

Mythical 73

Chapter 73: Eating with a Clear Conscience

As Chen Xi mentioned, the next day at noon, Zhao Yun and Jian Yong rushed back, covered in dust but in high spirits. After all, seeing fields full of bountiful harvests would make anyone happy.

"Xianhe, Zilong, have you already verified the tax revenues of each county?" Chen Xi poured tea for the two and asked.

"It's a bumper harvest. Apart from some late-planted crops, the people everywhere are already harvesting. Next year, we won't have to live so tightly," Jian Yong said excitedly, feeling a sense of accomplishment.

"Zilong, tell us your thoughts as well. By the way, take these things with you when you leave. They are gifts from the nearby people for you. I'm currently enjoying my share," Chen Xi said, turning to Zhao Yun and pointing to several baskets in the corner of the office filled with chestnuts, pine nuts, mushrooms, and wood ear fungus.

These nuts and mountain delicacies were gifts from the people, given to Zhao Yun to thank him for his efforts during the harvest season. While Zhao Yun might be reluctant to accept them, Chen Xi had no such reservations and accepted them without hesitation.

There were also gifts for Chen Xi and Liu Bei, but not as many as those for Zhao Yun, who had been working tirelessly among the people. In these times, meeting an official who genuinely cared for the people was rare, and they were immensely grateful.

"Zichuan, how can you accept gifts from the people? They work hard all year, and gathering these things is no easy task. How can you eat these pine nuts with a clear conscience?" Zhao Yun paused mid-reach for the pine nuts, his sense of righteousness surfacing.

Over the past three months, Zhao Yun had seen the hardships faced by the common people firsthand. They toiled from dawn till dusk, relying on their land for survival, praying for good weather and just governance. The more he saw, the more he felt the weight of his responsibilities and wished he had learned more about farming to help the people better.

Chen Xi had told him that some experienced farmers knew how to yield better crops and that he should seek them out to learn and share their techniques. Zhao Yun had spent three months running all over Taishan, collecting and disseminating farming knowledge. As a result, the people might not know Liu Bei, but they all knew Zhao Zilong, the man in the white robe who cared for their fields.

Seeing Zhao Yun's dedication, Chen Xi admired his spirit because he couldn't do what Zhao Yun did. He could give orders and advice, but he couldn't run around like Zhao Yun did.

"Zilong, you must accept these gifts. If you don't, the people won't leave, and they won't feel at ease. They believe in you, Zhao Zilong. If you accept their gifts, they will trust that you will continue to lead them next year. If you don't, they'll bring their families and kneel at your door tomorrow," Chen Xi said seriously, after cracking open a pine nut.

"Zichuan is right. At first, we refused, but people would wait outside with their packages, leaving at night only to return the next day without saying a word," Lu Su added, breaking open another pine nut. "They seek peace of mind. Once you accept their gifts, they'll believe in your commitment."

"It's that simple," Chen Xi nodded. "You can try not accepting, but people will keep coming with gifts. You should try it."

Before Chen Xi finished speaking, an elderly man in patched hemp clothes entered the office with a small basket on his back. Ever since people started bringing gifts, Chen Xi and Lu Su stopped preventing them from entering.

The old man respectfully bowed to the officials, looking nervous but visibly excited when he saw Zhao Yun.

"Please, have a seat," Chen Xi said with a smile, offering a cushion to the old man, who nervously declined until Chen Xi insisted. He finally sat down and took out a cloth bundle from his basket.

"Mr. Zhao, thank you for leading our village in land reclamation and teaching us farming techniques. We have nothing valuable to offer, but please accept these dates from my village's jujube tree," the old man said, presenting a bundle of shiny red dates.

Zhao Yun firmly refused, explaining that he would continue his work next year and that they shouldn't worry. However, the old man, who initially stuttered, began speaking fluently, insisting that Zhao Yun accept the dates or he wouldn't leave.

After the old man left, leaving the dates behind, Chen Xi bit into one and turned to Zhao Yun. "Zilong, what do you think?"

"I feel guilty," Zhao Yun sighed, feeling somewhat disheartened.

"Feeling guilty is a good sign. Make it up to them by ensuring that your governance improves and that the people live better lives," Chen Xi said, continuing to eat the dates. He had no qualms, as long as his conscience was clear.

"Think about what we've brought to the people of Taishan. If you can, you'll eat these gifts with a clear conscience. I certainly do," Chen Xi said, crunching on a date and expressing his confidence in his actions.