

Mythical 491

Chapter 491: Preparing to Clear the Field

"It's good that you're aware. I fear neither Guo Junshi, nor you, nor the strategists on Yuan Benchu's side have good intentions this time," Zhuge Liang mused.

"Probably, I'm the only one not thinking that way," Chen Xi replied with a wry smile. The geographical position of the Black Mountain Army dictated the scope of the battlefield, but would Chen Gong and Lu Bu really tolerate such a situation? It wouldn't be easy.

Chen Xi didn't elaborate further. The truth was that whether it was Cao Cao, Yuan Shao, Liu Bei, or Yuan Shu, they were all troubled by the presence of Lu Bu, who was stuck in the middle. If they chose to fight, they had to be wary of others stepping in. But if they didn't, any future move would be met with hesitation.

Chen Gong had clearly never intended for Lu Bu to vie for dominance over the entire realm. Yanzhou was just a foothold, a place to establish themselves. Lu Bu lacked the ability to conquer the world; he could be a general, a commander, even guard the borders, but he wasn't fit to be a ruler. Thus, Chen Gong's plan was to wait for a change in the situation, to become a valuable ally when the time came for the world to decide its overlord. In doing so, both he and Lu Bu would secure peaceful lives in their later years.

As for the seemingly precarious situation they were currently in, with Chen Gong's careful planning and Lu Bu's strength, it was actually not as dangerous as it seemed. Once the situation stabilized, Yanzhou might be difficult to expand, but no one would dare to attack them either.

Chen Gong had thoroughly compared the strengths of Liu Bei and Yuan Shao. From what was visible, Liu Bei and Yuan Shao had their own advantages and disadvantages, and both had victories in terms of military power. Yuan Shao's cavalry and Liu Bei's navy were unmatched in the north, with no other lords able to compete.

Because of this, Chen Gong knew that the struggle between Yuan and Liu would not be resolved quickly. Both had outstanding rulers, advisors, and armies. Chen Gong was confident that his wisdom would allow him to act as the decisive factor, tipping the scales at a critical moment. In this way, no matter who won or lost, he and Lu Bu would be safe.

Chen Gong's intentions were clear to the advisors under Liu Bei, Yuan Shao, and Cao Cao, but they hesitated to make a move because of the delicate balance. They weren't afraid of Lu Bu but were wary of the other lords. Such was the reality.

Earlier, Zhuge Liang had mentioned the Black Mountain Army, implying that both Yuan Shao's strategists and Guo Jia intended to shift the battlefield to Yanzhou, taking advantage of the chaos to eliminate Lu Bu.

By now, the situation in the north was clear. One of either Yuan Shao or Liu Bei would eventually dominate. Both Yuan Shao and Liu Bei were confident it would be themselves, and both understood that the other was the real enemy. Therefore, before the final showdown, there would be a clearing of the field—removing any obstacles in their way. The choices for those in the way were clear: submit or be destroyed.

Zhang He and Qu Yi had taken control of Youzhou, spending over half a year driving Gongsun Bogui out of Youbeiping. Gongsun Zan was unlikely to attempt a southern push anytime soon.

With one hand free, Yuan Shao now turned his attention to crushing the Black Mountain Yellow Turbans, quelling internal rebellion, and simultaneously hindering Liu Bei's progress.

Guo Jia had similar plans. He didn't want anyone disrupting the Yuan-Liu conflict either. Any lords who could potentially interfere, such as Yuan Shu, Lu Bu, or Zhang Yang, had to be severely weakened or eliminated before Yuan Shao and Liu Bei clashed.

In this way, Yuan Shao's and Liu Bei's strategists shared a common goal. Both aimed to drag Lu Bu into the fray and use the opportunity to destroy him, confident that their plans were flawless.

Chen Xi thought about this with a bitter smile.

It wasn't that Chen Xi doubted the cooperation between Guo Jia and Guan Yu, but when two strong forces clash, with eyes only for each other, it's easy for a previously underestimated third party to take advantage. If it were only Guan Yu and Guo Jia leading the army against Chen Gong and Lu Bu, Chen Xi would be confident. But in this complex situation, Chen Gong might find an opportunity to strike back.

Chen Xi recalled Zhang Liao's boldness and couldn't help but frown. Lu Bu's generals were indeed formidable!

The carriage sped along the road, protected by hundreds of cavalry sent by Liu Bei. With such an escort, there was no hindrance, and any merchant caravans quickly gave way upon seeing them. Although Qingzhou and Taishan were now peaceful, a convoy guarded by soldiers was clearly on a different level.

"We'll rest here for the night," Chen Xi said after two days of camping out. They had finally arrived at a place under Fa Zheng's administration.

As Lu Xun stepped out of the carriage, he was curious to see the locals bustling about. It was nearly dusk, yet construction was still in full swing. Judging by the scale, it looked like they were building a city.

"What's going on here?" Lu Xun asked curiously. "Aren't they enforcing a curfew? What if something happens at night?"

"There is a curfew, but it hasn't started yet," Zhuge Liang replied calmly, listening to the distant sounds of labor. "Fa Xiaozhi is really something."

"Indeed, he's done a great job," Chen Xi nodded in agreement. "It's more than I expected. I didn't think he'd take it this far."

"Linzi will likely become more prosperous than we can imagine. Within three years, it might even rival Fenggao," Zhuge Liang observed, watching the busy workers. "He always downplays his abilities, but he's truly impressive." Zhuge Liang couldn't help but praise Fa Zheng, though he then remembered Fa Zheng's rather peculiar personality and smirked. "His personality is the only problem."

"Personality doesn't matter as long as he gets the job done. He's done a remarkable job here, and I bet even Gongyou didn't realize it," Chen Xi remarked, admiring the wide roads leading to the city center. In such a short time, Fa Zheng had become increasingly adept at governance. Truly, a smart person is a smart person.

"He probably wants to build canals too, fully utilizing both land and water transportation," Zhuge Liang speculated, shaking his head. "He definitely knew how to do this before, but he just didn't want to. Now that he's started, he's going all out."

Chapter 492: Meeting Fa Zheng Again

"He's probably planning to make salt and iron the main industries of Linzi. The authority given to him by Xuande is practically used up in one go. He even demolished the original Linzi city and is rebuilding a new one here, insisting on making full use of the convenient transportation routes. We should take a look at his blueprint later," Chen Xi remarked with a shake of his head.

Fa Zheng was very clever, always prepared with various plans. Moreover, with Sun Qian's road construction bringing the provincial and county roads to the old Linzi city, Fa Zheng took advantage of the convenient transportation and decided to rebuild the city a bit further south, moving it closer to the main transportation routes. This way, the city could benefit even more from its strategic location.

"A blueprint? Fa Zheng understands this?" Zhuge Liang's eyelids twitched uncontrollably. He had always disliked complex city planning blueprints, especially the detailed ones that gave him headaches every time he saw them.

"He's very good at it. The later stages of Fenggao's inner city planning were done by him. He even integrated defensive structures into it. That guy has a lot of creative ideas in this regard," Chen Xi marveled. "He's also working with Liu Ziyang to design a drainage system that can prevent flooding. While his hands-on skills may not be top-notch, his mind is incredibly flexible and unrestrained."

Zhuce Liang frowned but remained silent. He knew that for Fa Zheng to be valued by this group, he wasn't just anyone, especially given his rather peculiar personality.

Chen Xi also found it odd. In history, Fa Zheng hadn't shown any special talent for city construction, yet in this lifetime, after just hearing some ideas from Chen Xi, he had managed to fill in the gaps on his own and become self-taught.

"Alright, enough about that. Let's head to the inn and rest for the night. I'm not sure if Fa Zheng returned to Taishan after being demoted from his position as the governor of Beihai, or if he's still in the Qi State," Chen Xi said as he led the Lu family's entourage to the inn. Although the new Linzi city wasn't fully built yet, its convenient location meant that all the necessary facilities were already in place.

