

Mythical 711

Chapter 711: The Beginning of Turbulence

When Zhao Yun arrived, he didn't bring many troops, only his White Horse Cavalry. He handed over his infantry to Taishi Ci, as Zhao Yun never had a deep sense of attachment to his personal troops and didn't need them to maintain his influence.

Zhao Yun's arrival signaled Chen Xi's imminent departure, which wasn't welcomed by everyone. For example, Gan Ning, though Zhao Yun technically didn't have the authority to command him, understood that with Chen Xi leaving, Zhao Yun would be the one to take over the northern defense. There was no debate about this.

Fortunately, Gan Ning was reasonable and didn't voice any objections. After Zhao Yun arrived, he turned Chen Xi's previous orders into a plan of cooperation. Gan Ning, along with Zhuge Liang and Fa Zheng, remained in the north, awaiting the right moment to act.

Of course, Zhao Yun had no intention of commanding Gan Ning directly. His role was to divide the defensive zones, from the Qingzhou-Jizhou border to the Yanzhou-Jizhou border. Barring any major surprises, this defense line wouldn't change for years. Even if they advanced into Jizhou, it would be a gradual push into enemy territory, not a shift in the defensive line.

"Zilong, Xingba, the eastern defensive zone of Yanzhou is yours. Zijing will likely arrive with troops soon, and he'll serve as your strategist. Xingba, you should take command of the navy. I believe the time is near," Chen Xi sighed. "Reports from Qingzhou indicate that the Lu family's latest ships have launched. When the time comes, you can go and take command. In the south, you must achieve victory."

"Don't worry, Military Advisor. I will defend Yanzhou well," Zhao Yun said steadily, clearly having done his homework.

"I'm confident too. Once the eastern part of Yanzhou is stabilized, I'll lead Kongming and the others to Jiyin. We will be victorious," Gan Ning declared with his usual arrogance. No matter how much time passed, Gan Ning's confidence never wavered.

"Whether or not we succeed depends on you," Chen Xi said, turning to Zhuge Liang and Fa Zheng. "The northern war won't end quickly, and I don't want us to fight on two fronts. Neither does Lord Xuande."

So, you two must not make any mistakes. Zhou Gongjin is formidable; don't let him seize any opportunities."

"Rest assured, the plan I've set will be executed. I will ensure that Yuzhou is cut off," Fa Zheng said, his tone flippant but his eyes filled with confidence. Despite his seemingly unreliable demeanor, no one could deny his intelligence.

Zhuge Liang nodded. "I'll keep an eye on Yizhou. Although the generals from Yizhou have performed admirably since leaving the region, Pang Shiyuan is skilled at exploiting risky situations. It's possible he could defeat the enemy in the most unexpected ways."

"So, if Yizhou falls, it's up to you," Chen Xi said with a smile. "Actually, there's nothing much I need to tell you. Just don't overwork yourself. Against any opponent, you won't lose, but overexertion could lead to worse consequences than any defeat."

In truth, Chen Xi was most confident in Zhuge Liang, but he was also the most worried about him. Unlike Gan Ning's occasional foolishness or Fa Zheng's impulsive decisions, Zhuge Liang was always mature and cautious.

Unfortunately, Zhuge Liang was also too diligent—so much so that Chen Xi found it concerning. Zhuge Liang didn't seem to consider himself human with how much he worked.

"I'll be careful," Zhuge Liang replied, hesitating briefly before agreeing to Chen Xi's request.

"Alright, I have nothing more to say. Once you're on the battlefield, just do your best. While there are many strange and talented people in this world, few can truly give you trouble. Just stay cautious," Chen Xi said lightly, glancing at the four people in front of him. All of them were exceptional talents, and as long as they performed well, they would rarely meet a match.

As Chen Xi boarded his carriage, he noticed Zhuge Liang looking as if he wanted to say something but couldn't. Smiling, Chen Xi reassured him, "I'll bring Miss Huang and Old Master Huang to Taishan on my way. The Huang family needs someone to hold down the fort right now."

With that, Chen Xi departed for Taishan, escorted by Xu Chu and his group of Tiger Guards. Originally, Chen Xi had planned to leave Xu Chu in Yanzhou, but since Xu Chu was Liu Bei's bodyguard, he had no choice but to bring him back to Taishan. Moreover, Chen Xi needed someone to protect him openly—or rather, someone to act as a deterrent.

As Chen Xi, escorted by over six hundred Tiger Guards under Xu Chu's command, made his way to Fenggao, reinforcements from Taishan also departed from Fenggao. Led by Sun Guan, Zhao Dun, Wu Lan, and others, and with Lu Su as their strategist, they led an army of thirty thousand out of Fenggao.

Meanwhile, in Donglai, Qingzhou, merchant ships loaded with goods docked, and the guards were the first to disembark. Judging by their disciplined march, it was clear they were seasoned warriors.

Xun Yan stood at the dock, overseeing the inventory of goods with his soldiers. He frowned slightly at the increasing number of guards but, recalling Jia Xu's secret letter, decided to let it be.

Xun Yan had grown fond of Liu Bei's policies and no longer held the mindset of drifting aimlessly, just looking for a decent lord to serve. He had seen that Liu Bei's ambitions resonated with his own, which was why he had fully committed to Liu Bei, rather than just going through the motions like before.

[Jia Wenhe is unreliable,] Xun Yan thought as he looked at the growing number of guards. Although he understood that these guards were meant to serve as bait to eliminate internal threats, the size of the bait seemed excessive.

[It looks like I need to contact my cousin to show where I stand,] Xun Yan thought as he closed his ledger and calmly walked past a tall man, maintaining a professional demeanor. In reality, during the time spent accounting, Xun Yan had already identified the guards and their leader.

[I hope Jia Wenhe knows what he's doing. Yuan Shao seems to be entering a phase of high confidence, with plenty of courage and strength. These soldiers could be considered death squads. Fortunately, they're not here to cause destruction.]

Xun Yan weighed the combat strength of the opposing force and concluded that, even with the retired veterans and the emergency reserve soldiers he could summon, he couldn't take them on alone. However, with this assessment in mind, Xun Yan felt reassured. As long as Fenggao was prepared, the noble families about to reveal themselves would be nothing more than jesters.

[I'll go home and write a letter to my cousin, then shut my doors and watch the show. This stance should be enough to indicate my tacit approval of the noble families' actions. They'll likely strip me of my governor position and summon me to Fenggao for questioning. After that, I won't need to return—an alternative way to enter the center of power.] Xun Yan yawned, pretending as if he hadn't seen anything, and left.

Chapter 712: Underlying Currents

"Brother Han, are we really just going to let him leave like that?" Gongsun Du asked, watching Xun Yan's departing figure as he addressed Han Xun.

"Do you really want to chase after him and kill him? Don't be foolish. Our mission isn't to deal with Xun Yan. Unload the goods and prepare to head toward Taishan and Fenggao," Han Xun replied calmly, retracting his gaze. "Besides, Xun Yan might not even be our enemy. If he fails to act appropriately, someone else will deal with him."

"Xun Yan, huh?" Gongsun Du frowned. "Fine, forget it then." He then turned to his subordinates and commanded, "Unload the goods, load them onto the carts, and transport them to Taishan."

Xun Yan left the dock with a calm expression, just as he had planned. Once he returned to Donglai, he closed his doors and refused all visitors. Any noble family members who came to visit were told that Xun Yan had fallen ill.

The fact that Xun Yan, who held actual military and political power in Donglai, had suddenly fallen ill at such a critical moment was something that the noble families could not help but ponder. The more they thought about it, the more they felt emboldened.

The rebellious factions within the noble families had already grown arrogant after the arrival of Yuan Shao's army. With Xun Yan's tacit support, they became even more brazen. What had once been cautious, covert actions were now openly displayed—they were hungry for power.

With Xun Yan leading by example and with Zang Ba and others having moved north, loosening their grip on Qingzhou, many of Qingzhou's prefects simply allowed the noble families to act as they wished. As long as the noble families didn't cause trouble in their own jurisdictions, the prefects turned a blind eye.

