

Mythical 581

Chapter 581: A Different Kind of "Don't Underestimate the Poor Young Man..."

"I'm not that stupid either!" Qu Qi pointed to his head. "The northern Hu tribes... the wool dispute we orchestrated has already caused rifts among the Xiongnu and Xianbei tribes. Adding this into the mix..." Qu Qi picked up a ball of cotton, his eyes glinting coldly. He clearly harbored no goodwill towards the Hu people.

"Stop!" Chen Xi interrupted, suddenly realizing that Qu Qi seemed to have a deep-seated grudge against the Hu people. Weren't most noble families inclined to manipulate and educate the Hu? Why was Qu Qi's attitude more akin to Gongsun Zan's?

"Huff..." Qu Qi exhaled deeply. "I'm losing control a bit." A grim smile crept onto his face.

"Hey, hey, don't scare me," Chen Xi said, observing Qu Qi's unusual expression. The current Qu Qi seemed vastly different from the arrogant and self-assured man he usually was. What was going on?

"I'm losing control... haha." Qu Qi's smile twisted with a hint of menace. "The Hu people left too deep an impression on me during my childhood... Haha, if you ever plan to eradicate them and need help, I can assist. The Qu family has some hidden treasures from the Mohist school, and I'd gladly contribute them all if it means wiping out the Hu."

Chen Xi was taken aback. If Qu Qi mentioned Mohist texts, it wasn't just a few books—it was likely the core of the Mohist teachings.

"The Qu family has been collecting Mohist texts since I was nine years old. Do you know why I was in Chang'an?" Qu Qi continued, almost to himself. "The Dongguan collection is said to hold all the books of the world, but there isn't a single Mohist text there. Do you know why? Because my family took them all. Whether it's mechanisms or ingenious devices, the Qu family has it all."

"I acknowledge the achievements of Confucianism, but if you look back at the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the only school of thought with the strength to rival a nation was the Mohist school," Qu Qi said nonchalantly, expressing a sentiment that could easily be construed as treasonous. Chen Xi merely sat and listened, intrigued and not interrupting. This was something he found fascinating.

"My family has restored much of the Mohist technology. I don't have your strategic acumen to benefit the world, nor can I rally the lords to sweep across the frontier. I can only take the most straightforward path: enrich the people and strengthen the nation, then push them to expand beyond our borders. It's only a matter of time," Qu Qi sighed. The Qu family had a long history, but producing a genius wasn't something that could be guaranteed. Qu Qi knew he couldn't reach that level.

Chen Xi smiled wryly. This was truly fate at play.

"So, what has your family managed to create?" Chen Xi asked curiously.

"Apart from farming tools, the main military equipment we've developed is the Qin crossbow," Qu Qi replied, his eyes flashing with a chilling light. The Qin crossbow had once decimated the Donghu and Xiongnu cavalry, making them look like helpless dogs.

"I..." Chen Xi was at a loss for words. Considering history, there wasn't much more he could say. He now suspected that the Qu family might have unearthed their ancestral treasures when they founded their state in Shu.

"Fine, I'll do my best. But let me be clear—I don't believe that the only good Hu is a dead Hu. My goal is assimilation. Of course, we'll need some devastating weapons. There will be battles, no doubt. The Qin crossbow, with its ability to pierce armor at 300 paces, is a game-changer against regular cavalry, even heavy cavalry," Chen Xi said with a wry smile. These ancient noble families were not to be underestimated.

"My family will fully support Lord Xuande and open all our resources to you," Qu Qi said solemnly, revealing that part of his reason for contacting Chen Xi was to express this commitment.

"We only need the Mohist texts and your craftsmen. Your family just needs to handle your own affairs as usual," Chen Xi replied, offering Qu Qi a very generous deal.

"You underestimate my family. We also have maps from the ancient Xiangli family detailing the mineral deposits across Jingchu—iron, copper, and stone mines," Qu Qi boasted.

The Qu family never lacked money because they controlled a copper mine. In this era, private minting was encouraged as long as the copper content and weight of the coins were correct. The state actually preferred it since copper smelting technology at the time meant a loss of 30% in value during minting.

"Your family has that kind of information?" Chen Xi asked, intrigued.

"Every millennia-old family has a secret to surviving and rising again, beyond their scholarly knowledge. It's their treasure troves that allow them to quickly amass wealth," Qu Qi explained solemnly. By handing over these secrets, the Qu family was fully committing to Liu Bei. If they lost even with such backing, the Qu family would be doomed.

In truth, the elder generation of the Qu family had been reluctant to part with this information. However, Qu Qi was determined, and the family already controlled a small copper mine that could sustain them for centuries. Many of the other mines were beyond their reach without state backing, and extracting them would draw too much attention.

"A millennia-old family's foundation... Alright, I believe you," Chen Xi said helplessly. Just look at the Yang family now. Despite being persecuted by Cao Cao, losing Yang Xiu, and being reduced to trembling in fear, they still regained their position as a top family by the time of the Northern Zhou Dynasty.

"I have one request. When we campaign against the Hu people, take me along. Also, if General Gongsun can be saved, please do so. He and I are of the same mind—only dead Hu are good Hu!" The coldness in Qu Qi's eyes made Chen Xi feel a chill.

"Alright, it's a deal. I want all your family's technology and craftsmen!" Chen Xi agreed, finding Qu Qi's request reasonable.

As Chen Xi left Qu Qi's residence, he shook his head. It seemed Qu Qi harbored a deep-seated hostility toward the Hu people, and his goal of enriching the nation had always included plans to eradicate them—something Chen Xi found hard to accept.

Still, Chen Xi mused, if the old Shan Yu had known that burning Ganquan Palace and leaving such a lasting impression on Emperor Wu would lead to a relentless campaign that would push the Xiongnu into the abyss of history, he might have choked on his own blood. This was, in a way, a version of "Don't underestimate the poor young man..."

Chapter 582: The Unchanging and the Changing

Zhao Yun, who was training cavalry on the plains of Xuzhou, had no idea that he, the highest commander of the Xuzhou defense zone, was about to be transferred to Yanzhou. He continued to train his cavalry, having fully mastered all the tactics of the White Horse Volunteers. The only task left was to integrate his military talent into the White Horse Volunteers.

"Shoot!" Zhao Yun commanded as he led his cavalry in a rapid, crisscross maneuver. Shadows merged into one, and then, in a coordinated motion, all the cavalymen nocked arrows and shot as their horses leaped.

"Thud, thud, thud!" The rain of arrows landed perfectly within the large circle Zhao Yun had drawn, and the White Horse Volunteers continued their unceasing barrage.

"Report, General! Su Shuang and Zhang Shiping request an audience," a scout announced as Zhao Yun prepared to activate his military talent for further training.

"Zhangming, take command of the troops. I need to attend to some matters. Lead them in regular exercises and practice your formations as well," Zhao Yun instructed Xue Shao.

"Yes, sir!" Xue Shao saluted.

Zhao Yun had great respect for Xue Shao, a former centurion of the White Horse Volunteers. Now, capable officers like Xue Shao who could train the White Horse Volunteers were scarce, and those who could add new dimensions to their training were even rarer.

Glancing at his cavalry from afar, Zhao Yun sighed. Although their combat abilities were no less than before, they no longer possessed the pure white majesty of the past. The pristine appearance that had once made them stand out was gone.

It wasn't easy to find good horses in the Central Plains, let alone uniform colors. Even powerful figures like Dong Zhuo and Yuan Shao didn't bother with such extravagance. The only person obsessed with uniform colors was probably the eccentric Gongsun Zan.

Zhao Yun thought to himself. After the defeats at Longkou and Jieqiao, and losing most of Youzhou to Ju Yi, Gongsun Zan was left defending Yubeiping. His personality had grown more eccentric, and the heroic and bold spirit he once had was hard to find.

However, Zhao Yun was relieved that no matter how much Gongsun Zan had changed, his attitude toward the Hu people remained the same. He still loathed them, continued to fight them, and had not withdrawn the Youzhou cavalry and infantry that defended against the Xianbei and Wuhuan.

