

Gold Chapter 101

Chapter 101

Yu Hai and Madam Liu looked at each other, and both of them could see helplessness in the other's eyes. They were both the younger generation, so there was little they could do against the overbearing and shameless Madam Zhang. If they were too resolute and stuck to their guns, the two women in front of them would slander them in the village for being unfilial. On the other hand, if they yielded too much, this pair of locusts would gobble them up and devour everything they could get their hands on.

"Madam Li, why are you here again causing trouble?" Just as the married couple were trying to find a solution, the sound of Old Yu's voice resonated in and provided them with a glimpse of hope.

Madam Li was still a bit timid in front of her father-in-law, so she weakly said, "Father, I was keeping Mother company..."

Madam Zhang abruptly interrupted her and pasted a smile on her face as she spoke to Old Yu, "Old man, Second Son still has a filial heart. Their family had come up with a new method of making money, so they were going to help us too!"

When Old Yu heard what she said, he looked towards Yu Hai with a remorseful expression and a tinge of gratitude. This son of his had always been filial since childhood. Even if he had caught a tiny tit, he would always bring it back home to let everyone eat some. In fact, after he settled down and got married, he still always gave the money he earned to the general purse and didn't keep a private purse.

Ah, he was not worthy of his son. He even pushed his son out of the family during his most difficult time. Fortunately, his son was able to survive and even his leg was preserved...

Old Yu switched his gaze to Madam Zhang and glared at her, "I already know about the method for making money! Aren't they just selling some appetizers to make a small sum of money every day? Stop trying to covet it, Second Son's family is relying on this little bit of money to make it through!"

"What do you mean? It's not a little bit of money, they make around twenty to thirty copper coins a day, ah! That's more than what you and Eldest Son brings home every day! This is Second Son's good intentions, so he should spread the wealth to the whole family. Husband, Third Son will be able to participate in the entrance examination for Rongxuan Academy soon. If he passes and then becomes a scholar who had passed the county level examinations, he can get a lot of benefits...his whole family is

living in town right now and doesn't he need money for living expenses?" Madam Zhang, once again, brought the topic of the conversation back to her younger son in an attempt to voice her complaints.

As Madam Zhang rambled on and on, Xiaocao and her family stayed mutely silent. It was obvious that she was forcing them to teach her how to make braised food. How did she manage to twist it around such that they were the ones volunteering for this?

Although Xiaocao had no qualms, her father was a different story. He had always been filial and was softhearted. In front of his father, Yu Hai wasn't able to refuse any request. In the end, Xiaocao was forced to fork out a portion of the spices she had used yesterday and give instructions on how to use them to Madam Zhang. In a pique of fury, she pretended to forget to give the pair of women the complete details on how to prepare and clean the pig head and intestines properly.

She had already reserved the pig head and offal in advance from Butcher Wang's stall at the dock's marketplace. Furthermore, the butcher was a kind and honest man. To him, it didn't matter who he made money from, but it was more important to preserve his relationships with and not have a reputation of breaking his promises. Thus, their ingredient supplies would not be endangered in the future. She planned on doing business as usual. As for who could make more money...that would depend on their own abilities!

Meanwhile, Third Young Master Zhou Zixu had gone straight home after buying the pickled vegetables from the market and was able to be at the table in time for the meal.

The three branches of the Zhou Family had not separated, so they were all present in the parlor for the meal. In the main hall, the ground was paved with glossy marble tiles that had been polished as bright as a mirror. The beams of the roof were painted in bright colors, and gorgeous glass lanterns dangled from the ceiling.

On the right side of the parlor was a display case made of red mahogany. On top of the case were a bunch of carefully arranged priceless objects: a blue and white porcelain vase made in the previous dynasty that was decorated with an image depicting 'Gui Guzi coming down the mountain [1]', a cloisonne enamel plum blossom vase, a long-necked vase made entirely of white jade with two round handles, and a variety of other delicate and well-preserved antique items.

A decorative screen made of red sandalwood was on the left side. The screen was inlaid with white jade that was carved into a picture depicting Five Hundred Luohan [2]. It was bright and beautiful and so luxurious that it was hard for a person to take their eyes away from it.

The patriarch and matriarch of the Zhou Family were sitting in the middle and seated on their right was the Zhou Family's eldest son. The head of the Zhou Family had three sons and two daughters. The eldest son and second son were birthed by his wife. The eldest son was conservative in his business dealings and was only able to preserve their current family wealth. He was in charge of a portion of the family's businesses and while he didn't make any big contributions, he also didn't make any large blunders.

The eldest son of the Zhou Family had two sons and a daughter. His oldest son was birthed by a concubine. Although his younger son was born by his wife, he had very little interest in doing business and had set his heart on his studies. He was truly a bookworm and pedant. His eldest son, on the other hand, had ambitions and grabbed every opportunity that came in order to show his abilities in front of the head of the family. Before he became an adult, he had helped his father supervise their store and had made sure everything was clear and orderly. He had carefully managed two stores, and they had increased their revenue by a third.

Furthermore, he completed the few tasks that the head of the family had given him perfectly, so the old man was quite pleased with this grandson.

The second son of the head of the family had died at a young age, so the patriarch had his married eldest son take a young girl from a declining family as a secondary wife in order to keep his second son's lineage alive. Thus, Third Young Master Zhou was considered a part of the second branch's family. Third Young Master Zhou's mother had a strong personality, so after she gave birth to him, she established herself as the widow of the second branch and severed all her ties with the eldest son. From then on, she lived alone in a small courtyard on the west side of the residence. Other than stepping out on the first and fifteenth days of each month to burn incense for the second son of the Zhou Family, she spent the rest of the time in her residence. This was the reason why the head of the Zhou Family regarded the mother and son pair with importance despite their awkward status within the family.

The third son of the Zhou Family was a person who only knew how to enjoy life but couldn't endure any hardships. The eldest son was always afraid of taking the slightest risk and had no courage. Thus, Patriarch Zhou had to take the reins back into his hands in his old age and become the primary driver of the Zhou Family again. He had no hope left for his sons, so he silently observed his grandsons out of hope that he could pick a successor out of them who would bring more glory and honor to the Zhou Family.

Although Zhou Zifang, who was the son of the eldest son, had decent abilities, he was still born from a concubine. Since ancient times it was known that there was a difference between children born from the main wife versus a concubine. In addition, he had a somewhat irritable temper and was quick to

take offense. Acting hastily out of greed could lead to the ruin of an entire family's fortune. Thus, as the patriarch observed from the side, he had to take a few points off of Zhou Zifang.

As for the second branch's Zhou Zixu, he had displayed astonishing talents since he was small. However, despite his recent beautiful business victories, the boy was still too young. This really caused the patriarch to worry incessantly, causing his hair to turn white faster...

"Haha! I'm really quite lucky when it comes to food. Just got home in time to make mealtime!" Third Young Master Zhou, Zhou Zixu, held two jars of salted vegetables as he came in. When he saw everyone's attention on him, he smiled a self-deprecating smile as he paid his respects to his grandfather and grandmother.

The head of the Zhou Family coldly snorted and said, "Looks like you still know how to come home! Every day you're running off to who knows where. Ah, other than Zhenxiu Restaurant, you have never even touched the other businesses of the family! Oh right, you had talked about having a condiment factory before the end of last year. How is it going so far? At your age, your father had already made waves in the southern province's market!"

Because he had an awkward status in the family, Zhou Zixu's grandmother had raised him at her side since childhood to avoid having other people treat him badly. Thus, his relationship with his grandparents had always been good. This caused the other grandsons in the family to envy him. In fact, whenever the patriarch seemed displeased, the other grandsons kept quiet out of fear. Even Eldest Young Master Zhou had to consider his words for a bit before he would say anything. However, Zhou Zixu was all smiles as he replied, "Grandfather, don't we still have you managing the rest of the family's businesses? You're old but vigorous. Staying at home doing nothing is really quite dull. As for my factory, didn't you previously say that this is for me to practice? I'm still young, so it's important to take it a little at a time, especially for business!"

"Is thirteen still considered young? It's the right age for settling a marriage and getting engaged, ah! Second Son's wife, you need to start considering his marriage prospects now. After he gets engaged, he's considered an adult and should start doing some proper business and stop running around outside, avoiding home!" The Zhou Family patriarch was very unsatisfied with him and wished he could just press on that youngster's head to transfer all of his knowledge of business matters to him.

Madam Jiang, who was Zhou Zixu's mother, agreed sweet-temperedly. Zhou Zixu let out a smile that was half a grimace at his mother and said, "Grandfather, how do you know I'm not concerned about the family's businesses? I'm not running around without a purpose. After all, the last time I was at the docks, didn't I find a dish of pickled fish that tasted quite good, eh?"

If he hadn't brought up this topic it would have been better as the Zhou Family patriarch frowned after hearing this and said, "Has the chef from Zhenxiu Restaurant figured out how to make this pickled fish yet? He even boasted that he's a famous chef but he's no better than a little girl from the countryside!"

"Grandfather, please calm down. It's not that the chef at Zhenxiu Restaurant was boosting his own reputation, but in terms of cooking, one false step makes a great difference. That pickled fish recipe was probably a secret recipe that was passed down from her ancestors, so it's unlikely it'd be easy to just figure it out." The eldest grandson, Zhou Zifang, cleverly interjected and explained.

Zhou Zixu also agreed, "That's right, that's right! Let's wait a little longer, if he really can't figure it out then, I'll just go to that little girl and buy the recipe from her."

The Zhou Family's matriarch loved her grandson dearly. She nodded her head in agreement and said, "Xu'er is right! Also, let's not talk about business during the family meal. Start the meal ah..."

Zhou Zixu hurriedly patted the jugs of pickled vegetables in his hands as if they were some priceless treasure. He sidled over to his grandmother, made eye contact with her, and said, "Grandmother loves grandson the most! Grandson also loves you very much. I know your appetite hasn't been very good lately, so I especially went to a pickled vegetable store and bought some appetizers in hope that they'll increase your appetite. Please try some! I personally carried them the entire way back home!"

When Matriarch Zhou saw her grandson's smiling face, she immediately felt better. As if he was still a child, she gently caressed his head, and said, "My Xu'er is still so filial. Qinglian, go to the kitchen and take a portion of these pickled vegetables out. Let's have everyone here try some."

Zhou Zixu's mother, Madam Jiang, glared lovingly at her son and said, "Be careful of boasting too much in front of grandmother. In a moment if it doesn't fit her tastes, what kind of situation do you think you'll be in?"

Zhou Zixu sat next to his mother and pulled on her arm like a spoiled child. He pouted and said, "Mother, it doesn't matter if other people give me face or not, but you need to help your son. If it's not tasty, please still eat a little more!"

His grandmother pointed a finger at him and gently laughed, "You little monkey...with such a filial heart, I will also give you some face and eat a couple more bites..."

A plate of sweet and crispy radishes and a plate of fragrant and spicy wine marinated tofu came out. They were artfully arranged on a crystal plate with a light dressing of sesame oil on top. The tantalizing smell of sweetness and sour hit everyone, which increased all their appetites greatly.

Matriarch Zhou's personal maidservant, Zitang, served her mistress a portion of the radishes and placed them into her congee bowl using ivory chopsticks. The combination of the sweet and crispy radishes with a hint of spiciness paired perfectly with the congee that had been slowly simmered with the best rice money could buy. The old lady's eyes lit up in pleasure as she enjoyed her food.

"How is it? Grandma, does it meet your tastes?" Out of all of the grandsons, only Zhou Zixu would ever intimately call the matriarch 'grandma'. The rest of them all respectfully referred to her as 'grandmother'.

The Zhou Family's matriarch carefully chewed and tasted the different flavors that came from the congee and pickled radishes. A bit of time passed before she finally met her grandson's eager eyes and slowly nodded her head, "Not bad, not bad! How could I not believe in my grandson's tastes?"

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As she talked, she dispensed with having her maidservant serve her. The old lady picked up her chopsticks to grab more crispy pickled radish and placed it in her bowl...unconsciously, after consuming a whole bowl of nourishing and dense congee, she still wanted to eat more. She had her maidservant serve her up another bowl. She had a taste of all of the other dishes on the table. However, the one she ate the most of was still the sweet, crispy and tasty radishes.

On the other hand, the patriarch of the family loved the wine-marinated beans the most. The old man liked to have a few drinks of alcohol every day. Since the wine-marinated beans had the slight fragrance of wine and a hint of spiciness, they provoked his taste buds and made him want to eat them continuously without stopping.

As for the other members of the family, they all praised these two appetizers continuously. A satisfied expression crossed Zhou Zixu's face. Suddenly he remembered the words that the shabbily dressed little girl, who had more dazzling talents than any of those noble young ladies, had said. He spoke to his grandfather, "Grandfather, do you think these pickled vegetables are delicious?"

Patriarch Zhou picked up a small steamed roll and used his chopsticks to place some wine-marinated beans on top. He opened his mouth wide to take a bite and closed his eyes, "Not bad..."

