

Mythical 241

Chapter 241: Comforting the Spirits

“No need, don’t worry about this. There’s still more than a month left, plenty of time for me to handle it,” Chen Xi waved his hand dismissively. He had already decided that he would just throw on whatever clothes he had at the time. After all, with the marriage, the conferral of titles, and the various ceremonies that Li Jue would be conducting, they would surely prepare an appropriate outfit for him, if only to save face. Chen Xi felt no pressure. If anyone thought it inappropriate, they’d understand once the title was conferred.

“Oh.” Fan Jian nodded, thinking that Chen Xi might go out to arrange for a set of clothes. After all, Fenggao’s tailors were quite capable, and making an outfit fit for a marquis wasn’t much trouble.

Though she was a bit unhappy that her husband wouldn’t be wearing something prepared by family, at this point, there was no need to be too particular.

“Rest well. I’m planning to go check on the construction of the Memorial Hall,” Chen Xi said as he patted Fan Jian’s head, indicating she need not worry about such matters. After all, what business did a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old girl have with these things?

Fan Jian, not too pleased, shook her head in a huff, her loosened hair from resting making her look a bit disheveled. It was clear she wasn’t entirely happy with Chen Xi treating her like a child.

“Hmph, come back early,” Fan Jian muttered, not entirely willing.

“Don’t worry, I’m off now.” Chen Xi waved his hand and prepared to leave. In addition to the Memorial Hall, he also needed to check on the Library and Liu Bei’s house. As the quality control inspector, he had to ensure everything was up to standard.

Honestly, Chen Xi’s attitude towards Liu Bei’s house was that as long as it didn’t collapse and was livable, it was fine. The gold and glitter on the outside didn’t matter much to him. In his view, Liu Bei’s house was just for show, perhaps with a bit of educational significance. Everything else was superficial.

As long as it looked grand and imposing, enough to awe people, that was good enough. That's why the tiles on Liu Bei's house were of all colors—aiming for a dazzling, colorful display. Interestingly, this was partly due to the craftsmen's skill levels—despite using the same materials, the results varied...

Next was the Library, which was somewhat more important, but still just a building. The value lay in the books, not the decorations. Making it luxurious was just a way to emphasize the idea that "there's gold in books, and beauty within," but even stripped of all the embellishments, it would still be a library.

As for the Memorial Hall, this was the main reason for Chen Xi's inspection. This place needed to convey the utmost solemnity and reverence. As the final resting place for all the heroic spirits, it had to be imposing enough to evoke a sense of being watched over by the spirits of the deceased.

Whether it would achieve that effect, he wasn't sure. But his instructions had been clear: the earth should be black, the bricks on the path black and reflective. The flowers on either side should be only red spider lilies on the left and white spider lilies on the right. That's the atmosphere he wanted!

Black bricks, black walls, black pillars—the entire Memorial Hall was to be shrouded in black. The only contrasting elements would be white decorations. Besides black, white, and red, no other colors were allowed. Chen Xi believed his aesthetic sense was on point.

Liu Bei saw the black walls from a distance, and his pace slowed involuntarily. As he got closer, everything turned pitch black, from the ground to the surroundings, slightly reflecting the sunlight. It didn't seem dark, just cold.

"Big Brother!" Zhang Fei's voice reached Liu Bei's ears, though it lacked the usual booming force, sounding rather subdued instead.

"Third Brother, it really is you guarding this place. I didn't expect you to have tempered your wild nature." Liu Bei smiled. "Has there been any trouble?"

"I don't know why, but once I got here, I couldn't help but be extra cautious. My soldiers feel the same. Come, Big Brother, let's light some incense at the Memorial Stone," Zhang Fei replied, scratching his head.

"I was just about to check on the Memorial Hall's construction. Yide, since you've been stationed here, have you noticed any issues with the building?" Liu Bei asked as they walked together.

"Zi Chuan did a great job." Zhang Fei led Liu Bei and the others deeper into the Memorial Hall until they reached a towering black stone monument. Carefully, Zhang Fei took out some incense sticks, lit them, and handed them to the group.

Liu Bei and the others took the incense, bowed three times before the monument, and quietly inserted the incense into the earthen jar before it. From the looks of it, the jar had likely been brought by one of the soldiers from home, as had the incense.

"I don't know why, but once I'm here, my heart feels at peace, and I can't help but lower my voice," Zhang Fei said, gazing up at the massive black monument. His usually robust figure and fierce demeanor seemed to soften, a more contemplative aura surrounding him.

"Me too!" Liu Bei placed a hand on Zhang Fei's shoulder and joined him in looking up at the towering black monument.

At that moment, both men felt a tranquility they had never known before. After a long while, Liu Bei took another incense stick, lit it, and placed it into the jar.

"To all the heroic souls resting here, may you find peace. I, Liu Xuande, will ensure that your families are cared for. If I ever knowingly allow your families to suffer injustice without intervening, I, Liu Xuande, swear to offer my life in atonement. Heaven and earth bear witness, and so do the spirits," Liu Bei vowed solemnly, as if speaking directly to the spirits.

"Granted!" A faint voice echoed through the air, though its source was unclear. It seemed to drift from nowhere, heard only by those present. Liu Bei and the others were momentarily startled but quickly composed themselves, bowing once more to the monument.

After Liu Bei and the others left the Memorial Hall, an elderly man with white hair and a youthful face appeared at the main gate. "Liu Xuande is indeed a man of virtue. It wasn't in vain that I traveled from Lujiang to Taishan to witness this. I wonder if my response on behalf of heaven will cause any trouble," Zuo Ci murmured, habitually performing a calculation with his fingers.

“Will it shorten my life? No matter. To meet such a virtuous ruler, there’s still hope for peace in this world,” Zuo Ci remarked indifferently. Having seen much in his long life, he no longer feared death. Born into the Han dynasty, he hadn’t fully embraced the Daoist detachment, still harboring a hope that the Han could endure.

Taking an incense stick, Zuo Ci calmly lit it and placed it in the jar, softly chanting an ancient song of passage from the shamanic era.

When Chen Xi entered, there was still half a burning incense stick in the jar, and he could faintly hear a calming song that made him frown.

“Who’s here?” Chen Xi asked as he stared at the monument, frowning. He couldn’t see anyone, but he could sense a presence standing there. Though the situation was eerie, he was certain there was someone there.

There was no reply, but Chen Xi sensed a slight fluctuation in the calming song, and instantly, he felt more at ease. He feared the unknown, but not a sentient being he could perceive.

Feeling more confident, Chen Xi avoided the spot where Zuo Ci stood, took an incense stick, lit it, bowed to the monument, and placed the incense in the jar. He then stood quietly, waiting for the song to end.

“Marquis Chen, I am Zuo Yuanfang. Greetings,” the elderly Daoist, now visible, said after the incense burned out, bowing to Chen Xi.

“Zuo Yuanfang?” Chen Xi was momentarily stunned but quickly composed himself and returned the greeting. “Chen Zichuan greets the chief celebrant.”

“No need for formalities,” Zuo Ci replied calmly, his eyes studying Chen Xi’s face. He tried to divine more but found his efforts repeatedly thwarted, only able to tell that Chen Xi’s fate was extraordinarily noble.

“Since the chief celebrant is already here in Taishan, why conceal yourself? Are you worried that Taishan would not properly welcome you?” Chen Xi asked with a smile, remaining composed in the presence of this legendary figure.

Chen Xi was confident, knowing that even if Zuo Ci did not favor him, he had nothing to fear. The most orthodox of Chinese immortals did not harm mortals, especially those who had contributed greatly to the world. Chen Xi was certain that his contributions were significant enough—saving millions, at least.

Chapter 242: The Loss of Mystique

Zuo Ci curiously observed Chen Xi, unable to discern even the slightest hint of reverence in his eyes. Instead, there was a sense of someone encountering a rare animal, which made Zuo Ci feel a bit uneasy.

