

Mythical 651

Chapter 651: Sun Ce and Zhou Yu Battle the Two Lius

Chen Xi still couldn't figure out what exactly had happened. How had Sun Ce suddenly soared to such heights? Weren't things on the brink of collapse due to Zhuge Liang's rumors? How had the situation turned around so dramatically?

As for Yuan Shu, the officials and ministers on Liu Bei's side didn't take him seriously at all. Despite his potential for war, Yuan Shu couldn't even fully utilize his own combat strength. If it came down to a one-on-one fight between Liu Bei and Yuan Shu, Liu Bei wouldn't even need any backup; Yuan Shu would be like meat on a chopping block.

Now, with Yuan Shu's son, Yuan Yao, dead, Yuan Shu intended to pass his power on to Sun Ce, treating him as his own son. Wasn't there something odd about this development?

Chen Xi didn't dwell on it too long and simply tossed aside Yuan Shu, now considering Yuan Shu's forces as Sun Ce's. As for any interference from the Yuan clan elders, Chen Xi didn't even bother to worry. Even if Yuan Shu didn't personally beat them down, the Yuan clan alone couldn't topple Sun Ce.

The secret letter from Yuzhou mentioned all kinds of backstabbing attempts from the Yuan clan elders—talk of family rituals, suppressing Sun Ce, sowing discord—but regardless of whether their efforts could be brought to the forefront, the elders were up against the formidable team of Zhou Yu, Pang Tong, Liao Li, and Gu Yong.

Currently, Yuan Shu had fully lifted any restrictions on Sun Ce and Zhou Yu, allowing them to draw strength from him and grow rapidly. He even seemed inclined to give them a hand to ensure Sun Ce's path was steady.

Given the current situation, if those unnamed Yuan clan elders managed to defeat Sun Ce, the world would have already been theirs. Based on the latest intelligence, Chen Xi could only conclude that the Yuan clan elders were making a series of foolish mistakes, continually lowering the bar and inadvertently boosting the reputations of Zhou Yu and Sun Ce.

Chen Xi was unaware of Zhou Yu's mental ability. After Zhou Yu confirmed that Yuan Shu genuinely intended to treat Sun Ce as his heir, he activated his "foolproof" aura full-time, causing the Yuan clan elders to make increasingly foolish decisions.

"Sun Bofu is a problem, and Zhou Gongjin is quite unusual. When the two of them work together, the strength they unleash is astonishing," Guo Jia remarked as he set down the intelligence report from Jia Wenhe concerning Sun Ce and Zhou Yu.

"It's more than astonishing. Either of them alone is a genius, but together, they're nearly unstoppable," Chen Xi said with a bitter smile. "When Zhou Gongjin is at Sun Bofu's side, Sun Bofu's might is on par with Yuan Benchu's."

"That's quite the exaggeration," Guo Jia raised an eyebrow, a flicker of interest in his eyes.

"They're the same age as me. Just think of their abilities as being on par with mine," Chen Xi sighed, noting that he and Zhou Yu were the same age.

"Do we need to activate the contingency plan we left in Yuzhou?" Guo Jia frowned. "If they truly are as capable as you say, once they consolidate their power, I'm worried they'll dismantle our contingency plan."

Chen Xi hesitated. The plan they had left in Yuzhou was more of a convenient afterthought, but given Zhou Yu's demonstrated capabilities, it wouldn't be difficult for him to unravel their plans once he fully controlled Jing, Yu, and Yang provinces.

"Forget it, Zichuan. We're holding the northern line, so let's leave the southern matters to Wenruo and the others. We need to trust them," Guo Jia said calmly.

"Right. That's how it should be," Chen Xi nodded. Li You and Jia Xu could handle matters related to Sun Ce. Their primary focus remained on dealing with Yuan Shao in the north.

Rewinding to the day Yuan Shu received news of Liu Biao's attack on Jingbei, he was already in a volatile state due to the grief of losing his son and the constant berating from the Yuan clan elders. Upon

hearing that Liu Biao was attacking Jingbei, Yuan Shu flew into a rage, immediately ordering his ministers to prepare for war against Liu Biao.

Sun Ce had always been eager to be at the forefront of any campaign against Liu Biao, and this time was no different. With both old and new grudges simmering, Sun Ce immediately volunteered to lead the charge against Liu Biao.

As for Zhou Yu, who had been concealing his true strength to prevent Sun Ce from outright defeating Liu Biao and to maintain the balance of power, he no longer saw any reason to hold back. Zhou Yu had confirmed that Yuan Shu genuinely intended to raise Sun Ce as his heir, so he no longer needed to worry about distant possibilities.

Watching Sun Ce rise with passionate fervor, Zhou Yu felt a sense of peace. Finally, he no longer had to hide his abilities and could fully commit to building a grand foundation for his sworn brother.

Zhou Yu quietly analyzed and considered the future; the regions of Jing, Yu, and Yang would soon be their stronghold.

He couldn't help but think of the success Liu Bei's faction had in cultivating talented scholars.

Zhou Yu thought with a touch of resignation.

After all, talents capable of stabilizing factions, balancing interests, and promoting development were always scarce. Those who met Zhou Yu's high standards were even rarer. With no other choice, Zhou Yu decided to take on the role himself temporarily, assigning Pang Tong to serve as Sun Ce's military strategist against Liu Biao.

Yuan Shu barely hesitated before agreeing to Sun Ce's request, appointing him as the commanding general with an army of 20,000 to march on Jingzhou. All of Yuan Shu's forces in Jingzhou were placed under Sun Ce's command. At the same time, Gu Yong, Liao Li, Zhou Tai, Jiang Qin, and other sidelined officials and generals were reinstated and promoted by half a rank.

"Bofu," Zhou Yu called out to Sun Ce after leaving the main hall.

“Gongjin, what is it?” Sun Ce stopped and asked.

“Jingzhou isn’t just Liu Biao’s territory; it’s also under Liu Zhang’s control. This time, you should listen closely to Shi Yuan’s advice and carefully assess the combat strength of Liu Zhang’s forces,” Zhou Yu said with a resigned tone. It was clear that no one in Yuan Shu’s camp had noticed that it wasn’t just Liu Biao who was sending troops into Jingzhou—Liu Zhang was involved as well.

“Liu Zhang?” Sun Ce looked at Zhou Yu in confusion, but out of trust in Zhou Yu, he simply nodded and said, “I’ll be careful. It doesn’t matter if it’s Liu Biao or Liu Zhang—I’ll defeat them!”

Chapter 652: Recommendation

Zhou Yu looked at Sun Ce’s confident expression and couldn’t help but feel a headache coming on. Without lowering his own intelligence through his reverse mental ability, it was almost impossible to have a pleasant conversation with Sun Ce. Sun Ce had loyalty and could heed advice, but when it came to strategic vision, he was completely lacking! “What he means is that you should pay more attention to Liu Zhang, see if it’s possible to annex Yizhou, then use Yuzhou and Yangzhou as the head, Jingzhou and Yangzhou as the waist, and Jingzhou and Yizhou as the tail, to launch a three-pronged campaign to unify the world,” Pang Tong remarked as he passed by, looking at Sun Ce with a face full of disdain.

“Yes, that’s exactly it. Shiyuan, make sure to keep an eye on things,” Zhou Yu sighed, acknowledging Pang Tong’s ability to grasp the full meaning with just a brief explanation.

“Your ambitions are too large. First, stabilize Jingzhou and Yangzhou, then eliminate the internal troubles in Yuzhou before even considering taking risks. A solid foundation is necessary,” Pang Tong bluntly refuted, not sparing Zhou Yu’s feelings.

“Make early plans. You handle Jingzhou while I oversee Yuzhou to clear out the internal threats,” Zhou Yu had grown accustomed to Pang Tong’s rebuttals. After all, Zhou Yu and Sun Ce’s handsome appearances were a constant irritation to Pang Tong, and while Pang Tong held an intellectual advantage over Sun Ce, he had none over Zhou Yu.

“Hmm. You handling internal affairs is pleasing to me, but it’s not your strong suit. You’ll be wasting your talents,” Pang Tong criticized without hesitation.