"Grandfather, do you think the customers would like it if Zhenxiu Restaurant added a couple small plates of these pickled vegetables to the cold appetizer platters?" At the pickled vegetable stall, the little girl had off-handedly mentioned this idea, and it lit up a lightbulb in his business minded self.

The patriarch's eyes, which had been comfortably closed, abruptly opened wide. He placed down the chopsticks in his hands and stroked his beard. He nodded and remarked in a gratified tone, "Xu'er, Grandfather has not missed the mark with you. You really are like Second Son ah...this idea is quite feasible, so I'll give it to you to handle!"

Zhou Zifang clenched his hand that was underneath the table into a tight fist. Despite his fingernails digging into his flesh, he felt no pain as he did his best to keep a faint smile on his face, "Grandfather, Younger Brother Xu is truly a dark horse whose ideas amaze the world! Fortunately, all of the Zhou family members have the same blood in our veins."

Within his heart, he secretly hated his younger brother. No matter how hard he tried, no matter how well he did business-wise, in his grandfather's heart, it wasn't enough for him to overcome his brothers who were born from the wives of the family.

Although his grandfather had complimented him for his business acumen and talents, he was only ever given a few small-scale business ventures. Zhou Zixu was just a little brat who didn't know anything. However, with just a simple idea that anyone could have come up with, his grandfather had decided to give him a larger share of the business in disguise, setting him up to be the successor. How could he accept this?

Within the Zhou Family, the wealthiest family in Tanggu Town, there were some people who were rejoicing and some people who worried. On the other hand, Xiaocao continued on with her usual tasks: making braised food and selling braised food. The whole household bustled around busily working to fulfill their aspirations.

After Madam Zhang made a fuss and came away with the recipe for the braised food, the next day she went to the market and bought a large pig head. She also made the butcher give her some pig intestines and tripe before she went home to prepare the food.

Pig intestines and tripe were not only dirty but also smelly. Naturally Madam Zhang didn't want to work with these ingredients herself. However, her daughter was also at home sewing her dowry and couldn't rough up her hands. Thus, the task naturally fell to Madam Li.

Madam Li was a lazy person who only liked to eat and gossip, so how could she possibly be someone who could do the hard work? If her efforts would result in money going into her own pocket, that would be a different story. However, all of the family's income went straight into her mother-in-law's control. Thus, she really had no incentive to work hard.

With one hand pinching her nose closed, Madam Li used water to wash out the nasty gunk that was inside the pig intestines. She then let the intestines soak a couple of times in clean water without scrubbing them. As for the pig head, she didn't even bother to remove all of the hair and fur or clean out the junk in the ears before she immediately placed it in a pot to boil.

During the braising process, Madam Zhang didn't want to waste money by using too many spices, so she cut down the amount needed for each spice by half. As for the expensive seasonings, she directly left them out. With this, the taste of the product had also been diluted.

The finished braised pig head meat and offal had a sickening stench of feces that could make anyone want to vomit. Who would want to eat something that smelled that bad? At the table, Old Yu didn't even bother trying the plate of braised pig meat. Instead, he slapped the table and howled, "Is this food fit for humans to eat? Quickly take this off the table and throw it far away! How can anyone have the appetite to eat with a smell this disgusting around?"

Third Son Yu Bo was at home for one of his rare visits. However, the stench of the braised food made him dry heave a couple of times. He didn't even finish the egg that was added to each of his meals before he threw down his chopsticks and went back to his room. The door to his room was slammed forcefully shut. As for Yu Caidie, she grabbed a pancake and some dried radish strips and went to the courtyard to eat her meal.

Heizi was the only person not affected by the horrible stench. Instead, he picked up a plump piece of pig head meat and ate it in large bites. Had Xiaocao been there, she would have silently laughed, 'This stupid boy. As long as it's meat, even if it smells worse than human excrement, he'll still eat it!'

However, they had spent around ten copper coins to buy the pig head. In addition, the spices also cost money. All in all, they spent around twenty to thirty copper coins. If they threw this food away, wouldn't that be the same as throwing money away?

Madam Zhang didn't care about any of this. That afternoon, she placed the braised pig head meat and intestines into a basket and dragged Madam Li with her to the docks.

"One copper coin for a portion of meat! This is the authentic Yu Family's braised food! Tasty and cheap...Big Brother, buy a portion and try some!" Under Madam Zhang's prodding, Madam Li managed to squeeze out a smile on her face as she advertised their wares. However, she was quite unwilling on the inside.

It was quite an opportune time for them. There wasn't a lot of work under Foreman Sun, so the dockworkers had all come early to wait for Xiaocao's braised food for one copper coin a portion. When they heard Madam Li yelling, all of them came over.

As usual, Old Hao fished out two copper coins and casually asked, "Give me two portions of pickled fish...where's Xiaocao today? How come she's not here?"

Pickled fish? The smile on Madam Li's face froze for a second. Madam Zhang, on the other hand, quickly took the money and said, "You're talking about my granddaughter, ah! She's busy today...Big Brother, we don't have any pickled fish today. We have pig head meat and intestines, do you want some?"

"Yes, yes! Give me two portions of pig head meat, larger portions please." Pig head meat was Old Hao's favorite dish. He had gotten used to buying pickled fish in the afternoons, so it was a nice surprise for him that he could get some pig head meat today.

After taking over the oiled paper packet that Madam Zhang gave him, Old Hao weighed the contents in his hand a bit. He grumbled inside, 'Why does it seem like they gave me a smaller portion of braised food today?' However, after thinking a bit, he thought, 'This meat is so delicious and it's only one copper coin. A smaller portion is just a smaller portion...'

Old Hao impatiently ripped open his oiled paper packet but the smell that came out wasn't the usual dense and appetizing smell. It was hard to describe but it assaulted his nose, causing him to scowl. He used one hand to pick up a piece and discovered that the piece still had obvious bits of pig fur, standing up tall and proud.

The braised food that Xiaocao sold for one copper coin a portion always smelled appetizing, had incredible flavor, but most importantly, she always cleaned the raw ingredients thoroughly. With this, even a fool could tell that there was something wrong with this braised food.

Old Hao held his portion of pig head meat as he squeezed through the crowd. He waved the piece with fur on it in front of Madam Zhang's face and said, "Yo Auntie, are you absolutely sure that Xiaocao herself had braised this pig head meat?"

"Of...of course! That bit of fur must have escaped our notice when we were preparing the food. Didn't see it then...Big Brother, I'll swap out a new portion for you..." Madam Zhang stammered awkwardly with a stiff smile on her face.

Seeing that the old woman was hemming and hawing, Old Hao knew something fishy was going on here. He placed that piece of meat back into the paper packet and shoved the whole thing into Madam Zhang's hand, "Go smell it yourself! Whenever you open a packet of Xiaocao's one copper coin a portion of braised food, the smell that comes out is so good. As for yours, I almost wanted to vomit from the stench. This absolutely is not something Xiaocao made! ...I don't want this anymore, refund me, refund me!"

Madam Zhang was like a Pixiu [1], gold and silver only went in and never came out. If you wanted her to refund you, tough luck! The expression on her face turned frosty, and she yelled shrilly, "You already ate it and you want your money to be refunded! Do you think bullying an old woman is easy?!"

At this time, she had already sold more than ten portions out. When the people surrounding her realized that something wasn't right, they put their coins back into their purses and stood at the side to watch and see.

A few of the dockworkers who had just bought the food hadn't opened up the paper pouches yet, and they hurriedly asked, "Auntie, I just got this and I haven't even opened the pouch yet. Can I return it now?"

When Madam Zhang saw that their roaring business had slid to a halt by the complaints, she obviously had no desire to return any of the money in her hands. She pinched herself on her thigh and started screaming towards the sky, "Okay, I see how it is! You're all trying to bully a pair of old weak women! You don't want to pay money for your goods! The heavens witness all, are you guys not afraid of receiving retribution?"

Madam Li joined in and hollered, "We are selling food. If you already got it in hand, who knows what you've done to it? If you return it, how are we supposed to sell it to other people? If the goods have already been transferred, we cannot refund the purchase!!"

Old Hao pointed at the pig head meat in his hand in frustration, "The food you sell is inedible! Refunding the money is heaven's law and earth's principle!"

"What 'heaven's law and earth's principle'? How is it not edible? If you eat it, will you die? Just eat some and see. If it really kills you, then we'll pay your funeral fees!!" Madam Zhang shrewish side was out in full force. At any rate, she was an old woman, the workers here on the dock wouldn't dare to touch her. If they did, then they really would be in for it!

Old Hao's eyes widened in fury. He clenched his fist into a death grip and advanced a step, "Old woman, how can you be so unreasonable? Not only that, you're even cursing other people to die!"

"Ahhhh! He wants to kill me!! Everyone come see, a whole group of men are trying to bully us two weak women! Is there no one here who cares..." Madam Zhang was frightened by the look of pure fury in his eyes, and she retreated two steps before she fell on the ground. She slapped her thighs as she cried and screamed.

Old Hao and the other dockworkers didn't know whether they should laugh or cry at this situation— did she have any leg to stand on after selling counterfeit goods?!

"Grandmother, what's wrong? Who's trying to bully you?" The sound of Xiaocao's voice could be heard from behind the crowd of people. The dock workers opened a small crack and let her in. With a basket slung over her arm, Xiaocao carefully walked towards where Madam Zhang was sitting.

Madam Zhang wasn't thickfaced enough to allow the younger generation to see her in such a dismal state. She hastily got up, patted off the dirt from her body, and then righteously shouted, "Xiaocao, you came at the right time!! Did you give us the wrong recipe on purpose because you didn't want us to steal your business? They're all saying that there's something wrong with the braised food and want to return it!"

Xiaocao glanced briefly at the faces behind Madam Zhang and had a basic understanding of what might have happened. She walked towards Old Hao, looked at the oiled paper pouch in his hand, and said, "Uncle Old Hao, can I take a look at the braised food in your hand?"

Old Hao handed over the pouch that he had previously owned and complained, "Xiaocao, smell this. Is this something that humans are supposed to eat?"

The smell that came out of the pouch assaulted Xiaocao's nose, and she couldn't help but frown. She inspected the pig head meat carefully and then turned to speak to Madam Zhang, "Grandmother, before you braise the pig head meat, you need to make sure you remove all of the fur and hair from the pig head. You also need to scrape and clean out all of the junk in its ears, and it's important to use a lot of force when scrubbing. Afterwards, you need to split the head open and take out its brains, then let it soak in some clean water and let the blood all come out. Then you need to let it soak in hot water for about half an hour. This is the only way to remove any odd odors from the pig head. Look at this pig head meat, there's still hair and fur on it. It's obvious that whoever was washing the pig head was skimping on the work."

Chapter 103 – Loss of Integrity

Madam Zhang stared fiercely at Madam Li, who looked down to avoid her eyes, and asked, "Why didn't you speak more clearly at the beginning? Did you do it on purpose?"

Xiaocao was so angry that she became amused by them and said, "Grandmother, when you're in the food industry, you have to see things through other people's eyes! When you cook for yourself, don't you wash the ingredients first? It's especially important to do so when braising pig head. Do you really still need other people to tell you? Look at this large intestine. The feces inside haven't even been thoroughly cleaned yet. How are people supposed to eat this?!"

The docker, who had bought the braised large intestine, saw Xiaocao taking out a lump of black substance from a section of the large intestine. He instantly felt his stomach lurch and was glad that he hadn't started eating yet.

Xiaocao continued, "Grandmother, based on the color of the braised food, there isn't enough flavorings in it. So, both the large intestine and pig head look deathly pale. Also, when braising food, you need to first boil in high heat, and then in low heat after half an hour. Each time, it needs to be cooked for a total of one and a half hours, so that the meat and bone can be easily separated by hand. It's important to have a good grasp of the fire. If the fire is too big and it's cooked too long, the pig head will be overcooked, and the output will be reduced. If the fire is too small and the cooking time is too short, then the color, aroma, and taste of the product will be poor. It's evident that you didn't get a good grasp of the fire for your braised food..."

These were all things that Xiaocao had told them before. However, that lazy woman, Madam Li, didn't have the patience to wait beside the stove. She had put out the fire and went out to gossip before the braised food was ready. As for the seasonings, Madam Zhang's eyes darted around and appeared somewhat guilty. In order to save some money, she had reduced the required seasonings by half.

"Oh... so this isn't the braised food made by Xiaocao. You deceived us by saying that it's the authentic one copper coin meat dish!" He snorted and continued, "I'll take it as throwing two copper coins in the sea, but don't expect us to buy any of your one copper coin food again!" Old Hao angrily threw the other packet of braised food from his hands next to Madam Zhang's feet, and then walked away furiously.

Xiaocao hastily stopped him and said, "Uncle Hao, I'll apologize for my grandmother. Please take two servings of pickled fish as compensation! Xiaolian, give Uncle Hao two portions of pickled fish."

