

Mythical 331

Chapter 331: Auspicious Signs and the Wedding

Chen Xi was dressed in a pure black silk robe embroidered with golden threads, wearing a crown as he slowly made his way towards Fan Jian's residence. This outfit was merely the regular attire of a marquis. According to the customs of elevating one's attire for a wedding, Chen Xi should have worn the robes of a prince or a higher noble. However, in Chen Xi's view, wearing the marquis robe sewn by Chen Lan, stitch by stitch, was far more meaningful than donning the princely robes gifted by Li Jue and Guo Si.

"Zichuan, congratulations," echoed around him as the warm winter sunlight bathed his body. He was surrounded by familiar and unfamiliar faces, all offering their well-wishes. Chen Xi was completely enveloped by the crowd, with nothing left but constant expressions of gratitude.

"Huh? What's this?" As Chen Xi was about to turn into a small alley after passing through the central area, a peach fell from the sky and landed in Gan Ning's hand. The peach seemed like a precursor, and when everyone looked up, they saw several more peaches descending from the sky.

"Hahaha, flat peaches!" Gan Ning laughed and immediately leaped into the air, grabbing several peaches in his hands.

"How can we let Xingba have all the glory?" Seeing Gan Ning leap into the air, Tai Shici's initial shock quickly faded. He, too, leaped up to grab the falling peaches. Whether it was Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Hua Xiong, Xu Chu, Wu Anguo, or Dian Wei, anyone with the ability soared into the air, snatching the peaches that descended from the sky.

In just an instant, all the peaches had been seized. Looking at the peaches in their hands, still covered in fuzz, everyone was momentarily stunned. How should they handle this? A heavenly sign?

Before they could decide what to do, peach blossoms began to fall like a rain of petals from the sky.

"An auspicious omen!" someone shouted. Everyone paused in surprise, and then the chorus of congratulations for Liu Bei erupted. Even Chen Xi, dressed in his ceremonial robes, turned to congratulate Liu Bei.

The envoys from various lords who had come to witness the ceremony were also taken aback by the scene. Chen Qun, in particular, had been watching Liu Bei closely ever since the first peach fell, noticing the shock and apprehension on his face. This meant that the auspicious omen wasn't something orchestrated by Liu Bei. Chen Qun was even more astonished when Dian Wei managed to grab three peaches.

By the time the peach blossoms fell, Chen Qun had become numb to the spectacle. He stared blankly as the rain of flowers fell on him. Even without reaching out, he could feel that the petals were genuine. When Dian Wei handed him one of the peaches and then began eating one himself, Chen Qun fully believed in the authenticity of the miraculous event.

"Congratulations, my lord!" Gan Ning laughed as he handed his peach to Liu Bei. The others followed suit, except for Dian Wei, who had already eaten most of his peach.

"Why aren't you all eating?" Dian Wei looked around curiously as he noticed that everyone was watching him munch on his peach.

Everyone was speechless. Liu Bei, having finally recovered, laughed heartily. "Since this is a heavenly blessing, and there's no decree stating that it must be bestowed upon me alone, let us all share it together!"

Liu Bei's words caught both Ju Shou and Chen Qun off guard. They then heard the surrounding people praising Liu Bei's benevolence. Silently, they admired Liu Bei's leadership qualities. Truly, this was a man who had built his success from nothing. His decisiveness and magnanimity were qualities that few could match.

Chen Xi quickly swallowed his piece of peach, listening to the crowd around him savoring the thin slices of peach, all claiming that the heavenly peach was incredibly sweet. Chen Xi couldn't help but smile wryly. With such a thin slice, how could they taste anything? Even if they ate the whole thing, they wouldn't be able to detect the supposed sweetness. After all, he and Qu Qi had grown these peaches. How could he not know?

After eating the "celestial peaches," the atmosphere became even more lively. The attention of the crowd shifted from Chen Xi to Liu Bei, and praises for Liu Bei rang out endlessly. Liu Bei, who still didn't fully grasp what had happened, could only respond instinctively to the crowd's adoration.

With a smile on his face, Chen Xi continued on his way to Fan Jian's residence. With so many witnesses to the auspicious sign, whether they believed it or not, the common people would certainly believe it, and even some superstitious families wouldn't be able to help but contemplate its significance.

"General Zhao, are you sure you didn't miss the target area?" Qu Qi asked Zhao Yun curiously. Throwing something without being noticed, hitting the target accurately, and not damaging the items required immense control.

"No problem," Zhao Yun replied, shaking his head. "As long as it was in the direction you mentioned, every item landed within that range, and none were damaged."

"That's good," Qu Qi said with a smile. "Let's go join Zichuan's wedding banquet. We've done our part."

"Hanmo, does this really make a difference?" Zhao Yun asked as he hurried to keep up. He didn't fully understand the purpose of all this.

"It does. It's about the divine right of kings," Qu Qi said coldly. "But who really knows what heaven is? If we have the opportunity to borrow the power of heaven, why not use it?"

Zhao Yun fell silent. He could already imagine the impact of his actions, but he was a man of few words. Since he had promised Chen Xi, he wouldn't reveal the true nature of the event to anyone.

After retrieving Fan Jian and Chen Lan from Fan Jian's residence, Chen Xi looked at the two radiant women and silently reached out, taking both of them by the hand. With one on either side, he led them out of the Fan household and onto his carriage.

Fan Jian sat on the left, Chen Xi in the middle, and Chen Lan on the right as they made their way into the main hall of the Chen residence. Chen Qun stepped forward and began reciting, "The peach tree is young and beautiful, its blossoms bright and radiant. This maiden goes to her new home, fit to manage her household..."

Chen Xi listened, gradually feeling drowsy as Chen Qun recited the lengthy blessings. When the recital finally ended, Chen Xi could only think of it as background music.

"The bride and groom, please wash your hands." An elderly woman from the Chen household, dressed in a dark silk robe, carried a golden basin filled with water and placed it before Chen Xi and his brides.

Chen Xi dipped his hands in the clear water, then dried them with a towel. Once again, he took Fan Jian and Chen Lan by the arm, while Chen Qun began reciting a different poem as background music.

"Take your seats, share a meal," Mi Zhu said with a smile, signaling for attendants to bring in prepared seats and a dining table.

Chen Xi scooped food from a prepared vessel and shared it with Fan Jian and Chen Lan, and the three of them ate together.

"Jian'er, eat quickly. If you don't eat now, you'll be hungry later!" Chen Xi whispered to Fan Jian, who was nibbling on her food. After all, ancient weddings started in the evening. They hadn't eaten lunch, and by the time Chen Xi finished the ceremony, it would likely be well into the afternoon.

However, it was all just part of the ritual. Sure enough, after only a few bites, the table was cleared away, and Chen Qun's recitation shifted to another verse.

"Drink this..." Mi Zhu smiled as he handed two gourds tied with red strings to Chen Xi. A wine jar was brought over, and Chen Xi split the gourd in half, offering one half to Fan Jian. The two of them drank a bitter sip of wine. Then Chen Xi split the other gourd in half and handed it to Chen Lan, and she too took a sip of the bitter wine. Chen Xi's face twisted into a grimace.

This signified that the couple would share both sweetness and bitterness in life. The more bitter the drink, the sweeter the future, or so the tradition went. But Chen Xi was already feeling bitter to the core.

He gently removed the earrings from Fan Jian and Chen Lan, then raised his hand to show them to the guests. At this point, they were legally husband and wife.

Using a small knife, they each cut a small lock of hair. Chen Xi didn't divide his own hair into two portions; instead, he tied it together with Chen Lan and Fan Jian's hair using a red string.

"The ceremony is complete!" Mi Zhu announced with a cheer.

"Congratulations! Congratulations!" The previously reserved guests rushed forward to surround Chen Xi, while Chen Lan and Fan Jian were escorted to their respective chambers. From here on, Chen Xi would handle everything himself.