Back when Gongsun Zan contended with Yuan Shao for control of the north, his strength came from his military might. Beyond the White Horse Volunteers, he commanded a large force of border troops!

Gongsun Zan was a staunch nationalist, which is why, even when he had the chance to turn the tide, he refused to recall his border troops. In his heart, losing a battle or even dying was acceptable, but allowing Han territory to fall into the hands of the Hu was not. Though he wasn't loyal to the Han dynasty, he was loyal to the Chinese people—a pride he would never relinquish.

Because of this, unbeknownst to most, Gongsun Zan recalled Tian Yu, a man he didn't particularly like but respected for his ability and integrity, and gave him a mission: to defend the northern frontier for twenty years without getting involved in any wars in the Central Plains.

After Tian Yu accepted the mission, Gongsun Zan handed over all the military authority for the northern defense, including 13,000 Youzhou cavalry and over 30,000 border infantry. This transfer took place without anyone else knowing.

These cavalry and infantry were scattered across the region. In peacetime, they farmed the land, but whenever the northern Hu tribes invaded, they would take the initiative to strike back under Tian Yu's command. This was Gongsun Zan's second line of defense, after the now-destroyed White Horse Volunteers.

After taking command, Tian Yu swore to Gongsun Zan that he would defend the northern frontier for the next twenty years. With that, Gongsun Zan's last worry was put to rest, and he had nothing more to fear.

Gongsun Zan may have had strong likes and dislikes, but he knew who to place in the right positions. Although he didn't like Tian Yu, he knew that if anyone could defend Youzhou after his death, it would

be Tian Yu. After all, Gongsun Zan wasn't completely ignorant of power dynamics—once Yuan Shao secured victory, he would need to appease the Youzhou nobility, and Tian Yu, who had both ability and Gongsun Zan's disfavor, would surely be chosen for such a role.

Gongsun Zan trusted his judgment, and indeed, in a previous life, Tian Yu proved to be exactly what Gongsun Zan had envisioned. Tian Yu guarded the northern frontier for decades, refraining from involvement in the internal strife of the Central Plains. During Yuan Shao's reign, during Cao Cao's reign, and even during Cao Pi's reign, Tian Yu fought the Hu tribes—Xianbei, Wuhuan, and Xiongnu—defending Youzhou and Bingzhou until his death. He rarely left the northern frontier.

Zhao Yun was unaware of these details, but he believed that Gongsun Zan would never forsake his pride.

"General Zhao." Just as Zhao Yun stepped out of the military camp, he saw Su Shuang and Zhang Shiping approaching, covered in dust from travel.

"It's been a long time, gentlemen," Zhao Yun greeted them with a salute. Regardless of their status, since they were serving Liu Bei, Zhao Yun treated them with respect.

"General Zhao, we've come from Shu Commandery, traveling by ship to Taishan and then overland, so we thought we'd stop by to see you. We also purchased some warhorses in Liangzhou and have brought them to you," Zhang Shiping said wearily. This business trip involved buying horses in Liangzhou, transporting them by water from Shu, and passing through Jingzhou and Yuzhou—quite the journey.

"Thank you both. How is the price of horses now?" Zhao Yun asked gratefully. With both Jizhou and Bingzhou restricting horse exports and Gongsun Zan unable to spare any horses for others, the supply lines depended on the connections of families like the Zhen and Mi families, as well as horse traders like Zhang Shiping and Su Shuang.

"The price of horses in Liangzhou has reached 60,000 coins, but fortunately, we've been trading with liquor, so it cost us about 20,000 coins in the end. The real challenge is transportation," Zhang Shiping said helplessly. Liangzhou had no shortage of horses, but getting hold of them was another matter. This trip had nearly gone awry—after all, Liangzhou wasn't familiar territory for Zhang Shiping. However, they succeeded, and with more trips, things should get easier.

"I also did some business with the Nanman and acquired some exotic treasures. Would you like to take a look, General Zhao?" Su Shuang said with a smile.

Before Zhao Yun could refuse, Su Shuang had his men bring forth a giant elephant and a lion, both of which left Zhao Yun astonished. Both animals possessed a strong internal energy and looked incredibly fierce—truly remarkable!

"Don't be surprised, General Zhao. There's one more creature, though it remains untamed. Please come and see for yourself!" Su Shuang said with a smug grin.

Chapter 583: Zhao Yun's Strength

Zhao Yun glanced at the elephant and lion. Indeed, they were fierce beasts, but their internal energy was only at the level of refining Qi into Gang, so they didn't surprise him much. After all, he had already killed several crocodiles with similar internal energy along the Yangtze River. However, when he looked at the Curly Red Hare in front of him, his attitude became much more cautious.

The Curly Red Hare snorted at Zhao Yun, its hooves twitching slightly. Compared to humans, animals have much sharper instincts. The moment the Red Hare saw Zhao Yun, it immediately recognized the immense danger he posed. The horse, which had been lazily munching on its feed, instantly became alert and stopped eating.

"What a fine horse," Zhao Yun remarked with admiration. However, beyond the horse itself, he was more interested in the small jade-like bead hanging from the Red Hare's neck.

Reaching out to pat the horse's neck, Zhao Yun could sense that this horse's internal energy had reached the level of a detached internal energy practitioner. This made it the fourth horse of such a caliber that he knew of. In terms of sheer internal energy, this horse was even more powerful than his own Night Illumination Jade Lion, second only to Lu Bu's Red Hare. As for the horse his senior brother had received from their master, it was probably on par with his Jade Lion, though it likely lacked the same potential for growth.

The Curly Red Hare didn't resist Zhao Yun's touch; rather, it was wary of him. Unlike the Night Illumination Jade Lion or Lu Bu's Red Hare, which possessed greater intelligence, the Curly Red Hare had only recently awakened its awareness, making it less intelligent. This lack of intelligence was likely the reason Su Shuang and Zhang Shiping had managed to bring it back.

"General Zhao, your presence is truly commanding. This horse has been stubbornly refusing to let us touch it throughout the journey. One of our servants tried to mount it and was nearly killed," Su Shuang said, seizing the moment to flatter Zhao Yun, hoping that he might successfully tame the horse.

"It is indeed a fine horse," Zhao Yun nodded, though he regretted that he already had a more suitable steed in the Night Illumination Jade Lion. This horse's only advantage was its superior strength.

"Then please, accept it as a gift, General. Such a fine horse would be wasted on us. A steed like this belongs on the battlefield," Su Shuang and Zhang Shiping offered the horse to Zhao Yun without hesitation.

"It is a fine horse, and perhaps only three others in the world could surpass it. But I cannot accept it. My Jade Lion has been with me for a long time, and we work well together. This horse would be better suited for another general," Zhao Yun declined, though his eyes remained fixed on the jade-like bead around the horse's neck, sensing a different kind of power within it—the residual power of a divine stone core.

"General, you jest. We can't bring this horse back with us easily. If it decides to leave, we couldn't stop it. If someone else takes it, we'd regret it deeply. Why not let you keep it for now? If you find another suitable general, you can pass it on," Su Shuang replied with a wry smile. For them, the horse was more of a burden than a blessing.

Zhao Yun thought it over and realized that Su Shuang's words made sense. He agreed to take care of the horse on their behalf.

Seeing Zhao Yun's agreement, Su Shuang and Zhang Shiping exchanged relieved glances. The elephant and lion were manageable—they had been tamed by King Mulu and could be commanded by the southern barbarians. But the horse was a problem. Although it had been traded for, it was uncontrollable, doing as it pleased. If it decided to leave, Su Shuang couldn't accept losing such a valuable horse.

Thus, they had decided to offer the Curly Red Hare as a gift to Liu Bei's trusted generals. After all, giving it to Liu Bei himself would likely result in rejection. They chose to seek out a warrior like Zhao Yun, who was renowned for his handsome appearance, affable nature, exceptional martial skills, and good

character. They were confident that Zhao Yun, even if he didn't keep the horse, would mention their names when gifting it to someone else, ensuring they wouldn't lose out.