Old Hao rubbed his hands together in embarrassment. He took two copper coins out from his pocket and said, "She is she and you are you! Take it as me buying these two pickled fish..."

Xiaocao pushed back his hand that held the money and said, "When the elders do something wrong, the younger generation should also bear some responsibilities. Although we have already split from the main family, there's nothing wrong with using a few copper coins to show filial piety to our elders. Those who had bought braised food from my grandmother can come over to get the corresponding amount of pickled fish from me. The money that you gave my grandmother will be our way of showing filial respects to her."

As soon as Madam Zhang heard that she didn't need to refund the money that she received, her anxious heart finally relaxed. Seeing that everyone was praising Xiaocao for being filial and doing honest business, she sneered in disdain. As she counted the ten or so coins in her hand, she inwardly resented that Old Hao for not coming later. If it hadn't been for him, she could have earned a profit. When she thought about how she hadn't earned back half of the money that was used to buy the seasonings, she felt a piercing pain as if a part of her heart had been dug out by someone.

When Xiaolian came over with the basket to give everyone the pickled fish, the crowd were surprised to find out that the two little girls looked exactly the same. Xiaocao smiled and said, "Everyone, this is my twin sister Xiaolian. Yesterday, as well as every afternoon before, she was the one who came to sell the braised food."

Old Hao was briefly stunned, and then he laughed, "I knew something was off! I had wondered why Xiaocao isn't as talkative in the afternoon. So it turned out to be another person! It's ridiculous that we didn't notice it was a different person in the morning and afternoon for so many days. It's so interesting and funny!"

The pair of sisters who looked identical attracted the attention of even more people, and thus, Xiaocao's business became more popular than ever. Brother Six, who had also come to buy two portions of pickled fish, glanced at the two sisters with his cold gaze. When he left, he had a rare smile on his face—He had guessed correctly...

Madam Zhang and her daughter-in-law's gaze were filled with envy as they looked at the endless crowd around Xiaocao. But, no matter how much they advertised, the news of their crude and inferior braised food had already spread among the dock workers. Their voices were already hoarse from all the shouting, but they still didn't sell another serving of food. Hence, they could only leave in disgrace.

Later, when their braised food was finally edible, there still wasn't anyone willing to support their business. This was how business worked. Once a business lost its integrity, then it would be difficult to redeem themselves.

After several times, the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law not only didn't earn any money, but they also lost their capital. The process of braising pig head and pig offal was very laborious. Neither of the in-laws were hard working people, so they gradually lost their interest in making money from selling braised food.

March should have been a good season for the weather to warm up and flowers to blossom. However, at the beginning of March this year, there was a cold current, which perfectly matched the saying: 'There is a chill in the early spring air.'

Fortunately, Madam Liu and Xiaolian had already taken time to make new bedding for the whole family. They had opened up the old quilts, took out the cotton, and fluffed up the cotton. After that, they stuffed the old cotton into the new covers and used them as a cotton-padded mattress in place of the rice straw on top of the kang bed. As for the new bedding, they had sewn four sets of new soft and fluffy cotton quilts.

When Xiaocao was covered with the warm and soft quilts, she sighed happily and rolled around on the bed, reluctant to get up. Madam Liu and Xiaolian were amused by her actions.

When the cold wave came, Yu Hai immediately drove his donkey cart to town to give both his sons a new set of cotton-padded clothes. Although the clothes were made of cheap coarse cloth, the cotton inside was new and it had better heat retention than their old jackets.

Xiaocao and Xiaolian had also put on new jackets, which were blue with red flower patterns. They were snuggling with their parents on the kang bed after dinner. The whole family looked out of the window with concern. Yu Hai sighed and said, "It seems like there's going to be 'peach blossom snow' tonight..."

Xiaolian asked, "Father, what's a 'peach blossom snow'?"

Madam Liu patiently explained the changes in the solar terms to her, and then recited a farmer's proverb: In March, on the third day of March, apricot flowers and peach blossoms will bloom all over the mountains. When the peach blossom blooms and the apricot flower withers, plums and prunes will grow up. As the peach blossom blooms and the apricot flower withers, persimmons will grow and the apricots will drop. If there's a spring snow in March, there won't be a high yield of fruits.

In the end, she concluded, "If it snows tonight, I'm afraid that the villagers who planted fruits this year will have a headache..."

Xiaolian looked out the window at the vegetable garden and said worriedly, "Then... will our family's vegetables be affected? I think we can harvest them in a few days. If it freezes, all our previous efforts would be wasted..."

Yu Hai looked at Xiaocao and couldn't help but ask, "Cao'er, can those straw thatches withstand this snowstorm?"

Xiaocao looked at the little golden kitten napping on the bed and asked in her mind, [Little Glutinous Dumpling, will the vegetables that we planted be alright? Didn't you say that if we watered them with your bathing water, they can resist drought, cold, and pests?]

Every night, it would absorb the spiritual energy of heaven and earth and recover its powers. Yes, in addition to soaking in water, it could also absorb the essence of the sun and the moon and turn it into its own spiritual power. The little golden kitten stretched, yawned, rubbed its little eyes with its paws, and

then said, [Don't worry! As long as it doesn't last more than three days, it will be fine... I'm tired, so quickly help this divine stone get to bed.]

Go to bed? My butt! Wasn't it just taking off the multicolored stone and putting it in a jar of water? Xiaocao reluctantly brought over the jar that the little divine stone usually rest in and placed the multicolored stone inside. After that, she repeated what Little Divine Stone said to her family. Xiaolian asked curiously, "Little Sister, where did you find that useless stone? You're always soaking it in water like it's some kind of treasure. What's the use of this stone?"

[Who's a useless stone? You're a useless stone! Your whole family are useless stones!] Little Divine Stone angrily bared its fangs at Xiaolian as it mimicked the Goddess of Spirit's favorite pet phrase, saying it in exactly the same manner. After scolding her, it was so pleased with itself that it even showed a complacent expression.

"Xiaocao, what's wrong with your Little Glutinous Dumpling? Hurry and take it away!" Xiaolian watched as the lazily sleeping kitten abruptly jumped on her head and scratched her hair with its tiny claws. It didn't really hurt, but it looked rather silly.

The Yu Family was still rather fond of the beautiful little golden kitten that suddenly appeared at their home. But, this little kitten was very proud and aloof. It usually ignored everyone except for Xiaocao.

Xiaocao grabbed the grumpy little kitten and pacified it by caressing it on her palm. She smiled and said, "I found it by chance in the stream. Xiaolian, don't you think the rainbow color looks very pretty? I found that the color becomes even more vibrant if it's nourished in the spring water every day. Moreover, I noticed that our family's life has been getting better and better after I picked up this little rock. Perhaps, it's a lucky stone!"

Seeing her daughter treat a rock as if it were a precious treasure, Madam Liu felt slightly saddened within her heart. She secretly made up her mind to buy some accessories for her daughters after they earned money from selling the vegetables. Her daughters were already at the age when they liked to be well-groomed. Time sure passed by quickly...

That evening, smoke reemerged from the kang flues in Dongshan Village, which had already been stopped for a period of time. Xiaocao's family had new mattresses and quilts, so they didn't really need to heat the kang bed.

The next day, the village was shrouded in a silvery-white attire, as if everything was dressed in silver. Even the mountains were covered in snow and looked as if they were back in the ice and snow-covered winter. The pond behind the house was like a green jadeite inlaid within white marble, brilliant and clear.

On top of the rows of old pine trees were snowballs of various sizes. In the bamboo forest, tall bamboo trees were bent by the heavy snow. Rows and rows of bamboo trees were covered by layers upon layers of silver cloaks.

The sun rose from the east side of the mountains and shone brightly in all directions. The mountain village became particularly enchanting. The snow accumulated on the distant mountain peaks was like rosy clouds in the sky. Under the sunshine, a faint golden glow appeared on the treetops. The sparrows in the woods hopped around and shook the branches. The snow accumulated on the branches fluttered to the ground like powder. When reflected by the sunlight, it looked like a layer of silver fog.

Xiaocao would always get seriously ill whenever it snowed in the past. She had also fallen seriously sick before the New Year (Author's note: It was fake.). Thus, her family was worried about her health. They requested her to stay at home and had Yu Hai drive the donkey cart and take Xiaolian to the docks to sell braised food.

After all, it was the spring season of March. After the warm sun rose, the snow began to melt under the sunlight. The sound of the snow crashing down could be heard and large clusters of accumulated snow fell from the bamboo trees. The bamboo tree straightened up its waist and shook its head as if it was saying: 'You want to crush me? Don't even think about it!' In the distance came the loud mooing of an old cattle, the quacking of ducks, and the laughter of people...

Chapter 104

Xiaocao and Madam Liu, who stayed at home, weren't idling around either. Taking advantage of the warm sunshine after the snow, they lifted up the straw thatches and shook off the snow on top. The smiles on mother-daughter's faces were even brighter than the sun as they looked at the green vegetables, which were bathing in the sunshine and unaffected by the spring snow.

Madam Fang, who had come to visit with her daughter, was shocked by the greenery in front of her when she entered the courtyard. She felt as if she had entered spring ahead of time. Madam Fang chattered endlessly, "Your vegetables are growing so well! Younger Sister Muyun, we also made straw thatches and tried to grow a vegetable garden according to the way you taught me. A few, sparse seedlings just sprouted, but they had wilted due to the heavy snow yesterday. I don't even know if they can survive..."

Madam Liu couldn't contain the joy on her face and said with a smile, "Xiaocao's father just lets her do whatever she wants. I couldn't stop them, so I just let them plant the vegetables with the thought that we're just wasting several bags of seeds. Unexpectedly, the vegetables that little lass planted actually sprouted. Your garden isn't growing very well, could it be that the soil isn't fertile enough? As you know, our yard has been deserted for many years and has accumulated a thick layer of foliar fertilizer."

Xiaocao quickly said, "The seeds for greens and mustard greens were scattered more densely in our backyard. When it gets warmer in a couple days, Auntie Zhou can take some back to grow in your garden."

Madam Fang's younger daughter, Zhou Shanhu, wasn't much older than her and had a lively personality. Every time she came, she would be envious of Xiaocao's family's greenery. When she returned to her own home, she would water and fertilize her family's vegetable garden. She wanted the vegetables in her yard to grow faster so that she could eat them as soon as possible. When she woke up this morning, she had cried bitterly at the sight of pitiful state of the vegetables, which were all frozen.

When Zhou Shanhu heard what Xiaocao said, she immediately grabbed Xiaocao's hand with a grin and asked, "Really? Are you really giving some to us? But... aren't you guys going to sell the vegetables in town?"

Xiaocao held her hand and walked towards the rear courtyard. As they walked, she said, "Shanhu, you should also know that if the crops are planted too densely, their growth will also be affected. If you and Older Sister Linglong come take some away tomorrow, it will benefit our family too. We got two laborers for free!"

"Hey! So that's what you were planning!" Zhou Shanhu laughed and tried to pinch her tender cheeks, while Xiaocao smiled and dodged her. The two young girls were chasing and frolicking beside the vegetable garden, while Zhou Linglong followed behind them, smiling quietly.

In the Yu Family's main house, Madam Li was complaining to her mother-in-law.

"Mother, I think that Second Brother-in-law's family earns more than ten copper coins daily from selling braised food! No matter what they probably earn more than a hundred copper coins. So that means they get three taels in a month, which is more than the income we get from our fishing boat!" As

Madam Li thought of the shiny silvers, she felt as if there were twenty-five kittens hiding in her heart—there were a hundred claws scratching her heart!

Of course, Madam Zhang was also envious of the second branch's income, but she couldn't just go take it from them. The old man wouldn't agree. Last time, when she got the braised food recipe from the second branch, that damned old man was angry at her for several days!

When Madam Zhang thought of how the old man was being 'partial', she slammed the rough ceramic cup in her hand heavily on table and vented her anger at Madam Li, "What's the point in talking about this? Can you get the money? It's all your fault! You can't even properly clean the pig offal and offended all the customers. Now, even if we stole the braised food that Xiaocao made and sold them, no one would be willing to buy them!!"

Madam Li's face went from blue to white after being scolded. She thought inwardly: 'How am I the one who offended the customers? Weren't you the one who was so greedy that you refused to give them refunds? You even shamelessly threw a tantrum! Even those rough men on the docks avoid you whenever they see you...'

Her eyes darted around for a moment, and then she stealthily changed the topic in order to redirect her mother-in-law's anger, "Mother, I can't believe Second Brother-in-law would act like this! He earns so much money every day, but he didn't even think of his parents. He appeared like such a good son in the past, but who knew... Tsk tsk, he was never sincere and was just pretending all along!"

Madam Li was seriously stirring up problems for no reason. Before Yu Hai's family had split from the household, they had to hand in all their income. If they also handed in all their money now that they were living separately, what would their family eat and drink with?

Madam Zhang snorted and angrily replied, "He's a good son? He's completely disregarding his parents' life or death, while his own family is eating and living well! How is he good? He deserves to be crippled! It's karma!"