"He's probably still in Qi. For some reason, I always feel like he has a special attachment to the position of Prime Minister of Qi," Zhuge Liang observed, looking around at the bustling crowd.

"It was the first position he earned through his own abilities. Of course, he'd value it," Chen Xi nodded. "At seventeen, he became a 2,000-dan official, even younger than I was. It would be strange if he didn't have any special feelings about it."

"Hey, Zichuan, Kongming, you really passed through here!" Just as Chen Xi and the others were about to enter the inn, Fa Zheng, dressed in a simple blue robe, his skin slightly tanned, waved at them from afar.

"You've set up roadblocks like a bandit. Of course, we'd have to pass through," Zhuge Liang quipped as he saw Fa Zheng, his usual irritability resurfacing. Back in Taishan, they had often clashed, mostly because Fa Zheng liked to stir up trouble, but Zhuge Kongming was not one to back down.

"Oh, come on. I'm not at your level of simplicity," Fa Zheng, who seemed to have worked hard for a while, appeared less sharp and provocative than before, more composed.

"You built the city here, and you want to say you didn't think about collecting a city tax?" Zhuge Liang glanced at Fa Zheng, trying to calm himself.

"Unfortunately, you're wrong again. Your standards are really slipping. The Zhuge Kongming who used to be fun to play with is no more," Fa Zheng said in a teasing tone. In truth, he had initially considered collecting a city tax, but after some thought, he realized it wasn't necessary.

Lu Xun watched the interaction between this slightly tanned young man and Zhuge Liang with interest. This must be the new mentor his master had prepared for him. He seemed quite capable.

"What's going on with you two?" Chen Xi scratched his head, puzzled by the tension. He could sense some friction in the air. Fa Zheng was always like this, but Zhuge Liang wasn't usually this way.

"I just think that Kongming is losing his edge. The Zhuge Kongming who used to amaze me in Taishan has changed and become more mediocre," Fa Zheng said with a tone of regret, making Zhuge Liang want to punch him.

"You're the one losing your edge," Zhuge Liang retorted, clearly annoyed.

"Your vision has narrowed to focusing only on city gate taxes. Tsk tsk, the economic impact of merchant caravans passing through far outweighs the revenue from city gate taxes. You've become shortsighted, Kongming. As former Beihai Governor Kong Wenju once said, 'Those who excel in their youth may not shine in adulthood,'" Fa Zheng continued to taunt, further provoking Zhuge Liang, who now understood what Fa Zheng had meant earlier.

"Well, not bad," Chen Xi interjected after thinking for a moment. "Xiaozhi, you've got quite the insight. Have you already coordinated with the surrounding counties and reissued travel permits?"

"Hmph, for the provincial and county level, it's just a matter of making a few calls. As for the county level, it's just an order," Fa Zheng replied nonchalantly, completely unbothered by his blatant use of connections.

"How about it? Isn't my plan great? I won't charge city gate taxes for merchant caravans with proper travel permits from nearby counties. This way, as a fully equipped large city at the crossroads of major routes with convenient waterways, it'll be very appealing to merchants. It's bound to flourish," Fa Zheng continued, his tone growing more and more triumphant, while Lu Xun became increasingly excited.

"Very impressive. You've definitely got a future in this," Chen Xi praised Fa Zheng, acknowledging that he had done an excellent job.

"Of course! I've been studying hard. More importantly, I thoroughly researched your previous actions and realized that everything you did was related to urban planning. So, from the very beginning, I put a lot of thought into the city planning for the new Linzi city. I designed drainage, sewage systems, surface channels, and underground tunnels. It's fully fire and flood-proof!" Fa Zheng boasted with great pride.

Lu Xun's eyes sparkled as he listened to Fa Zheng. He realized that Fa Zheng was incredibly capable, considering every detail. Even Chen Xi couldn't find any faults, and Zhuge Liang was left standing on the sidelines, listening.

"I even had a geomancer check the underground water veins while planning the city, and I drilled dozens of deep wells!" Fa Zheng continued. To be honest, he was mostly trying to get under Zhuge Liang's skin. The old tricks no longer worked; only sheer talent could apply pressure now.

Chapter 493: The Legacy Left by Guo Jia...

"When building the granary, I had a geomancer inspect the site. I built the entire granary underground, and each section of the granary is separated by rammed earth fireproof layers. Even if one area catches fire, it can be sealed off immediately," Fa Zheng said with extreme pride, habitually lifting his eyes to glance at Zhuge Liang.

"You've truly taken everything into account," Chen Xi couldn't help but give Fa Zheng a thumbs up. "You've thoroughly absorbed everything I taught you before."

"Of course. I've studied everything carefully. Recently, Kong Chenggong brought a young man from his family here. You haven't met him, but he's a genius. Not only is he skilled in literature, but he's also extremely talented in craftsmanship. The fireproof seals were his idea, and he even helped build them," Fa Zheng said with a smile, recommending the man to Chen Xi.

"Zheng Hun, Zheng Wengong, right?" Chen Xi raised an eyebrow. In today's world, the only person with the surname Zheng who could earn Fa Zheng's high regard for both literary talent and craftsmanship was Zheng Hun.

"Oh? You know him?" Fa Zheng asked in surprise.

"I've been asking Wei Shuo to find people like him for a while, but at the time, it seems he and his brother were in trouble, so we couldn't track them down," Chen Xi sighed.

Chen Xi knew that after 191, Zheng Hun should have been in Chang'an, but by the time he went looking, Zheng Hun had already disappeared. Additionally, Zheng Hun's brother, Zheng Tai, had been tricked by Xun You into confronting Dong Zhuo, resulting in his imprisonment. To avoid being caught himself, Zheng Hun had to hide, which was unavoidable.

"I sometimes think you know too much," Fa Zheng said with some displeasure, but he didn't provoke Chen Xi as he did with Zhuge Liang. He had enough sense to know when to hold back.

"Alright, let's continue inside. Standing here isn't helping," Chen Xi said, not bothering to explain himself further. He patted Fa Zheng on the shoulder and led the group inside. As for Elder Lu and Lady Lu, they had already gone in. Only Fa Zheng and Chen Xi, who were less concerned with formalities, had lingered at the entrance.

"Come on, let's get something to eat. The food here is exquisite. I'll treat you to Qi's most famous stuffed fish belly and fish sashimi. By the way, I've also made those kitchen tools you mentioned before. They work wonderfully," Fa Zheng said as he waved for the group to follow him to the dining hall inside the inn.

The inn didn't originally have these amenities, but when Fa Zheng was overseeing the construction of the new city and had nowhere to stay, he moved into the inn. Naturally, the kitchen and other essentials followed.

"Oh, exquisite food, huh? Although I'm not a fan of raw fish, I do enjoy cooked food. I don't want to end up like that unfortunate Chen Yuanlong," Chen Xi yawned. "Let's see your kitchen. After these past few days of rough travel, I could use a good meal. We'll discuss the important matters later."

"Speaking of Chen Yuanlong..." Fa Zheng recalled what Hua Tuo had told him, which had frightened him. For a long time, he avoided eating raw fish. Now, hearing Chen Xi mention it again, Fa Zheng decided it was better to stay away from such risky food.

"Let's stick to cooked food," Fa Zheng said, exhaling deeply. "I don't want to end up like Chen Yuanlong, who found all those little worms in his stomach. Just thinking about it gives me chills. Hua Tuo said if he'd waited a couple more years, Chen Yuanlong would have been picking out his coffin. I should probably visit Hua Tuo again—I've eaten quite a bit of that stuff recently."

