xuzhou incident had caused even the Wei family to distance themselves from him.

"Then what about assassination?" Cao Cao asked.

"Without a top-tier expert at the level of Internal Qi Leaving the Body, it's unlikely to succeed," Xun Yu replied with a bitter smile. Judging by the current situation, Chen Xi's spiritual reserves were vast enough to shock Xun Yu. To assassinate him, they would need a top-tier expert, and even then, it would likely require a suicide mission.

"Alas," Cao Cao sighed, feeling even more burdened. "Let's leave it at that for now. We'll reconsider if another opportunity arises. Chen Zichuan rarely leaves Fenggao, and when he does, he's heavily guarded. What a pity."

While Cao Cao was lamenting, Liu Bei was in Beihai, feeling quite excited. A descendant of the School of Names, who had forged a reputation for himself, was talking to Liu Bei about the abilities of the people under his command. This person, known as Zi Xiao, was actually the enigmatic figure known as Master Zi Xu.

Zi Xu had recently been injured, and for a good reason—he had been ambushed by Yu Ji. Before executing his plan, Yu Ji decided to eliminate those who could disrupt it, and Zi Xu was a prime target— isolated, without allies, and not part of any group. It would have been foolish not to kill him first.

Thus, Yu Ji, along with several accomplices, ambushed Zi Xu in Langya County. After a fierce battle, Zi Xu was severely injured. For someone like him, not dying meant that Yu Ji's goal wasn't fully achieved. As a result, Zi Xu was chased by Yu Ji's group for several days and nights, eventually seeking refuge with Liu Bei, knowing that Yu Ji wouldn't dare cause trouble in Liu Bei's presence.

With a forged document from the School of Names, Zi Xu, now going by Zi Xiao, joined Liu Bei. Since Liu Bei was currently recruiting talents, and Zi Xu arrived at the perfect time, Liu Bei personally decided to meet him.

Although the document was forged, Zi Xu's abilities were genuine. After decades of traveling the world, he had become quite astute. His suggestions offered a fresh perspective that even impressed Jia Xu and Liu Ye. Naturally, Liu Bei decided to keep him around.

Yu Ji, on the other hand, was infuriated when he saw Zi Xu blending in effortlessly with Jia Xu, Liu Ye, and others, chatting and laughing. However, there was little he could do about it.

"So, you're saying my ability can enhance the strength of those who share my ideals?" Liu Bei asked Zi Xu with a smile.

"Exactly. Some spiritual talents or army souls come with negative effects, but Lord Xuande's ability can weaken or even eliminate those negative effects," Zi Xu replied with a smile. "Take Ziyang's spiritual talent, for example. He often struggled to control it, but now he should be able to manage it better. Isn't that correct?"

"Now that you mention it, it does seem that way," Liu Ye nodded after thinking for a moment. "But it sounds like you're saying you know what our spiritual talents are. How is that possible?"

Liu Ye's eyes flickered as he glanced at Jia Xu. Whether Zi Xiao had any ulterior motives, Liu Ye felt that this person could still be of great use.

Chapter 423: As Expected

"Hahaha, our School of Names relies on understanding the essence of things through reasoning. Isn't that exactly what you mentioned?" Zi Xu said proudly. The School of Names had long been absorbed and diluted by other prominent schools of thought and the aristocracy, but calling himself a member of the School of Names wasn't entirely false.

"The School of Names..." Jia Xu slightly furrowed his brow. He was still quite suspicious of Zi Xu. Although this person was indeed capable, Jia Xu had never heard of him before. As for Zi Xu's claim that he had been studying the classics of the School of Names in seclusion in the mountains, this only made Jia Xu even more skeptical.

"Oh, is that so? I'm quite interested in the abilities of Xun Wenruo, Xi Zhicai, Cheng Zhongde, and Xun Gongda," Liu Ye said, his eyes gleaming with curiosity. Understanding the abilities of these four would make dealing with them easier in the future.

Zi Xu inwardly smiled bitterly. He realized he was getting too deeply involved. His original plan was to blend in with Liu Bei's group, offer some advice, resolve a few issues, and then leave. But now, thanks to Liu Ye and Jia Xu's constant probing, he was getting pulled deeper and deeper.

To speak or not to speak, that was the question. If he spoke, the consequences could become entangled. Both Cao Cao and Liu Bei's current situations were too precarious for immortals to interfere. But if he didn't speak, could he really fool Jia Xu, who was clearly no ordinary person? Liu Ye might be manageable, but Jia Xu's occasional deep thoughts made Zi Xu extremely wary. Especially since Jia Xu was a person whose depths he couldn't fully gauge; the future was shrouded in mist, making Zi Xu even more apprehensive.

"Um, I haven't had any direct contact with those four, so how would I know?" Zi Xu hesitated for a moment and decided it was best not to say anything. Liu Bei was a good man, but there was no need to get himself too deeply involved.

"Is that so?" Jia Xu said, staring intently at Zi Xu. "In that case, let's forget about them. Instead, tell me accurately about Zichuan's spiritual talent. Don't tell me you haven't had any contact with him. You've mentioned him before, and I'm very interested in our Chen Hou's spiritual abilities."

Zi Xu froze. Had he mentioned Chen Xi? Seeing Jia Xu's calm expression and hearing Liu Ye's instigating remarks, Zi Xu thought for a moment. Maybe he had mentioned it inadvertently. After all, Chen Xi's spiritual talent was quite famous among the "immortal" community.

"Well, I've heard of Chen Hou, but unfortunately, I've never had the chance to meet him," Zi Xu said cautiously, trying to avoid making any more mistakes. He was careful not to dig himself in deeper, aware that both Jia Xu and Liu Ye seemed to be probing for more information.

"So, you don't know about Zichuan's abilities either?" Liu Ye said, somewhat disappointed. They had already made some educated guesses about Chen Xi's spiritual talent based on what he had previously revealed, but they were hoping for a more professional evaluation.

"Haha, that's not entirely true," Zi Xu said with a smile. He didn't feel too pressured discussing Chen Xi's spiritual talent since it was something that was already close to being publicly known.