In the room, the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law were venting and making Yu Hai out to be a worthless person. However, they hadn't expected that an evil idea would emerge within the heart of a dark figure under the window, who had overheard them.

The sky was clear and boundless the next day. The snow from a couple days ago had already melted and seeped into the soil. Xiaocao and her sister were walking home with a basket in their hands.

Their baskets were completely empty. Xiaocao happily hummed as she touched her bloated purse. Xiaolian also had a delighted expression on her face and said to Xiaocao, "Little Sister, the manager of the restaurant at the docks asked you to help make a meal for a table in the morning. Are you going to prepare the same dishes as before?"

Xiaocao smiled and said, "This time, the guests are from the south, so they don't like spicy food and prefer sweeter flavors and vegetable dishes. I'm going to make new dishes on the basis of 'pearl balls' and 'shredded pork with bean sauce'. For the fish, I'm planning on making 'sweet and sour fish'. Since it has a sweet and sour taste, the southerners will definitely like it. Our family's bok choy and mustard greens should be ready to eat. The vegetable dishes will be 'sautéed mushroom and bok choy' and 'minced garlic with mustard greens'. For the staple food... 'three delicacies vegetarian crystal steamed buns' would be a good choice. It's exquisite and delicious! To be able to eat bok choy and mustard greens during this season, the guests will surely enjoy the meal!"

While the sisters were happily discussing the dishes for the meal and how much they had earned with the two taels that they were given, a dark shadow suddenly flew out from the withered bush on wayside and blocked the sisters' path.

Xiaocao was alarmed in her heart. She looked around and noticed that there wasn't anyone else on the road. Although they had two people, they were only children who weren't even nine yet. The other person had covered his face with a mask. Though he wasn't very tall, he looked very sturdy. Thus, he was more than capable of dealing with two thin and small girls.

"Take out your money! Otherwise, I'll kill you!" The masked man tried to make his voice sound deeper and pretended to sound vicious. But there was still a faint sense of immaturity within his voice.

Upon hearing him, Xiaocao had determined that he wasn't very old and should be at the age when his voice was changing. They had earned more than two hundred copper coins from peddling this morning. In the purse, she not only had the money they earned this morning, but also a deposit of two taels from the restaurant's boss. She was really reluctant to hand it over obediently.

She stalled for time as she tried to think of a way to get away, "Don't act recklessly! There's a lot of pedestrians on this road at this time. Roadway robbery is a felony. If you get caught and sent to the yamen [1], you will first be punished with fifty strikes. Even if you don't die, your skin will tear off!"

When the masked man heard her, all the flesh on his body trembled. He tightened his grip on the stick in his hand, pointed at the sisters, and angrily said, "Cut the crap and quickly hand over the money!!"

Xiaocao looked around and quietly squeezed Xiaolian's palm. She suddenly had a look of surprise and loudly shouted behind him, "Uncle Zhao! Did you come to sell game?"

As soon as he heard that it was the skilled fighter Hunter Zhao, the masked man was so scared that the stick in his hand fell to the ground. He turned around and looked behind himself, while he got ready to escape.

The moment he turned his head, Xiaocao pulled Xiaolian and ran in the opposite direction with all her might.

When the masked man saw the empty path behind him, he finally realized that he had been fooled. He scolded at them, "Stinky brats, I definitely skin you alive when I catch you!" After that, he swiftly ran after the sisters.

Although the sisters took the lead, their legs were short and weak, and was soon caught up by the robber. He furiously reached out his hands and pushed Xiaocao very far away. He said fiercely, "You dared to trick me! If I don't beat you up until you're crying for your parents, then I won't go by the surname of..."

He wasn't so foolish as to tell them his family name, and swiftly stopped himself before he exposed his own surname. He angrily sent a hard slap towards Xiaocao's direction.

However, at this time, Xiaolian suddenly strode forward and blocked her younger sister. With a sharp sound of the clap, Xiaolian staggered several steps backwards and fell to the ground after being hit. Her fair and tender face instantly became swollen.

Xiaocao rushed towards her to help her up. Her heart ached as she blew on her red and swollen face. She had always protected people who were close to her. For her younger siblings in her previous life, she had been in countless fights with people who had bullied them. She had 'gloriously' won the title of a tigress!

She tightened her fist and clenched her teeth. Directly fighting with the opponent would be her last resort. Based on his reaction when she tricked him earlier, he should know Hunter Zhao, Uncle Zhao. In addition, she had this lingering feeling that there was a sense of familiarity from the robber. She suspected that he was someone she knew and could possibly be someone from Dongshan Village...

[Yaaawn... Stop guessing. There's no one else other than your eldest paternal cousin, who's lazy, gluttonous, and a good-for-nothing!] The lazy voice of the little divine stone sounded in her ear as the little golden kitten on her shoulder stretched its back.

Yu Ge, Yu Heizi? Xiaocao looked at the other person's plump figure, who had a sharp rooster-like voice. He appeared to be tough on the outside, but was timid inwardly... It really was him!

Little Divine Stone nonchalantly said, [Little girl, do you want me, this Divine Stone, to use my power and teach that fellow a lesson?] Although the little celestial stone had recognized Xiaocao as its master, it usually didn't treat her with high esteem.

Xiaocao knew that Yu Ge, appeared fierce and malicious, but he was actually cowardly inside. She recalled how, on the day she woke up, he got so scared that he nearly wet his pants because of a few words. A plan was forming within her mind...

Yu Heizi had secretly eavesdropped on his mother and grandmother's conversation. He found out that Xiaocao went to the docks every day and earned over a hundred copper coins. Since he was young, his stingy grandmother had always stealthily fed him delicious food behind younger siblings of the second branch's back, but she had never given him more than two copper coins for allowance. It wasn't even enough to buy a piece of candy from a peddler.

One hundred copper coins was like a fortune to him. He thought about all the things he could do if he had a hundred copper coins. He would be able to buy two fragrant sesame pancakes stuffed with several pieces of beef and have a good meal in town. He could also buy a pearl hairpin for Xiaoxiang, who liked to dress up, to make her happy.

The next morning, he had heard that the two little girls, Xiaocao and Xiaolian, were the ones going to the docks today, and thus an idea formed in his mind.

Chapter 105 – Seeing a Ghost

He had originally thought that they were only two seven to eight year old girls, so he could get the money easily by just scaring them a little. But he hadn't expected that Xiaocao would threaten him with the yamen and the punishment of being flogged. She also tried to run away after deceiving him. He couldn't help but feel infuriated. He picked up the wooden stick that was as thick as a person's wrist and prepared swiftly knock them out and run away after grabbing the money. He needed to act quickly lest someone really passed by at this time and wasted all his efforts.

In the village, taking other children's things and bullying people were things that he had done ever since he was a young child. However, it was his first time committing a felony and robbing people on the road. With a twisted expression, he hardened his heart, lifted the wooden stick in his hand, and was about to ruthlessly strike Xiaocao's head.

Xiaolian screamed and disregarded the pain on her face as she rushed over to block the blow for her younger sister. Her younger sister had nearly died last summer after being pushed by their eldest aunt. She could never forget the scene of her sister's pale face being covered by the dark red blood. There was only one thought within her mind at the moment—she must never let her get hurt again!

When Xiaolian hugged Xiaocao with her own frail body to prevent her from being assaulted by the robber, Xiaocao's heart was filled with a burst of emotion. In her previous life, no matter how much she suffered, she had to stand up straight and face it bravely. She must never fall down because she knew that she was the main pillar of her family and the one person that her younger siblings could depend on. After being resurrected, she had become the one who was being protected, which let her feel the warmth of a family again...

Xiaocao supported Xiaolian's shoulders and pointed at the robber, who had the stick raised up high but seemed as if he had been paralyzed by a spell. She said, "Don't be scared! He can't do anything!"

"Uh? Why isn't he moving? Could it be that there's some deity helping us?" Xiaolian still had a lingering fear as she pulled her sister back a few steps and asked curiously.

At this time, Yu Ge was suffering from unprecedented fear and torment. As soon as he lifted the wooden stick, the sky suddenly darkened and fierce voice shouted, "How dare you, Yu Ge! To rob others of their wealth in broad daylight! To bully the good and the weak! The King of Hell had sent this immortal to detain your soul and take you to the Palace of Hell for trial!"

Heizi was so frightened that he immediately lost all his senses the moment he looked up. In the dark sky, there was a tall, bulky figure with the head of an ox and the body of a human holding a steel fork. Wasn't he the soul messenger in the legends? His legs went limp from the shock. He felt a warm sensation around his crotch and a stinky odor could be smelled. He was so scared that he had peed in his pants.

When a dark and shiny iron chain wrapped around his neck, he immediately threw away the stick in his hand, knelt on his knees, and desperately kowtowed at Ox-Head [1]. He kept begging for mercy, "Please spare me, please have mercy on me! Since this was my first time committing such a crime, can you please spare me this one time?"

Ox-Head spoke again, "You are a thief committing a robbery. You have also bullied the good and the weak and took possession of other people's properties. You shall be taken to the Cauldron of Boiling Oil [2]. You will be stripped of your clothing and thrown into the hot oil pan to be fried. Just like a fish, the human skin will gradually be fried into a golden crisp as the hot oil in the pan crackles... According to the seriousness of the case, the severity of the punishment will be altered. You're a first-time offender, so being fried two or three times should be enough! Alright, stop your nonsense and come with me!!"

Heizi would shudder every time Ox-Head said something. When Ox-Head finished speaking, Heizi had also collapsed on the ground and was unable to get up. If Heizi had a choice, he would rather pass out immediately. But he was extremely clear headed right now. At the same time, he was also afraid of fainting, and then be taken to the Palace of Hell in an unconscious state. He feared that he would be sentenced to the eighteen levels of hell and suffer the torments of being fried and frozen!

He was so frightened that he couldn't even speak. He just kept kowtowing and admitting his wrongdoings, while seeking a chance to mend his ways and start anew.

A faint smile slowly appeared on the corner of Xiaocao's mouth, while Xiaolian, who was beside her, exclaimed in astonishment, "Little Sister, is he possessed? What did he suddenly change his attitude and kowtow to us while begging for mercy?"

Xiaocao smiled and said, "Maybe... he was suddenly enlightened by Buddha to reform as an evildoer and become a good person! Isn't there a saying: 'there's a thin line between good and evil'? Let's go and let him be!"

Xiaolian picked up the basket that had fallen on the ground and asked in a slightly uncertain tone, “Little Sister, why do I have this feeling that his voice sounds slightly familiar? He should be someone we know, right?”

“Who cares if we know him or not? Let's quickly leave! If he suddenly changes his mind again, then we're done for!” Xiaocao was afraid of arousing Xiaolian's suspicion, so she couldn't stay to appreciate Heizi's humiliation and urgently pulled her away.

Heizi was still ceaselessly kowtowing to the air. His forehead was already bleeding, but he didn't dare to stop. Little Divine Stone saw that the sisters had gone far away, so it feigned a merciful appearance and said, [Alright! A fault confessed is half redressed. For the sake of your good attitude, I'll give you another chance! Remember to do good deeds and don't commit sinful acts!]

Heizi kowtowed repeatedly to express his gratitude, “Yes, yes! This little one won't dare to have malicious intentions again. I will definitely do more good deeds! Definitely!”

Seeing that he had learned his lesson, Little Divine Stone dissolved its power and chased after its master with its short legs at lightning speed.

Heizi only felt that the boundless darkness in front of him had dispersed and the soul messenger had already disappeared. After experiencing the 'calamity' earlier, he had finally realized the importance of light. Lying on the ground, it took him half a day to recover the strength in his upper body. His cotton-padded clothing was already soaked in cold sweat, especially his trousers. It was filled with his urine. He couldn't help shivering a few times when a cold breeze blew.

Heizi's head was wounded and bleeding, and he seemed as if he had been rolling around in the mud. So, when Madam Li saw his battered appearance after he returned home, her heart ached as she questioned repeatedly, “What happened? Heizi, who bullied you? Tell Mother, I'll go settle the scores with them!”

Heizi was afraid that he would leak 'celestial secrets' and anger Ox-Head and Horse-Face, so he hastily came up with an excuse, “Mother, no one was bullying me. I accidentally fell down when I climbed up a tree to catch birds. Mother, you should also be more amicable in the future, lest you get sentenced to the eighteen levels of hell!”

“Damned brat! You dared to curse your mother. Are you looking for a beating?” Madam Li raised her hand, but when she saw the wound on her son's head, she put her hand down in distress.

After suffering a scare and catching a cold, Heizi had a high fever throughout the entire night. The whole family scrambled to call for a doctor and get the medication. It took more than ten days for him to completely recover from the illness. After he recovered, all the villagers of Dongshan Village clearly noticed the changes in Heizi.

The little bully who used to go around playing tricks and picking on people had disappeared. He had become polite and would come forward to help others when they needed help. Heizi had never helped out at home in the past, but now, he would chop the firewood for his mother and help his grandmother feed the pigs. He had also followed his grandfather out to the sea several times. Everyone in the family agreed that he had grown up and became serious and hardworking.