"I am but an outsider, having come to Taishan by invitation. Why should I trouble the authorities? But Marquis Chen, aren't you worried that I might harbor ill intentions toward Taishan?" Zuo Ci flicked his horsetail whisk, a faint, unreadable smile on his face.

"Someone who can sing a requiem here likely doesn't have ill intentions. And if you were truly an immortal, you wouldn't harm me. If you're merely human, I have my own means of self-defense," Chen Xi responded calmly, his eyes fixed curiously on Zuo Ci's black whisk.

"There's no such thing as immortals, just people seeking the path to longevity," Zuo Ci sighed. "With talents like yours, if you wished to learn, you could easily reach my level."

"Oh, thank you for the clarification, Daoist." Chen Xi nodded, finally feeling completely at ease after hearing Zuo Ci's words.

Since Zuo Ci, a figure significant enough to be remembered in later historical records as a potential immortal, admitted that there were no true immortals—only people pursuing the path of longevity—Chen Xi felt relieved. From the moment he arrived in this world, he had been worried that mythical figures would intervene in history.

After all, it seemed impossible that the course of four hundred years of Han dynasty history would align so closely with the original timeline without some kind of interference. The mere fact that events had led to the Yellow Turban Rebellion in the late Eastern Han, despite minor differences, suggested the possibility of some external force influencing history.

Although Chen Xi had studied the historical events and found that many occurrences seemed to happen by coincidence, they still followed a logical progression. This made him uncertain whether someone had indeed manipulated events or if the natural flow of history had simply reached that point. But now, with

Zuo Ci's words, Chen Xi felt reassured: even the so-called "immortals" of the late Han dynasty were still human.

As long as they were human, Chen Xi had no further concerns. Even if they possessed extraordinary abilities, if they dared to oppose him, he was confident that he could teach them a lesson in "being human."

"It seems Marquis Chen is in a much better mood after hearing my words," Zuo Ci commented with a smile, still unsure of what was on Chen Xi's mind.

"Heh, thank you, Daoist, for resolving my doubts," Chen Xi replied calmly, the heavy weight on his heart lifted. Now, the great momentum of history could proceed without any interference. Without immortals, any tricks played by these so-called "mystics" would be no more than parlor tricks, easily dispelled by a well-formed military formation.

"I wonder, Marquis Chen, what brings you such joy. If you don't mind sharing, perhaps I can share in the happiness," Zuo Ci's curiosity seemed insatiable.

Chen Xi glanced at Zuo Ci indifferently. "I'm pleased because I'm finally confident that I can spread the prosperity of Taishan across the world. The unstoppable force of history can no longer be obstructed."

Zuo Ci frowned. In this chaotic era, no one could predict who would ultimately emerge as the ruler. Even with his extraordinary abilities, Zuo Ci couldn't foresee the outcome of this turbulent time. Yet here was Chen Xi, speaking with such certainty, which made Zuo Ci frown even more.

"Marquis Chen, I urge you to be cautious. The way of heaven is unpredictable, and who can truly see the end of this chaos? I believe it will take nearly a century of turmoil before the land is unified again. As for this unstoppable force you speak of, it has yet to manifest," Zuo Ci said, shaking his head. "Many stars, bright enough to obscure the Purple Star, have already appeared. The situation will be as chaotic as the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods!"

Indeed, despite Zuo Ci's expertise in mysticism, his conclusions were not far off from those reached by strategists like Liu Ye and Guo Jia. In fact, Guo Jia and Liu Ye might even be more accurate, given the intelligence they had gathered. They could pinpoint which figures these "stars" represented, as well as predict their future trajectories and possible conflicts.

"Daoist, you should rest and continue doing what those outside the world do. Leave the world's affairs to us. You pursue your path to immortality, and we'll handle what needs to be done. As for the unstoppable force of history, from today onward, it will be shaped by my hands!" Chen Xi's calm face exuded strong confidence.

Zuo Ci was momentarily stunned, sensing something different in his heart. When he tried to calculate the future again, he found that things had changed slightly. Sighing, he looked at Chen Xi. "Marquis Chen, you are truly a genius. Perhaps you will succeed where others have not. But the way of heaven is unpredictable, and who can say what tomorrow holds?"

"I'll be going now. If the chief celebrant needs anything, just ask General Zhang outside. I'm sure you have ways to convince him." Chen Xi glanced at Zuo Ci, unimpressed by mystics who had lost their mystique. Even if they had powers beyond the ordinary, Chen Xi no longer felt any awe. He waved his hand and turned to leave. His greatest gain today was shedding his fear of so-called "immortals."

"Marquis Chen, you are too kind. Farewell." With that, Zuo Ci transformed into a wisp of smoke and disappeared.

Chapter 243: The First Batch of Orphan Education Finds a Home...

After Zuo Ci left, Chen Xi curiously observed the lingering smoke, feeling a special sensation rising within him. It seemed like this technique would be quite effective for a quick escape.

Chen Xi didn't enter the main hall of the Jingling Shrine. He only stood outside, observing it briefly. There was no eerie or cold feeling; instead, there was an aura that naturally commanded respect. He had to admit that ancient craftsmen were truly skilled. Chen Xi had only given a rough outline, yet they managed to convey everything he had envisioned.

Silently, Chen Xi thought that as long as he did his utmost, the spirit of the army would gradually be forged.

If soldiers die fighting on the front lines while those at home are carefree and indifferent, and if the warriors who bled for the country aren't honored, or if their families suffer after their deaths, how could an undefeated spirit of the army ever be forged?

“May all of you rest in peace. I will do my best to give you everything you deserve. Your affairs after death will be properly handled. May your spirits bear witness to this!” Chen Xi said calmly, standing between the entrance and the massive black stele. He wasn’t one to believe in ghosts and gods, but sometimes people still needed such beliefs as their final moral boundary.

After completing his thoughts, Chen Xi prepared to leave. There wasn’t much to see in the Jingling Shrine. It was a place for the spirits of heroes to rest, with only rituals and caretakers present. It wasn’t a place for the living to disturb.

Chen Xi slowly exited through the front gate of the shrine. The soldiers guarding the shrine bowed respectfully to him before resuming their silent, statue-like stance.

After crossing the street in front of the shrine and turning onto the main road, Chen Xi, who had been solemn, suddenly let out a breath and returned to his usual carefree demeanor.

“The construction is really impressive. Even I couldn’t help but be affected by the atmosphere in there,” Chen Xi remarked with a smile. This was exactly the effect he had hoped for. If the shrine could make someone feel like their soul had been cleansed upon entering, it would be perfect. If it could even inspire fervent patriotism, that would be ideal...

Of course, this was just Chen Xi’s wishful thinking. He was already satisfied with the current outcome. To achieve that level of spiritual cleansing, it would take hundreds of years of worship and the honoring of countless heroes. For now, this was likely the best they could achieve, beyond which it would no longer be a matter of craftsmanship.

“Hey, you there, stop!” Chen Xi was on his way to the library when he spotted a familiar figure on the street.

It was none other than the little rascal who had bumped into him months ago and stolen his wallet. Judging by the way the boy was glancing around, it was clear he was looking for a target to pickpocket.

Chen Xi’s enhanced memory wasn’t perfect, but it was good enough to remember faces, especially when he had made a point of remembering this one. After all, losing his wallet had been a nuisance, and he hadn’t wanted to tell Chen Lan about it.

The boy froze, clearly confused at first, but then recognition dawned on him. After all, it wasn't every day he managed to steal a pouch full of gold pearls, so the memory was still fresh.

"Oh, trying to run, are we?" Chen Xi said, displeased. Although he hadn't brought Hua Xiong with him today, he still had a few personal guards with him. "Catch that kid! Don't hurt him, just grab him."

"Someone's trying to snatch me!" the boy yelled loudly as he saw three or four burly men rushing toward him.

"Grab that kid!" Chen Xi ordered his men, not bothering to explain himself. He was determined to catch the boy, find out if he had a gang, and then start the first wave of education for the city's street children.

"Help! Somebody help me!" the boy screamed, but Chen Xi remained unfazed, and the surrounding onlookers didn't intervene either.