“Let’s hear it then. I’m quite interested in this as well,” Liu Bei, who had been talking with an elder in the front about the local situation, turned around with a curious expression.

Liu Bei was genuinely intrigued by Chen Xi’s spiritual talent. He had heard about the talents of many of his other strategists, but no one had ever mentioned Chen Xi’s in detail. And the idea that Chen Xi might not have any spiritual talent was something Liu Bei couldn’t believe. After all, the transcendence of intellect and spirit was a hallmark of top strategists. How could Chen Xi not have it?

“If Lord Xuande is interested, allow me to explain,” Zi Xu said with a smile. He then proceeded to explain the conclusions that many immortals had reached about Chen Xi’s spiritual talent.

What Zi Xu described wasn’t much different from what Zuo Ci had previously mentioned, with the addition of an estimate of Chen Xi’s ability to gather residual spiritual energy. Overall, the evaluation of Chen Xi’s talent had been upgraded from “not bad” to “top-tier.” After all, if the speed of gathering residual spiritual energy were mediocre, then the effectiveness of the talent, no matter how impressive, would only be temporary. It could even become a burden for the person with the talent.

“Is this really true?” Liu Bei asked excitedly.

“It’s indeed true. Chen Hou’s spiritual talent deserves to be ranked among the very best, and it will only strengthen as Lord Xuande’s territories expand and as prosperity increases under your rule,” Zi Xu said with admiration.

Back when Chen Xi only governed Taishan, if not for the favorable conditions of that year and his rapid accumulation of spiritual energy, his domain might have fallen into turmoil before he could gather enough power. But after surviving that critical period, the residual spiritual energy began to snowball. Now, with the gradual unification of the world, it was almost impossible for Chen Xi to experience the fatigue or prolonged sleep that he had initially encountered.

“Hahaha! Zichuan truly is my lucky star!” Liu Bei laughed heartily. To have such a powerful spiritual talent explained why his territories had consistently enjoyed favorable conditions. This meant that as long as he governed well, he could create a positive cycle of prosperity.

Liu Bei had no doubts about Zi Xu’s explanation. The reason was simple: when Zi Xu mentioned Chen Xi’s spiritual talent, both Jia Xu and Liu Ye showed expressions of realization. This meant that they had

already suspected as much, and since they didn't refute Zi Xu's words, it indicated that he was telling the truth.

"Lord Xuande, it's best not to spread this information yourself. Others will naturally spread it for you in due time. Chen Hou is aware of his spiritual talent, but he prefers to keep it private," Zi Xu said with a smile, thinking he had successfully navigated the situation. While he held Liu Bei in high regard, he didn't want to get too deeply entangled, as he prided himself on maintaining a clean record.

Zi Xu was also quite impressed with Liu Bei's demeanor. Despite learning about Chen Xi's exceptional talent, Liu Bei showed no signs of jealousy or discomfort, which further increased Zi Xu's respect for him.

Not long after, Lu Su's dispatch finally reached the county seat of Beihai, Juxian. However, as Chen Xi had predicted, Fa Zheng had taken his father on an inspection tour of the countryside, or rather, he had gone to showcase his abilities to his father.

As for Liu Bei and his entourage, no one knew where they were. All that was known was that Liu Bei had taken Jia Xu, Xu Chu, and a few others on a private tour to observe the local conditions. But their exact location was a mystery, leaving the weary messenger in an awkward position.

The entire county seat had no one in charge. Apart from a few junior officials guarding the gates and a few local officials handling routine matters, no one knew where Fa Zheng was. After all, Fa Zheng had sent everyone out on inspections, reasoning that only by seeing things firsthand could they truly understand the needs of the people. And so, everyone was sent out, willingly or not. However, Fa Zheng's reasoning wasn't entirely wrong...

Given the situation, the messenger was at a loss. All he could do was wait in the county seat as the junior officials searched for Liu Bei. If they couldn't find him, there wasn't much else they could do.

Chapter 424: The Reason Is Still Complicated...

Meanwhile, Chen Xi and his group, marching through the cool night air, unknowingly passed by Liu Bei and his party, who were resting at a nearby farmhouse.

"What's wrong, Zhongkang?" Liu Bei, who was reading under the moonlight, was interrupted by the sudden surge of energy emanating from Xu Chu. Curious, he looked up and asked.

"A hundred or so riders are passing by, several hundred meters away," Xu Chu replied, frowning. Night marches weren't unusual, but such a large number of riders was worth noting.

"It's probably one of our units on urgent business. The heat during the day is unbearable, and with the cool night and bright moon, it's a good time for marching," Liu Bei pondered for a moment before concluding. "Did they stop?"

"No, they didn't," Xu Chu confirmed, realizing it was likely a routine march, so he didn't go out to investigate further. With the clear moonlight, if it had been a problem, he would have spotted the riders easily.

"Then it's fine. They must be handling military affairs," Liu Bei nodded and returned to his book.

Unaware that they had just missed Liu Bei, Chen Xi continued urging Hua Xiong to press on through the night towards Donglai.

"Zijian, don't worry about us. Move at full speed," Chen Xi called out to Hua Xiong, urging him to prioritize reaching Donglai over their comfort. "Better to endure some bumps than to miss the chance to secure the craftsmen from the Lu family."

"Understood!" Hua Xiong acknowledged. He then signaled his men, forming a wedge formation, and released a burst of fiery energy, accelerating their pace. Hua Xiong was indeed an exceptional cavalry commander.

"Huh?" Liu Bei, who had finally settled back into his reading, was once again interrupted by Xu Chu's surprised exclamation.

"What's wrong now, Zhongkang?" Liu Bei asked, puzzled. Ever since Xu Chu became his guard, interruptions like this were rare.

"Lord, I think I just sensed Zijian's presence," Xu Chu said, frowning in confusion. "But it was just for a moment. Perhaps I'm mistaken." Xu Chu's confidence wavered as he scratched his head, embarrassed.

"Hahaha, Zijian is still in Fenggao, training our cavalry based on the Western Liang model. How could he be here in Beihai?" Liu Bei laughed and patted Xu Chu's broad back. "Go rest, Zhongkang. You've been working hard."