"There's no other choice," Zhou Yu replied with a bitter smile. "Look at Yuan Gong's subordinates. Who among them can manage central development? Who has that capability?"

"That's true," Pang Tong thought for a moment about the people under Sun Ce's command and realized that none of them could match the likes of Chen Xi, Lu Su, or Xun Yu, who were skilled at managing central development, building the economy, and ensuring a prosperous domain.

"Gu Yong might be barely capable after a decade or so of tempering, but right now, asking him to manage the central administration is less effective than having me do it," Zhou Yu said, clearly exasperated. War requires resources, and without someone capable of managing the central administration, even the strongest foundation will eventually crumble.

"Hmm. There's one person who might be suitable. I saw him frequenting the taverns in Shouchun not long ago. He mentioned something about seeking refuge and continuing his studies in Jiangdong," Pang Tong recalled, frowning as he thought of someone.

"Why didn't you mention such a capable person earlier?" Zhou Yu glanced at Pang Tong, his tone tinged with dissatisfaction.

"It's not that I didn't want to mention him, but it seemed like he was also searching for a worthy master and hadn't found one yet," Pang Tong said nonchalantly. "Moreover, my relationship with him isn't exactly good. He's too smooth for my taste. If there's anyone in this world who can avoid making enemies for a lifetime, it's definitely this guy."

"That can't be right. Your evaluation of him is too high," Zhou Yu said in disbelief. Avoiding making enemies for an entire lifetime seemed impossible.

"His mental ability gives people a sense of mental expansion, and he can subtly guide others to say what he wants to hear. As a result, those who converse with him often feel they've benefited from the exchange, leaving them with a warm and pleasant impression," Pang Tong explained, recalling his interactions with Zhuge Jin. It was Zhuge Jin who had managed to mediate between him and Zhuge Liang, preventing them from coming to blows.

To be honest, Pang Tong had never met Sima Lang. That man truly had an innate ability to make people feel a sense of warmth and friendliness just by his presence. This was why when Zhuge Jin and Sima Lang encountered each other, their mental abilities naturally made them close friends.

“What’s his name, and where is he?” Zhou Yu immediately recognized that Zhuge Jin would perfectly meet his requirements. Even if Zhuge Jin didn’t excel at handling administrative tasks, as long as he could harmonize the factions, Yuzhou’s strength would see a significant boost.

“He’s Zhuge Liang’s elder brother, Zhuge Ziyu. He’s probably still in a tavern somewhere in Shouchun, but I’m not sure if he’ll agree to join us, given the way Yuan Gong... well...” Pang Tong trailed off, disparaging Yuan Shu without a shred of decency.

“He’ll definitely agree,” Zhou Yu said with a confident smile. He had heard of Zhuge Jin before. Although Zhuge Jin wasn’t particularly famous, if he was as Pang Tong described, then he must be one of the few rare talents of their time.

Pang Tong sneered. If he hadn’t noticed the shift in Yuan Shu’s camp, he might not have cared much. Even though he wasn’t sure how Zhou Yu had managed to help Sun Ce seize power, the current situation was highly favorable for Pang Tong. He realized he might now have the means to compete with Zhuge Liang.

About half a year ago, Pang Tong had learned that Zhuge Liang had become the Chief Clerk of the General Who Pacifies the East, working under Lu Su to handle administrative affairs and sitting in Taishan. At that moment, Pang Tong realized Zhuge Liang was on the verge of rising to great heights.

At the time, Pang Tong was in the midst of being sidelined while Sun Ce was under house arrest. One was in the sky, the other in the dirt—the difference between them was as vast as heaven and earth. Pang Tong was acutely aware that if he had any rival in his life, it would undoubtedly be Zhuge Liang. Zhuge Liang had already started to show his brilliance, while Pang Tong remained obscure. By then, he was already sixteen years old and fully capable of serving any warlord.

Now, an opportunity had presented itself in the form of Sun Ce. Sun Ce was beginning to display the qualities of a hegemon, and after being released from house arrest, Pang Tong felt a renewed determination, sensing that Yuan Shu had started grooming both Sun Ce and Zhou Yu. Though it seemed unbelievable, to Pang Tong, this was an opportunity—an opportunity to compete on equal footing with Zhuge Liang.

For this reason, Pang Tong spared no effort in planning for Sun Ce's future. He didn't want to fall behind Zhuge Liang; he wanted to prove that he was more talented. If he couldn't match Zhuge Liang in height or appearance, then he would outshine him in wisdom. Let's see who will ultimately become the true hegemon. The victor will write history, and Pang Tong's fighting spirit rekindled as he recognized that Sun Ce might indeed have the potential to contend for the dominion of the world.

When Sun Ce and Zhou Yu, accompanied by Pang Tong and bearing gifts, appeared before Zhuge Jin, Zhuge Jin was indeed surprised. Although he had no intention of serving under Yuan Shu, he still extended an invitation for Sun Ce and Zhou Yu to come inside for a discussion, not wanting to cause trouble on their territory.

While Sun Ce's approach to attracting talents relied on pure charisma, Zhou Yu preferred to win people over with his intellect, essentially saying, "Someone as brilliant as I am is following Sun Ce—don't you think you should trust my judgment?"

However, this tactic didn't work as well on Zhuge Jin. Although Zhuge Jin wasn't as cunning as Zhou Yu, Zhou Yu couldn't easily overpower him either. Instead, their conversations frequently sparked new ideas and insights, which only increased Zhou Yu's appreciation for Zhuge Jin, making him even more determined to recruit him. Yet, Zhuge Jin's skillful conversation subtly steered the discussion away whenever Zhou Yu was about to ask him to join Sun Ce's camp, clearly signaling that Zhuge Jin wasn't eager to accept such an offer.

Chapter 653: I'll Take the Blame

Zhuce Jin tried to steer the conversation away while also thinking of a way to make his escape. He had no interest in joining Yuan Shu. He had spent a considerable amount of time in Yuzhou, thoroughly examining Yuan Shu's situation, and had silently decided against joining him. Although Yuan Shu had a solid foundation, Zhuge Jin believed that Yuan Shu was not fit to be a ruler; he was better suited to be a gallant figure, one who valued loyalty deeply. But as a ruler, Yuan Shu would eventually ruin his own base.

As for Sun Ce, Zhuge Jin had also studied him extensively. In Zhuge Jin's view, Sun Ce was fit to be a valiant general, one akin to Xiang Yu, but not to be a ruler. Like Yuan Shu, Sun Ce was deeply loyal, and he had even more of the martial prowess that made him better suited to be a heroic figure than Yuan Shu.

This was why, after spending a long time in Yuzhou, Zhuge Jin ultimately decided to leave and head towards Jiangdong.

The Central Plains were definitely no longer a safe place. The great war in the north was inevitable, visible to anyone who wasn't blind. So the only option was to flee south.

The aristocratic families in Yizhou were notoriously insular, so Zhuge Jin naturally wouldn't seek trouble there. Although the families in Jiangdong were united, with the fall of the Lu family, the original power structure of the four great families had collapsed, making Zhuge Jin see new possibilities.

Currently, Zhuge Jin was not alone. When he fell out with the Zhuge family, he had taken a group of people with him, and since those clansmen were willing to follow him, Zhuge Jin would not neglect them. His plan was to head to Jiangdong and, while the three remaining great families were still at odds, seize the opportunity. With his wisdom, Zhuge Jin thought it possible to establish a new Zhuge family.

To put it into perspective, when Zhang Zhao and Zhang Hong moved to Jiangdong, their original intention was to rely on the Zhang family of Jiangdong. But when one of the four great families fell, Zhang Zhao and Zhang Hong used their talents to successfully absorb the Jiangdong Zhang family, even though they had to relinquish their Xu Province Zhang family banner.

Naturally, Zhuge Jin had a similar idea. During the chaos among the aristocratic families of Jiangdong, he could find a way in, and with his intelligence, he might not only secure a place to live but also rebuild the Zhuge family quickly.

Although Zhuge Jin appeared refined and smooth in manner, it didn't mean he lacked resolve. He also had his pride. In fact, every top figure had their own pride. Zhuge Jin was usually gentle in his guidance, but that didn't mean he was always going to be the nice guy. This time, he intended to capitalize on the turmoil among the Jiangdong families to carve out territory for himself.

