

Mythical 511

Chapter 511: An Unknown Soldier

"I can't stay by the lord's side forever. If I can cultivate the army's spirit independently, I can extract half of the veteran soldiers and create another unit of Xian Deng Death Warriors. Although the second unit may not be as strong as the first, with me leading them, I won't fear anyone," Ju Yi said confidently.

Ju Yi was undeniably arrogant and often acted impulsively, but once he acknowledged someone, he remained completely loyal. After establishing the Xian Deng Death Warriors, his first thought was to ensure Yuan Shao's safety. The memory of Gan Ning's night raid on the camp, where Yuan Shao was almost killed, still chilled Ju Yi to the core.

Whenever Ju Yi recalled that incident, he felt immense fear, which led him to harshly punish all the officers who had been responsible for guarding the camp, including Yan Liang, who had been injured at the time. Since then, he had been focused on creating a force to protect Yuan Shao.

"If General Ju has such intentions, our lord will surely be delighted," Tian Feng praised him, a rare display of flattery. However, he didn't support the idea of giving the Xian Deng Death Warriors to Yuan Shao. After all, under Yuan Shao's command, they would at best perform like well-led Danyang soldiers, but under Ju Yi's leadership, they were among the top five elite forces in the land, at least in Tian Feng's estimation.

"Unfortunately, I haven't perfected it yet," Ju Yi said with a hint of frustration. His bluntness was well-known, but Tian Feng, who was equally straightforward, didn't take offense—such matters were trivial.

"Let's consider when and where Guan Yu might strike at Licheng," Xun Chen suggested.

Ju Yi, Zhang He, and Yan Liang exchanged glances—how would they know? Asking them was as good as asking no one.

"I suspect we'll be facing not just Guan Yu and Guo Jia but also Zhang Fei, Hua Tuo, and Yu Jin. This time, the real battle is in Yanzhou, and our main forces have shifted to Weijun, not Bohai as before," Tian Feng mused.

"Let Wenbo and Gongyu create some friction on the border between Qing and Ji provinces. That should keep Guan Yu preoccupied. By the way, the main roads and county roads in Taishan and Qingzhou have been completed. We need to reassess their grain transportation capabilities," Xun Chen remarked with a hint of admiration. "Chen Zichuan truly is a genius."

"Should we also start constructing our main roads? Chen Zichuan didn't keep his road-building materials a secret. The Zhen family already has the sales rights," Tian Feng pondered. The biggest challenge with grain transport was spoilage—sometimes, a shipment of grain would arrive with only a fraction of it intact. The wide, flat roads that Chen Xi had built could significantly reduce travel time and losses.

"Don't you think the Zhen family is getting a bit too close to Liu Xuande?" Xun Chen asked with a frown.

"Maybe, but could the Zhen family really betray us? After the last exchange, the Zhen family is locked into Jizhou. Not just their roots but their entire century-old foundation is tied to Jizhou. If they were to betray the lord, I'd almost be happy—we could seize their wealth and double our treasury!" Tian Feng laughed.

"You're right," Xun Chen nodded, agreeing with Tian Feng's reasoning. However, a lingering sense of unease nagged at him. Unable to pinpoint the issue, he decided to set it aside for now.

Ju Yi's arrogance was well-founded. His infantry had defeated cavalry and even bested the fastest elite unit in the land, the White Horse Cavalry. His soldiers had triumphed over larger infantry forces in open battle, and they remained composed under ambush or night attacks.

Given Ju Yi's desire to challenge Lu Bu, Tian Feng felt some concern about Ju Yi's potential overconfidence. Still, after weighing the balance of power, Tian Feng felt reassured. Even with his humility, he acknowledged the strength of Ju Yi's Xian Deng Death Warriors.

It's strange how things turn out. Before Ju Yi's Xian Deng Death Warriors crushed the White Horse Cavalry, no one would have imagined such an elite force could exist. Similarly, no one paid much attention to the once-unknown Ju Yi. But while Ju Yi's Xian Deng Death Warriors were formidable, Lu Bu also had a yet-unrevealed elite unit—the Ferocious Cavalry.

"General Gao, do you have confidence?" Chen Gong had already guessed their enemy's intentions when Yuan Shao encircled the Black Mountain Army but didn't attack, and when Liu Bei remained on the sidelines. Naturally, he had begun making preparations.

"The Xian Deng Death Warriors? I can't be sure until we meet in battle," Gao Shun replied, his tone somewhat stiff and wooden.

"I'm not asking you to win. Just hold off Ju Yi. If you can hold off his Xian Deng Death Warriors, Lu Bu's Wolf Cavalry will be enough to crush Yuan Shao's forces in a very short time. Rather than relying on complex strategies, a thunderous strike to annihilate Yuan Shao's army is a more straightforward solution!" Chen Gong urged Gao Shun. "The outcome of this battle will determine our future standing!"

"Hold off the Xian Deng Death Warriors?" A gleam appeared in Gao Shun's eyes as he calmly replied, "No problem."

"Good. You and General Zhang should prepare. Once the Black Mountain Army enters Yanzhou, I'll notify you where to make your stand," Chen Gong said, though he didn't sound entirely confident.

In truth, Chen Gong wasn't sure Gao Shun could hold off Ju Yi. While he believed Gao Shun was a capable general, he didn't think he was a match for Ju Yi. In his mind, only Zhang Liao among Lu Bu's generals could stand alone against such a formidable foe. Gao Shun, who always attended meetings but rarely spoke, had left little impression on him.

However, during one strategy session, when Chen Gong mentioned, "If we can neutralize Ju Yi, this battle will have a high chance of success," Lu Bu immediately suggested assigning the task to Gao Shun. In Lu Bu's experience, Gao Shun had never lost a battle with his elite troops.

"Forget it. I can't put all the weight on him. I'd better make some additional arrangements," Chen Gong muttered as he watched Gao Shun leave.

As Gao Shun exited, Zhang Liao approached him. "Gongzheng, are you joining this campaign?"

"Yes, to face Ju Yi's Xian Deng Death Warriors," Gao Shun replied calmly, showing no sign of tension.

"Are you confident?" Zhang Liao asked with a slight frown. Ju Yi's defeat of the White Horse Cavalry had earned him considerable fame, making him one of the most renowned generals of the time. Naturally, Zhang Liao was concerned.

"I'll destroy him," Gao Shun said coldly, his expression as indifferent as if he were crushing an ant.

"That's good to hear," Zhang Liao sighed in relief. Whenever Gao Shun wore that stone-faced expression, it meant he was confident. Otherwise, he wouldn't have spoken so decisively. "But be careful. Ju Yi is still a formidable general."

"We'll be launching a surprise attack. We won't lose. The Xian Deng Death Warriors are strong offensively but weak defensively. Against ordinary troops, they can rely on offense as defense, but against my Ferocious Cavalry, they'll be wiped out in one strike," Gao Shun said, unusually talkative.

Chapter 512: Preparing for Battle

Every elite unit has its own greatest strength. For example, the now-destroyed White Horse Cavalry was the fastest unit of its time. If Ju Yi hadn't seized the opportunity to annihilate them in one strike, other armies would have been left in the dust—they were simply too fast. Similarly, when Ju Yi's goal was to defeat the White Horse Cavalry, he specifically trained his soldiers for maximum lethality, aiming to completely wipe out the White Horse Cavalry without leaving a single survivor.

As a result, the Xian Deng Death Warriors were trained to be exceptionally offensive, though at the cost of defense, which was only marginally better than that of the White Horse Cavalry. However, compared to ordinary troops, the Xian Deng's overwhelming offensive power allowed them to crush enemy formations before they could react, making their weaker defense almost unnoticeable. Especially with Ju Yi leading them, most enemies fled in terror.

But unlike Ju Yi, Gao Shun, who hailed from Jiuyuan in the northern lands, knew better than anyone what it meant to be truly elite. Whether it was superior offense, defense, agility, or impact, enhancing one aspect always came at the cost of another. While elite troops often displayed such pronounced strengths that their weaknesses went unnoticed, that didn't mean they were without flaws.

