

Mythical 591

Chapter 591: With This as the Heart

Before Zhao Yun returned, Chen Xi paid a visit to Liu Bei's residence. For the first time, he felt a sense of war-weariness. His once-calm heart now stirred with thoughts of his wife and child. Not everyone could be as emotionless as Le Yang or Yi Ya, those legendary figures who put their duty above all else.

When Chen Xi entered Liu Bei's home, there was no resistance or questioning. Xu Chu had gone to the front lines, Wu Anguo had gone to Jingzhou, and the only ones left to protect Liu Bei were the city management troops and the Xu family warriors led by Xu Chu's brother, Xu Ding. However, these two forces ignored Chen Xi's actions entirely.

"Zichuan?" Liu Bei looked at Chen Xi, who had suddenly appeared in his home, with some confusion. Beside him, Lady Zhang and Lady Gan also showed no signs of retreating.

"Xuande Gong, can we send Zijing instead?" Chen Xi asked after thinking for a moment.

"No," Liu Bei shook his head. "Zijing has the right status, but he lacks experience in leading troops. You know Yun Chang's temperament—Zijing would be more of a burden than help in the field."

Chen Xi frowned. Everyone knew Guan Yu's personality. While Guan Yu respected Lu Su in administrative matters, it would be difficult to get him to follow Lu Su's lead in military matters without Lu Su proving himself three to five times.

"But I have a compromise," Liu Bei said after glancing at Lady Gan and thinking it over.

"A compromise?" Chen Xi asked, puzzled.

"Zichuan, you came to ask me this because of your wife, right? We're in the same situation, so I understand. You can bring your wife with you," Liu Bei said seriously.

"No," Chen Xi refused outright. "War is chaotic, and it's too dangerous. I can't take that risk."

"Let me finish," Liu Bei waved his hand. "I understand your concerns, but I've reviewed your plans. Bringing your wife along won't be a problem. You're going to build a city, after all, and with a city to protect her and tens of thousands of troops guarding you, with Yun Chang and Zilong there as well, if it's still unsafe, then there's no place in this world that would be."

Chen Xi frowned, considering it. "Let me think about it."

"Changing commanders is impossible. We're in the same boat, so this is the only way," Liu Bei said helplessly. "You can delay the start of the campaign until the inner city is built. Fengxiao has stabilized the situation, and Yuan Benchu is also mobilizing his forces. With the three factions in play, there won't be any major developments for a while."

Chen Xi analyzed the situation. Although his military knowledge wasn't the best, he'd learned a lot since arriving in this era. He was confident in his ability to defend a city.

"Under those conditions, it might work," Chen Xi nodded. "But I'll need to move my whole household there."

Liu Bei agreed readily. "Your wife needs care, and you shouldn't favor one over the other."

Chen Xi bowed deeply to Liu Bei. "Xuande Gong, please issue the orders. I'll call for the voluntary relocation of people from Qingzhou, Taishan, and Xuzhou to Linyi. I'll also accept refugees from Bingzhou and Yanzhou, as well as the Black Mountain Yellow Turbans, to help build the new city. This place will become our stronghold for future campaigns against Jizhou and Weijun."

"Go ahead. With you overseeing it, I feel at ease. When we fight against Jizhou, Taishan is too far for reinforcements. Linyi is ideal," Liu Bei said with a smile. He was well-versed in the state of the world and knew that a multi-front strategy against Yuan Shao was necessary.

"I will do my best," Chen Xi replied earnestly. "When Liu Ziyang returns with his loyal forces, I'll have him stay in Linyi."

"That's not necessary. We don't need such formalities between us," Liu Bei said, waving his hand dismissively. "I trust myself, and I trust that I can lead all of you to the pinnacle of glory. We are aligned in our goals, so there's no need for such tokens."

"Thank you," Chen Xi said with a sigh. Liu Bei was still Liu Bei, and he himself was still the same. Neither of them had changed. The vow they had taken together, to follow the path of righteousness, still weighed heavily on Liu Bei, giving him unwavering resolve.

"Go now, and don't forget to write to me during the New Year. Don't get so caught up with your beautiful wife in Linyi that you forget about this friend who shares your ideals," Liu Bei said nonchalantly, waving Chen Xi away. Yet, the word "friend" in his last sentence left a deep impression on Chen Xi.

After Chen Xi left, Lady Zhang looked at Liu Bei, wanting to speak but hesitating. After several attempts, Liu Bei finally noticed her expression.

"You're wondering why I allowed it and didn't impose any conditions on Zichuan, right?" Liu Bei asked with a smile.

Lady Zhang didn't reply, but her curiosity was evident on her face.

"Because it's unnecessary. Zichuan and I share the same ideals; we're kindred spirits. I don't need such measures, and I refuse to doubt him. I trust him!" Liu Bei said calmly, his eyes filled with confidence. "I also trust myself. I don't make mistakes when judging people!"

Seeing the confusion in Lady Zhang's eyes, Liu Bei's confidence only grew. "It's not just Zichuan I trust. I trust all my subordinates. I believe I can lead them to greatness because the goal I pursue is grand enough to inspire them."

Lady Zhang and Lady Gan were clearly still puzzled, but Liu Bei said no more.

As Liu Bei spent more time in power, he became more imposing as a ruler. However, this was only an external change. Internally, his heart remained steadfast.

The vow he made all those years ago still weighed heavily on him, giving him unshakable resolve. He had not wavered from his original intention. He was still the Liu Bei who would sit on the ground, sharing drinks with Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Chen Xi.

Though his external circumstances had changed, his inner self remained the same. He still held onto his original kindness and righteousness. He was still Liu Xuande, who had made a great vow to heaven. He believed in the goodness of people and that by treating others with sincerity, they would respond in kind. He was determined to achieve the ancient ideal of "the benevolent are invincible," an idea that had been passed down through literature and legend, though its truth was uncertain.

"Yuan Benchu, we are destined to clash," Liu Bei said calmly, gazing northward. He had shed all doubt and was resolutely moving forward, guided by the vow he had made.

Perhaps Yuan Shao hadn't done anything wrong, and maybe the question of loyalty versus rebellion wasn't even relevant. Even Liu Bei knew that some of his own actions could be considered disloyal. But at this point, he believed in only one thing: what actions would bring prosperity to the Han Dynasty, and what actions would bring wealth to the people. With this as his guiding principle, everything became clear.

Chapter 592: The Reason for Invincibility at the Same Level

Chen Xi did not tell anyone that he planned to take his wife with him. After all, it wasn't something that would sound good. Throughout history, there have been few people who gained a good reputation for bringing their family and children along during military campaigns.

In Yanzhou, after Guo Jia stabilized the situation, he stopped engaging Lu Bu directly. Instead, he started harassing Chen Gong's forces—ambushing them one day, disrupting them the next night—only killing thirty to fifty men each time. However, after some time, the overwhelming morale of Lu Bu's army was gradually worn down.

But Chen Gong was not someone who could be easily dealt with. After suffering losses to Guo Jia's tactics, he retaliated by activating his spiritual talent and successfully counter-ambushed Guo Jia twice. Eventually, both sides decided to hold back.

"This situation isn't looking good," Guo Jia muttered to himself, watching with resignation as Yuan Shao's forces camped on the opposite side of the river from them. It was clear that a certain understanding had developed between Yuan Shao's and Lu Bu's forces.

"Do you remember what Marquis Chen once said? Only the weak need alliances. The path of a hegemon can never be shared; it must be faced alone," Chen Zhi said with some helplessness. He wasn't foolish—he could clearly see the growing communication between Lu Bu and Yuan Shao's forces. However, this was not the time to back down.

"You're right. Although it may seem a bit underhanded, war is ultimately about doing whatever benefits you the most. It seems the enemy commanders have been given significant decision-making authority," Guo Jia shrugged. Even if Yuan Shao and Lu Bu were to unite, Guo Jia wasn't worried about being defeated. He might not win outright, but stalling them wouldn't be difficult.

As it turned out, Guo Jia's assessment was mostly accurate. Tian Feng had returned with over twenty thousand troops, but this time the leader was Yuan Tan. However, Yuan Tan was merely a figurehead, unlike Chen Xi, who had real decision-making power. When Yuan Tan set out, Yuan Shao had explicitly told him to follow Tian Feng's orders.

In truth, Yuan Shao sent Yuan Tan primarily to give him experience and to bolster his reputation. Yuan Shao wasn't foolish enough to have Yuan Tan command in such a crucial campaign. After all, Chen Gong and Lu Bu were no novices, and neither were Guan Yu or Guo Jia. Yuan Tan certainly wasn't the kind of genius who could use such formidable opponents as stepping stones.

Originally, Yuan Shao's plan was almost identical to Liu Bei's, but upon reaching Yanzhou, Tian Feng realized that the current situation made their plan difficult to execute. So, he decisively chose to negotiate with Chen Gong. Naturally, this was reported to Yuan Shao, who, after brief consideration, granted Tian Feng full authority.

"General Yan, what impression did Lu Bu give you this time?" Tian Feng asked Yan Liang as they returned to camp after another round of negotiations with Chen Gong.