"Thank you both," Zhao Yun said, cupping his hands in thanks. He patted the Curly Red Hare's mane, brushing it gently. The horse, sensing Zhao Yun's strength, wisely nudged closer, recognizing that this was someone it shouldn't antagonize.

"Report! General, a letter from Taishan," a messenger arrived, handing Zhao Yun a letter.

Zhao Yun patted the horse's neck again, and the Curly Red Hare sensibly moved aside to continue munching on Su Shuang's feed.

"It seems we'll be returning to Taishan together," Zhao Yun said with a smile as he folded the letter. The letter from Chen Xi had clearly outlined the current situation.

Zhao Yun thought to himself.

Zhao Yun reflected on his past foolishness. When he was young, due to health issues, he had trained in flexible internal energy. Later, before leaving the mountains, his master had transferred his rigid internal energy to him. In a moment of recklessness, Zhao Yun used that energy to shatter his own flexible internal energy, causing it to collapse and condense into a core.

That event had been a life-or-death struggle for Zhao Yun. If his master, Tong Yuan, hadn't given him a fragment of a divine stone core and used its power to forge his internal energy into a core, Zhao Yun would have perished.

This incident was why Zhao Yun's internal energy possessed both rigid and flexible characteristics, and why his internal energy could shift between the two. However, the cost was that whenever his internal energy reached the peak of detachment, it would collapse back into the core, forcing him to start over.

Fortunately, each time his energy fell to the initial stage of detachment and then rose back to its peak, his strength would increase.

According to Tong Yuan, if Zhao Yun ever fully harnessed the power of that core, his strength would undergo a massive leap.

Of course, Tong Yuan also believed that if Zhao Yun ever fully activated that core, it would trigger an explosion, giving him the power of roughly ten peak detached internal energy masters, but at the cost of his life.

Chapter 584: Preparing for Battle Again

This was why Zhao Yun could sense the presence of the Divine Stone Core. After all, a fragment of the Divine Stone Core was sealed within his own internal energy core. Reflecting on this, Zhao Yun suspected that Lu Bu must have accidentally consumed a Divine Stone Core fragment; otherwise, there was no way he could be so powerful.

Zhao Yun understood his own situation well. In his previous six attempts at rebuilding his internal energy, the first three times, his internal energy had not reached perfection, and the energy stored within collapsed, forcing him to start over.

During the fourth and fifth attempts, he reached the pinnacle of internal energy detachment, but he still couldn't withstand the pressure from the core, and he had to rebuild his energy again. The sixth time was after the great battle at Hulao Pass, where he gained significant insights and reached the extreme limit of internal energy detachment at Taishan, which then triggered another rebuilding.

Overall, during his sixth rebuilding, his strength was undoubtedly top-tier at that time. However, when facing Lu Bu, Zhao Yun could only say one thing: Lu Bu was a monster, truly a monster!

Even at the extreme limit of internal energy detachment, Zhao Yun estimated that Lu Bu could easily take on three opponents at once. Such strength was utterly abnormal. Zhao Yun even doubted whether he could defeat Lu Bu if he fully mastered his own power. That guy was simply on a monstrous level!

With Zhao Yun's current strength, he estimated that once he completed his seventh rebuilding and fully mastered his powers, he would possess the strength of about three to four peak-level internal energy detachment experts. But when facing Lu Bu on his Red Hare, Zhao Yun still felt immense pressure.

Every warrior has their own obsession with being the best. Zhao Yun, too, wanted to try and claim the title of number one. However, for all the warriors in the world, if they couldn't achieve that rank

themselves, the only person they would acknowledge as deserving it was Lu Bu. Even someone like Ma Chao, from the remote and impoverished region of Xiliang, knew how terrifying Lu Bu was!

Zhao Yun took a deep breath. Lu Bu's existence gave all warriors a goal to strive towards, but defeating Lu Bu also became their wildest dream—though, in reality, it was just a dream.

Zhao Yun led the Curly Red Hare away and placed it in the stable with his Night Illumination Jade Lion. He patted both horses, signaling for them to get along, then filled their trough with ample feed before turning and leaving.

While Zhao Yun was present, both the Night Illumination Jade Lion and the Curly Red Hare refrained from causing trouble. However, once Zhao Yun left, the two horses immediately clashed. Both were dominant horses, and neither could stand the sight of the other. How dare another horse eat from its feed trough?

A loud "thud" echoed, and Zhao Yun casually covered his ears. Glancing back at the camp, he saw a flash of white light shooting out from the stable, followed by a streak of red flame-like energy chasing after it. The two horses, moving at lightning speed, disappeared over the horizon, only to return just as quickly.

"Let them be. They've been cooped up in the stable, eating and sleeping, sleeping and eating. They're turning into pigs. A little competition with another fine horse might do them some good," Zhao Yun muttered to himself as he watched the two horses, now mere streaks of light, racing madly across the sky. Although his Night Illumination Jade Lion was a prized steed, it clearly wasn't fond of exercise. Being challenged by the Curly Red Hare might just sharpen it up.

After handing over military duties to Chen Dao, Zhao Yun led three thousand White Horse Cavalry and over two thousand infantry towards Taishan. This time, his Night Illumination Jade Lion seemed much more spirited, likely because the Curly Red Hare's presence posed a serious threat to its status as the top horse.

"General Zhao, are you sure this is okay?" Su Shuang and Zhang Shiping, traveling with Zhao Yun back to Taishan, were concerned as they watched the Curly Red Hare and Night Illumination Jade Lion occasionally return with injuries.

"These kinds of wounds will heal in a day. Only through constant challenges will a fine horse become even more exceptional," Zhao Yun shook his head. He had been closely monitoring the two horses, and while they occasionally fought, most of the time, they were simply racing each other.

Meanwhile, in the Linyi area of Yanzhou, Sun Qian had already sent many engineers ahead to conduct on-site surveys. The Fan family had also dispatched some of their members to accompany the engineers. For such a large project, consulting feng shui experts was essential, so the Fan family's professional geomancers went along to assess the site's suitability for building a city.

While Liu Bei's side was preparing for a counterattack, a familiar scene of strategists arguing broke out on Yuan Shao's side. However, unlike before, this time even the usually decisive Yuan Shao wasn't sure which side to support.

Rewind to the time when Ju Yi was defeated, Yan Liang's troops were annihilated, Zhang He was routed, and Tian Feng and Xun Chen barely managed to hold off Lu Bu. After Ju Yi and Yan Liang regrouped with their scattered forces, they realized they were no longer capable of further battle. Helpless, they retreated to Wei Commandery, and a group of them returned to Ye City to beg forgiveness from Yuan Shao.

As Chen Gong had predicted, Yuan Shao didn't hold them accountable for the defeat. Instead, he comforted them, reassuring them that his vast resources could easily replenish the lost troops with more training. While he regretted the loss of the Xian Deng soldiers, his wealth and manpower were abundant, so he was willing to overlook the defeat.

After fully understanding the situation, Yuan Shao became deeply covetous of Lu Bu's Formation Breaker troops, Lu Bu himself, and Chen Gong. It was this desire that led Yuan Shao to consider recruiting Lu Bu and his men. But now, the question was how to go about it—should they fight first or negotiate directly? And what should be done about Lu Bu?

As for the latter question, Yuan Shao made a quick decision: Lu Bu had done the Yuan family a favor, so if Lu Bu was willing to defect, Yuan Shao would gladly accept him. Yuan Shao believed that his magnanimity would be enough to win Lu Bu over.

Regarding how to recruit him, Yuan Shao's strategists initially had differing opinions. But after further discussion, they reached the same conclusion as Liu Bei's side: negotiations were necessary, but they had to fight first. Only by proving their strength would they be able to negotiate favorable terms.

Thus, the matter of Lu Bu was settled. However, what really troubled Yuan Shao was the secret message Xu You received from Li You, informing them that Liu Bei had moved Zhao Yun from Xuzhou and was likely appointing Zhang Fei as the governor of Xiaopei. More importantly, no additional troops were being sent to Xuzhou, which meant that Xuzhou only had one army stationed there!