Of course, if any noble families dared to challenge the prefects' absolute authority in their counties, the prefects would not hesitate to respond harshly.

In this environment, where the people were indifferent and the officials did not interfere, the noble families felt that their opportunity had arrived. Although some noble scions were puzzled by the behavior of Qingzhou's prefects, they justified it by their own newfound strength.

"Brother Sun, what should we do?" Yin Li and Wu Dun, prefects of Le'an and Jinan in Qingzhou, were well aware of the situation in their jurisdictions, so they came to Linzi together to consult with Sun Kang.

"Wait," Sun Kang said after a moment of thought. "I was appointed Prefect of the Qi State by Prime Minister Fa's trust when he left. Before he left, he reminded me that no matter what happens, the prefects should focus on their duties."

"What about the noble families under our jurisdiction?" Yin Li frowned. "I'm worried that if they continue to gather like this, they'll gain enough strength to attack the cities. My deputy, Hua Yan, has advised me to bring troops into the city."

"My deputy has also suggested bringing troops into the city," Wu Dun said, his expression dark. "The noble families have amassed a significant number of private soldiers. If something goes wrong, it'll be a huge problem."

"Bringing troops into the city is fine, but don't provoke the noble families. Our task is to protect the people and maintain peace. If we lack sufficient forces, then conscript able-bodied citizens. The people of Qingzhou have mostly seen bloodshed before," Sun Kang replied after frowning for a moment.

"Conscripting the common people..." Wu Dun clearly wasn't optimistic. These were the same people who had been Yellow Turbans two years ago. While they could certainly fight, Wu Dun was concerned about their discipline. If they were conscripted and a battle broke out, they might cause more damage than the noble families.

"Don't worry. While their discipline might not be great, they have a strong sense of right and wrong in certain matters. The Yellow Turbans may have had poor military discipline, but in some cases, their values will surprise you," Sun Kang said, waving his hand dismissively. He had witnessed firsthand the

scene of tens of thousands of Yellow Turbans mourning for their fallen leader, where nearly all the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou grieved.

Because of that experience, Sun Kang knew that while the Yellow Turbans might have had poor discipline, they wouldn't turn against those who had helped them. To this day, the Yellow Turbans in Qingzhou still followed the traditional rites to honor their great leader and chief. Zang Ba himself was often moved when he saw people honoring him, even if it initially caused him some distress.

As the saying goes, "Righteousness often dwells among those who are rough." The situation with the Yellow Turbans was no different. They knew exactly how they had come to enjoy their current way of life, and they were willing to defend it with their lives—the life where they had clothes to wear, food to eat, and a roof over their heads.

In April of 194 AD, a rebellion broke out in Donghai, Qingzhou. A man claiming to be a disciple of Zhang Jiao laid siege to Beihai. Using this as an excuse, many civil and military officials accused Chen Xi of harboring ill intentions and petitioned Liu Bei to crack down on the Qingzhou Yellow Turbans, reduce investments in the common people, and strengthen military and political control.

Following Xun Yue's advice, Liu Bei acceded to the officials' demands. Taishan once again sent troops to Donghai to quell the rebellion, reducing Taishan's military strength to a historic low. As for the officials who had proposed holding Chen Xi accountable, they were now idle at home.

Soon after, allegations emerged that students from the Taishan Academy lacked virtue and were accepting bribes, leading to unjust rulings in Qingzhou.

The noble families began to clamor that the widespread education initiative would only empower unworthy individuals with knowledge, amplifying their potential to disrupt society. They argued that the noble temperament and cultivation couldn't be instilled in just one generation and that the influence of one's forebears was crucial to one's character. According to them, providing education to the common people would only lead to a degradation of the entire bureaucratic system.

In essence, the noble families started attacking the education initiative. Despite the program only having been in place for three years, its massive investment was something the noble families found intolerable. To them, with such vast resources, there were many better things to be done. And where had these resources come from?

A class comprising only one percent of the population controlled ninety percent of the power and eighty percent of the wealth, all while wanting to keep it within their families forever.

Thus, the noble families naturally didn't want anyone disrupting this system. Although most of them still didn't take the education initiative seriously—believing that even if commoners learned from books, they would still remain commoners, unworthy of standing alongside them—they clung to the idea that it was their place to determine who was worthy.

The noble families under Liu Bei's rule had complex feelings about him. They certainly wanted to be among those who followed a rising dragon. By now, it was clear to anyone with eyes that Liu Bei was on the rise. However, Liu Bei's continued success offered them little benefit.

While they could be considered his followers, they found that Liu Bei's growth was leaving them without what they truly desired—power and status. Therefore, they felt compelled to ensure that Liu Bei's rise depended on them rather than on Liu Bei's own capabilities.

As a result, although Yuan Shao had his own calculations, so too did the noble families. Why should they submit to Yuan Shao and fall under the influence of Jizhou's noble families? Why not trim Liu Bei's wings and then help him rise with the backing of the Qingzhou and Xuzhou noble families?

Chapter 713: Recognizing the Times

"Follow the dragon, follow the dragon... Why should we Qingzhou and Xuzhou noble families follow behind you Jizhou families? We've had enough of that two hundred years ago. Why should we follow you again this time? This is the anger of the Qingzhou and Xuzhou noble families. They didn't gamble before, but this time, they are willing to take a chance!"

As Chen Xi rode his carriage along the official road back to Taishan, he overheard numerous rumors along the way. He could understand the noble families' pursuit of power, but their petty, underhanded tactics only made Chen Xi sigh. Had he not left them a path to rise? No, quite the opposite—he had left them multiple paths.

"Zhongkang, tell me, what exactly do the noble families want?" Chen Xi made a gesture to Han Qiong, signaling him to block the sound from escaping. By now, Chen Xi had become more comfortable instructing Han Qiong.

"They probably want you to step back," Xu Chu hesitated before speaking. Unlike Dian Wei, Xu Chu, though not scholarly, had received some family education and had his own understanding of power struggles.

"They want me to step back?" Chen Xi chuckled, then sighed. "Do they have the qualifications to make me step back?"

In that moment, a trace of helplessness flashed in Chen Xi's eyes. Why, when he had already shown mercy, did these fools still not know their place? It wasn't that he couldn't crush these upstart noble families; he had set limits before. But those who had followed his lead years ago had already recouped their losses many times over.

"There are always those who can't see the bigger picture. Let's take a detour to Pingyang and see what those raucous noble families are up to," Chen Xi yawned, but his eyes revealed an icy coldness. There was a Bao family in Pingyang that had been so active that even Chen Xi had caught wind of it.

"Pingyang?" Xu Chu frowned, hesitated, then spoke up, "Military Advisor, perhaps we should head straight back to Fenggao. Recently, things in Pingyang have been a bit unstable."

"Unstable?" Chen Xi sneered. "Let's go. I have some ties with the Bao family. Let's see what they're up to."

"I still think we should return to Fenggao first. I'm sure the Lord has been waiting for you there for a while now," Xu Chu was still uneasy. The Bao family in Pingyang had been so active lately that even a marching soldier like Xu Chu had heard the news. He didn't want Chen Xi to go to such a dangerous place.

"To Pingyang," Chen Xi said calmly, glancing at Xu Chu. That look made Xu Chu immediately abandon any thoughts of further explanation.

Chen Xi changed course from the official road leading from Feicheng to Fenggao, heading toward Pingyang. Fortunately, the roads in Taishan were well-connected, sparing Chen Xi from a bumpy journey. By the time Chen Xi was nearing Pingyang, the Bao family had just received word of his approach.

"Uncle, at most half an hour from now, Lord Chen will arrive in Pingyang. What do you think he's coming for?" Bao Xun asked, his expression clearly showing concern after receiving news of Chen Xi's imminent arrival.

"Should we open the main gate of the Bao residence to welcome him, or shut our doors and refuse him?" Bao Shao said hesitantly. Although the Bao family had over a thousand private soldiers, he dared not suggest anything too rebellious.