"Terrifying!" Yan Liang replied after a moment of contemplation. It had been years since he last saw Lu Bu, but in this recent meeting during the negotiations between Tian Feng and Chen Gong, Yan Liang sensed that Lu Bu had become even more formidable than before.

Lu Bu had indeed accompanied Chen Gong to the negotiations, though he showed little interest in the discussions, or anything else for that matter.

Chen Gong had mentioned that Liu Bei's side had also sent a scholar to negotiate, but Lu Bu hadn't met him. As for the details of the negotiations, Lu Bu remained completely uninformed, as he had no interest in such matters.

Lu Bu had merely glanced at Yan Liang once, deeming him unworthy of further attention. To Lu Bu, Yan Liang was on the same level as Zhang Fei—someone who might provoke a fight if encountered. However, Zhang Fei and Guan Yu, despite being of similar strength, were different. Guan Yu had the capability to perform extraordinary feats as long as he was confident enough.

That one glance was enough to make Yan Liang's heart pound with fear. Compared to when Lu Bu had fought against three opponents at once, this version of Lu Bu seemed even stronger. Yan Liang, who had only recently achieved the level of perfected Internal Qi, could clearly sense Lu Bu's terrifying power.

"Terrifying?" Tian Feng asked, puzzled. Why use the word "terrifying"? He turned to look at Yan Liang for an explanation.

Yan Liang could only smile bitterly. "Yes, terrifying. If I were to face him with all my strength, I doubt I'd last more than thirty moves before I'm utterly defeated— and that's assuming he's not riding his Red Hare and I have a chance to flee."

"Ah..." Tian Feng felt a chill run down his spine.

"That being the case, I estimate that I'm now only on par with Guan and Zhang's level of strength," Yan Liang added with a sigh. He had indeed improved significantly, but it couldn't compare to Lu Bu's even faster progress. Lu Bu was a true monster.

"Guan and Zhang, huh? Then how do you gauge Zhao Zilong's strength?" Tian Feng asked after composing himself.

"Zhao Zilong? He's not overly strong, but I can't fully assess his strength. Maybe the next time I meet him, he'll be incredibly powerful, or maybe he won't have changed much," Yan Liang replied, shaking his head.

Now that he had grown stronger, Yan Liang realized that Zhao Yun hadn't been particularly formidable during the Battle of Hulao Pass. Zhao Yun didn't have the strength to confront Lu Bu head-on. In other words, his Internal Qi was refined, his technique and speed were excellent, but his foundation wasn't solid. A warrior's ultimate strength always came down to the depth of their Internal Qi.

Yan Liang's observation wasn't incorrect. At the Battle of Hulao Pass, Zhao Yun indeed didn't possess much Internal Qi, as he had just undergone his sixth rebirth of Qi refinement and hadn't fully stabilized it yet. However, due to the mysterious nature of his Internal Qi and his superb techniques and speed, even Lu Bu had been deceived.

Of course, after the Battle of Hulao Pass, Lu Bu, with his monstrous strength, soon realized Zhao Yun's weakness. However, unlike others who might underestimate Zhao Yun, Lu Bu had a deeper understanding of his true power.

Although Lu Bu wasn't sure why Zhao Yun's Internal Qi was so meticulously refined yet so sparse, he knew there had to be another explanation—possibly involving a Godstone!

Unlike animals, who could only instinctively absorb power from a Godstone, a warrior could use it efficiently and methodically. In fact, humans could typically harness several times more power from a Godstone than an animal could.

Unfortunately, beyond his natural talent, Lu Bu's current status as invincible among his peers—regularly taking on three opponents at once—was also due to his consumption of a Godstone, specifically a Godstone core.

Having experienced it himself, Lu Bu knew better than anyone the power of the Godstone. The Godstone granted him not only immense strength but also extraordinary recovery speed. This recovery wasn't just physical; it also restored his mental fortitude and resolve. This was why Lu Bu could never be defeated in direct combat.

Chapter 593: The Return of Zhao Yun and Fa Zheng

Sun Qian looked at the geological report for the Linzi region and felt completely reassured. The area had no shortage of stone, so constructing a strong city there would be no problem at all. The main challenge left was the issue of craftsmen, but as for stonemasons and carpenters, those weren't really crucial. When you've built enough structures, the work can be broken down into simple tasks—tasks so basic that anyone could do them as long as they were directed properly.

"How's it looking? Do you think we can build the city in Linzi?" Jia Xu asked, glancing at the report in Sun Qian's hands.

"It's straightforward. We'll use local materials. I'm planning to build a road leading there as well. Once it connects to Taishan, the time needed for troop movements could be reduced from ten days to eight. We've already started up the brick kilns in the area," Sun Qian replied confidently. "By paving the roads with bricks and ensuring a solid foundation, we can speed up the transportation of supplies by several degrees."

Sun Qian was now undoubtedly the most experienced person in the country when it came to large-scale construction. Just in the past year, he had personally designed and overseen the construction of five major cities, most of which were now nearing completion. He had also designed and handed off several other projects to be built by others.

"This isn't my area of expertise. You handle it. How long will it take to establish permanent defensive structures?" Jia Xu asked, shaking his head. He didn't understand the specifics, but he had complete faith in Sun Qian's abilities when it came to city building and infrastructure. After all, Sun Qian had overseen the expansion and reconstruction of both Taishan and Qingzhou.

"Before the new year, the city will be completed. At the level of a county seat at least, but if necessary, we can upgrade it further," Sun Qian said confidently.

To be honest, construction in Linzi had already begun under Lu Bu's nose, but for now, there were only quarrying teams, brick kilns, and logging crews at work. The rest of the workers were focused on planning the site.

Sun Qian didn't underestimate Chen Gong or Lu Bu, but he was confident that as long as they didn't see any significant construction, they wouldn't figure out what was going on. Even if Chen Gong visited the site, he wouldn't realize what was being planned. This was a matter of specialized knowledge.

"Upgrade it to the level of a prefectural city," Jia Xu suggested directly.

"That would extend the construction time. Although it could still be finished before the new year, it would require us to work faster," Sun Qian responded, puzzled. "A county-level city would already be a

formidable fortress. Is there really a need for more? We're only building a permanent defensive outpost, even though it is a city."

"That location will be our forward base for the campaign against Yuan Shao, and once it's completed, it will sever the connection between Jizhou and Yanzhou. While that may not seem significant now, it will be crucial for our future attacks on Weijun," Jia Xu explained calmly. He didn't scorn Sun Qian for asking what might seem like a naive question.

"In that case, a prefectural-level city it is. But if it's going to be a forward base, we'll build it with three layers: an inner city for administration, a middle city designed like a walled fort, and an outer city strictly for military defense. We'll reinforce the foundations, strengthen and heighten the walls, but this will all need to be done step by step," Sun Qian concluded after some thought. He truly had become a master architect.

"Then I'll leave it to you. Make sure the inner city is finished before the new year," Jia Xu said with approval, nodding in agreement with Sun Qian's plan.

After learning about the strategic importance of the city, Sun Qian abandoned his original plan for a county-level city and switched to a prefectural-level design. Fortunately, he had already reserved plenty of manpower, and with the additional Black Mountain Yellow Turbans available for labor, he wasn't worried about a lack of workers.

As for managing all these people, Sun Qian knew he couldn't personally oversee tens of thousands of workers without encountering chaos. But since Chen Xi would be in command, the coordination of labor would mainly be handled by him, and in that regard, Chen Xi had plenty of experience.

Sun Qian studied the maps to pinpoint the relative positions of the opposing forces and began calculating material needs. Before long, he had reached a conclusion.

Compared to the distance from Xuzhou's Xiapi to Taishan, the distance from Taishan to Fenggao and Linzi was only one-fifth as long. And with the speed at which Zhao Yun's army could march, coupled with the transportation network Sun Qian had already established between Taishan and Xuzhou, it only took Zhao Yun a month to bring his forces over.

“Hey, is that an army on the move over there?” Fa Zheng asked, peering into the distance at a column of troops moving along a parallel road. The distance was too great to make out the banners clearly.

By this time, Lu Xun had already been thoroughly worn out by Fa Zheng’s antics. On their return to Taishan, Fa Zheng had only brought five or six guards with him, making the journey back as swiftly as possible. Along the way, Lu Xun had been on edge, constantly worrying that they might be ambushed by bandits. But fortunately, they hadn’t encountered any trouble on the road.

“I think the banner says ‘Zhao,’” Lu Xun squinted and stared for a while before replying.

“‘Zhao’? That’s General Zhao! What’s he doing back here?” Fa Zheng wondered aloud, narrowing his eyes. “Looks like we’ve returned at just the right time. If I’m not mistaken, General Guan and General Zhang might have suffered a setback against Lu Bu. Come on, let’s go over.”

“It’s convenient, sure, but they’re in the middle of a march. Is it really okay for us to go over there? Are you even that familiar with him?” Lu Xun asked, looking in the direction of Zhao Yun’s forces. The sight of the disciplined column of a hundred cavalrymen left him deeply impressed. Having grown up in the south, this was his first encounter with such elite horsemen.

“We’re very familiar,” Fa Zheng replied with a shrug. He was indeed very familiar with Liu Bei’s top generals, but among them, he was closest to Zhao Yun. The reason was simple: Zhao Yun had served as a civil official for quite a while, and Fa Zheng had had plenty of opportunities to interact with him.