Chapter 585: The Double Ten Achievement: Marquis and Prime Minister

"What are you doing, Wenru?" Jia Xu curiously asked as he leaned over to see what Li You was writing and drawing on the paper.

"I'm adding some fuel to Yuan Benchu's fire, trying to push him into borrowing Yuan Shu's hand to attack Xuzhou, and then we'll counterattack Yuzhou, completely severing the relationship between Yuan Shu and Yuan Shao!" Li You replied nonchalantly.

"It won't be easy. Xu You and Ju Gongyu won't act so hastily. It's not yet time for them to prepare for a decisive battle," Chen Xi chimed in as he also leaned over to look at the Xuzhou defense map that Li You was drawing.

"Sometimes, when you're riding a tiger, it's hard to get off. Even if they don't want to act, the Xuzhou aristocratic families have shown signs of revival after I left. Once Zilong leaves, those aristocrats in Xuzhou will surely be eager to try something. Why not give them an opportunity and let them collude with Yuan Shao?" Li You's face showed a chilling smile.

Zhuge Liang, watching the three scheming individuals across from him, sighed helplessly. He reached out to pull the plate of dried fruit closer, ate a couple of pieces, then downed a large gulp of an extremely strong, bitter tea. His face scrunched up instantly, but after finishing the cup, he felt fully awake and returned to his work.

"Zhuge Liang, you really don't need to work so hard. Going to bed at the hour of Xu (around 7-9 PM) and coming to work at Mao (around 5-7 AM) is enough. There's no need to burn the midnight oil. You and Zijiang seem to be competing to see who goes home later," Chen Xi remarked with a helpless expression as he watched Zhuge Liang gulp down his tea. He felt it was entirely unnecessary to work so tirelessly.

While Chen Xi had instilled a laid-back atmosphere in the administration hall, some members of the staff were trying to curb this lazy trend. With Zhuge Liang joining the ranks, the number of diligent workers had significantly increased, making even Chen Xi feel embarrassed to arrive too late.

Sure enough, as you influence the world, the world influences you in return.

"Oh, what's that?" Chen Xi curiously looked at the diagram in Li You's hand. It seemed to resemble a formation. "A military formation?"

"Yes. Zijian said he lost to Xian Deng and asked me to help him get revenge, so I'm working on it," Li You sighed. Hua Xiong had proposed using Xiliang cavalry to spearhead an attack on Xian Deng, and Li You agreed. It made sense to recover from a fall where one had stumbled.

"I'm currently devising a new military formation tailored for Zijian, but it's quite challenging. Wenhe is assisting me," Li You explained as he noticed Lu Su also leaning in.

"Devising a new military formation?" Lu Su couldn't help but smirk. While others were busy learning, Li You was directly innovating. Truly impressive.

"Yes, Wenru has been pushed to the brink and is now determined to create a custom formation for Zijian. I've been roped in as well—couldn't refuse after all the favors he's done for me," Jia Xu added with a helpless expression.

"Do you need any help, Master Li?" Zhuge Liang stood up and asked.

"Just focus on your own work. Don't go looking for trouble," Li Ru glared at Zhuge Liang, who had a tendency to pile more work on himself, much like Lu Su. They were both the type to create tasks where none existed.

Zhuce Liang wisely remained silent, while Jia Xu, resigned to his fate, continued helping Li Ru with the military formation calculations. He knew that the massive losses among the Xiliang soldiers had been a heavy blow to Li Ru, and even if Hua Xiong hadn't sought revenge, Li Ru would have found a way to teach Ju Yi a lesson.

"Boyan!" Fa Zheng suddenly burst into Lu Xun's room with a loud shout.

"Prime Minister Fa, what brings you here?" Lu Xun asked, somewhat resigned. After spending some time with Fa Zheng, he finally understood why Zhuge Liang had that look when he left.

By now, Lu Xun had stopped resisting. He simply wasn't a match for Fa Zheng. The age gap was just too significant. Any thoughts of "baptism by fire" seemed like distant dreams.

"Pack your things. We're heading back to Taishan," Fa Zheng said with a yawn. He'd been in a good mood lately since the new city of Linzi in Qi was finally fully planned, and having the great scholar Wang Lie overseeing it provided a balance in Qi's political landscape, even though Wang Lie refused to take office.

"Back to Taishan?" Lu Xun was momentarily stunned, but then overjoyed. He could finally return to follow his master and, of course, catch up with Zhuge Liang. As for competing with Zhuge Liang, he had long since given up. The more he learned, the more he realized how terrifying Zhuge Liang was—an unfathomable depth of knowledge.

"Yes, back to Taishan. I've finished planning Linzi in Qi, and the rest can be handled by others. My presence is no longer needed. I should return now," Fa Zheng said calmly. "When we get back to Taishan, you'll meet many people, some of whom even I find challenging."

"Oh, I understand," Lu Xun replied calmly. He now knew his place. Although praised by Chen Xi, Zhuge Liang, and Fa Zheng, he realized he still had a long way to go.

"Don't worry. When we return to Taishan, there will be many people interested in you. And of course, you'll also encounter that guy from the Lu family. I've heard he's learning from Master Wenhe," Fa Zheng said, clearly showing respect when mentioning Jia Xu. Fa Zheng had great admiration for Jia Xu.

"Hmph, I won't lose to him," Lu Xun said confidently.

"Don't underestimate him. If Zichuan handed him over to Master Wenhe, he must have exceptional talent. And the fact that Master Wenhe is willing to teach him only further proves that," Fa Zheng warned seriously. "Don't take him lightly."

"I won't, but I still believe I won't lose to him," Lu Xun replied proudly.

"That's good. After we return, the intensity of our skirmishes with the north will increase, and the campaign to unify the north will hinge on this. A chaotic world is the best time for people like us to achieve great deeds. If you miss this opportunity, it will be hard to achieve the rank of marquis and prime minister before the age of twenty," Fa Zheng said, rarely revealing his ambition. His goal was to become a marquis by the age of twenty-three.

"Marquis and prime minister by the age of twenty?" Lu Xun was stunned. How many people in history had achieved that? And how many could say it with such calm confidence as Fa Zheng did?

"Does that surprise you?" Fa Zheng asked calmly. Lu Xun nodded. Who wouldn't be shocked by the prospect of becoming a marquis and prime minister by the age of twenty?

"Why be surprised? We already have a marquis in our ranks who wasn't even eighteen yet!" Fa Zheng replied matter-of-factly. "I'm confident that I can earn enough merit on the battlefield to be granted a marquisate. If I miss this opportunity, who knows when the next one will come?"

Lu Xun was at a loss for words. Fa Zheng's confidence was overwhelming. He couldn't comprehend what drove Fa Zheng to make such bold claims, but if Fa Zheng truly achieved the rank of marquis at twenty, he would undoubtedly be a symbol of early success.

"Pack your things. We'll be leaving soon," Fa Zheng said casually, waving his hand before heading outside.

Chapter 586: The Huang Family's Move

Fa Zheng gazed towards the northwest, silently retracting his gaze. The most painful experiences often lead to the greatest awakenings.

In Jingzhou, Jian Yong once again appeared at Lumen, but this time, he wasn't there to see Xu Shu. Instead, he was there to arrange a marriage for Zhuge Liang, bringing a large amount of betrothal gifts with the intention of relocating the entire Huang family to Taishan.

"Why is it so noisy outside?" Huang Chengyan, who was chatting with Zhuge Xuan, suddenly asked upon hearing the festive sound of suona horns outside.

"It seems someone has come to pick up a bride," an old servant of the Huang family confirmed after checking outside.

"Oh, in that case, don't disturb them. Go ahead and send a gift on my behalf," Huang Chengyan said, thinking it was a neighbor's wedding. He was slightly displeased that he hadn't received an invitation himself.

"Master, Master, something's wrong—no, no, something great has happened!" A servant rushed in, unsure whether to be alarmed or excited.

"Why are you so flustered?" Huang Chengyan glanced at the servant with disapproval, then turned to Zhuge Xuan with a smile. "My apologies, Yinyi. It seems the household rules are not strict enough here at the Huang family. Please forgive the disturbance." However, despite his words, he didn't punish the servant.