Judging by Chen Xi's clothing, it was clear he was someone of high status, and the boy was obviously a street urchin. In this situation, as long as Chen Xi didn't go too far, the citizens of the Han Dynasty wouldn't interfere.

Of course, Chen Xi's earlier order of "Don't hurt him" played a role in this. If he had said something like "Take him down, dead or alive," the crowd would have undoubtedly stepped in to stop him. In this era, while strong crossbows were prohibited for private ownership, many people still kept weapons like spears and swords at home. The martial spirit had been ingrained in the populace for centuries.

"Take this!" Realizing no one was coming to his aid, the boy quickly pulled out a stone from his pocket and hurled it at the pursuing guards.

"Huh?" Chen Xi stroked his chin in surprise. His guards were battle-hardened veterans, skilled enough to dodge arrows, yet this boy's aim was remarkably accurate, hitting them with every stone.

"What's causing this commotion up ahead? With all these merchants, things are getting quite chaotic," Liu Bei said, sighing as he followed Xu Chu through the crowded streets. Fenggao had become a bustling city, and Liu Bei was starting to understand why Chen Xi had emphasized the importance of city planning and management. Despite the wide streets, they were still prone to congestion.

"Lord, it seems that the military advisor is trying to catch someone," Xu Chu said. Standing tall and strong, he had a clear view over the crowd, unlike Liu Bei, who was stuck behind a wall of people.

"Chen Xi is catching someone? Xu Chu, go help him," Liu Bei ordered without hesitation. He could ask Chen Xi about it later.

"This kid is too slippery!" Chen Xi's eyebrow twitched. How was it that a street urchin could have internal energy nearing the Refining Qi into the Gang level? This was getting ridiculous!

"Don't worry, military advisor, Xu Chu is here!" Xu Chu roared, leaping over the crowd like a bear and landing near the boy, scooping him up in one swift motion.

"This is so embarrassing..." Chen Xi muttered. Everyone in Fenggao knew he was the military advisor, and with Xu Chu's size and reputation, it wasn't hard to figure out that the well-dressed youth giving orders had to be Chen Xi. The crowd fell silent, all eyes on Chen Xi.

"Let me go, you big oaf!" the street urchin yelled, kicking at Xu Chu's stomach. Xu Chu, unfazed, shook his hand, causing the boy to go limp.

"Military advisor, I've brought him," Xu Chu said, carrying the boy like a chicken and setting him down next to Chen Xi.

"Let's get out of here. This isn't the place to talk," Chen Xi said with a sigh, bowing slightly to the crowd before leading his group away.

Chapter 244: Arguing and Twisting Words

Chen Xi led Xu Chu through a few streets and arrived at a restaurant owned by the Mi family. As soon as the waiter saw Chen Xi, he quickly went to inform the manager.

"Greetings, Lord Chen, General Xu. What would you like to eat? We have a private room upstairs," the manager said with a respectful bow.

"Hmm, Lord Xu and I will wait for Lord Liu Bei, who should be arriving shortly. Prepare a couple of extra dishes. Oh, and boil a tub of water to wash this little rascal clean," Chen Xi instructed, pointing to the boy Xu Chu was holding.

The young boy, who had been hanging limply in Xu Chu's grip, had given up struggling. Realizing that he couldn't escape Xu Chu's grasp, he hung his head in defeat.

"Understood," the manager nodded as he eyed the mud-covered street urchin. "Waiter, take him to wash up and get him some clean clothes."

"Forget the clothes. Turn up the heat and make a stew out of him. Don't forget the spices!" Chen Xi said, glaring at the boy.

"No! No, please don't turn me into stew! I taste terrible!" the boy, who had been resigned to his fate, suddenly screamed in terror, flailing his arms and legs in Chen Xi's direction.

"Um, Lord Chen, we don't offer that service here," the manager said nervously, dabbing his forehead with a handkerchief. Joking about boiling someone alive wasn't exactly good for business, even if everyone knew it was just a joke. After all, they weren't running a shady establishment.

"Just kidding," Chen Xi said, giving the boy a light flick on the forehead, which quieted him down. "This little rascal is tough. My three or four personal guards couldn't catch him. If I leave him with you, he'll slip away for sure. Xu Chu, keep an eye on him and make sure he gets clean. I've never seen a twelve or thirteen-year-old kid this skilled."

"Understood," the manager said, relieved that he wouldn't have to deal with the morbid task. As long as it wasn't boiling someone alive, he figured his restaurant could handle it.

The boy, who had been hanging in Xu Chu's grip, finally relaxed when he heard Chen Xi's words. He stopped struggling and looked at Chen Xi with pitiful eyes. "Lord Chen, please let me go. I didn't mean to cause trouble. I have many younger siblings to take care of. I'll pay you back when I have money, I promise. Just let me go, okay?"

"Who said anything about paying me back? Xu Chu, make sure you use a metal brush to scrub him clean," Chen Xi said sternly.

The young street urchin had learned to read people's expressions after years of living on the streets. He could tell that Chen Xi wasn't truly angry, just a bit harsh with his words. However, Xu Chu's next comment sent him spiraling into despair. "Don't worry, I'll make sure to use a metal brush to scrub him clean."

"No! Please, no! I'll wash myself, I swear..." the boy's voice trailed off into a wail as Xu Chu carried him to the back courtyard. His cries sounded just like those of any other ten-year-old boy being forced to bathe after a long day of running around in the dirt. Whether they were beggars or not, they all seemed to have the same aversion to getting cleaned up.

"Sorry to disturb your business," Chen Xi apologized to the manager after Xu Chu had taken the boy away.

"There's no need for that, Lord Chen. Please, this way." The manager gestured politely, leading Chen Xi upstairs.

Chen Xi sat by the window on the second floor, casually eating some boiled meat—whether it was lamb or something else, he wasn't quite sure. Liu Bei might or might not show up, but that didn't stop him from enjoying his meal.

The door to the second floor suddenly opened with a creak, and Liu Bei stepped inside, followed closely by Li You, who wore an expression of mild resignation as he watched Chen Xi gazing out the window.

"Lord Liu," Chen Xi said with a smile, placing his chopsticks on the table and bowing politely.

"Zi Chuan, why did you make my residence so extravagant?" Liu Bei didn't bother with pleasantries. As soon as he entered, he immediately questioned Chen Xi in a tone that was far from friendly.

"Spending my own money to build someone else's home, and I still get scolded? Now that's what I call bad news—talk about flattering the wrong person," Chen Xi responded casually, completely unfazed by Liu Bei's tone.

"Lord Liu, please take a seat. It's easier to discuss things while sitting down," Li You said with a smile, gently guiding Liu Bei to the seat of honor on the left-hand side.

Once seated, Liu Bei continued to fume, glaring at Chen Xi. "Zi Chuan, can't you be a bit more frugal? That mansion is so grand that people will think I, Liu Bei, am living a life of luxury and excess. What are you laughing at? You're just as guilty as he is."

"Fine, fine. We're all in this together," Chen Xi replied nonchalantly. "Lord Liu, just live in your residence without worrying about it. You're a symbol of Fenggao, and living in such a landmark building is only fitting. As for the cost, let me ask you this: hasn't your governance improved compared to before?"

"That's just sophistry!" Liu Bei shot back, glaring at Chen Xi. After spending so much time with Chen Xi, he had learned how to deal with his tendency to twist words.

"Then let me put it another way. I built that residence to record your great achievements, Lord Liu. Living in such a grand building is fitting for someone who embodies virtue and benevolence, right?" Chen Xi said, casually using another excuse to deflect the argument.

He scooped a piece of meat into his small dish and gestured to Li You that they should eat and drink while he convinced Liu Bei. Liu Bei's problem wasn't that he didn't want to live in the mansion; it was just that his sense of morality was overriding his desires. In this case, it was Liu Bei's moral standards suppressing his indulgence, which spoke well of his character.