Gao Shun clenched his fists as he gazed coldly toward the north, where the so-called strongest troops in the world, the Xian Deng Death Warriors, awaited. However, Gao Shun was certain that he would not be defeated. His Ferocious Cavalry had never lost to anyone, and he had pushed his elite soldiers to the absolute limit.

Unlike the White Horse Cavalry, which was known for its versatility, the Bingzhou Wolf Cavalry was renowned for being all-rounded, and Gao Shun's Ferocious Cavalry had been selected from the most elite of the Wolf Cavalry. Under Gao Shun's relentless training, they had become a unit without weaknesses, excelling in close combat, ranged attacks, siege warfare, and defense—a super-soldier unit in every sense.

If the Xian Deng Death Warriors were a sharp dagger that could kill with a single strike in the hands of a skilled assassin, then Gao Shun's Ferocious Cavalry was a mighty halberd—capable of stabbing, slashing, sweeping, and cutting. However, it required a top-tier commander to wield it effectively.

Meanwhile, Hua Xiong, who had been idling in Fenggao, received Liu Bei's orders to temporarily join Guan Yu's forces and await further instructions. At the same time, Zhang Fei received his orders, preparing to enter Yanzhou to engage Lu Bu. Yu Jin, after completing his previous tasks, reorganized his troops and was already stationed at the Taishan border.

"Listen up, everyone! This upcoming battle will be the toughest fight you've faced since you started your military careers. The Xian Deng Death Warriors aside, I know Gao Shun better than anyone! His Ferocious Cavalry is incredibly strong!" Hua Xiong shouted from the command platform to his soldiers.

Upon learning that he would soon be facing Gao Shun, Hua Xiong was initially stunned but then began trembling with excitement—not from fear, but from anticipation. He had fully mastered the "Heavenly Lock Triple Change" technique that Li Ru had taught him, embedding it into his very being. The prospect of facing the terrifyingly powerful Gao Shun once again had Hua Xiong brimming with excitement.

The bandits Hua Xiong had once recruited from the Taishan area had endured numerous battles, and only about half of them remained. Of those, less than half were still standing in the camp—the rest had retired. However, the new recruits, under the subtle influence of the veterans, had become just as resilient.

Hua Xiong's troops showed no reaction to his words, their discipline deeply ingrained in their very will. Yet, despite his efforts, Hua Xiong had still been unable to forge the army's spirit with his own innate ability—something he regretted deeply.

"Though the Ferocious Cavalry is strong, we are no weaklings either. This upcoming battle in Yanzhou may be one from which many of us won't return. I'll distribute compensation payments to you in

advance! I, Hua Zijian, swear that even if one of you doesn't make it back, I'll ensure a second payment reaches your families!" Hua Xiong shouted to his soldiers.

Afterward, boxes of copper coins were brought forward, and Hua Xiong ordered them to be distributed to all the soldiers. It wasn't yet time for their regular pay, but Hua Xiong knew that the battle in Yanzhou wouldn't be easily won. He understood Lu Bu's strength better than most.

"Welcome back, Wenru!" Liu Bei stood up with a smile to greet Li You, who had returned looking travel-worn.

"Lord Xuande, are you planning to fight Lu Bu?" Li You asked, bowing slightly. He spoke before Liu Bei could help him up.

"Yes, Zichuan's plan has advanced to this point. The only remaining threat is Lu Bu. My intention is to offer him the chance to surrender. If he refuses, we'll have no choice but to kill him. I hope he knows when to yield," Liu Bei said, offering Li You tea and dried fruit.

"That's wise. Lu Bu is indeed a troublesome figure—it's best to resolve the matter early. But, Lord Xuande, who will command the campaign in Yanzhou, and which generals will you assign?" Li You asked respectfully.

"Guan Yu will command the forces, with Guo Jia as his strategist and Zijian as the vanguard. Yide has long wanted to face Lu Bu again, so I've made him Guan Yu's deputy. Zijing suggested I bring Wen Ze along to ensure stability," Liu Bei said openly. For him, there was nothing he couldn't share with the man before him.

"Did Jia Wenhe offer any suggestions?" Li You asked, frowning slightly.

"Wenhe agreed with Zijing's recommendation to have Wen Ze serve as the rearguard to stabilize the situation if necessary," Liu Bei replied, noticing Li You's expression. "Is there a problem with this arrangement?"

"Not a major problem, but Wenhe and the others underestimate Lu Bu. Though Lu Bu is often seen as a brute, there are two of his generals who must be taken seriously. One is Zhang Liao, known as Zhang

Wenyuan—an exceptional talent in both strategy and combat. The other is Gao Shun, a man of extreme humility, but he commands an elite unit that is among the strongest in the land," Li You said with a wry smile.

Li You held Zhang Liao in high regard—so much so that, back in Luoyang, he had persuaded Dong Zhuo to grant Zhang Liao the prestigious title of Cavalry Commandant when Zhang Liao was only 23 years old, a position just below that of a general.

Chapter 513: Recommending You as Chancellor of the Secretariat

As for Gao Shun, Li You didn't know much about him, but the stunning display he had witnessed during an unexpected encounter left a deep impression on him. Although Gao Shun had fewer than 800 troops in his Ferocious Cavalry, their sharpness made Li You feel uneasy.

"Is that so?" Liu Bei asked curiously, though he didn't doubt Li You's knowledge in the slightest.

"That crafty Jia Wenhe! He oversees the intelligence network, yet he overlooked such an important matter!" Li You complained indignantly. If they had gone in unprepared, they might have faced a serious setback.

"Oh, Wenhe has had a lot on his plate lately. It's understandable if a few things slip through the cracks, and no major mistakes have been made. But Wenru, I'm truly glad you've returned. Without you by my side to fill in the gaps, I always feel something is missing," Liu Bei said with a smile, showing no intention of blaming Jia Xu.

To be fair, it wasn't really Jia Xu's fault. He had never interacted with Gao Shun or Zhang Liao. When Jia Xu served under Dong Zhuo, he had only had brief contact with Lu Bu. As for the unassuming Gao Shun and Zhang Liao, Jia Xu, who had always kept a low profile, hadn't paid much attention to them. After all, when he foresaw Dong Zhuo's impending downfall, Jia Xu had quietly started to withdraw.

"Well, the matter in Xuzhou has been resolved. Chen Yuanlong's transfer order will be arriving soon, so I won't need to stay in Xuzhou any longer. Our preparations in Yuzhou are almost ready to be activated," Li You nodded. "However, there may be some issues with Yuan Gonglu. Sun Bofu and Zhou Gongjin are truly outstanding men."

"Oh, Yuan Gonglu can be set aside for now. If we succeed, it will be fortunate, but if we fail, there's no significant loss. As Jia Wenhe said from the beginning, it was merely an opportunistic move. If it doesn't work out, we lose nothing," Liu Bei said calmly. He understood that his main focus should be elsewhere. The gains and losses in Yuzhou were temporary; as long as they could secure Jizhou, everything else would eventually follow.

"It's good to see you with such a mindset, my lord. However, in the short term, I will primarily stay in the administrative hall. One reason is to help Zijing handle the backlog of matters left by Zichuan and others. Another is to keep up appearances for Jushou and the others," Li You explained calmly.

He believed in putting on a complete performance. Regarding the situation in Xuzhou, Jushou and Xu You were very satisfied with Li You's actions. Although there were some minor imperfections, this only made Jushou and Xu You believe that Li You was acting naturally.

"Very well, you can assist Zijing with the administration. Ziyang will also lend a hand. By the way, there's also the new legal code from Baining that needs your review. But Wenru, do you understand the law?" Liu Bei nodded slightly in agreement with Li You's plan, then habitually asked a couple of questions.

"I know a bit, enough to handle a review. Is Baining's new law more focused on legal principles or human compassion?" Li You inquired. He wasn't joking—he genuinely had some knowledge in this area. However, to be safe, he wanted to understand the law's focus before diving in.

"I'm not entirely sure, but Baining mentioned that it incorporates many customary laws that weren't previously written down, as well as some clan regulations," Liu Bei explained vaguely.