For the next few days, life was simple yet warm.

In the morning, at dawn, the little donkey called 'Little Gray' took the sisters to the docks to sell the braised food that they made the previous night.

The little gray donkey, who had been on the verge of death, was fed mystic-stone water and bean fodder every day. Little Divine Stone had also graciously treated its illness. After a few days, it not only recovered from its illness, but it had also fattened up. Its originally dull and bleak fur had become glossy. As if it knew that Xiaocao was its savior, it was especially close to her and obeyed all her orders.

Therefore, Yu Hai wasn't worried about his two eight year old daughters driving the cart by themselves at all. This was because they didn't even need to steer the cart when Xiaocao was around. As if it could understand the human language, the little donkey would run wherever it was being pointed to go.

Yu Hai and Madam Liu were also busy yet full of life. Every day, Madam Liu would wake up early and prepare breakfast for her daughters. Now that the family had better living conditions, she would always make different kinds of food with refined rice and wheat flour for her children to eat. But she continued to eat coarse grain flour herself...

When Xiaocao found out, she had talked to her mother several times about the matter. However, Madam Liu would just reply with a smile, “I'm already used to eating coarse grain flour, so if I suddenly

eat wheat flour, my stomach wouldn't be used to it." After that, she would hide from Xiaocao whenever she ate, fearing that her daughter would feel bad for her.

After their daughters left, she and her husband would prop up the straw thatches in the front and rear courtyards, so that the vibrant vegetables could bask in the warm spring sunshine.

Next, the idle Madam Liu would sit down and sew clothes and shoes for her husband and children. The morning passed by swiftly just like this.

Yu Hai, on the other hand, went net fishing in the middle of the pond behind the house on the bamboo raft that he had made himself. Actually, he was only pretending to fish with a net for others to see. In fact, he was actually catching fish with the 'fish bait' that his daughter had prepared. He caught a lot of fish every day, which made his neighbors envious.

After he came back from fishing, Madam Mao had once asked him to let her husband borrow the bamboo raft and fishing net so that he could try to fish like him. However, after wasting an entire afternoon, her husband had only caught two or three catties of small catfish. She was so angry that she scolded her husband for not living up to expectations and that he didn't even know how to catch fish.

Her husband, Qian Fugui, just laughed and said, "Brother Yu Hai is a first-class fisherman in the village. He had even caught a large shark in the sea before, let alone some small fish in the pond. How can we compare with him? We should just focus on raising our ducks..."

With the little donkey, they saved a lot of traveling time and Xiaocao had a lot more time on her hands. When they returned home at noon, she took a nice nap after eating a proper lunch. When she woke up, she fried the small fish and pickled fish with Madam Liu's help.

In the afternoon, Yu Hai drove the donkey cart and took his eldest daughter, Xiaolian, to sell the pickled fish. In this way, Xiaocao could rest for the entire afternoon.

When braising the pig head and large intestines in the evening, Xiaocao just needed to prepare the braising sauce and Madam Liu would be able to finish the rest of the process alone. Since the whole family worked together and divided the work, they weren't as busy and rushed.

Today, the entire family had gathered around a table to eat lunch. They were probably the only family in the village with the luxury of eating three meals a day, which was, of course, suggested by Xiaocao. With the reason that breakfast was eaten too early and she couldn't sustain her hunger until dinner, she simplified breakfast, made lunch the priority, and pushed dinner back for two hours. The new schedule was basically the same as the three meals in modern time. Thus, Xiaocao was very satisfied with the results.

For lunch, they had a plate of sautéed chives with dried bean curd and a bowl of thick fresh fish soup. The staple food was steamed buns made of wheat flour and sorghum flour. Originally, Xiaocao had suggested that they only eat wheat flour in the future, but Madam Liu, who was used to being frugal, wouldn't agree with her suggestion. She also said that Xiaocao was a spendthrift, who not only knew how to earn money but also spend money. So she was worried about how Xiaocao would manage a household in the future with her spending habits.

Chapter 106

Xiaocao didn't agree with her views. Didn't people earn money just to spend them? If people weren't willing to spend money, then there was no point in earning money. But she didn't argue with her mother. She intended to proceed step-by-step to slowly and subtly influence her mother.

At this moment, they suddenly heard a series of rowdy noise coming from afar outside the door, and then a rushed knocking sound came from the door. The family, who were currently eating lunch, glanced at each other and wondered who knocked on the door so urgently.

"I'll go open the door!" Xiaocao said as she put down her chopsticks. She ran to the door and saw an anxious Qian Wen who was about to knock on the door again. With red and swollen eyes, Little Shitou was still wiping his tears ceaselessly as he stood behind him.

Xiaocao was alarmed inwardly and hastily asked, "Brother Xiaowen, Shitou, what happened? It isn't a break today."

Seeing his older sister, Little Shitou, who had endured his feelings of fear and panic during this whole time, finally burst into tears. He choked with sobs and said, "Second... Second Sister, Eldest Brother... Eldest Brother, he's... he's dying!"

"What? What's wrong with Eldest Brother? Don't cry and speak slowly!" When Xiaocao heard his words, she anxiously grabbed his hand and shook it vigorously.

Seeing that Little Shitou was crying so hard that he could barely speak, Qian Wen helped him explain, "We didn't have any classes in the morning, so Little Shitou wanted to go visit his older brother at the carpentry shop. Since I was free, I also wanted to go stroll on the streets and buy a new brush. Thus, we went out together. When we reached the woodworking shop, we found your eldest brother beaten and covered with wounds. He was unconscious and spitting out blood as he lay on the ground. The shop worker said that he was beaten up like this because he had stolen money from the shop. I and several classmates carried your older brother to Tongren Medicine Hall. After the doctor's examination, he said that your older brother had hurt his internal organs, and there was no cure! If Doctor Sun hadn't recognized Little Shitou, they might not have even treated him and directly carried him out. Doctor Sun told us to be mentally prepared. If the internal bleeding continues, he's afraid that even if Hua Tuo [1] was alive, he wouldn't be able to save him!"

"Hang'er, my son ah——" Madam Liu, who had followed Xiaocao over, turned ghastly pale when she overheard the bad news. She cried out, and then fainted.

Yu Hai, who was beside her, promptly supported her and lightly pinched her philtrum. Despite the extreme grief within his heart, he was still the head of the family. If he also panicked, then this family would be in chaos.

Xiaocao tightly bit on her own lips, swiftly ran back into the house, and picked up the jar that the multicolored stone usually bathed in. The water inside was a high concentration of mystic-stone water, which was enough to save someone's life!

"Xiaolian, go to our parents' room and get the jar with the money inside. Little Shitou, you stay at home with Mother. I'll go to town with Father!" At this time, Xiaocao was the only clear-headed person here, other than Yu Hai. They shouldn't delay the matter any longer. They needed to quickly get to town and see if they could save her oldest brother.

Madam Liu had slowly woken up. When she heard Xiaocao's arrangement, she suppressed the sorrow with her heart and shouted, "No, I don't want to stay here! I want to go see my Hang'er. I know my son the best. He would never steal other people's things. My son is innocent!"

Xiaocao knew that her mother would never feel at ease if they didn't let her go. She thought about it and said, "Father, go and harness Little Gray to the cart. I'll take the horse carriage with Qian Wen and send the money to the medical hall first so that they can give Eldest Brother medicine. You take Mother and Xiaolian and follow after us..."

Qian Wen had rented this horse carriage in town. The horse wasn't really good, but it was young. As it galloped, the carriage jolted up and down, which made people feel as if their hearts were about to jump out.

Xiaocao sat in the dashing carriage with a blank expression. She tightly clutched the carriage with one hand to stabilize herself, while she tightly held the jar of mystic-stone water with her other hand. The little golden kitten sat solemnly beside her as it tapped its slender tail with a steady beat.

Qian Wen, who sat next to her, was curious about why she was still holding a jar at this time. But he didn't ask and just gently consoled her,

"Xiaocao, don't worry! Doctor Sun is a skilled doctor. When your father was injured, he also said that your father couldn't be cured at the beginning. Isn't he fine now? Your eldest brother will surely make it too!"

Xiaocao's mind was filled with words that Little Divine Stone had once said: 'As long as he's still breathing, he can still be saved!' At this time, she inwardly called out to all the gods and deities, and prayed piously that her eldest brother could hold out until she reached the medical hall.

After being repeatedly urged by Xiaocao, the coachman pushed the carriage to its full speed and arrived at town gates in less than an hour. However, this one hour was no different than an endless torment to Xiaocao's family.

Fortunately, there weren't many people on the streets at this time. The carriage directly took her to the entrance of Tongren Medicine Hall. After riding on the bumpy carriage for an hour, Xiaocao's legs had gone weak and she nearly fell to the ground when she got off the carriage. Luckily, Qian Wen, who was getting off the carriage after her, pulled her up from behind.

She tightened her hold on the jar and swiftly rushed into Tongren Medicine Hall. Just as the staff inside the medical hall wanted to stop her, he saw Qian Wen, who was dressed in the uniform of Rongxuan Academy. So he immediately changed his words and said, "The patient is in the rear hall. Doctor Sun and Doctor Zhang are currently in consultation."

Xiaocao didn't halt her steps at all and quickly entered the rear hall. She saw her eldest brother lying in the bed with a deathly pale face. His clothes were stained with blood, while his face and body were covered in bruises and wounds. She immediately choked up and burst into tears.

She knew that it wasn't the time to feel sad, so she wiped her tears with her sleeve and asked to Doctor Sun, who was doing acupuncture on her older brother, "Doctor Sun, my eldest brother... how is he?"

Doctor Sun remembered this strong and sensible little girl. He looked at her with pity and replied, "His fractured ribs had punctured the spleen and caused internal bleeding. I can only temporarily reduce the speed of his bleeding with this silver needle, but it will just treat the symptoms and not cure the root cause. If it continues like this, I'm afraid..."

Xiaocao hastily interjected, "That... if we can cease the bleeding, does that mean that my older brother's life will be out of danger?"

Doctor Sun stroked his beard, and then nodded slowly, "If we can effectively stop the bleeding right now and he could survive while I connect his ribs and then nourish him with medicinal soups that promotes blood circulation and dissipate blood stasis, I am ninety percent confident that he will wake up. But..."

He shook his head with a sigh because he knew that if he pulled out the silver needle, this young, vivid life would swiftly die in less than fifteen minutes.

Xiaocao hastily pretended to be sad and threw herself next to the bed. She used her body to block the line of sight of the two doctors and laid her small hand—or more precisely, the multicolored stone on her wrist—on her oldest brother's chest. She earnestly pleaded in her heart, [Little Glutinous Dumpling, please take care of my eldest brother's injury. I'm begging you. Please save him!]

The little golden kitten jumped on Yu Hang's bed and emitted a dazzling, golden light that others couldn't see. As if there was someone guiding it, the light slowly penetrated into Yu Hang's body. However, he feigned dissatisfaction and complained, [It's just my luck to have a master like you. My power, which I worked so hard to recover, is going to be depleted again! If I can't turn into my spiritual form this time, you must bring me fresh spring water every day as a reward...]

In less than half a quarter of an hour, the gold light that Little Divine Stone emitted gradually dimmed... until it completely disappeared. On the other hand, Yu Hang's, who was breathing feebly and hanging on his last breath, breathing gradually improved and stabilized.

[You must remember! You have to soak me in spring water. Spring water...] Little Divine Stone's voice became weaker and weaker, but it didn't forget to remind Xiaocao of its own welfare before disappearing.

Seeing Xiaocao lying on the edge of the bed with her shoulders trembling, Qian Wen thought that she was suppressing her inner grief and crying silently. So, he squatted down next to her and comforted her with a soft voice, "Xiaocao, heaven will protect and reward the good, so your older brother will definitely survive this! Don't cry anymore. Quickly go gather medicinal herbs and decoct the medicine!"

Xiaocao knew that Yu Hang's life was out of danger for now, so she rubbed her red eyes hard, sniffed, and went to the front hall with her head lowered. When decocting the medicine, she specially used the mystic-stone water and carefully boiled the medicine according to the doctor's instructions.

Yu Hai and Madam Liu came in and saw the lonely and sad back of Xiaocao, who had reddened eyes and her head hung low as she brewed the medication. Seeing this scene, their worries and fears surged in their hearts again. With a low cry, Madam Liu broke away from Yu Hai's support and rushed towards her son, who was covered in wounds and so thin that he only had bones on his body. She cried softly,

"Hang'er, my Hang'er! That goddamn bastard, how can he be so cruel and beat you into this state? It's all Mother's fault. I shouldn't have agreed to send you to be an apprentice in town. Mother regrets not listening to your younger sister. We should have taken you back earlier... It's all Mother's fault! Hang'er, wake up! Don't leave your mother!"