"But the people of the world haven't all been saved yet. Not to mention, we still have much work to do in Qingzhou," Liu Bei protested. He was far from being a benevolent ruler with achievements worthy of such grandeur.

"Which is why I built that palace for you, Lord Liu—to remind you of your responsibilities. Living in such a residence should serve as a constant reminder that only by embodying virtue can you truly feel at peace there. The more luxury you experience, the broader your perspective will become. Just like how a poor man might dream of the emperor eating plain buns and using a golden hoe. The more wealth you experience, the heavier the burden you must bear. Providing all people with peace and prosperity is a nearly impossible task, one that only a few wise rulers and ministers have ever achieved throughout the ages." Chen Xi continued to twist the argument, knowing full well that Liu Bei wouldn't be able to out-debate him.

"But..." Liu Bei tried to argue, struggling to keep up with Chen Xi's convoluted logic.

"No buts. The more wealth you experience, the broader your horizons will become. A poor man might dream of the emperor eating plain buns and using a golden hoe, but the more you experience, the greater the responsibility you bear. Providing for all people is one of the most difficult tasks, something that few wise rulers throughout history have ever managed to achieve." Chen Xi continued to twist the conversation, successfully shifting the topic from Liu Bei's personal luxury to the grander issue of governing the world.

Chapter 245: Even the Smallest Matters Can Be Glorious

As Chen Xi spoke, it was as if a golden light appeared behind him, radiating the glory of a sage. Liu Bei stood beside him, nodding continuously.

"Lord Liu, the ancient sages pursued nothing more than ensuring the people's basic needs were met. But should we be satisfied with just that?" Chen Xi asked calmly. He had already succeeded in convincing Liu Bei; all he needed to do was continue along this line of reasoning, and success was inevitable. Liu Bei was already beginning to agree with him.

"Do you remember your oath?" Chen Xi's eyes gleamed as he looked at Liu Bei. This was the most important part. "Meeting the people's basic needs may be difficult, but allow me to boast a little—if that were all we aimed for, I could barely manage it. But should we stop there? Shouldn't we aim higher? We may not be able to provide every person with a mansion like that, but we should strive to fulfill their aspirations. We need to broaden their horizons and give them greater ambitions!"

Liu Bei nodded repeatedly. He had seen the suffering of the people during his years wandering the borders, traveling through various regions, and witnessing the famine and devastation. He had believed that ensuring basic needs were met was already a monumental task. But after meeting Chen Xi and coming to Fenggao, Liu Bei now dared to claim that he could ensure his people were fed.

This was why Chen Xi wasn't worried when Xu Chu followed him around and Liu Bei was left without a bodyguard—because this was Tai Shan, the capital of Fenggao. As long as Liu Bei revealed his identity in this land of honor and filial piety, many people would be willing to die for him.

Anyone who even dared to suggest assassinating Liu Bei would immediately find themselves swarmed by citizens ready to fight to the death. Liu Bei was known as "Ren De" (the Benevolent) not just because of Liu Yan's praise, but because he had indeed done real deeds that the people acknowledged. Benevolence couldn't be earned through empty words alone.

Liu Bei had saved people on the brink of starvation, provided them with homes, and ensured they had money in their pockets. This kind of kindness was enough to be remembered for generations. Well, maybe not generations, but certainly within five.

"Lord Liu, the common people's horizons are very limited. They can only see their own small plot of land and are blind to the broader picture. You have already given them a life that surpasses their wildest dreams. But for you, is that enough?" Chen Xi asked.

Liu Bei thought about how he was now a lord compared to when he was making straw sandals to make ends meet. He shook his head. Back then, he had to count his coins before buying a drink, but now he cooked meat in bronze cauldrons. The difference was too vast to compare.

"What was your wish in those days?" Chen Xi asked, noticing Liu Bei shaking his head.

"To be free from worry, to have wine and meat," Liu Bei laughed. Now that he had achieved that goal, looking back at his past dreams seemed rather endearing, but also insignificant.

"Zi Chuan, I understand. What you're saying is that we shouldn't be content with just providing for the people's immediate needs. Now that we've achieved that, if we have the means, we should aim even higher. Just like the mansion you built for me—it's not just a residence, but a goal, a vision of the life that all people could one day enjoy!" Liu Bei's face shone with understanding, and he didn't need Chen Xi to say more—he had already filled in the rest.

Li You struggled to swallow a piece of meat as Liu Bei's glowing enthusiasm struck him as both amusing and awe-inspiring. He glanced at Chen Xi and realized that Liu Bei had been thoroughly convinced, but he couldn't bring himself to tell Liu Bei, "Chen Xi is just playing you."

Li You raised his cup and toasted Liu Bei, then downed his drink. He finally understood why Liu Bei's charisma was so compelling. Liu Bei's sincerity was almost naïve, but it was incredibly genuine.

"Exactly!" Chen Xi said, pretending to be moved by Liu Bei's passion. What he was really thinking, though, was anyone's guess. Chen Xi wasn't one to be easily swayed by emotion.

"From now on, I'll call my residence the Hall of Self-Discipline! I, Liu Xuande, am not yet worthy to live there, but since I do, I will strive to become worthy!" Liu Bei declared fervently, entering another phase of kingly grandeur. Unfortunately, neither of the two men beside him seemed to share in his enthusiasm.

"Yes, Lord Liu, work hard. I, too, will continue striving in that direction. Our goals are indeed lofty!" Chen Xi replied with a solemn expression. Now that Liu Bei was fully on board, it was crucial to keep him immersed in his vision and not let him realize what had really happened.

Liu Bei stood by the window, holding his cup as he gazed down at the bustling crowd below. Turning back to the others, he said, "We are still far from achieving our goals. Even in this prosperous Fenggao, there are still too many vagrants and beggars. Zi Chuan, let's start with the smallest tasks—let's ensure that the people have their basic needs met first!"

"No problem. I've already started addressing those issues. It seems Lord Liu has been paying attention to the problems in our territory. In fact, if you have the time, you should ask the common people about their experiences during your visits, rather than relying on your own observations. Their feelings are what we need to understand because, from our perspective, it's hard to grasp the details that matter to them."

Chen Xi smiled as he spoke. The fact that Liu Bei had noticed these problems meant that Li You had indeed been subtly guiding him in matters of governance.

"That makes sense. When I think about it, the way I view things now is very different from when I was a commoner in Zhuo County," Liu Bei nodded in agreement. "I will make sure to keep that in mind. But what do you mean by saying you've already started addressing these issues?"

"I've already begun working on these problems. Everything progresses step by step. Now it's time to start finding homes for these people. The issues we've discussed, like the academy, child education, military retirement, and welfare, have all been added to the agenda," Chen Xi explained, half-explaining and half-boasting. Liu Bei seemed to realize that even his seemingly prosperous and peaceful domain had plenty of issues.

"...Why was I unaware that there were so many problems in my domain?" Liu Bei was stunned. In his memory, his domain was among the best governed of all the lords. When did so many problems arise?

"These problems have always existed, but it's a matter of priorities. While they don't need immediate attention, they could lead to issues later on, so I'm systematically removing those hidden dangers," Chen Xi replied, completely unfazed by Liu Bei's bewilderment. He knew that Liu Bei would quickly forget about such issues if they weren't brought to his attention directly.

Chapter 246: Chen Xi's Youth Education

Chen Xi's words once again left Liu Bei baffled. However, Liu Bei had a good habit—if he didn't understand something, he wouldn't pretend to. When it came to those he trusted, he was willing to hand over full authority to them to solve the issue. As long as it was resolved in the end, that was all that mattered.

"Lord Liu, you should eat something first. I'll explain it to you later. This matter is quite complicated," Chen Xi said, pointing to the dishes on the table. If they didn't eat soon, the food would get cold.

At that moment, the door creaked open again, and a waiter entered with a large plate of lamb. He seemed to know when not to disturb the guests and when to serve the food. As for overhearing things he shouldn't, these people, being servants of Mi Zhu, knew well enough to keep such matters buried in their hearts.