Chapter 332: Imperfection

As soon as Chen Lan and Fan Jian were escorted away, the wine cups began to flood in towards Chen Xi. Whether from military officers, civil officials, or noble families, each offered their own toasts. By the time Chen Xi had barely stepped out of the main hall, he was already feeling dizzy.

"Third Brother, go help Zichuan block the wine. We can't let Zichuan's wife spend her wedding night alone," Liu Bei said, giving Zhang Fei a hearty slap on the back, signaling him to step in.

"Got it!" Zhang Fei laughed heartily, grabbing a jug of wine and charging forward. He was more than happy to help Chen Xi block the toasts, especially since both Chen Xi and Liu Bei usually limited his drinking.

"Ah, Third Brother, I'm counting on you. I can't take it anymore," Chen Xi said, his face flushed and slightly swollen, as he leaned on Zhang Fei's shoulder, starting to feel nauseous.

Zhang Fei's exuberant drinking style left Liu Bei unable to watch. Others would offer a bowl of wine, and Zhang Fei would gulp down several mouthfuls from the jug. Another would offer a cup, and Zhang Fei would take another big gulp. A small cup of wine? Well, not many had the audacity to offer just a small cup.

Eventually, Chen Xi was down for the count, but he managed to stay somewhat coherent before he was completely out, instructing Guan Ping and Fa Zheng to carry him to Fan Jian's room.

Chen Lan, being older and more experienced, had shared hardships with Chen Xi before, so she could understand many things. But Fan Jian, on the other hand, was less forgiving. If Chen Xi didn't at least show up, there was no doubt there would be trouble—a cold war, if not a full-blown confrontation.

Guan Ping and Fa Zheng carried Chen Xi to the door of Fan Jian's room. Before they could knock, a cool voice came from inside, "Come in."

Inside, Fan Jian sat calmly with four accompanying maidservants. Guan Ping and Fa Zheng placed Chen Xi on the bed and quietly retreated.

After dismissing the maidservants, Fan Jian carefully closed the door. Looking at Chen Xi lying on her bed, a hint of joy appeared on her face as she gently stroked his face.

Chen Xi, in his dazed state, swatted at the "mosquito" that was bothering him and turned over to continue resting.

"Hehe," Fan Jian chuckled, removing her phoenix crown and hairpins. She shook her head, letting her long black hair cascade down. These were things her husband, Chen Xi, should have done for her, but she had to take them off herself.

Fan Jian lay down beside Chen Xi, holding him close. The fact that he came to her room first was enough to satisfy her. The title of "Madam" that Chen Lan received had given her a lot of anxiety, but sometimes, a girl's contentment can be surprisingly simple.

After some time, just as Fan Jian was about to drift off to sleep, she noticed someone looking at her.

"Fell asleep, huh?" Chen Xi murmured as he played with her long hair, twirling it around his fingers.

Fan Jian's cheeks flushed with embarrassment as she softly replied, "I was waiting for you, Husband, but I must have fallen asleep. Am I useless?"

"No, I drank too much," Chen Xi replied gently. "I forgot to consider your feelings. You shouldn't have to put up with this."

"Husband..." Fan Jian drew out the word.

"Jian'er, just sleep," Chen Xi said, patting her back reassuringly.

For some reason, this time when Chen Xi called her "Jian'er," it felt different—so warm and comforting. A wave of warmth swept through her heart, and after some hesitation, she softly whispered in his ear, "Husband, let us rest together."

"Okay."

Seeing that Chen Xi had no intention of moving, Fan Jian silently began to undress him, whispering in his ear, "Husband, let your wife, Chen Fan, serve you as you rest..."

"Do you understand how?" Chen Xi asked.

Fan Jian pouted slightly, her tone tinged with dissatisfaction, "When you brought me to Mount Tai, the elders in my family taught me. But you've always kept your distance, preferring to seek pleasure in brothels rather than with me." If her earlier words were tinged with displeasure, the latter part carried a depth of bitterness that made Chen Xi uneasy.

After speaking, Fan Jian seemed to release all her burdens, quietly helping Chen Xi undress.

A breeze blew through the room, and the once brightly lit space was enveloped in darkness. The faint murmur of voices drifted away, swallowed by the vastness of the courtyard.

In another room, equally dark, a sigh could be heard. Chen Lan, though knowing full well that Chen Xi would go to Fan Jian first, had no desire to fight over it. Upon returning to her courtyard, she had immediately removed her wedding attire, taken off her crown and hairpins, and extinguished the lamps. Yet, she couldn't sleep. This was her wedding night, a once-in-a-lifetime event, and yet it was far from perfect.

Chapter 333: The Harm of Alchemical Elixirs in Wei and Jin Dynasties

The next day, when Fan Jian woke up, she was slightly disappointed not to see Chen Xi. It should have been her helping him dress.

Meanwhile, Chen Lan held her wedding dress and phoenix crown, sighing in regret. If she had known Chen Xi would come to her room, she wouldn't have removed them and gone straight to bed. But by the time Chen Xi arrived, it was too late for that.

"Well, well, Zichuan, you're up early today," Lu Su remarked as he saw Chen Xi casually reviewing documents in the administrative hall. "A moment of spring night is worth a thousand gold, yet I thought you wouldn't show up at all today."

Chen Xi glanced up at Lu Su. "If there were only one, I wouldn't have come today. But, alas, there isn't just one."

Lu Su laughed heartily. "Well said, well said!"

"It's a real hassle," Chen Xi sighed. "Some things look simple, but balancing them is really difficult."

"A lot of things seem easy when others do them, but doing them yourself is another story. Congratulations, Zichuan, on your marriage," Fa Zheng said as he poked his head in the door. Last night's peaches and peach blossoms had kept him awake all night, and he rushed to the administrative hall this morning with dark circles under his eyes.

"Xiaozhi, you look more sleep-deprived than I am," Chen Xi commented, noticing Fa Zheng's tired eyes.

"What was the deal with those peaches?" Fa Zheng asked directly.

Lu Su, also curious, looked at them with a grin. Fa Zheng had finally asked the question he wanted to know as well.

"Keep this to yourselves," Chen Xi said, waving his hand. "Yes, it was my doing. Chen Qun, Ju Gongyu, and Chen Yuanlong are probably all suspicious, but they can't explain the peaches they ate and the peach blossoms that fell. 'Heaven grants authority to kings,' after all. Why not use this power to stabilize the people and bring unity to our rule? That's what matters most."

“Alright, let’s leave it at that,” Fa Zheng wanted to probe further, but Lu Su swiftly ended the conversation. As long as it benefited their governance, why question more?

“You’ll understand later,” Chen Xi said with a smile, noticing Fa Zheng’s dissatisfaction. “Some things just haven’t been summarized yet. But with this peach blossom incident, we’ve garnered significant public support, making future governance easier. Let’s each focus on our tasks and wait for Cao Mengde to make his move.”

At these words, both Fa Zheng and Lu Su grew a bit solemn. Over time, they had come to understand Cao Cao’s strength well, and defeating him with just seventy percent of Liu Bei’s forces seemed incredibly difficult.

The most troubling part was that any attempt to inform Tao Qian of Cao Song’s impending fate might backfire, possibly even putting the blame on Qingzhou. Such a situation would only bring trouble, and Chen Xi had no desire to get involved in something so messy.

This left Chen Xi and the others helplessly aware that while they had long confirmed Cao Song’s imminent demise and Cao Cao’s subsequent retaliation against Xuzhou, they could do nothing to prevent it. They simply lacked evidence to prove who was behind it. While families like the Chen, Zhao, and Cao clans in Xuzhou were highly suspect, there was no concrete proof.