"I'm not tired, my lord," Xu Chu insisted, truthfully.

"Alright, but I'm heading to bed now, so you should rest too," Liu Bei closed his book and walked toward his quarters, leaving Xu Chu standing in the courtyard, still puzzled. After a moment, Xu Chu shrugged and went to rest.

"This speed is incredible!" Despite feeling nauseous from the rough ride, Zhuge Liang's eyes gleamed with admiration as he observed Hua Xiong leading the charge. "This must be a type of ability, right? It seems to enhance both strength and speed."

"Hahaha, that's my ability!" Hua Xiong called back without turning. "When I lead, the Western Liang cavalry's impact is stronger than anyone else's."

"Too bad that even with this, breaking through formations is still difficult," Hua Xiong added, his tone turning somber. While the Western Liang cavalry was renowned for its powerful charges, they still fell short without high-quality saddles and stirrups, despite Hua Xiong's leadership.

"Don't worry, Zijian. This problem can be solved, but now isn't the right time. Until we have our own horse-breeding grounds, I have to keep this under wraps," Chen Xi shouted over the wind. "Once we have our own horse supplies, you'll understand the true potential of the Western Liang cavalry. But for now, revealing it would put us in a difficult position!"

Things like horseshoes weren't of much use in this world, but high saddles and stirrups were crucial for cavalry. These tools could make heavy cavalry capable of taking on infantry at a ratio of one to ten. However, Chen Xi knew that if he introduced these advancements too early, they would quickly be replicated by others.

Helping the enemy wasn't in Chen Xi's interest, so without a stable horse supply, he'd rather slow down the cavalry training than give others a chance to copy these innovations.

"Thank you in advance, military advisor," Hua Xiong shouted into the wind, trusting Chen Xi's words after working with him for so long.

"You'll see soon enough," Chen Xi replied loudly, leaning back and wincing from the bumps. This journey made it clear to him that roads needed to be built as soon as possible.

Chen Xi had been ordering lime to be made at kilns, but they still hadn't successfully produced cement. Perhaps the technology was more advanced than he had anticipated.

As the rough ride continued, Chen Xi finally made up his mind. Cement was proving too difficult, so they would have to make do with a Roman-style mortar mixture. Using rammed earth as a base and the mixture to bond bricks might be the best solution for now. Sometimes, only firsthand experience could reveal the importance of certain issues.

"How about you, Kongming? What do you think our territories in Taishan and Qingzhou are still lacking?" Chen Xi asked Zhuge Liang, trying to distract himself from the uncomfortable ride.

"The biggest issue is the unclear division of official duties," Zhuge Liang responded directly, not using the question as a mere distraction.

"That's already been addressed. Once Lord Xuande became General of the East and received recognition from the imperial clan, he planned to establish his own offices and clearly define everyone's roles. But with everything that's happened since then, there hasn't been a good time. After dealing with the Yellow Turbans, he should have time to finally set that up," Chen Xi explained, waving off the concern.

This issue had been brought up long ago, even by Lu Su, but it remained unresolved due to the constant crises and Chen Xi's tendency to assign tasks across different roles.

Chapter 425: The System

After Zhuge Liang pointed out the issue, Chen Xi's thoughts began to drift all over the place, though he indeed no longer felt the jolts of the carriage.

Seeing Chen Xi deep in thought, Zhuge Liang didn't speak further and silently endured the relentless shaking of the carriage.

Chen Xi furrowed his brow, pondering the challenges of governance.

Chen Xi sighed internally, realizing that the emperor and noble system, while ideal, was unlikely to succeed again since it had already failed once.

His thoughts slowly returned to the present, and another harsh jolt nearly made Chen Xi vomit.

"Cough, cough... It seems only by escaping into my thoughts can I avoid the external world. This shaking is unbearable," Chen Xi lamented, looking over at Zhuge Liang, whose expression was even worse than his own.

"Zichuan, what were you thinking about earlier? You seemed so absorbed that you didn't even notice the bumps," Zhuge Liang said with a wry smile. He felt utterly battered from the ride. During the day, the march had been tolerable despite the heat, but now Hua Xiong had activated a military formation to increase speed, making the ride even more unbearable.

"Lost in thought..." Chen Xi quipped, holding onto the carriage railing to stabilize himself.

"..." Zhuge Liang was speechless at the response. He had intended to ask Chen Xi about his earlier thoughts, hoping for some insight, but Chen Xi's answer was completely off-topic.

"How do you think we could establish an eternal dynasty in this world?" Chen Xi asked, half-curved up in the carriage.

"An eternal dynasty?" Zhuge Liang looked at Chen Xi curiously. "The Five Virtues cycle, creating a system that sustains itself... To build an eternal dynasty..."

"Forget the Five Virtues cycle; that's irrelevant. Let's just take things one step at a time. I've done my part," Chen Xi exhaled deeply. "Once I've laid the foundation, how others walk the path will no longer be my concern."

Zhuge Liang was utterly confused. How had they gone from discussing an eternal dynasty to this sudden mood shift? The leap in logic was so vast that he couldn't follow it, leaving him perplexed and silent.

The two of them sat in the carriage, enduring the relentless jolts until sunrise when the temperature began to rise again. Only then did Hua Xiong call for a halt, wiping the sweat from his brow as the group settled down to rest and eat some dry rations.

"Ah, Qingzhou used to be a densely populated province, but now it's desolate, with hardly a soul in sight. The impact of natural disasters has been too great," Chen Xi said with a sigh as he looked out at the barren wilderness. "If I'm not mistaken, this land was once fertile fields, but in just five or six years, it has become like this."

"Yes, we haven't seen any signs of life for more than a hundred miles. This land indeed used to be fertile farmland. Qingzhou was once worthy of being called the granary of the empire, but now it's all wasted," Zhuge Liang crouched down, picking up some soil and brushing it off his hands. Having worked the land himself, he knew this soil had once supported bountiful crops.