"Stay away from raw food, especially anything alive," Chen Xi advised as he patted Fa Zheng's shoulder. He had been feeling a bit tired lately and suspected that another natural disaster might be brewing in Liu Bei's territory, though they could still manage.

Fa Zheng noticed Chen Xi's tired demeanor and leaned back slightly before glancing around. "You didn't bring any beauties with you, just Kongming and this guy. Why are you so worn out?"

"Shut up," Chen Xi snapped irritably. "You're too young to be talking like that. Seriously."

"I'm just curious. As for age, it's not like you're much older. Anyway, this guy must be the Lu Boyan you mentioned before. His eyes are sharp and full of life," Fa Zheng said, adopting a more authoritative tone, now that he had the status and experience to back it up.

"Lu Xun of the Lu family in Lujiang greets the Prime Minister of Qi," Lu Xun quickly stepped forward and respectfully saluted Fa Zheng.

"He seems promising," Fa Zheng stroked the few strands of beard he had managed to grow. "How about I take you to the pleasure quarters tonight?" Fa Zheng said brazenly to the courteous Lu Xun.

Chen Xi and Zhuge Liang's faces twitched involuntarily, while Lu Xun was completely stunned. His family's rules were strict, and there was no way he'd be allowed to visit such places. Besides, as a high-ranking family, the Lu family had plenty of singers and entertainers at home.

"He seems a bit naive. Looks like he's never been to such places before. Alright, I'll take you tonight. I'm sure you're curious!" Fa Zheng continued without hesitation. "But don't be shy—you'll go there sooner or later."

"Whack!" A cane struck Fa Zheng's back. "You unfilial son!"

Fa Zheng's father, Fa Yan, furiously hit Fa Zheng with his cane, causing him to stumble. Fa Zheng didn't even need to look back to know it was his father, and he quickly made a run for it.

Watching his son's recent accomplishments in building the new Linzi city had filled Fa Yan with pride. Seeing the heartfelt gratitude of the people made him feel that his son had finally matured. But then, Fa Zheng had to go and say something so shameless in public, which infuriated Fa Yan.

"How dare you run!" Despite using a cane, Fa Yan was still quite agile. He mainly carried the cane to show that he was old and that his son was now in charge. But hearing his son's disgraceful words made him lose his temper, and he chased after Fa Zheng, intending to give him a good beating.

"You unfilial son!" After chasing Fa Zheng around a pillar several times, Fa Yan realized he couldn't catch him, so he stopped and angrily scolded him. "Do we not have maidservants at home?"

"Yes," Fa Zheng replied softly.

"And what about female entertainers?" Fa Yan continued.

"We do," Fa Zheng quickly answered.

"How many of them are skilled in music, chess, calligraphy, and painting?" Fa Yan's beard quivered with anger.

"At least a dozen," Fa Zheng replied cautiously.

"Then why would you go to the pleasure quarters!" Fa Yan demanded furiously. "Do you even think about your status and theirs? That kind of place is beneath you. If you want something, don't we have it at home?"

"I was just going to watch a play. Really! You see, Boyan just arrived, and I thought I'd show him the best entertainment in Taishan. It's a cultural experience!" Fa Zheng quickly concocted an excuse, carefully explaining it to Fa Yan.

Chapter 494: The Hottest Entertainment Nowadays

"You can't invite the theater troupe to perform at home?" Fa Yan instantly became furious.

"But it's livelier with more people around..." Fa Zheng cautiously replied. Could he admit that it was Guo Jia who had led him astray? No matter how good things were at home, sometimes you just want to go out and have fun.

"Can't you set up a stage at home and invite people over?" Fa Yan stabbed his cane into the ground, and the green stone tiles cracked under the pressure. Fa Zheng's hair stood on end, realizing he had nearly forgotten how strong his father still was.

"That wouldn't be appropriate, mixing personal matters with official duties... Besides, I'm a clean official!" Fa Zheng coughed twice, a bit embarrassed by his own excuse.

"Oh, I see. You've grown wings and become defiant, huh? Going to the pleasure quarters and coming up with all sorts of excuses!" Fa Yan's beard trembled with rage. Meanwhile, Chen Xi and his group all kept their heads down, pretending to study the ground intently.

"Father, please give me some face!" Fa Zheng, realizing he couldn't withstand his father's reprimand any longer, smiled bitterly. "I was just joking."

"Are you still planning to visit the pleasure quarters?" Fa Yan pulled his cane out of the crack in the stone tile, coughed twice, and asked sternly.

"No, I won't go." Fa Zheng lowered his head and silently added to himself, not when you're watching, anyway.

"And what about watching plays?" Fa Yan glanced at the group, who were still focused on counting ants, feeling quite satisfied.

"I'll move the theater troupe to our home from now on, invite you to watch, even break down the back wall so everyone can enjoy it together," Fa Zheng replied, looking downcast and a bit aggrieved.

Fa Zheng's father, Fa Yan, had developed a fondness for theater ever since Fa Zheng invited performers from Manxiang Pavilion during the construction of the new Linzi city. Back then, entertainment options were few and far between, and theater was one of the few activities that both the elite and common folk could enjoy. However, the best performers and most skilled artists were exclusive to Manxiang Pavilion, which happened to be a pleasure house. And Fa Yan, having certain principles, would never set foot in a place like that.

Although Fa Yan often found it hard to focus on his reading when Manxiang Pavilion had performances, decades of ingrained habits were hard to break. And of course, his son, Fa Zheng, was also forbidden from visiting the pleasure quarters. But as it turned out, Fa Zheng had gotten used to sneaking off there without his father's knowledge.

"You said you wouldn't mix personal and official matters?" Fa Yan glanced at Fa Zheng, raising an eyebrow.

"That's different. The theater is privately owned, though we usually treat it like a public asset," Fa Zheng explained, signaling to Chen Xi for help—after all, Manxiang Pavilion was technically Chen Xi's property.

"Master Fa, I'm Chen Zichuan, the main owner of Manxiang Pavilion. If you'd like, I can arrange for performances at your home. And just to clarify, people often misunderstand the nature of Manxiang Pavilion—it's not a place for illicit activities, just a venue for enjoying music and theater. You can ask Xiaozhi; they don't engage in any immoral business," Chen Xi said with a helpless smile, stepping forward to bow respectfully.

"Ah, music and theater! A single song can fetch a fortune," Fa Yan said, shaking his head. He had seen firsthand how passionate people could get. One time, during an outdoor performance, a local tycoon offered a hundred gold coins just to hear another song. And truth be told, the performance had indeed been outstanding.

"Originally, the idea was just to provide some work for wandering women and offer the common people some entertainment. But it turned out to be so popular that people became obsessed. A hundred gold coins for a single song—that's quite the inflation," Chen Xi said, feeling a bit overwhelmed by how quickly the value of performances had skyrocketed.

"Hmph, a hundred gold coins is nothing. Your three maidservants, especially Chen Yun, are now famous. During their performance of 'White Snake and Green Snake' with Chen Ying, the head of the Wu family offered a fortune to take them as concubines. When he found out they were your personal attendants, he settled for presenting two white jade pendants as a gift, just to see them perform again," Fa Zheng chimed in with a smirk. "Right now, there are five major stars in the troupe, but two are already married, leaving only three—and they all reside in your estate."

"Hey, hey, hey, don't say it like that. What do you mean 'my personal attendants'?" Chen Xi raised an eyebrow. "I haven't touched any of them."

"Everyone knows that, but maidservants eventually belong to their masters. And with such talented ones, would you really let them go?" Fa Zheng gave Chen Xi a disdainful look.

"Actually, I would. If they want to marry, I'll even give them their household registration," Chen Xi replied, glancing at Fa Zheng.