"Master, the bridal procession for Zhuge Kongming has arrived to marry the young lady," the servant replied, bowing his head, aware of his earlier rashness.

"What?" Huang Chengyan was taken aback and turned to Zhuge Xuan, then smiled. "Yinyi, do you think our family's marriage arrangement with the Zhuge family still stands?"

Zhuce Xuan stroked his beard and laughed. "How could it not? This is a joyous occasion. Since Liang is here to marry your daughter, I, as his uncle, should also present a betrothal gift."

Saying this, Zhuge Xuan took out a jade pendant engraved with the character "Ge," which symbolized the head of the Zhuge family, and handed it to Huang Chengyan. Huang Chengyan was momentarily surprised but quickly understood and accepted the pendant that had been passed down from the Spring and Autumn period.

Although Zhuge Xuan had been infuriated by Zhuge Liang and Zhuge Jin some time ago, he calmed down later and didn't hold a grudge. After all, no matter what, Zhuge Jin and Zhuge Liang were still legitimate

members of the Zhuge family. After coming to Jingzhou, Zhuge Xuan, having thought things through, interpreted their actions as the eaglet finding its own sky.

"Hahaha, that's great!" Huang Chengyan laughed. "I thought you might not have let go of the past, but it seems I underestimated your magnanimity. Come, since you're also Kongming's elder, let's go see who's come to escort the bride."

"I'm not that petty. Although they indeed angered me back then, time has softened my stance. I can't control the path they choose, so why not let them walk it themselves?" Zhuge Xuan laughed and agreed, "Let's go and see."

Jian Yong, dressed in a dark scholar's robe, stood at the gate of the Huang family residence, waiting. He had already sent in the necessary documents, and now it was just a matter of receiving the family's response.

"Open the main gates and let the bridal procession enter," Huang Chengyan instructed after he and Zhuge Xuan changed into formal attire and appeared in the front courtyard. He then ordered the servants to open the main gate, which was rarely used, to welcome the bridal party.

"Phew, that's a relief," Jian Yong exhaled deeply. He had been worried that the Huang family might reject the marriage, especially considering Zhuge Liang's estrangement from the Zhuge family. But seeing the Huang family open the main gates for the bridal party reassured him greatly.

"Jian Xianhe of Lord Xuande's retinue pays respects to Elder Huang," Jian Yong greeted Huang Chengyan with a bow. He had met Huang Chengyan during his previous visit to Xiangyang and knew that the old man was easygoing.

"Hahaha, Xianhe, no need for formalities. It's been years since we last met. Come, let me introduce you to Zhuge Kongming's uncle, Zhuge Yinyi," Huang Chengyan said with a laugh as he stroked his beard.

"Greetings, Master Zhuge," Jian Yong said, feeling a slight jolt in his heart when he heard that this was Zhuge Xuan. But recalling the earlier reception, he quickly calmed down and bowed deeply to Zhuge Xuan.

"How is Kongming doing in Taishan?" Huang Chengyan glanced at Zhuge Xuan, knowing what he wanted to ask, so he took the initiative to speak.

"Kongming serves as the Chief Clerk under the General Who Conquers the East and is performing excellently. Even the General holds him in high regard," Jian Yong said succinctly.

"Chief Clerk under the General Who Conquers the East? Isn't that a bit too early?" Zhuge Xuan frowned. In his view, Zhuge Liang should only enter officialdom after turning twenty. Only then, after gaining more experience, would he be less prone to mistakes.

"My lord Liu Xuande and his subordinates all have high regard for Kongming, which is why he was appointed as Chief Clerk under the General Who Conquers the East. Consider that when Fa Xiazhi was slightly older than Kongming, he was already Prime Minister of Qi. Kongming himself feels confident in shouldering this responsibility," Jian Yong replied confidently.

"Very well, very well," Huang Chengyan said with a smile. "Young people should forge their own paths. In Taishan, the younger generation of civil officials is never in short supply. Seven or eight out of ten hold high positions, and some have even become marquises and ministers before reaching the age of twenty. If they don't try, how will they ever know?"

Zhuce Xuan had nothing more to say. Even he had to admit that Huang Chengyan's words made sense.

"Thank you, Elder Huang, for your understanding," Jian Yong replied calmly.

"Since you're here to arrange the marriage, I won't stand in your way. It's only natural for young men and women to marry," Huang Chengyan said after studying Jian Yong. "But I suppose you didn't come all this way just for that, did you?"

"The main reason is indeed to arrange the marriage. However, Kongming also asked me to come because he's concerned about the tense situation in Jingzhou. He worries that the Huang family might be in danger, so he ordered me to escort the entire Huang family to safety," Jian Yong explained calmly.

In reality, this was just a pretext. The real reason was that if they didn't marry Huang Yueying now, once Liu Bei clashed with Yuan Shu, it would be much harder for Zhuge Liang to wed Huang Yueying, who had been betrothed to him for years.

"That's reasonable. With Jingzhou now under Yuan Gonglu's rule, I don't feel entirely safe either. Moving to Taishan seems like a good idea," Huang Chengyan agreed calmly. He then turned to Zhuge Xuan and asked, "Yinyi, do you plan to move back to Xuzhou or perhaps to Taishan?"

"I think not," Zhuge Xuan replied after some thought. Although he had let go of the past, he didn't want to return to Xuzhou. Besides, the Zhuge family had another genius, and he intended to focus on nurturing him.

"Very well then," Huang Chengyan said after a glance at Zhuge Xuan. He had also met the young Zhuge Dan and couldn't help but acknowledge that the Zhuge family was indeed blessed, producing three exceptional talents in a single generation.

Chapter 587: The Talents of Jingzhou

Jian Yong never imagined that his mission this time would be completed so easily. All his rushing with Wu Anguo, galloping horses to Jingzhou, going straight to the Mi family's trading point, presenting Mi Zhu's letter of introduction, changing into formal attire, and carrying the betrothal gifts—all of it turned out to be unnecessary, as things were settled so simply.

Jian Yong had been eager to relocate the entire Huang family, but the process of moving such a large household wasn't something that could be accomplished in a day or two. However, during this time, Huang Chengyan didn't sit idle. He visited friends left and right, and successfully convinced Sima Hui to join them on the journey to Taishan.

Huang Chengyan also managed to bring along Pang Degong's top disciple, Jiang Wan. Compared to the fourteen or fifteen-year-old Zhuge Liang, Jiang Wan was already twenty, but he was the type to mature later. Only now was he beginning to show his brilliance. Across the land, fewer than five people, aside from Chen Xi the time traveler, could recognize Jiang Wan's potential.

"Shangzhang, where is your second disciple? How about letting me have him too?" Huang Chengyan, realizing he couldn't persuade Pang Degong or move the entire Lumen Academy, began targeting Pang Degong's disciples. His first choice, Pang Tong, had already left home, his second choice, Jiang Wan, was

already in his grasp, and now his sights were set on the eleven or twelve-year-old Fei Yi, whom Pang Degong had just taken in a few months prior.

Huang Chengyan didn't think much of the reserved young Fei Yi, but he had great faith in Pang Degong's judgment. After all, when everyone else thought Pang Tong was a fool, Pang Degong saw his potential. The outcome? Needless to say, there were fewer than a handful of people in the world more capable than Pang Tong.

When Xu Shu first arrived, everyone saw him as a rogue, yet Pang Degong befriended him. Within just a few years, Xu Shu had already become a rising star that Huang Chengyan had to acknowledge.

Then there was Jiang Wan—now Huang Chengyan had to admit that Jiang Wan was truly a late bloomer. From a seemingly dull stone, he was gradually revealing his brilliance, showing the potential to become a polished gem.

Because of all this, although Huang Chengyan couldn't yet see what made Fei Yi special, he didn't underestimate him either. On the contrary, he planned to bring Fei Yi along and teach him well. While Huang Chengyan might not be the best judge of talent, his teaching skills were undeniable.

