

Mythical 741

Chapter 741: The Hidden Danger Finally Erupts

"Small glass items can be handled by Lord Xuande's small glass kiln. The proper glass materials should be produced in the official kiln. This way, we avoid giving the scholars any leverage," Chen Xi suggested.

What exactly are these scholars? In the past, this group indulged in a life of luxury, discussing philosophy, playing music today, and drinking wine tomorrow. But ever since Chen Xi realized that these scholars were indeed capable—albeit more concerned with reputation than holding office—he decided to give them something to do.

He assigned them the task of criticizing and pointing out issues in governance. They were to speak up for the common people who didn't dare to voice their concerns. After all, these scholars had good moral conduct, though their behavior was sometimes eccentric.

Because of this, they were given the authority to provide suggestions and supervise the government. The result was that, when they couldn't find any major issues among the people or when their problems were minor and resolved quickly, they would turn their focus to the ruling class and create sensational news.

The last time these scholars had nothing to do, they stirred up a major scandal against Yuan Shao, leaving him in an embarrassing position. Chen Xi didn't want the same kind of scandal to occur on their side.

Chen Xi's words made Liu Bei feel a bit awkward, as the distinction between public and private kilns wasn't clearly defined when the glass kilns were first established. Only now, with Chen Xi's reminder, did Liu Bei realize that this was no longer an unregulated environment.

"Then I'll use my private kiln for making round mirrors. Zichuan, I seem to recall that you had a glass kiln as well. Which one was it?" Liu Bei asked, tilting his head.

"Did I?" Chen Xi looked up at the ceiling.

Who would remember such small details? But when Liu Bei mentioned it, Chen Xi vaguely recalled that he probably did have one back when the first batch of kilns was constructed. After all, some of the kilns back then were privately owned, though there were no formal documents or land deeds. In those days, who paid attention to such things? Of course, even now, no one would question whether Chen Xi had one or not.

"I remember you had one in the first batch of kilns. Do you recall which number kiln it was?" Liu Bei pondered aloud.

"It was the first batch that produced tea trays, cups, and teapots. There were only a few finished products, and we went together to check them out," Liu Bei reminisced, with Chen Xi nodding in agreement.

"I remember now. It was kiln number two. During the first firing, the whole batch turned out to be waste. I recall you even saying, 'Good thing it wasn't my glass kiln, or I'd have lost all my investment,' only for the workers to later report that your number two kiln was also full of waste." Liu Bei laughed heartily.

"Yeah, that did happen..." Chen Xi admitted, somewhat unsure. After all, he had often delighted in others' misfortune. "Well, let's use kiln number two to make large glass sheets, turn them into mirrors, and sell them all to cover household expenses."

"I'll purchase them then, and you can rest assured about the price, Zichuan. Unfortunately, the defect rate is just too high," Mi Zhu sighed. While these products were easy to sell, especially mirrors—after Mi Zhen saw one, she never wanted a bronze mirror again—the problem was the high defect rate.

"There's nothing we can do about it. The technique isn't advanced enough. For now, we just rely on the artisans' instincts. As long as we can still make a profit, we should keep going. These things are made from sand, after all. Selling one round mirror can cover all the production costs," Chen Xi said nonchalantly.

"White porcelain is also made from clay, but it's the technique that turns something ordinary into something valuable. No one says, 'Since it's made of clay, sell it at the price of mud,'" Mi Zhu retorted, dissatisfied. "We'll need to fire more of them."

"That's your domain, so you can decide how much to produce, Zizhong. Just don't let the market collapse under pressure. Also, get the artisans to work on different colors. We're not ready to mass-produce this yet, but we should be preparing the technology for when the time comes," Chen Xi added, giving a few more instructions. Although they knew this was a monopolized business, they weren't in a rush to profit from it at the moment.

After discussing some other matters, everyone dispersed. Chen Xi and the others were already used to the opulence of Liu Bei's new mansion. It no longer felt like when it was first built, and they didn't know where to settle. Habit, indeed, is a powerful force.

As Chen Xi arrived at the entrance of his own home, a white blur darted out from the door, and he quickly sidestepped to avoid it.

"Woof woof~" The little white dog barked a few times at Chen Xi, then darted back inside at an incredible speed.

In that brief moment, Chen Xi noticed something unusual. The normally all-white fur of his dog, Hum-Hum, had a few streaks of blood, and there was even a patch where the fur was missing. But recalling that the dog had likely fought off some bandits last night, Chen Xi didn't think too much of it. He was about to call Hum-Hum over for a bath, but the dog had already run back inside, clearly in a hurry.

Ever since being taken in by the Chen family, Hum-Hum had become more controlled, although there were still occasional incidents like running through walls by accident. It had also learned to ingratiate itself with those it needed to.

"Uncle Chen, nothing unusual happened today, right?" Chen Xi asked as he entered, greeted by his steward, who was waiting as usual.

"Master, the tree you planted was knocked down by Hum-Hum just a while ago," the steward said, bowing his head so that his expression couldn't be seen, though it probably wasn't a pleasant one.

"Was anyone hurt?" Chen Xi asked, puzzled. "It's been a while since this sort of thing happened. Did fighting last night get it all worked up?"

"A chicken from General Hua's next door became sentient and flew over. Hum-Hum spent the whole morning chasing it, and the tree was knocked down during that time. No one was injured, but Madam was startled. General Hua's steward already came by to apologize," the steward explained, still bowing his head.

"Cook that chicken for soup at lunch," Chen Xi said indifferently. "It's just a chicken. Taishan has tens of thousands of them. When you have that many, it's inevitable some will develop internal energy. But it dared to fly into my courtyard?"

"Master, that chicken is quite formidable. It scratched Hum-Hum's back, drawing blood, and even pecked off a chunk of flesh, which is why Hum-Hum was so persistent," the steward replied helplessly.

"Get an archer to take it down, and we'll have it for soup at lunch for Lan'er," Chen Xi said, pausing for a moment before realizing that, with over a million chickens, it wasn't a big deal if one or two reached the Refining Qi into Steel stage.

"Woof woof woof~" "Cluck cluck cluck~" The sounds of a chicken and dog fight drew closer, and then both animals suddenly appeared in front of Chen Xi.

"..." Chen Xi glanced at the steward beside him, feeling awkward. "Why didn't you tell me the chicken was this big?"

Chapter 742: After the Dispersal of the Divine Stone

Chen Xi looked awkwardly at the massive rooster, which was nearly one and a half meters tall. His own dog wasn't particularly large, only about a foot long, so no wonder its back had been scratched. For a chicken to grow this big was quite an accomplishment.

"Zhongkang, come over and help!" Chen Xi immediately stepped outside and, disregarding his status, shouted toward Liu Bei's residence.

"What's happened to Zichuan now?" Liu Bei, hearing Chen Xi's shout from inside, turned his head to look at Xu Chu. "Zhongkang, what's going on that Zichuan is yelling so frantically? Go check it out with Anguo. He hasn't been bitten by a dog again, has he?"

"Understood." Xu Chu and Wu Anguo clasped their fists, trying to stifle their laughter as they responded.

As soon as Xu Chu and Wu Anguo arrived, they saw the enormous rooster fighting with Hum-Hum in the outer courtyard. Immediately, they understood how to handle the situation.

Xu Chu charged forward like a bear, completely ignoring the rooster's pecking. He slapped the rooster's head, knocking it sideways, while Wu Anguo grabbed its claws and promptly dragged it away, planning to roast it for lunch—just as Chen Xi had intended.

"Military Adviser, it's taken care of," Xu Chu said, scratching his head as he approached Chen Xi. Hum-Hum, after seeing Xu Chu's brute strength and the fallen rooster, quickly retreated back to the inner courtyard.

"Take it to Lord Xuande's place. We might need to send troops to capture all the livestock and poultry that have developed internal energy. I've had a nagging feeling something was off for a while, and now I remember," Chen Xi said, rubbing his temple in frustration.

Xu Chu followed Chen Xi back to Liu Bei's residence. Upon seeing Wu Anguo dragging the large rooster, Liu Bei immediately understood the situation.