Pang Tong stood silently to the side, just listening to the conversation between Zhuge Jin and Zhou Yu. He couldn't help but feel a bit of schadenfreude. He had already told Zhou Yu that Zhuge Jin was an extraordinary talent, but Zhou Yu was still confident he could convince him. The result was now evident: Zhuge Jin was leading the conversation far and wide, leaving no opportunity for Zhou Yu to steer it back on track.

Sun Ce, standing to the side, was getting a headache. He was completely lost in the conversation. Zhou Yu and Zhuge Jin were discussing things that had nothing to do with what was currently happening. Sometimes they talked about history, other times about customs—none of which were topics Sun Ce wanted to hear.

“Gongjin, what are you even talking about?” After a long while, Sun Ce couldn’t take it anymore. It was driving him crazy to listen to a conversation that was clearly sophisticated but completely incomprehensible to him. Out of desperation, he spoke up.

Zhuce Jin’s expression shifted slightly before his face turned stern as he glanced at Sun Ce with apparent displeasure. “I was having a delightful conversation with Brother Gongjin—why would you interrupt us?”

“What you’re discussing is completely incomprehensible,” Sun Ce said as he scratched his ear. He could see that Zhuge Jin had no intention of helping him, so he decided to be more casual about it. After all, if Zhuge Jin wasn’t someone he needed, why bother tolerating him?

“Just because you don’t understand doesn’t mean Brother Gongjin doesn’t. And just because you don’t understand doesn’t mean it’s useless,” Zhuge Jin responded coldly, with a clear trace of annoyance in his voice. He might as well have been saying that Sun Ce was unworthy of his time.

“At the very least, I’m literate and have received systematic education, yet I don’t understand a word of this. How can the common people understand it?” Sun Ce retorted. “If the common people can’t understand it, then what use are you?”

“Well, that’s an interesting perspective,” Zhuge Jin said, his expression shifting slightly. “Since you have such a view, let me ask you: does the world belong to the aristocracy or to the common people?”

“The aristocracy is also the people,” Zhou Yu quickly interjected, answering on Sun Ce’s behalf as soon as he heard Zhuge Jin’s question. If Sun Ce were to answer, he would surely say the world belongs to the people, which wouldn’t be the right answer in this context.

“Does what he says count?” Zhuge Jin asked, seeing Sun Ce’s moment of hesitation.

"It counts. What Gongjin says is as good as if I said it myself. I'm responsible for executing, and Gongjin is responsible for planning!" Sun Ce, no longer hesitant after Zhuge Jin's probing question, responded with a cold smile.

"And what if his plans go wrong?" Zhuge Jin asked, his interest in this person growing.

"Hmph, if it's wrong? If it's wrong, then it's still my doing. What's the big deal?" Sun Ce said arrogantly, with an attitude that suggested he didn't care if he made mistakes.

"..." Zhuge Jin fell silent. He realized that Sun Ce was indeed different from the rest. If nothing else, that statement alone was enough to qualify him as a leader. Reflecting on how Zhou Yu had intercepted Sun Ce's response earlier and seeing that Sun Ce showed no signs of dissatisfaction, Zhuge Jin recognized that Sun Ce was remarkably tolerant of his subordinates.

"Alas, it's a pity that your sense of loyalty is too strong, and Yuan Gong's loyalty is too strong. You'll never repay that debt of gratitude. Otherwise, just based on what you said earlier, you could become a great leader," Zhuge Jin sighed.

In this era, rulers who dared to take responsibility for their subordinates' mistakes were exceedingly rare. Even the likes of Cao Cao, as a brilliant leader, often had others take the fall for mistakes. Very few leaders dared to shoulder the blame themselves. Sun Ce's previous statement clearly indicated that he was willing to take the blame for his subordinates' mistakes, regardless of the consequences. It was an attitude of accepting all the blame, no matter how serious.

"Yuan Gong has already fully entrusted the military affairs of the three provinces to Bofu, and I am assisting him in handling administrative matters," Zhou Yu quickly added.

"..." Zhuge Jin was taken aback. He then unconsciously clenched his hands together, squeezing his right hand tightly with his left before slowly releasing them, as if nothing had happened.

"I want to know how Yuan Gong's son died," Zhuge Jin asked after observing Zhou Yu for a long moment. He was intrigued now. Having a lord who would take the blame was a good thing. At least such a ruler was loyal, and it made risky ventures less daunting.

"It had nothing to do with us," Pang Tong interjected. "You should trust me on this—it was entirely an accident, and the process was extremely bizarre. The way things unfolded to reach this point was also incredibly strange."

"I believe you," Zhuge Jin nodded. Then, to Sun Ce's bewilderment, Zhuge Jin began tidying his clothing. Before Sun Ce could grasp what was happening, Zhuge Jin made a formal bow toward him. "Zhuge Ziyu pays his respects to my lord."

Chapter 654: The Final Test of Character

"Do you regret it?" Li You asked, looking at Zhuge Liang.

"There's nothing to regret. My elder brother chose the path he believed in. At least, before I had access to these core secrets, his choice was correct. My brother has good judgment," Zhuge Liang replied calmly. His demeanor wasn't as sorrowful as Li You had expected; in fact, Zhuge Liang's calmness was so unsettling that it made Li You feel a bit uneasy. Zhuge Liang was too composed.

"Your brother chose his own path, but you know that path is wrong. Don't you feel any guilt?" Li You asked, curious.

"If my brother wanted to come, he would have. But since he hasn't, he must have his reasons. Since he has already chosen his path, what's the point of me feeling guilty? I don't believe that once my brother made up his mind, anything I said could change his decision," Zhuge Liang responded, his tone indifferent and unfeeling.

The information about Zhuge Jin joining Sun Ce was brought to Zhuge Liang by Li You himself. Originally, Li You had thought Zhuge Liang would have some strong reaction, but from what he could see now, Zhuge Liang was as calm as ever, no different from any other time.

"Kongming, you are the most brilliant young man I've ever met. Your talent lies in understanding, without a single mistake, but your nature is too cold. It's rare to see anything that can shake you," Li You sighed.

Zhuce Liang didn't comment; he simply looked at Li You calmly. He knew that if Li You had personally come to deliver this information, it wasn't just to remind him about Zhuge Jin. There must be another reason.

“Kongming, you excel at understanding the grand picture. There’s something I need you and Xiaozhi to handle. The two of you can complement each other perfectly. What I want you to do is infiltrate Yuzhou and Yangzhou, and use your methods to suppress Sun Ce’s rise. Make sure they don’t have the freedom to act on other matters,” Li You said, his tone gentle.

“I’ll do my best,” Zhuge Liang said after a long pause, his brows furrowed. This task seemed extremely difficult.

“Don’t worry, we’ll provide you with support,” Li You said with a smile. “General Gan Xingba, Deputy General Taishi Ziyi, and the newly recruited Danyang soldiers from Xuzhou under Chen Shuzhi.”

“Do I have command authority?” Zhuge Liang asked, surprised.

“How could that be?” Li You laughed when he saw the look of surprise on Zhuge Liang’s face. After all, Zhuge Liang hadn’t yet reached the level where he could completely control his emotions.

Zhuce Liang nodded, realizing that he had been too hasty. Gan Ning was the actual commander of the navy, and Zhuge Liang had neither the experience nor the qualifications to command him.

“However, if you can win them over and get them to follow your lead, that’s not something we can interfere with,” Li You added with a smile when Zhuge Liang didn’t respond.

Zhuce Liang remained silent, deep in thought. He had noticed something interesting, and after a while, he asked, “Master Li, how long do you think it will take?”

“What?” Li You was momentarily confused, then nodded. “It’s hard to say, but it shouldn’t take too long. Wenhe and I are also trying to resolve it, but things are happening too quickly with Sun Ce and in Jingxiang. We need to make some adjustments.”

“I have no objections. But I would appreciate it if Master Li could help complete the planning and construction of the city outskirts,” Zhuge Liang said respectfully.