"Oh, now I see. So it's more inclined toward human reasoning. I always thought Baining had a strict, authoritarian approach, but it seems he's been influenced by someone toward compassion," Li You nodded, quickly grasping the situation from Liu Bei's brief explanation.

"That's about right. As for being influenced, I had Baining and Zhongyu work together on this legal code. As you mentioned, Baining does have a bit of a harsh streak," Liu Bei said with a touch of resignation.

Realizing that Li You might not be familiar with the other person he mentioned, Liu Bei added, "By the way, after our ritual for the fallen heroes, two people from the Xun family came to us. One is Xun Yan,

styled Xiuruo, who has a talent for governance. The other is Xun Yue, styled Zhongyu, who excels in creating laws, cultivating virtue, and educating the people."

Compared to Xun Yan, Liu Bei held Xun Yue in much higher regard. He believed that Xun Yue's talent was enough to make him a candidate for one of the Nine Ministers.

Li You nodded but remained silent. While he wasn't as familiar with the younger Xun Yan, he had heard of Xun Yue. When Dong Zhuo had risen to power, the Xun family had frequently sought out Xun Yue, who, as Liu Bei had described, had a knack for creating laws and teaching the people.

"Congratulations to Lord Xuande on gaining such a great talent," Li You said with a smile. It seemed that the aristocratic families were finally beginning to soften under Liu Bei's growing strength.

"In truth, I'm more grateful to have you all by my side. Any one of you could serve as one of the Nine Ministers, but it would be beneath your abilities. Zichuan may seem lazy, but the ability he shows in the little time he spends working proves he's fully qualified to be Chancellor. Zijing works tirelessly, and half of our governance's smooth operation is thanks to him. He, too, could easily be Chancellor," Liu Bei said with deep admiration.

"Zichuan and Zijing complement each other perfectly. Zichuan handles the grand strategy, and Zijing manages the details. Together, they are flawless," Li You said solemnly. "But Zijing works too hard—he neglects his own well-being, and it will catch up with him eventually."

"Yes, Zijing is too diligent. He works until midnight and starts again before dawn," Liu Bei said with frustration.

Liu Bei had often urged Lu Su to rest more, but after taking a break for a couple of days, Lu Su would return to his old ways, working around the clock. Most leaders worried that their subordinates wouldn't work hard enough—Liu Bei worried that Lu Su's overwork might lead to an early death.

"All I can do now is ensure the kitchen prepares regular meals for Zijing. I finally understand what Zichuan meant when he said a constantly running kitchen was essential," Liu Bei sighed.

"Hahaha..." Li You let out a stiff laugh. Lu Su, the workaholic—if you visited him in the morning, he'd be working, and if you left in the evening, he'd still be working. That man never rested, and it seemed his relentless work ethic would be his downfall.

"By the way, Wenru, you seem to know a little bit of everything, don't you?" Liu Bei asked uncertainly. "Sometimes I find you hard to read. Like Zichuan, you don't seem driven by power, yet you can handle almost anything. Sometimes I wonder if you two might be fellow disciples."

"Better not compare me to Zichuan. I'm not on his level. As for Chancellor, that's a role for Zichuan, Zijing, or even Kongming. If we're talking about government roles, I'd be best suited as Chancellor of the Secretariat, filling in the gaps. The role of Chancellor should go to them," Li You said, shaking his head. His desire for power had waned. He was content with achieving his goals and had experienced enough in life.

"Very well. Once the Han dynasty is restored, I will recommend you to His Majesty as Chancellor of the Secretariat," Liu Bei said solemnly, not noticing the slight twitch in Li You's expression.

Chapter 514: A Steadfast Heart

Li You was well aware of his own circumstances. While he could act freely under Liu Bei, trying the same under Emperor Liu Xie would be courting death. Compared to others, Li You knew he was firmly on Liu Xie's blacklist, especially considering his involvement in the assassination of the young emperor—a stain that could never be washed away.

"Thank you, Lord Xuande," Li You said with a calculating glint in his eye. By then, whether Liu Xie would still be in power was uncertain. When the time came, even if Liu Bei didn't wish to become emperor, he might not be able to resist the pressure from his supporters.

"If it weren't for your capabilities, Wenru, I wouldn't dare to recommend you," Liu Bei laughed heartily, though a hint of bitterness crept into his expression. "There are so many talented people outside the court, yet within the court, the virtuous are often dismissed, leaving only mediocrity to occupy important positions. It's a helpless situation."

"To sweep across the land and reshape the world—that has always been your goal, Lord Xuande. We must simply continue to do what we need to do," Li You replied calmly. Although their ambitions differed, Liu Bei's promise aligned with Li You's lifelong pursuit.

"The Lu family should be arriving soon. I've received an urgent message from Xiuruo. After that, we'll only have one weakness left," Liu Bei sighed. "In the northern regions, cavalry is crucial, and relying solely on Su Shuang's horse trade is far from sufficient."

"That's why our strategy is to secure Jizhou in one decisive battle. Once Jizhou is ours, we'll have a strong foundation to achieve our goals," Li You said confidently. His mind wandered to the hidden trump cards he had prepared—two forged ceremonial tripods, one representing the Emperor of Heaven and the other the Empress of Earth. These were intended to serve as justifications for future conflicts, symbolizing the supreme authority of the Yellow Emperor, even surpassing the imperial seal in legitimacy.

As Li You's thoughts drifted, he engaged in casual conversation with Liu Bei until Lady Zhang appeared, prompting Li You to leave with a blank expression.

Lady Zhang narrowed her eyes, watching Li You's departing figure. Only after he turned the corner did she withdraw her gaze.

"What's on your mind, Madam? Have you noticed something unusual or spotted a business opportunity? Tell me, and I can offer my advice," Liu Bei said, lounging casually in his chair. After spending much time with Lady Zhang, their interactions had become more relaxed and natural, unlike the initial awkwardness.

"Opportunities are plenty, but the Zhen family is already quite saturated. As long as we maintain our current ventures, the Zhen family will remain the top merchant house. Anything else would just be the icing on the cake," Lady Zhang said with a smile, using her silk fan to cover her mouth.

"Oh? Then what good news have you discovered?" Liu Bei responded calmly. "Only someone from the Zhen family could be so confident. But it's wise to consolidate your power—being too prominent invites trouble."

"Thank you for the advice, Lord Xuande," Lady Zhang replied unhurriedly. The Zhen family was no stranger to being in the spotlight, having held the top position for over a century. Now, with control over more than half of Jizhou's commerce, other families might be eager to take a bite out of their success. However, the local nobility, including the Yuan family, were at a disadvantage, allowing the Zhen family to flourish even further.

Seeing Lady Zhang's composed expression, Liu Bei didn't press further. The Zhen family's expansion had already reached its limit, as advised by Lu Su. Their rapid growth had made them a target, but their influence also played a vital role in Jizhou's prosperity. The Zhen family's operations had elevated the entire commercial landscape of Jizhou, increasing overall tax revenue by nearly ten percent, which was why Yuan Shao had allowed them to expand unchecked.

For Lady Zhang, overseeing the Zhen family's rapid growth had been both a challenge and a success. She had led them towards unimaginable wealth, with assets approaching a billion coins. Of course, this was in fixed assets; no merchant house could produce that much liquid currency. After all, the Han dynasty minted only a few billion coins per year.

Being one of the few "outsiders" aware of Chen Xi's plans, Lady Zhang was determined to deliver a prosperous Jizhou to Liu Bei. The better she made Jizhou, the easier it would be when the time came for action.

"By the way, Lord Xuande, I have some information to share with you privately. It's something you should be aware of," Lady Zhang said, closing her fan and looking at Liu Bei with a serious expression.

"Go ahead, I'm listening," Liu Bei replied with a smile.

"There's something off about Li Wenru. One of the concubines I sent to Xu You reported that after getting him drunk, she overheard that Li Wenru has ties to Yuan Benchu," Lady Zhang said gravely.