"Your father seems quite reassured now. Rest assured, I won't mix personal and official matters. When we return to Taishan, I'll arrange a full performance with all the top stars—even the supporting actors will be stars," Fa Zheng said with a touch of nostalgia. "Even your less talented maidservants have gained some fame now. I wonder how you managed that."

Fa Zheng helped his father to a nearby chair and gently patted his back, while Fa Yan closed his eyes and enjoyed his son's attentiveness. It was a touching father-son moment, hard to believe that just minutes earlier, Fa Yan had been cursing Fa Zheng as an unfilial son.

"Remember this, you brat. I'll let it slide this time, thanks to your friends. But if I ever hear you mention the pleasure quarters again, I'll break your legs!" Fa Yan warned menacingly after settling into his chair.

"Got it, I won't forget," Fa Zheng replied without missing a beat, then added, seeing his father's still sour expression, "Don't worry. I'll follow through on what I said. I'll move the theater troupe here."

"Hmph, off with you now. Don't embarrass me any further!" Fa Yan waved his arm dismissively, shooing Fa Zheng away as he retreated into the inner rooms.

"It seems you have it tough," Zhuge Liang remarked, feeling a bit wistful, yet somewhat envious.

"My father just can't stand my ways, that's all. Guo Jia is the one who led me astray—he's the one who got me into the habit of taking medicine, going to the pleasure quarters, and skipping out on bills," Fa Zheng said in an uncharacteristically serious tone. But then he shuddered, recalling how Guo Jia had often manipulated him. "Still, I have to admit, that lifestyle was quite liberating."

"Don't follow his example!" Chen Xi slapped Fa Zheng on the shoulder. "Learn the good things, not the bad."

"Hahaha, Guo Jia told me about the time you two skipped out on a bill and even visited a pleasure house without paying," Fa Zheng teased, grinning mischievously. Meanwhile, Lu Xun's image of his mentor,

Chen Xi, as a virtuous and righteous figure, shattered completely. The tall and noble figure in his mind seemed to shrink with every word...

"By the way, why aren't you married yet?" Chen Xi asked, feeling a bit awkward about Lu Xun's reaction. He tried to shift the conversation to a lighter topic, considering Fa Zheng's age and background. A wealthy and influential young man like him should have been married by now.

"Don't bring that up—it's been bothering me," Fa Zheng replied, wincing as if someone had poked a sore spot. "Come on, let's get something to eat. Marriage is a topic best avoided."

Chapter 495: Thoughts and Worries

"What's wrong with this guy?" Chen Xi asked in confusion. "Can't he just find a suitable match and get married?"

After saying this, Chen Xi looked at Zhuge Liang. He belonged to the category of people who had a wife but hadn't married her yet, similar to how Zhuge Liang's sister married Pang Tong's elder brother, and Zhuge Liang himself would marry Huang Chengyan's daughter. The marriages between noble families had long been arranged, just as Chen Xi was destined to marry Fan Jian.

"It's not that easy. The marriage arranged when I was a child fell through," Fa Zheng said with a bitter smile. "I don't mind it much, but my father is quite upset."

"Which family is so blind?" Chen Xi was taken aback. How could there still be families that would break off an engagement? Don't they care about their reputation? Even when his own family was in dire straits and he was a sickly man, Fan Liang never once considered not marrying Fan Jian to him.

"The Jiang family," Fa Zheng said, curling his lips. "They are a prominent family from Fufeng. When I was young, I was engaged to a girl from their family. We saw each other often when we were little, but... as our Fa family declined, they started to distance themselves. Earlier, I sent someone to pick up my father, and he wanted to bring her along, but..."

At this point, a flash of coldness appeared in Fa Zheng's eyes. He didn't care much about who he married, but breaking off the engagement without a reason and without giving an explanation was unacceptable.

"The Jiang family from Liangzhou?" Chen Xi asked, unsure.

"Their ancestral home is in Liangzhou, but they have many members in Fufeng as well," Fa Zheng replied with dissatisfaction. "They looked down on my family because we are small and weak. If I get the chance, I will definitely have a word with them."

Seeing the coldness beneath Fa Zheng's calm demeanor, Chen Xi knew that his true nature was beginning to show. Fa Zheng was inherently vengeful, and although Guo Jia had trained and tempered him for a long time, it seemed that old habits were resurfacing.

"They're blind," Zhuge Liang remarked, shaking his head. Despite Fa Zheng's tendency to stir up trouble and cause issues, he acknowledged Fa Zheng's talent, which was undoubtedly among the best in the world. Offending such a person, especially at this time, was indeed foolish on the part of the Jiang family.

"Who knows what they were thinking?" Fa Zheng scoffed. "If it weren't for the distance from Xiliang, I would have made sure the Jiang family learned their lesson."

Lu Xun pursed his lips, suddenly realizing that his new teacher, Fa Zheng, might be a bit ruthless.

"Why not take a concubine first and leave the main wife's position vacant for now?" Chen Xi suggested, trying to console him and prevent Fa Zheng from becoming too reckless. "Most of the officials in Taishan are in the same situation. The main wife's position is vacant, but they all have concubines."

"I already have concubines," Fa Zheng said, pulling a face. After his father brought up the matter and was upset, Fa Zheng immediately took a concubine to placate him. Finding a wife wouldn't be difficult for someone of Fa Zheng's current status and abilities.

"Oh, well, as long as you're content with it," Chen Xi said with a nod, though it was clear this matter was a thorn in Fa Zheng's side.

"Forget it, let's not talk about it anymore," Fa Zheng said gloomily. He couldn't understand why the Jiang family would cancel the engagement when his status, abilities, and future were all so promising. It simply didn't make sense to him.

Fa Zheng had initially wondered if the Jiang family thought he was too powerful for them to handle, but that didn't seem likely. After all, he and Jiang Ying had practically grown up together. Despite Fa Zheng's odd personality, he treated those close to him very well and was quite nostalgic.

Moreover, his father was still alive and a respected scholar. It was inconceivable that they would break off the engagement for such a trivial reason. After much thought, Fa Zheng concluded that the slow spread of information had caused the misunderstanding. If he had held an official position at the time, a formal letter would have prevented this, but now, at least he knew the Jiang family's true nature. Still, when he thought of Jiang Ying, he couldn't help but feel a bit regretful. For ten years, he had always believed she would be his wife.

"Let's go, have some food, rest a bit. I still have work to handle tomorrow, so I won't be returning to Taishan with you just yet," Fa Zheng said, waving his hand. The gloom on his face disappeared, replaced by his usual indifferent expression.

"Oh, are you planning to finish the infrastructure and landmark buildings before you leave?" Chen Xi asked as they walked toward the inner hall.

"Yes, I'm worried that if I leave now, they'll mess up the construction of the city. Once the key structures are in place, they'll have a template to follow even if I'm gone," Fa Zheng explained, nodding.

"That's a good plan. I'll leave Bo Yan with you then. Make sure to teach him military strategy and tactics—he and Kong Ming don't quite get along," Chen Xi said, patting Lu Xun on the shoulder. "Don't underestimate him; he's very smart."

"Oh, in that case, leave him here. I don't have much to do besides overseeing the city's construction. He can learn a lot just by observing," Fa Zheng said, glancing at Lu Xun, who bowed respectfully to him. "Kong Ming, are you heading back to continue your studies? Tsk tsk, at this rate, by the time you start as a minor official, I might already be managing the affairs of an entire province."

"I'll be heading back to assist Lu Zijing with the administration of the states and counties and to work on long-term planning. Who knows, some of the work you do in the future might be part of my plans," Zhuge Liang said nonchalantly, leaving Fa Zheng speechless. He turned to Chen Xi for confirmation.