Yu Hai looked at the countless new and old wounds on his son's bony body. He had heard from the doctor that his ribs were broken, and his life was in danger due to internal injuries. The tall and mighty man clenched his fist and brutally pounded on his own chest—what kind of man was he? He had sent his son into the tiger's den with his own hands and helplessly watched as he was beaten and tortured.

Xiaolian and Little Shitou cried so hard that they were gasping for breath. For a moment, there was a tragic scene inside the inner room. Qian Wen cried with them quietly and from time to time, he would glance at the only calm person in the room, Xiaocao. It was often said that 'people would act very abnormally when they were in extreme grief'. So, he was afraid that Xiaocao would do something unusual.

At this moment, Xiaocao looked up with cold and clear eyes. It was just a short moment of eye contact, but Qian Wen felt as if a basin of cold water in the depths of the cold winter had just been poured on him. He felt a chill piercing through his bones.

While he was briefly stunned, Xiaocao's calm yet slight cruel voice slowly spread in the room, "Father, Mother, stop being sad! I will definitely make that Shopkeeper Zhang be disgraced and lose all his reputation! I'll make pay with his blood!"

People couldn't help but be convinced by this small and determined figure. No one took her vows as words of nonsense. Qian Wen only felt as if that thin and small figure had some kind of power that radiated a dazzling glow that people couldn't take their eyes off of. A young man's heart could help but throb for her...

When the medicine was ready, Doctor Sun came in again to examine on Yu Hang's pulse and brought them a surprising news, "The patient's internal bleeding has stopped and his pulse is also stable. His life is no longer in danger."

The melancholic feelings that filled the room earlier had been instantly swept away. Everyone's nervous hearts finally felt relieved. Madam Liu shed tears again, but it was tears of happiness this time. She personally fed her son the medicine, and despite the family's opposition, she insisted on staying by his side.

Chapter 107

Xiaocao took Xiaolian and drove the donkey cart to the West Mountains. At the foot of the mountains, she fetched a good deal of spring water with a bamboo tube. On the way back, she soaked the multicolored stone in the spring water. A faint but cheerful voice sounded in her mind, [It's so comfortable... The spring water in the mountains are definitely more pure, so it can help this Divine Stone restore my power faster...]

Xiaocao was pleasantly surprised. She had originally thought that the little divine stone had used up all its power and would fall into a slumber for three to five days like last time when it treated her father's leg.

The little divine stone seemed to have read her thoughts and triumphantly said, [Little girl, aren't you underestimating this Divine Stone? Previously, I had just accepted a master and my power had just began to awaken. Thus, I exhausted all my power in order to save someone. But it's different now. This

Divine Stone's power has been gradually improving. Earlier, my power was only temporarily depleted. If I soak in the spring water, I will be able to replenish the energy that was consumed in four to six hours.]

Little Divine Stone wasn't going to tell Xiaocao that every time it exhausted its power to help her or the people around her, its energy and power would be enhanced. This was the reason it was willing to help those weak humans again and again. If it continued like this, one day it would be able to recover all its power, break through the confinements of this realm, and return to Goddess Nuwa's side!

Xiaocao looked up and saw dark clouds coming from the west. With concealed aggression and fury in her gaze, she sneered and whispered, "So four to six hours! Little Glutinous Dumpling, are you willing to help me out again? Let the rage of vengeance ignite!"

At dusk, thick, dark clouds weighed down on the sky, hiding the vast scarlet sky of the west. The sky appeared very heavy, as if it was going to fall down. The repressed heavens seemed like it was carrying a heavy baggage, while the indifferent wind rushed through the streets and lifted up patches of the withered leaves.

The workers of the shops on both sides of the streets prepared to close up. On the street, the pedestrians walked against the cold wind and rushed to get home before the storm.

The entrance of Zhang Ji's Carpentry Shop was surrounded by curious onlookers. In the middle of the crowd, on a donkey cart, lay a lifeless young man who had no trace of blood on his face. Next to the cart, the young man's family, with grief and indignation, stared fiercely at the shopkeeper, who stood in front of the woodworking shop.

The ugly and ferocious-looking Shopkeeper Zhang stood at the entrance with a worker who wielded a club in his hand. He grimly shouted, "Where did this group of country bumpkins come from? They actually dared to blackmail me, Old Zhang. Don't you know who I am! Hurry up and leave. If you want to do make trouble, then I'll send you to the yamen after a beating!"

A thin and pretty young girl confronted the sinister shopkeeper without fear. Her hair was tousled by the wind, causing it to stick to her small, pale face. Whether it was during ancient times or modern times, never underestimate people's curiosity for gossip. More and more people were gathering over. The whole family and Zhang Ji's Carpentry Shop were completely surrounded by the massive crowd of people.

Xiaocao, whose eyes were like bottomless pits, swept her gaze around the crowd and cried sorrowfully, "Fellow countrymen, this severely injured youth lying on the donkey cart is my eldest brother, who's an apprentice of Zhang Ji's Carpentry Shop!"

"Shopkeeper Zhang is mean and cruel. He often beats, scolds, and abuses his apprentices. He doesn't even treat them like humans. It hasn't even been half a year since my pitiful older brother worked here, but there isn't any part of him that isn't wounded! Today, he had even been beaten until they broke his ribs and injured internal organs. Even Doctor Sun of Tongren Medicine Hall said that it's difficult to cure these serious injuries!"

"My pitiful older brother is only ten years old, yet his life is already hanging on a thread! Shopkeeper Zhang, shouldn't you give us an explanation?"

Although Zhang Ji's Carpentry Shop was very famous in Tanggu Town, Shopkeeper Zhang was also infamous for being greedy, cruel, and immoral.

Among the onlookers, a gray-haired old man sighed and shook his head, "What a sin! How can he be so ruthless to such a young child?"

The worker of the store next to Zhang Ji's Carpentry Shop wasn't surprised and calmly said, "Shopkeeper Zhang of Zhang Ji's Carpentry Shop is violent and frequently gets angry at the staff in his shop. It's even worse for the shop's apprentices. They're provided with the worst meals, while they also have to do the hardest jobs. Moreover, they often get beaten for no reason whatsoever. As a result, very few of the people who come to the woodworking shop to be an apprentice have stayed a full month."

"I know that kid Yu Hang. He's very diligent and honest. Although he seems thin, he does nearly all the heavy and tiring transportation of timber without any complaint. Unexpectedly, he also couldn't escape the fate of being cruelly beaten. Ay... You guys should have known better. Why didn't you inquire about the place before sending your child there? Isn't that the same as sending your child into the pit of hell?" Another store's shopkeeper added with a voice filled with pity and regret.

"What are you people talking about! Be careful with your words! To maliciously slander and defame me right in front of my face, do you think that I, Zhang Dongming, can be easily bullied?" When Shopkeeper Zhang was young, he was a well-known ruffian in town. There were more than one murders associated with him, but he was the younger brother-in-law of the official registrar, who the county magistrate placed great importance on. Every time he caused trouble, the problem could be smoothly settled, and thus he became more and more fearless.

After being threatened by his fierce gaze, the people who whispered in the crowd immediately shut their mouths. Some of the more timid had even quietly withdrew from the circle for fear of being recognized by Shopkeeper Zhang and that he would take revenge on them in the future.

Madam Liu, who had gradually stopped crying, instantly burst into tears again when she heard his words. Standing next to the donkey cart, she gently touched her son's pallid face and cried, "My dear son! It's all Mother's fault! At that time, I should have done my best to stop you from being sent here even if I ended up with the reputation of being unfilial. Every time I saw you, you would tell us that everything was fine. You told us that you were eating and sleeping well and that we didn't have to worry about you... Why are you so foolish? If you had told Mother about your situation, I would have brought you home no matter what!"

Yu Hai's veins were popping out as he clenched his fists. He gritted his teeth and said, "Shopkeeper Zhang, I sent my son, who was alive and well, to your shop, but he ended up being on the verge of death. I want to know, what is the reason you would be so cruel to a ten year old child?"

Zhang Dongming was a little afraid of Yu Hai's tall and strong physique. However, when he saw the weak woman and young children around him, and that there were many people with weapons beside him, his confidence immediately boosted up again, "That's right. I was the one who hit him, so what are you going to do about it? Not only did he steal the head craftsmen's food, but he also stole money from the shop! I'm already considered soft-hearted for not beating that thief to death!"

"That's impossible! My eldest brother won't steal from others! You're wrongly accusing him!" Little Shitou clenched his small fist and swung it at Shopkeeper Zhang with resentment.

With his hands behind his back and a confident expression, Zhang Dongming ordered one of the workers behind him, "Go! Bring out the things that we found in Yu Hang's room!"

A moment later, the worker brought out a washed-out handkerchief, which contained several strings of copper coins. Each string had about fifty copper coins. Shopkeeper Zhang took the money and showed it to the crowd and sneered, "Have you looked clearly yet? There are a hundred and fifty copper coins here. Everyone should know that apprentices don't receive a wage. But we have found so much money at the head of Yu Hang's bed. If he didn't steal it, then where did it come from? Also, the fellow who lived with him said that he often smelled food in the middle of the night... The head craftsmen's meals had always been served by Yu Hang. So where did the food that he secretly ate at night come from? Well isn't it very obvious now!"

Seeing the 'evidence' that Shopkeeper Zhang presented, the onlookers immediately changed their stance and said, "That's unexpected. Yu Hang seems like such an honest child. I wouldn't have expected him to do such a thing!"

"Don't judge a book by its cover! I can understand stealing the head craftsmen's food since he's still a growing child and probably couldn't stand the hunger. But, to be so greedy as to steal the boss's money, that's unforgivable!

"If he got caught stealing, then there's nothing to say even if he was beaten to death..."

.....

When Xiaocao saw the people who had just cried injustice for them, turn against the 'thieves' one after another, she couldn't help but straightened her back and shouted, "Shopkeeper Zhang, you're accusing my eldest brother of being a thief, but did you personally see it? Or did you personally catch him stealing money? Isn't it too arbitrary to judge my older brother as a thief just because you found a few copper coins in his room? Dear folks, can we also randomly accuse you of being thieves if we find some money in your pockets?"

"No way! The money in my pocket is mine, which I worked hard to earn. How can it be stolen?"

"That's right, that's right! It's also a crime to make false accusations!"

.....

Xiaocao's clear eyes swept across everyone's face and she spoke in a strong and imposing voice, "That's right! In the same way, my father and I were the ones who gave my eldest brother the money when we came to send or pick up my younger brother from town! I never expected that my older brother was reluctant to use even a single coin and saved up the money, and thus led to such a disaster!"

Zhang Dongming glanced at her disdainfully with his murky triangular eyes and said, "Little girl, you should also use your brain when lying! If your family has money, they wouldn't have sent their child over

to be an apprentice! To say that you had provided him with dozens of copper coins each time, do you think that everyone is stupid?"

When faced with everyone's doubtful eyes, Xiaocao wasn't flustered and calmly said, "My family probably didn't have the ability to do so half a year ago! But now! Although we're not operating a big business like Shopkeeper Zhang, we do have a small business at the docks and are capable of earning two or three hundred copper coins a day! Let me ask you. I feel sad to see my eldest brother not being able to eat well and wear warm clothes, so I sent him some food and money. Is anything wrong with that?"

Suddenly, a voice came out of the crowd and shouted, "I recognize this little girl. She sells one copper coin meat dishes at the docks. When I was a porter at the docks, I had bought her family's braised food before. The braised food that Miss Xiaocao makes is delicious and they have excellent business. If you're too slow, they would be all sold out already!"

This voice had confirmed the authenticity of Xiaocao's words, so she continued, "Shopkeeper Zhang, the string of money in your hands were all personally strung together by me. I made the string with the different colored threads that my mother's leftover embroidery threads. I have sent money twice and given him food once, which is something that the workers in your shop should know about..."

"Last time, when I came out to shop with my classmate and passed by Zhang Ji's Carpentry Shop, I left twenty copper coins for my eldest brother..." Little Shitou spoke up once again.

Chapter 108

"My little brother and I brought a total of one hundred and seventy copper coins to our older brother. If there is an extra copper coin, then it'll be yours!" Xiaocao was confident about the number of coins on the string. Her older brother was very frugal. If there wasn't anything important, then he wouldn't touch his money.

Shopkeeper Zhang spread the string of coins on the palm of his hand. He silently counted the number of coins in his mind. Sure enough, there were one hundred and seventy copper coins in total, not one coin more or less. Originally, he got drunk and didn't hold back his strength when beating Yu Hang. Yu Hang had fallen unconscious after spitting out blood from the beating. After Yu Hang had fallen unconscious, he had found this money after searching through Yu Hang's room. Today, Yu Hang's family came here to get an explanation from him, so he hurriedly took out the money as an excuse.

The crowd surrounding them saw that Shopkeeper Zhang's expression had slightly changed. The people who were closer to him could clearly see the thread that was used to keep the copper coins together

were just as Xiaocao had said, a multicolored embroidery thread. The crowd's heart once again tilted towards Xiaocao's favor.