"What we need to consider is why he's coming. Recently, our Bao family hasn't exactly been quiet about our views on education," Bao Tao frowned.

After Bao Xin's death and upon hearing that Liu Bei had defeated the Yellow Turbans, the Bao family had moved back to Taishan. Now, with Bao Dan, the old master, rarely speaking, it was Bao Tao who was effectively steering the family.

It was partly due to Chen Xi thwarting Dong Zhuo's plans in Luoyang that Bao Tao hadn't died in Xingyang. But after Bao Xin's death, Bao Tao resigned from his post and moved his family back to Taishan. He did this partly because he saw promise in Liu Bei and partly because the Bao family had been a prestigious family in Taishan for generations. In the past, they could muster twenty thousand private soldiers!

Moreover, although the Bao family had left Cao Cao's domain, they had supported him during the campaign against Dong Zhuo and later, after Bao Xin's death, when Yanzhou fell into Cao Cao's hands. There was still a connection there, so even if Cao Cao rose to power in the future, he wouldn't make things difficult for the Bao family. Thus, Bao Tao moved the family back to their ancestral land.

Unfortunately, by the time the Bao family returned, Chen Xi had already distributed Taishan's land to the common people. Although the Bao family held land deeds, they couldn't reclaim the land from the people. Fortunately, Chen Xi didn't press too hard, and the Bao family wisely followed his lead, shifting their focus to commerce.

As a result, after several years, the Bao family's wealth had reached its peak. Moreover, the land exchange vouchers Chen Xi had allowed them to keep were still valid. According to Chen Xi, these vouchers would be honored once the land was unified under one rule. Of course, this benefit was only for families who had followed Chen Xi's lead in those early years.

In short, the Bao family had suffered little loss. Unfortunately, when people are well-fed and clothed, they often seek power. The Bao family, like many others, found themselves in a position where they lacked nothing materially, and so their ambitions turned once again to the pursuit of power.

"How about we just shut our doors and refuse him? That person is quite formidable. It's better not to meet him if we can avoid it," Bao Xun suggested, frowning. This was how most noble scions felt about Chen Xi—when someone is so powerful that you can't even see their full capabilities, fear and awe naturally arise.

"We will greet him outside the city with our entire clan, invite him in with great ceremony, and answer any questions he has. We should have no other thoughts," Bao Tao was still deliberating when the old master, Bao Dan, who rarely left his quarters, appeared in the main hall. Leaning on his cane, he glanced at his sons and grandsons.

"Father, what brings you here?" "Grandfather, please, have a seat." The family members in the main hall quickly offered Bao Dan a seat.

"At a time like this, how could I not come?" Bao Dan struck the floor with his cane a few times, causing his sons and grandsons to lower their heads in silence.

When Chen Xi arrived in Pingyang, the entire Bao family was waiting for him outside the city. The old master, Bao Dan, personally greeted Chen Xi.

"Old Master Bao, it's been a long time," Chen Xi said, looking at the calm expressions of the Bao family members. He sighed, then jumped off his carriage and bowed to Bao Dan.

"Lord Chen, you still have that commanding presence. Please, come in," the old master straightened his back and made a gesture inviting Chen Xi inside.

"Sigh, I initially came to see what was going on, but seeing how straightforward you are, Old Master Bao, I won't ask anymore," Chen Xi shook his head, indicating that he wouldn't enter.

While other families might consider it disrespectful, the old master remained polite and showed no sign of displeasure.

"Lord Chen, please ask your questions. Once you do, my Bao family will provide an answer. That way, you'll be at ease, and so will I," Bao Dan said, leaning on his cane as he looked at Chen Xi.

"I'm just curious—has my reputation grown so much that it's enough to make your Bao family change course?" Chen Xi asked helplessly.

Chapter 714: The Situation Amidst Chaos

"The Marquis Chen personally comes to visit. My Bao family is willing to offer him a favor. Power can be contended for at any time, but to confront you directly, no noble family in the entire land has the courage. We only dare to unite as one to face you, but if you stand before us, we do not dare," Bao Dan said, with a tone of absolute candor.

"Very well, I understand. From today, the Bao family will close its doors for three months," Chen Xi said, glancing at the descendants of the Bao family before him, then slowly making his pronouncement.

"Agreed," Bao Dan nodded in assent.

[The final desperate counterattack by the rebellious faction of the noble families: they will either pave the way for their family's complete submission to Liu Bei's rule with their corpses, or they will cut off his wings and succeed.] Chen Xi took a look at the members of the Bao family, then turned and left. He already understood what was happening. The noble families of this land were not fools, after all!

Chen Xi said nothing more, boarding the carriage and leaving Pingyang under Xu Chu's escort, heading back to Fenggao. With that brief conversation, he had already grasped the cause and effect of the whole situation, which was enough.

After seeing Chen Xi off, the Bao family members slowly returned to their old residence in Pingyang, where they shut their doors, just as they had said, and sealed the house for three months.

"Are we just giving up like this?" Bao Xun asked bitterly, looking at the head of his family. Although he had thoughts of giving up when he heard Chen Xi was coming, to abandon everything so decisively and cleanly, without gaining anything...

"Did you intend to negotiate with him?" Bao Dan turned to look at his grandson. He could see the resentment in his grandson's eyes, but what good would that do?

"No... I didn't dare..." Bao Shào replied with a bitter smile. "Perhaps this is for the best. By not participating in this matter, our Bao family might be spared. Misfortune lies beneath good fortune, and good fortune hides within misfortune. Who can say what today's decision will bring tomorrow?"

"Sigh... Seal the house for three months. All members of the Bao family are forbidden to leave. Anyone who steps outside the ancestral land of the Bao family will be expelled from the family," Bao Dan sighed deeply, then swept his eyes coldly over his descendants before issuing his order.

"Master, what about our business? How will we manage if we stop for three months?" One of the younger members of the Bao family stepped forward hesitantly.

"Has our Bao family fallen so far that we can't survive three months without doing business? Nonsense!" Bao Dan waved his sleeve and left without further discussion.

A few days later, several members of the Bao family did leave the house, and as promised, Bao Dan struck their names from the family registry. However, he did not remove their line from the ancestral temple.

[When will the Bao family produce talents as outstanding as those of the Xun or Chen families? Sigh, if they wish to leave, let them leave. I only hope that one day I regret my decision today, as the Chen family once did.]

Bao Dan's hands trembled slightly as he touched the family registry on the table. He sincerely hoped that one day he would be the one to regret this decision, not the family members who had left.

[Sigh... Time and fate.] Bao Dan sighed deeply, setting aside his impossible wish. The existence of someone like Chen Xi was, in the eyes of all the noble families, both a proof of their capabilities and a testament to their discernment.

Chen Xi, having left Pingyang, had no way of knowing what had happened within the Bao family. But even if he had known, it would have made no difference to him. By now, Chen Xi had fully understood the intentions of the noble families.

[I, too, represent the noble families...] Chen Xi sighed. Although he had always claimed to stand from the perspective of the common people, upon reflection, he realized that the class he represented was indeed the nobility.

[Never mind these matters. If I cannot change the class I represent, then let me change this class. At least for now, I still have the power to do so. The noble families... truly are a strange class.] Chen Xi looked up at the carriage roof and smiled bitterly. This class truly was strange!

"Military Advisor, are you alright? You've been silent since we left Pingyang. Did something happen with the Bao family? If you wish, I could go back and eliminate them," Xu Chu asked, concerned after not hearing a word from Chen Xi for a long time.

"No, it's nothing. I just came to understand some things, which will make dealing with them much easier," Chen Xi replied with a smile. "The noble families have their own demands of me. This was inevitable, I suppose. I imagine the Chen family, ever since they relocated to Taishan, has had much they want to say to me."

"...", Xu Chu remained silent. Once again, he realized that he and Chen Xi lived in completely different worlds, where he couldn't even comprehend the Military Advisor's thoughts. Should he reply with "Yes" or "Oh"?