"We need to restore irrigation and reclaim the land. Qingzhou now has more land than people, but we must also plan for the future. Distributing land should be done cautiously, especially considering the remaining noble families and powerful clans in Qingzhou," Chen Xi said with a sigh. He realized that dealing with the nobility and powerful clans was inevitable since Qingzhou hadn't been completely destroyed, and many of these families still survived.

"Zichuan, you don't seem to have a personal grudge against the noble families and powerful clans. Although many of your policies target them, you don't appear to dislike them personally," Zhuge Liang remarked, lying on a mat and feeling exhausted.

"Yes, the emergence of noble families is inevitable. What I target are the aspects of them that conflict with the interests of the people," Chen Xi replied, yawning. He was on the verge of collapsing from the rough ride.

"No wonder some of your policies have actually benefited the noble families and powerful clans. Now it makes sense," Zhuge Liang said weakly, understanding Chen Xi's mindset. Many things became clearer once he grasped this.

"Noble families and powerful clans are also composed of people. If they obey the law, I have no reason to go after them. Moreover, their existence actually helps maintain local stability," Chen Xi added, closing his eyes in fatigue. If he hadn't been the one to order the increased speed last night, he would have commanded them to slow down long ago.

"These families and clans are essentially the evolved forms of local tribes. Their existence is unavoidable. As long as they behave, I won't scheme against them. But if they don't know their place and constantly push boundaries, then I won't have any choice," Chen Xi's voice grew quieter as he spoke, clearly exhausted from the night's journey.

"But you're obviously undermining the foundations of these families," Zhuge Liang observed, trying to maintain his composure. "While your policies may bring them significant benefits, your efforts to enlighten the populace are what they resent most."

"These families have dug deep into their heritage, but now they don't know how to move forward. Many are trying different approaches, and right now, it seems more of them support maintaining the status quo. That's why I'm suppressing that group while promoting another," Chen Xi said, recalling the insights he'd gained from the Chen family. The internal strife within the noble families had become quite evident.

"By the way, I'm not making all the noble families unhappy. Some are also trying to enlighten the populace," Chen Xi added with his eyes closed.

Hearing this, Zhuge Liang couldn't help but think of his own family. The internal discord in the Zhuge clan mirrored what Chen Xi described. Should they rest on their ancestors' glory and enjoy endless prosperity, or should they spread their teachings like the philosophers of old, striving for intellectual clashes that could spark a new era? This was likely a dilemma many families, whose ancestral teachings had been exhausted, were grappling with.

Chapter 426: The Internal Chaos of Noble Families

During the Three Kingdoms period, most noble families were remnants of the aristocracy from the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. The noble families established during the Chu-Han Contention were mostly eradicated during the reigns of Emperor Jing and Emperor Wu of Han, and the loyalists of Emperor Guangwu's rise to power were almost entirely gone. These Spring and Autumn aristocrats, having survived the chaotic struggles of the Warring States, had learned how to preserve themselves...

The noble families that descended from the aristocracy of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods primarily based their family teachings on the doctrines of the various schools of thought, such as the Confucian, Daoist, Legalist, and other philosophies. These families either directly descended from the disciples of the Hundred Schools of Thought or absorbed the essence of one of these philosophies.

Chen Xi confirmed this while perusing the vast collection of books in the Chen family's library. Although the Hundred Schools of Thought no longer existed as they once did, their teachings lived on in the form of family doctrines within the noble families, including Confucianism.

However, due to the Qin Emperor's burning of books and burying of scholars, and the subsequent chaos of the Chu-Han Contention, communication between these schools decreased, and the families became more cautious. The early Han Dynasty's initial reverence for the Daoist principle of non-action saw a brief revival of these schools, but before they could fully flourish, Dong Zhongshu, by catering to Emperor Wu's preferences, suppressed all schools of thought except Confucianism.

As a result, the various schools of thought adopted a Confucian façade and quietly transformed into the family teachings of noble families, refraining from exchanging ideas with other schools. Whether it was out of self-appreciation or clinging to the past, the teachings of the Hundred Schools were further developed within each family in isolation, and without external exchange, these teachings were continuously deepened.

Remarkably, it took the noble families, with their brilliant minds, four centuries to fully develop and exhaust the wisdom passed down from the Hundred Schools by the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty.

In other words, these noble families spent 400 years bringing their family doctrines to the highest level, reaching a point where they had nowhere else to go, leading to ideological chaos within the families.

Originally, members of a family following the same doctrine would have unified thinking. However, as seen in the Chen and Xun families, the current situation went beyond mere strategic differences and could be considered familial division due to conflicting ideologies.

This is why, despite the spread of education undermining the foundations of noble families, some of them were actively promoting it and even enjoying the process.

For example, the Yingchuan Academy in Yuzhou was established by the Xun and Chen families. They admitted students based on talent rather than social status. Similarly, the Lumen Academy in Jingzhou, also founded by noble families, accepted students like Xu Shu, who came from humble beginnings.

At the root of this is the fact that noble families during this period no longer knew which direction to take. Whether it was consolidating their status or spreading their doctrines to revive the flourishing intellectual debate of ancient times, or combining multiple schools of thought to create new ideologies, someone was pursuing each of these paths because the old ways had been exhausted, and necessity drives change.

Even the Sima family, a staunch supporter of consolidating social strata, had core members advocating for the complete dissemination of their teachings to restore the glory of the Hundred Schools. This illustrates the severe internal conflicts within these noble families.

This was what left Chen Xi most speechless—the noble families were in a perplexing state. They were trying everything, and in this chaotic era, the younger generation, suppressed for so long, was eager to make their mark with their own ideas.

Undoubtedly, some noble families were dominated by absolute rulers who could force the entire family to follow a single path. For example, Chen Qun's dominance over the Chen family meant that if not for Chen Xi, the Chen family would be united as one.

As for the Xun family, while Xun Yu was undeniably powerful, the factions within the family advocating for change were also strong. The previous generation, known as the Eight Dragons of the Xun clan, couldn't unify their thoughts, and the next generation was even more chaotic. If not for the emergence of several extraordinary figures in this generation, the Xun family would likely have fractured in the chaos.