But Shopkeeper Zhang rudely and unreasonably replied, "Humph! You are just a group of poor country bumpkins. If you could, you would've split a copper coin in two. How would you be willing to give Yu Hang over a hundred copper coins as an allowance? Little girl, your tongue will be pulled out in hell for lying!"

"Shopkeeper Zhang, if you falsely accuse other people, you will be tortured after you die!" Xiaocao's jet-black eyes looked just like night sky as a cold ray of light flashed by her eyes, making people can't help but shudder, "Moreover, we pay one tael of silver each month for Rongxuan Academy's tuition for my younger brother. Since we're able to afford that, why wouldn't we be willing to give Yu Hang a trifling one hundred copper coins?"

The crowd had just noticed the short little boy who was wearing Rongxuan Academy's primary class uniform. They couldn't help but feel admiration and respect towards the little boy. After all, Rongxuan Academy wasn't just open to anyone. They had all heard that inside Rongxuan Academy's doors, there are hidden dragons and crouching tigers [1]. It was said that people from the big government officials', dukes', and marquises' residences were all trying to get into the school!

When the grandson of the prefectural magistrate of the Jinwei Prefecture passed the exam and entered the primary class, the prefectural magistrate had invited many people to dinner! Then wasn't this little boy a classmate of the magistrate's grandson? If he reported this to the prefectural magistrate, then it wouldn't be good for Shopkeeper Zhang!

Is Rong...Rongxuan Academy that great? Even if...the crown prince breaks the law, he will bear the same crime and punishment as commoners. Does it mean that just because you're the family of a student from Rongxuan Academy, you can steal things?" The shopkeeper tried to appear fierce as he was a coward at heart. He was trying to bluff his way out by making unreasonable excuses.

"Shopkeeper Zhang, how can you prove that it was this little brother who had stolen the copper coins?" Within the crowd, a handsome young man wearing a white scholarly robe, couldn't bear the injustice any longer so he spoke out for them. If Xiaocao was in the mood to check the young man out, she would've recognized him as the grandson of the foodie headmaster, Yuan Yunxi.

Shopkeeper Zhang's rat-like eyes looked around for a few moments before he looked at them and said, "But there is no one who can prove that it wasn't Yu Hang who had stolen these copper coins!"

Yu Xiaocao raised an eyebrow and sneered at him, "Shopkeeper Zhang if I can prove that he didn't steal these copper coins, what would you do?"

"That..." Shopkeeper Zhang frowned and hesitated.

"I have earned these copper coins by selling braised food, so there should be a small amount of oil on each of the copper coins. Can anyone bring me a basin of warm water?" Yu Xiaocao didn't look at Shopkeeper Zhang; her gaze was directed at the crowd.

The crowd around them suddenly became silent. They all had some misgivings regarding Shopkeeper Zhang, so they all avoided Xiaocao's gaze.

Xiaocao felt an ice-cold burst of wind attack her heart. No matter what time period it was, there were always not enough people who had the courage to stand up and confront evil forces!

Yuan Yunxi squeezed his way out of the crowd to a literary store not far from here. He pushed up his sleeves and filled a large basin with hot water. Yuan Yunxi squeezed through the crowd again with the basin of hot water and said, "Miss Xiaocao, the hot water is here!"

Yu Xiaocao gratefully looked at the handsome young man who had a warm heart. She sincerely thanked the young man and grabbed the string of copper coins from Shopkeeper Zhang's hand, "I will throw these copper coins into the water. If grease appears, then it'll prove that I wasn't lying. It'll also prove that I have indeed, given these copper coins to my brother."

After she finished speaking, she broke the string that was holding the coins together and threw all the copper coins into the basin of warm water. Sure enough, rainbow-like grease appeared in the warm water. The crowd looked at Shopkeeper Zhang with condemnation and disgust.

Shopkeeper Zhang continued to retort, "Just because there's grease on the coins, it doesn't prove that those coins belong to you. Maybe these copper coins were given to me by a butcher! Every day, I would go buy meat and oil, so it's natural for those copper coins to be stained with grease. My assistant had seen Yu Hang wandering around the account room before. Am I right, Xiaoxing?"

The person that Shopkeeper Zhang addressed as 'Xiaoxing' was the shop assistant that would help Xiaocao call Yu Hang out every time she visited. Originally, he was standing on the side, watching the scene. But when he was suddenly called out by the shopkeeper, he began to panic. After a burst of panic, under the shopkeeper's warning gaze, he said, "Yes, yes...in the past, I've seen Yu Hang sneaking and wandering around the account room...he must be harboring some evil intentions!"

Yu Xiaocao's gaze was as sharp as a knife, her voice was brimming with fierceness when she interrogated the shop assistant, "This big brother, you will have to take responsibility for what you say! Have you seen my brother enter the account room with your own eyes? Have you seen my brother steal money from the account room with your own eyes? Since you haven't, why are you so sure that my brother harbors evil intentions?"

The shop assistant was young, he had only said those groundless accusations under Shopkeeper Zhang's pressure. But he began to stutter and insist that he was right after Xiaocao's questioning.

Shopkeeper Zhang glared at his assistant while secretly scolding his assistant for being useless. He countered, "If he didn't have any evil intentions, why would he be secretly wandering around the account room? It's clear that he's doing that because he wants to steal money!"

"Shopkeeper Zhang, I've heard that your business has been doing well. Recently, I heard that you've received a job from an influential official from the capital, is that true?" Yu Xiaocao abruptly changed the topic of conversation.

Zhang Dongming stroked the goatee on his chin and proudly said, "That's right! The woodwares from our Zhang Ji Carpentry Shop is famous throughout the capital! The man who works for Royal Prince Yang, Sir Fang, has ordered a screen and a bed from our carpentry shop. Humph! It was already nice of me not to report this Yu boy to the officials for stealing things, so what does a beating count for?"

Yu Xiaocao indifferently looked at how Shopkeeper Zhang was intoxicated by his success and said, "Since the business in Zhang Ji Carpentry Shop is doing so well, the amount of money going in and out of the account room should be around a few hundred to a thousand copper coins, right? You said that my brother has been stealing for a long time, but instead of stealing more money from the mountain of money inside the account room, he only stole a hundred copper coins. Is my brother stupid or what?"

"Uh..." Shopkeeper Zhang choked on her words. He looked around before he replied, "Your older brother is timid, so he's afraid that he'll be discovered if he steals too much. Little girl, stop making

excuses and quickly take your brother away. I will be merciful and no longer look into the matter anymore."

"Shopkeeper Zhang, the gods can see everything. My older brother isn't a thief, the gods know this and will do something about it! I, Yu Xiaocao swear to the gods that everything I said is true! I dare to use my life as a guarantee that my older brother would've never stolen anything!" Yu Xiaocao simply exchanged a few words with the little divine stone in her heart before she vowed, "If these copper coins are stolen, my whole family is willing to be struck by lightning. I don't know if Shopkeeper Zhang is willing to make a serious vow like me?"

Although Shopkeeper Zhang had a guilty conscious, he pretended like he was unperturbed. He sneered and said, "Vow? It's only considered glib talk, who doesn't know how to do that?"

He looked up and pointed at the sky, which was swimming with thick, dark clouds. He said with a strange voice, "Gods, I, Zhang Dongming vow..."

Rumble, rumble...

Zhang Dongming hadn't even finished speaking yet when thunder began rolling in the dark clouds. Bright rays of lightning were faintly discernible in the clouds. Shopkeeper Zhang was frightened by this and retreated a few steps. In the beginning, his eyes were full of contempt but now they were full of fear.

It couldn't come true, could it? He had lived for over 50 years, and if he hadn't made thousands of oaths, then it should've at least been around hundreds, wasn't he still living well? Humph! It was only a little girl who put a lot of importance on making an oath. What could a verbal oath do? What had happened before must've been a coincidence. Today was a cloudy day so it's natural to see some thunder!

While Zhang Dongming's heart was rolling over and over, the other people didn't notice the ray of light that shot forth from Yu Xiaocao's wrist and directly into the dense and dark clouds in the sky.

Above the clouds, the God of Thunder lazily fiddled with the thunder hammer in his hand. The God of Thunder had blue skin and a pointed mouth. After he yawned, he finally absent-mindedly hit the hammer in his hand. After he hit the hammer, thunder immediately began to roll in the sky, enveloping the earth its muffled sound.

The Goddess of Lightning had silver hair reached the ground and an enchanting figure as if she had just walked out of a painting. She was directly facing the mirror in her hand, trying to pop the pimple that had mysteriously appeared on her face.

"Old wife, stop shamelessly showing off your beauty! We must make more lightning! The God of Thunder couldn't help but remind her of their job. However, the Goddess of Lightning had actually exploded in fury after hearing his words.

"Who are you calling 'old wife'? I'm charming and as beautiful as a flower; beautiful to the point that even birds and beasts are attracted by my looks... (Author's note: after a thousand words later) yet you've called me 'old' right in front of me! I think that you're tired of living!" The Goddess of Lightning raised the hand that was holding the mirror and a ray of lightning shot from her hand, heading straight towards the God of Thunder.

The God of Thunder easily dodged the lightning as he half-heartedly apologized, "Okay, I'm the one to blame. It's my fault for calling you an 'old wife', you are 'beautiful wife', is that okay? We were demoted to this tiny space where there is barely any spiritual energy. Every day, we hit the hammer, beat a drum, and look at a mirror. There are no prospects here. When will we be able to return to the ninth gate, where we can serve the Goddess of Spirits? I'm willing to give up being the God of Thunder to serve as a doorman just to return!"

When the Goddess of Lightning heard what the God of Thunder had said, she became extremely angry. She ruthlessly pinched him and hatefully said, "Wasn't this all because of you? You offended the silver wolf that the Goddess of Spirits doted the most on! Otherwise, why would we be exiled to this damned place?"

"How would I know that the beautiful silver wolf is the Goddess of Spirits' beloved pet? The silver wolf is too narrow-minded. I merely burned a few strands of his hair, but he went as far as to complain to the Goddess of Spirits." The God of Thunder felt very regretful such that his intestines had turned green.

At this time, a flash of golden light passed by, and a small golden cat which was the size of a child's fist, appeared in front of the God and Goddess of Thunder and Lightning.

"Which evildoer are you? Quickly reveal yourself!" The God of Thunder stood in front of the Goddess of Lightning and pointed the thunder hammer at the small golden cat in alarm.

"Humph! Little Thunder, you have a lot of courage! You dared to address this Divine Stone as 'evildoer!' Do you not want to return to Spiritual Space?" The small golden cat looked at him with disdain as it spoke.

Chapter 109

Spiritual Space? The God of Thunder and Goddess of Lightning looked at each other and saw a shocked expression on each other's faces. There was actually someone who knew of the Spiritual Space in this broken space? Could it be... a patrolling envoy sent by the Goddess of Spirits?"

"You...may I ask who you..." The Goddess of Lightning pushed aside the God of Thunder and tried to squeeze out a smile on her face. She was afraid that her hope might become nothing.

[Humph! As deities of the Spiritual Space, you actually don't know this Lord Divine Stone. To be so ignorant, it's no wonder you were punished and exiled to this shabby, little space! How sad! What a pity!] The small golden cat shook its head softly and sighed.

With the God of Thunder's fiery temper, how could he endure this mini cat's mocking? He was about to flare up when the Goddess of Thunder quickly stopped her husband and gave him a look. She smiled, "It was us who were ignorant and didn't recognize you. Were you sent by the Goddess of Spirits to check on us?"

[Goddess of Spirits? Humph! Humph! She doesn't have the power to order this Divine Stone around!] The little golden kitten lifted its head and snorted, [This Divine Stone serves under Goddess Nuwa and is the only one to be favored by her. Even the Goddess of Spirits have to give me some faces.]

The Great Pangu [1] split heaven and earth and created the world, Goddess Nuwa made humans with mud, and the Goddess of Spirits was leader of all spirits—these three gods of creation were known by all within the Primeval Realm. The Goddess of Spirits was the most famous one among the three gods of creation because not only did she create all spirits and living things besides humans, she also had an amazing ability—she was able to open up new spaces.

When the spiritual energy within the Primeval Realm was becoming sparse and the cultivation world became increasingly silent day by day, the Goddess of Spirits created the 'Spiritual Space' and set up new order for the cultivation world and the immortal world.

The Goddess of Spirit was generous, but she tended to shield those who were close to her. Had the fiery-tempered God of Thunder not offended the Goddess of Spirits, the God of Thunder and Goddess of Lightning would still be living leisurely within the Spiritual Space, like a fish in water.

This worn-down space was created by the Goddess of Spirits when she was still young and learning, so it wasn't very well made. As a result, the spiritual energy here was only one percent of the what the Spiritual Space held, which wasn't conducive for cultivators to cultivate in. Most of the deities here were immortals from other spaces, who were sent here to cultivate and gain experience. Of course, there were also a few like the God of Thunder and Goddess of Lightning, who had been sent down from the higher realms to reflect on their mistakes.