"Hmph, I'll be returning to Taishan soon enough," Fa Zheng said when he saw Chen Xi nodding slightly, indicating that Zhuge Liang's future tasks had indeed been arranged. Although Zhuge Liang would initially assist Lu Su, with his talent, it wouldn't be long before Lu Su would delegate some of the simpler tasks to him. Fa Zheng was sure of this, having sparred intellectually with Zhuge Liang for quite some time, with neither gaining the upper hand.

"Yes, you'll have to return eventually. In fact, soon everyone will need to gather together," Chen Xi said with a playful smile, and Fa Zheng instantly understood the implications of his words.

"Alright, let's not discuss official matters tonight. Let's talk about more pleasant things—food, drink, and entertainment! Let the feast begin, with music and dance!" Fa Zheng exclaimed as he entered the main hall, laughing heartily. Watching a new city rise from the ground had been exciting, but maintaining his official demeanor in front of others had been exhausting. Finally, he could relax and enjoy himself for a change.

Chapter 496: Current Technology Scavenging Plan

Chen Xi didn't feel the slightest bit guilty about eating Fa Zheng's food. Whether it was music, dance, or banquets, Chen Xi accepted everything without hesitation. However, he had to admit that Fa Zheng's chefs were quite good at cooking.

"This is for you as well." Chen Xi passed a small dish from his table to Lu Xun, who was sitting beside him, happily wielding his chopsticks. It was clear that Lu Xun, who was used to eating stewed dishes every day, was very pleased with the novelty of stir-fried dishes.

"Oh, thank you, Master," Lu Xun said respectfully, putting down his chopsticks.

"Don't mention it. If you like it, Fa Zheng, bring him another serving," Chen Xi said, pointing at the table. "Give him some fried rice instead of steamed buns. He might not be used to the buns. Bring a variety of dishes; Bo Yan seems to enjoy this kind of meal."

Fa Zheng waved to a servant, who quickly replaced Lu Xun's small table with another one and laid out a variety of small dishes and bowls.

"Um..." Lu Xun hesitated, unsure whether he should finish the meal here.

"Relax and enjoy your meal. My father is already hosting a banquet for your parents and grandfather, and the performances have also been arranged," Fa Zheng said with a smile, easily seeing through Lu Xun's hesitation.

Originally, by status, Fa Zheng and Chen Xi should have hosted the entire Lu family, but Fa Zheng felt that he was too young for such a responsibility, so he had his father entertain the Lu family while he hosted Zhuge Liang and the others.

Naturally, with Fa Yan presiding over the main banquet, it would have been inappropriate for Chen Xi to attend as a mere companion, so they split into two groups. The main banquet took place in the main hall, while their group dined in an inner chamber of the hall, allowing them to relax without concern.

"Thank you," Lu Xun said, bowing respectfully to Fa Zheng. The etiquette he had been taught from a young age was displayed to perfection.

"No need to be so formal. Soon enough, you'll realize that eating like this every day isn't that special anymore," Fa Zheng said with a smile. "Many things subtly change your habits over time. Even the best things, once they become routine, will eventually be overlooked. You'll soon get used to this lifestyle."

"Wow, Fa Zheng, you can say such things now?" Chen Xi chuckled. "It's true, though. The most terrifying changes are those that happen gradually, altering your mindset little by little until you become accustomed to what once seemed impossible."

"I learned that from our lord," Fa Zheng said with a smile. "In the past, even when our lord held high positions, there was still a bit of pettiness in his bones. But now, he's gradually becoming more magnanimous, no longer caring about short-term gains and losses."

"That's how it should be. Occupying such a position nurtures such a temperament—it's always been that way. By the way, has Yuan Benchu sent over the beauties and fine horses yet?" Chen Xi nodded, then asked curiously.

"They've arrived. The women are quite beautiful, but the horses... well, not so much," Fa Zheng said with a dismissive wave. Yuan Benchu wasn't a fool—he was one of the few true leaders in the world. He knew exactly what could be given and what couldn't. Sending women wouldn't enhance Liu Bei's military strength, but sending top-quality horses would. As a result, while the horses he sent were good, they were far from suitable mounts for top warriors.

"Yuan Benchu isn't so easily fooled. What about those clever gadgets and tricks?" Chen Xi asked with interest. "Like rare items from the Han Dynasty?"

"There were quite a few, including the seismoscope and armillary sphere made by Minister Zhang during the reign of Emperor He. There were also some self-propelling boats and flying machines from the previous Han Dynasty, along with a bunch of gold and jade trinkets," Fa Zheng said, shaking his head. "Aside from the seismoscope and armillary sphere, which are somewhat useful, the rest are just distractions that dull the mind. Are you sure these won't cause any problems?"

"What about the waterwheel, the drum cart, and that so-called flying machine?" Chen Xi asked curiously. If they sent over the armillary sphere, they surely wouldn't have skipped these. They might seem useless, but they contained a lot of technological value.

"The flying machine's wings are missing, but the drum cart and waterwheel are here. You really want them? Be careful not to get too absorbed in them," Fa Zheng said with a bit of curiosity. Becoming obsessed with such things was no joke. Although Fa Zheng admired Zheng Hun, he also saw him as someone who had wasted his talents on trivial pursuits.

"Some things are only misunderstood because they were developed in the wrong direction," Chen Xi said, unable to resist criticizing Zhang Heng.

Take the waterwheel, for example. It was said to have operated without error for decades. Zhang Heng's creations were renowned for their precision. His hydraulic-powered armillary sphere was said to match the accuracy of the celestial bodies. In other words, as long as it remained intact, its timekeeping was flawless.

But why use such precise machinery to keep a calendar? Why not turn it into a clock? The difficulty level would have been almost zero.

And then there were the wooden automaton horses—an example of how Zhang Heng's technological path had veered off course. The mechanical ingenuity involved was astounding, yet it was used to make a toy. If that effort had been directed toward making large equipment like ships, it would have been far more beneficial.

Then there was the south-pointing chariot. Precision aside, the automatic gear mechanism alone represented a significant technological breakthrough. With such innovations, many agricultural tools could have been developed, but instead, Zhang Heng focused on recreating ancient curiosities, proving he could match the ingenuity of sages from the past—and then he simply discarded them.

"Well, do as you please. When you return to Taishan, just ask Zijing. He's stored away anything that might not be suitable," Fa Zheng said. Although he didn't fully understand Chen Xi's intentions, he trusted that Chen Xi knew how to handle things.

In fact, Chen Xi had long anticipated that the gifts Yuan Shao sent would likely include not only women but also materials meant to corrupt Liu Bei. However, in ancient times, many such things were actually advanced technology with significant research value. For example, studying Zhang Heng's gear mechanisms could lead to improvements in many existing tools. Unfortunately, few people recognized their importance.

After all, while Chen Xi knew about many of these things, the current state of society and technology limited their development. Even if Chen Xi provided guidance, the resources and skills needed to create them were often lacking. As a result, finding ancient methods that closely resembled modern concepts was often the most efficient approach. After all, many technologies in ancient China had simply disappeared over time...

Take salt drying, for example. The technique originated during the time of the legendary Emperor Shennong and had become incredibly advanced by the early Western Han Dynasty. However, when a certain prince used this method to build his power and rebel, the technique was suppressed by the government and eventually lost after more than a hundred years of prohibition.

Another example was glass. A mature glassmaking technique existed in the early Spring and Autumn period, but it was suppressed because it threatened the interests of Chu State's semi-porcelain industry. The technology vanished, leaving behind only a few artifacts as collectibles for the nobility of that era.

Chapter 497: There's Always a Remarkable Person

Some technologies were banned by the state, while others disappeared inexplicably. For example, the practice of piercing ox noses existed before the Qin era, but vanished during the Han Dynasty, only to reappear in the Jin Dynasty and disappear again in the Tang Dynasty. Ancient technological advancements often had strange fates—some would mysteriously disappear, while others would inexplicably emerge.