"Let's eat," Liu Bei said with a smile, using a small fork to cut some food onto his plate before starting to eat.

After the waiter made several trips to serve the food, he didn't appear again. Liu Bei, Li You, and Chen Xi began chatting about past events, comparing them with the present and marveling at the twists of fate.

Just as they were enjoying themselves, there was a knock at the door.

"More dishes? We haven't even finished the ones we have. This fried dish with soybean oil is delicious, but we shouldn't be so wasteful," Liu Bei remarked, glancing at Chen Xi. Chen Xi looked at Li You, and with no other choice, Li You went to open the door. Being the closest to it, he figured he should take care of it.

"Oh, it's you, Zhongkang," Chen Xi said with a smile, raising his wine cup in greeting. "I was wondering how we could have so many dishes. What happened to that little brat you were supposed to bring? Don't tell me he escaped from you."

"How could I let him escape?" Xu Chu grunted, pulling the boy out from behind him. "No way he could've gotten away from me!"

Chen Xi nearly choked on his drink. After forcing it down, he coughed a few times and stared at the boy in disbelief. "Are you sure this is the same kid? Did you get the wrong person?"

The boy standing before him now was a far cry from the dirty street urchin from before. He was dressed in plain but clean robes, his face handsome, his lips red and teeth white. He wore a gold crown on his head, a jade pendant at his waist, and held a folding fan made of wood—one that had become quite fashionable in the Han Dynasty. The transformation was so drastic that it was as if someone had swapped him out entirely.

"Who would believe this kid is a thief? And look at how clean he is for a beggar. Are you playing the role of a fallen nobleman?"

"You're the thief!" the boy retorted angrily, instantly losing his refined demeanor.

"Oh, now I believe it. You can change the clothes, but you're still the same little thief inside," Chen Xi remarked, shaking his head.

"Alright, Zi Chuan, don't quarrel with a child. Come, come, young man, tell me which family you belong to. Have a seat here," Liu Bei said. He hadn't quite grasped the situation but saw that this boy was quite bold and handsome, with a strong presence that suggested he was close to reaching the level of refining qi into gang. He clearly came from a good family.

"That kid is a thief. But I guess it just goes to show that clothes make the man," Chen Xi muttered in dissatisfaction. If he hadn't known that this boy was a thief, he would've taken a liking to him. He had the looks, and at such a young age, he was already strong enough to take on several grown men. Truly a good seedling.

"It's just a bag of gold beads. I'll pay you back when I have the money," the boy grumbled. Then, with a more formal tone, he introduced himself, "My name is Ma Zhong. Greetings, General of the East."

"Good, good," Liu Bei said, patting Ma Zhong on the back. "Strong, capable, but it seems you haven't had proper guidance."

Chen Xi stood there in shock. This kid was named Ma Zhong? At this time and age, with such skills, it could only be the same Ma Zhong—infamously known as a general-killer. Given his humble background, it wasn't too far-fetched for him to have ended up as a beggar. After all, even at the peak of his career, Ma Zhong was only a military scribe, yet he managed to be recorded in history as a general-killer, a rather ironic distinction.

Sitting awkwardly, Ma Zhong fidgeted in his seat, clearly unused to the situation. His eyes locked onto the food on the table, and he swallowed hard. Liu Bei, noticing this, smiled and served him a plate full of meat, showing no signs of disdain. He even handed Ma Zhong a small fork, indicating that he should help himself to whatever he liked.

"Zi Chuan, care to explain? Even if it was a bag of gold beads, that doesn't seem like enough reason for you to pay him so much attention," Liu Bei said, watching Ma Zhong devour the food. He patted Ma Zhong on the back, trying to remind him to slow down, but Ma Zhong, still chewing a mouthful of meat, turned his head in confusion, not understanding Liu Bei's intent.

"I just found him a bit of an eyesore. Besides, transforming these street kids is part of my plan. I intend to give them a chance—a chance to learn a trade, acquire knowledge, or develop martial skills. And since this one stole from me and I caught him a second time, he makes for an excellent test subject. By the way, hand over my wallet," Chen Xi said, glaring at Ma Zhong as he continued to scarf down food. He then began to explain the entire plan in detail.

"So that's how it is. Every young person deserves a chance. It's the right thing to do," Liu Bei said, looking at Ma Zhong with pity as he continued to gobble down his meal.

"We'll mobilize the citizens to help locate all the street kids. We'll provide them with three meals a day and a place to stay. The younger ones will be taken care of by designated caretakers, and as they grow older, they'll be educated," Chen Xi said, eyeing Ma Zhong. "Of course, the first thing we'll need to do is

break their habit of stealing. For kids like this one, I think a stint in military training would be a good start."

"Zi Chuan, you seem to have quite a grudge against Ma Zhong. He's just a child; show some leniency," Liu Bei said gently. He couldn't help but feel sympathy for Ma Zhong, who was still struggling to finish a pig's foot. If this fine young boy had been starved to this extent, how many others like him were out there in the Han Empire?

"Fine, I won't hold it against him," Chen Xi waved off, seemingly letting go of his irritation. "Honestly, I've occasionally thought of gathering all the kids and educating them. Teach them about loyalty and righteousness, military and national matters, even the duties of a great nation. After all, these children are the future, and many of my ideals rest on their shoulders."

Chen Xi wouldn't tell Liu Bei that his real goal was to mold the next generation according to his vision. After all, with control over printing and papermaking, he could determine what was taught. Instilling the values he wanted in them was just a matter of deciding what went into the textbooks.

Chapter 247: Grading is Essential!

Chen Xi couldn't guarantee that the textbooks he chose were the best, but he was confident that they were far superior to those chosen by others of his time. Sometimes, the wisdom accumulated over time and the broader perspective were enough to surpass most scholars.

"In that case, I'll contribute some funds as well," Liu Bei said without much hesitation. He had developed a habit of contributing to projects for the benefit of the people, and besides, he wasn't strapped for cash at the moment. Having just rented out some land, Liu Bei had plenty of spare money on hand.

"No problem, Lord Xuande. If you're willing to invest, that's even better. These foundational and welfare investments don't yield direct profits. In fact, they'll require continuous funding every year," Chen Xi warned Liu Bei upfront. Not everything Chen Xi did was profitable. Some endeavors were purely about love and welfare, with immense significance for the country as a whole. He was hinting that the money Liu Bei invested here would need to be continuously poured in, with no visible returns.

Liu Bei paused, momentarily stopping as he petted Ma Zhong. After a while, he turned to Chen Xi and said, "In the end, they are children of the Han. Since I, Liu Xuande, still have the means, I will invest. Let's give the people a chance, and give myself one as well."

"Lord Xuande's benevolence is admirable," Chen Xi said calmly. Investments with no return, purely aimed at improving the vision and quality of life for the people, required an understanding that it would take astronomical sums of money, something Liu Bei seemed prepared for.

"Hahaha, when I was broke before, living with empty sleeves was also quite refreshing. Even if I end up without a single coin, I still have the support of the people under my rule, and I'm happier now than I ever was! Money comes and goes quickly. Instead of hoarding it and wondering how to spend it, I'd rather hand it over to you, Zichuan, to use for the people's welfare!" Liu Bei said with a hearty laugh.

As Liu Bei patted Ma Zhong's hand, he couldn't hide his slight regret at the large sum of money he'd be parting with. But his generosity remained unshaken, showing that he had grown used to the large fluctuations in wealth that came with Chen Xi's handling of funds.

"Lord Xuande's wisdom is commendable," Li You and Chen Xi exchanged a glance, both satisfied with Liu Bei's current attitude of viewing wealth lightly.

"What's wise about it?" Liu Bei waved dismissively. "If I were truly wise, every child under my rule would have food and clothing. Let's start working on education right away!"

"Lord Xuande, it's best to take things step by step. First, we need to gather all the children under fifteen who are wandering without families. Then, we issue teaching credentials to scholars, giving those with credentials access to the library. At the same time, we'll register the students, offering free breakfast and lunch to those who aren't wanderers. This will gradually expand the household registration system, linking educational qualifications and library access to it," Chen Xi explained to Liu Bei, emphasizing that the process wasn't as simple as it seemed.

