

Mythical 771

Chapter 771: Always Playing the Empty Hand Trick

"Do you know how much money the Taishan government has?" Chen Xi didn't answer directly but instead posed this core question.

"Based on the current rate of construction, without any sign of financial shortage, our merchant guild estimates that Zichuan has accumulated around ten billion coins in wealth, with an equivalent amount in grain, and even more in manpower," Mi Zhu said helplessly. The merchant guild always kept an eye on Chen Xi's activities, trying to gauge if he was planning any new ventures or constructions that might present a business opportunity.

"Hmm, that's a reasonable estimate. The funds I can access exceed ten billion, and the rest is more or less as you described," Chen Xi said, smirking slightly.

"As expected of you, Zichuan. I never realized we were so wealthy," Xun Yue, who had little concept of money, was surprised by how much could be accomplished with that much wealth. "With so much, why don't we invest it all at once? Wouldn't that be faster?"

"Indeed, I didn't expect we had this much wealth," Li You agreed, nodding in approval. Unlike some scholars who avoided discussing wealth, Li You had no issue with it. With such resources, they could easily enrich an entire province. He couldn't fathom how Chen Xi had accumulated so much.

"You're speaking as if we have a project that could use ten billion coins at once. Do you want to build another Great Wall?" Chen Xi retorted, rolling his eyes. "Spending money wisely is an art. Spending it effectively is even more important than making it. It's a critical skill. If you don't believe me, I'll give you ten billion coins and let you try to spend it effectively."

"That's true, spending wisely is indeed a skill," Mi Zhu agreed, deeply understanding the truth behind those words. "But many in our merchant guild have always felt that you spend money sporadically, Zichuan. And part of the reason for that may be because you hand things off to others after a while."

Chen Xi opened his mouth, then sighed, clearly frustrated. "What I'm about to tell you, just keep it to yourselves. Don't speak about it outside."

"Is there some hidden secret?" Li You was the first to ask, curious.

Having worked closely with Taishan's finances, Li You knew well that while a lot of funds came in, there were also large expenditures, and they rarely had much surplus. Yet it was a fact that Chen Xi had always been funding various construction projects without ever running out of money. Even when he claimed to have no funds, it seemed more like an excuse not to do something rather than an actual lack of money.

Chen Xi shot Li You a look, his expression clearly saying, "You talk too much."

"What I'm about to say, don't tell anyone. The truth is that Taishan often has no money at all. In fact, I've sometimes been spending next year's funds," Chen Xi said with a helpless shrug.

The group was stunned. This was certainly not the answer they had expected. Mi Zhu's expression showed deep contemplation before he looked at Chen Xi in shock.

"That's how it is," Chen Xi shrugged again, motioning for Mi Zhu to keep quiet.

"But my greatest strength is that once I spend the money, I quickly make it back. After all, there's a time lag and liquidity issues to consider. So at any given moment, I can mobilize up to ten billion coins," Chen Xi said, smiling at Mi Zhu. "Now do you understand, Zizhong?"

Mi Zhu was wiping sweat from his brow, deeply shaken by this revelation. He had never imagined the situation was like this, but now that Chen Xi explained it, it made perfect sense. Moreover, if Chen Xi didn't say anything, no one would ever notice.

"I will certainly strengthen oversight in this area. I won't allow any local government to exploit this," Mi Zhu said, still wiping sweat from his face.

Mi Zhu now fully understood the vast gap between himself and Chen Xi. The level at which Chen Xi was operating was far beyond anything Mi Zhu could grasp. No wonder Chen Xi had been able to build Taishan into such a prosperous region from nothing.

"If anyone tries to use economic tricks you don't understand, feel free to come to me. I'll gladly educate them. Of course, Zizhong, as long as merchants ensure that their activities benefit both sides or even multiple parties without infringing on national interests, it's fine to turn a blind eye to some minor transgressions," Chen Xi added. He had no problem supporting merchants if they could achieve such results.

"I'll keep that in mind," Mi Zhu said cautiously, still sweating. What Chen Xi was doing was too sophisticated for him, though it didn't seem like he was exploiting loopholes.

"I can sort of follow what you're saying," Li You said. Having dealt with finances, he roughly understood what Chen Xi meant. "But if we keep drawing funds from the banks like this and can't replenish them in time, won't that lead to problems? It could even cause the system you've built to collapse. This seems very risky."

"Don't worry, it won't come to that. I usually operate within planned limits. As long as our credibility holds, the system won't collapse. There's always a time lag to consider, and right now, the momentum is on my side. Even if someone suspects something, they lack the power to undermine it," Chen Xi said, shaking his head.

To ensure the system's stability, Chen Xi had actually injected significant funds into Taishan's economy. But rather than cash, these funds were in the form of real estate—land titles from Qingzhou and Taishan were stored in Taishan's banks as collateral.

Normally, this would be illegal, but since Taishan both built and regulated the system, Chen Xi could run it however he wanted. The fact that he remained this self-disciplined was already commendable. Besides, Chen Xi had no intention of deceiving anyone; he was merely leveraging fixed assets to generate economic activity.

From a legal standpoint, it could be considered illegal, but since Man Chong hadn't yet established relevant laws, there was no legal framework to define it as such.

And more importantly, the only person with the knowledge and authority to declare Chen Xi's actions illegal was Chen Xi himself. But if he didn't say anything, no one else would even understand how the system worked, let alone know that it was against the law.

Even if laws were established in the future, Chen Xi's methods could easily be classified as legitimate business practices. At the very least, Chen Xi didn't believe that someone like Man Chong, who didn't deal with business, would be able to uncover any issues.

"They lack the power to undermine it?" Li You felt a bit uneasy. The fact that it wasn't impossible to undermine but merely difficult suggested there were risks.

"Fine, if they do try to disrupt it, I'll reveal my trump card. Though I don't really want to use it, I have roughly one trillion coins worth of collateral, though not in cash," Chen Xi said with resignation.

"..."

Li You seemed to grasp some of the implications but didn't ask further. The others, meanwhile, were left in silent contemplation, considering the weight of Chen Xi's words. The issues revealed in his explanations were worth further thought, especially for Man Chong.

Chapter 772: A Troubled Mind

"Anyway, you don't need to worry about us running out of money," Chen Xi shrugged as he spoke. "I won't boast, but in an emergency, I can gather 40 billion in cash in batches. In a true crisis, I can mobilize up to 300 billion. Any more than that, and I might crush every merchant in the Han Dynasty."

"It feels like all our hard work over a lifetime doesn't compare to a single word from you," Mi Zhu said somewhat dejectedly, feeling demotivated when facing someone who seemed like a monster in comparison.

"It's different. You manage the wealth of a family, while I'm operating at the scale of a nation. The difference is vast. Even after the Yellow Turban Rebellion, Dong Zhuo's chaos, and various wars, the Han Dynasty still has a population of over 40 million. Little by little, it all adds up," Chen Xi smiled, trying to comfort him, though he knew that Mi Zhu would have to come to terms with this on his own.

"Let's just drop it. We've long been prepared for this," Mi Zhu waved his hand, signaling that Chen Xi didn't need to offer further reassurance. They had all mentally prepared themselves, and Chen Xi's immense capabilities were something they had long been aware of.

"As long as you understand. Anyway, I have no intention of dabbling in commerce, so you don't need to worry about me competing against you," Chen Xi chuckled, making it clear he had no interest in becoming a merchant like Fan Li.