Similarly, Chen Xi and the others knew that while Cao Cao could guess Tao Qian wasn’t behind the plot, he would still demand justice for his father’s death. Whether it was for vengeance or other reasons, Cao Cao would require Tao Qian to answer for it.

Chen Xi couldn’t help but sigh at the thought of the devastation Xuzhou would face in history—Cao Mengde was truly ruthless!

“Congratulations, Zichuan,” Jia Xu said as he entered and bowed to Chen Xi.

“Wenhe, you’re early,” Chen Xi smiled. “Have a seat. Today, let’s handle the usual matters first. Once everyone’s here, we’ll discuss other things. The generals have been taken by Xuande Gong for training, so let’s focus on our work for now.”

Chen Xi gestured for Jia Xu to take a seat and start his tasks. Soon, all the civil officials of Taishan arrived, each offering their congratulations to Chen Xi, who graciously returned the greetings.

“Is everyone here?” Chen Xi scanned the room, from Lu Su to Wang Xiu, and then from Guo Jia to Chen Chi. “Alright, let’s all go see the physician. You’ve all been avoiding seeing a doctor despite my earlier advice to visit Physician Hua. Since none of you went on your own, I’ll take you all myself.”

Everyone’s faces darkened. Avoiding the doctor was something they all shared, only seeking medical help when absolutely necessary.

“I have Five-Stone Powder. Take a dose, and you’ll feel light as a feather, immune to all ailments,” Guo Jia immediately produced his mystical remedy. “Besides, I just ate a celestial peach yesterday. Don’t I know if I’m healthy or not?”

“Guo Fengxiao...” Chen Xi’s eyelids twitched.

“I also have some alchemical pills,” Lu Su said, pulling out a porcelain bottle and shaking it. “One pill and you’re full of energy. Zichuan, want to try one?” He opened the bottle and offered a pill.

“Lu Zijing...” Chen Xi muttered in frustration.

“I’ve got some of that too,” Fa Zheng added, producing a similar porcelain bottle. “Though mine isn’t as flashy as yours.” He poured out a pill.

“Who else has these things?” Chen Xi’s voice grew cold.

“They’re quite popular, you know. Look...” Liu Yan chimed in, pulling out a collection of small porcelain bottles. “This one is a premium Five-Stone Powder from Yanhe, this one’s a Golden Pill from Wenci, this one’s a treasured remedy from Jiu Zhen, and this one’s a Flower Pill from Wencai...” Liu Yan listed them off, revealing a dozen different types of famed alchemical elixirs.

“I...” Chen Xi was at a loss for words. He distinctly remembered that such items didn’t become widespread until the Wei and Jin periods. How was Liu Yan already able to produce so many varieties?

What Chen Xi didn't know was that these substances had started circulating among the elite as early as the late Han period. By the Wei and Jin periods, they had spread beyond the intellectual circles to all levels of society. The fact that Liu Yan could produce so many types was simply a testament to his vast network of connections...

"You do realize these things are toxic, right? A little won't hurt, but too much can be fatal!" Chen Xi snapped in anger. Now he understood why people like Guo Jia and Fa Zheng died young. At this rate, they were all destined for an early grave, while historically, figures like Liu Yan survived because Liu Bei's early poverty didn't allow them to indulge in such extravagant pastimes!

Instantly, everyone's expressions stiffened, including Jia Xu's, who looked somewhat guilty. Clearly, he had also partaken.

"You're all coming with me to see Physician Hua! Especially you, Fa Xiaozhi. If I catch you taking these things again, I'll hang you from my rafters. Believe me, I mean it!" Chen Xi slammed the table in fury. If he let this continue, they'd all end up dead!

Chapter 334: The Inescapable Pursuit of Fame and Fortune Throughout History

Chen Xi directly summoned his capable subordinate, Chen Dao, to lead a group of a hundred city guards to escort the high-ranking civil officials of Fenggao to the medical examination, whether they were willing or not. The annual physical check-up was mandatory.

Speaking of which, Zhao Yun and Hua Xiong were Chen Xi's true trusted generals, but unfortunately, both of them had been taken by Liu Bei to organize the military today. After all, Chen Xi had always instilled in Liu Bei the importance of never relinquishing military control, a principle Liu Bei adhered to rigorously.

However, since Hua Xiong was also responsible for Chen Xi's personal safety, he had recommended Chen Dao to step in during his absence. When Chen Xi first heard of Chen Dao from Hua Xiong, he was surprised, but upon confirming that this was indeed the historical figure who trained the elite Baiyi soldiers in Xuzhou, Chen Xi became very interested.

These were the super soldiers who, even after Liu Bei's great defeat at Yiling, had managed to hold off the Wu forces and retreat safely. Although the Wu Kingdom's infantry was often seen as a stepping

stone for Wei generals to gain experience, this didn't detract from the fact that commanding them required skill, especially under Sun Quan or Lu Xun.

Given Chen Dao's prowess, Chen Xi didn't hesitate to write a recommendation letter to Liu Bei, which led to Chen Dao being promoted to military officer in charge of a unit of five hundred to a thousand soldiers—far beyond the nominal position he had held under Hua Xiong.

Despite the officials' reluctance, Chen Xi herded them towards the storage area of Fenggao, where Hua Tuo had established a clinic—one that Chen Xi had initially set up before Hua Tuo took over.

When Chen Xi's group arrived, they found only a few patients, and Hua Tuo, as Liu Yan had mentioned, was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is Physician Hua?" Liu Yan asked in confusion. "Has he gone out on a house call?" After questioning a guard, they learned that Hua Tuo was in the warehouse, organizing the medical herbs.

"Let's go see how our strategic reserves are doing," Chen Xi waved his hand, and the group followed him to the warehouse. Although these officials typically stayed in one place, given that they were already here, it was only right to pay a visit to the physician whom Chen Xi considered so important.

As they pushed open the warehouse doors, a strong scent of herbs, mixed with a faint mustiness, filled the air. Looking at the piles of herbs, Chen Xi felt a headache coming on. When they had been gathering these herbs, people had even brought entire baskets of ginseng, let alone the other miscellaneous herbs, until the warehouse was completely full.

Chen Xi stared at Hua Tuo's back as he organized the herbs, feeling a sense of familiarity. He scratched his head—had they met before?

"Physician Hua, we're here to see you," Liu Yan called out as soon as he saw Hua Tuo's busy figure.

Hua Tuo turned to see a large group of people blocking the way and couldn't help feeling a bit irritated. When Liu Yan had mentioned that he could use Qingzhou's strategic reserves, he hadn't fully understood what that meant until two days ago. After discovering that he was running low on supplies during a treatment, he had brought the document Liu Yan had given him to the warehouse, where he

was shocked by the sheer quantity of stored herbs. He had immediately set to work sorting them out, fearing that if they continued to be stored this way, many would lose their potency.

“Old master, we meet again,” Chen Xi said with a smile when Hua Tuo turned around. Suddenly, Chen Xi remembered where they had met before—Hua Tuo was the physician who had treated him without revealing his name, to whom Chen Xi had given a horse in gratitude. No wonder the treatment had been so effective—it had been a stroke of luck!

“You are...” Hua Tuo frowned, finding Chen Xi’s face familiar, but unable to recall where he had seen him. As a physician who treated people every day, Hua Tuo often struggled to remember past patients.

“My Qingzong horse is still doing well, I hope?” Chen Xi said with a grin.

“Oh, now I remember—you’re that scholar from Yingchuan,” Hua Tuo said, recalling the horse that had been a great help to him.

“Yes, that’s me. I never expected we’d meet again. So, how do you find Qingzhou’s strategic reserves?” Chen Xi asked proudly.

“Such wastefulness!” Hua Tuo spat out the words.

“Is that really necessary?” Chen Xi replied, displeased. “I gathered all these herbs precisely because I was concerned about the possibility of an epidemic. If that happens, we need to have medicine ready immediately. If we wait until the epidemic strikes to gather herbs, countless lives could be lost. And yet you call this wastefulness?”