"No, I can't let you have my second disciple. If Gongyan willingly follows you, I have no objections, and I agree that he's ready for the challenge. But my second disciple is too young. He could be easily ruined," Pang Degong firmly refused Huang Chengyan's request.

"How about this? You come to Taishan as well. Haven't you always wanted to enlighten the common people? Taishan is the perfect place for that!" Huang Chengyan suggested, puzzled as to why Pang Degong, whose ideals aligned so closely with Liu Bei's, was so determined to stay in Jingzhou. In Pang Degong's response, Huang Chengyan sensed a hint of resolute determination.

"I would love to, but I can't go. Instead, I ask you to observe Taishan on my behalf. Use your eyes to record Liu Xuande's words and deeds, and the changes among the people of Taishan. As for me, I won't go," Pang Degong said with a bitter smile. He had no intention of leaving Jingzhou and would remain at Lumen until death. The reason for this, however, he chose not to disclose.

Despite Huang Chengyan's repeated attempts to persuade him, Pang Degong remained unwavering in his decision not to leave Lumen.

Meanwhile, Jian Yong had already met with Xu Shu. When Jian Yong saw Xu Shu again, it was clear that Xu Shu had become more refined since their last encounter. A newfound wisdom shone in his eyes.

"Yuan Zhi, aren't you going to Taishan?" Jian Yong asked as he sat across from Xu Shu. "The position of Chief Clerk under the General Who Conquers the East is still open for you."

"Not yet. I feel like I'm close to returning, but the time isn't right," Xu Shu sighed. He could already sense the presence of his spiritual talent but had yet to awaken it. He was only a small step away from joining the ranks of the most elite strategists.

"What are you waiting for?" Jian Yong asked, puzzled.

"I'm waiting for my spiritual talent to awaken. I can sense it, but I'm not quite there yet. Once I awaken my spiritual talent, I will be ready to fulfill the promise I made," Xu Shu said with a gentle smile.

Jian Yong inhaled sharply. He had never imagined that Xu Shu could be so formidable. Liu Bei had spoken of Xu Shu before, and a few years ago, Xu Shu was still considered a rogue. Now, he had reached such a level of proficiency.

"But I'm still a bit short, and my knowledge of military tactics, strategy, formations, and leadership could use more work," Xu Shu admitted with a touch of frustration. He simply hadn't had enough time. If he had a few more years, he wouldn't feel so rushed.

"Then wait a little longer. Don't force the awakening of your spiritual talent. When Kongming forced his awakening, it led to serious side effects. There's no need to rush. Even if the northern conflict begins, it won't be over quickly. You still have plenty of time," Jian Yong advised, worried that Xu Shu might become impatient and make the same mistake Zhuge Liang had.

Jian Yong didn't doubt Xu Shu's words. After all, he had occasionally felt the same kind of pressure around Xu Shu that he had experienced from Jia Xu and others who had awakened their spiritual talents. It was a sign—a sign that Xu Shu's mind had reached the brink of a breakthrough, ready to ascend to the next level of spiritual power.

"I agree," Xu Shu said calmly. He wasn't in a hurry. He understood the situation in Taishan and Jizhou very well. The conflict between Yuan Shao and Liu Bei wouldn't be resolved in a year or two. Both sides were too powerful for a few losses to be decisive. Before the war reached its climax, Xu Shu estimated he still had two years to study, and he believed that would be enough.

"Then stay in Jingzhou for now. Do you need me to assign some soldiers to protect you?" Jian Yong offered.

"No need. Lumen Academy is very safe, especially now that Liao Gongyuan is the governor of Xiangyang," Xu Shu said with a sigh. He saw things even more clearly than Jian Yong. Xiangyang had already fallen into Sun Ce's hands, and Pang Tong, Pang Degong's nephew, was serving under Sun Ce and held a high position.

Jian Yong didn't linger with Xu Shu, not wanting to bring any trouble to him. Right now, Xu Shu was relatively unknown at Lumen Academy. Drawing attention to him could lead to significant problems.

For this reason, Jian Yong couldn't understand why Xu Shu didn't want to go to Taishan to study. Compared to other places, Taishan undoubtedly had the most extensive collection of books in the land. With Xu Shu's status, he would have access to an incredibly high level of knowledge, far beyond what Jingzhou could offer.

Returning to the residence that Huang Chengyan had prepared for him and Wu Anguo, Jian Yong decided not to venture out again. He made himself a cup of tea and pulled out a copy of Strategies of the Warring States to read. Before he could finish the first chapter, he heard a soft knock at the door, causing him to pause.

"Who's there?" Jian Yong asked as he put down his book and stood up.

Chapter 588: Meeting Yi Ji Again

"Xianhe, long time no see. Do you still recognize my voice?" A hearty laugh came from outside the door. Jian Yong was momentarily stunned, then suddenly remembered who it was. He burst into laughter and quickly opened the door.

Standing at the door was a refined scholar, dressed in simple yet elegant attire, with a gentle smile on his face that exuded the demeanor of a cultured man.

"Ji Bo, it's been a long time!" Jian Yong greeted Yi Ji warmly and invited him inside. He then peeked outside to check the surroundings and signaled Wu Anguo to keep an eye out before carefully closing the door.

"Phew, it wasn't easy getting here," Yi Ji exhaled deeply. After all, he was nominally a subordinate of Liu Biao, and coming to Xiangyang, now under Yuan Shu's control, was quite a risky endeavor.

"What brings you here so suddenly? This is Xiangyang, after all. If you get caught, no one will be able to save you. Liu Jingsheng's current strength is not enough to retake northern Jingzhou, let alone defend southern Jingzhou," Jian Yong whispered, his voice filled with concern, as if afraid someone might overhear. In reality, with Wu Anguo standing guard outside, there was no need to worry.

"Eh?" Yi Ji was a bit surprised. During their last meeting at the Taishan Alliance, he had gotten to know Jian Yong quite well, recognizing him as a diplomatic talent rather than someone with strategic insight.

"Well, ahem, after spending some time in Taishan, I've been exposed to a lot. I have a bit more understanding of the current state of the world," Jian Yong admitted with a lighthearted chuckle, not hiding his growth and newfound awareness.

"Taishan truly is a remarkable place," Yi Ji remarked with a sigh. "I believe I'll have the chance to visit again."

A glimmer of light flashed in Jian Yong's eyes, but it quickly faded, unnoticed by anyone.

"I requested this trip from my lord. What you mentioned before was indeed true—southern Jingzhou is vast and sparsely populated, with dangerous beasts, swarms of insects, and rampant barbarian raids that consume much of my lord's resources. Although Kuai Yue has made plans, it's ultimately a losing battle," Yi Ji candidly revealed the dire situation of Liu Biao.

"Is it really that bad?" Jian Yong was taken aback. He had overheard Jia Xu and Li You discussing Liu Biao's predicament—how even if Liu Biao displayed brilliance as a ruler, and even if Kuai Yue were a genius strategist, and Huang Zhong an unparalleled warrior, it would still be impossible to reclaim northern Jingzhou.

Liao Li, Gu Yong, and Yu Fan, though not as skilled as Kuai Yue, along with Jiang Qin, Wen Pin, and Dong Xi, who were not as valiant as Huang Zhong, had ten times the resources and ten times the grain supplies. There was no need to fight; they could simply watch as Huang Zhong and Kuai Yue depleted their provisions and were forced to retreat.

With such overwhelming advantages in troops and supplies, Wen Pin and Gu Yong could easily wear down their opponents without much effort.

"The population in southern Jingzhou is too small, and with a mixed population of Han Chinese and barbarians, the people are fierce and unruly, refusing to submit to authority. The Wuxi barbarians frequently clash with my lord's forces. Although they lack proper military tactics, their advantage lies in the terrain, and Kuai Yue has struggled to find an effective solution," Yi Ji said helplessly. The Wuxi barbarians were indeed formidable in battle.

In truth, the so-called Wuxi barbarians and the Shan Yue were essentially Han Chinese who lived in the mountains, isolated in remote areas with difficult living conditions. Their fierce nature made them formidable in mountain warfare.