"Alright, enough of this. Let's get back to the topic. The commercial law should be tested with trial regulations that can be adjusted at any time, with a six-month cycle. In other words, after you make changes now, they will take effect in six months. So, Bo Ning, make sure to mark each law you revise with the implementation time," Chen Xi redirected the conversation, moving on to other matters.

"That works too," Man Chong nodded in agreement. It was similar to what he had in mind. Since commerce was flourishing, new situations were constantly arising. Thus, he would continue revising the commercial laws until they reached a point of perfection.

"As for the clan law, this is simple. You just need to draft the core rules and let each clan align their basic regulations accordingly. As long as they don't conflict with your core guidelines, it's fine. If they want to add some of their own clan rules, tell them they can only apply within their own clan, and they need to leave a copy of the amendments with us," Chen Xi didn't place much hope on the clan laws, as they were just a starting point for regulating the aristocratic families and couldn't be too restrictive at this stage.

"What's the point of such laws then?" Man Chong asked, dissatisfied.

"The point is that, over time, we'll tighten the grip. Eventually, it will reach the level we want," Chen Xi said calmly. "Right now, it's not feasible. All we need is this initial restraint. The rest will be taken care of by future generations. Our role is to provide the direction."

Man Chong gave Chen Xi a deep look but said nothing more.

"We can't solve a thousand years' worth of problems in a single era. We just need to take the first step. Future generations will naturally continue in the direction we set, as long as it's the right one," Chen Xi added.

"Is it inevitable then?" Xun Yue murmured. He understood what Chen Xi was implying. Liu Bei's vow to restore the Han Dynasty was ultimately unachievable, and this oath would force every future leader to

face the impossibility of surpassing their predecessors. When Liu Bei fell, he too would become a figure that needed to be surpassed.

After distributing a few more tasks, Chen Xi quietly returned to his work. Without Lu Su, he had to handle much of the administrative duties himself, something that was quite troublesome for him.

Around noon, Mi Zhu was the first to leave, needing to attend to matters related to the merchant guild. As for everything he had seen and heard today, he had already buried it deep in his heart and wouldn't share it with anyone.

Soon after, Man Chong and Xun Yue also left, both preparing to review the laws and start raising awareness for the new civil and criminal codes.

After some time, Jia Xu also departed, as there were pieces of intelligence that required his attention. The real war between Yuan Shao and Liu Bei was about to begin, no longer just minor skirmishes. Every piece on the board needed to be confirmed, as plans involving vast resources and manpower were finally nearing the time for harvesting.

Later, Wang Yi, following Li You's instructions, also left the administrative office to go home and handle materials related to the water network construction. The unfinished work left by Lu Su had now completely fallen on Wang Yi's shoulders.

As the sun began to set, Chen Xi sat upright and stretched, glancing across at Li You, who had also straightened up in his chair. For once, Li You's typically emotionless face showed a hint of concern.

"Wenru, if there's something on your mind, just say it. It's just the two of us now," Chen Xi spoke first.

"I've had this uneasy feeling lately, as if something significant is about to happen," Li You said, his expression unchanged, though his eyes revealed deep worry.

"Things happen every day. How would I know what you're referring to?" Chen Xi responded helplessly, unsure of what to make of Li You's vague concern.

"I've only felt this kind of confusion twice in my life. Once when I awakened my spiritual talent, and the other when Dong Zhuo was on the path to ruin," Li You said, looking directly at Chen Xi. His tone hadn't changed, but Chen Xi sensed the gravity of his words.

"Is something happening with Lord Xuande?" Chen Xi's first thought was Liu Bei.

"No, I've observed closely. There's nothing different," Li You shook his head.

When Li You first noticed his state of confusion, his immediate focus had been on Liu Bei. Dong Zhuo's downfall had been a major blow to him, and as a strategist, it was unacceptable to make the same mistake twice.

"If it's not Xuande, then what could it be?" Chen Xi said nonchalantly. "As long as there's nothing wrong with Xuande, what could possibly threaten us at this point? We're strong enough to face the entire world alone. At most, we could leave the world in shambles with a single campaign."

Li You nodded, acknowledging the truth in Chen Xi's words. But despite this, a sense of unease still lingered in his heart.

"Don't worry. As long as it's not Xuande, no one in this world can defeat us. Every one of the key players from our early days has found their path. Even if new challengers arise, they'll only cause minor problems. They won't stop us," Chen Xi reassured Li You, noticing his unease. They no longer feared any challenges.

"I still can't shake this uneasy feeling," Li You said, shaking his head slightly. "I was hoping you could make sense of it, but it seems even you can't."

"I don't know everything," Chen Xi replied, slightly irritated.

Chapter 773: A Shock to the World

Chen Xi had no real way to comfort Li You in his current state. After a few words of reassurance, he said nothing more. At the very least, Chen Xi didn't believe that there was any issue in the world that could shake the foundation they had built.

"Zhen Mi, pour some tea for Wenru and me!" Chen Xi called lazily to the outside. Moments later, Zhen Mi appeared with a tray of tea. This had become a sort of exclusive service—tea that had only been available in Taishan for a few years now.

Dressed in a delicate silk robe with floral patterns, Zhen Mi brought over a tea tray. She replaced the old cups and filled them with fresh tea for Chen Xi, and then moved to pour tea for Li You.

Just as the sun dipped below the western mountains, a strange sound suddenly echoed across the entire Han Dynasty. It was indescribable, but at that moment, almost every person instinctively bowed toward a certain direction, as if moved by some unseen force.

Both Li You and Chen Xi immediately stood up. In that instant, they could see the golden clouds of fortune surrounding each other. These clouds, normally invisible, now manifested clearly. But neither of them paid attention to this; they turned their heads toward the same direction, eyes wide with disbelief, as if they could see through all obstacles.

"How is this possible?" Li You murmured to himself, still in shock. "This... how is this possible?"

As he spoke, the golden clouds surrounding him began to condense visibly, slowly turning the same color as the scholar's robe he wore—deep green.

Meanwhile, Zhen Mi, who had been carrying the tea, felt her legs buckle beneath her as the mysterious sound reached her ears. She instinctively fell to her knees, facing north. However, Chen Xi, his expression grave, reached out to support her. She too began to emanate golden clouds of fortune, though not as intense as Chen Xi's. Even so, they were remarkable.

Chen Xi's own golden clouds gathered around him rapidly, losing their golden hue and transforming into a pure white, radiating a seven-colored brilliance. At the same time, the fortune surrounding Zhen Mi shifted in sync with Chen Xi's, turning from gold to the same radiant white.

Neither Chen Xi nor Li You paid any attention to the changes in themselves. Instead, their disbelieving eyes remained fixed in the direction of the north.

At the same time, in his home, Liu Bei, who had been spending time with his wives, Zhang and Gan, stood up reflexively as the strange sound reverberated through his heart. His eyes seemed to pierce through the northern horizon, as if seeing through all obstructions.

In that moment, the golden clouds surrounding Liu Bei began to condense at an astonishing speed. As they gathered, the golden light, which was almost too bright to look at, gradually dimmed and transformed into a thick, earthen yellow.

As the sound echoed, both Zhang and Gan felt their knees give way, but Liu Bei, with a calm expression, gently helped them to their feet.

As soon as Liu Bei touched them, the same golden aura began to emanate from their bodies, turning the same earthy yellow as Liu Bei's. The aura grew thicker and heavier, making Lady Gan, who had always seemed a bit ordinary, appear more graceful and dignified. Lady Zhang, already elegant, now seemed to exude an even greater noble presence.