“You must be Chen Zichuan. In that case, your reasoning makes sense,” Hua Tuo said, slightly taken aback. “But unfortunately, herbs and grain aren’t preserved the same way. You’ve collected three large warehouses of various herbs. If they retain half their potency, it would be a blessing. You didn’t even process them properly.”

“Oh, then please, Master Hua, teach me,” Chen Xi said, humbling himself.

"I'm working on it," Hua Tuo sighed. "But the quantity is too large for me to handle alone."

"That's easy. Just tell me how each type of herb should be stored, and I'll print instructions for the soldiers. You can oversee the process. It took us three months to gather all these herbs—hundreds of men can sort them in ten days," Chen Xi replied casually, somewhat exasperated by Hua Tuo's stubbornness.

Hua Tuo was stunned. He had always gathered, prepared, and administered medicine on his own, never considering that he could enlist help.

"There's strength in numbers, Master Hua," Chen Xi continued. "On your own, you can only save hundreds, maybe a thousand people. But individual power has its limits. You should focus on writing books, passing on your medical knowledge, and documenting treatments for various symptoms. That way, you can save more lives instead of wasting time on tasks that others can do."

Hua Tuo was struck by these words. The vast quantities of herbs in these warehouses had already amazed him—gathering so many in a lifetime seemed impossible, and he would never use them all. But now, Chen Xi's words made him realize what he should be doing.

"You make a good point," Hua Tuo acknowledged, "but we physicians are often lumped together with shamans and witch doctors, and people are naturally averse to seeing doctors."

Chen Xi glanced around at the officials, noting their awkward expressions—Hua Tuo's words hit close to home.

"Then prove that those who oppose you are wrong," Chen Xi replied nonchalantly. "If you can demonstrate that you're right, why worry that others won't believe you? Put those who doubt you on a pillar of shame, and ensure your own legacy. Found a school of medicine that rivals Bian Que—isn't that a legacy worth striving for?"

Chapter 335: Time to Take Medicine

Fame and fortune are difficult to escape throughout history. If Chen Xi remembered correctly, he once read in a book that Hua Tuo came from a family of scholars and was self-taught in medicine. There are historical records that mention Hua Tuo, in his youth, was well-versed in classical studies and health practices. He was recommended for an official position by Chen Gui while traveling in Xuzhou, and later

by Huang Wan, who was the Grand Commandant. However, Hua Tuo declined both offers, showing that the lure of wealth likely didn't appeal to him much.

As for fame, the elderly man before Chen Xi was indeed a figure renowned throughout history. Thus, Chen Xi could only try his luck in persuading him. Whether it would work or not, that would depend on fate.

"Why be so formal, Governor Chen?" Hua Tuo smiled. "I never said I would leave. Since the governor prioritizes the people's well-being, how could I not assist you?"

Chen Xi sighed, realizing that any lasting change would depend on the bonds Hua Tuo would form with the medical students in Taishan. Otherwise, when Hua Tuo felt he had done enough, he would leave to travel the world and continue healing others, fulfilling his calling.

"Thank you, Master Hua," Chen Xi bowed, and Hua Tuo accepted the gesture. Only then did Chen Xi feel at ease.

"Governor, what brings you here today?" Hua Tuo asked after glancing at Chen Xi and his companions. "I assume you wouldn't have come looking for this old man unless there was something you needed."

Chen Xi smiled bitterly. Such was the prevailing mindset of this era. He recalled that hundreds of years later, Han Yu had said, "Physicians, musicians, and craftsmen are people whom gentlemen disdain." Of course, the musicians Han Yu referred to weren't those like Cai Yan, but entertainers. These groups were considered lowly by scholars, no matter how skilled they were.

Because of this, Chen Xi knew how important Hua Tuo was, but he didn't personally go to welcome him when he first arrived in Taishan. Sending Liu Yan to inform Hua Tuo of matters felt inappropriate, but fortunately, Liu Yan, now a well-known scholar, could act freely without being bound by convention. He could do as he pleased, without worrying about societal norms.

Liu Yan could act that way, but Chen Xi could not. He represented half of Taishan's dignity. If Chen Xi personally went to greet Hua Tuo, he would set a precedent, and soon he would have to greet everyone. The pride of scholars in this era wouldn't allow them to be slighted. If a lowly person received a grand welcome while they did not, they would turn and leave in indignation.

Such was the societal environment of the time, and it wasn't something that could be changed by one person or even a generation. If Chen Xi didn't want to oppose the entire scholar class, he had to avoid making foolish decisions. He was a man, not a protagonist in a story who could defy fate. He wasn't so naive.

Due to this, Chen Xi only approached Hua Tuo when necessary. In other cases, he could be more casual. Even the bow he had just given could be justified as being for the benefit of Taishan's people.

"Please, Master Hua, check the health of Taishan's officials," Chen Xi said with a smile, gesturing toward the group.

Hua Tuo glanced around, then his gaze landed on Chen Xi. He pointed to Guo Jia, Lu Su, and Fa Zheng, and calmly stated, "Including you, everyone here is in a state of physical weakness. He, he, and he—if they don't take care of themselves, their lifespans will not be long."

Chen Xi coughed, "I'll take care of it when I get back. For now, please prescribe something for these three, and then for everyone else who's unwell. We're counting on you, Master Hua."

"You can't be so reckless," Hua Tuo replied. "Though they all suffer from poisoning, each case is different. And you all have different types of physical weakness. The youngest among you is overworked, you suffer from excessive military campaigns, he has lung deficiency..."

Hua Tuo pointed to each person, diagnosing them one by one. If this were the 21st century, Chen Xi would have turned and left. But facing Hua Tuo, he had no choice but to accept it. After all, diagnosis by observation was one of Hua Tuo's specialties.

Chen Xi might have accepted it, but others did not. As expected, the irritable Fa Zheng was the first to speak up. "How can you be so sure that we have these illnesses? We didn't feel anything wrong before you mentioned it."

Although Guo Jia remained silent, he clearly had his doubts. After all, who wouldn't be skeptical? Was this some charlatan trying to scare them into believing they were ill?

Hua Tuo glanced at Fa Zheng. “You’ve been taking mercury-based pills, haven’t you? Your emotions are unstable, your memory has slightly deteriorated, you sometimes suffer from insomnia, you’ve lost your appetite, and your vision is starting to decline.”

With every word, Fa Zheng’s face darkened. He hadn’t noticed these issues before, but now that they were pointed out, he realized they were true. Especially his unstable emotions—despite his young age, he was mentally sharp and shouldn’t have been so irritable.

Guo Jia, who knew Fa Zheng well, immediately realized that Hua Tuo’s diagnosis was accurate. A sense of dread crept over him—could he also be ill?

“You’re still young,” Hua Tuo continued, ignoring Fa Zheng’s shock. “Stop taking those pills, and I’ll prescribe something for you. You’ll be fine. As for the youngest here, more rest will suffice—no need for medication.”

Hua Tuo then turned to Lu Su and Guo Jia, frowning. These two had more severe cases, and their age didn’t help matters.

“This is Lu Zijing, and this is Guo Fengxiao,” Chen Xi introduced them. “Please, Master Hua, speak frankly.”

“Let’s start with Lu Zijing. Though both are deeply poisoned, he has a stronger constitution and hasn’t indulged in vices. He likely only feels occasional discomfort in his lower back. He needs to stop taking the pills and follow a month of treatment. After that, food therapy will suffice,” Hua Tuo shook his head, acknowledging that this wasn’t his area of expertise.