What Chen Xi needed to do now was to gather these lost technologies and put them back on the right track. With his perspective, he could at least figure out better uses for these advanced technologies. As for materials, this world had a mysterious technique called "cultivation."

As long as the technology was advanced enough, materials wouldn't be an issue. Top-tier cultivation could fulfill all requirements—although that might be an exaggeration, for most technologies applicable to this era, materials wouldn't actually pose a problem.

"If it's really useful to you, I can help you gather some. There are people in Qi who enjoy collecting such things, although they've recently shifted their interest to watching plays," Fa Zheng said with a smirk. In Qi, there was a rich man who used to love collecting these kinds of materials, which were not valuable but highly intriguing.

"Oh, so there's such a person? Then I'll go with you sometime," Chen Xi replied with a nod. He was quite interested in ancient curiosities, as they often contained significant technological content.

After a hearty meal, the moon had already risen high in the sky. The opera that Fa Zheng had arranged at Manxiang Pavilion was ready, and on the other side, Fa Yan and the others were thoroughly enjoying themselves.

The elders had much to talk about, whether discussing the customs of various regions from decades ago or referencing the infamous "Party Prohibition Incident" of yesteryear. Fa Yan and Lu Kang found themselves kindred spirits, both well-read men who enjoyed exchanging knowledge.

Moreover, both Fa Yan and Lu Kang were over seventy years old and had unusually young sons—Lu Kang's eldest son was not yet thirty, and his second son, Lu Ji, was only ten. Fa Yan's eldest son, Fa Zheng, was merely eighteen. Both men felt a sense of pride in their late fatherhood.

In this era, having a son was a point of pride in aristocratic families. The famous alchemist Zuo Ci was renowned for his expertise in bedroom arts. Similarly, Sima Fang was known for fathering eight sons, even though Sima Yi became famous later. It was said that Sima Fang fathered Sima Min at over sixty years old. Such things were certainly worth celebrating, weren't they?

"Hahaha," Fa Yan said, pulling Lu Kang by the arm. "There's no need for us to jostle about in front of others. Let's go together."

"In that case, I humbly accept," Lu Kang laughed.

When Lu Kang first entered the newly built city of Linzi, he was deeply impressed. After meeting Fa Zheng, he realized that Fa Zheng was not only a genius but also someone highly favored by Liu Xuan De. Otherwise, such an important task wouldn't have been entrusted to Fa Zheng. What he saw firsthand far exceeded the rumors, leaving Lu Kang in awe.

After meeting Fa Yan, Lu Kang knew better than to flaunt his own status. Instead, he made an effort to befriend Fa Yan, leading to mutual satisfaction between the two.

As the summer night stretched on with a cloudless sky, the bright moon illuminated the surroundings. The torches that had been prepared became unnecessary, and the courtyard of the inn transformed as Fa Zheng had arranged—a wall was torn down, and a stage was set up there.

Word of the open-air theater had spread among the people of Linzi, who had prepared early. To ensure safety, Fa Zheng deployed the Tun Tian soldiers to patrol the area. By the time Chen Xi and the others arrived, the place was packed with people—a sea of heads as far as the eye could see.

"There are so many people..." Chen Xi remarked, his mouth twitching slightly. "I really wonder if the people at the back can hear anything. And what about safety? What if there's a stampede?"

"People can choke on water, let alone watching a play. Despite the crowds, we've never had an incident. The Tun Tian soldiers maintain order, and no one dares cause trouble. If anyone makes noise, they won't hear the performance. We established a rule—anyone who disrupts the play gets beaten up," Fa Zheng said with a shrug.

"That effective?" Lu Xun asked in amazement. "It's incredible that this can draw so many people."

"There's something even more impressive," Fa Zheng smirked. "Man Bo Ning enacted a new law— anyone who stirs up public outrage can be killed by anyone without penalty. So, you get the idea..."

"This counts as public outrage?" Chen Xi said with a twitch of his lips. "If I'd known there'd be this many people, I'd have built a theater."

"You're right. We should make that our first project in Linzi. We're building a new city anyway, and I've always felt something was off about Manxiang Pavilion," Fa Zheng said. After spending so much time with Chen Xi, he had learned to pick up on ideas quickly and immediately expanded on Chen Xi's casual suggestion.

"So that's it—tea houses, inns, and taverns all have their own spaces, so it makes sense that performances should have their own venue. I always felt something was off about holding performances in brothels," Zhuge Liang said, realizing the flaw that had always bothered him.

"Unwritten rules often hold more sway than laws. That's why Man Bo Ning is codifying those reasonable unwritten rules into trial laws. The results have been excellent," Fa Zheng said with a smile.

Seeing Lu Xun cover his mouth, worried about stirring up public outrage, Fa Zheng chuckled and reassured him, "It's fine to speak softly now. Someone once watched a play and left behind a technique for amplifying voices. They were satisfied with the play but complained the sound was too quiet, so they left this method."

Only when Zhuge Liang asked did Fa Zheng continue, "This method amplifies the voice so it can be heard clearly within a range of three hundred paces. The volume remains the same throughout that range, without being deafening."

"That's practically a secret technique," Chen Xi muttered. "Which expert had so much time on their hands?"

"I don't know. They just left a bamboo slip with the name 'Qu Ah,' saying they'd return for another performance in the future and asking us to reserve a seat. They also mentioned heading to Jiangdong to kill someone," Fa Zheng said with a shrug.

Chapter 498: A Certain Version of a Mythical Drama

Chen Xi's face twitched a couple of times, but in the end, he decided not to say anything. He had already guessed who that mysterious figure might be. If you go by certain interpretations, this person was one of the top experts of the era. It made sense that only someone of that caliber could calmly offer such a secret technique as a reward.

Soon after the crowd settled down, the play officially began. Chen Xi scanned the stage but didn't recognize anyone. That wasn't surprising—despite how generous he was with his maidservants, with Fan Jian's cautious nature, she wouldn't let them perform outside the house. It wasn't just a matter of status, but also of safety.

As Chen Xi watched a white-robed and a green-robed girl take the stage, he instantly knew what the play was about. Initially, Chen Xi had set this up to give Liu Luo's girls something to do, which led to the custom that only women performed in operas. But what about Fahai? Had Fahai become a nun too? Now, that would be an interesting twist!

"Hey, Zi Chuan, you look particularly eager right now. What are you waiting for?" Fa Zheng asked with interest during an intermission when he noticed Chen Xi's expectant expression.

"Waiting for Fahai!" Chen Xi replied with a chuckle after a brief pause. He couldn't help but be curious about a female Fahai. Besides, the girl playing Bai Suzhen had an ethereal quality to her performance.

"Oh, Daoist Fahai? Now that's a real master!" Fa Zheng said. "Let me tell you, I don't care much about Bai Suzhen, but I really respect that Daoist. The whole flooding-the-Golden-Mountain thing is just too immoral. Honestly, she deserved to be defeated."

"Watch your words. Some people here haven't seen the play yet," Zhuge Liang pointed out, gesturing toward Lu Xun, whose eyes were shining with excitement. It was clear that, in an era with so few entertainment options, Lu Xun was thoroughly captivated by his first experience with theater. Even Lu Lao Tai Ye and Lu Jun were engrossed.

"Wait, say that again?" Chen Xi rubbed his ears, confused. "Fahai is a Daoist? Who wrote this script?"

"Didn't you write it? Fahai is the child attendant of the Great Supreme Elder Lord. Because his thoughts were impure, the Elder Lord sent him to the mortal world to experience the human condition and seek transcendence," Fa Zheng explained, puzzled.

"When did I ever write such nonsense?" Chen Xi retorted, exasperated. "And why would Bai Suzhen get killed? She's supposed to be the disciple of the Old Mother of Mount Li, only coming down the mountain to fulfill a vow. And what about that other guy? The God of Wealth? Didn't he reincarnate as Bai Suzhen's son? Didn't he eventually become a prime minister and save his parents, who then ascended to immortality?"