"You even managed to uncover that..." Liu Bei chuckled. "Yuan Benchu is getting careless."

"Wait, you knew about this? And you still allow Li Wenru to be close to you, even letting him handle confidential documents? Aren't you worried about potential problems?" Lady Zhang asked, bewildered.

"Relax, it's all part of a plan. Wenru is using me as bait to deceive Jushou and the others, and it took him considerable effort to set it up. That's also why Yuan Benchu sent me so many concubines and gifts. I'm not that naive," Liu Bei explained with a wave of his hand.

"Oh, I see. I rushed back from Jizhou just to tell you about this. By the way, is my daughter still with Lady Cai?" Lady Zhang asked, visibly relieved.

"Yes, Cai Zhaoji is tutoring Miss Cai and also teaching Mi Zhen and your daughter. She has no bias against them. It's a pity though—if Cai Zhaoji were a man, she would undoubtedly be a genius of the highest order," Liu Bei sighed.

"I wonder how much they can learn, but my daughter is clever. She may not surpass Lady Cai, but she should outshine Mi Zhen," Lady Zhang mused, clearly admiring Cai Zhaoji despite only having met her once.

"Mi Zhen is too headstrong and often causes trouble. I'm considering finding her a marriage match to help her settle down, but Zizhong won't allow it. He dotes on his only sister. By the way, Zichuan should be back soon, right?" Liu Bei shook his head, recalling Mi Zhen's antics.

"How would I know such things?" Lady Zhang replied with a laugh. "I just returned from Jizhou."

"When he returns, I'll greet him as usual. Funny how I'm always the one to welcome him back," Liu Bei said with a smile. Despite all the changes in his status and responsibilities, his heart remained the same as it had been at the beginning.

Chapter 515: Returning Home

On the way back, Chen Xi wasn't in a hurry. He leisurely looked around, seemingly trying to find something to nitpick about. However, upon entering Taishan, where he managed the political affairs himself, he no longer had the intention of stirring up trouble.

"It seems I've done a pretty good job," Chen Xi remarked, pleased as he observed the citizens registering their households as they entered the city. Over time, Lu Su had taken over Li You's duties and had successfully implemented the household registration system.

"This is beyond just 'pretty good'," Lu Yu commented from the carriage window, marveling at the bustling crowds outside. Although he had been to Taishan once before, seeing it again still filled him with awe.

"It will get even more prosperous in the future," Chen Xi shrugged. "This is just the beginning; the city isn't fully built yet. You can tell Zijing hasn't finished everything, like the markets outside the city."

"Heh heh heh," Zhuge Liang chuckled slyly. Lu Su really had his hands full; anything that wasn't completed became his responsibility.

"Look at this, even entering the city still requires payment. We've been waiting here for so long and haven't seen a single person or merchant who didn't have to pay. The plan I left with Zijing clearly hasn't been implemented," Chen Xi said helplessly.

"Zijing truly has it tough," Zhuge Liang remarked with a shake of his head. "You should be more understanding. He has many responsibilities, and your plan might not have been prioritized. Perhaps there's even an issue with your plan."

"There's nothing wrong with the plan; it just requires a lot of calculations," Chen Xi shrugged again. "A small amount of money shouldn't be something to haggle over with the people, nor should it be something we cling to."

"Halt!" The gatekeeper at the city gate commanded Chen Xi's driver. "Present your household registration, pass, or documentation. Any one of the three will suffice."

"Oh, it's you, Yuanjian. What are you doing guarding the gate?" Chen Xi leaned out of the carriage window and noticed Liao Hua, whom he recognized.

"Greetings, Chief Advisor," Liao Hua respectfully saluted and replied, "General Guan believed I had a talent for reading, studying military strategies, so he approved a document for me to return and study. In the meantime, the lord appointed me as the gatekeeper to gain experience."

"Oh, so these fifty-plus people are under your command now?" Chen Xi asked curiously. "Not bad, you've quickly risen to the rank of Tun Leader."

"During the battle in Licheng, I ambushed an enemy deputy general and earned a military merit. General Guan promoted me to Centurion, and I was further promoted when I returned," Liao Hua said with a sheepish grin, scratching his head.

"Keep up the good work, study hard, and you'll become a general," Chen Xi encouraged with a smile. Liao Hua then ordered his men to let Chen Xi's carriage pass through.

Looking at the wide and orderly city of Fenggao, Chen Xi couldn't help but feel a surge of pride. This city had been built bit by bit under his supervision and had now become the center of Liu Bei's domain!

Within this city were complete infrastructures and numerous officials under Liu Bei's command. Among these people were individuals who history had overlooked, and Chen Xi was carefully working to correct those historical oversights.

In this era, some had already risen to prominence, some were just beginning to show promise, and others remained unknown. But Chen Xi knew the value of these people, and compared to others, he clearly understood how these unrecognized talents should develop. This understanding was Chen Xi's greatest support!

"Zichuan is back," Liu Bei quickly learned of Chen Xi's return soon after he entered the city.

"Zhongkang, come with me to greet Zichuan. No need to go outside the city this time. I wonder what surprise he'll have for me this time," Liu Bei said with a smile to Xu Chu. As for Li You, who had returned a few days earlier, he had already been pulled into work by Wang Xiu, sent by Lu Su.

"Understood," Xu Chu replied respectfully, following closely behind Liu Bei.

"Zichuan is back?" Lu Su didn't even look up as he listened to the report. "Send someone to have Shuzhi bring him in. I won't be going; if Lord Xuande is there, tell him there's too much work, and I need Zichuan to help manage it. Let Shuzhi handle the rest."

"..." Li You furrowed his brow slightly as he heard the resentment in Lu Su's tone but said nothing. On the other side, Liu Ye, busy calculating accounts, also paused for a moment before continuing his work. There was no way Lu Su would let them leave without finishing.

Twisting and turning through the streets, Chen Xi calmly avoided the administrative office and didn't report to Liu Bei. Instead, he successfully made his way back home.

"Knock, knock, knock!" With Chen Xi away, his household kept the gates closed at all times, so the only way to enter was to knock.

"The master is not home. Guests, please come another day," came the voice of the old housekeeper from inside, likely a phrase he had repeated many times.

"I'm back," Chen Xi replied calmly.

The gate quickly opened wide, and the housekeeper bowed low. "Welcome home, Master. The two mistresses are still studying at the Cai residence. I will send someone to bring them back immediately."

"That's fine," Chen Xi waved his hand. "Did anything happen at home while I was away?"

"Forgive me, Master!" The housekeeper suddenly knelt, his voice trembling with fear.

"There's no need for such formality in this household. Stand up. You've served my family since my father's time and have taken care of me all these years. What is there to be afraid of?" Chen Xi said as he pulled the housekeeper to his feet. With the housekeeper's cautious nature, the worst that could have happened was something being broken by the maids.

"Your study was burned," the housekeeper admitted, his head lowered in alarm.

"..." Chen Xi rubbed his temples. "It's fine; it's not your fault. You can't enter the inner courtyard without permission, so it's understandable. If it burned, it burned," Chen Xi said with a wry smile. "Find me a female housekeeper to manage the inner courtyard. It was my oversight."

"Thank you, Master," the housekeeper said respectfully. "I'll have a candidate ready for you by this afternoon."

"Alright, you can rest now. I'll ask Jian'er later who burned my study," Chen Xi said dismissively, indicating that the housekeeper needn't worry further. After all, without his orders, no man besides Zhuge Liang could enter the inner courtyard.

Meanwhile, in the Jingling Hall, where he had been chanting scriptures and praying, Zuo Ci suddenly stopped. "Nanhua, come out. I know you're here."

"It's been a long time, Yuanfang. You've always had the sharpest eyes among us," Nanhua, the old immortal, revealed himself, standing behind Zuo Ci.

"Hmph, and yet here you are," Zuo Ci glanced back at Nanhua. "Zixu, stop hiding. I can see you too."

"Times are hard for everyone," Zixu appeared beside Nanhua with a smile. "But I'm surprised, Nanhua, that you're still alive. When Zhang Jiao claimed to have inherited your teachings, I suspected you were dead."