"Zhongkang, let's head back to Fenggao. I've grasped the general situation. I was initially puzzled by why things had escalated so much, but now I understand. It's their demands of me, after all. Maybe I really should give it some thought," Chen Xi said with a smile, his thoughts turning inward as he considered what the head of the Bao family had said. After all, he himself did represent the noble class.

Xu Chu might not have understood what Chen Xi was talking about, but he at least understood the command to return to Fenggao. If he couldn't even grasp that, then it would be like Zhou Yu being unable to play with Sun Ce even after lowering his IQ—intelligence does impact the harmony of friendships.

As Chen Xi's carriage headed toward Fenggao, the closer they got, the more rumors they overheard, and the more peaceful the people appeared. It was clear that the years of good governance had led the people in the political center to largely ignore rumors. Though they still listened and spread them, no one believed them unless an official notice was posted.

"It seems the situation isn't too bad," Chen Xi said with satisfaction. All the efforts he had made to gain the people's trust were finally bearing fruit. No matter how widely rumors spread, the people treated them as jokes. They might chat about them over tea, but hardly anyone took them seriously.

"Military Advisor, someone is blocking the road, requesting an audience," Xu Chu suddenly reported to Chen Xi inside the carriage, ordering the soldiers to halt.

"Ignore them. County matters should be handled by the county magistrate. I'm now a military commander returning with the army; this isn't my concern. Tell them to go find the county magistrate of Boxian, Yang Rong. Don't bother me with it," Chen Xi replied calmly.

"As you command!" Xu Chu cupped his fist and ordered the soldiers to draw their swords, their murderous aura forcing the petitioners blocking the road to step aside in fear.

"Lord Chen says that if you have any concerns, report them to your local county magistrate," Xu Chu shouted as they passed through the crowd.

It was only after Chen Xi had left that the scholars dared to breathe a sigh of relief. "Hmph, what's so great about him? Isn't he just a few years older than us? How dare he treat us so dismissively!"

"He may not even be older than you," someone nearby sneered.

"If I had his luck..." Before the one complaining could finish, the person who had just spoken cut him off. "You'd still be no match for him."

"You! Tell me your name!" The enraged scholar shouted at the nearby man, who had infuriated him.

"I am the magistrate of this Boxian County," Yang Rong said indifferently. "Now, tell me, what did you want to petition about?"

Chapter 715

Yang Rong was doing very well in Boxian. As a person capable of governing an entire prefecture, managing a small county like Boxian was not something an ordinary person could compare to—especially since it was close to Fenggao, benefiting from a wealth of policies.

The reason Yang Rong had not been promoted to a prefectural governor despite his qualifications was largely because he wanted to stay close to his younger brother Yang Dan and his wife, Cai Zhenji.

There was also the fact that he lacked a strong desire for power. Yang Rong enjoyed his leisurely lifestyle in Boxian, spending a few days or a week dealing with official matters before putting up a sign to indicate his duties were done. Then he would head back to Fenggao to spend a few days with his wife.

As for whether this would cause any trouble, if one could manage a county as well as Yang Rong, to the point that no one would come looking for trouble, then generally, no one would care if he sneaked off. "If the people don't complain, the officials won't investigate"—that was the norm. Of course, if he were caught in Fenggao by Man Chong, that would be a different story.

After dealing with the troublemaker, Yang Rong dispersed the group of scholars. He could easily tell what these young noblemen were up to, but he was not inclined to get involved.

Yang Rong was the typical "don't meddle in affairs outside your jurisdiction" type. Even though this incident had occurred in his county, he was planning to spend a week in Fenggao and decisively chose to bring the troublemaker along. In Yang Rong's view, it was best to let the higher-ups handle such matters.

It wasn't that Yang Rong was foolish. Although his abilities couldn't match those of the top-tier officials, he was still among the best in his class.

Moreover, Yang Rong had a remarkably detached disposition, often viewing things from the perspective of an observer. This allowed him to discern many subtle undercurrents in various situations, which was why he would sometimes feign ignorance when asked by Jia Xu.

"These noble families are truly a headache," Yang Rong muttered as he shielded his eyes from the sun, gazing at the sky. He suddenly felt an aversion to heading to Fenggao, but thinking of his wife, he sighed and urged his horse onward, toward the place where all conflicts were about to converge.

[So be it, I'll consider this an act of loyalty to Liu Bei. Fenggao is indeed a gathering place for storms, so I might as well go and see what tricks the noble families have up their sleeves. But as for trying to hold Liu Bei or Chen Zichuan in check, they're far from being able to do so.]

As he thought this, Yang Rong glanced at the scholar riding beside him and shook his head slightly. It wasn't that he looked down on the noble families, but if they were all like this unimpressive bunch, they really stood no chance—none at all. The gap was just too wide.

[Forget it. I'll head to Fenggao and directly request an audience with Liu Bei. At least that will show where my loyalties lie.] Yang Rong decided to stop pondering these matters. With his insight, he could already tell that what was happening was a struggle between noble families. Yet, the higher-level conflict had not even begun. These noble families were merely pawns being manipulated.

[It's rather pitiable, really. The noble families, who have always been the ones moving the pieces, now find themselves as the pawns. But perhaps it's only through such a dramatic shift that the noble families will realize the kind of era this is, and only such a formidable turn of events can curb their greed.]

Yang Rong gazed at the heavens with a sense of lament. Though he couldn't see the full picture, just glimpsing a few key moves allowed him to understand that in this grand game across the land, the noble families had no choice left but to follow. They no longer had the right to resist; long ago, they had lost control over their own destinies.

Chen Xi could not hear Yang Rong's thoughts. He simply returned to Fenggao calmly, under Xu Chu's protection. As usual, Liu Bei and his remaining civil and military officials came out to greet him, although this time, the ranks behind Liu Bei seemed noticeably thinner.

"I'm back," Chen Xi said as he opened the carriage door and stepped out. He straightened up and looked at the large "Fenggao" characters on the city gate, speaking calmly. This return signaled the final adjustments in Taishan before the imminent northern campaign against Yuan Shao.

"Welcome back," Liu Bei said with a smile, looking Chen Xi up and down. "The petty villains have finally shown themselves."

"Yes, I came back to hear what the noble families want. What are they after?" Chen Xi replied calmly, then turned to Li You, Jia Xu, and the others. "I'll leave everything in your hands now. I'll retreat and refuse visitors until you've finished. When the time comes to act, I'll reappear."

"You've returned at just the right time, but it has disrupted our rhythm. I'm concerned that some of these small-minded fools might be too scared to act now," Li You said, gazing at Chen Xi.

"Perhaps this is their last chance at survival. Whether they choose to act out of desperation or retreat, who can truly see into the hearts of men?" Chen Xi shook his head. "The noble families truly are a contradictory existence."

"Indeed, very contradictory," Jia Xu agreed. "But soon, they won't be. Only by subduing them with our own hands can we claim the right to command them. True, permanent submission is impossible, but at least we can make them understand who they should be following now."

"Only by personally subduing them can we make them understand that morality, benevolence, and interests are only meaningful when backed by strength. We have given them morality and benevolence, and we have granted them benefits. Now, we must demonstrate our strength so they can see the truth!" Man Chong said coldly, clearly ready to strike with deadly force.

"Truth is always cloaked in force," Chen Xi smirked. "We have given them the ability to oppose us, but now it's time to wake them up. By this point, they're already like arrows nocked on a bowstring, with no choice but to release. I wonder how many noble families will act soon."

"Zichuan, you'll see. The noble families truly are a contradictory lot," Liu Bei said, patting Chen Xi on the shoulder. "They possess morality and talent, along with corresponding virtues, but they haven't used them for the right purpose. It's a shame about so many scholars, some of whom have dedicated three years to teaching their students."

"Right and wrong seem blurred now, but time will tell who is truly in the right. Time will prove everything," Chen Xi said, shaking his head. "Their principles and ours have come into conflict, and that's reason enough to crush them."

"I can't argue with you, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that as I stand on the city walls of Fenggao and look around, I'm very satisfied. I hope that one day, when I stand beneath the steps of the imperial court and look back, I will still feel this satisfaction," Liu Bei said with a smile, not disputing Chen Xi's words. He knew exactly what his goal was—he just felt a little regret for those people.