"What kind of plot is that?" Fa Zheng countered, baffled. "How could a deity reincarnate as a demon's child? And her vow was clearly problematic—wasn't she harming people?"

"I just want to know who rewrote this story into something so bizarre!" Chen Xi grumbled. "How are they supposed to evoke tears with this version?"

"Tears? What's there to cry about? The demon gets defeated, the Daoist achieves enlightenment, and Xu Xian joins Fahai's sect, destined to become immortal. Isn't that a perfect ending?" Fa Zheng's eyes sparkled with confusion as he asked Chen Xi, to whom this version seemed like a perfect, happy conclusion. What was Chen Xi unhappy about?

"I just want to know who turned my plot into this absurdity!" Chen Xi fumed. This wasn't the story he had originally written.

"The original script was definitely yours. The rest must have been passed down from your household, probably with a bit of embellishment. But honestly, given the choice between your original and this version, I think you should let your wife and concubines help refine your stories in the future," Fa Zheng said, delivering a painful blow to Chen Xi. Judging by Lu Xun's flushed cheeks and clenched fists, it was clear that this version resonated more with the audience's moral and aesthetic standards.

"Oh, great. If this is the version being performed, Chen Yun and Chen Ying are going to get completely vilified," Chen Xi muttered. With the audience's current fervor, there was no way Chen Yun and Chen Ying would escape criticism.

"Hah, back then they performed the version you wrote—the ethereal Chen Yun and the mischievous Chen Ying. They had everyone in tears. Then your wife, bored and curious, watched the play and had Cai Da Jia rewrite the script. But honestly, this version feels more realistic," Fa Zheng said nonchalantly.

In reality, Fa Zheng cared a lot. He had been one of those tearful audience members during the original play, though he'd never admit that to Chen Xi. He fully supported the revision; the previous version was too much of a tearjerker, though it was unforgettable.

"Jian'er..." Chen Xi sighed. "So after that, Yun'er and Ying'er stopped performing, huh?"

"Yeah, they rarely perform anymore, but there's still a strong demand for them to return. Cai Da Jia's revision, while elegant, can't compare to the emotional impact of your original story. I heard you had Cai Da Jia add poetry to it from the start, right?" Fa Zheng asked curiously.

"Yeah," Chen Xi replied absently. He knew what had happened with Chen Yun and Chen Ying. Even without much thought, he could guess that Fan Jian was worried about their growing fame leading to them becoming more prominent in his life. After all, in this era, maidservants were often considered potential concubines.

However, Chen Xi wasn't too concerned. Fan Jian wouldn't trouble Chen Yun and Chen Ying. She'd likely just have them stay home for a while instead of performing, but she wouldn't impose harsh restrictions. Besides, with Chen Lan around, nothing serious would happen.

Chen Xi understood that Fan Jian's anxieties stemmed from his increasing status and the time they spent apart. She feared losing his affection, not out of malice but from insecurity. The best solution was to spend more time with her, to reassure her.

As he mused over the situation, Chen Xi realized that aside from himself, his wife, and his concubine, the only other people in his household were maidservants. Even Zhuge Liang had mentioned wanting to move out, further tilting the gender balance in the house.

In the end, Chen Xi gave up thinking about it. This wasn't a problem with an easy solution. As for the idea of waiting for his maidservants to marry off, that was just wishful thinking. With how comfortable life in the Chen household was, it was better to stay there until they found someone special. Besides,

Fan Jian wasn't the type to create problems, and the Chen household was a good place to be. He was sure some of them were just waiting for him to make a move.

As the final act of the play ended, things unfolded just as Fa Zheng had said. The White Snake perished, the Green Snake, who aided her, was trapped beneath the river, Fahai ascended to the heavens, and Xu Xian, now enlightened, resolved to become immortal.

Chapter 499: A Worthy Person Arrives from Afar

As the final performance concluded, Lu Xun remained eager for the next act, much like the citizens of Linzi. However, after waiting for some time, it became apparent that the show had ended.

"That's it? I wanted to see Xu Hanwen complete his cultivation and slay the Green Snake too," Lu Xun complained to Fa Zheng, clearly dissatisfied with the abrupt ending.

Slap! Lu Xun received a light smack, one from Chen Xi for his lack of empathy toward the Green Snake, and another from Fa Zheng, who was annoyed that Lu Xun found fault with one of the rare long plays.

"Is there more?" Fa Yan, who had been seated for quite a while, asked lazily, tapping Fa Zheng's foot with his cane.

"The show is over, Father. I only arranged for one performance tonight, and this was one of the longer ones. Look at the moon; it's already high in the sky," Fa Zheng replied, pointing to the nearly full moon now positioned at its zenith.

"Ah, it was a good show. Since it's over, make sure the citizens disperse safely. We don't want any incidents," Fa Yan said, using his cane to stand up and politely gesturing to Lu Kang to follow.

Fa Zheng sighed and quickly signaled the arranged troops to start dispersing the crowd. It didn't take long before the once-crowded area was nearly empty.

"This Magistrate of Qi, Fa Xiao Zhi, is truly remarkable," commented a weathered old man in his fifties, gazing in Fa Zheng's direction. "Not even twenty years old, and within a year of governing Qi, the region is thriving. I wonder what kind of brilliance Chen Xi, often called a genius, will display."

"They are indeed impressive, far better than we were at that age," another man in a green robe said with a smile. "Kong Wenju's recommendation seems well-founded. I wonder how Liu Xuan De fares."

"Hmph. Are you still chasing after official titles?" scoffed a small, white-haired old man. "Isn't bringing peace to the people more important than wealth or rank? Do you really want to be seduced by worldly splendor?"

"How can you help the people without a position of power? Morality can inspire, but I believe in the authority of the government. Trust in the officials will lead the people to follow. But how long can one man's virtue and reputation last?" the man in the green robe retorted, casting a displeased glance at the white-haired elder.

"Even if it lasts only a day, it is better than chasing an official title and achieving nothing. Besides, as long as the people are educated and virtuous, the world can be governed well," the white-haired elder responded calmly, seemingly indifferent to everything.

The older man standing between them watched the two forty-something men argue with an expression of indifference. After all these years, he was used to their constant debates whenever they met.

"Alright, let's give it a rest," the man in the middle said, scratching his ear. "This debate seems to be dragging on for too long. What's the deal?"

"Hmph. There's no point in arguing with you. We have comparable knowledge and unwavering resolve. To prove who is right, we'll have to rely on facts. The three of us have traveled from Liaodong, partly on Kong Wenju's request, but also with a desire to see Liu Xuan De. So let's not argue anymore and let him be the judge," the man in the green robe said with a snort, knowing that neither side would easily yield.

"We'll see. As I said before, I'll continue teaching, and you can continue being a minor official. Whether we're right or wrong, history will judge us," the white-haired elder said with calm certainty before heading toward the city inn.

The man in green shook his head and refrained from further debate, following behind. He was already planning when and how to approach Fa Zheng. He didn't want to meet Liu Bei too early—he wanted to rely on his own abilities to impress Liu Bei, rather than being promoted based on reputation alone.

Early the next morning, Chen Xi casually washed up and went looking for Fa Zheng. Bang, bang, bang! Chen Xi knocked loudly on the door. He had seen clearly the previous night that Fa Zheng was not alone. Fa Zheng had often disturbed his rest in the same manner, and now, Chen Xi had the chance to return the favor.

"Who is it? It's early morning—can't a person get some rest? Disturbing someone's dreams!" Fa Zheng shouted, frustrated. He had been enjoying a warm embrace and was just about to make a move when the knocking ruined his mood.