Chapter 516: The Era of Heroes

"Zhang Jiao, that guy..." Nanhua sighed helplessly, then suddenly changed the subject. "I want to kill Yu Ji. Do you know where he is? I suspect he's trying to steal the nation's fortune."

"No wonder, I was wondering why I couldn't beat him," Zixu said with a nod after a moment of surprise. "If that's what he's up to, count me in. At least Zhang Jiao had some restraint, but Yu Ji is outright insane."

"The teachings back then were mine, but let me clarify something: Zhang Jiao's power had nothing to do with me. Even though I've cultivated for many years, we all witnessed what happened with Zhang Jiao. To be honest, in a one-on-one fight, I wouldn't be his match," Nanhua said with a cold smile.

Zuo Ci and Zixu exchanged glances, understanding dawning in their eyes, along with a trace of fear.

"So it was as we suspected. But who interfered in the end?" Zixu asked. Zhang Jiao's power had been vast, but in the end, he still fell.

"Someone saw through it and severed the middle channel. Otherwise, he would have succeeded," Nanhua said calmly. "I now suspect Yu Ji is attempting the same thing, though he lacks Zhang Jiao's courage. Instead, he's likely stealing fortune from one region and channeling it into himself."

"Why are you both looking at me?" Zixu asked, displeased.

"Because you're the most suitable. The two of us haven't crossed paths with Yu Ji much yet. You, on the other hand, can settle old scores," Zuo Ci said, staring at Zixu.

"Fine, I'll handle it. But I can't guarantee I'll be able to kill Yu Ji. And Yuanfang, your disciple is with him—aren't you concerned?" Zixu agreed after a moment of thought.

"This is fate," Zuo Ci replied indifferently, not even opening his eyes. "Yu Ji never considered the dangers of what he's doing. Zhang Jiao's failure might have been fate as well."

"You're surprisingly detached," Zixu remarked calmly. "Well then, I'll head out now. I suppose you two have more to discuss."

Zixu left, flying directly towards Jizhou. During his last battle with Yu Ji, he had learned that Yu Ji planned to meet with Yuan Shao in Jizhou, so without further thought, Zixu headed there.

After Zixu left, Zuo Ci, who had been sitting in meditation, opened his eyes and stood up. "Nanhua, did Zhang Jiao really die so easily? Even with heavenly lightning striking him, he should have been able to protect himself, right?"

"Who knows? Perhaps in his final moments, he saw something and forcibly altered his fate. Don't you find it odd that so many brilliant talents have appeared in this era? Should this world really be filled with so many extraordinary people?" Nanhua asked, his expression calm.

"No wonder he died despite being surrounded by so many Yellow Turban warriors, who also disappeared with him. Hahaha," Zuo Ci laughed, a wild and unrestrained laugh, as many things that had previously been unclear suddenly became obvious to him.

"He really was a fool," Zuo Ci suddenly remarked, his expression changing.

"That may be true, but I don't think he was a fool. On the contrary, if someone on this stage manages to defeat all their opponents," Nanhua smiled, full of pride, "then it will all have been worth it."

"Indeed. After Zhang Jiao's death, the fortune he gathered over a hundred years of the Han Dynasty fell upon the exceptional talents of this generation. People who originally had only above-average potential have rapidly transformed into geniuses. The fortune of over a hundred years of the Han Dynasty now rests on this generation, no wonder they shine so brightly!" Zuo Ci said with some emotion.

At this point, both Zuo Ci and Nanhua had guessed Zhang Jiao's intentions. When Zhang Jiao realized his cause was hopeless, he decided to return the gathered fortune to the Han Dynasty. This would ensure that the Han Dynasty would have at least another hundred years of prosperity. However, when all that fortune fell upon the current generation, Zhang Jiao saw things he wasn't supposed to see. As a result, he sacrificed himself to ignite all the fortune of the Han Dynasty.

This explained why the Han Dynasty collapsed so suddenly despite showing no signs of external decline, and why, after the Yellow Turban Rebellion, the world suddenly saw an explosion of brilliant minds.

Both Zuo Ci and Nanhua began calculating the situation. As their calculations slowed, their expressions grew more somber.

"So that's how it is?" Nanhua, who finished calculating before Zuo Ci, finally understood Zhang Jiao's ultimate plan.

"Perhaps he was right. Liu Xuande truly has the potential to rise to the top in this era of shining stars. If that happens, the calamity we've been fearing won't come to pass," Zuo Ci nodded in agreement after completing his calculations.

While Nanhua and Zuo Ci felt relieved, they didn't know that in the original timeline, this era of shining stars had no one capable of bringing it to a close. No one could unite the land, and the extreme brilliance of that era exhausted the strength of the entire nation, leading to the eventual downfall of the country.

But this time was different. Though Nanhua and Zuo Ci couldn't precisely calculate the fate of the nation, they could sense that Liu Bei had a significant chance of uniting the land. If that happened, the original crisis would never emerge.

In their view, as long as the country was unified, it would not only have the national fortune accumulated during its founding but also the century-long fortune Zhang Jiao had gathered, as well as the outstanding heroes born from that fortune. With such a group of civil and military talents, the land would undoubtedly be well-governed!

These civil and military talents were not like those born during the decline of a dynasty, when the national fortune had already crumbled. Instead, they were top-tier individuals born from the explosive culmination of over a century of fortune. Any one of them would be considered a prodigy in any era.

"Where are you going, Nanhua?" Zuo Ci asked as he saw Nanhua's expression change and watched him walk toward the door.

"I'm going to destroy the group centered around Yu Ji. We can't let him succeed. These individuals are meant to prepare for any potential disasters in the future. They mustn't be tampered with. Even in death, they should die among their peers to grow stronger," Nanhua said calmly.

The coldness in Nanhua's voice was unmistakable. Now that he understood what was at stake, he had no intention of letting Yu Ji's reckless actions slide.

"Good. I'll stay here and keep an eye on Chen Zichuan. If I'm not mistaken, his fortune is immense. Go deal with Yu Ji!" Zuo Ci didn't try to stop him. Yu Ji's attempt to steal fate must not be allowed!

Nanhua left immediately, flying directly toward Xuzhou, where Yu Ji had a permanent residence. He planned to wait there for three months. If Yu Ji didn't return, he would seek him out personally.

Neither Zuo Ci, Nanhua, nor Zixu had considered one question: How did Zhang Jiao, a common man who had only recently started practicing Daoism, come up with such a method of cultivation? Borrowing the power of fate, Zhang Jiao's ten years of cultivation had already surpassed that of Nanhua.

Chapter 517: Still Not Enough People!

Chen Xi led Zhuge Liang and Lu Yu to the inner courtyard. Zhuge Liang naturally made his way to his room, while Chen Xi arranged for Lu Yu to rest in the guest room.

"Welcome back, my lord," greeted a chorus of maidservants as Chen Xi entered. If nothing else, his inner courtyard certainly had an abundance of maidservants.

"Chen Yun, are you getting used to staying at home?" Chen Xi asked, noticing that Chen Yun seemed a bit bored.

"Greetings, my lord," Chen Yun, who had been pretending to read but was actually daydreaming, quickly stood up upon seeing Chen Xi.

"I asked if you're getting used to staying at home," Chen Xi repeated, worried that Fan Jian might have been giving her a hard time.

"Everything is fine, my lord," Chen Yun replied, lowering her head.

"Here, take this," Chen Xi handed her a jade token. "With this, you can freely enter both the inner and outer courtyards. Jian'er won't bother you. She just gets bored easily. Do whatever you like."

"Thank you, my lord," Chen Yun said, bowing gracefully as she accepted the token.

"Who burned down my study?" Chen Xi asked.

"Miss Mi and Miss Zhen were looking for something in your study one evening. They accidentally left an oil lamp burning. We, the maidservants, are not allowed inside your study, so we only noticed the fire after it started," Chen Yun explained, her head still lowered, without hiding anything.

"I see," Chen Xi said, smiling. "Jian'er really is something. If you ever need to check something in the study, feel free to do so, just as long as you don't burn it down."