"For a chicken to grow this big is no small feat. Everything alright at your place?" Liu Bei asked, amazed at the sight. He pointed to a reclining chair, motioning for Chen Xi to sit before asking.

"No issues," Chen Xi sighed, shaking his head in exasperation. "We'll have it cooked for lunch; it should be quite nourishing."

Liu Bei waved his hand, signaling that everything was fine. "You left not too long ago, and now you're back again. What's the matter this time?"

"It's because of that." Chen Xi pointed at the rooster that Wu Anguo was still dragging around.

"I didn't think you'd be so stingy. Alright, take it back and cook it. Make sure I get a bowl of soup once it's done," Liu Bei teased with a laugh.

"Lord Xuande, you misunderstand. What I meant is, don't you think it's strange that a rooster can grow this large? And what about other animals? There have been numerous incidents of livestock developing internal energy recently," Chen Xi explained, rolling his eyes.

"Now that you mention it, it does make sense. Just as people can develop internal energy after eating well, so can livestock. But ordinary animals with internal energy aren't too much of a threat. It's only cases like this..." Liu Bei began to frown as he understood the potential danger.

"When the numbers increase, stranger creatures will appear. During the locust plague a few years ago, there were cases of locusts with the power of the Refining Qi into Steel stage, but they were still just insects. As long as they didn't reach the Internal Qi Projection stage, there was a limit to their physical strength and internal energy output, so a single slap could still kill them. It wasn't too alarming," Chen Xi added, frowning.

"Order a thorough inspection of the entire territory. Any livestock or poultry with internal energy strong enough to harm people should be captured immediately," Liu Bei said after thinking for a moment. "But this shouldn't be too pressing of an issue."

"I just remembered that several years ago, incidents like this were rare, if not nonexistent. But recently, there have been numerous cases of livestock harming people, and there are some things about this worth pondering," Chen Xi said, frowning as he looked at Liu Bei.

"That's because the Divine Stone has nearly fully dissipated, and the world's vital energy has increased substantially. Moreover, the natural vital energy is now much easier to absorb. Animals are even more sensitive to these changes than humans," a voice interrupted. It was Zuo Ci, who appeared suddenly, shaking his horsetail whisk as he offered an explanation.

"Daoist Zuo, aren't you supposed to be reciting scriptures at the Jingling Temple? What brings you to my humble abode?" Liu Bei asked, smiling as he greeted Zuo Ci.

"How could a place as magnificent as Lord Xuande's residence be called 'humble'?" Zuo Ci replied, tilting his head to look at Liu Bei. He could see the golden clouds gathering above this courtyard. Whether it was Liu Bei or Chen Xi, both were figures of great fortune. Even a small fraction of their luck would be highly beneficial to him.

"Daoist Zuo, are you saying that the increase in vital energy is causing animals to develop internal energy at a higher rate? What about humans? We're the most intelligent of all creatures. Surely, this must affect us too!" Chen Xi asked, his brow furrowing deeply.

"This generation won't be too affected. At most, people will find it easier to develop internal energy, and those who already possess it will find it easier to cultivate. However, the next generation may see children born with internal energy. These offspring are likely to reach the Refining Qi into Steel stage with ease," Zuo Ci said gravely. "By my estimation, such individuals will have a high chance of achieving this."

"Hiss..." Chen Xi remained calm, but Liu Bei couldn't help but draw a sharp breath.

In Liu Bei's mind, children born with internal energy would be even more gifted than the likes of Lu Bu or Zhao Yun. Even Zhao Yun and Lu Bu hadn't developed internal energy until they were five or six years old. The gap between them and these children would be staggering!

"Being born with internal energy isn't the problem. I want to know if this will affect the breakthrough to the Internal Qi Projection stage," Chen Xi asked seriously, fixing Zuo Ci with a focused gaze. Nothing was more important to him than this.

Chen Xi wasn't particularly concerned about babies being born with internal energy. What worried him was whether the rise in vital energy would impact breakthroughs to the Internal Qi Projection stage.

Whether the rise in vital energy made it easier or harder for people to reach the Internal Qi Projection stage, neither outcome was good news for Chen Xi.

If it became easier to break through, it would erode the advantage Liu Bei currently had with his elite generals, making the Internal Qi Projection stage less valuable. If it became harder, it would mean the next generation's potential would be diminished, and the number of top-tier warriors would decrease.

"There will be no effect on that. I can assure you. The breakthrough to the Internal Qi Projection stage is entirely about self-realization, not the accumulation of internal energy. Some people may accumulate vast amounts of energy but still fail to break through, while others manage to do so with far less," Zuo Ci

said, shaking his head. The Internal Qi Projection stage wasn't something that could be achieved through sheer internal energy accumulation.

Of course, there was an issue of perspective here. Those at the peak of the Refining Qi into Steel stage could still accumulate internal energy, which suggested that the next stage could be breached through sheer energy accumulation.

However, in practical terms, breaking through purely by accumulating vast amounts of energy was akin to using brute force to prove one's path. The sheer amount of energy required for that would be roughly equivalent to the full accumulation of nine Zhao Yuns...

Chapter 743: The Chariot About to Charge

What was even more important was that the internal energy accumulated during the Refining Qi into Steel stage was different from the internal energy accumulated during the Internal Qi Projection stage.

Only Xiang Yu, who swallowed an entire Divine Stone core, could achieve the feat of proving his strength through sheer force. For everyone else, such a thing was virtually impossible. So, unless one could achieve clarity of heart and mind, they could essentially abandon the hope of reaching the Internal Qi Projection stage.

In fact, to put it more practically, if a peak Refining Qi into Steel warrior wasn't stuck at the clarity of heart and mind barrier, many more would have reached the Internal Qi Projection stage.

Guan Hai's ability to reach the Internal Qi Projection stage was almost a miracle. After struggling for so long, he only achieved enlightenment after letting go of everything.

For a somewhat talented young person, especially one who had been learning martial arts since the age of five and came from a decent family, with years of diligent practice, reaching the Refining Qi into Steel stage was not difficult. The Refining Qi into Steel stage required consistent effort and accumulation, rather than luck or talent.

But to reach the Internal Qi Projection stage, one needed talent, luck, and hard work in equal measure. As the world's vital energy increased, more people would get stuck at the peak of the Refining Qi into Steel stage, but the number of those who could break through to the Internal Qi Projection stage would still be very few.

"Will the rise in vital energy in the world increase the strength of warriors below the Internal Qi Projection stage?" Chen Xi asked another question.

"It should, but it won't matter much. A warrior at the Internal Qi Projection stage will still defeat them with a single strike. As long as they can't release their internal energy externally, it's irrelevant. The essence of releasing internal energy isn't just about letting it out—it's about wielding vast amounts of energy. If they can't do that, it's still just a single blow," Zuo Ci replied. He seemed to have studied this matter thoroughly, and might have even sparred with warriors at the Internal Qi Projection stage.

"Oh, I understand now," Chen Xi nodded. He had grasped the situation. The rise in vital energy would indeed affect Liu Bei's forces, but the impact wouldn't be as severe as he had initially feared.

"Since Lord Chen has come to terms with it, I will say no more," Zuo Ci, seeing that Chen Xi had made up his mind, bowed to Liu Bei and Chen Xi before disappearing.

"Zichuan, are you sure you understood everything he said?" Liu Bei asked with a frustrated look, watching as Zuo Ci vanished. He was still thoroughly confused and hadn't grasped the significance of Zuo Ci's words.

"More or less. It won't affect us too much; it just means that elite soldiers will become even more important," Chen Xi nodded. "The fact that the world's vital energy is increasing due to the dispersal of the Divine Stone—or rather, returning to its natural state—is truly remarkable."

With that realization, Chen Xi felt more at ease. If the Divine Stone truly was a catalyst, then the historical trajectory as he knew it was probably over. Catalysts don't get used up by the reaction they initiate, so even if the world advanced into a technological civilization, the martial arts would still continue to develop.