"We simply walk different paths. All I hope for is that one day, when you stand beneath those steps, you will see a world as prosperous as Fenggao is today," Li You murmured as he glanced at Liu Bei.

[To this day, as a ruler of the land, Liu Bei has only satisfied Li You in one respect. Everything else, he considers to be merely average, and that is Liu Bei's character.]

Chapter 716: The Noble Families, Oh the Noble Families

Whether when he was first rising to power or now as a ruler of the land, Liu Bei's only changes were in his appearance and demeanor. His heart remained bound by his oath, unwavering in his commitment to fulfill his dream: food and clothing for all, homes and fields for every family, education and care for everyone!

A simple and straightforward dream, but only Liu Bei dared to proclaim it and work relentlessly to achieve it. No matter the difficulties, even to this day, Liu Bei remained steadfast on this path, his heart resolute and unwavering.

Despite how discreetly Chen Xi tried to return, it was impossible to completely conceal his arrival from the noble families in Taishan. Realizing this, Chen Xi abandoned any attempt at secrecy. Though he maintained a low profile, he returned to Taishan openly and without pretense.

"He's back," said the members of the Qing and Xu noble families, watching from the windows of a teahouse as Chen Xi's carriage passed along the main street.

"He's back..." muttered the heads of various powerful families gathered in the northern part of Fenggao. Their expressions varied as they reviewed the intelligence reports brought to them, but any internal struggle they had felt began to dissipate.

If Chen Zichuan didn't return, even if they managed to win, what would be the point? In just a few short years, Chen Xi had helped raise Liu Bei from nothing to the brink of becoming a supreme ruler. If they couldn't gain Chen Xi's approval, if they couldn't earn his respect, then what meaning would their efforts have?

"Xu Ziyuan indeed lost, and it seems he lost quite thoroughly," sighed Bai Yue, the head of the Bai family. "But then again, it's only to be expected. Even though many of us here have gathered because of Xu Ziyuan's actions, none of us truly believed he could defeat that man."

"Losing was inevitable," said Wei He, head of the Wei family, with the same resigned expression. To him, the defeat of Xu You, who had once fought on the same side, was a foregone conclusion.

"Did anyone here really place their hopes on Xu Ziyuan to defeat that man? That was just a pretext," said Li He, head of the Li family, with a bitter smile. "If we were to hear now that Xu Ziyuan had won, I'd be more worried that things would be even more complicated for us."

"Although he returned quietly, he made no effort to conceal it, even taking the time to visit the Bao family. Such actions are typical of that man," said Zhang Hao, head of the Zhang family, with a look of helplessness. "The situation is clear—he's given us a way out. If we give up now, he'll let the past be forgotten. If we're going to back out, we better do it quickly."

"Giving up is unrealistic at this point. We've come too far, and there's no turning back now. It's a relief that he's returned; it means our families can be preserved. I truly hope we don't have to confront him. It's no joke—just the thought of facing him makes me tremble," said Shi Wen, head of the Shi family, with a wry smile.

His words prompted bitter smiles from the other noble scions present. Having seen Chen Xi's terrifying capabilities firsthand, who would want to go up against such a monster? But sometimes, there's no choice.

"For the sake of our families..." A noble scion stood up, extending his hand with a calm expression.

"For the sake of our families..." The others also stood, extending their hands in unison. Though they knew they were marching toward certain defeat, and that they didn't truly need to take this path, they still rose to face their fates.

"But what if, by some slim chance, he doesn't understand the demands of the noble families?" In moments like these, when everyone seems ready to march to their deaths, there's always one person who disrupts the consensus.

"Do you think he's like you?" scoffed Qian Lin, head of the Qian family, casting a disdainful glance at the young scion of the Su family.

"But what if he pretends not to see us?" Zhao Bin of the Zhao family said with a bitter smile. Just as you can't wake someone who pretends to be asleep, if Chen Xi chose to ignore them, there would be nothing they could do.

"Should we give up, then?" came a hesitant question from within the group, causing the others to pause.

"Let's do it. I trust him!" Shi Wen declared, and the others responded in agreement. In the end, their eyes burned with determination. Though they might not have been comfortable with Chen Xi's methods, and he had not always fought in the same trenches as they had, they were willing to place their faith in his integrity.

At another gathering of the Qing and Xu noble families, the atmosphere was entirely different. Unlike the resolute group earlier, this one had turned into a chaotic marketplace. Some wanted to retreat, others were prepared to fight to the death, still others had given in to despair, and some were arrogantly confident. Their discussions yielded no consensus; each was more interested in what they might gain from the situation.

After returning home, Chen Xi immediately shut his doors to visitors. At this time, his wife, Chen Lan, was six months pregnant, so Chen Xi spent most of his time with her and Fan Jian. As for Mi Zhen, Zhen Mi, and the others, they were all under Cai Yan's watchful eye, restricted from leaving the house. Even if Cai Yan didn't fully understand the situation, Li You would have warned her of the dangers.

The sun was already becoming slightly warm in the April sky. Since his return, no one had disturbed Chen Xi, and he was content to spend his time at home, resting with his wife. But on this day, as Chen Xi was basking in the sun with Chen Lan and Fan Jian, a maid reported that someone from the Chen family had come to see him.

"Ugh..." Chen Xi frowned, uncertain whether he should meet with Chen Shang. He had some idea of why the Chen family was visiting, but what troubled him was whether or not he should see them.

"Husband, you should meet with the family elder. Since the Chen family moved to Taishan, they haven't caused you any trouble and have faithfully followed your orders. Now, knowing that you're refusing visitors, they still come to see you—there must be something important," Fan Jian said hesitantly, noticing Chen Xi's thoughtful expression.

"Alright," Chen Xi agreed after a brief moment of reflection. Although he had a good sense of why they had come, he still needed to show them some respect.

When Chen Xi stepped into the central hall, he saw the family elder, Chen Shang, pacing back and forth, looking visibly agitated.

"It's been a long time, Uncle," Chen Xi said calmly, bowing slightly to Chen Shang.

"Zichuan, it's good to finally see you. To be honest, I came here fully prepared for you to refuse to see me," Chen Shang said, his tone carrying a hint of resentment, though his expression soon calmed.

"You're too kind, Uncle. I've been away from home for so long that only my two wives have been here. Under these circumstances, it's only natural that I refuse visitors. But since I'm back now, I wouldn't be so rude as to turn you away. Please, take a seat," Chen Xi replied, not taking Chen Shang's resentment to heart. Though his attitude toward the Chen family had been somewhat distant, he still adhered to the proper courtesies.

"I imagine you can guess why I'm here. But I want to know, Zichuan, how do you view the noble families of the land?" Chen Shang asked directly after taking a sip of tea, getting straight to the point.

"I come from a noble family," Chen Xi responded calmly.

"..." Chen Shang remained silent, clearly waiting for Chen Xi to continue.

Chapter 717: Sit Down and Talk

"I can tolerate the special privileges of the noble families, their desire for power and land, and even their ever-expanding ambitions. In fact, as long as they don't destabilize the foundation of the state, I find the existence of noble families quite reasonable," Chen Xi said, almost making Chen Shang overjoyed.

"But," Chen Xi continued, "all special privileges, all desires for power and land, must be tied to responsibilities. Otherwise, what the noble families are doing, in essence, is undermining the foundation of the state." Chen Xi's words left Chen Shang utterly helpless.

"Is there no room for compromise?" Chen Shang asked, his face full of resignation.

"None. Do you remember how the Chen family rose to power? From stagnation and decline during the Western Zhou, to rising from poverty in the Spring and Autumn period, to flourishing at the beginning of the Warring States, and then gradually declining again, only to build up strength repeatedly to reach its current state," Chen Xi said calmly.

"But..." Chen Shang wanted to argue, but Chen Xi cut him off. "Without external threats, a noble family that stagnates will eventually disappear in the long river of history. Wouldn't it be better for me to personally weed out the weak and keep the strong?"