"Zichuan!" Before Chen Xi could lie down for a rest, he heard Liu Bei's voice from the outer courtyard. Since Liu Bei had arrived, there was no way Chen's steward could have stopped him. However, Liu Bei was always considerate enough never to enter Chen Xi's inner courtyard.

Sighing, Chen Xi got up and muttered a few complaints before heading out. Meanwhile, Chen Yun brought tea and snacks to the front courtyard.

"Lord Xuande, it's been a while," Chen Xi greeted Liu Bei with a smile as soon as they met. He was becoming more relaxed around Liu Bei lately.

"You look well, Zichuan. Hua Tuo was right. You just needed some rest, haha!" Liu Bei laughed, showing a slight shift towards a more carefree demeanor. "I went to pick you up earlier, but after waiting for a while and not seeing you, I figured you must have snuck back home."

"Who's sneaking? I simply returned home as planned," Chen Xi laughed, defending himself. "But I appreciate your effort, Lord Xuande."

"You..." Liu Bei shook his head in mock exasperation. Then his gaze shifted to Chen Yun. "So, this is the famous Chen Yun, who played Bai Suzhen. She does have a refined aura."

"Servant Chen Yun greets the General Who Pacifies the East," Chen Yun quickly bowed in respect.

"All right, you may leave," Chen Xi said, waving her off.

"Lord Xuande, is there something urgent?" Chen Xi asked after Chen Yun had left, pouring Liu Bei a cup of tea.

"Not urgent, but Zijing said that if you don't show up at the administrative office soon, he'll come after you himself," Liu Bei said with a smile.

"Really? Zijing's struggling that much? Isn't he supported by Wenhe, Wenru, Ziyang, Gongyou, Xianhe, Zhongyu, Shuzhi, Gongxi, Hanmou, Boren, and the others?" Chen Xi raised an eyebrow. "With so many people, what could they possibly struggle with?"

"Gongyou is busy with construction. Xianhe and Weishuo are handling the ceremonial procedures for opening government offices. Zhongyu and Boren are revising the laws. Shuzhi is working on Zijing's

plans. Gongxi has been sent to Qingzhou by me. After Zilong left, Hanmou became immobilized. Boren just surrendered and isn't familiar with our operations yet," Liu Bei explained with a helpless smile.

They had plenty of talented people, but when Chen Xi left, he had assigned tasks to everyone, leaving no one available to help.

"What about Wenhe, Wenru, and Ziyang? With those three, everything should be manageable," Chen Xi asked, puzzled.

"Ziyang just returned from Qingzhou. Wenru just got back from Xuzhou yesterday. As for Wenhe, he said he's not good at handling these matters, so he didn't get involved, to avoid making mistakes," Liu Bei sighed, recalling the recently overworked Li You and others.

"What a joke!" Chen Xi exclaimed, slamming the table. "Jia Wenhe is shirking his duties! He's letting Zijiang shoulder all the burdens alone!"

"Let's deal with Wenhe later. I'm here to talk to you," Liu Bei said, looking at Chen Xi with exasperation.

"How about I send someone over to help? They won't be much worse than me and are as hardworking as Zijiang," Chen Xi offered with a sigh. Who knew they'd suddenly run out of competent people?

"You're thinking of Kongming?" Liu Bei asked, pulling a face. When Chen Xi had captured Fazheng, he often had him handle various tasks, calling it 'training.' While Fazheng had indeed developed well, Liu Bei couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for him.

"He's the only one left. Besides, it's time for him to start handling government affairs. This is a good opportunity for him to learn," Chen Xi said with an air of benevolence. However, given Liu Bei's understanding of Chen Xi, he knew Chen Xi was just trying to avoid work.

"Fine, if you don't want to handle government affairs, how about leading the army to Yanzhou to assist the Black Mountain Army with Yide and Zijian?" Liu Bei agreed, seemingly resigned, before quickly changing the subject, catching Chen Xi off guard.

Cough cough "Never mind, I think I'd rather stay in Fenggao and work out the details regarding the Lu family," Chen Xi quickly declined, pretending to cough. He had barely spent any time at home this year. Except for the New Year, he had been busy non-stop.

"You've already arranged for the Lu family to stay at the post station, and Lu Boyan has acknowledged you as his master. The Lu family is now firmly on our side. I'll handle the rest. Tonight, we'll host a banquet to welcome you and the Lu family, and Zijing can report the recent developments," Liu Bei said calmly.

To be honest, Liu Bei still didn't fully grasp the importance of the Lu family. Although Chen Xi and Lu Su had mentioned it, Liu Bei's northern perspective made him more focused on land battles, and he had little understanding of the naval conflicts that would eventually come.

Perhaps Cao Cao felt the same way before the Battle of Red Cliffs. Unless someone enlightened Liu Bei, he likely wouldn't realize the importance of the Lu family until he suffered a significant defeat. This was the difference in understanding between the northern and southern regions.

"Didn't Zijing update you on the progress of his work during this time?" Chen Xi asked, puzzled.

Chapter 518: Zhuge Liang Takes Office

"With Wenru absent, and you also not around, who's left to explain the reports to me? I can only grasp a rough idea of more than half of the work, and unlike you and Wenru, who have plenty of free time, Zijing's workload is extremely heavy..." Liu Bei sighed, tugging at his lips as he spoke.

Chen Xi couldn't help but grin sheepishly. Liu Bei's words made sense, after all. Without Chen Xi and Li You to assist, explaining everything clearly to Liu Bei was a significant challenge for Lu Su. It would take a lot of time, and for someone as busy as Lu Su, that time could be better spent getting more work done.

"Oh, look, Kongming is here," Chen Xi quickly diverted attention as he saw Zhuge Liang approaching, glad for the distraction.

"Greetings, Lord Xuande," Zhuge Liang said calmly as he walked over and respectfully bowed to Liu Bei. "May I ask what Lord Chen requires of me?"

"There's a lot of political work lately. I recommend you go assist Zijing and accumulate some experience. I believe you've studied enough by now," Chen Xi suggested, his tone as calm and thoughtful as usual, looking out for Zhuge Liang's development.

"Lord Xuande, don't you want to test him first?" Chen Xi turned to Liu Bei. "Kongming is practically ready to govern a region."

"No need for that. Kongming isn't like Xiaozi. When Xiaozi took office, I needed to assess him. But Kongming is different; he's of prime ministerial caliber. I'll give you a handwritten appointment letter later—let's make you the Assistant to the Chief Clerk under my command," Liu Bei replied, waving off the suggestion, trusting Zhuge Liang without the need for a test.

Compared to the somewhat impulsive Fazheng, Liu Bei had complete confidence in the refined and composed Zhuge Liang. However, when it came to assigning positions, Liu Bei gave Zhuge Liang a modest rank, a six hundred dan salary position, despite his strong faith in him. Zhuge Liang was certainly more reliable than Fazheng had been at the start, yet Liu Bei refrained from giving him a high office right away.

"Thank you, Lord Xuande," Zhuge Liang responded calmly, his expression neither thrilled nor disappointed, maintaining his usual composed demeanor.

"Starting tomorrow, you can take up your position with Zijing. Learn from his experience, but don't adopt his workaholic habits. And avoid Zichuan's lazy tendencies," Liu Bei joked as he signaled Xu Chu. A servant soon approached, carrying a tray with a jug and several small cups, each cup emitting a faint glow.

Liu Bei personally poured a cup of wine for Zhuge Liang and then for Chen Xi and himself. "Kongming, I toast to you. Li Wenru has praised you as prime ministerial material, and Zichuan has said the same. My officials and ministers all speak highly of you, and I share their view. This cup is my expression of hope for your future. Do well!"

Liu Bei's straightforward words moved Zhuge Liang, causing him to show a rare expression of excitement as he raised his cup and drank it all in one go.

Chen Xi took the jug from Liu Bei, refilled Zhuge Liang's cup, and then raised his own. "I also toast to you. Kongming, remember, you will be the pride of this era. I can only guide you; some things are beyond me. From now on, it's up to you—may you hold high office and serve the people."