“As for Guo Fengxiao...” Hua Tuo sighed, “He has a dual deficiency of energy and essence, fewer children, pale skin, labored breathing, a persistent cough, and a general weakness. He’s taken too much of the Five Minerals Powder. Stop taking it immediately—while a little can be medicinal, too much harms the body. Avoid alcohol and women, practice inner energy cultivation, and focus on food therapy. Even with some residual toxins, you’ll be fine.”

Guo Jia stopped fanning himself.

Hua Tuo had no good solution for the Five Minerals Powder. He could handle mercury and gold-based pills, but the Five Minerals Powder was tricky. It was a medicine for treating illness, but overuse had turned it into poison. Guo Jia's frail body couldn't withstand strong treatments—using them might kill him before they cured him.

Everyone present was intelligent and adept at reading others. They quickly realized that Hua Tuo's diagnoses were spot-on, and began worrying about their health. They might have been reluctant to see a doctor before, but no one wanted to die.

Chapter 336: Preparing to Take Action

Among the group, only Zhuge Liang was fatigued due to overwork, and Chen Xi was worn out from military campaigns. The others, to varying degrees, needed some medication and a good cook to restore their health. At this point, no one was questioning whether Chen Xi was right to bring them here; after all, anyone who was made aware of their unintentional health issues and their implications would feel a bit anxious.

"Everyone, follow Master Hua's instructions and take your medicine properly. As for Fengxiao, Zijing, and Xiaozhi, I'll inform Lord Xuande of your condition. I believe he will take this matter seriously. And Fengxiao, I'll be confiscating your gold card, and I'll hold onto your salary for the next few months. I'll also notify all the taverns and shops in Fenggao. From now on, you'll eat at my house on time each day," Chen Xi said with a smile, shaking the money pouch, wine gourd, and gold card from Manxiang Tower that he had taken from Guo Jia.

Guo Jia, always the free-spirited one, may have been affected by Hua Tuo's words, but once outside, he reverted to his carefree personality, showing no concern for his own health. For him, life was meant to be lived to the fullest, with no regrets.

Left with no choice, Chen Xi resorted to drastic measures. After all, Hua Tuo had said that as long as Guo Jia abstained from the Five Minerals Powder, alcohol, and indulgence for three months, and properly recuperated, he could eventually enjoy those pleasures again without worry.

Chen Xi estimated that with his abilities, keeping Guo Jia confined to Fenggao for three months and making him abstain was a difficult but achievable task.

"Nooo!" Guo Jia wailed in despair. For someone who lived to enjoy life, this was unbearable.

"No room for negotiation. You don't have a wife, so as a friend, I'll help you recover," Chen Xi dismissed Guo Jia's pleas without a second thought. "I'll seal off your home too. For the next three months, stay clean."

"Ah!" Guo Jia clutched his heart dramatically, collapsing against Fa Zheng.

"And you, Fa Xiaozhi. If I catch you taking any more of those pills, I'll strip you of your position and make you start over!" Chen Xi declared angrily.

The position of Chancellor of Qi State was extremely important to Fa Zheng. Even though he had never set foot in Qi State, the title alone allowed him to write home to his father with immense pride. Recently, Fa Zheng had been reveling in his success, eager to bring his father from Fufeng to Taishan to care for him. The thought of losing it all over some pills was unbearable for him.

"I swear, I'll never touch those pills again!" Fa Zheng hastily threw away his expensive bottle of pills.

Turning his attention to Lu Su, Chen Xi found him to be the most composed of the three.

"I understand. I didn't realize these things were harmful before, but now that I know, I won't take them anymore. I only used them to stay alert," Lu Su replied calmly.

Three people, three different reactions, and three different approaches to life: Guo Jia's carefree attitude towards life and death, Fa Zheng's rebellious yet filial nature, and Lu Su's relaxed and easygoing demeanor.

"Alright, I'm relieved about you, Zijing. But do keep an eye on Fengxiao for me. Wenhe, Ziyang, Boming, Kongming, you all too—make sure he doesn't get into trouble," Chen Xi said to the others.

"I won't cause any trouble. Stop worrying about me!" Guo Jia protested vehemently.

"Objection overruled. There's no point in resisting," Chen Xi said, glancing at him. "Don't you want to see the great achievements you helped build?"

Guo Jia fell silent. Aside from life and death, the only thing that could restrain Guo Jia was his own aspirations.

Chen Xi knew that silence meant acquiescence. As long as everyone stayed healthy and worked together, they could withstand any adversary. After all, this group of people was the result of his careful selection. Though none of them were the best individually, together they formed the strongest strategic team of their time.

In the region of Lu, on the border between Xuzhou and Yuzhou, snowflakes began to fall, and the group led by Cao Song had to take shelter in a dilapidated earth temple.

"This is too slow—only twenty li in one day. I had hoped to personally deliver the news about Tao Gongzu to my son, but after all these days, we've only traveled a few hundred li. We're still halfway to Chenliu," Cao Song said, sipping warm wine to ward off the cold.

"Father, why worry? A little earlier or later doesn't matter. My brother is a brilliant man; he won't mind the delay. When he hears the news from you, he'll be overjoyed," Cao De reassured him while serving some meat.

"Haha!" Cao Song laughed heartily. "You're right, my son will be delighted. But it's best to inform him sooner so he can prepare. Bring me paper and ink—I'll write to Mengde and explain the situation in Xuzhou."

Cao De fetched the writing materials. As Cao Song stroked the blank paper, he sighed, "This Liu Weishuo is indeed talented. The legacy of his family's scholarly tradition is undeniable."

"Father, you're right," Cao De replied with admiration.

Cao Song quickly penned the letter to his eldest son, Cao Cao, detailing Tao Qian's intentions and his own speculations. He believed that with his son's brilliance, he would know how to seize Xuzhou once he received the letter.

"Cao Lie, take this letter and deliver it to Mengde in Chenliu immediately," Cao Song commanded, handing the letter to his most loyal and brave guard, who would lead a group of ten men to deliver it.

"Yes, sir!" Cao Lie saluted, securing the letter and setting off with his men.

Outside the temple, a group of men huddled around a fire. Seeing Cao Lie's group depart, one of the guards signaled to Zhang Kai, who nodded. Thirty soldiers quietly slipped away into the snow, followed by the sound of approaching hoofbeats.

Chapter 337: The Death of Cao Song

Cao Lie and his men had ridden dozens of miles when they encountered a band of robbers blocking the narrow valley path. "This tree was planted by me, this road was paved by me. If you want to pass, leave a toll!"

A standard bandit's demand. Cao Lie sneered, quickly drawing his crossbow and firing at the leader. However, he was met with a chilling gaze from the other side, and a sudden sense of dread gripped him. He saw cold gleams of steel coming their way and immediately understood that these men were after them from the start.

"Take cover!" Cao Lie shouted, leaping off his horse just in time. The next moment, three massive siege bolts pierced through their mounts, killing two of his men instantly.

"Take them down!" The leader of the ambush ordered with a cold laugh, and his men charged forward. Their well-drilled formation and gleaming blades revealed them to be seasoned soldiers, not mere bandits.

"Split up and break through! We must get word to Lord Cao!" Cao Lie shouted without hesitation and charged directly at the enemy.

Back at the dilapidated earth temple, Zhang Kai chewed absentmindedly on a piece of dry food. The bitter cold of the snow made him shiver. He glanced at the firelight inside the temple, a fierce resolve gradually forming in his eyes.

Gathering his men, Zhang Kai whispered, "Cao Song's group is nearly defenseless, and the treasure they're carrying—money, jewels, and rare treasures—are beyond count! Think about it, brothers, why do we continue to live on the edge, licking blood off our blades? This is a golden opportunity! We could become wealthy men, disappear to Yangzhou, gamble, visit brothels, and marry several concubines. We could live in comfort for the rest of our lives. All we have to do is kill Cao Song and take his riches! Are we in or not?"