"Why not just handle the household registration in one go?" Liu Bei asked, puzzled.

"Because it can't be done all at once. If we only focus on registration, too many people will avoid it. But if we give scholars teaching credentials first, they'll gain access to the library, something they value. Once they get used to this, we'll introduce a third credential, and by then, most of them will accept it. Combining all three credentials into one simplified registration will encourage them to participate," Chen Xi explained.

Introducing new concepts was always challenging, but fortunately, there was a scholarly class that everyone aspired to join, and this class had things they wanted. Without these incentives, the task would be much more difficult.

"We'll register the children, but not their parents. Children are more open to new things, and when their parents see the benefits, they'll accept it too. Then we can set conditions—like requiring adults aged eighteen to forty to be literate in a thousand common characters to receive household registration and its associated benefits. They can continue their education if they wish... The key is to make the system as detailed as possible!" Chen Xi said proudly. He remembered how a certain country had implemented a similar system and actually achieved mass literacy.

Li You was so shocked that he spilled his drink. What was Chen Xi trying to do? In an era where ninety percent of the population was illiterate, this was truly an ambitious plan!

"This...", Li You muttered as he looked at Chen Xi. He was shaken. Previously, it seemed like Chen Xi just wanted to dethrone the aristocratic families. Now it appeared that Chen Xi was trying to fulfill the dreams of ancient sages! The phrase "Make all people understand" had been a lifelong aspiration for many wise men, who could only weep in frustration at its unattainability.

"But we don't have enough scholars to teach everyone," Li You quickly pointed out the biggest flaw in Chen Xi's plan.

"Don't worry, don't worry. It's only a thousand characters, it's simple. Even if we lack teachers, I'll find a way to make it work. There's an old saying: 'One can be a teacher if they achieve mastery, regardless of age.' If Gan Luo could become a prime minister at twelve, why can't we have young teachers?" Chen Xi said nonchalantly. He had already prepared literacy materials, including the "Thousand Character Classic," which he had learned as a child.

If he relied solely on his previous brain capacity, Chen Xi might have only memorized parts of the "Thousand Character Classic," but never the whole thing. However, thanks to the mental fortitude and enhanced memory from his awakened spiritual talent, he could recall it all easily.

"..." Li You was taken aback and mumbled, "One can be a teacher if they achieve mastery, regardless of age... Zichuan, you've effectively shut down any counterarguments. Very reasonable, dealing with scholars should always involve reason."

"Zichuan's words are indeed insightful. 'One can be a teacher if they achieve mastery, regardless of age.' This should become the guiding principle of our academies. I hadn't realized you were so knowledgeable in this area," Liu Bei said, deeply impressed.

"..." Chen Xi was speechless. Once again, he realized that wisdom accumulated over a thousand years, even if spoken casually, could easily outshine the thoughts of many ancient scholars. So many modern sayings had been refined over the centuries into guiding principles for good governance. Simply using them could lay the foundation for new schools of thought.

"Let's move on. Household registration won't be an issue. In this era, literacy is everyone's dream. As long as we provide opportunities for people to learn, even if they forget what they learned today, they'll keep trying. We won't face resistance here. So, we need to establish grading systems. Household registration should indicate a person's skills—even a carpenter should have a grade!" Chen Xi, deeply influenced by modern grading systems, was eager to implement them in the Han dynasty.

Chapter 248: This Damn Era!

Chen Xi's way of thinking seemed remarkable to Li You, Liu Bei, and others. With such a system in place, one could simply glance at a person's household registration and know everything about them. How convenient! "Enough talk for now," Chen Xi said, waving his hand dismissively. "Zijing will eventually hand over a complete plan to Lord Xuande. Right now, we need to focus on feeding this kid and having him lead us to where the stray children gather. Let's capture them all first."

"Very well, Ma Zhong, can you take us to where you've been staying?" Liu Bei asked warmly. Ma Zhong nodded, though he had been devouring his food, years of living as a wanderer had trained him to stay alert, so he had been paying attention to Chen Xi and the others' conversation. In the end, he was sure these people had no ill intentions toward him, and he understood what they wanted to do. Although he couldn't grasp why such good things were only being done now, he knew how important this would be for people like him!

"Can I take the rest of this food with me?" Ma Zhong asked Liu Bei, his face full of hope. He had already finished the soup and only the sliced meat remained, which was easy to carry.

Liu Bei sighed and patted Ma Zhong's head. "Don't worry, you'll get to eat more in the future. Train well, and you'll become a mighty warrior."

"I want to take it back for my younger siblings..." Ma Zhong muttered. As the eldest among them, with agile reflexes, he was able to steal enough to keep the younger orphans alive. After all, opportunities like that one time with Chen Xi, a large mark with no caution, were rare. Unfortunately, even then, the gold he stole had been of little use...

Liu Bei glanced at the remaining food on the table and realized that from the beginning, Ma Zhong had been thinking of his siblings. He patted the boy's head again. "Who knows how many orphans like you are wandering the land. Soon, a servant will come and pack this food for you. You've had it tough these past years, haven't you?"

Ma Zhong only let out a small grunt and said nothing more. Chen Xi had some understanding of the hardships of wandering, even in the so-called lawful era of the 21st century, where recorded footage of wanderers was full of suffering. In this chaotic world of 1800 years ago, it was far worse—unspeakably cruel. If it weren't for Ma Zhong's strength and quick thinking, he and his younger siblings might have been sold... or worse, even eaten...

Carrying the wrapped food in dried lotus leaves, Ma Zhong hurried off to the place he'd been staying.

"Let's follow him," Liu Bei said, not stopping Ma Zhong's urgent movements. The boy's actions deeply moved him.

After many twists and turns through narrow alleys, the roads became even narrower. Seeing the conditions, Chen Xi couldn't help but think this area needed to be demolished and rebuilt. Yes, his public works program would find new tasks here, tearing down and reconstructing the neighborhood.

"Zichuan, does Fenggao still have places like this?" Liu Bei asked angrily, looking at Chen Xi. The streets were filthy with stagnant water, and the refugees—so thin it was hard to tell their age or gender—were covered in grime and looked utterly miserable.

"I can't help it. Fenggao developed too quickly. I'm not omnipotent; I can only manage things to a certain extent. Besides, haven't I already planned to address these issues, bringing them to light and cleaning them up?" Though Chen Xi was horrified by the scene, his expression remained calm, and his tone steady.

Chen Xi gazed at the people around him and sighed inwardly. While he hadn't noticed them before, their situation was largely their own doing. He clearly remembered that his public works program never stopped, and free medical treatment had been offered continuously. Judging by Ma Zhong's actions, he had likely gotten food from the public works sites and tried the free clinics. Yet, this group ended up like this—what else could Chen Xi say? They could have just left the alley!

Seeing Chen Xi's indifferent demeanor, Liu Bei hesitated to say more. He realized that Chen Xi's public works program had indeed been running continuously, and the free medical treatment was always available. Many people would go to the public works sites, help out, and get food in return. Even those with minor ailments would visit the clinics, which, though not top-notch, were free.

"I can't do much more. I want to help, but if they refuse assistance, what can I do?" Chen Xi said helplessly. "I'll make them understand what forced labor in exchange for food means soon enough!"

"..." Liu Bei could tell from Chen Xi's expression that he was serious about forcing these people into labor. "Sigh, after all, they are under my rule. Letting them live like this is my failure."

"Yes, it's all Lord Xuande's fault, so you'll need to keep working hard. But don't worry, dealing with them won't be a problem." Chen Xi casually tossed the blame onto Liu Bei, making it clear that he could handle the situation.

"Sigh~" Liu Bei sighed as he walked past the refugees squatting and sitting in the filthy streets. He noticed their cloudy eyes and fearful expressions. Since the establishment of Fenggao, Liu Bei had never seen anyone look at him this way. The citizens he knew always looked at him with gratitude, warmth, and respect—never with the gaze he saw today.