Even so, Xun Yu could only barely keep the family's various factions in check. His own ideology didn't align entirely with either the conservative faction or the revolutionary thinkers. On one hand, he allowed Xun Yue and others to continue their private academies; on the other, he sought to restore ancient rites and govern the empire according to tradition. Meanwhile, his conflicts with Xun Yan's theories on the Han Dynasty and the imperial family, as well as his agreement with Xun Shen's focus on quelling chaos and restoring order, only added to the internal contradictions.

When Chen Qun explained all this to Chen Xi, he was left stunned. It's a wonder that Xun Yu hadn't lost his mind dealing with all these challenges. The fact that Xun Yu managed to maintain the Xun family's

standing amidst this internal chaos speaks volumes about his capability—perhaps managing the bureaucracy under Cao Cao was easier compared to managing his own family.

Chapter 427: Noble Families' Schemes

After understanding these dynamics, Chen Xi's respect for the thousand-year-old noble families greatly diminished. It turned out that every family had its own troubles. At first glance, the generations of outstanding talents within these families seemed strong and prosperous, but after learning about Xun Yu's situation, all Chen Xi could do was sigh deeply.

A strong family naturally produces strong members, and thus, any internal opposition also becomes formidable. Even Xun Yu and Xun You had conflicting views, let alone other family members. You may be unmatched in talent, but those who continue to challenge you must also be rare geniuses; otherwise, they would have perished long ago. Such is the harsh reality...

What Chen Qun prided himself on most was that under his management, the Chen family had avoided large-scale internal strife. Although Chen Xi might represent a separate branch of thought, it was merely a reasonable strategy, and it did not equate to the internal resource squandering and mutual antagonism that plagued other families. As for who would ultimately win, the surviving party would still be a part of the Chen family. Though Chen Qun was displeased by internal competition, compared to the bloody battles within other families, he found Chen Xi's upright approach far more acceptable.

This was also why some of the elders within the Chen family began to support Chen Xi. For those elders who had grown old and seen through worldly affairs, with no interest in power but a strong desire for the family's continuation, Chen Xi, who was now famous throughout the land, and the brilliant Chen Qun were both equally favored. For them, the Chen family needed such figures, so when the family split its resources, they deliberately provided Chen Xi with many of the things he needed.

Every time Chen Xi thought about the 4,000 people who were transferred to his side when the Chen family divided its resources, he couldn't help but be impressed. The thousand-year-old families truly had a deep foundation. Although they might not be as wealthy as the Mi family, possessing only a tenth of their riches, their heritage was no joke!

Out of the 4,000 people, nearly 3,000 were various craftsmen that Chen Xi had requested. Although many were apprentices or low-skilled workers, several were already master craftsmen. Some had even been granted the Chen surname, indicating they were long-term retainers of the Chen family rather than short-term hires. This was a staggering realization!

Considering this, the various noble families likely concealed a significant portion of the Han Empire's population within their private households. However, what intrigued Chen Xi even more was the source of the Chen family's doctrines.

From what Chen Xi could tell, the Chen family's teachings seemed to include elements of Daoism, Legalism, Confucianism, Mohism, Yin-Yang, and even the School of Names and Diplomacy. Each contained some core essence. Calling it eclectic would be an understatement, as the miscellaneous school (Zajia) had produced few significant figures and left behind little written work.

When Chen Xi tried to look into the origins of the Chen family's teachings, there seemed to be no records. While other families' origins were well documented, the Chen family's was mysteriously absent. Perhaps it was a case of "family shame must not be publicized"?

With this in mind, Chen Xi couldn't help but ask, "Kongming, are you still awake? I want to ask you something."

"I'm not asleep yet. What do you want to ask, Zichuan?" came Zhuge Liang's drowsy response.

"Which of the Hundred Schools does the Chen family's doctrine come from?" Chen Xi inquired.

"The Chen family's teachings? You're a descendant of the Qi royal family. The Hundred Schools of Thought flourished in the Jixia Academy, where they reached their peak through intense debates and were refined to perfection. The Jixia Academy was established by your ancestors, so why would you need to borrow from others?" Zhuge Liang mumbled sleepily.

The philosophy of the Hundred Schools of Thought was perfected through debates at the Jixia Academy. After winning or losing debates, the schools would put their theories into practice, then refine their ideas further and debate again, eventually reaching their zenith. As the host of these debates, the state of Qi might not have placed much value on these philosophies, but it certainly recorded much of their essence. The Chen family's doctrine stems from this legacy.

"Jixia Academy..." Chen Xi murmured to himself. It was indeed a case of not seeing what was right in front of him.

Suddenly, Chen Xi felt a burst of clarity. No wonder the Chen family had been so generous!

Chen Xi felt a brief pang of irritation. The Chen family had made such a bold move without informing him first. That was quite ruthless.

However, Chen Xi quickly calmed down. The Chen family's actions were logical and justified. After all, they hadn't broken any laws. Their method was within the rules and didn't deserve punishment.

As he lay staring up at the tent ceiling, Chen Xi reflected on everything. In the end, what truly bothered him was the Chen family's lack of confidence in his success.

Chen Xi raised his left hand and studied the lines on his palm. Then, he let his hand fall back onto his forehead. He resolved that once he returned, he would deal with those in the Chen family who lacked faith in him.

As Chen Xi mulled over his thoughts, he found himself increasingly frustrated by the complexities of dealing with noble families. By now, the major families had likely realized that Chen Xi's attitude toward them wasn't as hostile as the rumors suggested. He wasn't trying to uproot them all at once, nor did he harbor any clear intent to resist them outright.

If he had been intent on destroying them, the noble families would have seen no choice but a fight to the death. But with the current situation, it seemed more like Chen Xi was initiating an internal purification of the noble families.

Chen Xi himself was a prominent figure within the Chen family, and although his thinking might differ from the mainstream, that wasn't unusual. Many figures within noble families had unconventional ideas. After all, even Confucius' ideas weren't accepted by the ruling class at first, yet Confucianism eventually became dominant. Who could say what the future would hold? As long as Chen Xi wasn't openly hostile to the noble families, they saw no reason to go to war with such a powerful figure.