“Here, when we believe someone is capable of holding their own, we give them a folding fan,” Li You said as he took out a blood-red, grayish-white folding fan from his robe, slowly opening it. The fan seemed to shimmer with a light that resembled flowing blood, encased in a jade-like glow.

“This is my folding fan. When Zichuan had several made, I immediately chose this one,” Li You said with a smile.

To Li You, this fan symbolized his dark past, the pain he had endured, and the endless bloodshed he had caused. But now, all of that was wrapped in a jade-like glow.

The same went for Jia Xu, whose dark wooden fan bore almost no decoration, yet Jia Xu had immediately taken to it and always kept it with him.

When they had selected their fans, each person had, to some extent, revealed their true nature. Now, it was Zhuge Liang’s turn. Li You laid out the remaining ten or so fans. There had been about twenty made, and these were all that were left.

Zhuge Liang glanced at the fans, and he had a vague feeling that while each fan had its own meaning, none of them suited him.

“None of them suit you?” Li You asked, already guessing what Zhuge Liang was going to say from the look in his eyes.

“Indeed, none of them align with my temperament,” Zhuge Liang replied calmly.

“I thought so. When Zichuan brought out these fans, he said that each one had its own meaning, and finding a fan that resonated with you meant that, in some way, you were unparalleled,” Li You sighed.

“You might think I’m joking,” Li You continued when he saw Zhuge Liang’s skeptical expression. “But after observing for these past few years, I’ve realized that Zichuan was right. Those who took a fan they were drawn to have neither damaged nor lost it, and in some ways, they are indeed unparalleled.”

“Zizhong’s fan represents wealth—it’s very lavish. Weishuo’s fan represents fame—it’s plain but has a faint, lingering fragrance. My fan represents the past, and Wenhe’s fan represents concealment. As for the others, you can guess based on who uses them,” Li You explained, smiling at Zhuge Liang. He was curious to see how Zhuge Liang would react to the truth.

When Fazheng couldn’t find a fan he liked, he had exploded upon hearing this, but then he grabbed one from Jia Xu, declaring, “If I can’t find a fan I like, then I’ll just take one at random. Since it’s about fate, then my power is fate!”

In reality, the fans were a final test of character. The first batch was made with specific people in mind; Chen Xi had tailored each one to match the recipient’s character, and when they were chosen, it was clear that each fan had something in common with its owner.

Take Mi Zhu’s luxurious fan, for example. It was the only one with such opulence, and when chosen based on character, the outcome was predictable. Liu Yan had the self-awareness to pick the simplest fan, and the dark-hearted Jia Xu naturally gravitated toward his fan. This accuracy wasn’t due to the fans themselves but rather the people choosing them.

“I won’t take any. A fan doesn’t define me—I am who I am. I’ll have one made when my wife arrives,” Zhuge Liang said calmly, shaking his head. He was completely unfazed by Li You’s attempt to rattle him.

“Kongming, if you can keep this mindset on the battlefield, I have nothing more to teach you. The rest is up to experience,” Li You said with a satisfied smile, indicating that Zhuge Liang had passed the final test.

Chapter 655: What Did I Miss?

Compared to Zhuge Liang’s first encounter with such matters, Fazheng was already accustomed to Jia Xu’s unconventional ways.

“Master Jia, what brings you here?” Fazheng was spending time with Jiang Ying at home when the doorkeeper informed him that Jia Xu had come to visit. Fazheng immediately prepared for trouble; having dealt with Jia Xu before, he knew that if Jia Xu was coming to see him, it had to be something serious.

“Apologies for interrupting your time with your lovely wife and concubines,” Jia Xu said, though his tone lacked any genuine remorse.

Fazheng rolled his eyes and invited Jia Xu inside. He was used to Jia Xu's style by now. "Aren't you busy tutoring Lu Zijia? What brings you here?"

Based on his years of experience, Fazheng knew that trying to outmaneuver Jia Xu would only lead to getting outplayed, so he decided to get straight to the point.

"Zijia is learning well on his own now; I don't need to watch him all the time," Jia Xu replied with a hint of a smile as he thought about how Lu Yu had seamlessly integrated with the other young talents in Taishan, even getting along well with Lu Xun, whom he had previously tricked.

Fazheng couldn't help but sneer inwardly. Lu Yu was definitely playing the other young talents like puppets, showing a natural talent for it. He had already absorbed quite a bit of Jia Xu's cunning.

"Why are we talking about him? I'm here to assign you a task. You're familiar with Gan Xingba, right?" Jia Xu asked.

"Yes, quite familiar," Fazheng nodded. Gan Ning was an easy-going person who got along well with almost everyone in Taishan, and Fazheng had interacted with him frequently due to various matters.

"That's good. Your task is to assist Gan Xingba in suppressing Yuzhou and to establish contact with Yizhou to bring out Gan Xingba's family," Jia Xu said, outlining the mission.

Fazheng paused, confused by the vagueness of the task. What did he mean by establishing contact with Yizhou? With Liu Bei's current power, Gan Ning could easily retrieve his family from the timid Liu Zhang without any trouble.

After thinking it over for a while, Fazheng finally said, "I'll take the task, but I'll need your help with my remaining administrative duties. As for Yizhou, the Land of Abundance... Heh."

Fazheng wasn't stupid. Even though he hadn't been to Jia Xu's place to catch up on the latest intelligence over the past couple of weeks, the mere mention of Yizhou suggested that something significant had happened there. A little thought was enough to understand what might have occurred.

He silently pondered the situation.

Fazheng couldn't understand why Liu Zhang, whom they had assessed as someone who would just stay in Yizhou and wait for his demise, suddenly decided to launch a military campaign. But since he had made a move, Fazheng would seize the opportunity to thoroughly understand Yizhou's strength, laying the groundwork for future conquests.

"Don't worry. I'll find someone to handle your duties while you're gone," Jia Xu said with a nod. He knew Fazheng would grasp the essence of his assignment.

Fazheng froze, then half-jokingly exclaimed, "Please don't let Lu Zijia and Lu Boyan handle my duties. That would be a disaster waiting to happen!"

Jia Xu's expression darkened. He wasn't that irresponsible—leaving such tasks to a couple of twelve or thirteen-year-olds. He glared at Fazheng, "I have other candidates. Zichuan recommended someone, meaning Wenru should train them first, and then pass them on to Zijing for further development."

"That sounds promising. Another civil administration talent, huh? But with that training process, could it be another Zhuge Kongming?" Fazheng was initially excited, but then he realized that this method was precisely how Zhuge Liang was trained. Just thinking about Zhuge Liang's demeanor made Fazheng want to punch something.

"Possibly," Jia Xu said vaguely, as he hadn't met the candidate yet—he had only heard about them through a letter Chen Xi had sent to Liu Bei, which was then passed to Li You. "But this is good news. The stronger our foundation, the easier our work will be."

Fazheng scoffed. He had always wanted to tell Jia Xu that being too comfortable would lead to complacency, but he had never voiced it. He didn't believe for a second that Jia Xu couldn't see the reality of the situation.

In Fazheng's view, Taishan's military strength was already sufficient. There was no need to continue stockpiling more forces—there wasn't an enemy they couldn't defeat at this point. This wasn't like a year ago when they had to worry about the Yuan family's potential unification. Now, even if the Yuan family united, they wouldn't be able to hold them back.

"Xiaozhi, there are too many interesting things in this world. Don't let your vision become too narrow. This time, as Gan Xingba's advisor, I want you to broaden your perspective. Don't just focus on the Central Plains—our lord's ambitions are beyond what the Central Plains can contain," Jia Xu said with a smile, patting Fazheng's shoulder.

Fazheng frowned, wanting to ask for clarification, but ultimately held back. "Alright, I'll go and see what's out there. But let me be clear—I'm guessing my real mission is to help the two imperial relatives in Jingzhou and Yizhou keep Yuan Shu in check and curb his influence in the South."

"It's no longer about Yuan Shu. You've been spending so much time at home with your lovely wife and concubines that you're out of touch with what's happening outside. Yuzhou, Jingzhou, and Yangzhou are now under Sun Ce's control," Jia Xu said with a sigh.