"If my guess is correct, the suppression of generals by military formations will become even greater. In the past, the reason generals at the Internal Qi Projection stage were suppressed by cloud qi was that military formations would draw in the surrounding vital energy, as well as the internal energy released by soldiers, to form cloud qi," Chen Xi speculated.

"As the amount of vital energy in the world increases, the cloud qi will become denser and absorb even more internal energy. The external release of internal energy and the vital energy that generals at the Internal Qi Projection stage rely on will be consumed more quickly by the cloud qi," Chen Xi calmly explained his theory.

"That's not too big of an issue. After all, in large-scale battles, individual martial prowess alone cannot turn the tide. The role of personal strength in a battlefield of ten thousand soldiers is primarily to boost morale," Liu Bei said without a hint of worry. This wasn't a major concern for him.

"Exactly. I've already prepared for this, and I never planned for our generals to fight alone in a battle," Chen Xi nodded in agreement.

"My point is that the importance of elite troops has increased. As the amount of cloud qi grows, elite troops will be able to harness that power more efficiently. Compared to the issue of the limited number of army soul formations, the ability of elite troops to utilize cloud qi is the most efficient," Chen Xi said with a serious expression. All cavalry formations consisted of elite troops, after all.

"In that regard, I'm even less concerned. The Qingzhou Army has already taken shape under Wen Ze's command. We've stationed him in Sili to avoid drawing attention from other lords, and we already have one hundred thousand elite infantry under our banner," Liu Bei said confidently, aside from the cavalry issue, everything else was under control.

"Exactly. We don't need to worry. The rise in vital energy might allow warriors to improve their skills in single combat, but at the higher levels, nothing has changed. If they can't release internal energy externally, they'll still be cut down with a single blow," Chen Xi nodded, acknowledging Liu Bei's confidence.

"Lord Xuande, I'll go order our troops to sweep through Qingzhou and Xuzhou. Once we've tidied things up internally, everything should fall into place," Chen Xi said, rising after feeling Liu Bei's unshakable confidence.

"The outcome of the campaign to save the Emperor in Sili will soon be revealed. Several years ago, Zijian made a proposal when he went to Sili. I hope this time, His Majesty won't let down the goodwill of his ministers," Liu Bei said, gazing wistfully toward the west.

For some reason, in that moment of reflection, Liu Bei had a feeling that even though he was acknowledged as an imperial relative by the Bureau of Clan Affairs, the Han Emperor might not seek refuge with him this time.

"His Majesty surely understands your goodwill, Lord Xuande, but those close to him may not all be virtuous. It's likely that they'll judge you by their own standards, and given the Emperor's youth, he may hesitate," Chen Xi said, not fully committing to his words, but it was clear that the outcome was likely as he predicted. The last time Hua Xiong went to invite the Emperor, it was with this situation in mind.

Having suffered so much, Emperor Liu Xie may now understand the difference between right and wrong and could likely swallow his pride and act as though the last incident had never happened. But the civil and military officials around him would never want to lose face in front of a mere imperial relative.

Chen Xi also gazed off toward the northwest, as if he could see the fleeing Emperor of Han. Then, quietly, he turned his head away. Whether things changed or stayed the same, nothing could stop the chariot that was Liu Bei from charging forward.

Chapter 744: The King's Resolve

Chen Xi's intuition was sharp. Upon learning that Cao Cao had entered Sili, he had a feeling that Cao Cao would obtain control over the Emperor. However, what intrigued Chen Xi was how Cao Cao would manage to achieve this, especially considering his current weak position.

As for the trouble Cao Cao would cause Liu Bei by gaining control of the Emperor, Chen Xi could only say that unless Cao Cao and the Emperor formed a relationship as close as that of Emperor Ai and Dong Xian, a plot like the Edict in the Belt would surely surface eventually. Throughout history, no powerful minister has ever had a good ending; either the emperor is merciful, or the minister is exceptionally capable of retiring with honor.

Chen Xi silently withdrew his gaze from Liu Bei, reflecting on these thoughts.

It could be said that both Liu Biao and Cao Mengde were considered heroes of their time, but in this life, neither had fared well. Cao Mengde had lost due to the decimation of his veteran soldiers, while Liu Biao's downfall came from a lack of people in his territory. Despite their grand ambitions and having powerful generals and brilliant strategists, they could only watch helplessly as mediocre individuals took control of the Central Plains.

Sometimes, Chen Xi thought of the phrase Cao Cao often repeated: "A thousand troops are easy to find, but a good general is hard to come by." Yet now, Cao Cao had no shortage of strategists or generals; what he truly lacked was the soldiers he had long dismissed as unimportant.

"Zichuan, what are you mumbling about?" Liu Bei asked curiously, noticing Chen Xi's lips moving without making any sound.

"I was thinking about Cao Mengde and that old saying—'A thousand troops are easy to find, but a good general is hard to come by,'" Chen Xi replied calmly.

"An army without experienced veterans is like a dish with no flavor. Even if Yun Chang were to lead raw recruits, it wouldn't make a difference. But soldiers like the Danyang Troops or our city management forces, who have honed their skills in life-and-death battles, instinctively know how to fight, even without a great general leading them," Liu Bei said with a hint of a smile. "Such troops, however, are rare."

"Veterans must make up at least half of a top-tier unit. Speaking of which, I regret not being able to make better use of the tens of thousands of veterans we captured from Cao Cao. After two years without seeing combat, they've likely been reduced to second-line troops," Chen Xi said with a sense of loss. Those soldiers could neither be killed nor released, and their potential was wasted.

"Cao Mengde truly made a mistake back then. The Han dynasty is governed by filial piety, but he used filial piety as an excuse to unjustly implicate others. Although he realized his mistake and corrected it, I hope he doesn't make such grievous errors again," Liu Bei said with a sigh. "Cao Mengde can be too extreme and stubborn at times."

"Realized his mistake?" Chen Xi asked, puzzled. "He admitted to being wrong? Why haven't I heard about this?"

"You didn't know?" Liu Bei was about to tease Chen Xi for being slow, but seeing his genuinely confused expression, he explained what had happened the previous year when Cao Cao admitted his mistake. Chen Xi was taken aback.

"This really happened?" Chen Xi frowned deeply. "That doesn't seem right. I haven't heard any rumors, and something as significant as this should have caused more reaction. Did Cao Mengde send private letters to various governors or submit a memorial to the Emperor?"

"Cao Cao issued a public proclamation," Liu Bei said, leaving Chen Xi utterly shocked.

"How could such an opportune moment pass without us capitalizing on it? At the very least, we should have rallied the people of Xuzhou to unite with us, strengthening our hold on the territory. Moreover, how did the Yuan brothers and the Liu clans not react?" Chen Xi was in disbelief.

As he processed this revelation, his face shifted from pale to flushed before he finally understood what had happened.

"Zichuan, have you figured it out?" Liu Bei asked, noticing that Chen Xi's expression had returned to normal.

"Xi Zhicai..." Chen Xi uttered the name, sighing. "Forget it. There's no point holding a grudge against a dead man. I was outplayed by him—he handed me a trap in the form of a jade disk! His grasp of human nature was truly impeccable!"

"What? You were outwitted by Xi Zhicai?" Liu Bei recalled the sickly yet sharp-eyed man who had once visited Taishan.

Chen Xi shared parts of his analysis with Liu Bei, then chuckled bitterly. "That man was indeed astute. His schemes, likely even unknown to Xun Wenruo and the others, ensured that Cao Mengde would not repeat such egregious mistakes in the future."

Liu Bei nodded repeatedly, full of admiration for such a loyal minister who would go to such lengths to assist his lord, even in death.

Chen Xi, however, reflected quietly.

Staring at the sky, he realized that Liu Bei's ambitions were too great for him to achieve alone. He would need external forces to help him, and that proclamation from Cao Cao, with the passage of time, would become one such external force—an immensely powerful one.

Chen Xi smiled ruefully. What an enormous temptation. If he had encountered that proclamation earlier, he might not have fully understood its significance. But now, he did.

"Lord Xuande, may I ask: if there were a person of great talent who could help you fulfill your oath to the Han, would you dare to seek them out?" Chen Xi asked, clasping his hands and bowing to Liu Bei.