"Uncle, you still have a chance. Convince me, and I will help you. If you can't, then I will take matters into my own hands. At least if you fall by my hand, there will still be a chance for revival. But if you are overthrown by the people, you will have no chance left," Chen Xi said with a solemn expression, as if he were a warrior ready to face a challenge.

"Convince you?" Chen Shang scoffed. "Who are you? You are Chen Zichuan, the Marquis of Yingshang, the man who helped raise a powerful lord while still in your youth. If I could convince you, would I even need to be here?"

"Then let me convince you, Uncle. Let me ask you one thing: do you believe that the way the noble families have gained their current power is reasonable?" Chen Xi asked, looking directly into Chen Shang's eyes. He had realized that he now held an innate advantage over the noble families—not just in status, but in every aspect.

"It's reasonable!" Chen Shang replied firmly.

"Is it really reasonable?" Chen Xi asked with a slight smile, still staring at Chen Shang.

"It is reasonable," Chen Shang insisted, his eyes resolute as he faced Chen Xi.

"Is it truly reasonable?" Chen Xi's eyes now held a hint of mockery.

"Reasonable..." Chen Shang hesitated, his eyes flickering with uncertainty.

"It seems even you know the truth. Since that's the case, why not let me make it truly reasonable? At least then, when I ask you the same question in the future, you can look me in the eye and give me the same answer," Chen Xi said, his expression serious.

Chen Xi knew that the elders of great families like the Chen and Xun clans had the ability to discern the truth, and that they wouldn't lie to themselves. Even if they had to consider the well-being of their families, they couldn't help but speak the truth when questioned by Chen Xi.

"Making it reasonable is impossible. Human nature is inherently selfish!" Chen Shang shook his head. "The existence of families is inevitable, and human relationships are determined by nature. Mozi once spoke of universal love, but if your child and a stranger fall into the water, and you can only save one, how could you love them both equally?"

Chen Xi sighed inwardly. This was the frustrating thing about the Chen family—they were well-versed in the teachings of all the ancient schools of thought.

"Uncle, please don't speak in riddles. I can't achieve absolute fairness, but I can at least ensure relative fairness. I can make sure that the power held by the noble families is balanced by their responsibilities. At the very least, I can prevent the common people from looking at this entire class with hatred," Chen Xi said calmly.

"Our losses would be too great," Chen Shang admitted, no longer hiding his true concerns. By coming here, Chen Shang was acknowledging that after the noble families had dealt with the last wave of rebels, they had begun to reflect on their own existence and were seeking a way to negotiate with Chen Xi—not to demand more, but to minimize their losses.

"What do the noble families want? If you're hoping for eternal prosperity, forget it," Chen Xi said, cutting off Chen Shang before he could speak further.

"We aren't asking for the impossible. Those noble families who have already chosen to side with us have long since given up on rigidly maintaining the status quo. They simply don't want to see their decline continue," Chen Shang said, waving his hand dismissively. He wasn't chasing after unrealistic goals; he wanted tangible benefits.

"Fine. There's no need to discuss wealth; let's move on. You need land, family learning, power, and privileges," Chen Xi said, glancing at Chen Shang, who was watching him with a tense expression. As someone representing all the noble families in these negotiations, Chen Shang was under significant pressure.

As Chen Xi pointed out, wealth wasn't the primary concern for the noble families. While they needed money for certain things, it wasn't their ultimate goal. For the noble families, land was the foundation, power was the goal, and privileges were the icing on the cake. But most importantly, the noble families valued family learning and land above all else!

Land provided the foundation for their rise, family learning provided the means to achieve it, and the rest—power and privileges—could be pursued through the talents of their members, just as Chen Xi had done. Who would have predicted that the young man who left the family would amass such immense power?

"Yes, we need family learning, land, power—these things. But family learning comes first, land second, and power and privileges can be set aside for now," Chen Shang agreed, correcting Chen Xi's earlier statement. Noble families understood the importance of family learning better than anyone.

"Indeed, family learning is paramount. I can understand that. Land comes second, which also makes sense. Uncle, what you've said is reasonable. As for family learning, I have nothing to say. I've already opened the library; whether you're satisfied or not, the library is there," Chen Xi said, satisfied that the noble families were at least being realistic.

Chen Shang's heart sank at Chen Xi's words. If things were to continue this way, the noble families would be treated no differently than commoners, leaving them with no inherent advantages.

Seeing Chen Shang's reaction, Chen Xi smiled. "For the noble families, one book will count as ten. In other words, for every book you contribute to the library, you can choose to transcribe ten books from it."

Chen Shang's eyes lit up with joy at Chen Xi's offer. There were many valuable books in the library, and exchanging one for ten didn't seem like a bad deal. However, Chen Shang was still hoping for more.

"Can the ten books we transcribe be chosen from any category? And how many times can we do this in a year?" Chen Shang asked cautiously.

"Of course, this applies to regular books. Madam Cai Zhaoji has the catalog, as well as the library's general index. One book can be exchanged for ten, and noble families can also contribute a book in exchange for a specific title, or if they don't know the title, they can request a book based on its subject matter," Chen Xi explained. He knew that things needed to be restricted for people to truly appreciate their value.

"As for how many times this can be done, nine is the limit—so nine times a year. For specific titles, you can make three requests," Chen Xi said casually, having not considered the need for restrictions until Chen Shang brought it up.

Chapter 718: A Huge Pitfall, and the Nobility Fell Into It

"I'll speak on behalf of the other noble families," Chen Shang nodded.

From Chen Shang's perspective, exchanging one book for ten was an overwhelming advantage. A year could yield ninety-three books in exchange, considering that ordinary people could only borrow three books in three years. With such a significant advantage, if the noble families still lost, then even Chen Shang would believe they deserved to disappear.

In this era, from the viewpoint of the noble families, their true opponents were the scholars of humble origins, not the common people whom they regarded as beneath them.

For the noble families, losing to the scholars was unfortunate, but they could still tolerate it since many scholars were originally from fallen noble families. However, they completely disregarded the common

people. This mindset was vividly embodied in people like Yuan Shu and Yuan Shao, who never imagined that centuries later, it would be the common people, not the scholars, who would pull the noble families down from their pedestals.

"They will learn soon enough. When the number of educated commoners increases, they'll understand what true terror looks like," Chen Xi thought to himself, silently amused. The noble families were limited by their perspective and couldn't see their greatest threat.

"Uncle, let me add something," Chen Xi continued.

"Go ahead," Chen Shang replied, frowning but not refusing.

"For the sake of fairness, everyone under Lord Xuande's rule will have this privilege," Chen Xi said calmly.

Chen Shang was momentarily stunned. He repeated what Chen Xi had said, then smiled and responded, "No problem. If all the people of the realm have this privilege, that's fine. By the way, we actually have a lot of confidence in Lord Xuande."

"Zichuan, you are still a nobleman at heart. The only ones with real access to books are the noble families, so this privilege you offer is just a facade of fairness," Chen Shang thought to himself.

"That's all the better, then," Chen Xi nodded, unfazed by Chen Shang's apparent goodwill. The noble families were clearly conflicted about Liu Bei, caught between admiration and resentment. The reason? They respected Liu Bei, but unlike other warlords, Liu Bei did not rely solely on the noble families as his main support.

"Regarding the land, I can't return it to you just yet. But as I promised the noble families before, once order is restored, I will return the land to you. After all, you don't farm it yourselves, so there's no rush," Chen Xi continued, his expression unchanged as he made a promise to Chen Shang.

"Will you really return the land to us?" Chen Shang asked skeptically. Even with the land vouchers in hand, the noble families found this promise unreliable. However, given the generous terms Chen Xi had

just offered, Chen Shang decided to tolerate this uncertainty. "We won't ask for much—just return thirty percent of the land."

"Not possible right now. I still need it for the time being. But when the time comes, I will honor the land vouchers you hold. Although the location won't be here," Chen Xi firmly refused, despite feeling pleased with how much the noble families were willing to sacrifice in support of Liu Bei. However, he had no interest in fulfilling this request just yet.