Although Jia Xu had long anticipated Sun Ce's rise to power, he hadn't expected it to unfold in such a dramatic way. His original plan was to force Sun Ce into a conflict with Yuan Shu, making Sun Ce carry a stigma, diminish his reputation, and significantly reduce his appeal to talent.

But the current situation was entirely unexpected for Jia Xu. He realized that he had been too hasty when questioning Zixu, but unfortunately, that wild encyclopedia was no longer around.

"No way," Fazheng said, his face filled with disbelief.

"I wish it weren't true, but it is. Otherwise, I wouldn't be sending you to handle it," Jia Xu replied helplessly before recounting the entire sequence of events to Fazheng.

The story of how Sun Ce inherited Yuan Shu's forces was so bizarre and convoluted that it left Fazheng stunned. He finally understood what it meant when people said reality was stranger than fiction. How could everything have turned so absurd in just a little over ten days without him keeping up with the news?

"And it gets even crazier. Missing out on the latest intelligence was a major blunder on your part," Jia Xu said, smirking. "We've taken Yanzhou."

"Pfft, that's impossible! It hasn't even been a month!" Fazheng exclaimed in disbelief. "What on earth have I missed these past few days?"

Chapter 656: Being Too Smart Isn't Always Good

In this era, the transmission of information was slow and antiquated. Without special channels, it was nearly impossible to obtain news from another province. For instance, while the battle between Liu Bei and Yuan Shao might decide the fate of the empire, the people in the southern regions remained blissfully ignorant.

"You've missed out on quite a lot," Jia Xu nodded, "Don't get too caught up in your affairs with women. Go and establish your own achievements. Don't you want to be like Zichuan, dressed in the attire of a prince, welcoming your bride?"

Fazheng fell silent. Ever since Jiang Ying had returned, he had indeed been slacking off. The reason was obvious, and now, with Jia Xu's reminder, he quickly snapped out of his complacency. It wasn't yet time for him to rest on his laurels.

"Please have someone compile a summary of major events from around the country every three days and send it to me," Fazheng said, his resolve returning as he spoke with a steady tone.

"Rest assured, as long as you need it, it will be done. Guo Fengxiao suggested this sort of system when he went north, but later deemed it too troublesome and only requested updates on northern affairs. He didn't want to be notified about the south unless something major happened," Jia Xu nodded.

Seeing Fazheng's now calm demeanor, Jia Xu added with a meaningful tone, "Kongming has had the habit of reviewing intelligence regularly for a long time. He goes over reports from all over the country every three days, and reviews major events on the day they occur."

"That guy..." Fazheng muttered in dissatisfaction, "He's really annoying, but that's just like Zhuge Kongming."

"It seems you're no longer at odds with Kongming," Jia Wenhe nodded. "Among the younger generation, you and Kongming are the standouts. After Zijing, Kongming will undoubtedly be the one to take over. After me or Fengxiao, it will be you. Get along with Kongming."

"I knew it wasn't going to be that simple. So Kongming is going too, huh? Don't worry, I won't make trouble for him," Fazheng said, looking a bit frustrated. After hearing Zhuge Liang mentioned earlier, Fazheng had already suspected that Zhuge Liang would also be part of this mission.

"Good. Make sure to exchange ideas with him. I believe you two can complement each other," Jia Xu patted Fazheng's shoulder and then sighed, "In the blink of an eye, you've grown so much."

Fazheng rolled his eyes. What did he mean by "in the blink of an eye"? And complementing Zhuge Liang—how unreliable did someone have to be to suggest something like that? If he and Zhuge Liang were together, Fazheng could barely suppress his impulse to argue; if they didn't end up fighting, it would already be a miracle.

Jia Xu shook his head and said no more. The tension between Zhuge Liang and Fazheng was something they would have to resolve on their own. Although everyone believed that if they could work together smoothly, they would be an unmatched pair with capabilities far greater than when separated, the two of them just couldn't see eye to eye!

After Jia Xu left, Fazheng hurried to give instructions to Jiang Ying and then brought his sister-in-law, Wang Yi, back home.

Wang Yi had been living happily in Taishan since her arrival, with no intention of returning to Fufeng. Fazheng, although vengeful towards his enemies, treated his own people very well, and thus he treated Wang Yi, who had brought his wife to him, with great kindness.

Compared to the barren lands of Yong and Liang, nothing could match the prosperity of Taishan, the most thriving city in the empire. Naturally, after arriving, Wang Yi was nearly dazzled by the luxury and had no desire to return to her homeland. Over time, she had developed the habit of daily shopping trips, accompanied by a few servants.

Unlike Jiang Ying, who was worried about Fazheng's departure for military duties, Wang Yi was much more carefree.

"That's how it is. I may not return until summer, but when I do, I'll formally marry you," Fazheng reassured Jiang Ying.

"Brother-in-law, my sister and I will miss you. Remember to bring us gifts when you return," Wang Yi said cheerfully, showing no concern at all.

"I will. I'll bring gifts for both of you. But while I'm away, your sister has a soft nature. If anyone from Fufeng visits and I'm not around, you'll need to handle it," Fazheng said calmly, knowing that Wang Yi's words had already eased Jiang Ying's worries.

"Don't worry, brother-in-law. If anyone from the Jiang family comes, they'll behave themselves. Just make sure to bring those gifts back, and I'll make sure Jiang Jie is dressed beautifully for your return," Wang Yi responded confidently. Though she was somewhat dazzled by the prosperity around her, she was still a sharp-minded woman.

"Ying'er, while I'm away, if your cousin wants to buy anything, just let her. The Fazheng family may be small, but we're not lacking in wealth," Fazheng said. He knew that to get someone to work hard, you had to keep them happy. Jiang Ying was frugal and thrifty, completely different from Wang Yi, who expressed her personality freely. He worried that while he was away, Jiang Ying might try to curb Wang Yi's spending.

"And you, if anyone bullies you, don't try to handle it on your own. Run back here and tell the doorman, then have him take you to Xing Si to find Man Baining," Fazheng instructed Wang Yi. He wasn't worried about his wife, who rarely left the house, but Wang Yi loved to go out and explore.

"Oh..." Wang Yi drawled in response, as if wondering why she needed so much protection.

Fazheng sighed as he watched Wang Yi's casual attitude, knowing she hadn't fully grasped the seriousness of what he was saying.

"Forget it. Do you want to be an official?" Fazheng asked, exasperated. Compared to Mi Zhen, Wang Yi was still more reliable, at least in Fazheng's eyes. "If you want, I can get you a position as a lady official."

"Is that even possible?" Wang Yi asked in surprise. She realized that perhaps she had underestimated Fazheng—her brother-in-law was quite capable after all.

"Just say if you want it or not," Fazheng said, feeling helpless. If he could convince Wang Yi to take an official position, at least someone would be keeping an eye on her. Moreover, he noticed that Wang Yi tended to do whatever he suggested, rarely changing her mind once she agreed.

"It's not just a tea-serving position, is it?" Wang Yi's eyes gleamed with interest, but she was clever enough to specify that she wasn't interested in menial tasks typically assigned to female officials, whose real purpose was often just to be seen and married off.

"..." Fazheng didn't reply immediately. He had indeed considered tricking Wang Yi into such a position to keep her out of trouble.

Seeing the look of disdain on Wang Yi's face, Fazheng sighed internally, realizing that his sister-in-law was too clever to be easily fooled.

Chapter 657: A Seed Planted Unintentionally

Fazheng coughed lightly, "Of course not. Hmm, Zhuge Kongming is busy with military and political affairs, Wang Shuzhi has gone to Yanzhou, so... how about you become Lu Zijing's secretary? You know who Lu Zijing is, right?"

Although Wang Yi hadn't had much opportunity to interact with Taishan's ministers, she had spent enough time wandering around Fenggao to know who was responsible for building Taishan. Lu Su had contributed significantly to its development, so in Wang Yi's mind, Lu Su was an elderly, wise man with white hair.

"Yes, I know. Can I really be his secretary?" Wang Yi asked excitedly.

"You should be able to. I'll take you to ask him in a bit; he should give me some face," Fazheng said, estimating the time. After all, Wang Yi was literate, intelligent, and had good handwriting, so being a secretary shouldn't be a problem.