"What's there to fear? Of course, I'd go to them, once, twice, or even three times. If they truly have the ability, I should seek them out, not for my own sake, but for the Han dynasty," Liu Bei responded, glancing at Chen Xi. His tone was full of resolve, as if to say, "Isn't that an obvious question?"

"Oh? That's good to know. But what if this person is your enemy?" Chen Xi asked, looking at Liu Bei.

"A mere personal grudge? Surely you understand the difference between public duty and personal vendettas. If they can truly benefit the Han and the people of the world, they must be sought out. I cannot let my personal enmities stand in the way of the Han's prosperity. Even Duke Huan of Qi could tolerate Guan Zhong, who nearly killed him. What enmity could I possibly have that would surpass that?" Liu Bei said with a hint of pride, clearly showing that he had reached a high level of enlightenment in this regard.

Chapter 745: This Decadent and Corrupt Era...

Liu Bei's words left Chen Xi momentarily speechless, causing him to pause in contemplation.

"Zichuan, as you once said, a leader's private morality is not the real issue. Over time, I've thought about it a lot, and I've come to understand the truth in those words," Liu Bei said, his gaze distant and serene before he turned his eyes back to Chen Xi.

"What's most important is identifying and employing talent, placing each person in the right position. As for personal grudges or enmities, they don't matter. Even if someone holds a personal grudge against me, if they are the only one who can bring prosperity to this land, I will still use them!" Liu Bei declared, his face resolute.

"I understand," Chen Xi responded with a wave of his hand.

"However, such a person doesn't seem to exist. Of all the people I've met, the only one capable of strengthening the empire without empty rhetoric is you, Zichuan. But could you perhaps stop being so lazy? I've given you half a month of leave already," Liu Bei said, returning to a more casual tone after seeing Chen Xi's expression lighten.

Chen Xi smirked but didn't reply. After being in the Han dynasty for so long, one thing he had mastered was the art of ignoring certain things. Moreover, without Lu Su around, he felt less inclined to act.

"Tomorrow, I'll have An Guo lead a team to clear out any lingering threats in Qingzhou, Xuzhou, and Taishan," Liu Bei continued, shaking his head at Chen Xi's lack of response. He knew that Chen Xi wouldn't take action unless pushed, preferring to sit back unless prodded.

"Have An Guo take Bo Yan with him and see how many lower-level officials are slacking off," Chen Xi suggested with a slight smile. Letting Lu Xun and Lu Yu handle the tasks was a good idea, but they still needed to be cautious. Their abilities weren't quite at the level of someone like Fa Zheng when he swept through northern Yizhou in a fit of fury.

"Ah, Zi Jia..." Liu Bei sighed, rubbing his temples. "My mentor was a great Confucian scholar, yet Zi Jia has turned out so rebellious."

Lu Yu had been causing chaos in Fenggao, but no one had formally complained. If people were worried about Liu Bei's personal feelings, at least one or two upright individuals would have spoken up by now. After all, even Guo Jia and Chen Xi had been reported for misconduct before. If Lu Yu had truly committed any serious offenses, someone would have come forward by now.

"Are you saying you were just as rebellious back in the day?" Liu Bei teased.

"Perhaps. I didn't really notice it at the time," Chen Xi said, his face showing a hint of nostalgia.

After chatting a bit more, Liu Bei decided not to assign any additional tasks to Chen Xi. From Liu Bei's perspective, Chen Xi could work if he wanted to, but it wasn't a big deal if he didn't. Taishan was running

smoothly on its own, and all he really needed from Chen Xi was for him to provide overall direction from a high level.

When Chen Xi returned home, his steward handed him an invitation from Mi Zhu. After skimming through it, Chen Xi realized he'd have to deal with a few matters the next day. But in his mind, none of these small tasks were of significant importance, regardless of how they were handled.

As soon as he stepped into the inner courtyard, Chen Xi spotted Fan Jian sitting at a stone table, lost in thought, with her head propped on her hands, exposing a bit of her fair wrist.

"What are you thinking about?" Chen Xi asked, giving Fan Jian a gentle tap on the head. Her neatly pinned hair, adorned with a golden hairpin, fell loose, cascading down her back, with only the top knot still intact.

"Ah!" Fan Jian let out a soft exclamation, her face falling as she saw her hairpin drop onto the table.

Chen Xi quickly picked up the hairpin. "Let me put this back for you. You shouldn't sit outside for too long; it's still a bit chilly."

Back at the dressing table, Chen Xi leisurely combed Fan Jian's hair. He couldn't even remember the last time he had done this for her. Time, with its steady passage, had gradually softened his initially detached sense of responsibility, and his relationship with Fan Jian had transformed into one of deep affection. This bond, rooted in familial warmth, seemed like the only way to sustain the long journey ahead.

As he continued combing her hair, an unexpected wave of desire surged within him. Before long, their gazes met, and with a tender kiss, the two were drawn into the bedroom. Whether it was a moment of passion or simply a deep connection, they found themselves swept away.

"Husband..." Fan Jian's sweet voice whispered in Chen Xi's ear.

"Hmm," Chen Xi murmured, gently caressing Fan Jian's smooth back while gazing at the sunlight streaming through the window. "Time flies so quickly. It's already been two years. Do you have any wishes, Jian'er?"

“Wishes?” Fan Jian pondered for a moment, her brow furrowing slightly before she spoke. “I wish for my husband to cherish me, for the Chen family to prosper... and, hmm, for me to be the one in charge at home!”

“Hahaha!” Chen Xi burst out laughing, nearly losing his breath. Fan Liang, having only one daughter, had married her off to the son of a close family friend. As a result, Fan Jian hadn’t been taught the intricacies of household politics, leading her to make some naïve and silly mistakes, often out of a fear of losing Chen Xi’s affection.

“It’s not like Lan’er would ever fight with you,” Chen Xi reassured her, still chuckling. “Lan’er wouldn’t hold a grudge against you. She’s been through a lot more and understands the value of things. She would always let you have your way.”

Fan Jian, unaware of these nuances, sometimes acted childish by dismissing the servants. But neither Chen Yun nor Chen Ying ever felt disliked by her. It was more like she was trying to hide candy so no one else could eat it, all the while pretending nothing was amiss—a behavior that was endearing in its innocence.

As he comforted the beaming Fan Jian, Chen Xi quietly slipped out of bed, carefully tucking her in before heading toward the most secluded part of the inner courtyard, where Chen Lan resided.

“Greetings, Master,” Chen Ying greeted Chen Xi cautiously as she opened the door. “Mistress is still resting. She didn’t sleep well last night due to the commotion, and she only just lay down.”

“Oh, I’ll just check on her and leave. I won’t disturb her,” Chen Xi said, glancing at the still-sleeping Chen Lan. Seeing that she was resting peacefully, he decided to leave without waking her.

“When Lan’er wakes, let me know. Oh, and tell Yun’er that she should come with me to Manxiang Tower tomorrow,” Chen Xi said as he exited, casting a glance at Chen Ying’s beautiful face. To be honest, she was even more stunning than Chen Lan.

“Yes, Master,” Chen Ying replied, bowing slightly, her fair skin visible beneath her clothing.

“Just remember to notify Chen Yun. By the way, you look better in blue. Also, is Chen Yun still spending her time reading as much as before?” Chen Xi said, briefly glancing at Chen Ying’s exposed skin before turning his head away. After all, in this decayed, corrupt, and brutally real feudal society, everything about a maid belonged to the master.

Chapter 746: Heroic Elegance

While Chen Xi still found time for romance at home, Fa Zheng and Gan Ning had already plunged deep into Runan. Runan, which had long been a power base for the Yuan family, crumbled almost instantly under Gan Ning’s attack, offering little resistance before the battle was already over.

From the north to the south, the moment Fa Zheng marched out of Shanyang, he had ambitions to swallow all of Yuzhou. His army swept through the land with unstoppable momentum, and they encountered almost no real resistance until they reached Runan.