"This divine artifact..." Liu Bei murmured in disbelief. Although he had suspected that something extraordinary would appear, he was still shocked by the magnitude of it. He finally understood the true nature of a "divine artifact."

Jia Xu, showing no emotion, ripped the intelligence report in his hand into pieces. All of the preparations they had made could now be set aside. Heaven had played a trick on them, and a divine artifact had descended. The golden clouds of fortune surrounding him went unnoticed as he gazed silently toward the north.

When the dragon's roar had rung out, Man Chong had immediately activated his spiritual talent. His legalistic mind, cold and logical, overpowered his emotions, and he stared north with an icy, merciless gaze.

Mi Zhu gritted his teeth, refusing to kneel, though his eyes were locked toward the north. Even though he could not see what was happening, he understood what had just been born.

Cai Yan's music abruptly stopped. She had been kneeling at a low table, instructing her students in the art of the qin, but now she stood, her graceful movements filled with elegance and poise.

Among the other women who had been listening to the music, only Huang Yueying and Wang Yi stood reflexively. The rest bowed their heads and kneeled toward the north.

Soon after, Jiang Ying and Cai Zhenji also struggled to their feet. Jiang Ying seemed to be lifted by some invisible force, a testament to Fa Zheng's pride and her connection to him. As for Cai Zhenji, she wavered for a moment before managing to stand firm.

"A divine artifact..." Cai Yan whispered, glancing around at the women gathered for her music lesson. Those who had managed to stand understood the significance, while the others, no matter how talented, found themselves bowing low toward the north.

As her gaze swept over Wang Yi and Huang Yueying, even Cai Yan felt a twinge of surprise at their strength. When she looked at Jiang Ying and Cai Zhenji, she sighed softly, murmuring to herself, "It seems it's true that a husband's status raises his wife, or perhaps a mother's position elevates her children."

At the same time, in a secluded chamber, Fan Jian and the sleeping Chen Lan suddenly awoke. Though the servants around them had already fallen to their knees, the two women stared blankly toward the north. Although they couldn't see anything, they instinctively knew to look in that direction. Around them, the same pure white aura of fortune that surrounded Chen Xi began to gather, glowing with seven-colored light.

In Xuzhou, the troops of Yuan Shu and Zhang Fei suddenly froze mid-battle, then all turned north and knelt. In that moment, the clouds of war dissipated. The only one still standing was Zhang Fei, next to his kneeling warhorse, Wuyun Treading Snow. Yet even he, rather than pressing the attack, stared gravely toward the north.

In Yuzhou, Fa Zheng stared northward, his face a mixture of confusion and awe. Gan Ning stood by, his face pale with shock, while Yuan Shu, supported by Ji Ling, struggled to stand, only to throw his head back in wild laughter.

On the Yangtze River, the soldiers rowing Zhou Yu's ships suddenly dropped their oars and knelt toward the north. Zhou Yu alone remained standing, a proud figure emitting a great golden aura, as he gazed solemnly northward. Behind him, Zhou Tai stood silently.

In Jiangdong, the duel between Zixu and Yu Ji in the sky abruptly halted. Both men turned to look north, and a powerful force immediately knocked them from the sky. Neither of them resisted, both wearing expressions of sudden understanding as they plummeted toward the ground.

In Jingxiang, Huang Zhong gripped his blood-red saber, staring northward with a heavy expression. Xu Shu struggled to his feet, a breakthrough finally arriving at the moment he least wanted to kneel. Zhuge Liang, too, gazed into the distance as though seeing through time and space, watching the divine artifact manifest. Meanwhile, Sun Ce and Pang Tong stood side by side, their faces filled with uncertainty as they too gazed northward.

In Yongliang, Cao Cao stared toward Yanzhou with a bitter smile. Beside him, Dian Wei scratched his head in confusion but also turned his gaze toward Yanzhou.

Chapter 774: Struggle for the Cauldron

In Chang'an, as soon as Liu Xie heard the dragon's roar, his legs gave out involuntarily, and he slid from his dragon throne, kneeling toward the east. Even though there was a part of him that struggled to stand, the moment he weakened, he couldn't rise again.

In Chenliu, after hearing the dragon's cry, Xun Yu found himself shedding tears uncontrollably. Even in a future shrouded in darkness, he had continued to strive forward. Now, at last, he realized that the Han Dynasty's fate was still intact—there was hope yet. The heavens had not forsaken the Han!

In Bingzhou, as Lu Bu clashed in battle at Jiuyuan, he swung his halberd, killing a Hu general in front of him. His warhorse, Red Hare, reared and neighed toward the sky. Wielding his halberd in a wide arc, Lu Bu soared into the air, standing defiantly under an immense pressure.

"Just a mere object, and you think it can make me submit?" Lu Bu sneered. A radiant golden-red aura burst forth from his body. Meanwhile, back in Jiuyuan, Diao Chan, feeling the overwhelming strength transmitted across the distance from Lu Bu, slowly stood from where she had been sitting weakly.

In Yanzhou, Zhao Yun gently patted the neck of his Night Illumination Jade Lion, calming his steed, which had been agitated by the current events. As for the golden clouds that began to form around him, he paid them no mind, his eyes fixed solemnly toward the west—the battlefield where Yan Liang and Tian Feng clashed against Guan Yu and Guo Jia.

In Jizhou, Yuan Shao turned his gaze toward Yanzhou. In that moment, he saw the battlefield unfolding in Yanzhou reflected in his eyes. Though he had not known what the cauldrons were at first, the instant he turned to look, the names of the two cauldrons—Xuan Yuan's Heaven Cauldron and Xuan Yuan's Human Cauldron—were forcibly etched into his mind.

At that moment, countless hidden figures across the land emerged from their reclusive lives, all silently staring at the massive bronze cauldrons hovering over the heart of the Central Plains. Some remained quiet, others grew excited, some even greedy. The myriad faces of humanity were on full display.

"The Heaven and Human Cauldrons have appeared," Wang Yue, standing atop the ruins of Weiyang Palace, murmured. His desire for official rank had never been fulfilled, but his role as the emperor's secret protector remained. His duty was to ensure the emperor survived; whether the emperor could command him depended on the emperor's own abilities.

"The Han Emperor..." Wang Yue cast a contemptuous glance at Liu Xie, who was kneeling on the ground. He could withstand this pressure—yet the emperor, the Son of Heaven, had bowed. What did this signify? Liu Xie likely had no idea.

Meanwhile, Tong Yuan squinted toward Yanzhou. He knew exactly what the appearance of the Heaven and Human Cauldrons meant. It was not just about the fate of the empire but also the prime opportunity for so-called immortals to seize fortune.

Silently polishing his spear, he muttered, "Immortals, huh? Beyond the northern borders, any who dare enter the Central Plains at this moment... will face nothing but death!"

Moments earlier, in Yanzhou's Ji Yin, Guo Jia had finally managed to entrap Tian Feng after a series of calculated maneuvers. However, Tian Feng was no easy opponent. The moment he fell into the trap, he activated his own backup plan, and Yan Liang's army charged in from the rear.

Unfortunately for Tian Feng, Guo Jia had anticipated this move. As soon as Yan Liang arrived, Guan Yu led his forces out to meet him head-on. At that moment, victory seemed assured.

Had it not been for the subsequent unexpected development, either Yan Liang or Tian Feng would have perished here. Yet Guo Jia had not foreseen the impact of their attacks—Guan Yu and Yan Liang's powerful blows had shattered the earth, unearthing the Heaven and Human Cauldrons buried beneath.