"Zichuan, please be honest with your uncle. Don't deceive me, or else I'll be the one left in a difficult position when peace returns, and I'll be torn apart by those who expect answers," Chen Shang said with a hint of desperation, playing on their familial bond.

Chen Shang found Chen Xi's proposal highly unreliable. Land exchanges had been played out by the noble families many times before—exchanging high-quality fields for low-quality ones could leave them in tears. Noble families were confined to exchanging land within specific regions, but if this became a national matter, it could easily result in exchanging fertile fields for barren wastelands.

"Don't worry. I can draft a written agreement. If the land you receive isn't of high quality, you can come find me. I'll sign and stamp it myself. But for now, it can't happen. Besides, you don't really understand farming," Chen Xi said, remaining calm despite Chen Shang's emotional plea. Chen Xi found the situation amusing but assured his uncle that he wouldn't stoop so low.

"Are you sure it will be good land?" Chen Shang pressed.

"I have no reason to deceive you. We can even exchange smaller plots for larger ones, with the only conditions being that we can't commit fraud. A plot is a plot, whether large or small, high or low quality, irrigated or dry. The only thing that matters is that the land is real," Chen Xi said, his tone indifferent, as he spoke words that made Chen Shang's heart race.

Chen Shang was momentarily speechless, his mouth opening and closing as he struggled to find words.

"Rest assured, uncle. No one will go out and measure every plot. I'm at the top, and you're beneath me. Who would bother with such details? As for exchanging dry land for irrigated land, I'm planning to consolidate the noble families' land into one area. As for land deeds, I'll take care of those—no one will know once they're burned," Chen Xi said, opening a door for Chen Shang.

"Gulp," Chen Shang swallowed hard. He had seen bold people before, but never someone this audacious. Yet, Chen Xi's reasoning was flawless.

"So, uncle, what do you think? Want to give it a try? Just a few adjustments, and the Chen family could end up with thousands of hectares of prime land," Chen Xi said with a sly smile.

"You're not joking?" Chen Shang muttered.

"No joke. I can draft the agreement right now. But to avoid trouble later, I'll make it clear that all citizens are entitled to this benefit. However, since it's a benefit, it's first-come, first-served," Chen Xi said nonchalantly.

"The Northeast Plain fits all the conditions I mentioned earlier. But since you don't farm, you'll just treat it as ancestral land. Consolidating the noble families' land into one area for collective farming will make things easier," Chen Xi thought to himself.

"I agree," Chen Shang said after confirming that Chen Xi wasn't trying to trick him. There was nothing more to say—only a fool would pass up such an opportunity. As for whether this would harm the state, who cared?

"I'll draft the agreement, and you can take it back for the noble families' heads to sign. But let me make one thing clear: I can exchange land for you, but if it goes uncultivated and someone finds out, I won't go easy on you," Chen Xi said sternly.

"No problem. We won't let the land go to waste," Chen Shang agreed. "If we don't have enough labor, we'll hire people to farm it. We won't make things difficult for you, Zichuan."

Chen Shang knew that if the land were to be left uncultivated due to a lack of labor, higher authorities would likely investigate, and they wouldn't be able to cover it up. In such a case, it could drag Chen Xi down with them. So, he assured that all noble families would ensure the land was farmed, even if it meant hiring workers.

"Good," Chen Xi replied coolly, though inwardly, he was laughing.

Opening up the Northeast Plain for farming wouldn't be difficult in a world with internal energy and cloud energy. The challenge lay in cultivating the land afterward, given the lack of population. Even with a reclamation corps, managing five million hectares would be impossible. But with the noble families voluntarily signing agreements, they'd have no choice but to hire workers to farm the land.

With the noble families hiring workers and additional policies in place, they might just manage to fully cultivate that million-hectare land. As for the remaining four million, it would depend on how many noble families took the bait.

Chapter 719: The Nobility's Choice

"There are so few noble families. If we had more, it wouldn't be so troublesome. It would be much easier to manage them all together if we could consolidate all the ancestral lands into one area," Chen Xi thought to himself as he began calculating in his mind.

Chen Xi knew that such matters couldn't be rushed. If he appeared too eager, it would only raise suspicion. Even though Chen Shang might have some doubts, he had no way to verify them and could only carefully ponder and later test his assumptions.

When the time came to develop the Northeast Plain, Chen Xi could guarantee that the noble families would be both frustrated and overjoyed. After all, good land was indeed good land, small plots were exchanged for large ones, and the land deeds were in their hands. Chen Xi wasn't playing games with them—the only issue was the farming.

However, noble families didn't farm the land themselves. They hired long-term laborers, short-term workers, and employed their own servants. So, it wasn't much of a scam; the only hardship was moving people there for the first year. But once the granaries were filled after the first harvest, their pain would subside.

In this way, Chen Xi wasn't exactly scamming the noble families; in fact, they stood to gain significantly. But considering the vast, uninhabited Northeast Plain, Chen Xi felt it was only fair to use the nobility to fill this void while giving them some benefits in return.

"I'll agree to this on behalf of the noble families. But Zichuan, be mindful of yourself. Don't let yourself get caught in a trap. Even though I don't know how you're going to do this, I hope you understand the risks," Chen Shang warned, looking at Chen Xi. After all, he was his elder and cared for his well-being.

"Don't worry. Military strategy is not my forte, but in governance, you can trust that there will be no loose ends," Chen Xi nodded in reassurance.

After a few battles, Chen Xi had realized that military affairs were not his strong suit. But when it came to administration, he found it quite manageable. And so far, no one had noticed how poorly he handled military matters, as they had always won in the end.

"Then I'm reassured. Here are the nameplates of the noble families in Yuzhou," Chen Shang said as he took out a paper filled with surnames. "Most of them are just looking to benefit from the situation. If the unrest in Qingxu doesn't harm the foundation, they will follow in the footsteps of the Chen family."

Chen Xi took the paper and skimmed it quickly, surprised to see so many noble families considering aligning themselves with Liu Bei.

"Noble families have to look out for themselves. Although the Qingxu nobility both love and hate Lord Xuande, it's clear to the sharp-eyed that our families have been growing. Although we know we can't keep up with the rapid growth of Taishan, we have been growing nonetheless. It's just that, overall, our growth seems insignificant," Chen Shang said with a helpless sigh.

This was the most frustrating part for all Qingxu noble families. Their families had indeed grown, but why did it still feel like they were falling behind?

Some noble daughters, after learning basic statistical methods from Cai Yan, had figured out that although their families were growing faster than before, Taishan was growing much faster, which made their own growth seem trivial by comparison.

This was why noble families were eager to send their children to study under Cai Yan—she truly had talent. If Cai Yan's family hadn't been reduced to just one member, the noble families wouldn't have hesitated to marry into her line, as marrying a capable wife could help elevate the family. After all, it wasn't certain that misfortune would follow.

As a result, the Hedong Wei family was currently in a dilemma. They wanted to bring Cai Yan back, but they had not made the effort when she first left Chang'an. Now, they lacked the face to do so, and the matter was left unresolved. The Wei family had barely any ties to Cai Yan anymore.

In short, despite the frustrations of the Qingxu nobility, the noble families in other regions saw how these early adopters were now flourishing. Seeing this, they couldn't help but feel envious.

Noble families existed to grow stronger. The pioneers from Qingxu were now thriving. Even though they occasionally complained about Liu Bei, or about officials like Lu Su, no one else cared about that. They only cared about the results.

From the perspective of noble families in other regions, the complaints of the Qingxu nobility were merely a ploy to keep others from sharing in their newfound prosperity. They found it suspicious that the Qingxu nobility couldn't clearly explain how Liu Bei's government was limiting them. Seeing their continuous growth, it was natural for other noble families to be curious.

As for the rebellious elements among the Qingxu nobility, they probably never intended to overthrow Liu Bei. They needed Liu Bei's support, not opposition.