Runan’s capital city, a place of immense strategic importance, was clear in Zhou Yu’s eyes, yet any reforms were cut short before they could take root. Carrying the overwhelming force of a tidal wave, Fa Zheng had already taken Runan. Though there was some opposition, it could only be described as a swift victory.

Standing atop Runan’s city walls, Fa Zheng felt a sudden clarity, as if he were standing at the peak of the world, able to grasp all its mysteries.

At that moment, Fa Zheng fully understood that the centuries of accumulated power of the great clans were nothing more than a joke, as long as they couldn’t overtly wield it. Their vast size meant nothing unless they were willing to fight to the death.

Looking down at the trembling gentry of Runan, a faint smile appeared on Fa Zheng’s lips. He still remembered the time when, as a county magistrate in Yizhou, he had to bow before these great clans. The prestige of those noble families back then had forced his family to submit.

Fa Zheng’s eyes were cold as he swept his gaze over the cowering nobles of Runan. These high-and-mighty families now shivered like quails, trembling before him.

"Xingba, let's go. To Shouchun. I want to announce to the people of Jiangnan that I, Fa Xiaozhi, have arrived!" At this moment, Fa Zheng was filled with pride. Whatever bitterness he had harbored in his heart was now swept away.

As Fa Zheng rose higher and higher, the taunts and insults from the past no longer weighed on him. The mocking voices that once haunted him had become nothing more than ripples in his memory. The sneers of yesteryear no longer had the power to stir even the faintest resentment within him. The phrase "how can a sparrow understand the ambition of a swan" echoed in his mind, but such thoughts no longer bothered him.

"Just like that?" Gan Ning asked, glancing at the white-robed Fa Zheng, who stood proudly in the spring breeze.

"Yes, just like that. The pieces I've set in motion have played their part. I'm heading to Shouchun, where the gentry, commoners, and officials of Yuzhou will learn one thing—Fa Xiaozhi is here," Fa Zheng declared, his voice filled with arrogance. His once vengeful eyes now gleamed with youthful exuberance.

The pawns Fa Zheng had planted over the years were not in high positions. But over time, they had risen to important roles, like gatekeepers and postal station commanders—positions that, while not prestigious, were crucial in times of war. With their help, Fa Zheng had torn through Liang, Chen, and finally arrived in Runan.

"This land, this kingdom... The Han Dynasty still stands!" Fa Zheng looked out over the vast expanse of Yuzhou, his voice brimming with confidence.

"You're sure nothing will go wrong?" Gan Ning asked, watching Fa Zheng. The strategist's achievements during this campaign had left Gan Ning both shocked and silent. He realized that in this world, Fa Zheng was not the only genius—there were people whose brilliance shone so brightly that it was blinding.

"Xingba, are you afraid?" Fa Zheng turned slightly, his presence emanating a pressure that even Gan Ning could feel. Since the moment they set out from Shanyang, Fa Zheng had transformed. His predictions were always spot on, and every battle ended in victory. In nineteen days, without stopping, he had taken fourteen cities, advancing from Liang to Chen and then to Runan, where he swiftly captured its capital, Pingyu.

Even though Fa Zheng had claimed that he had meticulously planned everything in advance, the sheer scale of his achievements left Gan Ning in awe. It didn't feel like warfare—it felt like a complete rout. Everything had happened so quickly, too quickly. The day after capturing Pingyu, a messenger from the county of Ku, which Gan Ning had already conquered, arrived in Pingyu with a plea for reinforcements.

It was then that Gan Ning truly understood what Fa Zheng had meant—if Gan Ning could reach the capital of Runan, Fa Zheng would take it. Yuzhou, after Fa Zheng had cut off its communications network, was utterly defenseless. No unfortified city could stand against Gan Ning's forces.

"Afraid?" Gan Ning scoffed. "I, Gan Xingba, have never known fear. I just think, Fa Strategist, that your ambition is too vast. We only have a little over twenty thousand men—can we really conquer all of Yuzhou? Isn't that a bit too bold?"

"Too bold? Yuzhou's available forces amount to only about a hundred thousand. Who can stop me from conquering Yuzhou?" Fa Zheng replied with a faint smile, deftly dodging Gan Ning's concerns.

"I believe you can take it, but holding it... With just twenty thousand men, we may not have enough strength," Gan Ning reasoned. Though he had come to respect Fa Zheng after witnessing his brilliance, he still had his reservations.

"All I want is for Yuan Gonglu to give up on Huaibei. Yuzhou might fall into chaos for a while, but once it's within our sphere of influence, others will sort it out. That's not my problem. When I made a bet with Jia Master, I declared that within two months, I would force Yuan Gonglu to abandon Huaibei!" Fa Zheng said proudly, his confidence now unquestionable. Gan Ning, despite thinking Fa Zheng's words to be absurd, found himself impressed.

"Xingba, you might as well call me Xiaozhi from now on. While we're at it, let me ask: do you want to come with me to Shouchun? I'm just going to show off and wait for them to come after me!" Fa Zheng, with an air of arrogance, turned to Gan Ning.

Fa Zheng had noticed the change in how Gan Ning addressed him. Though he enjoyed the recognition, he also felt a hint of distance growing between them.

"Show off? Sure, I'll come with you. We'll leave Wen Xiang and Zi Fang to guard the city. But you'll need to explain everything to me on the way," Gan Ning replied, not one to be constrained by formality.

"Let's go. We'll talk on the way." Fa Zheng glanced north, his expression momentarily wistful before returning to his usual confident self. "This battle for Yuzhou is the stage I've chosen for myself, the stage I've built. I want the whole world to see that Taishan still has me, Fa Xiaozhi!"

As Fa Zheng and Gan Ning descended the city walls, the nobles of Runan instinctively parted to let the young man—someone younger than their own sons—through. Not a single noble dared to step forward to question him about the appearance of Liu Bei's army or what was to become of them.

Walking through the path opened by the nobles, Fa Zheng suddenly threw his head back and laughed. His laughter rang out, inexplicable to those watching.

"Come, Xingba! Let's go give Yuan Gonglu a show of power!" Fa Zheng declared with a booming laugh. Everything else was irrelevant now. If the nobles continued to operate in the shadows, they would never be able to step into the light of day.

Chapter 747: Marching on Shouchun

For those below the aristocratic class, the power of the great families seemed invincible. However, for those above this class, the intricate web of connections that these families relied on was full of holes. Although powerful, they were bloated and riddled with weak points.

Fa Zheng's arrogance left the noble families of Runan fully aware that he had no interest in communicating with them. He brazenly declared his intention to go challenge Yuan Shu, leaving the Runan families speechless. His overbearing attitude silenced any objections they might have had.

"Disperse," said Zhou Xun, sighing as he looked at his peers after watching Fa Zheng and Gan Ning depart. "Close your doors and wait for the outcome. We are no longer in a position to interfere. Whether General Yuan wins or this Chancellor Fa prevails, we can only hide and bide our time."

"Ah, youthful success," Zhao Yi said with a bitter smile. "I fear General Yuan won't make it back in time. The Zhao family is doomed."

"Let's hope that Zhou Gongjin can perform a miracle, or we truly have no way to recover," Chen Chuang said with bitterness. "Disperse, everyone. When the elder from the Chen family wrote to us, we all hesitated and thought long and hard."

Yuzhou had long been a hub of culture and scholarship, home to both large and small influential families. Yet, upon witnessing Fa Zheng's swift capture of Runan, they all felt an overwhelming sense of despair, realizing the situation was beyond saving.

"Close your doors and wait for news. If Yuan Shu arrives, we may have a chance to fight. If not, we have no choice but to surrender." Zhao Yi's face was grim as he turned and left slowly, knowing that the Zhao family's closeness to Yuan Shu would spell their downfall.

After Fa Zheng and Gan Ning left, the families of Runan exchanged helpless glances before silently dispersing. Fa Zheng's arrogance had already made everything clear. Whether it was youthful ambition or sheer disregard for others, Fa Zheng now had the strength to back his claims. Even if he marched openly to Shouchun to flaunt his power, there was no one in Runan capable of stopping him. The once-proud families could do nothing but wait for the inevitable outcome.