As for following Chen Xi's rules, that wasn't a big deal. It was just a game of power dynamics, and right now, Chen Xi had the upper hand. If they didn't play, others would step in.

What the noble families couldn't understand was Chen Xi's ultimate goal. One moment he seemed intent on universal education, which threatened their status, but the next, he was offering them significant benefits. Then, he allowed them access to local education systems. Was his thinking chaotic? That couldn't be it!

By now, the noble families had acknowledged Chen Xi's capabilities and were far more cautious in dealing with him. The seemingly contradictory actions had led them to speculate that Chen Xi was using tactics similar to those employed by the noble families during the Warring States period when they had wiped out rival schools of thought.

Chapter 428: Expanding the Navy

The noble families suspected that Chen Xi was clearing the playing field, but Chen Xi himself had no idea about this and wouldn't have cared even if he knew. Chen Xi's plan was to let the noble families naturally fade away within a balanced societal system. Of course, if after all the changes he made, the common people still couldn't compete with the noble families, then there was nothing more he could do.

Chen Xi always saw himself as a guide, while Liu Bei was the enforcer or arbiter. That's why Chen Xi consistently instilled the principle of fairness in Liu Bei. He knew true equality was impossible, and personal biases would always exist, but as long as Liu Bei had the intention of treating people fairly, that was enough for Chen Xi. He never expected Liu Bei to meet the moral standards of a saint.

By the time they woke up, it was already past noon, but the scorching summer sun still made things unbearable. After hastily eating some dry rations and drinking plenty of water, Chen Xi and Hua Xiong's group waited under the shade of the tents for the sun to set.

"How many days do you think it will take to reach the Donglai port at our current pace?" Chen Xi asked Hua Xiong.

When Chen Xi asked this, Zhuge Liang's expression visibly soured. He had never endured such hardships before. During his time at the Zhuge family or even in Chen Xi's inner courtyard, where he was surrounded by warmth and comfort, everything was always well taken care of for him. Now, however, he was facing the harsh reality of travel, lacking even basic necessities like bathing water and fresh clothes. The clothes he wore had become uncomfortable, and it was clear that his inexperience had caught up with him.

“It will take about three to four days,” Hua Xiong estimated based on their current speed and the distance remaining.

“Good,” Chen Xi replied, looking at the dust on his clothes with a sigh. He now understood the true meaning of being “travel-worn.” The hardships of ancient travel were no joke.

Over the next three days, Chen Xi and Zhuge Liang were thoroughly jostled, but they finally arrived at their destination. After quickly purchasing new clothes and changing into them, Chen Xi led Zhuge Liang to the naval camp at the Donglai port.

By the time they arrived, it was already evening, and Xun Yan had enforced a curfew. However, given Chen Xi’s direct approach—breaking into a clothing store, taking what he needed, and leaving money for the owner—no one could really fault the shopkeeper.

“Military grounds, halt!” When Hua Xiong led Chen Xi to the naval camp, it was already late. If it weren’t for the long summer days, it would have been completely dark by now.

“Thud!” An arrow landed a few meters in front of Hua Xiong’s feet, kicking up a cloud of dust.

“Under the command of General Liu Bei, General Hua Xiong has urgent business with the naval commander, Gan Ning,” Hua Xiong announced, throwing his insignia to the soldiers on guard.

“Please wait a moment, General. I will inform the commander immediately,” a shadowy figure behind the barricade responded cautiously, retrieving Hua Xiong’s insignia before rushing into the camp.

“Commander!” the messenger shouted outside Gan Ning’s tent. Gan Ning, who had been studying military texts, looked up with a frown.

“What is it?” Gan Ning asked.

“General Hua Xiong, under the command of Liu Bei, has arrived and requests an audience with you,” the messenger reported loudly.

“Hua Xiong? What brings him here?” Gan Ning wondered aloud. Seeing the insignia and knowing it was indeed Hua Xiong, he called for his weapons. “Notify Taishi Ziyi and Mi Fang as well. There may be something significant.”

Although Gan Ning had the demeanor of a bandit, his instincts for warfare were sharp.

“Tell the entire water camp to arm themselves, load the supply ships with provisions, and prepare for five days of rations and water,” Gan Ning ordered as he rushed out to meet Hua Xiong.

After a brief ride, Gan Ning arrived at the camp’s entrance, where he dismounted and greeted Hua Xiong with a broad smile. “Hua Xiong! Who are we fighting this time? My men are ready for action. Just give me the target, and we’ll take them down together!” he laughed heartily.

“We might actually need to fight this time, and the opponent is no pushover,” Hua Xiong responded, his own warrior spirit roused by Gan Ning’s infectious enthusiasm. He then gestured to Chen Xi behind him. “This mission is serious. The strategist himself is here.”

“Greetings, Strategist!” Gan Ning quickly saluted Chen Xi, showing a rare hint of formality. “What brings you here, and how can I assist?”

“We’re heading to rescue the Lu family, and we might have to face off against Sun Bofu. The situation could get tough, so you’ll need to mobilize your entire force,” Chen Xi explained succinctly.

Hearing this, Gan Ning seemed eager for the challenge. A warrior like him wasn’t suited for garrison duties; he thrived in battle and raids. Keeping him stationed in one place wasn’t ideal, but giving him an enemy to fight was perfect.

“But let’s be clear, I came here without official orders since Lord Liu Bei isn’t present. I only have this,” Chen Xi said, revealing Liu Bei’s short sword as proof of his authority.

“What’s that?” Gan Ning asked, puzzled. He had never seen Liu Bei wield this sword.

"It's the Lord's personal sword," Hua Xiong explained with a sigh. "With this, he can command the army. Taishi Ci knows about it, but you probably haven't seen it before."

"Ha! Don't worry about that. You didn't need to bring it. Liu Bei gave me full authority over the navy after handling the prisoner transfer to Yizhou. We can proceed under my independent command," Gan Ning said with a wave of his hand. "We'll take the prisoners along, and while it might slow us down a bit, it's still within my jurisdiction."