"Wow, you have that much influence?" Wang Yi asked, bubbling with excitement. She had only been in Taishan for a little over half a month, and Fazheng had spent most of that time at home with Jiang Ying, building their relationship.

Fazheng rolled his eyes, thinking to himself, "She really doesn't know much."

After making sure Jiang Ying was settled, Fazheng took Wang Yi out. They quickly arrived at the administration hall, where the guards respectfully greeted Fazheng.

"Is Zijing inside?" Fazheng asked. The weather was still chilly, so he wasn't sure if Lu Su was at home or at the office.

"Lu Cishi and Li Changshi arrived this afternoon. They are currently handing over some official duties to Zhuge Changshi," Xu Ding, the guard, replied, his expression as firm as ever.

Following Fazheng into the administration hall, Wang Yi became much more cautious, careful not to cause any trouble for Fazheng.

Even though Wang Yi had noticed that Fazheng seemed to hold a significant position, she didn't want to inadvertently cause any issues, especially knowing how arrogant Fazheng could be.

"Zijing, Li Shi, Kongming," Fazheng greeted the three men who were busy with their work as he entered, raising his hand in a familiar gesture.

"Fazheng, you're here. It seems Wenhe has already handed over military affairs to you, interrupting your time with your wife," Li You said calmly, "I'll make sure you get an extra month of leave later."

"Forget it; that's not important. I'm here to ask Zijing for a favor," Fazheng waved off the offer nonchalantly as he turned to Lu Su.

"Go ahead, what's the problem you can't solve?" Lu Su asked with a smile.

Wang Yi finally noticed the young man seated at the head of the table, dressed in a dark green scholar's robe, calmly organizing documents. His steady demeanor exuded a sense of wisdom, completely unlike the elderly figure she had imagined. The difference from her mental image was striking.

"There are many problems I can't solve. I have military duties that require me to leave Taishan, so I need someone to look after my household," Fazheng said, grabbing a chair and sitting down casually, a gesture that caught Wang Yi's attention. It spoke volumes about his status.

"Is that really something you need to worry about?" Lu Su chuckled, "Even if you didn't ask, everything would still be fine."

"Yes, well, this is my cousin. She's gentle, literate, and virtuous," Fazheng said, praising Wang Yi without hesitation. In truth, he didn't know her all that well, aside from the fact that she could read. But this was the time to flatter her.

"Greetings, I am Wang Yi of the Wang family. I pay my respects to Lu Cishi, Li Changshi, and Zhuge Changshi," Wang Yi said gracefully, bowing. Although she was shocked by how young Lu Su was, now was not the time to dwell on that.

"Enough with the pleasantries. Get to the point. Last time, you tricked me into having Gongyou build a road near your place, and I had to replan everything," Lu Su glanced at Fazheng, unimpressed by his attempts at flattery. He was immune to such things, having often interacted with women like Mi Zhen and Zhen Mi.

"My cousin wants to be a lady official. Is there an opening?" Fazheng got straight to the point.

"There are plenty of openings. Cai Zhaoji's library still needs more officials to manage the books. It's a relaxed job, and she'll even teach them," Lu Su responded without hesitation, suggesting that Wang Yi work under Cai Zhaoji, who was responsible for most of the female officials.

At this point, the daughters and sisters of Taishan's officials were all under Cai Zhaoji's supervision. Only she had the authority to manage such a distinguished group of young women.

"If it were that simple, I would have already sent her there. She wants to be a secretary," Fazheng sighed, "Just find a place here in Taishan for her as a secretary. It'll keep her from wandering around."

As Fazheng's gaze briefly passed over Wang Yi before focusing back on Lu Su, Lu Su immediately understood. This was just like when Mi Zhu had asked for his sister to be given a position, mainly to keep her under watch.

After a moment of consideration, Lu Su said, "Having her as a secretary is fine, but it's not ideal for a woman to follow someone around. And since she's your cousin, she can serve as a secretary here."

"I appreciate your help, Zijing," Fazheng said, feigning gratitude. He had expected Lu Su, the good-natured man, to think he had the same concerns as Mi Zhu had before.

"No need for thanks between us. As it happens, Shuzhi has gone to Yanzhou, and Kongming also has matters to attend to. I could use a secretary here," Lu Su said with a smile, though both Li You and Zhuge Liang turned their heads to hide their expressions.

Li You quietly averted his gaze, having already discerned Fazheng's true intentions.

Zhugé Liang, who often clashed with Fazheng, knew him well enough to see through Fazheng's real motive.

"You'll start here tomorrow. Just do whatever you're asked," Fazheng instructed Wang Yi, who was beaming with happiness.

"I'll work hard," Wang Yi replied, feeling a sense of joy. She realized that managing a household might not be her calling after all. The idea of holding an official position planted a seed in her heart, one that was beginning to take root.

"Zijing, make sure to keep an eye on her," Fazheng signaled to Lu Su with a look.

Fazheng's primary concern was genuinely to have Lu Su watch over Wang Yi, to prevent her from getting into trouble or making questionable friends. Even a fool could be responsible when it came to their siblings.

"Don't worry," Lu Su replied with a reassuring look.

Chapter 658: Not Taking It Seriously

As Fazheng and Lu Su exchanged glances, neither considered that Wang Yi and Mi Zhen were entirely different types of people, nor did they realize how different Wang Yi was from Cai Yan. Though all three were talented women, Cai Yan excelled in refined arts like music, chess, calligraphy, and painting, while Wang Yi specialized in strategy, tactics, and governance. Wang Yi wasn't here to idle; she intended to do real work.

In this era, there were no rules against women holding official positions, but few women had ever served as ranked civil officials. Most held minor roles related to service, dining, or ceremony.

There might have been some women with abilities equal to top-tier ministers, but they never had the opportunity to showcase their talents.

Wang Yi wasn't sure if she had a knack for governance, but she wasn't about to let this opportunity slip away. She had her own ambitions and saw this as a chance to prove herself.

After Fazheng escorted Wang Yi out of the administration hall, she still radiated happiness. Fazheng, unable to resist dampening her mood, remarked, "Still daydreaming? Tomorrow, you'll start learning from Zijing. No more wandering around, and if you mess up and get dismissed, don't expect me to help you."

"I won't get dismissed! I definitely won't embarrass you," Wang Yi said confidently, looking at Fazheng.

"Don't worry, even if you do a terrible job, it won't embarrass me," Fazheng replied dismissively. "You're not a man, so messing up is to be expected."

Fazheng had no idea how deeply this remark would affect Wang Yi. It was this very statement that steeled her resolve to make Fazheng see her in a new light.

"Later, I'll get you a permit to access the library. Zijing seems to be planning a waterworks project again. You should study up so you don't get lost when he talks about it," Fazheng said nonchalantly. "There are all sorts of books there; feel free to read them, just don't damage anything. If anyone asks, just say you're a new official."

Fazheng wasn't really concerned with what Wang Yi could do or whether she was suited to be a secretary. For him, the priority was simply finding someone to keep an eye on her. Despite Wang Yi's suspicions, the level of supervision hadn't changed much in essence.

Lu Su's attitude was the same. He didn't care whether Wang Yi could or should do the job. His role was simply to keep an eye on her for Fazheng, without paying much attention to details like her age.

If Fazheng had brought a man for consideration, Lu Su would have at least evaluated his capabilities. Even a genius like Zhuge Liang had undergone thorough assessment and wasn't officially recruited until he was fourteen.

Wang Yi's casual recruitment was largely because no one saw her as a real official. Even Li You and Zhuge Liang, who were known for their strict adherence to rules, turned a blind eye. Their indifference signified that they didn't consider it a serious matter. The only person taking it seriously was Wang Yi herself.

"Alright," Wang Yi responded enthusiastically. She was still riding the high of excitement, deeply admiring Fazheng for securing her an official position. Naturally, she planned to study waterworks in earnest.

Fazheng had no idea that his attempt to take the easy way out by making Wang Yi an official would later cause him much consternation. Sometimes, it turns out that women can be just as formidable as men.