When Fa Zheng and Gan Ning arrived at the military camp, Mi Fang and Xu Sheng were leading their troops in training. For them, the current situation was uncertain, and they could be called to battle at any moment. All the soldiers needed to be kept in peak condition—hard work now could mean the difference between life and death later.

"Greetings, Military Advisor Fa, General Gan," Mi Fang and Xu Sheng saluted as soon as they saw Fa Zheng and Gan Ning.

Like Gan Ning, who had developed a deep respect for Fa Zheng's abilities, Mi Fang and Xu Sheng had also witnessed Fa Zheng's incredible strategic acumen during their campaign. They dared not show the slightest disrespect.

"How's the training going?" Fa Zheng asked as he glanced at the soldiers. The army had been advancing relentlessly, rarely stopping along the way, but the soldiers were well-fed with the best rations available—meals with both meat and vegetables.

Following the principle of using whatever resources they could find, Fa Zheng had been opening the grain stores wherever they went, both to win over the people's support and to ensure that his troops were well-nourished. After all, maintaining this level of intense warfare without proper sustenance would inevitably lead to problems.

In truth, Fa Zheng had launched this campaign without bringing any supplies, relying entirely on provisions seized from the enemy. Like Xuzhou, Yuzhou produced an abundance of grain, and its granaries were well-stocked. As long as they could take a city, there was no issue of logistics. Fa Zheng had ordered his troops to carry only three days' worth of dry rations before setting out.

"The troops are ready and can move out at any time," Xu Sheng reported, stepping forward with a solemn expression. "The navy is also in position."

"The navy is ready?" Fa Zheng turned to Gan Ning. "When did they get into position?"

"It's just the Huai River, not the Yangtze," Gan Ning laughed. "Yuan Shu hasn't fortified it much. Small sailboats are enough to cross. The river pirates here have already submitted to me, pledging their loyalty. The fleet is ready."

"Good, that's settled. Zifang, you will guard the city. Unless I personally return, do not open the gates for anyone, no matter who it is," Fa Zheng instructed, nodding in approval. He knew that to Gan Ning, who had sailed even the open seas, the Huai River was merely a small stream. There was no cause for concern.

"Understood," Mi Fang replied with a bow.

Though Mi Fang might have been reluctant to lead soldiers in direct combat, he was confident in his ability to hold a city. He knew his troops well and understood that as long as he stood firm, they would not abandon him. With this certainty and the strong walls of Runan, Mi Fang believed that as long as he remained cautious, his forces could hold out until Fa Zheng returned.

"Wen Xiang, you will assist in defending the city. Stay vigilant," Fa Zheng said, turning to Xu Sheng.

"Understood," Xu Sheng responded, bowing his head. "Where are General Gan and the Military Advisor headed?"

"To Shouchun. Only by going there will Yuan Shu realize that his rule is nothing more than a crumbling tower," Fa Zheng said with a confident smile, exuding the pride of a young man as well as the assurance of a master strategist.

"How many troops will General Gan take to Shouchun?" Xu Sheng asked.

"Take all the cavalry and a few infantrymen—three to five thousand will be enough," Fa Zheng replied, answering for Gan Ning. "We're just going to show off; there's no need for a large army."

"Isn't that too dangerous?" Xu Sheng asked, his brow furrowing in concern.

"We'll appear right next to Yuan Shu's seat of power. Do you think they'll believe we have so few men? If they have any sense, they won't risk guessing that we're undermanned," Fa Zheng said with a light laugh. "Feign strength where there is weakness, and weakness where there is strength. We'll toy with them and see if they dare to engage."

Fa Zheng spoke casually, but Xu Sheng knew their forces were spread thin. If they had fifty thousand men, Fa Zheng would have led thirty thousand to Shouchun, not the small force he was taking now.

"Please be careful, General, Military Advisor," Xu Sheng said, thinking through all the possibilities but ultimately settling on this final piece of advice.

"Don't worry. I know what I'm doing, and Zhou Gongjin knows his part as well. It's all about timing now—our scouts must reach the enemy's communications outposts just as our own forces move in," Fa Zheng said calmly, confident in his strategy. If he weren't, he would never have proposed it.

"Prepare the troops. Transfer all the cavalry to Xingba, along with three hundred scouts. Supplement the rest with elite veterans," Fa Zheng ordered, taking command.

Soon, the drums of the camp sounded, and the soldiers quickly assembled. After the incense burned down, the camp was silent, waiting for Fa Zheng's orders.

Chapter 748: The Filth

Looking at his troops, Fa Zheng felt somewhat helpless. If only they had more cavalry, they could make a quick assault and reach Shouchun by tomorrow while maintaining their combat effectiveness. Unfortunately, Taishan wasn't suitable for raising horses, and wild horses didn't naturally thrive there.

As for buying horses, they had already acquired as many as possible. It was impossible to get more, as Yuan Shao had nearly monopolized the horse trade in the northern regions, making it difficult to obtain these strategic resources south of Bingzhou and Jizhou. Further south, apart from Yuan Shu possessing some horses, even someone like Liu Biao could only provide a warhorse for his generals, making a full cavalry unit a pipe dream.

It wasn't that the south had no horses, but southern horses were not suited for riding. They were useful for pulling loads but inadequate for combat.

After swiftly organizing his troops, Fa Zheng didn't waste time with unnecessary words. He left the army under the command of Gan Ning, with himself acting as the military strategist, and they set off for Huainan, heading toward Yuan Shu's seat of power, Shouchun.

As Fa Zheng led his forces toward Shouchun, rumors about Liu Bei's campaign against Yuan Shu began circulating in the city.

Although Fa Zheng had severed most of the communication routes and enforced military control in the rear, some rumors still slipped through. However, Zhou Yu and Zhuge Jin were busy managing internal affairs and didn't have time to investigate these lower-level whispers.

Moreover, these rumors were mainly spread among commoners, without any confirmation from aristocratic families. The noble families' intelligence networks weren't faulty, but the communication channels had been dismantled, so when news reached Shouchun, it was mostly hearsay with no concrete proof.

Yuan Shu's family had also heard rumors, but they didn't take them seriously. They were aware of the internal turmoil in Qingzhou and Xuzhou, believing Liu Bei would be too preoccupied to make any moves against them. Otherwise, given Liu Bei's current strength, they wouldn't dare provoke him.

"Ziyu, take a break," Zhou Yu said, looking at the bloodshot eyes of Zhuge Jin. By now, he had to admit that although Zhuge Jin might not excel in any particular area, his combined qualities made him the perfect person for their current situation.

"I'll rest once we've finished this work," Zhuge Jin replied with a smile, rubbing his eyes to stay awake.

Zhou Yu poured him a cup of strong tea, not saying much, and then continued working alongside Zhuge Jin on Yuzhou's administrative affairs.

If they only aimed for a basic understanding and a gradual approach, they wouldn't need to work this hard. However, both of them had long-term goals. Even if they didn't expect to achieve instant success like Taishan, they wanted to lay the groundwork for Yuzhou's rebirth from its deeply rooted problems.

"Our best option right now is to redirect internal conflicts outward," Zhuge Jin said, downing the strong tea along with the tea leaves, closing his eyes to gather his strength.

"That's why I agreed to let the Yuan family elders launch an attack on Xuzhou," Zhou Yu said, looking tired. Apart from himself and Zhuge Jin, there was no one in Shouchun he trusted to handle these matters. Others in Sun Ce's camp weren't as dependable when it came to governance.

"I've been to Taishan and know the strength that place holds. Similarly, having lived in Xuzhou for a long time, I understand the situation there. It's indeed as the Yuan family elders said—dominated by powerful families. I've also heard about Li Wenyou's strategies," Zhuge Jin said, his face expressionless, fatigue clearly overwhelming him.

"You think it's unwise?" Zhou Yu asked, picking up on Zhuge Jin's hesitation.