With their near-perfect strikes, the two generals had ripped the ground apart, causing the Heaven and Human Cauldrons to emerge. As if provoked by the challenge to their authority, a dragon's roar echoed in the hearts of all who heard it.

Both Yan Liang and Guan Yu, who had been battling in the sky, were struck by this roar and fell to the ground. The soldiers fighting below also dropped their weapons, all kneeling in the direction of the cauldrons.

At this moment, only Guo Jia and Tian Feng managed to remain standing, though they too were struggling under the immense pressure. Unlike those in other distant parts of the Han Empire, the weight of the pressure here was incomparably greater on Guan Yu, Yan Liang, Guo Jia, and Tian Feng.

"What is this...?" Guan Yu muttered as he forced himself to stand, using the Green Dragon Crescent Blade for support. Behind him, the ethereal image of a green dragon grew more solid. Yet all he could see was Yan Liang standing, though barely, with a nearly solid blood-red dragon behind him.

A hundred paces away, Yan Liang glared at Guan Yu. As Guan Yu staggered to his feet, so did Yan Liang, both men severely injured from their fall. Their internal energy had been heavily suppressed by the cauldrons' appearance.

"The Heaven and Human Cauldrons, used by Emperor Xuanyuan to sacrifice to the heavens..." Guo Jia said gravely. Even though he had never seen these artifacts before, the sight of their overwhelming presence—emitting golden clouds of imperial fate and floating weightlessly in the sky—was enough to convince him they were real.

Tian Feng, his eyes wild with fervor, heard the continuous dragon roars and saw the golden dragon coiling around the Heaven and Human Cauldrons. He gritted his teeth and began walking slowly toward the cauldrons. He understood now what these cauldrons represented—the imperial fate of the Han Dynasty, six hundred years in the making!

"General Guan, quickly seize the cauldrons! We cannot allow the imperial fate of the Han to fall into Yuan Shao's hands!" Seeing Tian Feng's determined advance toward the cauldrons, Guo Jia shouted urgently at Guan Yu.

Guan Yu let out a low grunt in response, acknowledging Guo Jia's shout. Though both he and Yan Liang had suffered from the cauldrons' backlash, they had also been recognized by the imperial fate.

Upon hearing Guo Jia's call, Guan Yu opened his eyes, set on the cauldrons shining with golden light in the sky, and took large strides toward them. As for the soldiers under his command, only the absolute elite among them could still struggle to move. The majority remained prostrate on the ground, unable to rise.

"Yun Chang, don't even think about it!" Yan Liang gritted his teeth, forcing himself to move. The Heaven and Human Cauldrons, six hundred years of imperial fate, and Yuan Shao's favor all flashed through his mind, compelling him forward step by step.

Guan Yu cast a cold glance at Yan Liang, his face haughty as he continued toward the Xuanyuan Cauldrons. By now, Tian Feng was almost close enough to touch the Heaven Cauldron.

Though Guan Yu had held the advantage before, his hesitation to kill Yan Liang or Tian Feng had allowed Tian Feng to take the lead. Now, that hesitation might just cost Guan Yu this critical opportunity.

Chapter 775: When One Play Ends, Another Begins

The moment Tian Feng touched the Xuanyuan Heaven Cauldron, the golden radiance that had been flowing from the cauldron instantly retracted back into it, losing its brilliant glow. The cauldron returned to its original form—a bronze vessel with ancient, mysterious carvings, now fully revealed before Tian Feng.

As the Heaven Cauldron settled in front of Tian Feng, he remained in a daze. Similarly, Guan Yu was the first to touch the Xuanyuan Human Cauldron and also fell into a trance. After a long while, both men simultaneously opened their eyes. Tian Feng, still somewhat dazed, reached out to lift the Heaven Cauldron.

On the other side, Guan Yu also tried to lift the Human Cauldron. However, while Guan Yu effortlessly hefted the multi-ton cauldron, Tian Feng strained until his face turned red, but the Heaven Cauldron didn't budge.

"Yan Liang, give me a hand!" Tian Feng, his face flushed, called out to Yan Liang, who had barely caught up. When Yan Liang touched the Heaven Cauldron, he too entered a brief daze, but quickly snapped out of it, lifted the cauldron without hesitation, and began retreating.

As for the cauldron that Guan Yu had already taken, there was nothing Tian Feng could do about it. His soldiers were too weakened to help, and even if they recovered, they were still surrounded.

Guo Jia bit his finger, hesitating. His own troops wouldn't recover in time, and blocking Yan Liang and Tian Feng was nearly impossible. However, allowing them to take away the Xuanyuan Heaven Cauldron was something he could not permit.

"Tian Yuanhao!" Guo Jia suddenly shouted at Tian Feng across the battlefield.

"Guo Fengxiao! Next time, I won't be so careless," Tian Feng replied, his expression serious as he stared in Guo Jia's direction. "If I ever capture you, I will present you to my lord. It was a mistake for Guo Gongze to let you go all those years ago!"

"Hmph, empty words! If not for the appearance of the Heaven and Human Cauldrons today, this would have been your death day!" Guo Jia coldly retorted. "I, Guo Jia, swear today: because of my failure to secure the cauldrons, I will ensure that the Heaven and Human Cauldrons return to Liu Bei's hands one day!"

At that moment, a sharp gleam flashed in Guo Jia's eyes. Though the loss of the cauldron pained him deeply, there was no way to prevent it for now. At the very least, he couldn't allow both cauldrons to fall into Yuan Shao's hands.

"We're leaving!" Tian Feng scoffed, instructing Yan Liang to carry away the Heaven Cauldron. Such a divine artifact, representing three hundred years of imperial fate, could never be allowed to slip away!

"General Guan, we need to go as well. Zhou Cang, Sima Ju, Jiang Gong, prepare the troops. Once they recover, lead them south to Jiyin," Guo Jia quickly gave his orders, directing Guan Yu to carry the Human Cauldron and make their escape. Though the cauldrons' oppressive force was beginning to dissipate, the cauldrons were still too heavy for ordinary horses to pull—only divine steeds could manage it.

Just as the overwhelming pressure from the Heaven and Human Cauldrons was about to subside, and those kneeling across the land were beginning to rise, a phoenix cry suddenly echoed throughout the entire Han Empire.

"The Imperial Seal..." Li You's face turned as dark as coal. On the other side, the jade Imperial Seal, which Chen Xi had always considered a mere decoration, had been activated as well.

"Legend has it that Bian He presented the Heshi Bi after seeing a phoenix descend upon the Chu mountains. Could this be the manifestation of the Chu state's fate?" Chen Xi mused aloud, looking at Li You.

"...", Li You said nothing, his face still dark. After studying the Imperial Seal for so long and finding nothing unusual about it, he'd assumed it was merely an ornament, and had even used it as bait. Who could have predicted that it truly carried the empire's fate?

As the phoenix cry rang out, the attention of those attuned to such phenomena shifted once more—this time toward Shouchun. The Imperial Seal had been casually left in Sun Ce's residence, unguarded and unvalued by him, dismissed as nothing more than a trinket.

"Phoenix cry?" Yuan Shu murmured to Ji Ling.

"Congratulations, my lord!" Ji Ling immediately knelt before Yuan Shu.

"It is useless to me," Yuan Shu said, casting a greedy glance at the golden phoenix now manifesting over Shouchun. However, he quickly regained his composure. "I said I don't want it, and I won't change my mind. Regardless of whether it's real or fake, ensure Bofu's family is protected. Anyone who dares covet the divine artifact will be executed!"