Chen Xi drained his cup, and Zhuge Liang followed suit, smiling warmly. "The strength of the people is boundless, and virtue will guide them—this you taught me early on. I know what to do, Lord Xuande. I understand."

"Zhongkang, bring it here," Liu Bei called out to Xu Chu.

"Here it is," Xu Chu replied, carrying a large chest with ease, as if it were weightless. He placed it down gently, demonstrating his remarkable strength.

"These are gifts I prepared for you, including the wealth you'll need for your upcoming marriage. Since you're now in office, it's not appropriate to continue living at Zichuan's place. Inside this chest are two land deeds—take them," Liu Bei said, pointing to the chest. He had prepared these gifts in advance.

"Thank you, Lord Xuande. In that case, I won't decline," Zhuge Liang replied, not even looking at the chest. He knew anything Liu Bei gifted would be of high quality.

Liu Bei didn't know who Zhuge Liang's fiancée was, nor did he care much. To Liu Bei, Zhuge Liang's talent was what mattered most. Even if Zhuge Liang led a life of indulgence like Guo Jia, Liu Bei wouldn't mind as long as his intellect remained sharp.

Liu Bei had given similar gifts to all his officials, though many still remained bachelors. In Taishan, these gifts were jokingly referred to as "wedding funds," yet few had actually gotten married.

"Later, I'll write your marriage contract. It's rare for us to have a formal wedding here," Chen Xi said with a sigh, while Liu Bei chuckled at the thought of his own marital status still awaiting resolution.

"Let's discuss it later," Zhuge Liang said calmly, not too eager to wed just yet.

"Whatever you prefer," Chen Xi replied nonchalantly. Since Zhuge Liang wasn't interested, he wouldn't push. "Before you go, could you bring Lu Zijia here? There are some things I need to inform him about."

"Lu Zijia?" Liu Bei raised an eyebrow as Zhuge Liang gracefully excused himself. "My mentor's son, whom Lord Wang took away. So, you've brought him back? That's good. I'll take care of him from now on."

"No, Lord Xuande, you shouldn't take on Lu Zijia's education. He's a genius, no less brilliant than Fazheng. If you take him in, your connection to his father will make you go easy on him, and he'll end up being spoiled. Do you want to see Lord Lu's son become mediocre?" Chen Xi quickly stopped Liu Bei.

While Liu Bei was undoubtedly a great leader, his approach wasn't suited for someone like Lu Yu. Liu Bei's path was one of benevolence, meant to shine as a beacon for others. But Lu Yu needed a darker, more rigorous path to realize his potential. Handing him over to Liu Bei would be a disservice, and Chen Xi wasn't about to let that happen.

Chapter 519: Finally Taking the First Step

"Hahaha, Zichuan, you must be joking. I have met Zijia before. While he does have a steadfast personality, to say he could rival Xiaozhi is quite an exaggeration. Although Xiaozhi may be somewhat unruly, his genius is rare in this world," Liu Bei said seriously. He had met Lu Yu before, and his evaluation was based on that meeting. In Liu Bei's eyes, although Lu Yu was talented, he did not compare to Fazheng.

"They are different, Lord Xuande. Xiaozhi excels in strategy, while Lu Yu's talent lies hidden beneath the surface. If he walks a different path, his achievements won't be inferior to Fazheng's," Chen Xi said, shaking his head.

"Truly?" Liu Bei asked in disbelief.

"Exceptional doesn't even begin to describe him," Chen Xi said, nodding thoughtfully. "Otherwise, I wouldn't have personally brought him back. He is indeed remarkable."

"Oh, then I'll leave him in your hands," Liu Bei said after some thought, deciding to trust Chen Xi's judgment. After all, Lu Zhi only had one son left, and if Lu Yu could grow to the level Chen Xi described, it would be easier to support him in the future, ensuring that the Lu family wouldn't decline.

"Don't worry, in less than ten years, Lu Yu will undoubtedly impress you, Lord Xuande," Chen Xi said with a smile. "By the way, is that jade plate a gift from Yuan Benchu?"

"If I had such a jade plate, I would have pawned it to fund the construction of Mount Tai," Liu Bei laughed. "Do you like it? If so, it's yours. Our white porcelain is getting better and better," he added, picking up the wine cup, which now had a faint, glowing sheen.

"The progress is remarkable..." Chen Xi smiled wryly. It seemed that when something was truly needed, technological advancement in ancient times could accelerate at an abnormal pace. "In that case, have they also made progress on the agricultural tools and water wheels I instructed them to design before I left?"

"Not yet. Although there have been some results, Hanzhong is still not fully satisfied. And compared to your expectations, there's still a long way to go. Moreover, the tools break down quickly," Liu Bei said with some frustration. "But fortunately, Xiaozhi has already started producing iron farming tools."

"Have the master craftsmen made any breakthroughs?" Chen Xi asked, still concerned. In this era, food security was paramount. As long as people had enough to eat, even if the market collapsed, the Han Dynasty could still hold on.

"No breakthroughs," Liu Bei shook his head. "Let's not dwell on that. Look, Zijia is here. Don't forget to come to my place tonight. I'll be hosting a welcome banquet for you, and there are a few matters that require your presence."

"I won't forget," Chen Xi nodded.

"I'm just worried that once your wife and concubines are back, you'll forget all about it. Everyone knows how it goes when there's no one around to remind you. But this time, we must formally welcome the Lu family. Keep that in mind," Liu Bei gently reminded him, knowing that Chen Xi had a history of being easily distracted.

"Greetings to General of the East," Lu Yu greeted Liu Bei with a composed demeanor, bowing respectfully before turning to Chen Xi and bowing again, "Greetings, Lord Chen."

"No need for formalities, Zijia. You can just call me senior brother. Your sister-in-law and nephew are currently staying at the Lu residence next door. Since I thought you were going to stay with Lord Wang for your studies, I didn't make any arrangements. But now that you're back, you can stay there. Everything is well-prepared," Liu Bei said with a smile.

"Zijia wouldn't dare be so disrespectful," Lu Yu replied with a shake of his head, while Liu Bei shrugged helplessly. He wouldn't have minded if Lu Yu called him senior brother, and since he had promised to take care of the entire Lu family, he had no ulterior motives. But it seemed Lu Yu was a bit stiff in Liu Bei's view.

"I almost forgot you already have a place to stay in Mount Tai. In that case, you should quickly reunite with your sister-in-law and nephew. Tomorrow, after the si hour (around 9 AM), come to the administration office. I will introduce someone to you, but whether you can become his disciple will depend on your abilities," Chen Xi said, realizing he had overlooked this detail. However, Lu Yu hadn't mentioned it either.

"Thank you, Lord Chen," Lu Yu said, trying his best to maintain his composure.

"Go on," Liu Bei said with a smile and arranged for a few guards to escort Lu Yu to the Lu residence.

"What do you think?" Chen Xi asked.

"Steady but lacking in adaptability. His talents are mediocre at best. But as long as I'm around, the Lu family won't face any upheaval. And given his youth and the hardships he's endured, he won't become a wastrel. Though he may not revive the Lu clan, under my protection, they won't decline," Liu Bei said, shaking his head. He still couldn't see any particular brilliance in Lu Yu.

"Tomorrow, I'll take him to meet Jia Wenhe. Tonight, I'll make sure he receives some materials about Wenhe. Given his talent and my recommendation, passing Wenhe's test shouldn't be difficult. It will all depend on how seriously he takes it. By tomorrow, you should see what I mean, Lord Xuande," Chen Xi said with a smile.

"That might not be easy. Of course, if he can become Wenhe's disciple, that would be ideal. But Wenhe... I've noticed that he lacks motivation. He only moves when prodded, and if I don't push him, he

does nothing. He has little interest in power or family matters. I even tried to arrange a marriage for his daughter, but that went nowhere," Liu Bei said, helplessly shaking his head.