Zhang Kai's followers were not elite troops but former Yellow Turbans who had been co-opted into service. Even those from Danyang, who had once been elite soldiers, had been reduced to barely scraping by under the harsh conditions imposed by commanders like Cao Bao. Their discontent was immense.

Stirred by Zhang Kai's words, the soldiers began to lust after Cao Song's wealth. Yet, among them, one cautious voice spoke up, "Boss, even if we seize the treasure, how do we get it to Yangzhou? If Governor Tao becomes enraged, we won't escape from Xuzhou alive. How can we reach Yangzhou to enjoy our spoils?"

These words were like a cold bucket of water, dousing the excitement of the group. Wealth was tempting, but only if they lived to enjoy it. Without their lives, everything else was meaningless.

"Don't worry about that," Zhang Kai reassured them confidently. "There are plenty of people in Xuzhou who want Cao Song dead. If we kill him, someone will help us deal with Governor Tao. Besides, once Cao hears that his father has been killed, Tao Qianzhu will have his hands full dealing with Cao's revenge."

Zhang Kai was merely repeating what had been told to him by someone who had persuaded him to kill Cao Song. Zhang Kai himself didn't understand the full implications, but the person had guaranteed his safe passage out of Xuzhou. Without that assurance, Zhang Kai would never have dared to target Cao Song.

After exchanging glances, the soldiers all nodded. They were already living dangerously, so why not gamble for a fortune?

Having reached a consensus, Zhang Kai quietly adjusted his men's positions and surrounded Cao Song's group.

Inside the temple, Cao Song felt a growing sense of unease after sending off the letter. Unable to shake off the ominous feeling, he stepped outside for some air.

As soon as he exited the temple, he saw Zhang Kai's soldiers switching their guard shifts. A sudden surge of fear gripped him, and he turned back toward the temple in a panic.

"He's onto us!" Zhang Kai shouted as he saw Cao Song's alarmed reaction. Drawing his weapon, he bellowed, "Kill Cao Song and his men!"

In less than the time it takes to drink a cup of tea, Zhang Kai led his 500 men in a charge. Most of Cao Song's elite guards had long since been whittled down; only a few hundred servants remained, and they were no match for Zhang Kai's hardened troops. It didn't take long before they were all slaughtered.

"Father, run!" Cao De shouted as he drew his sword and rushed out. But as soon as he stepped through the temple gate, he was impaled by a massive siege bolt, the force of which pinned him to the wall.

"My son..." Cao Song's anguished cry echoed as he watched in horror.

"Old Master, flee!" The captain of Cao's guards shouted, ordering two men to escort Cao Song to the back of the temple while he rushed out to hold off the attackers.

"Run!" In the back courtyard, Cao Song saw his favorite concubine frantically clutching jewelry and treasures. Furious, he shouted at her to move.

"Old Master, quickly escape through the back! We'll hold off the Xuzhou bandits!" Several of Cao's remaining guards rushed to the back courtyard, blocking Zhang Kai's men from advancing further.

"Why aren't you moving?" Cao Song roared at his concubine.

"But what about our wealth?" The slightly plump concubine, feeling reassured by Cao Song's presence, asked anxiously.

"This is not the time to worry about wealth! As long as we're alive, we can always make more!" Cao Song scolded her, but he still grabbed her hand to drag her along.

The courtyard wall wasn't very high, but the guards had forgotten one thing: what they could easily leap over was like a towering obstacle for an old man in his sixties and a plump concubine.

However, fortune smiled on them when they discovered a hole in the wall. Both were overjoyed.

"Quick, crawl through!" Cao Song pushed his concubine forward. She managed to get halfway through but then got stuck, unable to move in either direction despite Cao Song's efforts.

The cruelest fate is to show you a glimmer of hope only to snatch it away. That was exactly what happened to Cao Song.

With the sounds of battle growing closer, Cao Song had no choice but to abandon his efforts to free the concubine. He turned and fled in the opposite direction, hoping to find another way out. Unfortunately, as he reached the latrine, he was caught by one of Zhang Kai's officers and slain with a single stroke.

"It's done," Zhang Kai reported after the massacre, his men loading all the wealth onto carts. He then approached the gray-robed steward who had been advising him.

"Zhang Kai, you've kept your word. Rest assured, my master will keep his end of the bargain as well," the steward said, handing Zhang Kai a token. "Take this, and no one will stop you as you head south."

Chapter 338: Cao Cao's Premonition

In Chenliu, Cao Cao suddenly felt a strange unease. He had been discussing the following year's governance with Xun Yu and the others when this feeling struck him, leaving him momentarily distracted.

"Lord?" Xun Yu inquired softly.

"I don't know why, but I'm feeling uneasy," Cao Cao replied, frowning at Xun Yu.

Just then, a voice from outside announced, "Urgent report from Taishan!"

Cao Cao stood up abruptly, his body swaying slightly.

"Read it!" Xun Yu, seeing Cao Cao's expression and recalling that Zhicai had recently coughed up blood, felt a chill. His face turned pale, but he maintained his composure as he ordered the messenger to continue.

"Chen Changshi reports that Military Adviser Xi has once again vomited blood and fallen unconscious," the messenger announced. Upon hearing this, Cao Cao's small frame trembled slightly. "Zhicai..."

"Fortunately, thanks to the intervention of Hua Yuanhua from Qiao County, the injury has been stabilized, but it will require a long period of recuperation before recovery," the messenger continued, just as tears were about to fall from Cao Cao's eyes, taking a sudden turn in his report.

"Couldn't you have said that all in one breath?" Xiahou Yuan, who had been tense from the initial news, scolded the messenger. Xun Yu was an indispensable figure for Cao Cao's camp, and the initial news had everyone on edge. The unexpected turn left them all relieved, prompting Xiahou Yuan to scold the messenger half-heartedly, mingling his words with a sense of gratitude.

"So, Zhicai's condition has stabilized?" Cao Cao asked, letting out a breath.

"Military Adviser Xi's condition has been stabilized by Doctor Hua. He woke up not long ago, but Doctor Hua has advised against any strenuous activities or travel in the near future," the messenger, clearly a sharp individual, likely given specific instructions by Chen Qun, explained.

"How skilled is Doctor Hua?" Cao Cao inquired further.

"Lord, Doctor Hua Tuo's medical skills are unparalleled in the world, beyond comparison. With Doctor Hua by his side, Zhicai will not suffer any further harm, and previous injuries may even be healed," Cheng Yu, well-versed in the strange and remarkable figures of the world, explained.

“Good, good,” Cao Cao said, finally reassured. “I will personally write a letter to Liu Xuande, asking him to take good care of Zhicai.”

Cao Cao, feeling that his earlier unease must have been related to Xi Zhicai, now that he knew his adviser was safe, felt much more at ease.

After most of the civil and military officials had left, Cao Cao kept Xun Yu, Xun You, Cheng Yu, and Zaozhi behind.

“Tell me the truth. What’s really happening with Zhicai? He’s never been like this before. Why did he insist on going to Taishan?” Cao Cao’s sharp gaze swept over the remaining advisers.

“Lord, this matter concerns Zhicai’s spiritual gift...” Xun Yu sighed and revealed everything. As he explained, Cao Cao listened in astonishment. It turned out that every top strategist had a spiritual gift, a fact that Zhicai had risked his health to uncover by going to Taishan.

“Alas, it’s because I’m too weak. If I were stronger, Zhicai wouldn’t have to do such things! When he returns, I must warn him not to do this again!” Cao Cao sighed, feeling a deep sense of guilt for what his adviser had endured on his behalf.

“Lord, we suspect that Zhicai’s spiritual gift allows him to sense others’ spiritual gifts. However, he may not fully understand his own. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be in such a condition. After all, he’s used our spiritual gifts before without issue, but ever since he arrived in Taishan, things have gone wrong. It seems he knows others but not himself,” Xun Yu speculated.