"Good," Chen Xi agreed after a brief pause. "But I'll accompany you. Even though this isn't considered unauthorized deployment, it's better if I'm there. This situation is tricky."

"Alright. Hua Xiong, will you join us?" Gan Ning asked.

"No, I need to report back to Lord Liu Bei. I've already left my post for too long," Hua Xiong replied, shaking his head. "Just make sure to protect the strategist."

Chapter 429: Gan Ning's Wisdom

Hua Xiong gave a few final instructions to Gan Ning before leaving half of his personal guards behind and departing. As he mentioned, he had technically left his post without permission, so it was better for him to return and report back as soon as possible.

"Take care, Hua Xiong. Strategist, don't worry, I will protect you well," Gan Ning waved to Hua Xiong, who didn't try to convince him to stay. Hua Xiong knew that it was better to return quickly after leaving his post, even if he had a valid reason. Cavalry always caught Gan Ning's eye, but unfortunately, he still didn't have any cavalry under his command. He figured it was better for Hua Xiong to return and continue training his cavalry, so maybe one day, Gan Ning could get a few hundred cavalymen of his own.

After watching Hua Xiong leave, Gan Ning made a gesture to Chen Xi to follow him. The soldiers behind them removed the barricade, lit torches, and stood in two rows, holding long spears and staring sharply ahead without moving.

"You've trained your soldiers well," Chen Xi commented. Having experienced several battles, he could sense that these were no ordinary soldiers—there was a certain aura about them.

"Thank you, Strategist! These men are handpicked by me to guard the camp entrance," Gan Ning laughed. "Look at their physique, their eyes, and their equipment. Each one of them has been through at least ten battles and has some real skills." Gan Ning looked proud. "Impressive, right?"

Chen Xi looked at the soldiers guarding the gate, and one of them even managed a strained smile when he noticed Chen Xi looking at him. Gan Ning wasn't lying—he had indeed carefully selected these men. Ever since he had successfully raided an enemy camp with just a hundred riders, he had become particularly concerned about the security of his camp. He prided himself on his ability to raid others' camps, so if someone managed to do the same to him, it would be a huge blow to his reputation. As a result, Gan Ning took the defense of the camp gate very seriously.

"This way, Strategist," Gan Ning led the way around the camp's main gate.

"Alright," Chen Xi nodded, though a bit puzzled.

"There are traps there, at least ten of them. Some of the gate guards are former hunters, so I had them set up some traps," Gan Ning explained, noticing the group's curious expressions. He picked up a stone from the ground and threw it toward the gate.

With a series of clicks and thuds, thick crossbow bolts shot toward the gate, followed by a rain of arrows, a net, and a burst of flames. Finally, a large boulder rolled into a pit that had opened up in the ground.

Chen Xi broke out in a cold sweat. Gan Ning had certainly gone to great lengths to defend the camp gate. With so many traps, any enemy force attempting a night raid would be in for a nasty surprise, buying time for the rest of the camp to prepare for battle.

"Gan Ning, with these traps at the gate, isn't it difficult for your own men to come and go? Won't it affect your ability to deploy troops?" Chen Xi sighed, glancing at Gan Ning.

"I'm in the navy. We leave the camp by boat, not by land," Gan Ning replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. Chen Xi could only sigh—his logic was sound, after all.

"Alright then, keep doing it your way," Chen Xi gave a thumbs up to Gan Ning, who was grinning. Gan Ning was indeed a talented general, though his thinking might be a bit unconventional. Still, his tactical acumen was undeniably sharp.

When Gan Ning brought Chen Xi to the central command tent, Taishi Ci was already waiting with his weapons, along with Mi Fang, who had gained some weight, and Gan Lan.

"Strategist, General Gan," Taishi Ci and the others saluted when Gan Ning and Chen Xi entered the tent, then took their places.

Chen Xi gestured for Gan Ning to take charge. He wasn't one to lead the troops himself, especially when it came to naval warfare, which he knew nothing about. Even on land, where he had a bit more experience, he preferred to leave the command to more capable generals like Liu Bei or Guan Yu.

Gan Ning took the main seat without hesitation, placing Chen Xi at his left-hand side. The other officers took their positions accordingly.

"General Mi, how are our supplies?" Gan Ning asked. As Chen Xi had guessed, Gan Ning had entrusted Mi Fang with overseeing the logistics, assuming that someone from the wealthy Mi family wouldn't be tempted to embezzle from the military. In Gan Ning's eyes, maintaining good relations with someone so rich was beneficial for everyone.

"We have twelve carts of dried meat, seventy thousand shi of unprocessed grain, with thirty thousand already loaded onto the ships. We have enough fresh water for twenty days, with seven days' worth of dried rations stored in the camp. We also have seventy thousand high-quality arrows, forty thousand arrows that haven't been properly treated yet, seven hundred spare bows, a thousand spare sabers, eight hundred spare spears, and various other cargo for ballast. We're ready to set sail at any time," Mi Fang reported in detail.

"Good. Taishi Ci, how are the troops?" Gan Ning asked next.

"General Mi has successfully calmed the newly conscripted men. Our morale is high, and we are ready to deploy," Taishi Ci replied diplomatically. Mi Fang's method of "calming" the troops was essentially a financial assault.

Mi Fang no longer cared much about personal wealth. His family's fortunes were still vast, and unlike in the historical narrative where the Mi family had lost everything after years of turmoil, they remained extremely wealthy. Even if Mi Fang sold all of the navy's supplies, it still wouldn't compare to the wealth his brother had given him to win favor with the naval commanders. So, for Mi Fang, overseeing logistics wasn't particularly interesting since he had no intention of skimming off the top. This was exactly why Gan Ning had assigned him to the role.

"Load the private goods as ballast, bring the captured Cao troops, and prepare to set sail!" Gan Ning ordered, openly mentioning the private goods in front of Chen Xi. Such cargo was considered a perk for the navy.

Chen Xi just smiled and said nothing. He didn't mind the private goods, as long as they didn't affect combat readiness. A little extra cargo for the sailors' benefit wasn't something he was concerned about.