"Die!" Ma Zhong's furious voice suddenly rang out from a courtyard.

"What a coincidence. Zhongkang, it's up to you now. Capture them alive. We don't know how long they've been watching. Human traffickers, huh? How despicable," Chen Xi said, recognizing the situation immediately. When Ma Zhong mentioned both boys and girls, Chen Xi knew that female beggars were easy targets for traffickers. This era was truly twisted.

When Xu Chu arrived, Ma Zhong was already fighting several men, while his younger siblings huddled behind a pillar, watching quietly without a sound. They were clearly used to such things.

The Tiger Fool didn't waste any time. He punched each of the men, leaving them all coughing up blood. It was then that Ma Zhong realized the vast difference in strength between him and Xu Chu. Had Chen Xi not ordered the soldiers not to harm Ma Zhong earlier, even the regular troops could have easily subdued him.

"Well, it seems this place isn't very safe, is it?" Chen Xi casually kicked one of the heavily injured men at his feet. "Tell me, why were you after these kids?"

"They're from the Manxiang Pavilion!" Ma Zhong spat, kicking one of the men's necks with enough force to break it. Chen Xi was momentarily stunned, then looked at Ma Zhong with interest. He hadn't expected the boy to have such a mindset—killing someone to implicate everyone present. Now, naturally, Liu Bei and the others would be forced to intervene.

After killing the man, Ma Zhong noticed that no one seemed to care. He began to explain the whole situation calmly.

"Of course, you were an obvious target. A kid leading a group of little girls and boys? Any trafficker would be after you. If you weren't so skilled and cautious, you'd have been sold off yourself," Chen Xi remarked, his tone indifferent, though his words clearly angered Ma Zhong.

"They've come for us many times. The last time, they managed to capture some of my siblings. I killed several of them and rescued my sister. Since then, I've been much more careful, and they haven't dared to come back as boldly," Ma Zhong said, his voice steady as he spoke of killing.

Chen Xi's eyes showed a fleeting trace of pity before quickly returning to their usual calm. A boy of twelve or thirteen had already taken the lives of several adults who had wronged him. This damn era...

Chapter 249: The Pain of Understanding Too Much

Chen Xi crouched down and grabbed the leader by the collar. "You're from Manxiang Pavilion? Why haven't I seen you around?"

"You'd better let us go, or our master won't let you off!" the leader spat blood as he spoke, though he refrained from making too many threats. Xu Chu's strength had shaken him deeply; with just one punch, all his skilled men were left incapacitated.

"And who's your master? If you don't say, there aren't many in all of the Han Dynasty who would dare to provoke us. So, tell me, who's your boss? I like bold people," Chen Xi grinned with a devilish smile. When Ma Zhong mentioned that these men were from Manxiang Pavilion, Liu Bei began glaring at Chen Xi. In Liu Bei's mind, this was one of Chen Xi's businesses—how could it be involved in such things?

"My master is none other than the advisor under Liu Xuande, the Marquis within the Passes, Chen Zichuan!" the leader shouted angrily at Chen Xi.

When Ma Zhong heard this, he immediately became wary. He knew that the person squatting on the ground, who looked like a rich young master, was indeed Chen Xi. If that were true, then the words spoken at the tavern earlier must have been lies, perhaps just an attempt to turn private dealings into something lawful. Ma Zhong now felt he had walked into a trap, and panic flashed across his eyes. Silently, he glanced around at his younger siblings, signaling them to leave.

"I don't recall ever instructing anyone to engage in human trafficking. And just so you know, Manxiang Pavilion no longer deals in such things. What were you planning to do with the young girls?" Chen Xi asked, noticing Ma Zhong's cautious behavior. He rolled his eyes and then pulled out his seal of nobility, waving it in front of the leader's face. "I am the master you're talking about. Now explain to me when I ever gave you orders to do this."

"Spare me, Lord Chen, spare me!" The leader immediately begged for mercy upon seeing the seal. He now realized he had seriously miscalculated.

"Hold on. I want to know what your connection to Manxiang Pavilion is. Don't worry; if what you say is true, I won't hold it against you." Chen Xi was not particularly inclined to pass judgment on the issue of human trafficking—it was a common practice of the time. In this era, many people willingly sold themselves or their children in exchange for food, and selling people without consent was only marginally worse. However, it was still an abuse of power.

The leader, realizing his situation, knew that lying could only make things worse. With no other choice, he spilled everything he knew like beans being poured from a can.

"Just my luck," Chen Xi muttered to himself once he got the story. "I knew Manxiang Pavilion had shifted business, so why would they still be taking in people like this? Someone fetch a few men and take them to Man Chong. Have him give a fair sentence—just don't kill them."

Chen Xi sighed. He had suspected something was amiss when even small fry like these knew about his backing of Manxiang Pavilion. He wasn't looking forward to having his name dragged into the mud.

"Now I understand. When Fenggao wasn't wealthy, people often had to sell their children. Manxiang Pavilion's old line of business naturally got involved in that. But now, with prosperity across the territory, people can afford to keep their kids, so no one's selling them. Without a steady supply, these people turned to kidnapping," Chen Xi explained with a weary expression.

The reason these thugs used Manxiang Pavilion's name was simply that it was big and intimidating. Local officials would turn a blind eye when they saw this group rounding up beggars—after all, they figured someone powerful was behind it. But this time, they had bumped into someone too powerful.

"I knew Zichuan wouldn't stoop so low. With so many ways to make money, why bother with something like this?" Liu Bei nodded in agreement, subtly signaling Li You. To Liu Bei, unlike Chen Xi, it wasn't enough to just let things go. Such actions tarnished the reputation of officials and deserved harsh punishment. In his mind, the best course was to execute a few criminals to set an example.

Li You smiled knowingly. He understood Liu Bei's intentions. Executing a few human traffickers would send a clear message. After all, back in the day, when dealing with the Yang family officials in Guanzhong, heads rolled, and that show of force had a lasting impact. Without such methods, even Dong Zhuo could have been doomed.

"Looks like there's more work to be done. What a headache!" Chen Xi grumbled. Now, he would have to regulate some of the gray market activities. Who knew how many people were using his name to get away with such things? He wasn't about to let himself become a scapegoat.

"Hey, Ma Zhong, just so you know, I wouldn't stoop to something as disgraceful as this. If you trust me, take your siblings and come with us. If not, stay here. Take a gamble—live a life in the light, or pass on this chance and wait for one that may never come," Chen Xi said, too tired to try persuading Ma Zhong further. The suspicion in the boy's eyes was understandable; after all, officials had long since lost the people's trust.

"Stay or go—your choice," Chen Xi said, scanning the group of children. It was clear they all looked to Ma Zhong, and his hesitation was evident. But Chen Xi couldn't blame him—after years of wandering, without some level of wariness, he would have been sold off long ago.

Liu Bei also watched Ma Zhong, noting how the boy's eyes darted between the door and his siblings before finally resting on him. "Lord Xuande, can I trust you? You really won't just sell us off to someone else?" Ma Zhong asked.

Chen Xi covered his eyes, feeling exasperated. What was this kid thinking? Selling him wouldn't fetch much. He was Ma Zhong, after all—the future slayer of gods. His value was far beyond that of an ordinary child.

"I once swore to ensure that all under my rule would have clothing and food. That includes you. I will protect you until you reach sixteen!" Liu Bei declared solemnly. Even for this small goal, Liu Bei knew he would have to put in a great deal of effort. But having seen this situation, he felt compelled to offer hope.

"I believe you!" Ma Zhong finally said after a long pause.

Liu Bei approached and gently patted Ma Zhong's head. "Let's go. Take your siblings and leave this place. I'll make arrangements for you, and once Zichuan has things ready, you'll start schooling."

Chen Xi shook his head slightly, looking at the children. He admired Ma Zhong—despite everything, the boy remained loyal to his siblings. Without them, Ma Zhong could probably make it anywhere on his own.