“It seems that’s the case,” Cheng Yu agreed. “By rights, Wenruo’s gift should be among the strongest, yet Zhicai has used it without problems. But after going to Taishan, things have gone awry. It must be a case of knowing others but not oneself.”

Cao Cao sighed. “In that case, I’ll write to him and advise him to stop probing into others’ spiritual gifts, just to be safe.”

“There’s not much else we can do,” Cheng Yu lamented. “If we could uncover their spiritual gifts, it would make dealing with them so much easier. What a pity.”

“Zaozhi, how is next year’s preparation for the military farming coming along?” Cao Cao asked, turning his attention to Zaozhi.

“We’re short on oxen, but the wastelands throughout Yanzhou have been cleared. By next spring, we can begin planting. If all goes well, we should be able to harvest five million hu of grain,” Zaozhi replied calmly. Although the previous year’s farming efforts had been hampered by the Yellow Turbans, they had still produced some results. That partial yield had helped sustain Cao Cao’s army through several weeks of fighting.

“How did Liu Xuande acquire so many oxen?” Cao Cao asked curiously. Both he and Liu Bei were not wealthy, so how did Liu Bei manage to obtain such a large number of oxen?

“I don’t know, but I’ve sent people to investigate,” Zaozhi responded calmly. Though he was a low-key figure, Zaozhi’s importance to Cao Cao was no less than that of the two Xuns, and he had the authority to deploy resources accordingly.

“Good,” Cao Cao nodded. “Wenruo, any new intelligence from Yuan Chang in Chang’an?”

“Liangzhou’s Ma Teng and Han Sui have raised an army of 100,000 to suppress the rebels,” Xun Yu replied with a neutral expression. In his view, Ma Teng and Han Sui were rebels themselves, and their actions were hardly about restoring order.

“Is there an opportunity for us?” Cao Cao asked, his face lighting up as he turned to Xun Yu. He was particularly eager to acquire the Xiliang cavalry.

“The timing isn’t right. If I’m correct, Ma Teng and Han Sui will likely be defeated. Even if by some chance they win, it will only spread the chaos from Xiliang to Yongzhou, which won’t be good for the Emperor,” Xun Yu shook his head. He saw the situation clearly: Ma Teng and Han Sui’s forces were large, but they lacked unified command, a fatal flaw against the experienced and well-led forces of Dong Zhuo’s former generals. In Xun Yu’s view, their chances of victory were slim.

“What a shame. Such elite troops, and they’re not mine to command,” Cao Cao sighed, frustrated by his current lack of cavalry.

“Lord, please endure for a little while longer,” the taciturn Xun You finally spoke. “Yuan Chang has his plans. Li Jue and Guo Si are no match for him.”

Hearing this, Cao Cao felt reassured. Zhong Yao, a devoted admirer of Cai Yong, had, after much coaxing from Xun Yu and the others, quietly aligned himself with Cao Cao. Whenever he could, he would subtly stir up trouble between Li Jue, Guo Si, Fan Chou, and Zhang Ji, gradually sowing discord among Dong Zhuo’s former followers. Although their bonds, forged in the crucible of battle, were strong, the seeds of doubt had already been planted.

Chapter 339: Zhong Yao and Yang Xiu

At Zhong Yao’s residence in Chang’an, the time usually reserved for his calligraphy practice was instead occupied by a meeting with a seventeen or eighteen-year-old youth.

“What does Zhong Shangshu think of my proposal?” Yang Xiu calmly toyed with his teacup, his demeanor so composed that Zhong Yao couldn’t fathom his thoughts.

“It’s hard to say, hard to say,” Zhong Yao replied, shaking his head. Throughout the turmoil in Chang’an, whether during Dong Zhuo’s reign of chaos or under Wang Yun’s influence, Zhong Yao had remained a low-profile figure, carefully navigating the shifting political landscape. Despite all the changes, he continued as the Shangshu (Minister of the Imperial Secretariat), carrying on with his daily life, practicing calligraphy, and studying the works of Cai Yong. Now, with Yang Xiu approaching him under the guise of rescuing the Emperor, Zhong Yao wasn’t about to be easily swayed. In his eyes, Yang Xiu was still too young and inexperienced.

“The timing isn’t right, is it?” Yang Xiu smiled, showing no sign of displeasure at Zhong Yao’s refusal. His expression remained relaxed. “Then I will ask Zhong Shangshu to continue assisting us. When the time is right, I will return.”

Zhong Yao’s hand paused as he caressed his teacup. He glanced at Yang Xiu in surprise, his mind racing. After a moment, he spoke slowly, “When the time comes, I will also need the support of the Taiwei.”

“Thank you, Zhong Shangshu,” Yang Xiu responded with a smile. “I will inform my father of your stance. Please consider the consequences of your actions carefully. My family is already weakened, and such opportunities are rare. I hope Shangshu will act with caution in the future.”

Zhong Yao's eyes flickered with uncertainty, unsure whether Yang Xiu was being truthful. After a long silence, he sighed, "Dezu truly lives up to his reputation as a brilliant man. The Yang family will not fall easily in this era."

Yang Xiu accepted Zhong Yao's praise calmly. "Since Shangshu understands, I will take my leave. Li Jue and Guo Si are extremely wary of my family, so it may be difficult for us to communicate again."

"Once is enough. I believe you, Dezu, are a careful planner who won't need further contact. When the opportunity arises, we will both seize it," Zhong Yao replied with a light laugh, turning the tables on Yang Xiu and regaining the upper hand in their exchange.

"Agreed," Yang Xiu said with composure, showing no sign of anger or dissatisfaction with Zhong Yao's proposal.

As Yang Xiu's carriage left, Zhong Yao stood at the doorway, his expression slightly heavy. He couldn't help but wonder if he had underestimated the remaining strength of the Yang family, one of the most powerful and influential lineages, having produced five generations of grand officials.

Inside the carriage, Yang Xiu closed his eyes, contemplating the day's events. He had successfully deceived Zhong Yao. In truth, the Yang family had lost most of its power and resources during Dong Zhuo's rebellion and the subsequent chaos caused by Li Jue and Guo Si.

Internally, the Yang family was now rife with infighting and blame. The faction that once advocated for a strategy of politically undermining the Emperor had crumbled, with many members defecting to join their in-laws, the Yuan family.

Unlike those who were outraged by Dong Zhuo and Li Jue for disregarding the established political rules, Yang Xiu remained calm and rational. He understood the situation too well.

If the Yang family hadn't seen a real chance to control the Emperor politically, they wouldn't have supported the plan so wholeheartedly. Unfortunately, Dong Zhuo's disregard for politics and his brutal actions, including deposing the Emperor and slaughtering ministers, destroyed much of the Yang family's influence. Later, on the advice of Li Ru, Dong Zhuo recalled the scholars and officials exiled

during the partisan purge, balancing the political landscape in a way that made Dong Zhuo more powerful than the Emperor himself.

Initially, the Yang and Yuan families had cooperated to push the so-called "pure scholars" led by the Xun, Chen, and Cui families out of the court. The two families then tacitly agreed to divide their strategies: the Yang family would work from within the political system to undermine the imperial authority, while the Yuan family would seize power from the provinces.

However, things had not gone according to plan. The Yuan family was thriving, with Yuan Shu controlling much of the central and southern regions and Yuan Shao commanding formidable forces in the north. In contrast, the Yang family, suffocated by the chaos in Chang'an, could only watch as their influence waned. How could the Yang family, once equal to the Yuan family in prestige and power, have fallen so low?

Now, the Yang family realized that unless they escaped from Chang'an, their plans had no hope of succeeding. Outside of the city, they believed that leaders like Yuan Shao, Yuan Shu, Cao Cao, or Liu Bei would still follow the rules of the political game. After all, these men were aristocrats with status and reputation, not uncivilized brutes like Dong Zhuo, Li Jue, or Guo Si!