Seeing Chen Xi's smile, Gan Ning felt relieved. He preferred to be upfront about such things—if the higher-ups were aware and didn't mind, then it could be considered an established rule.

Chapter 430: The Navy's Combat Tactics

Mi Fang couldn't help but feel embarrassed after hearing Gan Ning's words. Among the entire navy, he was the one most enthusiastic about sneaking personal goods onto the ships. Being a wealthy man, he often spent his own money to provide extra meals for the soldiers. Because of this generosity, the navy, which had roots as water pirates and river bandits, was more than happy to help Mi Fang when he needed to smuggle goods. As a result, the entire navy turned a blind eye to his actions.

Of course, part of the reason was that Mi Fang never made things difficult for the navy. He only brought extra cargo when the ships weren't fully loaded. If the navy's ships were full, he wouldn't add any goods. But more often than not, Gan Ning's navy sailed with mostly empty cargo holds, dragging supply ships behind them, which meant Mi Fang had plenty of room for his private goods.

"Gan Lan, as usual, have the supply ships towed by the larger vessels. Load the first batch of captured Cao soldiers onto the spare supply ships—three hundred per ship. Assign fifty men to guard each one," Gan Ning instructed after considering the size of the supply ships, showing no mercy as he packed three hundred prisoners onto each vessel.

"Understood!" Gan Lan saluted and quickly went to the prisoner camp to carry out the orders.

"Captains, conduct a final inspection of your ships' facilities and backup equipment. Assemble your crews and prepare to board. We are heading to the Yangtze River to rescue the Lu family!" Gan Ning stood up and issued his final command.

"Yes, sir!" All the captains rose, saluted Gan Ning, and left to prepare.

As Mi Fang was about to leave, Gan Ning called out to him, "Mi Fang, bring extra private goods this time. Take all the unsold stock from before. We're not just going to rescue the Lu family; we also need to head to Yizhou. The date of our agreement with the local chiefs is approaching, so let's take care of everything in one go."

"Ah..." Mi Fang looked embarrassedly at Chen Xi. Being exposed by Gan Ning in front of Chen Xi made Mi Fang uncomfortable, but before he could explain, Gan Ning turned to Chen Xi and respectfully said, "Strategist, please don't mind. We need some cargo for ballast during our voyages to prevent capsizing, so I instructed Mi Fang to bring goods for trade with the locals. This also provides some welfare for the navy's soldiers."

Mi Fang was taken aback, then felt deeply grateful to Gan Ning for covering for him. Initially, he had been worried about how to explain himself to Chen Xi. After all, using official resources for personal gain could easily provoke Chen Xi's displeasure. If his brother, Mi Zhu, found out, he'd surely get a scolding. Mi Fang had come to the navy and learned nothing but smuggling.

"These matters fall under your responsibilities, as long as you approve," Chen Xi said with a wave of his hand. He understood the reasoning behind Gan Ning's actions and saw no need to interfere. Gan Ning knew how to handle things appropriately.

"Thank you, Strategist. Thank you, General," Mi Fang said excitedly, scratching his head. With Gan Ning taking responsibility, he felt relieved. Gan Ning had always turned a blind eye to his smuggling activities, so he wasn't too worried now.

"Don't thank me just yet. Let me clarify something, Mi Fang. You're using our navy's ships, and our safety is guaranteed, right?" Chen Xi glanced at Gan Ning, who immediately took the cue.

"Of course, our navy can go wherever we want," Mi Fang nodded vigorously, then quickly caught on and added, "I'm willing to donate half of my profits to the navy as welfare for the soldiers." He wasn't stupid and understood the importance of creating a shared interest.

"Good. Don't worry, Mi Fang. Our navy has your back. We'll protect you better than those bandits who charge tolls. No one will dare rob your goods, and if anyone tries to strong-arm you, we'll be your shield," Gan Ning said smoothly, his years as a river pirate clearly showing in how easily he handled such negotiations.

Mi Fang didn't mind giving half of his profits to the navy. As someone sent by his brother to gain life experience, he had little concept of money, just like how telling people like Mi Zhen or Zhen Mi about money wouldn't mean much to them. They simply didn't have a sense of its value.

In fact, Mi Fang had lost a lot of money in previous trades, failing to sell many of his goods. This was why Gan Ning suggested bringing along the unsold stock. Several shipments had been returned and were now piled up in warehouses, enough to fill several ships. Even Gan Ning felt the waste, thinking, "That's money just sitting there!"

Despite the losses, Mi Fang never hesitated to continue providing good food and drink for the navy, even after losing a significant sum. This generosity greatly pleased Gan Ning, who appreciated such a straightforward and generous man.

"Alright, go ahead and get your ship attached to the main vessel," Gan Ning said, waving Mi Fang off to handle his tasks before they set sail.

"Taishi Ci, how are things with the navy? Are you getting used to it?" After the others had left, it was just Gan Ning, Taishi Ci, and Chen Xi in the tent. Chen Xi casually asked.

"I'm learning naval command from Gan Ning. Overall, I find commanding a navy much more challenging than leading troops on land," Taishi Ci said as he sat down. "Looking back, I realize how difficult Gan Ning's role is."

"Hahaha, Taishi Ci, I've told you many times, you don't need to worry about ship maneuvering. What you need is a flagship, a main ship. Our navy has a special move called 'Ram it!' Just learn that, and you'll

be fine. My ship maneuvering skills are average, but we have big ships—just crush the enemy's small boats!" Gan Ning laughed wildly.

In his days as a river pirate, Gan Ning had relied on small, agile boats, where tactics and maneuvering were key. But after upgrading to larger ships provided by the Lu family, he found that ramming was often the most effective tactic. Ten large ships lined up and charging at full speed could even devastate mythical creatures.

Since then, Gan Ning's combat style had become much more aggressive. Forget fancy tactics—just ram the enemy and be done with it.

Taishi Ci could only smile wryly at Gan Ning's words. He couldn't accept such a brutish approach—there was no skill involved, and if the enemy had bigger ships, they'd be doomed.

Chen Xi glanced at Gan Ning, realizing that sometimes brute force really was the simplest and most effective solution.