In Sun Quan's room, the thirteen-year-old stood quietly beside the bookshelf where the Imperial Seal lay. Unlike others, he did not kneel. Instead, he tilted his head, gazing at the seal with curiosity—and a touch of desire.

"Yu Ji..." Zixu's eyes were cold as he looked at Yu Ji. "Is this your doing? The Imperial Seal's three hundred years of fate should have been used up long ago. How is it possible for it to release its power again?"

"If I had that kind of ability, do you think I would still be gathering fate?" Yu Ji scoffed, clutching his whisk. If he had known the Imperial Seal still held such power, he would have stolen it long ago—but fate had not been in his favor.

Zixu stared at Yu Ji, realizing his question had been pointless. He then spoke again, "Nevertheless, I cannot allow you to live."

"You think you can kill me?" Yu Ji sneered. "Do you even have the strength?"

Back on the borders of Jiujiang, Fa Zheng's eyes gleamed with excitement after hearing the phoenix cry, while Gan Ning showed a strong interest. Despite the intense pressure from the seal, they had already learned that the Imperial Seal in Shouchun held just as much fate as one of the Heaven and Human Cauldrons.

"Shall we attack Shouchun?" Gan Ning asked, though his tone made it clear he had already made up his mind.

"No. Our current target is clear. Changing plans now would only lead to chaos, and we might end up with nothing," Fa Zheng replied calmly, suppressing his own desires.

"The Imperial Seal, huh?" Zhou Yu smiled. Earlier, he had been distressed over whether Yuan Shao or Liu Bei would claim the six hundred years of fate. He hadn't expected that the true imperial fate had been in their hands all along.

"Father..." Sun Ce muttered to himself, looking back toward Shouchun. His resolve grew even stronger.

"The Imperial Seal?" Pang Tong stroked his small beard, murmuring to himself.

In Yongliang, Cao Cao felt a deep bitterness. First the Heaven and Human Cauldrons, now the Imperial Seal—yet none of these divine artifacts had anything to do with him.

Liu Xie knelt in humiliation, his hands clenched tight, nails digging into his palms. Rage consumed him—why hadn't the Imperial Seal revealed its true power when it was in his possession? Was he not the emperor of the Han Dynasty?

Yuan Shao looked back toward Shouchun with a smile. In his mind, whatever Yuan Shu held would eventually belong to him. Truly, the world was aligning in his favor.

"Zichuan, you made a mistake this time," Liu Bei thought as he looked back at Shouchun, his resolve unwavering. "But when you advised me against it, was it because you didn't want me to be burned by this dangerous object? The Han Dynasty's treasure should not fall into the hands of another."

"This never ends, does it?" Jia Xu sneered, gazing in the direction of Shouchun. So what if his plans had crumbled again? Facing both Yuan Shao and Yuan Shu simultaneously—he was confident in the strength they had amassed!

"Does this artifact hide itself because it deems the current ruler unworthy?" Wang Yue muttered to himself before casting a glance at Liu Xie within the grand hall. "Perhaps it's because he does not deserve it. Cao Mengde, I'm waiting for you—let me see what you can do!"

Chapter 776: Everyone's Reactions

"Zhen Mi, go refill the tea," Chen Xi said calmly after the second wave of oppressive pressure swept across the Han Dynasty. As the pressure faded, Chen Xi tapped his fingers on the table, giving the instruction to Zhen Mi.

"Alright," Zhen Mi replied, her face showing a hint of shyness, but she quickly regained her usual calm expression. She picked up the teapot and slowly walked out, closing the door behind her. She knew the conversation that would follow was not something she should be listening to.

"Wenru, it seems the thing that had you uneasy was this," Chen Xi said with a headache. "Let's not talk about the Imperial Seal for now. As for the Xuanyuan Three Cauldrons, I bear some responsibility as well."

“What if I told you that the two cauldrons you saw before were actually fakes I had forged? Would you believe me?” Li You, now that things had spiraled out of control, calmed down. After all, they had weathered many storms. This wasn't something that could topple Taishan.

“Those were fake?!” Chen Xi felt his face twitch involuntarily. “You really outdid yourself...”

“It must have been some kind of anomaly. Forget it, we need to think about how to handle this situation now,” Li You said, crossing his hands under his chin. They had made the mess, and now they had to clean it up. Fortunately, the situation wasn't catastrophic—they could still manage it.

“What is there to think about?” Chen Xi sneered. “We go to war.”

“I was thinking the same,” Li You agreed. “Timing doesn't matter anymore. If we allow Yuan Shao to truly seize control of the Imperial Fate, no matter how much of an advantage we have, we'll only be left lamenting 'heaven's will.'”

“We must act immediately and seize it. There's no time to play games,” Chen Xi said seriously. “Mobilize the 120,000 Qingzhou Army northward. All mid-level officers studying strategy at Taishan Academy are to be reassigned. Reserve officers from the regular army should be transferred to the new corps to lead them.”

“Activate the emergency reserves. Open the supply lines on the official roads. Dispatch food and weapons immediately. Equip retired soldiers and Tuntian troops with full combat gear. Place the territories under military control,” Li You added. This was his area of responsibility.

Chen Xi and Li You exchanged glances, both seeing the fire in each other's eyes. If they had known the cauldrons were real, they would have dug them up long ago. It was frustrating to realize they'd let things get this far.

“Get ready. Everyone will soon be on their way here. We can't avoid it anymore. Even if we have to fight on two fronts, we must seize the cauldron!” Chen Xi said to Li You, his eyes now cold and sharp.

“Bang!” Jia Xu burst into the room first, his face as dark as a pot's bottom.

"I'm ready to cut off all the enemy's spies in the north. Activate the secret networks in Jizhou. The plan to disrupt the trade routes will begin tomorrow. All hidden assets in the north are ready to be mobilized. The first wave of the Jizhou disruption plan is set to start!" Jia Xu barked coldly at Chen Xi as he stormed in.

"Sit. Wenru and I have been considering the same. It will take ten days to gather and deploy our elite forces," Chen Xi half-explained. As for Jia Xu's preparations, they no longer needed discussion. They had to act, and nothing was more important than this.

"Bang!" The door slammed open again, and Mi Zhu rushed in, his forehead covered in sweat. "This is bad! The Xuanyuan Cauldrons have emerged!"

"We know, we know," Chen Xi waved his hand dismissively. "Zizhong, how are you holding up?"

"Just exhausted. But I made it through. Afterward, I realized my previous vision was far too narrow," Mi Zhu said, wiping his sweat and trying to regain his usual composed demeanor. He had been frantic because of the situation and its implications for Liu Bei. However, seeing this group of people gave him reassurance.

"Zizhong, how is everything on your end?" Chen Xi asked.

"No issues. Once the northern campaign begins, we will do everything to stabilize food prices, salt, and other essential goods. Even if prices rise, I will ensure the increase stays below 10%. I've been strengthening management in this area ever since the merchant guild was founded," Mi Zhu nodded, confident in his preparations.

"After the war begins, I'll personally oversee the laws in Qingzhou, Xuzhou, and Taishan. Anyone who dares violate the law will be severely punished!" At that moment, Man Chong entered, his voice cold and unyielding. The others instinctively gave way to his commanding presence.

"How much pressure should we apply to Jizhou?" Xun Yue asked, posing the most crucial question.

"Before we seize the Xuanyuan Cauldrons, all efforts must be focused on obtaining them. We'll only start with basic relocation of refugees, and city defenses..." Chen Xi pressed his fingers against his temples. After a long pause, he raised his head to look at the group.