For the Yang family, strict rules weren't the issue—what they feared was a lack of rules. In Chang'an, the warlords held life and death in their hands, killing at will. This sense of helplessness, of being at the mercy of others, was intolerable for the proud Yang family.

Thus, they were left with one final gambit: to flee Chang'an with the young Emperor, find refuge in a warlord's territory, and use the political system to undermine their host from within, gradually seizing control.

Yang Xiu's goal was to convince Zhong Yao that the Yang family still had strength, even if only enough to assist him. This would allow the Yang family to seek shelter with Zhong Yao, who could then protect their remaining assets. Yang Xiu didn't care about Zhong Yao's other alliances; what mattered to him was the opportunity to escape Chang'an with the Emperor. If they succeeded, it would be like a dragon soaring into the sky!

As for Zhong Yao's warning that they would need no further contact, Yang Xiu didn't take it seriously. It wasn't that he underestimated Zhong Yao, but rather that Yang Xiu was confident in his own intellect, believing that Zhong Yao wouldn't be able to outmaneuver him.

Unbeknownst to Yang Xiu, the Yang family's weakened state prevented him from learning that Zhong Yao's ultimate allegiance was to Cao Cao. However, even if Yang Xiu had known, he might have been relieved to escape Chang'an rather than worry about what life under Cao Cao would be like.

The Yang family's legacy of four generations of grand officials had both elevated and constrained them. Despite Yang Xiu's remarkable intelligence, which allowed him to see through Zhong Yao's plans and predict the fractures forming among Li Jue and his allies, he remained bound by the family's prestigious reputation. He couldn't fully grasp the reality that, beyond Chang'an, a world of wolves awaited them, ready to pounce on their weakened state.

As Yang Xiu's carriage disappeared into the distance, Zhong Yao shook his head and turned back inside. He harbored no illusions that Cao Cao was a kind-hearted leader. In a world torn by chaos, those who could carve out territories were not to be underestimated.

Comparing Cao Cao's ambition with Yang Xiu's intelligence, Zhong Yao couldn't help but sigh.

Chapter 340: Unyielding Will!

Chen Xi was quite frustrated with the current situation of Xizhi Cai, who was still bedridden in the inn. Although Hua Tuo had assured him that Xizhi Cai wouldn't die, seeing him in a half-dead state every day made Chen Xi uneasy. While they weren't afraid of confronting Cao Cao, it would be disastrous if a conflict broke out because Xizhi Cai died in Taishan. Being accused of killing an envoy would be a disaster.

"Brother Zhizai, please rest well and don't overexert yourself," Chen Xi said, accompanied by Guo Jia, offering some unconvincing words to Xizhi Cai.

Xizhi Cai waved them off, too tired to respond. He wasn't a fool and had already guessed that his spiritual talent might not be as he had previously thought. There seemed to be a distinction between friend and foe in his ability.

Perhaps the spiritual talents of enemies were weaker, but merely analyzing them was costly. If he truly tried to use them, the drain on his energy would be far greater than analyzing the spiritual talents of allies or neutral parties.

He realized this when he coughed up blood after trying to use Zhuge Liang's talent. A twelve or thirteen-year-old Zhuge Liang couldn't possibly have a greater spiritual reservoir than him. If he could activate his talent, then even if there were side effects, they wouldn't be fatal.

When Xizhi Cai activated Zhuge Liang's talent, all the spiritual talents and abilities of Cao Cao's subordinates appeared before him. In that instant, Xizhi Cai's life hung by a thread.

Spiritual talents are the result of the utmost refinement of intelligence and spirit—a manifestation of one's instincts. As such, it's unnatural for someone's instincts to produce a talent that would cause severe self-harm. This simply doesn't align with normal circumstances.

It was this near-death experience that made Xizhi Cai realize his spiritual talent wasn't omnipotent. He also understood why analyzing that person's talent had caused such problems. It wasn't just the nature of the talent—it was also due to limitations within his own.

"Zhizai, it looks like you'll be spending the New Year in Taishan," Guo Jia quipped, his tone laced with sarcasm. "Seeing you lying there half-dead really lifts my spirits. I keep thinking you're just going to keel over and die!"

Xizhi Cai shot a glare at Guo Jia. The last thing he needed was Guo Jia's reckless mouth cursing him. If Guo Jia inadvertently brought his doom with his words, Xizhi Cai might never make it out alive. He couldn't afford to die when Cao Mengde's great work remained unfinished!

"You just wait, Guo Fengxiao! I'll make sure you pay for this!" Xizhi Cai snapped, thoroughly annoyed by Guo Jia's jibes. The thought of being inadvertently doomed by Guo Jia's loose tongue filled him with dread.

"You can still talk? Stop playing dead!" Guo Jia retorted indignantly. "I thought you were done for, but it turns out you can still speak! I came all the way here to see you, and you can't even get up to greet me."

"I'd be better off if you didn't come at all," Xizhi Cai grumbled. "Watching you prance around just makes me furious. Changwen, get this jinx out of here!"

Chen Qun sighed as he entered the room and dragged the belligerent Guo Jia away, leaving only Chen Xi and Xizhi Cai behind.

“Why do this, Brother Zhizai? Though Fengxiao might wish you dead with his words, you know how he truly feels,” Chen Xi said helplessly. In his view, Guo Jia and Xizhi Cai were like bickering brothers.

Since Xizhi Cai had woken up, Guo Jia had come by every day, bringing small gifts, only to immediately start teasing him once he was conscious. On one occasion, he even provoked Xizhi Cai to the point of fainting from anger. The animosity seemed so intense that one had to wonder what kind of grudge existed between them.

“That guy’s a jinx,” Xizhi Cai muttered from his bed, fearing that Guo Jia’s unintended curse might actually come true.

“...” Chen Xi was left speechless, eventually sighing after a long pause. “You two are impossible.”

Since waking up, Xizhi Cai had refrained from any reckless behavior, understanding that even if he could analyze the spiritual talents of Taishan’s strategists, he couldn’t use them. Moreover, purely analyzing talents without activating them would take at least a month, making the whole process frustrating.

Nevertheless, Xizhi Cai adopted a mindset of getting whatever results he could. For over a month, he focused solely on analysis, resisting the urge to activate anything. Finally, he had some success—he had figured out the spiritual talent of the man standing before him, Chen Zichuan.

When Xizhi Cai first analyzed Chen Xi’s spiritual talent, if he had attempted to copy it, he would have been dead by now. He couldn’t have resisted the temptation to try out such a classic spiritual talent.

Because of this, Xizhi Cai’s gaze at Chen Xi was particularly complicated. This was the best spiritual talent he had ever encountered—so powerful that even Xun Yu’s talent paled in comparison.

Thinking about this terrifying talent, Xizhi Cai realized that defeating Liu Bei would require one of three things: Chen Xi’s downfall, Liu Bei’s incompetence leading to chaos, or overwhelming force to crush Liu Bei. The first two options seemed nearly impossible, while the third, considering Liu Bei’s current strength and the potential of his army bolstered by Chen Xi’s talent, seemed incredibly difficult!

Fortunately, Chen Xi's talent wasn't without flaws. It was because of this second aspect that Xizhi Cai could continue planning Cao Cao's grand strategy without fear. After all, there was always the problem of managing occupied territories. One wrong move could plunge Chen Xi into a state of endless sleep, leading to a vicious cycle or even permanent incapacitation.

Just as Chen Xi was contemplating finding an excuse to leave, a messenger arrived quickly. "Military advisor, the lord requests your presence!"

"What's going on?" Chen Xi asked, momentarily caught off guard. Then, realizing this was the perfect opportunity to make his exit, he turned to Xizhi Cai with a bow. "Brother Zhizai, please continue to rest well. Lord Xuande is calling, so I won't disturb you any further."