Lu Xun fell silent. Even if he didn’t know exactly who Zhao Yun was or what his rank was, the fact that Zhao Yun commanded a full army, with such elite cavalry leading the way, clearly marked him as one of Liu Bei’s top generals. In Lu Xun’s mind, Fa Zheng, despite being the Chancellor of Qi, should be quite distant from such a powerful military leader.

“Let’s go over and say hello. You were worried about us getting ambushed, weren’t you? Traveling with an army should put your mind at ease,” Fa Zheng teased.

Lu Xun’s concerns were understandable, having grown up in Jiangdong, where conflicts with pirates and water bandits were common. This had made him especially cautious during the journey.

In reality, there were no significant bandits or marauders left in Taishan. Liu Bei's policies were so effective that anyone willing to work could find food and even earn a little money. There was no need to risk their lives for robbery.

"Let's just stop here," Fa Zheng ordered the driver to pull their carriage to the side of the road. It was common knowledge that an army on the move would always have the right of way, and it was even written into the law. No one would challenge them, nor would anyone try to compete for the road with a military force—it was simply asking for trouble.

Chapter 594: A Dazzling Sight?

"Hey, I see someone familiar—Qin Zhangming," Fa Zheng called out cheerfully as soon as he spotted Zhao Yun's adjutant from the roadside.

"All units, halt!" Qin Shao raised his spear and commanded the army to stop marching. Lu Xun finally breathed a sigh of relief. Although it was clear that this army was returning to Taishan and not going into battle, intercepting a military force still felt risky.

Lu Xun glanced curiously at Fa Zheng, who stood smiling beside him.

"Prime Minister Fa, please wait a moment," Qin Shao instructed one of the cavalymen beside him, then respectfully saluted Fa Zheng.

"Hmm, are you all just returning from Xuzhou?" Fa Zheng asked.

Qin Shao remained silent for a moment, glancing at Lu Xun, signaling the presence of an outsider.

"This is Zichuan's disciple," Fa Zheng explained, pointing to Lu Xun. "He's under my guidance for now, so it's fine to discuss general matters."

"Yes," Qin Shao nodded and proceeded to give Fa Zheng a brief report on the situation.

"Oh, I see. I thought Guo Fengxiao had suffered a setback, but it turns out..." Fa Zheng chuckled, making a few remarks as if he had hoped Guo Jia might encounter some minor difficulties, though that hardly seemed realistic.

Soon enough, Zhao Yun appeared at the front of the army, riding his famous Night Illumination Jade Lion. Accompanying him was the curly-haired Red Hare horse.

"Long time no see, Xiaozhi," Zhao Yun greeted with a salute.

"Indeed, it's been a while. How's Xuzhou?" Fa Zheng asked with a smile, but before Zhao Yun could answer, Fa Zheng's attention shifted. "By the way, what's the story with that horse beside you?"

"Xuzhou..." Zhao Yun furrowed his brow slightly. Unlike some generals who focused solely on military affairs, Zhao Yun had experience as a civil official and understood both governance and public sentiment. He could sense the undercurrents beneath Xuzhou's calm surface, but he wasn't inclined to discuss these matters openly. Fortunately, Fa Zheng's question about the horse gave him an easy out.

"This is the curly-haired Red Hare that Zhang Shiping and Su Shuang brought back from the southern barbarians. It's an excellent steed," Zhao Yun said, reaching out to stroke the horse's mane. The Red Hare snorted appreciatively, but the Night Illumination Jade Lion began to shake its head in agitation. Zhao Yun had to soothe both horses before they settled down.

"Impressive. I remember that your horse usually scares others away. This one must be quite powerful," Fa Zheng remarked in amazement. "By the way, this here is Zichuan's disciple, though I've been showing him the ropes lately."

"Oh, Zichuan's disciple," Zhao Yun raised an eyebrow. "Make sure you don't lead him astray. And to think, Zichuan didn't even host a proper ceremony for accepting a disciple."

"We'll hold one later. By the way, mind if I borrow that horse for a couple of days?" Fa Zheng asked with a mischievous grin.

Despite coming from a family of Confucian scholars who had shifted to military studies, Fa Zheng still valued proper etiquette.

"No way. If it were an ordinary horse, I'd give it to you, but this one..." Zhao Yun chuckled ruefully. He then patted the Red Hare's head and pointed skyward. The horse, understanding the signal, leapt into the air and began to fly.

Lu Xun's eyes nearly popped out of his head, and even Fa Zheng was stunned for a moment. After clearing his throat to mask his surprise, he remarked, "Didn't expect it to be a horse with detached inner energy. Even if you gave it to me, I wouldn't be able to ride it."

The truth was, a horse like this would be difficult for Fa Zheng to manage. Although a civil official's mental fortitude could naturally exert pressure on animals, the Red Hare was on a different level. To ride it, Fa Zheng would need to spend at least half a year taming it, and there was even a chance it could turn on him.

"Maybe I'll gift you another horse later. I know this one's tricky," Zhao Yun said with a wry smile.

"Thank you, General Zhao," Lu Xun quickly bowed in gratitude.

"No need for formalities," Zhao Yun responded, waving his hand dismissively. He then whistled, and the Red Hare swiftly descended from the sky, landing gracefully beside him.

"Mind if I trail behind your army for a bit? I'm also heading back to Taishan," Fa Zheng asked politely.

"Even if I said no, you'd probably follow anyway," Zhao Yun replied with a laugh. He was quite familiar with Fa Zheng and didn't mind exchanging some friendly banter.

"In that case, I'll stick to the rear and won't interfere with your march," Fa Zheng signaled his driver and guards to follow the army from behind.

After Fa Zheng's departure, Zhao Yun raised his spear, and the army resumed its march. He remained stationed under the command banner with his two horses. Having two exceptional steeds was certainly a source of envy, but it was also a hassle. The Night Illumination Jade Lion and the Red Hare constantly quarreled, making them difficult to manage. However, the competition between the two horses had at least slimmed down the Night Illumination Jade Lion's excess fat.

"So, you really are well-acquainted with him. I thought you were joking," Lu Xun remarked, curious.

"I'm familiar with all the civil and military officials in Taishan. You'll understand when you reach Fenggao," Fa Zheng replied with a smile.

Joking aside, Fa Zheng was indeed well-known among the officials of Taishan. In fact, he was so notorious for his antics that everyone recognized him. But now, thinking back, Fa Zheng couldn't help but cringe at his past behavior. Truly, those were the reckless days of youth when he constantly skirted the edge of disaster.

That said, despite Fa Zheng's penchant for trouble, no one could deny his abilities. During the year-end assessments, Fa Zheng always ranked among the top civil officials, even if he did look young for his age.

"Hey, Brother Zhang, long time no see!" Fa Zheng called out as he spotted Zhang Shiping after following Zhao Yun's army. He immediately waved in greeting.

Having been taught by Guo Jia and Chen Xi, Fa Zheng now understood the importance of merchants. He no longer looked down on them as he once had. In fact, his perspective had changed drastically after he realized how essential commerce was to the prosperity of Qi.

"Prime Minister Fa, you flatter me!" Zhang Shiping was initially surprised but quickly smiled. It wasn't too long ago that Fa Zheng would look down on people like him, but now he was being so courteous, which naturally lifted Zhang Shiping's spirits.

"It's nothing," Fa Zheng replied with a smile. He then glanced around, his gaze suddenly falling on a familiar figure. His cheerful expression darkened for a moment as he sighed inwardly.

Chapter 595: A Thousand Miles to Find Her Husband

Zhang Shiping, who had always navigated the bustling markets and mingled with the officials, naturally had a keen sense of observation. That brief moment of melancholy in Fa Zheng's expression made Zhang Shiping's heart tighten.

As someone who had fully aligned himself with Liu Bei, Zhang Shiping understood clearly that if any lord had a chance to unify the land and restore the Han dynasty, Liu Bei's chances were at least sixty percent. Given Liu Bei's benevolence, it was almost certain that talented ministers like Fa Zheng, who had risen to high positions at a young age, would hold power for decades to come.

With that in mind, Zhang Shiping, as a businessman, would never dare offend a rising star like Fa Zheng, whose future was bound to be bright. That moment of sadness in Fa Zheng's eyes made Zhang Shiping wonder if he had somehow made a mistake.

"Brother Zhang, don't worry about it. I just thought I saw something wrong—probably just my eyes playing tricks on me after days without seeing any women," Fa Zheng laughed, trying to brush it off.

Although Zhang Shiping's expression hardly changed, Fa Zheng, who had been trained for a long time by Guo Jia and Jia Xu, could easily read people's thoughts. Recognizing Zhang Shiping's concern, Fa Zheng put on a playful, flirtatious grin.

"Haha, it seems the Prime Minister is quite the expert," Zhang Shiping responded with a knowing smile. As long as the problem wasn't with him, he didn't care about the rest. He wouldn't take Fa Zheng's words too seriously, nor would he pretend not to have heard them. But since they were on the march, there was no time to linger; he'd address it later when they reached Taishan.