Liu Bei had a deep understanding of his subordinates by now. Chen Xi usually didn't do much work himself, preferring to assign tasks to others. If Lu Su couldn't finish everything, Chen Xi would step in to help, but mostly to streamline processes and then delegate the simplified tasks.

Lu Su, on the other hand, was the most diligent, taking on any task and ensuring everything was completed, even when others weren't around.

Guo Jia was lazy, usually only handling intelligence and strategic planning, rarely involving himself in administration unless specifically asked.

Li You, as a secretary, was meticulous and responsible but seldom took initiative. His main job was answering Liu Bei's questions.

Jia Xu, unless given specific tasks, spent his time drinking tea and snacking. When he first arrived from Chang'an, he was thin and haggard, but now he had grown quite plump.

Liu Ye was capable of handling any task but tended to drift off into his own thoughts, sometimes for half a day. Liu Bei often suspected Liu Ye was feigning absent-mindedness.

Sometimes, Liu Bei felt that both Li You and Jia Xu were deliberately avoiding certain matters. Unless absolutely necessary, they wouldn't involve themselves in things, as if they were intentionally staying out of the way.

"Zijia has a good chance of passing. Anyway, you'll see tomorrow. These are minor matters. Now that I'm back in Mount Tai, it's time to move on to the second step of my plan," Chen Xi said with a confident smile. Ever since the Battle of Hulao Pass, he had been working towards this moment.

Chapter 520: Some Things Were Predestined (1)

While Chen Xi and Liu Bei were enjoying food and drinks, Fan Jian had already returned with a group of girls. However, due to Liu Bei's presence, she merely greeted them briefly before leading the others into the inner courtyard.

"Zichuan, I won't bother you any further," Liu Bei said, patting Chen Xi on the shoulder. "Just remember to come to my residence tonight."

"Of course, I won't forget," Chen Xi replied with a smile as he saw Liu Bei out of his courtyard. Watching Liu Bei's carriage travel only a few hundred meters to reach his own residence, Chen Xi turned back to find a flock of ladies behind him, led by Fan Jian. Seeing Chen Xi turn around, Fan Jian and Chen Lan bowed respectfully, saying, "Welcome home, husband."

"Enough with that," Chen Xi said with a slight smirk. "We don't need such formalities here. You and Lan'er seem to be doing well, and I'm doing fine too. That's all that matters. As for the rest of you..."

Chen Xi's expression turned cold as he addressed the others, "Mi Zhen, Zhen Mi, explain what happened to my study. Why were you burning things in my study when you had nothing better to do? Do you have a grudge against me?"

"Who has a grudge against you?!" Mi Zhen instantly reacted like a startled cat, leaping forward to defend herself. "It was an accident, and besides, I only burned a tiny bit."

Zhen Mi tried to tug at Mi Zhen's sleeve, but Mi Zhen slapped her hand away and looked at her with annoyance.

"I am Jia Yun, daughter of Jia Wenhe," Jia Xu's daughter stepped forward and spoke. "This incident is also partly my fault. My two younger sisters were searching for books at the time, and I failed to stop them. Please do not blame them, Lord Chen."

"Jia Wenhe's daughter?" Chen Xi sighed. Normally, he considered himself on the same level as Jia Xu, but seeing Jia Xu's daughter now left him somewhat speechless. She seemed even older than Fan Jian.

"Yes, my father is Jia Xu," Jia Yun replied with a bow.

Compared to the other women, Jia Yun's appearance was quite ordinary. Mi Zhen and Zhen Mi were still young, but both had excellent temperaments and looks. As for the second Miss Cai, although she didn't possess the same scholarly and intellectual aura as her sister, she certainly wasn't an airhead and had a

lively charm. Fan Jian had developed a graceful and dignified presence over time, while Chen Lan maintained a delicate and gentle beauty, each with their own merits. Only Jia Yun appeared plain in comparison.

"Forget it, I didn't intend to argue with this girl in the first place. She used to be so well-behaved when she was a lady-in-waiting, but ever since Zizhong let her out... hmph!" Chen Xi glared at Mi Zhen and huffed.

"Hmph, who needs your forgiveness? It was just some books that got burned; I'll replace them!" Mi Zhen pouted. She didn't like owing anyone favors, but Chen Xi's teasing had brought out her usual defiance.

"Miss Mi, you shouldn't say such things carelessly. If it weren't for Zizhong's sake, I wouldn't let you off so easily for playing with fire in my study. Now, go find someone to marry already; you're driving me crazy," Chen Xi said, waving her off. Although he found her mischievousness endearing at times, she could be quite troublesome.

"Marry whom?" As soon as Chen Xi pushed her aside, Mi Zhen bounced back in front of him with enthusiasm, completely devoid of the usual shyness of a young lady. Instead, she was eager, like a child excited about a new toy.

Mi Zhen's response nearly choked Chen Xi. In the past, she would at least blush and hide, but now she was so brazen.

Before Chen Xi could respond, Mi Zhen had already started counting on her fingers, "If it's about marriage, in all of Mount Tai, the only suitable ones are the son of Advisor Jia, the son of General Guan, and you!"

"You're going to be the death of me," Chen Xi muttered helplessly. "Jian'er, who taught her this? Last year, when she was serving Lord Xuande as a lady-in-waiting, she was so well-behaved. How did she turn into this?"

"Zhen'er is just a little... well..." Fan Jian fidgeted with her fingers, unsure of how to explain.

After spending time with Mi Zhen, Fan Jian realized that Mi Zhen had always had this personality. In the past, she had been constrained by her family's circumstances. But now that things had settled down, Mi Zhen no longer felt the need to pretend to be a good girl. Previously, she had been mindful of her behavior in public, but now, everyone around her knew her true nature, so there was no need to put on a facade.

As Chen Xi sighed, Mi Zhen had already tallied up the eligible young men in Mount Tai. "What do you think about me marrying Zhuge Kongming?"

"I am already married," came a voice from Zhuge Liang's courtyard, instantly dashing Mi Zhen's hopes.

"Then, what about Fa Xiaozhi? He's pretty good too," Mi Zhen muttered.

"He also has a wife," Zhuge Liang, despite his disagreements with Fa Zheng, didn't want to see him suffer, so he spoke up again.

"Hmph, can you stop talking? It's not like I don't know!" Mi Zhen grumbled, then dreamily added, "Actually, I think General Zhao is quite good." She finished with a smile, her eyes narrowing into crescents as she looked at Chen Xi.

Chen Xi exchanged a glance with Fan Jian, who sighed. It was clear what Mi Zhen was thinking. "Sure, sure, General Zhao is indeed impressive—handsome, skilled in martial arts, and well-versed in governance. He's a man of both literary and military talents. I'll make sure to tell him."

"That would make me the happiest," Mi Zhen giggled, though she seemed to remember something troubling. "But what should I call him when I see my brother?"

"If I were Zizhong, I wouldn't acknowledge you as my sister. You're not even married yet, and you're already making fun of your brother," Chen Xi said helplessly. "Miss Mi, what are you trying to accomplish?"

"Miss Cai said that if a woman has the chance, she should seize her own marriage. And Miss Cai is the smartest among us, so I think she's right. That's why I'm determining my own fate," Mi Zhen said solemnly, her earlier excitement and frivolity gone.

"I'm beginning to regret entrusting you all to Cai Zhaoji. Second Miss Cai, do you think your sister is right?" Chen Xi asked, turning to the second Miss Cai.

"My sister only recently realized this truth," she replied with a chuckle, covering her mouth. "When I asked her to run away with me to escape marriage, she refused. She even read *The Lessons for Women* over and over, but in the end, it didn't help."

Chen Xi looked into her eyes, noticing the faint sadness hidden behind her sharp words. Cai Yan, despite her exceptional talents, had reached a point where no one could marry her. Her status, knowledge, and position made it harder for her to find a match. Sometimes, the second Miss Cai wanted to tell her sister to just find someone she liked and get married.

But Cai Yan was Cai Yan, and her sister was just her sister. If it weren't for the loss of their father and their family's decline, Cai Yan wouldn't be so indulgent with her rebellious sister, let alone consider her advice.