"Not unwise, but unnecessary. Even if we lose, it's better than facing internal conflicts. However, it feels like a wasted effort," Zhuge Jin replied. He understood Zhou Yu's reasoning behind allowing the Yuan family elders to act, but he couldn't help feeling it was a shame.

"We've locked Yangzhou within our control, so whether we act sooner or later doesn't make much difference. As you said, at least we're redirecting the conflicts. Honestly, I don't fully trust the judgment of the Yuan family elders," Zhou Yu said, his eyes flashing with insight.

"Li Wenyou is in charge of Xuzhou, and neither Liu Xuande nor Chen Zichuan is a fool. There's bound to be more going on than meets the eye. Leaving aside Chen Zichuan, Liu Xuande is unparalleled when it comes to recognizing and utilizing talent," Zhuge Jin said, still with his eyes closed. His assessment of Liu Bei was extremely high.

"Indeed, his ability to choose the right people is unmatched. If not for him, none of us would have the positions we hold today," Zhou Yu said with a smile. "But I'm betting on a major defeat."

"This is truly filthy politics. Sacrificing tens of thousands of soldiers just to maintain stability and ensure future growth," Zhuge Jin said as he opened his bloodshot eyes, staring at Zhou Yu. "It's truly filthy."

"We might still win," Zhou Yu said after a long pause. "If Bofu were here, he wouldn't allow me to make this decision. He'd choose to charge ahead and fight with everything he had."

"Stubbornness leads to fragility. Filthy or not, at least we can ensure such things won't happen again in the future," Zhuge Jin said with a faint smile. "Let's focus on planning how to conquer Yangzhou."

"Haha, we might not lose. Even though we both know Xuzhou has Li Wenyou's machinations, it's not easy to swallow ten thousand troops. Xuzhou only has one army led by Zhang Fei," Zhou Yu said, shifting the tone with a laugh. "All the schemes in the world are useless if you don't have the manpower to execute them."

"Victory would bring even more trouble," Zhuge Jin replied, a rare hint of sarcasm appearing on his face.

"That's why it's filthy politics," Zhou Yu said, chuckling. "I've already pulled my navy back to Shouchun, leaving the middle reaches of the Yangtze completely open. I've given Liu Jingxuan the opportunity for a decisive move. If he doesn't muster his remaining strength now, I'll simply say that time's up!"

"He will. Liu Jingxuan may have been distracted by indulgence, but after clearing his mind, he'll definitely make a desperate bid for survival. There's no need to worry about that," Zhuge Jin said with a smile. "I'm only concerned about whether Jingbei can hold the line."

"Liao Gongyuan may have a narrow heart, but his abilities are exceptional. With General Han and others assisting, I'll deliver a strategic blow at the right time. But, Ziyu..." Zhou Yu said, looking at Zhuge Jin with a serious expression.

"Yangzhou is no issue. If you trust me, Gongjin, let me handle it my way," Zhuge Jin said with a smile.

"Very well. I'll leave it to you, Ziyu," Zhou Yu agreed, saying no more, signaling his approval of Zhuge Jin's plan.

Chapter 749: The Beginning of Reform

As Fa Zheng pressed on toward Shouchun, Chen Xi had already begun to settle matters with the aristocratic families of Qingzhou, Xuzhou, and Taishan. Of course, as for those families in Xuzhou who had entirely chosen a different path, Chen Xi could only ignore them for now.

"Patriarch," Chen Shang appeared before Chen Xi after taking a day to rest, adhering strictly to the etiquette expected of an elder towards the family head, without any additional undertones.

"Take a seat, Uncle Grandfather," Chen Xi gestured to the chair opposite him. Afterward, Chen Yun brought in tea and snacks before quietly withdrawing, leaving only Chen Shang and Chen Xi in the room.

"Zichuan..." Chen Shang hesitated, sighed deeply as he saw Chen Xi take a sip of tea, unsure of how to begin.

"There's no need for such worry, Uncle Grandfather. Everyone makes their own choices, and theirs weren't necessarily wrong. You can rest assured; I have no intention of digging into past matters. Otherwise, I wouldn't be in such a rush to settle things with the families. When needed, I will make use of them." Chen Xi set down his cup, his expression calm.

Chen Shang opened his mouth as if to say something but then gave only a bitter smile, silently acknowledging his understanding.

"For this afternoon's meeting at Manxiang Tower, the Chen family need not attend. You will take over some of the businesses under my control. I'll have Chen Ge deliver the documents this afternoon." Seeing Chen Shang's silence, Chen Xi knew that the events of the previous day had affected him. Though it was a fact that aristocratic families prioritized self-interest, violating agreements was an immense disgrace for them.

"This..." Chen Shang was startled, lifting his head to look at Chen Xi's unchanged expression.

"I have no intention of severing ties with the Chen family," Chen Xi explained with a smile, noticing the drastic change in Chen Shang's expression and realizing his actions had been misinterpreted.

"Then why this course of action?" Chen Shang asked, confused.

"The Chen family needs to remain low-key. Just as before, there's no need to seek conflict. With me at the forefront, the greatest benefits will come. There's no need to chase after everything. Being generous benefits everyone." For the first time, Chen Xi used the term "we" when addressing the Chen family.

"Good!" Chen Shang was overjoyed. This was the first time Chen Xi had clearly expressed his intentions. Chen Shang wasn't foolish; he understood that as long as Chen Xi was around, their family would continue to prosper. They didn't need to pursue trivial gains, and their approach could be steady and dignified.

"Ordinarily, I won't interfere with the Chen family. The elders can manage things however they wish, but when the need arises, if I say go east, the Chen family must go east. But rest assured, I won't harm my own family. However, our class needs some adjustments to align with both law and morality," Chen Xi said calmly.

"The family head is naturally the leader of the clan. This is as it should be," Chen Shang nodded in agreement.

"If there are outstanding members among the younger generation of the Chen family, let me know. I will personally oversee their education," Chen Xi said with a sigh. "The same goes for members of the Yingchuan Chen family. After all, we are all one Chen family."

A glimmer of joy appeared in Chen Shang's eyes. For years, Chen Xi had largely ignored the Chen clan that had relocated to Taishan. Now, he was finally beginning to take charge of the family's affairs, and it seemed like he intended to consolidate the family.

"Patriarch, what is the reason for this change?" Chen Shang asked, still puzzled by the sudden shift.

"The aristocracy needs a leader, just like the Yuan and Yang families once had. Now, the Yang family is trapped in Chang'an, barely able to protect themselves, and though the Yuan family remains powerful, they are not aligned with us," Chen Xi explained.

As he had predicted earlier, once the north was stabilized, the next step in governance wouldn't be as simple as suppressing the aristocracy and supporting the common people. The aristocracy still held considerable knowledge and power. Rather than repressing them, it would be more effective to channel their abilities constructively. When the time came, someone would need to lead them, ensuring they didn't stray from the right path.

Chen Shang swallowed hard. With the Yang and Yuan families out of the picture, the top-tier aristocratic families left were the likes of the Xun and Chen families. Although the Xun family was influential, the Chen family was no pushover either.

The thought of the Chen family becoming the leading aristocratic clan filled Chen Shang with an intense excitement. The prospect of being at the pinnacle of the aristocracy was irresistible. Prestige brought wealth, and the two went hand in hand.

"That's why the Chen family needs to stay low-key, so low-key that no one even notices us. All we need to do is quietly do good deeds," Chen Xi patiently instructed his elder.

"Indeed, that makes sense. In such a climate, even the smallest mistake will be magnified many times over," Chen Shang mused, nodding in agreement. "But the Yuan family won't be so easily toppled. If we act too quietly, and ultimately fail, we may still face their backlash."

"The Yuan family may be strong, but they're not my match. I dislike the ways of the aristocracy. I want top-down reform along with bottom-up reform, pushing the aristocracy to change swiftly," Chen Xi said plainly.

"I hold the aristocracy's moral standing in high regard, but I can't stand their conduct. I need the aristocracy's actions to match their claimed morality. That's why I will take on the role of Chen family head," Chen Xi continued.

"The Yuan family..." Although Yuan Shao's plans had failed this time, the unrest in Taishan was proof that Yuan Shao was not weak.