"Use full force. Destroy the city if we must. Once we confirm a cauldron is within, demolish the walls and deliver the final blow," Li You cut in, echoing Chen Xi's thoughts. "We can't afford to make the same mistake twice."

"Alright." Chen Xi sighed. "Do it. Once we locate the cauldrons within a city, tear down the walls and seize them."

"Bang!" The door burst open once again, and Qu Qi appeared in the hall. "It's time for the northern campaign. I've been waiting long enough, and this time, we don't need any other justification."

"There's no avoiding it now. The Xuanyuan Cauldrons have surfaced, and given the current situation, no one will believe us if we say the cauldrons are fake. How's your work on the cotton and cold-resistant crop improvements? Time is running out," Chen Xi asked. From the start, their northern campaign had always aimed at more than just Yuan Shao—Liu Bei intended to sweep through the entire northeastern plain in one fell swoop.

"I'm researching other substitutes, and I've made some progress," Qu Qi said with a smile. "After so many years of waiting, I finally see hope."

"The Xuanyuan Cauldron has appeared!" Wang Yi rushed in, flustered, with Huang Yueying following closely behind, her expression showing mild annoyance.

"We're aware," Chen Xi responded irritably. "Master Liu Bei should be here soon. Everyone, get ready. No need to elaborate further. We already have one of the Heaven and Human Cauldrons, so we can rest assured on that front. As for the other one, Yuan Shao's army will likely get it, so our target is clear."

"Zichuan, are you that certain?" Liu Bei stepped in, looking at Chen Xi.

"Greetings, my lord." "Greetings, Master Liu." A mix of responses followed. In Liu Bei's ranks, addressing him as "Master Liu" was common practice, though it sometimes caused confusion.

"No need for formalities. Let's discuss what we're going to do," Liu Bei said as he waved them off, taking his seat at the head of the table.

Chapter 777: The Call for the Northern Campaign

"How else can we proceed? If we don't eliminate Yuan Shao now, he'll become a major threat soon," Chen Xi suggested with some subtlety.

He didn't explicitly say it, but before, they hadn't considered Yuan Shao a significant danger, so they planned to whittle him down slowly while continuing to build up. But now, the situation had changed—they had to fight. How could they possibly tolerate Yuan Shao any longer?

"Zichuan, are you suggesting we go to war immediately?" Liu Bei frowned, his brows furrowing deeply. "Didn't we agree that at least one of the cauldrons would be ours?"

"One of the Heaven and Human Cauldrons being in our possession is almost certain. In that situation, the only ones who could approach and take the cauldrons were General Guan and Yan Liang, due to the extraordinary nature of these cauldrons," Chen Xi said while rubbing his temples. "No doubt, Fengxiao's first priority was to secure one of them."

"I see," Liu Bei nodded, not delving too deeply into the matter, but Jia Xu furrowed his brow, contemplating other possibilities.

"In that case, we don't need to rush," Liu Bei said, shaking his head. "Whether Yuan Shao holds one cauldron and we hold the other doesn't change the fundamental situation. Our goal isn't just to unify the land, but to improve the lives of the people. We don't need to act out of haste or ego."

His words weren't delivered with force, but they were thoughtful. Even with such significant changes, Liu Bei's original ambitions remained unchanged. He wasn't in a rush for quick success.

"I'm afraid that's not possible, my lord. If Yuan Shao gains control of the Xuanyuan Cauldron, the resulting implications would be too unpredictable," Li You was the first to respond.

“Master Liu, you may have misunderstood. Each of these cauldrons holds 300 years of national fate. Once one is tied to Yuan Shao and the other to you, the disparity will become enormous. If we view Yuan Shao’s current power as a one, and ours as a two, then with the cauldrons, it becomes more like eleven to twelve,” Chen Xi interjected, exaggerating the cauldron’s importance. Sometimes, simple addition was easier to understand than multiplication, especially in moments like this.

“Is it really that significant?” Liu Bei asked, his eyes widening.

“These are artifacts representing 300 years of national fate, and you’ve seen for yourself how the masses kneeled before them, my lord. Please consider Zichuan’s words carefully,” Jia Xu said, his tone neutral but his message clear. In this moment, he was siding with Chen Xi.

“My lord, Yuan Shao is not someone to be underestimated,” Man Chong said bluntly, directly pointing out the threat Yuan Shao posed.

“But if we go to war with Yuan Shao now, we’ll be fighting on two fronts. There’s even a chance that Yanzhou will come under attack from Cao Cao,” Liu Bei pointed out, gesturing to the two fronts—Yuan Shao to the north and south—and the potential threat from Cao Cao in the west.

Liu Bei wasn’t ignorant of strategy. After spending so much time in Taishan, with Chen Xi’s extensive collection of military treatises available, Liu Bei had developed some strategic insights. He was well aware of the hidden dangers that could arise from large-scale conflicts.

“That’s not an issue. From the very beginning, we’ve had a clear and precise plan in place, and up until now, everything has gone according to schedule. Just because we’ve been balancing war and development doesn’t mean we lack the power to crush the other warlords,” Chen Xi said with a shake of his head.

“Building is far more difficult than destroying. Our original goal was construction, which is why we proceeded cautiously. But now, if we shift to a full-on northern campaign, the pressure on us will be much lighter. In fact, after retrieving the Xuanyuan Cauldron, we could even focus on stabilizing the region,” Li You said, now firmly in the camp of those pushing for war.

“The destructive power of chaotic armies is immense, which is why we’ve been advancing slowly. But now, with the cauldron as our target, we can afford to set those concerns aside. Once we secure the

Xuanyuan Cauldron, we can deal with everything else afterward,” Xun Yue added. He also supported the campaign against Yuan Shao—such a powerful artifact could not fall into Yuan Shao’s hands.

Liu Bei observed the expressions of his ministers, sensing their determination. He remained silent for a moment before asking, “How long do you estimate it will take to achieve our objective, and what will the approximate extent of the damage be?”

“Yuan Shao’s forces are quite formidable. According to our previous plan for a northern campaign, if we fully unleash our military strength, the first battle could push us to the southern border of Jizhou. After that, Yuan Shao will likely appear on the battlefield personally. It will take about a month to establish supply lines and build roads to support our army,” Jia Xu answered with confidence, the numbers flowing effortlessly.

“Overall, I estimate that after Yuan Shao appears, we’ll be locked in a stalemate along the Wei Commandery front for about three months,” Jia Xu continued calmly. “Following that, Yuan Shao will retreat to Ye City, and that will be the best opportunity for us to execute our final war strategy.”

“Based on the intelligence I’ve gathered, although Xin Du is the administrative center of Jizhou, for someone like Yuan Shao, who’s preparing to invade the Central Plains, the importance of Ye City surpasses that of Xin Du. Therefore, it’s highly likely that Yuan Shao will store the Xuanyuan Cauldron in Ye City,” Jia Xu explained, glancing around at the others in the room. His meaning was clear to everyone.

“Master Liu, the opportunity is now. We must act quickly. Gather the troops and launch the northern campaign. Strike Jizhou while Yuan Shao is preoccupied with General Gongsun!” Chen Xi said gravely. You can’t afford to keep a tiger as a pet.