After exchanging a few more words with Zhang Shiping, Fa Zheng returned to the convoy with Lu Xun. As soon as they were back in the carriage, Fa Zheng received a whack from a cane.

"Father, please go easy on me! I can't take another hit like that," Fa Zheng said with a wry smile, glancing at Lu Xun, who was trying to suppress a laugh.

"How did I, Fa Yan, end up with a son like you?" Fa Zheng's father was fuming from his son's earlier remarks. If they hadn't been in public, Fa Zheng would have received more than just a single strike.

"Just a few days ago, I was still your good son," Fa Zheng muttered helplessly. "Once you have a grandchild, you won't bother with me anymore."

Fa Yan fell silent. There was little he could say to Fa Zheng. He had to admit that his son had far exceeded his expectations. However, Fa Zheng's occasional reckless and nonchalant behavior still made him want to give his son a good thrashing.

Meanwhile, Jiang Ying was looking at the girl in front of her, who was a year younger than her—Wang Yi. "Sister, I think I just saw my husband..."

"Then why don't you go see him?" Wang Yi retorted, rolling her eyes. "We came all this way to find him. After traveling from Liangzhou to Taishan, we've covered so much ground. Now that we're finally here and you've spotted him, why hesitate?"

Jiang Ying could only smile bitterly. She had indeed come to find Fa Zheng. Her family had planned to marry her off to the Ma family of Fufeng—yes, the same Ma family as Ma Chao's. Compared to the declining Fa family, the Ma family had been growing stronger in recent years, and the Jiang family saw marriage as a way to secure their future in Xiliang.

However, Fufeng was also the hometown of the Ban family—the family that produced Ban Gu, Ban Chao, and Ban Zhao. In other words, it was a place where girls grew up reading books and emulating Ban Zhao. Naturally, Jiang Ying was one of those well-educated women.

Despite the engagement, Jiang Ying considered herself already betrothed to Fa Zheng. Her family's decision to marry her to the Ma family was deeply unsatisfactory. After all, Fa Zheng wasn't dead. Even if he was far away in Taishan, and even if he had fallen on hard times, she believed she should still marry him. How could her family stop her from leaving? Did they have no sense of decency?

Of course, Jiang Ying's grievances went unnoticed by her family. They didn't take her protests seriously, reasoning that the distance from Xiliang to Taishan was too great, and the times were too dangerous. Thus, Jiang Ying found herself confined to her home, albeit not under strict supervision.

This situation allowed Jiang Ying to maintain some contact with the outside world. Her mother, sisters, and other female relatives supported her decision. It was a matter of regional pride—after all, the women in this area were known for their strong wills.

Her mother, aunts, and cousins didn't have any better ideas, mainly because they had no idea where exactly Fa Zheng was. Even when Fa Zheng sent someone to bring Fa Yan to Taishan, he hadn't mentioned his official rank or specific location—just that they should come to Taishan.

In the end, Jiang Ying's smartest cousin, Wang Yi, came up with a plan: a journey of a thousand miles to find her husband. If Fa Zheng was in Taishan, they would go and find him. Once they left, it would be difficult for Jiang's family to track them down.

The plan was indeed risky. If Jiang Ying had gone alone, she might not have survived the journey. But Wang Yi, being the clever woman she was, wasn't about to let that happen. She ensured everything was arranged before they set off.

Wang Yi's intelligence was unmatched in their family, especially in terms of logical reasoning and meticulous planning. After much consideration, she managed to connect with Zhang Shiping.

Using the Wang family's influence in their homeland, they lured Zhang Shiping into their plans. Then, leveraging the Jiang family's status, they reached out to the Ma family. Jiang Ying, disguised as a man and accompanied by a steward, met Zhang Shiping briefly to leave an impression.

Once Zhang Shiping agreed to purchase horses, he developed a favorable impression of the Jiang and Wang families. Wang Yi then disguised herself as a servant, and they joined Zhang Shiping's convoy under the pretense of investigating the potential of a new trade route to Taishan.

For Zhang Shiping, it was a win-win situation. With no reason to doubt them, he treated their disguised steward as a distinguished guest. Thus, Jiang Ying and Wang Yi traveled smoothly to Taishan.

As they journeyed, Jiang Ying learned more and more about Fa Zheng. He was far from the minor official her father had assumed. Liu Bei wasn't just some minor warlord—he was a dominant power in the Central Plains. By the end of the year, Fa Zheng had become the Prime Minister of Qi, a title that exceeded all expectations.

Now, Jiang Ying found herself unsure of how to approach Fa Zheng. In her memory, he was still the playful youth she had once known. But after years apart, his status had grown far beyond anything she could have imagined. Could he still accept her as she was? Jiang Ying couldn't help but feel lost.

"I'll handle this, Sister Ying. It seems I'm the one who needs to take the lead after all," Wang Yi said calmly as she finished her tea and set the cup down. Although she wasn't entirely confident, as a smart woman, she knew that remaining composed was essential to keep her companion hopeful.

Chapter 596: Doing One's Best and Leaving the Rest to Fate

That day, after the army had set up camp, Wang Yi weaved her way through the area and found herself near Fa Zheng's carriage, but she did not see him.

"Excuse me, is Fa Xiaozhi here?" Wang Yi asked directly, not wanting to waste time with someone like Lu Xun, whom she considered just a kid.

"The Prime Minister had some business to discuss with General Zhao and isn't here at the moment. If you have something important, I can pass it along," Lu Xun replied, glancing at Wang Yi and sensing no apparent danger. After all, girls generally didn't appear threatening.

"Can you really pass it along?" Wang Yi was initially disappointed, but after sizing up Lu Xun's refined appearance and recalling his composed manners earlier, she decided to give it a try.

"Certainly," Lu Xun said, setting aside what he was working on and standing up.

"Are you sure?" Wang Yi raised an eyebrow. "Don't promise what you can't deliver."

"If I say I can do it, then I will," Lu Xun responded, a bit annoyed.

"Oh, that's good. I was worried you might fail," Wang Yi nodded.

"Speak quickly. My time is valuable too," Lu Xun said, dusting off his hands.

"Take me to see Fa Xiaozhi," Wang Yi said with a slight smirk.

Lu Xun was taken aback, then he gave Wang Yi a long, hard look. "Follow me."

"Thank you," Wang Yi said with a light laugh. "Little brother, I owe you one. I'll treat you to some pastries later."

Lu Xun silently cursed himself. He had underestimated Wang Yi and fallen for her trick. But having agreed, he could only take her to Fa Zheng, as he prided himself on keeping his word.

Although Lu Xun's expression showed some displeasure, he didn't say anything more. Wang Yi could tell that he was a steadfast character, so she continued cheerfully, "Don't be angry, little brother. How about this—I'll tell you my name as an apology. I shouldn't have tricked you, but I have urgent matters to discuss with him."

"I'm not angry," Lu Xun replied, calming himself. He glanced back at Wang Yi.

"Even if your face doesn't show anger, that doesn't mean you aren't upset. Actions sometimes reveal more than expressions," Wang Yi teased.

Lu Xun's brisk pace slowed as he regained his composure. He turned to Wang Yi and said, "Alright, I'm no longer upset. I didn't expect to be so emotional. I am Lu Boyan. It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss."

"Impressive," Wang Yi muttered, surprised by how quickly Lu Xun regained his calm. But since he had introduced himself, she responded with a graceful bow, "I am Wang Yi of the Wang family in Fufeng."

"Fufeng?" Lu Xun raised an eyebrow, beginning to make some connections, especially since Fa Zheng was also from Fufeng.

"Is that so surprising?" Wang Yi asked with a smile. Seeing Lu Xun's reaction, she knew he had linked her to Fa Zheng. That was exactly what she wanted, so she didn't have to explain much more. Wang Yi wasn't naturally domineering; she had acted urgently only to meet Fa Zheng as quickly as possible and resolve the matter.

"No, not at all. Come with me, but once inside the camp, be mindful of what you say," Lu Xun said with a hint of frustration, feeling that Wang Yi had indeed tricked him.

Soon, Lu Xun led Wang Yi to the outside of the military camp. Although the entire convoy was under the army's protection, they were still stopped at the camp entrance.

"Who goes there?" the guard asked, though the security wasn't overly tight.

"I'm accompanying the Prime Minister," Lu Xun sighed, producing the token that Fa Zheng had given him. After verifying the token, the guard allowed both of them to enter.

"It doesn't seem that strict here. They even let me in," Wang Yi said, surprised. She had been disheartened earlier when Lu Xun led her toward the military camp, knowing that women were usually forbidden from entering.

"Quite the opposite. This camp is very secure. Without this token, you wouldn't have been allowed in," Lu Xun explained, feeling slightly defensive. "Fa Xiaozhi once served as the central military advisor for the army, a position he still holds. This token signifies that status."

"He served as a military advisor?" Wang Yi was shocked.

"He did. During the campaign against the Yellow Turbans, he was the military advisor," Lu Xun replied with a smirk, remembering how Fa Zheng had boasted about his past achievements.

Fa Zheng's situation was somewhat complicated. He did hold a noble title. In fact, all the participants in the campaign against the Yellow Turbans had received titles and rewards. Even if he hadn't received one then, he would have been granted a title later.