"Young Master, just ignore him," grumbled the concubine in Fa Zheng's arms.

"It's probably Chen Zi Chuan. That guy..." Fa Zheng chuckled helplessly. "You go back to sleep. I'll go out and talk to him. He really holds a grudge."

"I'll help you get dressed," the concubine said as she got up, signaling the two maidservants to fetch Fa Zheng's clothes.

Soon, Fa Zheng emerged, dressed but clearly sleep-deprived, his eyes a bit swollen. He yawned and waved at Chen Xi, who stood outside the door. "You really hold grudges, huh? If I'd known, I would have arranged for a concubine for you too."

Normally, Fa Zheng would have arranged for a concubine for Chen Xi when staying overnight, but given Chen Xi's temperament, he had refrained. However, seeing the situation this morning, Fa Zheng regretted that decision.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," Chen Xi clicked his tongue as he inspected Fa Zheng. "Didn't see this coming."

"Alright, alright. You need to leave this afternoon, so let's not waste time with pointless jabs," Fa Zheng replied nonchalantly. His skin had thickened considerably, and Chen Xi's teasing no longer fazed him.

"You..." Chen Xi raised an eyebrow. "You're just like Feng Xiao, picking up all the bad habits!"

"'Waste is just misused treasure,' wasn't that your saying?" Fa Zheng quipped, completely unfazed. He now had an air of indifference similar to Guo Jia, who wouldn't be deterred from his ways, no matter what.

Chen Xi shook his head, feeling somewhat helpless in the face of Fa Zheng's stubbornness. It seemed that early mornings dulled people's minds, making them less sensitive to criticism.

As Chen Xi and Fa Zheng left the courtyard, Zhuge Liang, who had been reading nearby, closed his book and joined them. Unlike the others who enjoyed sleeping late, Zhuge Liang woke up at dawn every day to read. Though he had read those books many times before, he firmly believed in the principle of "reviewing the old to learn the new."

As they walked through the alleys, Chen Xi curiously listened to the sound of children reciting texts. He turned to Fa Zheng, wondering why the education plan seemed to have reached Linzi earlier than expected.

Chapter 500: Teaching According to Aptitude

"Don't look at me like that. I'm not selfless enough to use my own money to build an academy," Fa Zheng said with a glance toward the courtyard where the sounds of reading were coming from. "Maybe it's the work of a benevolent person."

Zhuce Liang gave Fa Zheng a look but remained silent. Fa Zheng, however, understood the meaning behind it. In this era, it wasn't uncommon for kind-hearted people to set up soup kitchens or repair bridges, but building an academy was another matter entirely. It required a long-term vision and substantial resources, and most people wouldn't see the immediate benefits. Usually, academies were only for the children of wealthy families, along with their servants and playmates.

"Who knows? Maybe a great scholar felt generous," Fa Zheng insisted, trying to justify his reasoning.

Zhuce Liang simply shook his head. The age of the children's voices suggested they were around six or seven years old—an age where they would typically be taught at home, not in a public academy.

"Let's go in and take a look," Chen Xi suggested as he began walking toward the academy. As they got closer, he could hear the lessons more clearly and recognized that the Thousand Character Classic he had introduced for early education had already become widespread.

“Tsk tsk, the teacher here is quite good,” Fa Zheng commented quietly after listening to a few sentences.

“He’s not just good. Judging by his questions and teaching methods, he’s adapting his approach to each child’s needs—teaching according to aptitude. It’s rare to find a scholar of such caliber,” Zhuge Liang added quietly. Both he and Fa Zheng knew the significance of having a teacher like this.

Though Liu Bei had made a promise, Chen Xi had prepared thoroughly for the educational reforms. Given the times, he had to consider many factors. Therefore, before the widespread implementation of education, he had to carefully plan each step.

In Han society, the phrase “children of poor families mature early” wasn’t just a saying. While noble families might have their children marry at seventeen or eighteen, in poorer households, marriage and childbearing often came much earlier. For seven- or eight-year-old children, they were already considered important laborers within the family, capable of handling small tasks.

Given this reality, Chen Xi couldn’t force families to prioritize education over survival. He had to be flexible, allowing breaks during busy farming seasons and conducting classes during less demanding times of the year. Typically, lessons were held from 5 AM to 7 AM and again from 1 PM to 3 PM, with full-day sessions during the harshest seasons of summer and winter. In return, the children were provided with two meals during the school day, but if they didn’t pass their lessons, they couldn’t continue to waste resources.

“Hmm, there are people here. Grandfather asks you to come in,” a young girl, after curiously observing the three men, opened the courtyard gate and politely invited them inside.

“Thank you, little miss,” Chen Xi said with a smile as he stepped into the courtyard.

Seeing the stone tables and benches in the yard, Chen Xi immediately recognized the elderly man with a ruddy complexion seated at the head as the scholar who had been teaching earlier. Despite the modest surroundings, it was clear that this man was no ordinary figure.

Before Chen Xi could introduce himself, the old man waved his hand. “Please, sit down. I’m old and my legs don’t work so well, Chen Hou, Minister Fa,” he said.

Chen Xi raised an eyebrow but then smiled and gestured to Zhuge Liang. "Old master, it seems you've overlooked someone. It's not just us; Kongming is here too."

Zhuce Liang sighed and stepped forward, bowing slightly. "I am Zhuge Kongming of the Zhuge family from Langya."

"Zhuge family of Langya..." The old man stroked his beard thoughtfully. "I'm not sure which branch you're from, but you'll certainly surpass your ancestors. You should let go of some things and focus on internal affairs. You have a talent for governance. Though you may excel in military strategy with some effort, your true brilliance lies in administration. And while you're well-rounded, the man beside you is even more so."

Chen Xi's curiosity deepened. How could this man, whom he had never met before, make such accurate assessments of Zhuge Liang? Even Chen Xi himself had considered that Zhuge Liang's true potential lay in internal governance rather than military strategy.

History had shown that Zhuge Liang was a steady general, but when it came to certain opponents, his strength lay more in maintaining balance rather than outright victory. However, his skills in administration were unparalleled, even though he had divided his focus among various disciplines. The fact that this old man could discern such insights after a brief encounter left Chen Xi both impressed and intrigued.

Seeing Zhuge Liang remain silent, the old man turned his gaze to Fa Zheng. "Minister Fa, you are undoubtedly one of the most brilliant strategists of our time. However, your path is narrow, and you are single-minded in your pursuits. Your heart is too small. If you continue with your current mindset, you'll struggle to overcome the shadow that haunts you. You should observe the differences between the lives of the common people and the wealthy merchants more closely."

Fa Zheng's face darkened, but he said nothing. He knew all too well the shadow that loomed over him, the grudge he held onto. It was something that had often caused him to hesitate and second-guess himself, especially when it involved the person who had outmaneuvered him in the past. Unless he surpassed that individual, he knew he would never fully let go.

With this revelation, Chen Xi became even more curious. Fa Zheng rarely showed his vengeful side, often coming across as carefree and unbothered. However, Guo Jia had once warned Chen Xi that Fa

Zheng could be quite vindictive, which made Chen Xi believe that Fa Zheng's true nature had been suppressed but not erased.

"And what about me?" Chen Xi asked with interest. "Old master, you've given them both advice. Could you give me some guidance as well? I'm dealing with a lot of frustrations."

The old man chuckled. "Chen Hou, your troubles are beyond my ability to resolve. My eyes can discern a person's potential, and I can sense their character, guiding them on how to be educated. But you, Chen Hou, are already set in your ways. While your character is not perfect, it's also beyond my ability to address." After speaking, the old man's energy seemed to diminish slightly.

"Oh, that's fair enough," Chen Xi nodded. "But from the way you speak, it sounds like you possess some sort of spiritual ability?"