“Very well!” Seeing Chen Xi’s urgency and the hopeful expressions of his other ministers, Liu Bei made his decision. “Send orders for Zang Ba to take over full military command in northern Qingzhou. Summon Wei Yan, Guan Ping, Sun Shao, Zhao Yan, Sun Kang, Chen Hua, Zheng Zha, and Xu Qin back to Taishan. Mobilize the mid-level officers studying at Taishan Academy, and have the newly graduated students join the army. Arm the Qingzhou soldiers and prepare for the northern campaign!”

“Yes!” Everyone present bowed in unison.

“Zichuan, will you join the campaign or stay to oversee the rear?” Liu Bei asked, glancing sideways at Chen Xi, understanding that he would not impose on Chen Xi’s decision.

“I’ll join the campaign. For that final maneuver, it won’t work without me and General Guan,” Chen Xi replied after a brief moment of thought.

“Alright. Wenru, you’ll remain here to oversee things, and Zhongyu will serve as your deputy,” Liu Bei said, nodding toward Li You.

“Yes,” Li You and Xun Yue replied, cupping their hands in salute.

“Boning, you’ll be responsible for maintaining law and order in Taishan. I won’t take the city management troops with me,” Liu Bei said, turning to Man Chong. “But don’t be too harsh—sometimes a bit of leniency can save lives.”

“Yes,” Man Chong replied, his face expressionless.

“Zizhong, you’ll handle market supervision in Qingzhou and Xuzhou. Make sure the people can still afford basic necessities,” Liu Bei instructed Mi Zhu.

“As for Hanmou, Miss Huang, and Miss Wang, you will remain in Fenggao and continue your research and work,” Liu Bei said gently, addressing Qu Qi, Huang Yueying, and Wang Yi, the last of whom he mentioned in passing.

Chapter 778: The Canal Project

After getting to know these technical talents better, Liu Bei realized their immense importance. For instance, when Qu Qi had too much to drink, instead of using his spiritual power to calm him down, Liu Bei would personally keep an eye on him to prevent any mishaps.

According to Liu Bei, every breakthrough Qu Qi made in agriculture represented a significant step toward the restoration of the Han Dynasty. In this era, as long as the people under your rule had enough food to eat, there would be no shortage of those willing to die for you.

"Zichuan, do you have any other instructions?" Liu Bei turned to Chen Xi to ask, hoping to avoid any future issues.

"It's just a pity I wasn't there when my wife gave birth," Chen Xi sighed. Compared to others, he couldn't let go of his personal emotions as easily.

"We'll deal with the Xuanyuan Cauldron first, and talk about everything else later. Send orders to all the relay stations to begin mobilizing our troops," Liu Bei said with a bitter smile. He had anticipated that Chen Xi would struggle to let go of family matters. "Zhang should also return to Jizhou soon; this will be a dangerous time."

"If we want fewer casualties, danger is unavoidable. If our original goal was only to unify the world, we would have already started. However, doing so would mean countless Han citizens would be displaced and suffering. We cannot sacrifice an entire generation for the ambitions of a few," Chen Xi replied helplessly.

"We will keep the war within our control. When necessary, we can end the conflict at any time by paying the price," Liu Bei declared, sweeping his gaze over everyone present. "The world has long awaited the battle between Yuan and Liu. Let them witness it and understand the vast gap in power between us."

"Let them realize the difference in strength!" Chen Xi added with a mocking smile. "Ju Gongyu and Xu Ziyuan believe they have mastered the essence of Taishan. Let them see the true strength of our Taishan."

"Chen Xi... the light of dawn, dispelling darkness and bringing brilliance. Zichuan, your father placed great hopes on you!" Liu Bei laughed, but his expression soon turned serious. "Together, we will dispel the darkness that hangs over the Han Dynasty!"

"I will follow my lord forward!" Li You smiled, the unease he had previously felt now gone. As long as Liu Bei remained unchanged, even if they had to fight the world alone, victory would still belong to Taishan. They would not lose!

After distributing the military duties, Chen Xi and the others immediately got to work. Each of them began activating the plans Chen Xi had laid down long ago, and now, each seed had grown into a towering tree.

"Wang Yi, continue to manage the waterworks in Qingzhou and Xuzhou. Additionally, start researching how to connect the rivers and the Yangtze. Figure out what kind of infrastructure is needed if this connection is possible," Chen Xi instructed Wang Yi, who seemed somewhat dissatisfied. Recently, Chen Xi's wife had mentioned that Wang Yi had been diligently studying hydraulics.

"What?" Before Wang Yi could respond, Mi Zhu had already reacted. "You want to connect the rivers and the Yangtze with a waterworks system?"

"The difficulty will be immense, and the manpower and resources required would be enormous. It might even rival the construction of the Great Wall under the First Emperor," Wang Yi's eyes initially gleamed at the prospect, but after hearing Chen Xi's instructions, she felt disappointed. The project seemed too labor-intensive and costly.

"I didn't say it needed to be done now. I'll give you 5,000 work hours to draft a detailed plan. Present a complete design by then. As for technical support, I can only recommend Zheng Wengong and Huang Yueying. Unfortunately, there aren't many experts in waterworks," Chen Xi replied casually, shrugging.

"Such an enormous project would exhaust the people! How could it ever be completed?" Wang Yi grumbled, clearly upset. To her, it felt like Chen Xi had just handed her a meaningless task because she was a woman in the government.

"Miss Wang, how about leaving this entire matter to me instead?" Mi Zhu interjected, his face filled with a smile. Wang Yi couldn't see the potential benefits of the project, but Mi Zhu certainly could. To rise from a minor merchant to his current position, Mi Zhu had to possess a keen commercial intuition.

"Agree to it, Shiyi," a soft voice came from Huang Yueying, reaching Wang Yi's ears. About to protest further, Wang Yi stopped in her tracks. She deeply admired Huang Yueying, who was a few months younger than her but far wiser.

"Agree to whom?" Wang Yi whispered, but before Huang Yueying could answer, Wang Yi realized the situation. She quickly turned to Chen Xi and said flatteringly, "I spoke rashly earlier. Please forgive me, Chancellor Chen, for my youthful impetuosity. I am willing to take on the task."

"Work closely with them. The other women who study alongside you can also help," Chen Xi replied, not minding Wang Yi's tone, showing no interest in holding grudges over such minor issues.

"I'll definitely present a plan that will satisfy you, Chancellor Chen!" Wang Yi said excitedly. After reflecting on the task, she realized it actually held many potential benefits. "I'll get to work right away."

Without even glancing at her, Chen Xi waved her off, and Wang Yi dashed away energetically. Huang Yueying, on the other hand, gracefully bowed before leaving. Recently, the war machines in Taishan had started operating smoothly.

"Zichuan, how could you assign such a massive task to a young girl?" Mi Zhu immediately questioned after watching Wang Yi and Huang Yueying leave. "This kind of project, which requires both money and manpower, should be left to us!"

"This task cannot be entrusted to any of you," Chen Xi shot a glance at Mi Zhu before calmly explaining, "The manpower, resources, and funding must come from the government."

"What if I offer to fund the project? We could complete the canal in about fifteen years without charging you. Just provide us with the plans. In fact, we don't even need the plans—give us twenty years, and we'll complete it for you," Mi Zhu said, grinning. It wasn't about making money anymore. For the Five Great Merchants, the thrill of earning profits had long passed. Now, they sought a sense of accomplishment.

"Even if you offered all the resources, I wouldn't agree to let you handle it. If you were to manage the construction, you'd inevitably charge tolls. In your view, the tolls might not seem like much, but..." Chen Xi pressed his temples and firmly rejected the idea.