Fa Zheng had been made a Marquis of the Passes when he was appointed Prime Minister of Qi the previous year. Although the title was a bit superficial, it was still a noble rank. Regardless, he was officially a marquis. And while the title didn't come with land, during these chaotic times, land grants were practically meaningless. As a symbol of status, however, Fa Zheng stubbornly refused to acknowledge himself as a marquis until he was granted a more substantial title.

This was why even Fa Zheng's father didn't know that his son actually held a noble title. Fa Yan occasionally wondered how Fa Zheng could become the Prime Minister of Qi without such a rank. How could that be?

Fa Yan and Lu Xun had assumed Fa Zheng wasn't a noble. Wang Yi, however, had correctly deduced according to Han law that he must have been granted a title, though she hadn't understood how Fa Zheng had earned it. After all, the Han Dynasty had a law that stated, "No one can be ennobled without military merit."

Now that Lu Xun had mentioned Fa Zheng's participation in the campaign against the Yellow Turbans, Wang Yi finally understood. She couldn't help but laugh bitterly. All she could do now was her best. She realized that since leaving Fufeng, Fa Zheng had soared to great heights. The difference between them had grown so vast that Wang Yi could only resign herself to fate.

"What's wrong?" Lu Xun asked, noticing that Wang Yi, who had been playful and teasing him earlier, had suddenly fallen silent.

"I'm just feeling a bit reflective," Wang Yi replied with a helpless expression. She had a strong urge to turn around and leave. The Wang and Jiang families had struggled for over a century, claiming to be among the most powerful in Fufeng, yet they had never produced a marquis. The highest-ranking official in their lineage had only been a city governor, nowhere near Fa Zheng's level.

One hundred years of effort from two families couldn't compare to five years of Fa Zheng's work. Wang Yi couldn't help but feel melancholic. It was a harsh reminder that sometimes people failed to recognize true talent. If Jiang Ying's father knew about Fa Zheng's current situation, he might have regretted not seeing the true potential of an uncut jade.

"We're here. I'll take you this far. The rest is up to you," Lu Xun said, pointing to a large tent.

"Since you're already here, come on in, Boyan," Zhao Yun called out from inside the tent, having heard the commotion outside with his sharp ears.

"It seems you won't have to wait long," Lu Xun said, lifting the tent flap and stepping inside.

Wang Yi let out a long sigh and followed.

Chapter 597: A State of Maturity

Fa Zheng was quite puzzled when Lu Xun brought Wang Yi to him, but given his trust in Lu Xun, he didn't ask too many questions.

With Wang Yi and Lu Xun present, Fa Zheng and Zhao Yun did not delve deeply into their conversation. Zhao Yun had already discussed the situation in Xuzhou, and Fa Zheng had made his estimates. After exchanging a few more words, Fa Zheng took Lu Xun and Wang Yi with him as they left the camp.

"Miss, may I ask what brings you to me?" Fa Zheng formally greeted Wang Yi outside the camp, bowing slightly.

"Fufeng's Wang Yi greets the Prime Minister," Wang Yi responded with a bow of her own.

"Oh, so we're fellow townsfolk," Fa Zheng said with a smile, a flicker of recognition in his eyes as he began to sense that Jiang Ying was involved.

"The Prime Minister's rise to prominence must mean he doesn't remember our past meeting," Wang Yi subtly guided the conversation in the direction she wanted.

"Let Jiang Ying come forward. No matter what you say, it won't be effective. Some things need to be said by her personally," Fa Zheng's eyes were calm, which sent a chill down Wang Yi's spine.

"Are you so certain, Prime Minister?" Wang Yi tried to keep her composure. This was not the right time for Jiang Ying and Fa Zheng to meet.

"I don't blame her. Even if she couldn't come, I would have gone to fetch her myself. It's enough that she's here. The Jiang family may try to stop her, but they can't stop me. You must have had a hand in helping her leave Liangzhou, correct?" Fa Zheng said calmly as he bowed deeply to Wang Yi. "Thank you."

"You truly don't blame her?" Wang Yi asked in surprise.

"I only blame myself for not being strong enough. If she had sent me a single letter, I could have made the Jiang family live in fear day and night. I haven't taken any action because I didn't know what she wanted," Fa Zheng said calmly. "The position of my main wife remains vacant, waiting for her answer."

"You're not worried that we're here to seek a powerful connection?" Wang Yi asked, amazed by the now-calm Fa Zheng, who exuded an air of maturity. She had absolute confidence in her own intelligence but had never expected someone to understand the situation without asking any questions.

"I'm not worried, nor do I mind. My wife is entitled to share in my status and glory. Besides, the marriage contract is still valid. No matter the reason, she is my wife. It's that simple," Fa Zheng said with a carefree smile. Whether this was a matter of seeking power or a pure childhood bond, having her share in his status and glory was enough. It was better than standing alone, waiting.

Wang Yi was momentarily stunned. She had prepared herself for Fa Zheng to reject the marriage, given his current success. Jiang Ying was not an extraordinary beauty, and the Jiang family could no longer be considered a significant ally. This marriage could even be seen as them climbing the social ladder. Furthermore, the Jiang family had embarrassed Fa Zheng in the past.

"Go and bring her here. The Jiang family's short-sightedness is their problem. I know the customs and traditions of Fufeng well. Let her come; my father is here," Fa Zheng said, unwilling to waste more words on the matter. He was confident in his knowledge of Fufeng's situation.

"I'll go get Sister Jiang," Wang Yi said, giving Fa Zheng a long look. She hadn't expected him to see things so clearly. If she remembered correctly, Fa Zheng had been quite petty in the past. Why was he so magnanimous now?

"Your fiancée has arrived," Lu Xun remarked, looking at Fa Zheng.

"A long-standing wish has been fulfilled, so I'm in a good mood," Fa Zheng replied with a smile. "When we return to Mount Tai, I'll announce the marriage and make preparations for the wedding."

"Congratulations!" Lu Xun quickly offered his congratulations. "But aren't you supposed to wait three months? If I remember correctly, at your rank, a wedding requires a three-month waiting period. Won't you wait?"

"I won't wait. The six months required for a noble's wedding have already passed. We'll marry as soon as we return," Fa Zheng said with a cold smile. "I won't even send the Jiang family a wedding invitation."

"A noble's ceremony?" Lu Xun asked, confused. "Are you a marquis?"

"Of course. You didn't know?" Fa Zheng rolled his eyes.

"Then why did you say you'd be a marquis by age twenty-three? You already hold the title of marquis, and you achieved it before turning twenty. Why did you make such a fuss about it?" Lu Xun asked, bewildered.

"Without land, what's the point of a marquis title? When I said I'd be a marquis by twenty-three, I meant a township or county marquis. This marquis without land is just a joke," Fa Zheng said disdainfully, completely looking down on his current title.

"You're something else," Lu Xun replied, giving Fa Zheng a thumbs-up.

Meanwhile, Jiang Ying felt her anxiety subside after Wang Yi left. She had mentally prepared herself for Fa Zheng to reject the engagement. When she left the Jiang family, she wasn't entirely sure what her intentions were, but now her heart had settled. Whether they succeeded or not no longer mattered.

Jiang Ying sighed deeply, fully calming her inner turmoil.

"Sister," Wang Yi's voice called out as she returned to Jiang Ying.

"You're back," Jiang Ying said calmly.

"Congratulations. Fa Xiaozhi—oh, I mean brother-in-law—is waiting for you," Wang Yi said, keeping her words brief but conveying everything Jiang Ying needed to know. "He's asking for you."

Jiang Ying was at a loss, looking at Wang Yi with confusion, unsure of what to do.

"Get up, Sister. It's time to see brother-in-law. He said he's willing to share his status and glory with you," Wang Yi smiled, pulling Jiang Ying to her feet. It seemed that when you took action, the results could be surprising.

When Jiang Ying appeared before Fa Zheng, he didn't know what to say. She wasn't particularly beautiful—she couldn't compare to someone like Cai Yan, nor was she as attractive as some of Fa Zheng's concubines. But for some reason, seeing Jiang Ying again put Fa Zheng at ease.

Neither spoke for a long time until Fa Zheng finally reached out and took Jiang Ying's hand. "Come, let's go see Father."

Jiang Ying blushed but didn't resist, obediently following Fa Zheng to see Fa Yan. Just as Fa Zheng had expected, Fa Yan was surprised to see Jiang Ying. His face lit up with joy. After all, she was the daughter-in-law he had chosen for his son. Despite the ups and downs, she had finally appeared before him. The guilt he had felt toward Fa Zheng gradually dissipated.

"Good, good, good!" Fa Yan said, stroking his beard as he listened to Jiang Ying recount how she had arrived. He couldn't help but sigh in admiration. Then, seeing how much more mature his son had become, Fa Yan urged him, "Treat Jiang Ying well. Don't let her down."

"I understand, Father. You should rest now. I have some things to discuss with Jiang Ying," Fa Zheng nodded, tightening his grip on Jiang Ying's hand.

"Yes, it's been a long time since you two have seen each other. I won't disturb you," Fa Yan said, reassured by his son's clear affection for Jiang Ying.