After securing a permit for Wang Yi to access the library from Cai Yan, Fazheng considered his tasks for the day complete.

Cai Yan's serene, intellectual demeanor, coupled with her stunning beauty and subtle sorrow, had a profound impact on both men and women. Her combination of talent, appearance, and poise was unmatched, and neither Mi Zhen nor Zhen Mi, who were still developing and lacked experience, could compare to her.

Naturally, Wang Yi was also drawn to Cai Yan's charisma and obediently followed her, feeling that she had finally found a group where she belonged. Wang Yi had been in Taishan for over half a month, but

this was the first time she had encountered so many other women, most of whom were also quite beautiful.

"Cai Dajia, please take care of my cousin," Fazheng said respectfully. Even he adopted a more serious tone when addressing Cai Yan, in stark contrast to his usual casual demeanor.

"Yes, I'll look after her," Cai Yan replied gently. Although she was only a few years older than Wang Yi and the others, she often took on the role of a senior figure.

After giving Wang Yi a few more instructions, Fazheng quickly made his exit from the place that made him uncomfortable. He also harbored a bit of fear towards Cai Yan—not because of any curse, but because being around her made him feel like a delinquent student in the presence of an exemplary one. There was a sense of unease, as if it was better to avoid her if possible.

Having left Wang Yi in good hands, Fazheng headed straight to Gan Ning's camp outside the city, ready to mooch off his friend. Unlike Zhuge Liang, Fazheng had no qualms about taking advantage of others.

"Xingba, I'm here to seek your protection," Fazheng shamelessly announced even before he reached the camp gates.

"Fazheng!" Soon, Gan Ning and Taishi Ci emerged together, not at all bothered by Fazheng's behavior. Gan Ning had long since grown accustomed to Fazheng's antics; after all, when Gan Ning first arrived, it was Fazheng who had kept him company in his mischief.

"Xingba, whether I earn merits, get paid, or do hard labor this year depends on you. Don't let me down; I still need to get married," Fazheng said as he jumped down from the carriage and threw his arm around Gan Ning's shoulder, giving Taishi Ci a nod of acknowledgment.

"Don't worry, with me, Gan Xingba, you can be at ease," Gan Ning boasted, "We'll sail back to Yizhou in style, and no one will dare stop us. As for your wedding, when have I ever skimped on betrothal gifts?"

"That's right, you've always had the money, living off the sea," Fazheng gave a thumbs up. When it came to lavish gifts, Gan Ning's generosity never failed to impress. Though the Mi family was wealthy, they couldn't easily gather a variety of rare pearls like Gan Ning could, thanks to his coastal connections.

"Come on, let's drink! Once we set out tomorrow, it'll be hard to find time for a good drink," Gan Ning laughed as he filled cups for Taishi Ci, Fazheng, and Mi Fang.

"You wouldn't believe it, Fazheng. Money is one thing, but last year I spent so much time finding that place the strategist told me about. When I finally got there, I almost couldn't control myself," Gan Ning said, his voice slightly slurred as he drank more. With Fazheng present, he felt at ease and let his secret slip.

"Oh? It must be quite the haul to get you so excited," Fazheng said with a grin, assuming Gan Ning was exaggerating as usual.

"It's worth at least a thousand times what I have, and that's just the liquid assets," Mi Fang chimed in, his expression twitching as he raised his cup.

Chapter 659: Trouble with a Single Misstep

Mi Fang's comment left Fazheng momentarily puzzled since Mi Fang was often overlooked in comparison to Mi Zhu, who was usually the first person people thought of when mentioning the Mi family.

"Sigh, you wouldn't believe it—where we went last year," Taishi Ci said, setting his cup down on the table with a sigh, a look of deep contemplation on his face. "It really is true that you don't know how vast the world is until you venture out."

"Stop leaving things half-said. What did you guys see?" Fazheng asked curiously, suppressing his inebriation with a bit of willpower. Only then did he begin to grasp the full implications of what Mi Fang had mentioned earlier—wealth a thousand times that of their family, all in cash. How was that even possible?

Gan Ning set his cup down and began recounting the events of the previous year.

The main task that occupied Gan Ning throughout the previous year was transporting prisoners to Yizhou. After completing that task, he accepted Chen Xi's assignment to explore the southern regions.

By that time, it was nearly winter, and with the northern seas already beginning to freeze over, Gan Ning was more than happy to head south.

With orders in hand, Gan Ning and Taishi Ci organized their fleet, towing sufficient supply ships and carrying an uncertain map drawn by Chen Xi along with a few feng shui masters.

It turned out that Gan Ning and Taishi Ci were fortunate to have survived the journey. Mi Fang, known for his fear of death, had prepared an abundance of supply ships after learning that the sea charts Gan Ning held were unreliable. After all, they were not going into battle, so Mi Fang made sure they had plenty of smaller boats in tow.

As they set off, everything seemed fine while passing Yizhou and Qiongzhou, but once they truly ventured into the open sea, Gan Ning realized that his previous experiences navigating the Yangtze River were nothing compared to the vastness of the ocean. Storms at sea could easily spell doom, even if they used their qi to try and resist; in the face of such intense storms, even inner qi was often useless.

After being battered by several major storms, Gan Ning found that all five thousand of his soldiers had developed inner qi, even the rowers. Gan Ning himself saw a significant improvement in his strength through repeated confrontations with the storms.

Even Mi Fang, who was primarily concerned with logistics and had been living an easy life, managed to break through to the level of refining qi into steel after surviving several deadly storms. After all, anyone who saw a storm break the mast they were tied to would fight for their life. In those situations, anyone who got swept away would have drowned unless they could manifest inner qi.

To be fair, Chen Xi had made a slight error when drawing the map. They should have sailed south from Yizhou, but Gan Ning, based on the map, sailed south from Qiongzhou, which led them on a longer route. Fortunately, they eventually discovered what Chen Xi had referred to as the theoretical island of Luzon.

As to why it didn't match the map exactly, Gan Ning, Taishi Ci, and the others believed that this was indeed the large island Chen Xi intended them to find. The reason was simple: after the feng shui masters surveyed the island, they came to the conclusion that the entire island was essentially made of metal, with visible mineral veins everywhere.

The sight of such abundant copper and iron deposits was so captivating that even the fleet captains began to suggest staying on the island indefinitely, ruling over the local resources and living like kings, with Gan Ning as their leader.

However, Gan Ning quickly dismissed this idea after a moment's hesitation. Without the connection to the central plains, these resources would be worthless. Moreover, this island had been pointed out by Chen Xi, who likely had his own reasons for it. Gan Ning didn't believe that claiming the island for himself would lead to any lasting control.

Taishi Ci, a man of filial piety, remained unmoved by the idea. With his mother still alive, he had no desire to settle in such a remote place. As for the wealth, Taishi Ci didn't see the point in having more money than one could ever spend.

Mi Fang, meanwhile, was the most composed. Although he was astounded by the fact that the copper on the island could create wealth a thousand times that of his own family, he wasn't tempted in the slightest. In this life, he had never experienced the hardships of poverty. The wealth of the Mi family was more than sufficient for him, and even if the Mi family subsidized the military, no one would object.

As a result, despite some of the sailors' desires for wealth, the strong leadership of the three men kept things under control, and no significant issues arose.

Of course, those who were so money-driven that they were willing to stay behind were left on the island at Gan Ning's suggestion. He left them with ample weapons and equipment to guard the island, while all the ships were taken away. The remaining sailors and feng shui masters were content with their decision, and everyone was satisfied.

Upon their return, Gan Ning made a new map of the sea route, making future trips much easier. On their way back, as they passed through Jiaozhou and the Nanyue area, they made a profitable trade with the local tribal chiefs, exchanging glassware, porcelain, silk, tea, and other goods for local specialties like jewels, coral, ivory, rhino horns, and spices. They also shamelessly hauled a large amount of timber onto their ships before continuing their journey.

Porcelain, silk, tea, and glassware were extremely popular in the Nanyue area, and since Mi Fang was willing to trade for anything, they accepted not only jewels and coral but also spices and even rare woods if those were all the locals had to offer. The tenfold profit margins made Mi Fang eager to collect whatever he could.