"Come on, everyone. Get some food. The General of the East will take us away from here soon," Ma Zhong told his younger siblings, picking up the bundle of food he had dropped earlier.

A group of scrawny children immediately ran to Ma Zhong's side, calling him "big brother" as they quickly devoured the food. Their eyes, full of longing for more, revealed just how hungry they still were. Yet, despite their young age, they already knew not to trouble their older brother.

What a cruel era this is, Chen Xi thought. These children should be nestled in their parents' arms, not living with such a painful understanding of life.

Chapter 250: Fa Zheng's Three Great Aspirations

Liu Bei usually didn't have much going on, but when his interest was piqued, he would find something to do on the same day. For instance, after settling Ma Zhong and the others at the Zhang residence, he decided to convene his civil and military officials to discuss state affairs.

"Zichuan, why do you think Lord Xuande is urgently gathering us today?" Lu Su asked as he walked beside Chen Xi, holding a half-completed plan.

"Lord Xuande saw some unpleasant things today, and now he's probably going to find something for us to do," Chen Xi replied casually.

"I think this is mostly your fault!" Liu Ye grumbled from the side, clearly displeased. "After all, you turned the lord's new home into that. Do you think he can live there in peace given his current mindset?"

"Indeed, indeed. Zichuan, you really went overboard this time. Didn't you see? That house is so colorful; it practically glows with the splendor of a mythical phoenix," Mi Zhu chimed in, leaning over to join the conversation.

Recently, Mi Zhu hadn't needed to run his businesses as much. A commercial regulation had been stuck in a stalemate for some time, mainly because Chen Xi hadn't pushed for speed. Now, a group of people, including Mi Zhu and Zhang, were in a heated debate, which was only intensifying as commerce in the Qingzhou region, centered around Fenggao, grew more prosperous and worthy of such disputes.

"A phoenix is also a symbol of virtue. It's said that a phoenix has five virtues. Good! From now on, that residence shall be called 'Five Virtues Residence,'" Chen Xi shamelessly renamed the place, knowing no one would suggest tearing it down.

"Military Advisor..." Zhao Yun called out, but then everyone turned their heads to stare at him. Although many could serve as military advisors, and Chen Xi was usually the one referred to without mentioning names, everyone was bored enough to tease Zhao Yun for fun.

"Ahem, your design for the residence is far too extravagant. It goes against the Han Dynasty's tradition of simplicity," Zhao Yun said, hesitating before finally speaking up.

"You should ask Gongyou about that. I only provided the materials; how it was built is his responsibility, not mine," Chen Xi deflected the blame onto Sun Qian, who could only sigh in resignation.

"Without those materials, I wouldn't have been able to build these structures, you know? Even I found it overwhelming once I finished, let alone Lord Xuande. My biggest worry now is that the people under our rule won't be able to accept it," Sun Qian replied, clearly exasperated.

Everyone fell silent until Fa Zheng suddenly piped up from the side, "If I had the money, I'd build one just like it. This can be one of my three great life aspirations."

"Such modest aspirations, Xiaozhi. As a young man, you should have grander dreams. Come on, tell us what your other aspirations are," Chen Xi teased, looking at Fa Zheng with a hint of disdain.

"Hmph! My first aspiration!" Fa Zheng puffed out his chest proudly. Everyone stopped walking, curious to hear his answer. But after building up suspense, Fa Zheng deflated a bit and hesitated before saying, "One day, I want to get back at Guo Fengxiao. He's always messing with me."

The room went silent. After a long pause, Jia Xu gave Fa Zheng a thumbs up. "Xiaozhi, keep working hard. I believe you might stand a chance within your lifetime."

"Exactly, exactly!" "Mm-hmm!" "Xiaozhi, I'm rooting for you!" Everyone responded half-heartedly. They all knew how tricky Guo Jia could be. While they believed Fa Zheng might eventually reach the same level as Guo Jia, they doubted he could ever successfully get back at him. Guo Jia's instincts alone were enough to avoid nine out of ten potential pitfalls.

Fa Zheng looked around at the group of dismissive faces, frustrated that they didn't take him seriously. He had recently started taking on official duties, thanks to Chen Xi involving him in various affairs. Yet here they were, all treating him as a joke. He thought to himself, I'm Fa Xiaozhi, with a talent for analyzing people—how could I not see through their facade?

"Alright, alright, let's stop joking around. Xiaozhi, what's your second aspiration?" Chen Xi asked, suppressing his laughter.

"To cook lamb in a bronze cauldron, just like Lord Xuande..." Fa Zheng said wistfully.

"Sigh..." Chen Xi patted Fa Zheng on the shoulder and walked away.

"Hopeless," Lu Su muttered.

"Such a waste of potential," Liu Ye added as he shook his head and walked past Fa Zheng.

"Hey, hey, hey... What are you all doing?" Fa Zheng protested. To him, this seemed like a grand aspiration.

"Xiaozhi, besides the first one, your other aspirations are really disappointing," Jia Xu said, patting Fa Zheng on the shoulder with a look that said, It's my fault you turned out this way.

"Hey, hey, hey..." Fa Zheng was dumbfounded. What's going on here? Why do they all look at me like I've gone astray? I'm not connected to Jia Xu—how did this become his problem?

"I think I'll go back to reviewing the laws," Man Chong said coldly, giving Fa Zheng a hard look before patting him twice on the shoulder and walking away.

"Keep up the good work, Xiaozhi!" Jian Yong said, wearing a pained expression.

"Ah, youth wasted," Sun Qian added, following suit.

"Sigh..." Mi Zhu shook his head as he passed Fa Zheng. It was clear that Chen Xi's unconventional thinking had influenced this group. As young men with few inhibitions, they were more than willing to play along and tease each other.

"Weishuo, you're not going to say something too, are you?" Fa Zheng asked, now thoroughly confused by the situation and wondering why everyone looked at him with such disapproval.

"Sigh, my life goal is simply to follow in their footsteps. Xiaozhi, my condolences," Liu Yan said, delivering a final blow.

"Con... Condolences?" Fa Zheng was taken aback. How did we go from discussing aspirations to offering condolences?

"Hey, Wenhe, Ziyang, Zijing, did you notice? Weishuo is the harshest of them all. Last time, it was me; this time, Xiaozhi's completely lost. Famous scholars really are tough," Chen Xi remarked.

"Indeed. We should let Weishuo handle the final step in such matters. His words really are a finishing blow. Xiaozhi, who was so proud just now, seems to have been completely disoriented," Liu Ye added, stroking his beard and sneaking a glance at Fa Zheng.

"Oh, right. Shouldn't we give Xiaozhi his own seat now? He's capable enough to be of use, after all. He's been stuck at Fengxiao's table long enough. Look, Xiaozhi's about to sit in Guo Jia's old spot—clearly, he's been messed with so much that he's forgotten he should have his own seat," Lu Su observed.

"How tragic. He's forgotten that he should have his own place at the table and not just be sitting at a deputy's spot," Jia Xu said, clicking his tongue in amazement.

"Xiaozhi, you're now qualified for your own seat. You don't need to sit as a deputy to Fengxiao anymore," Li You said with a smile, seeing through the antics of Chen Xi and the others. He decided to inform Fa Zheng of this happy news.

Fa Zheng immediately perked up, realizing that he had earned his own seat at the table. Only those with their own seat could be considered primary officials. Even if it was the last seat, it was far better than being stuck as a deputy to Guo Jia.

After all, no matter how well a deputy performed, the credit would go to the primary official. But once he became a primary official himself, glory and achievements would be within his grasp.

"Where do I sit? Where do I sit?" Fa Zheng asked excitedly.

"Next to me," Jia Xu and Man Chong said simultaneously, pointing to the seats beside them. Overjoyed, Fa Zheng hurried over without a second thought. Li You exchanged a glance with Chen Xi, who nodded in agreement. Fa Zheng's seat, placed between Jia Xu and Man Chong, wasn't likely to change anytime soon.