Fa Zheng and Jiang Ying moved to another carriage, where they shared their stories of the time they had spent apart. Compared to Jiang Ying's tales from Liangzhou, Fa Zheng's stories were much more eventful. This allowed them to rekindle their old familiarity, and the distance between them vanished.

As Fa Zheng looked at the young woman in his arms, a cold smile appeared on his face.

Fa Zheng wasn't indifferent to what had happened. He just didn't want to take out his anger on his future wife, and after all, the Jiang family was still her family. As for the Ma family of Fufeng, they would have to bear the brunt of his wrath.

The next day, Fa Zheng brought Jiang Ying to meet Zhang Shiping. At first glance, Zhang Shiping thought Fa Zheng had attracted the attention of a woman from the Jiang family of Fufeng and was about to make a joke. However, Fa Zheng's words quickly extinguished that thought.

"Thank you, Brother Zhang. This is my wife," Fa Zheng said, bowing slightly to Zhang Shiping, who immediately gave up on any teasing.

"Hahaha..." Zhang Shiping forced a laugh, swallowing the joke he had planned to make. Fa Zheng's words made it clear that the woman beside him was his wife. Teasing about a concubine was one thing, but teasing about someone's wife? That was asking for trouble.

"I am Jiang of the Fa family. I apologize for any deception during our journey," Jiang Ying said, bowing slightly.

"No need for such formalities, Madam," Zhang Shiping replied, laughing nervously. Had he known she was Fa Zheng's wife, he would have been more respectful. But now, he was simply relieved that he hadn't made any mistakes.

"Please accept this, Brother Zhang," Fa Zheng said, handing Zhang Shiping an invitation. The card announced Fa Zheng and Jiang Ying's wedding on the second day of the second month of the following year. "This is the first wedding invitation I'm sending out. If not for your help, our wedding wouldn't be possible."

Zhang Shiping was momentarily stunned, then quickly understood. Fa Zheng was positioning him as a matchmaker, a far more honored role than Zhang Shiping would have expected.

"You two are a perfect match. Even without my help, this union would have happened eventually. I merely played a small part. I'll be sure to attend the wedding," Zhang Shiping said, overjoyed.

As Fa Zheng and Jiang Ying left, Jiang Ying couldn't understand why Zhang Shiping seemed so happy. She also didn't understand why Fa Zheng hadn't shown more gratitude. After all, without Zhang Shiping, she wouldn't have made it here.

"You'll understand when we reach Mount Tai. That invitation I gave him is the biggest thanks I could offer. Any more would be too much for him to accept," Fa Zheng explained. "From now on, the Fa family is yours to manage. I'll handle matters outside, but the Fa family itself will be in your hands."

"Alright, I'll do my best," Jiang Ying replied, though she wasn't very confident.

"Feel free to do as you like. The Fa family is quite wealthy, so you can experiment as you see fit," Fa Zheng said with a laugh. "But what's more important is that you get started on the ceremonial garments. We don't have much time."

"I'm confident in that," Jiang Ying replied with assurance. Compared to the needlework of women like Fan Jian, Jiang Ying's skills were far superior.

"Good luck. I'll see if I can participate in a battle soon and maybe earn the title of a landed marquis," Fa Zheng said, lost in daydreams.

While Fa Zheng was daydreaming, Chen Xi and Liu Bei had already received word that Zhao Yun and Fa Zheng were about to return to Mount Tai.

"Let's go. Fa Xiaozhi and Zhao Zilong are coming back. Let's go welcome them. Who's coming with me?" Chen Xi called out from the administrative office.

Chen Xi had long wanted to leave. Sun Qian had already gone to Yanzhou, but Chen Xi had to wait for Zhao Yun, which meant he had to stay in Mount Tai. By now, he was getting impatient. At least when he was out on official business, he didn't have to deal with administrative work. He much preferred construction projects.

"I'll go with you," Jia Xu quickly agreed. He had also grown tired of the paperwork. Although his primary role was intelligence, Lu Su had roped him into handling government affairs, which Jia Xu found tiresome.

"I'll join you too," Li You said, having just finished his own tasks. After handing them over to Lu Su, he decided to get some fresh air and chose to accompany Chen Xi and Jia Xu.

"Let's go. After all, they're both high-ranking commanders. We should all go together. I'm sure Lord Xuande will come too," Chen Xi said, leading Jia Xu and Li You out of the city to meet the arriving troops. After all, external troops were not allowed inside the city and could only wait in the outskirts.

As they made their way through the inner city, Chen Xi, Jia Xu, and Li You watched the bustling crowds and the occasional presence of city management teams, all with smiles on their faces.

"Looks like Fenggao needs to be expanded again. In just one year, it's already reached full capacity. We'll need to build another outer wall," Li You remarked as he surveyed the surroundings. "I must say, Chen Xi's decision was indeed the right one. Without that particular law, Fenggao wouldn't be as prosperous as it is now."

"It's expected. In matters of military strategy, I may not be able to match you two, but when it comes to development and construction, I'm confident I'm second to none. At most, my plans need others to fine-tune," Chen Xi said proudly. He knew he couldn't compete with them in strategy, but he had absolute confidence in his development and construction skills.

"You're just too lazy to do it," Jia Xu sighed, shaking his head. "It's not that you can't do it, but rather that you see it as a waste of time. You'd rather give a general outline and let others execute it. As long as they stay within your framework, the overall strategy remains intact. Even if the details aren't perfect, you're confident that you can still outmaneuver your opponents."

"I don't know how to do it, not that I don't want to," Chen Xi protested.

"Who knows?" Jia Xu and Li You both shook their heads. They didn't believe Chen Xi for a second. If he could devise grand strategies, how could he be incapable of handling the details?

"I think we should go ahead with the expansion. Fa Xiaozhi is back, and he has experience with building Linzi. Let's have him handle Fenggao's expansion. Then we'll have more land to sell," Chen Xi suggested. Seeing that the two didn't believe him, he could only shrug. Honestly, he could handle some of the details, but he knew he was far less skilled than Lu Su or Zhuge Liang.

"We don't need to do that just yet. The treasury is full, so let's wait and see," Li You replied, shaking his head.

The three exited through the city's north gate, where Liu Bei was already waiting. After greeting him, they stood beside him to await the arrival of the army.

"They've finally arrived. It seems the White Horse Volunteers have been well-trained," Chen Xi remarked as he spotted the flags rising on the horizon. Soon, a large formation of cavalry appeared in view—Zhao Yun's army had returned to Fenggao.

Chapter 598: Troubles in the Northwest

Zhao Yun stationed his troops several dozen miles outside Fenggao, bringing only a few hundred cavalry along with Fa Zheng, Lu Xun, and Jiang Ying to proceed ahead.

"Zhao Yun greets my lord," Zhao Yun said as he dismounted and bowed to Liu Bei and the others who were waiting for him and Fa Zheng.

"Zilong, it seems your White Horse Volunteers are well-trained. You must already be aware of the upcoming mission," Liu Bei said with a smile as he helped Zhao Yun to his feet.

"I will do my utmost," Zhao Yun replied, his expression calm and composed.

"With you saying that, I am reassured. Please keep an eye on Zichuan and ensure he doesn't act alone," Liu Bei said, pointing to Chen Xi.

Before Zhao Yun could respond, Chen Xi rolled his eyes and said, "Xiaozhi has arrived." Compared to Zhao Yun's Night Illumination Jade Lion, Fa Zheng's carriage was much slower, but it had finally caught up.

"Xiaozhi," Liu Bei called out to Fa Zheng with a smile. "You did well in Qingzhou. Later, we'll have a banquet to welcome you and Zilong back."

As Liu Bei was about to lead Fa Zheng and Zhao Yun back to the city, Fa Zheng did not immediately follow, causing Liu Bei to pause.

Fa Zheng extended his hand to help Jiang Ying down from the carriage. Liu Bei couldn't help but chuckle—he hadn't expected Fa Zheng to return with his wife. Given the formality of the occasion, it was clear that Jiang Ying must be his official wife, as Fa Zheng wouldn't dare present anyone else.

"Jiang Ying greets Lord Xuande," Jiang Ying said calmly as she performed a bow after being helped down from the carriage by Fa Zheng.

"Lady Fa, no need for such formalities," Liu Bei said with a slight bow in return. Then, turning to Fa Zheng with a face full of congratulations, he noticed that Chen Xi and the others were all wearing teasing expressions.

"Greetings to Lord Xuande and Master," Lu Xun said as he jumped down from the carriage.

"Your apprentice?" Liu Bei asked curiously.

"Yes, my apprentice," Chen Xi replied with a smile. "I wonder how well Xiaozhi has taught him in my stead."

"Don't worry, don't worry, you'll see soon enough. This boy is very clever," Fa Zheng said with a beaming smile.

"No one else, right?" Liu Bei asked with a smile. He had almost started walking earlier, not expecting there would be two more people.

"No one else," Fa Zheng replied with a grin. Since Jiang Ying's arrival, his mood had greatly improved.

"Then let's get in the carriage. Lady Fa, please ride in this one," Liu Bei said, pointing to a carriage pulled by four horses.