"Yuan Shao is not the problem, nor is the Yuan family. I only want the Chen family to quietly undergo reform. Before Lord Xuande finishes securing the north, we need to present the aristocracy with a successful model of reform, so they can see that there is another path forward." Seeing Chen Shang's hesitation, Chen Xi didn't want to elaborate further. He had already made up his mind and was not offering a choice.

"If the family head has already decided, why bother discussing it with me instead of simply issuing orders?" Chen Shang, exasperated by Chen Xi's unyielding tone, asked with a hint of dissatisfaction.

"So that people understand," Chen Xi replied casually, popping a piece of pastry into his mouth before continuing. "It's better if people understand. But if they don't, I'll have them realize the necessity through the reforms themselves. This is something I've already decided on, and it will not be stopped."

Chen Xi's words left Chen Shang grimacing, but they also made it clear that Chen Xi's determination would not be swayed. After a long pause, Chen Shang sighed deeply, "Since the family head has made the decision, I'm sure the elders of the Chen family will understand."

At this point, what more could Chen Shang say? Both in principle and in practicality, he could only agree to Chen Xi's demands and prepare for the Chen family to become the first to implement these reforms. Whether this transformation succeeded or failed would determine the course of many future events.

Chapter 750: Yuan Shu's Memory

As Fa Zheng arrived in Shouchun, Zhuge Jin was resting on the table, and Zhou Yu, after completing the governance plan for Yuzhou, finally had time to accompany him. Meanwhile, the Yuan family elders were busy fantasizing about capturing Xuzhou and establishing the foundation of the Yuan family's dominance. Of course, this celebration wouldn't be complete without banquets and dances performed

by maidservants in the hall. In short, the Yuan family was in high spirits, feeling that victory was within their grasp and already celebrating with a feast.

Yuan Shu, still immersed in the pain of losing his son, had no interest in the Yuan family's affairs. His heart had grown cold. What had once been an incredibly important ambition to dominate the land now seemed far less significant to him.

"Here, take this." A haggard-looking Yuan Shu handed another piece of rice cake to a beggar.

The beggar extended his filthy hand to accept the rice cake. After bowing his head in thanks, he began devouring it in large bites.

Standing by, Yuan Shu no longer resembled the once-wealthy and proud man he had been. The death of his only son had reduced him to a frail and despondent figure. His once jet-black hair had lost its luster, and he now looked more like an old man. With his ambition for conquest shattered, Yuan Shu no longer had any thoughts of contending for the world.

"Sigh," Yuan Shu shook his head, leaving the beggar behind with Ji Ling and Yan Xiang. "In fact, it's not so bad to leave everything in the hands of others. At least back then, I couldn't roam freely like I do now, and I never saw the scenes hidden beneath Shouchun's prosperity."

"My lord..." Yan Xiang started to explain.

Yuan Shu waved his hand, interrupting him. "I wasn't blaming you. I just suddenly felt sentimental after seeing this. Our noble families trace their lineage back to the Yellow Emperor, Xuanyuan. As the Emperor's agents, we govern the land, and it was from this role that the great clans were born."

Yan Xiang looked at Yuan Shu in confusion, not understanding why he was suddenly saying this. He could only wait for Yuan Shu to continue. As for Ji Ling, Yuan Shu's most loyal subordinate, he didn't care whether Yuan Shu was right or wrong. Yuan Shu's choice was his unquestionable path.

"Our noble families are all descendants of Xuanyuan, born to govern the four corners of the world and educate the masses. Though our families have experienced ups and downs, ever since we were entrusted with guarding the land, we have been the foundation of Huaxia civilization, standing firm for a

thousand years! That is the source of our family's eternal strength!" At that moment, Yuan Shu's body exuded the pride accumulated over a millennium of noble heritage.

"To govern the land and educate the masses, we were born to enjoy the offerings of the people in a lofty position. How could we resort to such despicable means to exploit our own citizens? These lowlifes are a disgrace!" Yuan Shu roared in anger.

Yuan Shu had always lived in his own world. He was loyal, with his own set of principles, and upheld his own sense of morality. To him, it was only natural for noble families to be high above, enjoying the offerings of the people.

In Yuan Shu's mind, for thousands of years, it had been the noble families who had paved the way for Huaxia civilization with their blood on the thorns. The nobles of old, and now the great clans, had always played the role of pioneers. In Yuan Shu's understanding, it would remain this way for future generations of their families.

This is why Yuan Shu viewed the common people as ants. To him, the taxes paid by the people were nothing compared to the responsibilities the noble families had shouldered for thousands of years. They had given more, so they deserved more.

To Yuan Shu, the current living conditions of the people under his rule were a testament to his success. Therefore, he naturally believed that he should enjoy the people's offerings. Yuan Shu had never interacted with the lower class.

Had he not relinquished his power, he might never have witnessed the lives of the people under his rule until his downfall was imminent.

"These scum! With the honor of our noble family, why would we need to exploit the people to prove our worth!" Yuan Shu's eyes were cold. What he had read in books conflicted with what he now saw. Having always adhered to the philosophy of laissez-faire governance, Yuan Shu was filled with nothing but anger upon witnessing such scenes!

"Have I been wrong? Never engaging with the people, always remaining aloof, and following the most correct form of governance, allowing the people under my rule to thrive on their own—was I wrong?" Yuan Shu muttered to himself.

Yuan Shu's eyes were lost as he gazed forward. In the midst of his anger, he couldn't help but reflect on his own mistakes. His noble family's arrogance made him disdain to shift the blame, and he felt no need to understand the thoughts of the common people, whom he viewed as ants. He was the protector of the established system, yet now, reality was telling him that the system he upheld had become twisted.

"Was I wrong?" Yuan Shu stood still, questioning himself, his eyes full of confusion.

Reflecting on all the policies Yuan Shu had implemented, he realized he had never issued any edicts that burdened the common people, never raised taxes, and never increased labor duties. He had always followed the laws of the Han Dynasty. So why were there so many refugees under his rule? The very existence of such people implied that he had failed to properly govern the region.

"I wasn't wrong." After a long pause, Yuan Shu's eyes gradually grew resolute. "I followed the laws set by the Han Dynasty without changing a single thing. I only preserved what was already in place. The ones at fault are those who have abandoned the responsibilities of the noble families—they are the ones who broke the rules!"

"Come, let's go and ask the elders of my family what they are doing. Have they forgotten the responsibilities that have kept our family thriving for a thousand years? When did our noble families fall to the point of competing with the people for profit?" Yuan Shu swept his gaze over Yan Xiang and Ji Ling as he spoke.

Yuan Shu's thought process was simple: as a noble family entrusted by the emperor to govern the land, even if one were to rebel, the most fundamental responsibility must not change. The noble families must always remain noble, forever standing high above the common people. This position wasn't because of their bloodline or family name, but because of the responsibilities they shouldered.

In ancient times, the emperor and the feudal lords were our ancestors, who blazed trails and expanded territories, establishing the legitimacy of the Central Plains. In distant ages, during the Hundred Schools of Thought, it was our ancestors who penned the chapters of Huaxia civilization. We take pride in the blood that flows in our veins, but we do not use bloodlines to determine our worth.

This was the noble family in Yuan Shu's memory, from the books he had read throughout his life. The feudal lords, nobles, ministers, and then the noble families—each generation had worked hard, driven by their own standards.

We view the common people as ants, yet even ants have lives. It's just that they cannot bear this responsibility. We bear this burden and educate the ants, hoping that one day they can take on the same responsibilities as us. Our noble families have passed down Huaxia civilization for generations, and it is this civilization that we continue to protect.

This was Yuan Shu's naïve ideal. The books he had read had always emphasized what his ancestors had done and how important they had been to the people of the world.

Yuan Shu had come to a clear understanding: noble families must always lead the world. The responsibility we bear is such that our ancestors blazed trails, our predecessors expanded territories, and our generation must govern the land and educate the masses!

We must be the ones to lead the people of the world, for this is the foundation of everything we enjoy. And now, the noble families have fallen into decline.