Handing the construction of the Grand Canal over to private entities was a surefire way to fail, in Chen Xi's eyes. Mi Zhu's suggestion wasn't entirely off base; with the resources of the merchant guilds, building the canal in fifteen years was feasible. They could stagger the funding and subcontract parts of the project to various large merchants.

However, if the canal were privately owned—even leased out to private interests for a few decades—it would cause endless headaches. Therefore, from the very beginning, Chen Xi had no intention of

privatizing the construction of the Grand Canal. It had to be a government-led project, and chaotic times like these provided the perfect opportunity to undertake such an endeavor.

"What if I donate the money for the project?" Mi Zhu suggested, now aiming to fund the canal as a philanthropic effort to build his reputation.

Chapter 779: The Unveiling of Chaos

Chen Xi had no particular comment on Mi Zhu's actions of choosing reputation over wealth. After all, Mi Zhu had already experienced all the riches and glory life had to offer and was simply walking away with a carefree attitude.

"It's not impossible, but it will have to wait another two years. I won't start working on that until then. You know how it is: the further I push back tasks, the more important they are," Chen Xi thought for a moment and said.

"By then, the overall situation in the world should be clearer, and it will be time to handle the fertile lands of the North. We can start the development project then," Li You added, hinting at the prearranged plans for developing the northern territories.

"Yes, these are grand projects that need to be handled separately. They are not small matters, and their impact is massive," Chen Xi shrugged. "In any case, we'll discuss it when the time comes. Now is not suitable. Let's give Wang Yi another two to three years, and by then, she should be able to present a feasible plan."

"Then I'll start preparing the funds in advance," Mi Zhu smiled. "When the time comes, I'll donate ten billion coins all at once."

"You should first focus on uniting the merchants into a single front before thinking about donations," Chen Xi waved dismissively, not paying much attention to Mi Zhu's grand gesture of donating money for fame. At this point, whether Mi Zhu had one billion or ten billion coins, his lifestyle wouldn't change much, given his wealth, status, and influence.

"I'll do my best," Mi Zhu replied with a slightly awkward smile.

When it came to matters concerning Liu Bei, the members of the merchant association would listen to Mi Zhu's command. Even if families like the Wei and Wu clans had objections, they would simply opt out rather than oppose him. But in other matters, they would still bicker and not follow orders.

"In this chaotic world, to accumulate such manpower and resources, only someone like you could pull it off," Xun Yue remarked with admiration. Chen Xi's abilities in domestic governance were indeed astonishing; it was no exaggeration to call him a genius in this regard.

"Enough of this talk. Let's focus on mobilizing our forces for the Northern Expedition. If the Xuanyuan Cauldron gets taken to Xindu by Yuan Shao, it will become much harder for us to retrieve it. We need to move quickly," Chen Xi smiled, shifting the conversation away from Xun Yue's praise.

While Fenggao remained relatively calm, the rest of the world had descended into chaos, with many losing their sense of reason. Only a few individuals remained clear-headed amid the turmoil.

"Zhengnan, I leave Gongsun Bogui's burial in your hands. Give him a proper funeral. I'm heading to Yanzhou," Yuan Shao said, patting Shen Pei on the shoulder.

"My lord, leave this matter to me. I will ensure Gongsun Bogui receives a grand ceremony," Shen Pei nodded, expressing no objections to Yuan Shao's sudden change in command. He too had witnessed the emergence of the Xuanyuan Cauldron.

"Zhengli, come with me to Yanzhou. We will retrieve what is rightfully mine," Yuan Shao said, turning to Ju Yi with a calm demeanor.

"I will pave the way ahead for you, my lord!" Ju Yi bowed deeply. "My troops now possess both the will and the strength to enforce that will. Unfortunately, my greatest opponent has left the Central Plains. I wish I could face him again."

"You mean Gao Gongzheng?" Yuan Shao smiled. "He will be under my command soon enough. Lu Fengxian has retaken Jiuyuan and is currently regrouping. It is one of my ministers who governs his territories. So, Zhengli, you will not have another chance to face him."

"What a shame," Ju Yi's face showed a hint of bitterness. He had been thoroughly defeated in their last encounter, and just as he had succeeded in forging an army with true military spirit, the opportunity to battle his old rival had slipped away.

"Hahaha, mount up! Follow me, and we shall conquer the Central Plains!" For the first time, Yuan Shao openly displayed his ambition to dominate the world.

"I will ride by your side and clear all obstacles for you!" Ju Yi declared boldly. Though the world was filled with talented and extraordinary individuals, Ju Yi firmly believed himself to be among the best.

"What's that...?" At that moment, Zhang He, who was accompanying Yuan Shao, squinted at a streak of azure light across the sky. "That is... a person?"

With the pressure of the Xuanyuan Cauldron and the Imperial Seal unleashed, the hidden immortals of the world could no longer contain themselves. This was the perfect opportunity to seize their fortune. With the nation's sacred artifact in hand, one's luck would soar, and refining it could lead to ascension!

"This path is blocked!" Tong Yuan stood atop the high sky among the clouds, holding his spear and axe, his gaze cold as he faced a Confucian scholar dressed in azure robes.

"Tong Yuan, are you here to stop me?" The voice that echoed in Tong Yuan's ears was hoarse, making it hard to determine whether it belonged to someone young or old.

"Turn back, and I will not hinder you," Tong Yuan said calmly.

"Then there's nothing more to discuss!" The azure-robed Daoist chuckled. With a slight movement of his hands, blue lightning flickered around his body. In the next moment, he transformed into a deep blue streak, tinged with red, and shot toward Tong Yuan like lightning.

A cold, murderous glint flashed across Tong Yuan's old face. A layer of icy blue light appeared over his spear and axe as he charged directly toward the azure-robed Daoist.

"Boom!" A thunderous crash echoed in the heavens. A bolt of lightning pierced through the clouds and struck the earth, followed by the slow descent of the azure-robed Daoist.

"I told you, this path is blocked," Tong Yuan smirked coldly as the figure of the azure-robed Daoist gradually turned to ash as he fell.

"If you're careless, you will die." As the words were spoken, an old man dressed in red appeared in the sky. The azure-robed Daoist, who had been turning to dust, suddenly seemed to rewind, his form restored as if time itself had reversed.

"Thank you, Nandou," the azure-robed Daoist bowed weakly to Nandou, his face pale.

"Leave. That artifact is not something you can claim, and Tong Yuan's strength is beyond your reach," Nandou didn't even glance at the azure-robed Daoist. He kept his gaze fixed on Tong Yuan. "I am heading to the Central Plains. Will you stop me?"

"You said you wouldn't interfere in the turmoil of the Central Plains," Tong Yuan replied calmly.

"I need that fortune," Nandou stated, half negotiating, his tone light yet unyielding, leaving no room for opposition.

The azure-robed Daoist cupped his hands to Nandou and transformed into a streak of lightning, retreating to the northern frontier. Having faced death once, he now knew what truly mattered.

"No," Tong Yuan shook his head. "The affairs of the Central Plains belong to its people. Those who choose that path must bear its cost."

"Then let us fight!" Nandou said, his expression unchanging.

"Turn back, Nandou, or you will die here today!" Nan Hua suddenly appeared on the battlefield.

"Retreat to the northern frontier. I've said it before—so long as I live, any true immortal who steps into the Central Plains without my permission will die!"

"Such harsh words..." A new voice echoed in the air. A golden-robed youth appeared, looking at Nan Hua. "Do you think we would come here if we were afraid?"

"Beiming..." Nan Hua narrowed his eyes. "Even you, the timid one, have come. Who else is here?"