These families were mostly expressing their demands through this unrest. If they failed, they would obediently follow orders. After all, Liu Bei had never indicated he would completely destroy the noble families.

In truth, the Qingxu nobility could be divided into two categories, with three types of people. The first category consists of those who initially opposed Chen Xi. During the early stages, Chen Xi had no mercy in dealing with them, completely suppressing them. The second category includes those who, although dissatisfied, chose to side with Liu Bei and have been growing stronger, gradually accepting his rule.

The first category consists of a single type: those whom Chen Xi had thoroughly defeated and who now harbor deep resentment towards Liu Bei, truly desiring to overthrow him. These are the pawns of strategists like Xu You.

The second category splits into two types: those who prefer to be big fish in a small pond and, despite their improved circumstances, remain discontented because they lack significant power, and those who

are pragmatic, focusing on their family's growth. Since they've achieved their goals, they see no reason to rock the boat.

The first category is not worth mentioning, while the second represents the common dilemma among all noble families. Every noble family has these two types of people; the only difference is the ratio. This issue was bound to surface eventually.

Due to Xu You's machinations, the Qingxu nobility needed to vent their internal problems to maintain stability. But before doing so, they intended to lay their cards on the table.

If Chen Xi's response satisfied them, they were willing to become pawns, using this opportunity to integrate themselves into Liu Bei's administration in a different capacity.

If not, they would still act as pawns, but they wouldn't follow orders willingly, nor would they share any beneficial information with Chen Xi.

Mice have their paths, and snakes have theirs. When it comes to matters concerning the noble families, intelligence gathering doesn't prioritize this aspect, so not even someone like Jia Xu could know everything.

Chapter 720: Things Could Be Better

"So, after this event, these noble families in Yuzhou are willing to side with us? I don't recall Zhou Yu causing any recent trouble," Chen Xi asked, puzzled. Zhou Yu wasn't typically this aggressive.

"That's why I said 'after this.'" Chen Shang looked at Chen Xi, and in that moment, Chen Xi understood the underlying meaning.

"No wonder Uncle mentioned this as 'icing on the cake.' I see now. If we win, they'll see it as the foundation of a lasting power, and combined with what they've witnessed, they'll naturally consider joining us. It's also because they're dissatisfied with Sun Ce's methods, right?" Chen Xi said calmly.

"Exactly. How you use this information is up to you," Chen Shang said, handing over this strategic advantage to Chen Xi without hesitation. After all, it wasn't his own people who would suffer if things went wrong—those unfortunate families could just be seen as contributing to the greater good.

“Understood,” Chen Xi nodded. “Is there anything else? Go ahead and say it all at once. I don’t have any deep-seated resentment toward noble families. To be honest, as long as you don’t challenge the rules I’ve set, I won’t go out of my way to target you unless history itself deems your existence obsolete.”

“Can you put that in writing?” Chen Shang asked directly, recognizing how important this promise was.

“Sure, but writing it down is too basic. We have someone who has calculated that the Two Heavenly Cauldrons of Heaven and Man will soon emerge. When the time comes, I can have the words ‘No group or individual, be they commoners or nobles, shall be targeted by any ruler unless they destabilize the foundation of the state’ engraved on one of the cauldrons!” Chen Xi said nonchalantly.

To Chen Xi, the supposed emergence of the Two Heavenly Cauldrons was just a fabrication by Li You. He could do whatever he wanted with it. The noble families merely sought reassurance, and since Chen Xi had no intention of outright destroying them, he might as well give them that peace of mind.

Chen Xi believed that the noble family system inherently had flaws, especially after the spread of education. Their eventual decline into history was inevitable.

Of course, if the noble families somehow managed to survive and even thrive under the new educational system, it would mean they had undergone systematic reforms and adapted to the new era. At that point, would it even be necessary to target them?

Chen Shang was initially stunned by Chen Xi’s words. It wasn’t until Chen Xi mentioned engraving on the cauldron that Chen Shang realized the significance—these were none other than the legendary Cauldrons of Heaven and Man, associated with Emperor Huangdi!

“Is this for real?” Chen Shang asked in a daze.

“There’s no reason to deceive you. The Three Cauldrons of Heaven, Man, and Earth are said to belong to Emperor Huangdi. With the emergence of the Heavenly Cauldrons, I can have this statement engraved on them, to be preserved for all time!” Chen Xi said, tilting his head slightly. He felt that deceiving people was surprisingly easy, especially when you could strike at their vulnerabilities.

“No destabilizing the foundation of the state—no group or individual, be they commoners or nobles, shall be targeted by any ruler,” Chen Shang repeated, realizing that, like before, this was incredibly fair. But commoners had no reason to be targeted; only the nobility had any value in this context.

“What exactly does ‘destabilizing the foundation of the state’ mean?” Though shaken by Chen Xi’s words, Chen Shang quickly regained his composure, pinpointing the crux of the matter.

“When the time comes, Bo Ning will have his legal principles engraved on the Heavenly Cauldron, so you’ll know. Just focus on remembering the parts that pertain to you,” Chen Xi said with a smile.

Chen Shang’s face twitched. If they dared to engrave such things on the Cauldrons of Heaven and Man, it meant that even if there were traps, those would be clearly written out. If you saw the trap and still walked into it, there was nothing more to say—it was a matter of intelligence.

“Alright, I’ll agree to all of this. When the Heavenly Cauldrons emerge, the noble families will send representatives to witness it. If the contents engraved match what we’ve discussed today, we will abide by them!” Chen Shang said solemnly, implying that while the cauldrons might be fake, they must at least be recognized by Liu Bei and the people under his rule.

“No problem.” Chen Xi wasn’t concerned with these details. As long as he understood the noble families’ intentions, that was enough.

However, Chen Xi hadn’t anticipated that the cauldrons they would eventually unearth were the real deal. When the cauldrons were unearthed and the sky turned turbulent, it was clear to anyone with eyes that these were authentic. By the time they were moved to Fenggao, the visible manifestation of the nation’s fortune further solidified what these cauldrons truly represented.

Naturally, when Chen Xi had the statements engraved, the noble families outwardly condemned him for desecrating the sacred cauldrons, but inwardly, they were pleased. To them, having their concerns etched into these artifacts placed them alongside the legendary cauldrons.

“This is a list of all the rebellious members within the Qingxu noble families,” Chen Shang said, handing over a document that was never supposed to reach Chen Xi.

“You’re just selling them out like this...” Chen Xi’s eye twitched. The nobility had no scruples, it seemed.

“It’s not selling them out. This information wasn’t supposed to be given to you, but it’s no longer necessary. We’re satisfied with your conditions, and the nobility’s goal is to grow stronger, not to court death. We never really expected to win this rebellion,” Chen Shang said, shaking his head.

Chen Xi said nothing in response, simply listening intently. He was genuinely intrigued by the behavior of the noble families.

“There are indeed some within the Qingxu nobility who are very dissatisfied with you, but most acknowledge that following you has indeed made them stronger. We’re not blind, and we have plenty of intelligent people, even if they’re not as brilliant as you. There are still enough capable of governing a district or a county,” Chen Shang sighed. “At most, we’re just a bit unwilling to accept the situation.”

“There’s nothing that can be done about that. In Qingzhou, some families oppose me. What can I do? The fact that I didn’t wipe them out shows my restraint. As for the rest of you, to be blunt, I don’t have time to micromanage the nobility. If you follow my lead, your families will continue to grow,” Chen Xi said with a shrug.

The truth was that Chen Xi hadn’t gone out of his way to target the nobility unless they directly opposed him. Even then, he would only crack down on them if he noticed a widespread trend among them. Chen Xi’s strategy had always been to balance rewards and punishments—offer benefits while holding a stick. Even if he beat down a family, as long as they started following orders, he wouldn’t target them further. In fact, if a noble family wanted to leave, Chen Xi wouldn’t stop them.

“Our families are indeed growing, but Taishan is growing even faster. That’s why there’s internal conflict within the nobility. Otherwise, with our current rate of growth, we’d be fully supporting the ruling power in any other era,” Chen Shang said helplessly.