Jiang Ying glanced at Fa Zheng, who nodded, and so she didn't say anything more. She climbed into the carriage. In Xiliang, horses were common, but a four-horse carriage was purely a symbol of status.

"Xiaozhi, you've done well for yourself," Chen Xi teased enthusiastically once Jiang Ying was in the carriage. "The last time I left Linzi, you were still longing for your childhood sweetheart. I didn't expect you to return with your fiancée. Getting married next June?"

"Congratulations," Jia Xu said with a smile. "I had originally thought of marrying my daughter to you. I didn't expect that after a trip to Qi, you'd quickly find your true love."

In truth, Jia Xu and Guo Jia had been quite concerned for Fa Zheng. After all, they had mentored him, and while they weren't officially master and disciple, they were close friends and confidants. They were both displeased with the Jiang family's earlier actions.

"Congratulations, Xiaozhi. Such a big event, and you didn't even hint at it," Liu Bei joined in the teasing.

"Hold on, hold on! Who said I found someone new in Qi? This is my fiancée—the one I've mentioned before. Didn't you catch the 'Jiang' surname?" Fa Zheng replied indignantly. "We're getting married next February; the six-month waiting period has already passed."

"Huh?" Chen Xi was surprised. "Did the Jiang family send her over? Our influence hasn't reached that far yet, has it? Fufeng is quite remote, and the Jiang family isn't a major clan."

"Get in the carriage first, and I'll explain," Fa Zheng said as he nimbly hopped into another carriage, not caring about maintaining decorum. Chen Xi and the others followed suit, while Liu Bei, shaking his head, joined them. Only Zhao Yun remained on horseback, and this scene didn't go unnoticed by Jiang Ying and Lu Xun. It gave them a clearer understanding of the relationship between Liu Bei and his subordinates—one that was both a bond of lord and subject and that of friends.

"Congratulations. True love has found its way," Chen Xi was the first to speak after hearing Fa Zheng's story. "She's a good girl; don't let her down."

"Xiaozhi, you're quite fortunate," Liu Bei said, patting Fa Zheng on the shoulder. "I'll provide you with a supplementary dowry when the time comes. From now on, be more mature. You've done well this time; your talents are remarkable. Just don't let trivial matters cloud your judgment."

"I'll keep that in mind," Fa Zheng nodded. "However, I ask for your permission, my lord, to deal with the Ma family of Fufeng at the appropriate time."

"As long as you don't let trivial matters block your wisdom, dealing with such a minor issue is no problem," Liu Bei said with a smile.

"Xiaozhi, you've chosen a good opponent," Jia Xu interjected. "The Ma family of Fufeng has become quite well-known recently."

"Well-known?" Fa Zheng raised an eyebrow. "I don't recall any family in our region deserving that title."

"Ma Shoucheng and Ma Mengqi's family—surely you remember them," Jia Xu said with a grin. "They're the Ma family of Fufeng."

Fa Zheng paused, then a cold smile spread across his face. "No wonder the Jiang family wanted to marry Ying'er to them. Let me carefully weigh this family. Located in the northwest and entangled with the Xiliang Qiang and Hu tribes, from any perspective, they won't be our allies."

"Allies?" Li You's eyes flashed coldly. "If the path we're on still requires allies, then it's not worth taking."

"Well said," Liu Bei agreed with a nod. He was increasingly convinced of Chen Xi's earlier statement—that the strong don't need allies, only conquests. Especially when they are kings!

"The Ma family of Fufeng, huh?" Chen Xi stroked his chin. "What do you think would happen if Cao Mengde went to Guanzhong and tried to ally with the Ma family?"

"It would be difficult," Li You said, shaking his head. "After the opening of the Zheng Guo Canal in Guanzhong, they haven't lacked for grain. The Xiliang cavalry has as much prestige among the Qiang and

Hu tribes as Ma Shoucheng does. If Cao Mengde wanted to ally with the Ma family, he'd face the major issue of the Qiang and Hu tribes following the strongest leader."

"Whether Ma Teng allies with anyone or not is irrelevant to us. We can always spread rumors. I refuse to believe Ma Teng and Han Sui are of one mind with Li Jue and Guo Si. And I'm even more convinced that Li Jue doesn't want to swallow them whole," Fa Zheng said with a cold smile. Spreading rumors was all too easy.

"It's a pity we're too far away," Chen Xi sighed. Mount Tai was too distant from the northwest. "We don't have enough spies in Yongzhou to keep track of Cao Mengde's movements. He's always a thorn in our side."

"He's indeed a problem, but our greatest enemy right now is still Yuan Benchu. Once we defeat him and secure the north, restoring the Han dynasty will be within reach," Li You acknowledged Cao Cao's threat, but compared to Yuan Shao, who had already amassed significant power, Cao Cao was of lesser concern.

Chapter 599: Concealing Merit and Fame

Welcoming banquets were minor affairs, but this time was different due to the presence of female guests. Setting up the banquet became a bit troublesome. Previously, regardless of whether Lady Gan was the principal wife, she would step in to host if there were female guests. But this time, things were more unusual.

Glancing at the women gathered in the inner chambers, Chen Xi couldn't help but shake his head. As expected, Lady Zhang was in charge of hosting. However, to maintain appearances, the wives and daughters of some civil and military officials were also invited.

"What's there to hide?" Chen Xi shrugged as he commented to Jia Xu.

"Well, she's not officially married yet," Jia Xu said, his somewhat plump body swaying slightly. Recently, Jia Xu seemed to be putting on weight again. It seemed that his recent workload hadn't been too taxing on his mental faculties.

"Wenhe, you've become more prosperous," Lu Su remarked, glancing at Jia Xu. Jia Xu looked slightly embarrassed. After all, he was living comfortably in Mount Tai—eating well, sleeping well, and with

work not being too heavy, it would be strange if he didn't gain weight. However, looking at Lu Su across from him, he found himself at a loss for words.

"Kongming, you seem to have changed a lot," Fa Zheng said, stroking his chin as he habitually targeted Zhuge Liang.

"You've also changed—seems like you've matured," Zhuge Liang retorted lazily. Then, as if remembering something, he cupped his hands towards Fa Zheng and said, "Congratulations. It seems your wishes have been fulfilled."

Fa Zheng had been about to argue with Zhuge Liang, but when he heard this, he couldn't help but nod, a smile flashing across his face. "Yes, they have. I hear you're also getting married? When's the date?"

Zhuce Liang glanced at Fa Zheng, feeling slightly annoyed. "Next year, the date hasn't been set yet. You'll receive an invitation when the time comes."

On the other side, Lu Xun eyed Lu Yu. "It's been a while, Zijia. You seem to have gained some weight. What have you been eating lately?"

In reality, Lu Xun was being polite—Lu Yu hadn't just gained some weight, he had become noticeably plump. When Lu Xun saw him waving hello earlier, he barely recognized him; Lu Yu had become quite chubby.

"It's been a while for you too. That's my master over there," Lu Yu said, looking toward Jia Xu with a face full of respect. His round face gave a slightly dazed expression as he replied.

"He seems harmless," Lu Xun observed Jia Xu for a long time, unable to detect anything particularly remarkable about him. Jia Xu smiled warmly, and when he noticed Lu Xun looking at him, he even waved in a friendly manner.

"Yes, he's very harmless. My master is very kind. I've been learning from him as well. He often talks about 'losing is a blessing.' And see? I'm learning well," Lu Yu said, nodding repeatedly.

But Lu Yu had now turned into a little chubby man, and his nodding motion looked quite amusing, causing Lu Xun to laugh uncontrollably, trembling with mirth, while Lu Yu scratched his head and chuckled along.

"Your apprentice isn't doing too well. It looks like mine is about to outwit him," Jia Xu commented with a chuckle, pointing at Lu Yu and Lu Xun. He waved at them, showing them a plate of snacks on the table, only putting it down when Lu Xun quickly waved his hands in refusal. Then, Jia Xu turned back to Chen Xi with a sly smile.

"Tsk," Chen Xi huffed in dissatisfaction. "It's too soon to judge. You'll see what my apprentice is capable of soon enough. Mark my words—he'll be able to go head-to-head with Kongming."

Jia Xu remained silent for a long time, and just as Chen Xi was about to mock him, Jia Xu finally spoke. "If he beats Kongming, I'll eat this table. If he loses, you eat it."

"Let's not go that far," Chen Xi said, wiping the cold sweat from his brow. Zhuge Liang was already quite extraordinary, and he had only become more so recently. He believed Lu Xun could hold his own against Zhuge Liang, but winning? Did Jia Xu think anyone could outwit this embodiment of ancient wisdom?

"Thought so," Jia Xu said, glancing at Zhuge Liang and raising his cup to him. Zhuge Liang returned the toast, but the moment Jia Xu laughed heartily, Zhuge Liang felt a chill run down his spine—Jia Xu laughing never boded well.

"Choose your opponents wisely," Chen Xi said with a bitter smile. "You've spent quite some time with Kongming now, so you must have some sense of him. What do you think?"

"If Fa Xiaozhi is a genius, then Zhuge Kongming is a peerless prodigy. This guy can do everything on his own," Jia Xu said in amazement. His most distinct impression of Zhuge Liang was that the man never made mistakes.