As for Huang Zhong, while his strength was undeniable, there was only so much he could do. The Wuxi barbarians had learned to either surrender or fight to the death when facing him. After suffering several defeats, they had become more cautious, but they still occupied vast territories. So far, Kuai Yue had been unable to devise a strategy to fully subdue them, leaving the situation to drag on.

"Enough of that. I came here for two reasons. The first is that Huang Hansheng's son needs to be taken to Taishan for medical treatment," Yi Ji said, looking at Jian Yong with a clear gaze that surprised him.

Seeing Jian Yong's startled expression, Yi Ji continued, "It was my suggestion to General Huang, and although he initially refused, his love for his son eventually made him agree. However, once Huang Xu leaves, there will be no more Huang Xu in southern Jingzhou."

Jian Yong took a deep breath, deeply impressed by Yi Ji's persuasive abilities. That someone as heroic as Huang Zhong could be convinced by Yi Ji was remarkable, though it was clear that Huang Xu's dire condition played a significant role. Yi Ji's ability to achieve this spoke volumes.

"Yong here thanks Ji Bo on behalf of the General Who Conquers the East," Jian Yong said with a deep bow. He had long suspected that Yi Ji harbored a strong affinity for Liu Bei, though his loyalty to Liu Biao had prevented him from showing it. Yet now, Yi Ji had delivered such a valuable gift.

"Please, Xianhe, take care. Whether it succeeds or not will depend on the young man's fate," Yi Ji said gravely, making his intentions clear. "But do not bear too much burden. Even if it doesn't work out, I have a sixty percent chance of ensuring success."

Jian Yong nodded, though he placed great faith in Hua Tuo's medical skills, so he wasn't overly worried. Yi Ji's words, however, did alleviate some of the pressure. Jian Yong hadn't expected Yi Ji to have such connections with Huang Zhong.

"Rest assured, with Hua Tuo in Taishan, as long as he's still breathing, there's hope," Jian Yong said confidently. Yi Ji nodded in agreement. If it weren't for Hua Tuo's widespread reputation, Huang Zhong would never have agreed to the plan. After all, even though Zhang Zhongjing couldn't cure Huang Xu, he had managed to keep him alive.

"Now for the second matter, which is the main reason I came here. Strategist Kuai asked me to inquire when Taishan plans to move against Yuzhou," Yi Ji asked with a serious expression.

"I don't know," Jian Yong replied, shaking his head. While Chen Xi and Jia Xu often talked about attacking Yuzhou, it was clear they hadn't taken any actual steps yet. Instead, their focus remained on the ongoing conflict with Yanzhou.

"My lord Liu Jingsheng hopes to form an alliance with the General Who Conquers the East to restore the Han dynasty and drive away the shadow cast by the Yuan family over the empire," Yi Ji continued. "Both of our lords are related to the Han imperial family, with no conflicts between them. In fact, Jingsheng has long admired Xuande."

"I can't make that decision, but I can relay the message to my lord Liu Xuande. Whether it happens or not, you'll receive an answer. However, I think the likelihood of agreeing is quite high," Jian Yong mused after some thought, deciding it was best not to outright refuse.

"Thank you, Xianhe," Yi Ji said with a nod. Unlike Jian Yong, who was purely a diplomat, Yi Ji had his own understanding of the broader situation. While Liu Biao's position in southern Jingzhou wasn't strong, the

Yangtze River provided a natural defense. Offensive capabilities might be lacking, but defending against attacks was well within their means.

Leaving southern Jingzhou and moving into the open plains of northern Jingzhou, however, would be a different story. For this reason, Yi Ji suspected that Kuai Yue's plans might harbor some ulterior motives. Yet, even after Kuai Yue had spelled out the risks, Liu Biao had still chosen that path, leaving Yi Ji with little room to dissuade him.

Chapter 589: Forging the Soul of the Nation

"By the way, there are some things I've speculated on, but I can't guarantee their accuracy. I'll tell you, and you can take the message back," Yi Ji said after conveying Liu Biao's orders, shifting to the matter he truly wanted to discuss.

"Let's hear it," Jian Yong responded with curiosity.

"The Cai family may be leaning towards Yuan Gonglu," Yi Ji said uncertainly. "Ever since they took refuge in southern Jingzhou to avoid disaster, and after my lord had to dismantle and significantly reduce the navy due to a lack of funds, the relationship between the Cai family and my lord has become strained."

"Hmm..." Jian Yong nodded but refrained from making any comments. To him, this situation seemed quite normal and nothing worth dwelling on.

For a large family like the Cai clan, it was natural for them to seek their own interests when they felt deprived. In Jian Yong's experience, this was not uncommon. Even Chen Xi, who led the reforms, had to promise future benefits to persuade many families, and still, some short-sighted ones opposed his changes. So, seeing the Cai family act this way didn't surprise him at all.

"You misunderstand my point. What I'm saying is that the Cai family needs to be closely monitored. If they truly align themselves with Yuan Gonglu, then my lord's position will become precarious. Should the Cai family turn against us and coordinate with external forces, southern Jingzhou would be indefensible," Yi Ji said with a grave expression.

"You should probably have the Kuai family or Liu Jingzhou handle this. We can't do much from here," Jian Yong replied, still somewhat puzzled by Yi Ji's request.

Yi Ji sighed inwardly. There were things he couldn't openly discuss. Although his loyalty leaned towards Liu Bei, as long as Liu Biao was alive, he remained Liu Biao's minister and could not betray him. He would continue to fulfill his duties within those constraints, but beyond that, he wouldn't act against his principles.

This sense of duty made it difficult for Yi Ji to directly ask Jian Yong to inform the people in Taishan to prepare for a potential collapse of Liu Biao's forces and to be ready to rescue key figures like Kuai Yue, Kuai Liang, Huang Zhong, Xiang Lang, and Han Song.

The current situation was that Liu Biao's resources were too thin, and he was hampered by internal strife and insufficient supplies, not by a lack of capable subordinates. If Liu Biao's forces crumbled, these talents would have no choice but to scatter.

In Yi Ji's view, it was better for Liu Bei to prepare in advance. Even though he had already sent Huang Xu to Taishan, there was a high likelihood that Huang Zhong would follow if Huang Xu survived—or even if he didn't, provided Huang Zhong remained unaware of his son's fate. Once in Taishan, Huang Zhong would undoubtedly serve Liu Bei.

Yi Ji had also been in contact with the Kuai family, and if the worst happened, he believed he could convince them to join Liu Bei. However, southern Jingzhou was not just about Kuai Liang, Kuai Yue, and Huang Zhong; there were many other figures involved.

Yi Ji alone couldn't get all these people to safety. Only Liu Bei himself could gather them all, and these talents, though currently shackled by the limitations of southern Jingzhou, had significant potential. If Liu Biao fell and these talents were absorbed by Sun Ce, it would be a great loss.

"Forget it. Just relay my exact words to Chen Zichuan and the others. Some things are better left unsaid," Yi Ji sighed. He was still bound by his duties to Liu Biao and had to continue serving him.

"I will," Jian Yong replied with a smile, not taking Yi Ji's words too seriously. "Ji Bo, can you tell me about the virtuous ministers and talented scholars in Jingzhou? I've got some free time, and I'd like to visit them."

Yi Ji nodded and began introducing Jian Yong to the hidden talents and renowned scholars across Jingzhou. Although Jingzhou wasn't short on second-tier and nearly first-tier strategists, the truly top-tier talents had either been recruited elsewhere or remained unknown.

While Jian Yong was busy digging for talent in Jingzhou, Zhuge Liang was anxiously awaiting the arrival of his bride. He had long been destined to marry Huang Yueying, so he wasn't worried that she would refuse.

Truthfully, beneath Zhuge Liang's gentle and refined demeanor lay a will capable of taking bold action when necessary, especially after being influenced by the new ideas imparted by Chen Xi. Zhuge Liang had developed new perspectives on many things.

"Kongming, you've been rather distracted lately," Lu Su observed as he glanced at Zhuge Liang.