When they finally arrived at the port in Qingzhou, they unloaded their goods, and Mi Fang handled the accounts. The Mi family collected the goods and immediately converted them into cash. Soldiers who wanted their share paid out immediately received it on the spot, while those who wanted to send it to their families had the Mi family deliver it for them.

This kind of service was exclusive to the Mi family in the Taishan, Qing, and Xu regions. In addition to these soldiers, some merchants also entrusted their money to the Mi family for safekeeping to ensure its safety. The Mi family issued receipts, and the funds could be withdrawn at their destination, with the Mi family taking no cut of the transaction.

Initially, the Mi family only offered this service to merchants they knew well, but after Mi Zhu became the head of the Taishan Merchants' Guild, it became a benefit extended to all members.

With Mi Zhu's financial backing, no one doubted the Mi family's reliability, and everyone was happy to take advantage of the service. After all, carrying large sums of money was nerve-wracking, but carrying a small receipt was much safer.

When Chen Xi noticed the increasing trend of money transfers through the Mi family, he quickly stepped in, taking control from Mi Zhu to prevent the unregulated growth of this practice, which could have led to the emergence of banks. It wasn't the right time for such institutions to appear, so the Taishan government took over the operation, although it was still nominally under the Mi family's name.

With the government now handling it, merchants felt even more secure. The government was seen as more reliable than the Mi family, which led to even more people using the service. Over time, as the amount of money held increased, Lu Su, who hadn't initially understood Chen Xi's reasoning, eventually realized why Chen Xi had removed Mi Zhu from the operation.

Chapter 660: The Differences Between Two People

Fazheng listened in silence to Gan Ning and the others as they recounted their experiences. After a long pause, he sighed and said, "Only now do I realize how vast the world truly is, and I finally understand what Master Li and Master Jia meant when they spoke of their frustration with the heavens."

"Indeed, it's that same frustration. Here in the Han Empire, we never seem to have enough resources," Mi Fang added with a sigh. He wasn't entirely sure what Jia Xu and Li You had said, but Fazheng's mention of their frustration resonated with him deeply.

"As Master Li said, if the heavens don't grant it, we shall take it for ourselves. Once we plant our flag there, that place belongs to us," Fazheng said with a nod, feeling a sense of pride. During this period, Han officials had a strong sense of pride in the empire's strength. Even amid internal strife, they never doubted their ability to crush foreign enemies.

"Don't worry," Gan Ning said confidently, "Even though over a thousand of my men might be greedy, they are still Han soldiers. They won't forget who they are."

Fazheng nodded in agreement. A thousand well-equipped Han soldiers would be a formidable force in any place outside the Central Plains. For example, the Wuji Colonel who controlled the Western Regions only had about two thousand men under his command...

"One day, I'd like to see the world beyond as well," Fazheng mused. "Focusing solely on the Central Plains can be rather limiting. The preparations we've made in Taishan are beyond what any other warlord could imagine. But it's a shame that the Han Empire's effective control range is limited to what can be reached within ten days' travel."

If messages couldn't be delivered within ten days, and if armies couldn't arrive within a hundred days, any rebellion in such areas would be impossible to quell. This was a significant constraint on the empire's ability to govern distant territories.

"Master Lu is working on the roads precisely to address this issue," Gan Ning remarked out of habit before realizing he shouldn't be aware of such matters. "Uh, I mean, that's what I heard Master Lu say."

Although Fazheng was a bit suspicious, he didn't press further. He nodded and continued to engage in idle chatter with Gan Ning and the others, fostering camaraderie until nightfall, when he returned to Fenggao to spend the night at home.

Meanwhile, Zhuge Liang was diligently continuing his studies. In contrast to Fazheng's relaxed approach, Zhuge Liang, ever cautious, had already begun to gather intelligence on the four provinces of Yuzhou, Yangzhou, Jingzhou, and Yizhou.

"Yizhou is truly a troublesome place," Zhuge Liang thought after reviewing the intelligence on Yizhou from the past few years. The region was tightly sealed off, offering outsiders little chance to learn much about it.

"It seems that the most critical aspect of this mission will be obtaining accurate information about Yizhou," Zhuge Liang concluded, closing the intelligence reports with a frown.

"This is likely a precautionary measure," Zhuge Liang continued to analyze. "Liu Zhang of Yizhou is weak-willed, but as a member of the imperial family, if our lord sweeps across the land, it would take only a single envoy to bring him to submission. However, because of Liu Zhang's weakness, it's also possible that someone might usurp Yizhou from him. So, we must prepare for that possibility."

Zhuce Liang carefully considered the potential enemies surrounding Liu Zhang, eventually focusing his attention on Hanzhong. "If we can eliminate Zhang Lu, Liu Zhang could serve as a faithful guardian of his territory. But if he can't even reclaim Hanzhong, we might have to make early preparations."

"Rest now, husband," Jiang Ying said, bringing a bowl of ginseng soup to Fazheng. She watched him drink it before gently urging him to rest.

"Yes, yes, let's sleep. I'll figure it out later. I'll just adapt to the situation as it comes. These intelligence reports are practically useless," Fazheng grumbled, feeling frustrated. He then pulled Jiang Ying close and went to bed.

Unlike Zhuge Liang, Fazheng didn't have the patience to pore over such reports. He was more adept at improvisation. After reviewing the intelligence on Yizhou, all he felt was that the region was closed off and xenophobic. Beyond that, he had no further impressions, so he decided to deal with Yizhou's people once he met them.

The next day, both Fazheng and Zhuge Liang appeared before Gan Ning with renewed energy. The group set out by water toward Xuzhou, where they planned to rendezvous with Chen Dao, bolster their forces, and feign an attack on Yuzhou. In reality, their mission was to divert troops from Yuzhou to Yanzhou while preparing to make alliances with Liu Bei and Liu Zhang.

Upon arriving in Xuzhou, Zhuge Liang immediately noticed that with Zhao Yun's Baima Yicong already deployed and now with Chen Dao's half-trained Baiyi soldiers, there were hardly any regular troops from Taishan left in Xuzhou, except for Zhang Fei's unit.

Zhuce Liang, knowing Zhang Fei's character, was concerned. Although Zhang Fei could be meticulous at times, he was prone to rash decisions and had a temper. Was it really wise to leave him in charge of Xuzhou, especially with the local aristocratic families harboring resentment against them?

"Are you worried about General Zhang?" Fazheng asked with a smile.

"General Zhang is well-suited for leading a charge but not for holding down a territory," Zhuge Liang said seriously. "I'm afraid the local aristocrats might plot against him."

"I was the one who recommended General Zhang for this position," Fazheng said after glancing at Zhuge Liang.

"This doesn't seem appropriate," Zhuge Liang replied, furrowing his brow.

"On the contrary, only with General Zhang here do the Xuzhou aristocrats have the courage to act," Fazheng sneered. "General Zhang doesn't need to gauge the situation himself—others will do it for him."

"Are you trying to draw out the hidden enemies? But what if Yuzhou or even Jizhou moves against us?" Zhuge Liang's frown deepened despite Fazheng's explanation.

"Jizhou is far away and beyond immediate reach. And there's something crucial to keep in mind: by the time Jizhou receives this intelligence, an unexpected situation will likely arise," Fazheng said with a cold smile. "Moreover, Yuzhou's grudge over the events of a few years ago is still fresh. Given such an opportunity, even if it's a trap, they'll be tempted to take it."

"Did you anticipate the situation with the Yuan family and Sun Ce?" Zhuge Liang asked, relaxing his frown slightly.

"No, I didn't foresee things aligning so favorably. However, I did meet with Chen Yuanlong of Xuzhou. He's quite talented, though unfortunately constrained by his family," Fazheng sighed.

"I see," Zhuge Liang nodded and refrained from further questioning.

Fazheng's strategy soon began to show results. The aristocrats in Xuzhou, seeing that only Zhang Fei's unit remained, could no longer suppress their anger and started planning to seize the opportunity to challenge Liu Bei.

At the same time, the Yuan family in Yuzhou and Zhou Yu also received this enticing news. Deciding whether to act or not became a real headache for them.