"Exactly. Bo Yan might be able to match him in military strategy, Zijia could compete with him in political maneuvering, and Xiaozhi might outshine him in devising plans. But in a one-on-one comparison, none of us here could beat him," Chen Xi remarked, full of admiration.

Zhuge Liang's growth had been so rapid that it far exceeded Chen Xi's expectations. Initially, he had been worried about nurturing him too quickly, but in such a short time, Zhuge Liang had already become brilliantly outstanding.

"He truly is a prodigious talent. But at least we still have the right to sit here and evaluate him. Especially you—you're not that much older than them, yet you're the one always judging them," Jia Xu noted, his expression turning mischievous as he shifted his gaze from Fa Zheng to Chen Xi.

"This is what it means to conceal one's merit and fame. Geniuses fight on the stage, showcasing their glory, while we sit back and critique—after all, we've already fought our battles," Chen Xi said with a sly grin, passing his amusement to Jia Xu, who in turn spread it to the others.

It was indeed curious—Zhou Yu, Chen Xi, Lu Su, Liu Ye, and Guo Jia weren't much older, yet they were considered part of the older generation when it came to ranking. This was why they had the privilege of critiquing those around their age, or even older. The concept of ranking by seniority was quite amusing.

"By the way, enough about those guys. I've confirmed what you mentioned—five million qing of fertile land, though it needs to be reclaimed," Jia Xu said, lowering his voice cautiously, not noticing that Lu Su, seated nearby, had spilled his drink in shock. Farther away, Zhao Yun, who had been polishing his spear, suddenly froze.

"So soon?" Chen Xi was stunned. It hadn't been long, yet Jia Xu had already confirmed it.

"Five million qing of land—wouldn't I be quick about it?" Jia Xu said, waving his hand dismissively, his eyes shining with excitement. Even a man as composed as he couldn't resist the allure of five million qing of unclaimed fertile land.

By this time, Lu Su had stopped drinking entirely. He couldn't help but inch closer to Chen Xi and Jia Xu. With five million qing of land, what problem couldn't be solved?

With a thud, Lu Su leaned too far and nearly toppled over, drawing Jia Xu and Chen Xi's attention to him.

"Ahem, just curious," Lu Su said, rubbing his hands together eagerly. For the first time in a while, he showed some of the enthusiasm of his younger days, a stark contrast to the morose elder quietly drinking by himself earlier.

Chapter 600: Eternal Ages, Man Will Conquer Heaven

"Come on, tell me, where is it? Where is that land?" Lu Su rubbed his hands together, his excitement almost overflowing, his face full of anticipation.

"Don't get too excited, it's still far from us," Jia Xu said as he tapped his empty wine cup. Instantly, Lu Su got the hint and refilled Jia Xu's cup with wine.

"I'm interested as well," Li You said, his expression calm, though his tightly clenched fists betrayed his inner thoughts. He knew exactly what five million qing of fertile land would mean for the current Han Dynasty. "During my years of traveling across the empire, I don't recall there being so much fertile land anywhere."

"Heh heh," Chen Xi's face twitched slightly, realizing that both Li You and Lu Su, with their sharp ears and keen minds, had caught onto the discussion.

"First, let me tell you that this land is currently in Yuan Benchu's territory, though he hasn't discovered it yet," Jia Xu said calmly. He clearly didn't consider the Wuhuan or Xianbei tribes as any real threat, or even as proper enemies.

"Yuan Benchu," Li You and Lu Su exchanged glances, and they both saw the spark in each other's eyes. "We now have another reason why we must defeat him. Tell us more about the location—I'm very interested. It's best to plan early."

"The land lies north of Youzhou, in the area currently inhabited by the Wuhuan and Xianbei tribes—a region of lush grasslands," Jia Xu replied, his tone steady.

"The climate will be an issue, but if the land is truly fertile, millet could be cultivated there," Lu Su, who now had some experience with agriculture, mused aloud. "Qu Hanmo has been researching cold-resistant crops."

The others turned to Chen Xi, who nodded and said, “I had him research cold-resistant millet. That land can sustain one harvest per year without issue, and because the soil is rich, even primitive farming methods like slash-and-burn agriculture could yield fifty percent more than the Central Plains. I can guarantee the five million qing of fertile land is real.”

“The biggest challenge will be getting the people to settle there. The bitter cold of the north will make it hard for people to live there—that’s the real issue,” Li You frowned. “Wool clothing could help, but five million qing is a vast area. We’ll need to relocate at least ten million people. Do we have enough warm clothing for that many?”

“Hanmo, come here, I need you,” Chen Xi called out to Qu Qi, who was nearby eating. “Wenru needs to ask you about winter clothing. Show him what you’ve got.”

Qu Qi frowned slightly as he walked over. After a brief greeting, he sat down across from them.

“Hanmo, do you have anything to help the people withstand the cold?” Lu Su asked, getting straight to the point. This was a crucial issue.

“I do. I’ve already mastered a cultivation method. I was planning to report it to Lord Xuande in a while. It’s ten times warmer than hemp and can rival wool, but with a much higher yield,” Qu Qi said flatly, though his words struck the others like a thunderclap.

“Amazing,” Lu Su praised, looking at Qu Qi, then turned to Chen Xi. “Impressive—planning three steps ahead. It seems you’re well-prepared. Hanmo, how long will it take to produce enough for a million people?”

“A million?” Qu Qi’s face twitched. Such a large number right from the start—Lu Su’s grand scale of thinking certainly fit someone used to overseeing projects involving tens of thousands of people.

“Yes, we’ll need at least a million in the initial phase. More will follow,” Li You nodded in agreement.

They all had immense confidence in Qu Qi’s ability to develop new crops and resources. After all, Zhao Yun had been able to leave his post because Qu Qi had taken over his duties, boosting food production

by thirty to fifty percent. During festivals, the people even placed offerings to Qu Qi on their altars, truly embodying the phrase "people live by food."

"It would take about four to five years, assuming favorable weather and large-scale planting. However, the barren lands of Yanzhou and Bingzhou could also be cultivated," Qu Qi estimated. "But for this, you'll need to prioritize resources in this area."

"If that's the case, four to five years should suffice for us," Jia Xu calculated, nodding. "It's unfortunate, though. By then, we'll be sweeping southward with the momentum of victory, and the empire will essentially be ours."

"Expanding our territory will leave a legacy for future generations. The Central Plains will always be ours—no one can take it from us. But that land isn't ours yet," Li You said, his eyes cold. Compared to the eternal security of the Central Plains, it was better to secure that northern territory as soon as possible. If any unforeseen changes occurred, it would be a disaster.

Chen Xi glanced at the others, seeing that they had all decided to make that land their own before turning their focus back to the Central Plains. He had no objections; it seemed like the right move.

"Let me make one thing clear—while the essence of the world isn't in the Central Plains, and its people are abundant, the truly fertile land isn't here. I know of a place where you can scatter seeds at random and harvest three times a year. Dig anywhere and you'll find copper and iron. When the time comes, let's work hard together," Chen Xi said solemnly.

His words made Jia Xu and the others feel like their eyes were about to pop out of their heads. Even Zhao Yun, who had been quietly eavesdropping, was stunned. A place like that actually existed? Why had they never known about it?

"Such a place exists?" Jia Xu muttered to himself in disbelief.

"Of course. Defeat the northern enemies, take the Central Plains, and grasp the empire—then you'll see it. For now, let's focus on securing the north. Once we've claimed those five million qing of fertile land, the twenty thousand qing of river plains in Guanzhong will seem insignificant. Watch me show them who's boss!" Chen Xi boasted, confidence radiating from him.

“If such a place exists, I must see it in my lifetime—to witness why the heavens are so unfair!” Jia Xu’s eyes grew cold and resolute as he gazed at Chen Xi. The chaos of this era had shaped him, but it had also shown him too much suffering—countless displaced people, countless children devouring each other for survival, all for a single grain of food that held so much anger, but also so much hope.

Compared to Jia Xu’s icy determination, Li You’s chest swelled with anger after hearing Chen Xi’s words. How could the heavens be so unjust?

Unconsciously, Li You reflected on his past motivations—serving the common people, the poor. Yes, all these brilliant strategists of humble origins fought so that people like them could have food to eat, clothes to wear, books to read—or rather, so they could have hope of climbing higher. That had been his reason for following Dong Zhuo!

When the young emperor was deposed in Luoyang, and then killed in a fit of rage, wasn’t it because he believed that bringing all the warlords together, gathering the elite troops for a single battle at Hulao Pass, and then using the momentum of victory to sweep the land, would be the quickest and most effective way to end the chaos?

Only with that kind of overwhelming strength could the country be reshaped, the system restructured, and the suffering of the people brought to an end in the shortest possible time.

But now, hearing from Chen Xi that there were lands where crops could yield three times a year, Li You suddenly realized how unjust the heavens were. In the Central Plains, even the best land could only produce one crop a year, though it didn’t need to lie fallow. As for the rest—no need to mention it! The disparity was immense!

“If such a place exists, I must see it with my own eyes!” Li You shouted in anger, drawing his sword and driving it into the table, the blade trembling with his fury. “If the heavens are unjust, then I will defy them. For eternity, man will conquer heaven!”