"When one's heart is preoccupied, it's hard to stay fully focused," Zhuge Liang calmly admitted, not denying Lu Su's observation.

"Hahaha, just wait a little longer. With An Guo accompanying them, there's no need to worry. However, this means our lord now has no personal bodyguard," Lu Su chuckled, trying to comfort him, but he couldn't help but express some concern.

"Don't underestimate the fifty City Guard soldiers. These soldiers are battle-hardened elites, each having fought in at least fifteen battles. They're now fully equipped with well-forged large shields, plate armor, strong crossbows, and suitable melee weapons," Man Chong interjected, feeling defensive. Compared to the Tiger Guards, he had more faith in the City Guard, a unit that had emerged from the crucible of battle and possessed a military soul.

"By the way, this is the only unit we have with a military soul, right? How did that come about?" Lu Su asked, raising his head.

"I don't know. It just appeared out of nowhere. I never trained for it, yet somehow we have it. Unfortunately, it can't leave this area; otherwise, I'd love to take it out to teach Lu Bu a lesson," Man Chong replied with a proud smirk. Although he wasn't purely a strategist, he was a competent commander, even if his martial prowess was lacking.

The military soul was an embodiment of elevated willpower, and the aura enveloping Fenggao City was actually a manifestation of Liu Bei's innate ability. It reflected the deep-seated loyalty of his followers and their unwavering recognition of him and Taishan. When this recognition intensified to fervor, mingled with honor and sacrifice, it became the military soul.

However, this spontaneously generated military soul was rooted in a fervent belief in Liu Bei and the Taishan government, mixed with the ever-present incense offerings at the Spirit Hall, a place that symbolized the fallen and the sacrifices made. This was why this powerful unit could not leave the area; their soul was bound to this place.

Neither Liu Bei nor Chen Xi fully understood the reasons behind this phenomenon. They continued to strive towards their lofty goals, unaware that as they worked, more and more people began to recognize and support the Taishan government. Through their efforts, education, propaganda, and rituals, they were, unknowingly, forging a soul—a national spirit.

Chapter 590: Unavoidable

Liu Bei was at home taking care of Lady Gan. Over time, his household had expanded with several concubines, but the only one who truly held a special place in his heart was Lady Gan, who had been with him since before Taishan was established, back when he was not yet a ruler of the land. As for Lady Zhang, aside from their shared interests, there were other factors at play between them.

Chen Xi was at home caring for Chen Lan. Meanwhile, Mi Zhen and the other girls had been taken under Cai Yan's wing. This was the first time Chen Xi had seen Cai Yan in his own home. Her calm and indifferent demeanor, tinged with a hint of sorrow, stirred complex emotions within him. It was this combination of beauty and talent that would leave a lasting legacy through the ages, both in reputation and in grace.

However, it was clear that Cai Yan had little interest in Chen Xi, and he, in turn, had no deep intentions towards her. They merely exchanged greetings, and Cai Yan stated that she would strictly discipline Mi Zhen. Afterward, she left with the group of girls, leaving behind an atmosphere of coldness that seemed to dim the entire courtyard.

"Without those girls around, it does feel a bit empty," Chen Xi remarked as he glanced around the now quiet courtyard. He sighed, realizing that he, too, had fallen into the common pitfalls of men. Even though he knew there would be little future interaction with them, men were naturally drawn to beauty.

"My lord, there's no need to be so concerned. Although Sister Zhen can be impulsive, ever since I became pregnant, she's been careful not to cause trouble in the courtyard," Chen Lan said with a smile. "She's a bit reckless, but she hasn't done anything truly wrong." She added this last part, as if worried about something.

"I'd rather invite Zhen Mi than have her around," Chen Xi said firmly, recalling Mi Zhen's previous antics. "I let it slide last time because she was young, but I didn't hold her accountable for burning down my study." Although Chen Xi's study wasn't filled with precious books like in other families, it still wasn't a place to be treated lightly. He had allowed the girls in for other reasons at that time.

"Thank you, my lord," Chen Lan said, smiling as she covered her mouth. "Sister Zhen did go too far that time, but I'm grateful that you didn't report it to the Mi family."

"This is the only time it will happen," Chen Xi said, lightly tapping Chen Lan on the forehead. "It's mostly because once it's reported, it becomes difficult to handle. Our family isn't like others. Even though I've inherited a third of the Chen family estate, we still live independently. I've only given them some conveniences."

Chen Lan nodded in agreement, understanding the unspoken complexities. She remained quietly nestled in the blankets, listening to Chen Xi speak.

"The reason I live separately is that when many people are gathered, there must be rules. These rules apply not just to the Chen family, but to me as well. Even as the head of the family, I must adhere to certain rules," Chen Xi sighed. "Being part of a powerful family has its advantages, but it also imposes many restrictions."

Chen Lan nodded in acknowledgment. Having lived with Chen Xi for over a decade, she was well aware of the strict regulations within the Chen family. Living together with the rest of the family had its perks, but it also brought many complications. To protect Chen Lan and the others, Chen Xi ultimately chose to live separately.

"Here, I can act as I please, and many things can be overlooked. But if the whole family were gathered, many matters would become much more complicated," Chen Xi sighed again. "High-status families are good, but they also impose many limitations."

Chen Lan nodded, though not fully understanding, and Chen Xi gently patted her. "If you're tired, go to sleep. Don't force yourself—it's not good for your health."

"Mm," Chen Lan murmured softly and obediently turned to her side to rest.

There were many things Chen Xi hadn't mentioned. If he had truly lived with the rest of the Chen family, Mi Zhen and the others probably wouldn't have visited as often, and even if they did, they would have had to maintain the strict demeanor of noblewomen, adhering to proper etiquette in every action.

This was why Mi Zhen and the others often lingered at Chen Xi's home, as well as at Jia Xu's and Cai Yan's. These were the few places where they could truly relax. Although Cai Yan valued propriety, she overlooked their minor transgressions during breaks, as she, too, had suffered under the same strict codes.

As for Jia Xu's home, it was similar to Chen Xi's—rules were minimal, and there was even a peer their age, Jia Yun.

If Chen Xi had lived with the rest of the Chen family, his study would have likely been off-limits to anyone but the illiterate maids who cleaned it, his pregnant wife, Chen Lan, and any esteemed guests he invited. Anyone else who entered would have been subject to family discipline.

The ancestral hall and study were sacred places in any family. Aside from the head wife, who could enter under specific circumstances, and guests with permission, these places were forbidden. External women, especially, were not allowed.

In such a situation, even if Chen Xi's study didn't hold anything valuable, Mi Zhen's intrusion would have required an explanation from the Mi family. If she had burned the study, the Mi family would have had to turn her over for punishment, no matter how much Mi Zhu doted on her. And once things reached that point, Chen Xi would have had no choice but to act harshly. It was better to pretend nothing had happened.

Seeing that Chen Lan had fallen asleep, Chen Xi quietly left the room, instructing the maids before heading outside.

Glancing at Fan Jian, who was busy sewing baby clothes, Chen Xi shook his head. Since Chen Lan became pregnant, Fan Jian had changed significantly. She rarely visited Cai Yan anymore, nor did she invite other girls over. Most of her time was spent reading or sewing baby clothes.

"Jian'er, I'm planning to go to Linyi. Stay home and take good care of Lan'er," Chen Xi sighed, expressing a thought he had struggled to convey to Chen Lan, hoping Fan Jian would pass the message along.

Fan Jian froze, the robe she had been happily stitching falling into the basket unnoticed.

"Another campaign?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, another campaign," Chen Xi replied calmly. Since Taishan's rise, he and Chen Lan, along with Fan Jian, had seen more time apart than together.

"Can't you stay?" Fan Jian asked, her eyes reddening slightly.

"I'm afraid I can't," Chen Xi sighed. "I've chosen this path, and I have to keep walking it. I'm sorry for leaving you and Lan'er behind."

"Will you be back before the New Year?" Fan Jian hesitated before asking.

"I'll do my best," Chen Xi sighed. He had decided to take on this responsibility, knowing that he was the only one qualified to do so in Taishan.