The God of Thunder and Goddess of Lightning had stayed here for about seven or eight hundred years. It had been so long that they thought they had been abandoned forever. They thought that they would have to just continue living aimlessly while hitting the thunder hammer daily as the God of Thunder. However, they had finally discovered new hope today.

The God of Thunder's eyes lit up after hearing the little divine stone's words. He moved closer with his pointed face and he spoke flatteringly, "May I ask what the Lord Divine Stone is here for?"

[As you know, as a mystic stone, it takes much longer and is more difficult to cultivate compared to humans and spiritual beings. It has been hundreds of millions of years since this Divine Stone had been obtained enlightenment under the refinement of Goddess Nuwa. For a long time, this Divine Stone had been cultivating smoothly and without obstacles. But I encountered an obstacle when I was close to making a transformation!] As the little divine stone recalled its days around Goddess Nuwa's side, a trace of nostalgia emerged within its golden eyes.

It was precisely because it had been irritated that it was stuck at the transforming stage that it went to provoke Goddess of Spirits' authority. As a result, it was banished to the mortal realm by the grudge-bearing Ling'er! The little divine stone was in an even worse situation than the God of Thunder and Goddess of Lightning. It was sent to even more barren and shabby space, where there was barely any spiritual energy to speak of.

After much difficulty, it finally found a place with a tint of spiritual energy—it recuperated in the creek in front of the Potala Palace in Tibet for several hundred years before being picked up by Lin Xiaowan, who went there on vacation. It used all its spiritual power to transport Lin Xiaowan's soul, who had died after falling down the stairs, to this realm and found a suitable body for her. However, it had accidentally acknowledged her as its master, forcing it to board the pirate ship.

Since the situation had already turned out like this, it decided to go with the flow and take things as they come. Although Yu Xiaocao was weak, she was kind in nature. Helping her was the same as helping itself. In order to successfully return to the higher realm as soon as possible, the little divine stone dropped its pride and dignity, and helped its weak master grow.

With its head lowered, the small golden kitten sighed and continued, [In order to overcome the obstacle, Goddess Nuwa let her sister—the Goddess of Spirits—send me to this space to cultivate experience. I inadvertently made a blood pact with a human and now I need to help her for a century. Once she dies, this Divine Stone can return.]

It turned out that it had come down from the Spiritual Space to gain experience! The God of Thunder and Goddess of Lightning looked at each other. When they were in the Spiritual Space, they had heard that the celestial stone, which was leftover after Goddess Nuwa patched the heavens, beside Goddess Nuwa had gained wisdom. However, they never expected that a rock could also cultivate into an immortal!

Since the divine stone could return to the Spiritual Space after a century, they needed to be on good terms with this Lord Divine Stone. Hopefully, when it returns, it could put in a good word for them in front of the Goddess of Spirits, even if it was just one or two sentences. Based on the Goddess of Spirits' benevolent and generous personality, she would definitely remember them and forgive their crimes.

"May I ask why Lord Divine Stone is looking for us, these little deities?" The Goddess of Lightning asked cautiously with a smile.

Seeing that the two were quite obedient, the little divine stone swayed its slender tail and 'meowed,' [This Divine Stone's master is in a difficult situation with a malicious businessman. I hope the two of you can act according to my orders later.]

"But... if he wasn't an extremely evil person and this little god punished him with the thunder penalty without permission, it would be hard to justify this to the Jade Emperor of this realm." Although the God of Thunder had a terrible temper, he was considered a good god who had principles.

The small golden kitten gave him a contemptuous look, [Are you an idiot?! Who told you to kill him? You just need to create a little thunder and lightning to scare that wicked man. Can you do it?]

[Understood! This little god knows what to do!] The Goddess of Lightning pulled on the God of Thunder, who was about to say something, and secretly glared at him, fearing that he would offend the divine stone. If that happened, they might have to stay here forever and never be able to get out of this situation.

The little divine stone was very satisfied with how tactful the Goddess of Lightning was. It held its head high and chest out as it paced on the clouds and nodded, [Very good! After you guys accomplish this task, consider it as this Divine Stone owing you a favor. When this Divine Stone returns to the Spiritual Space, I will definitely plea for the two of you in front of the Goddess of Spirits. You will just have to wait for the decree to be pardoned.]

"Thank you, Lord Divine Stone! Thank you, Lord Divine Stone." The God of Thunder and Goddess of Lightning thanked the little divine stone profusely after they heard its words. Right now, if someone else saw this scene, they would surely split their sides laughing. It was quite weird to see two dignified immortals bowing to a small golden kitten who was only the size of a child's fist.

Under the God of Thunder and the Goddess of Lightning's escort, the mini golden cat transformed into a golden light and returned to the multicolored stone on Yu Xiaocao's wrist. Had it not been afraid that it would attract too much attention, it would have chosen to appear on Xiaocao's shoulder in its cat form.

At this time, Shopkeeper Zhang Dongming, who didn't believe in heresy, pointed at the sky and vowed in a peculiar tone, "I, Zhang Dongming, swears to the heavens that if I wrongly accused the young lad whose surname is Yu, then let the Heavens strike me..."

Before he had finished speaking, the God of Thunder and Goddess of Lightning had received the little divine stone's order, and a loud sound of thunder rang out. The sound of thunder sounded as if there was a landslide and the ground splitting open. It felt as if the ground vibrating. Shopkeeper Zhang was so scared that his legs went limp and he fell onto the ground.

However, the Goddess of Lightning wasn't finished. She aimed the mirror in her hands at the signboard with the name 'Zhang Ji's Carpentry Shop'. A glaring beam of light flashed by and a bolt of lightning struck the signboard, turning it into a pile of ashes that happened to fall on Shopkeeper Zhang's head.

Shopkeeper Zhang recalled of the oath he just made and thought that he couldn't escape this calamity. He eyes went still with fear, and a feeling of wetness spread down his thighs.

After a few seconds of silence, the surrounding people began to talk amongst themselves.

"Heavens! Shopkeeper Zhang got struck by lightning! His oath has been fulfilled!"

"The Heavens has opened its eyes! It should just kill this black-hearted man! The grandson of Old Liu's family from the neighboring village, who was sent over to be an apprentice, was beaten until his legs were broken. Now, the boy can never use his legs anymore."

"He's crippled but at least he's still alive. Over the past decade or so, there had been two apprentices who disappeared from this woodworking shop. Shopkeeper Zhang told others that they stole some items and ran off. But I reckon that these two children had most likely met with a disaster."

"What a sin! The Heavens should've taken him away already!"

"What a great strike! It would be even better if it hit more accurately and strike this vile and rotten man to death!"

"Thank goodness, I borrowed twenty taels from here and there, and got my Si'er back. Otherwise, he would've ended up like the child from the Yu Family."

"Ay! I don't know if the child from the Yu Family can be saved."

...

Yu Xiaocao looked coldly at Shopkeeper Zhang, who lay paralyzed on the ground and had wet himself in fright. She said with hatred, "Shopkeeper Zhang, I already told you that 'the gods will always be looking over our actions'. It's not that you're not going to be punished but rather it wasn't time yet! Now, do you still insist that my brother stole money from your store?"

Shopkeeper Zhang had already woken up after fainting briefly. However, he didn't have any face to confront the wetness between his legs and the criticism of his neighbors. After hearing Xiaocao's words, his heart was filled with respect and fear towards the gods, so he decided to fake death until the end.

Yu Xiaocao saw the slight movement of Shopkeeper Zhang's eyelids, and knew that he was pretending to be unconscious. He had beaten the sensible and clever Yu Hang until his bones were fractured and left with internal injuries, so she obviously couldn't just let him go like that. She needed to give him a deep and unforgettable lesson!

Yu Xiaocao communicated with the divine stone in her mind, and then the little divine stone sent out its second command. Above the clouds, the God of Thunder picked up his thunder hammer once again, while the mirror within the Goddess of Lightning's hands flickered repeatedly.

In front of Zhang Ji's Carpentry Shop, the limestone slabs near where Shopkeeper Zhang lay prone on the ground were consecutively struck by thunderbolts. The broken pieces of limestones flew onto Shopkeeper Zhang's face and body.

Zhang Dongming's ears were about to be deafened by the sound of thunder. He felt as if the snow-white thunderbolt was almost about to land on him. How would he dare to continue to lay on the ground and pretend to be dead?

Disregarding how others would view him, he got up nimbly and tried to jump into the store to hide. But, as if they had eyes, the thunderbolts chased him the whole way and repeatedly struck at locations within one meter of him, cutting off the path into his store.

The onlookers were afraid of being implicated by the thunderbolts, and all backed away. Only the members of the Yu Family stood firmly in the midst of the lightning flashes and roaring thunder. With the fierce winds blowing behind them, they appeared somewhat solemn and tragic.

Yu Xiaocao looked at him with a stern gaze, "Shopkeeper Zhang, aren't you going to plead guilty? Or, are you only willing to repent sincerely after the Heavenly Thunder strikes you on the head and turn you into a pile of dispersing ashes?"

Chapter 110

"I plead guilty, I plead guilty! It's all my fault, I should die! I hit Yu Hang when I was drunk and I was afraid of the consequences, so I made it sound like he had stolen money from me instead! Heavens, please forgive me, ah, please forgive me!" Zhang Dongming had been scared out of his wits. He held his head in his hands as he knelt on the ground crying for forgiveness like a broken record.

Zhang Dongming actually had a good business acumen. Otherwise, the rich and noble people from the capital wouldn't bother coming to a backwards place like Tanggu Town to commission furniture. However, this man was not only miserly but he also had a fatal character flaw: he loved alcohol. In addition, his ability to handle alcohol was very poor. Every time he came across wine he had to drink it until he was drunk, and when he was drunk, he was given to violent tendencies.

Towards the people around him, especially the apprentices who came from poor and impoverished families, he would either beat them up with his fists or find some other way to torment them to satisfy his violent cravings. Thus, most of the apprentices at his store didn't end up staying long as they all tried to find any method they could to leave. As for those who had no options, they could only be like Yu Hang, silently enduring until they lost their lives to him.

Out of all of the apprentices, Yu Hang was considered to be one of the people who had lasted the longest time. He was naturally diligent and cautious when he worked, so the main teacher of the shop took better care of him. Thus, Shopkeeper Zhang had fewer opportunities to make him his punching bag.

Unfortunately, Shopkeeper Zhang was like a rabid dog when he was drunk and didn't differentiate between innocent and guilty people before he bit them. In fact, in his drunken stupor, he didn't have any qualms causing the head craftsman trouble. Every time he was drunk, the apprentices in the store were out of luck, and Yu Hang often couldn't escape the fate of being hit by Shopkeeper Zhang.

This time, the head craftsman had left to purchase some lumber and took one of the tall and strong apprentices to help. He left Yu Hang in the back courtyard to practice carving and shaving wood—the head craftsman had noticed that Yu Hang was hardworking and clever, so out of the kindness of his heart towards this apprentice, he wanted to transfer some woodworking techniques to him.

Yu Hang had been practicing his skills diligently and didn't expect calamity to suddenly fall upon him. Shopkeeper Zhang had been invited to drink alcohol with some people, and, when he staggered back to the shop, he headed straight towards the back court to satisfy his drunken urge to beat someone. Yu Hang had turned into his victim. Not only did he beat the child with his fists from head to toe, but the drunken man also picked up every piece of spare lumber there was around and hurled them at Yu Hang's tiny and weak little body. The boy tried to shield himself but in the end he spat up blood and stopped moving...

This wasn't the first time he had accidentally killed an apprentice. In fact, Shopkeeper Zhang never cared about the lives of his students who had come from powerless, destitute families. After killing them, he'd carelessly throw their corpses into a common grave and let the feral dogs drag their bodies away. Once

he got rid of any clues or evidence pointing towards him, he would then make a false countercharge. Shopkeeper Zhang would bring his partner along to visit the dead apprentice's family and then accuse the apprentice of stealing something from the store and running off. Then, the timid family members would even have to kowtow to him and ask for forgiveness.

Shopkeeper Zhang had a vague idea what Yu Hang's family situation was like. He was the son of an ordinary, poor fishing family that had relied on fishing for generations. Yu Hang had no background and no status, so even if he accidentally killed the boy, what was the worst that could happen? However, who would have thought that the Yu youngster had a little brother who was studying at Rongxuan Academy and that he would be on break and want to visit his brother today? Thus, his crime had been exposed prematurely.

In actuality, being exposed wasn't really a big deal either. All he needed to do was make up something that made it Yu Hang's fault and send his poor, trash family away. After all, weren't impoverished fishermen, who were on the bottom of the social ladder, all cowardly and timid? Why was there a silly girl who managed to lead him by the nose and make him make a vow to the heavens? Usually making a heavenly oath meant nothing, but why did the heavens act today and send lightning to punish him...

In order to fix the problem now, his only choice was to kneel on the ground and ask the heavens for mercy and forgiveness! Zhang Dongming repeatedly knocked his forehead on the ground and the sound of his head tapping on the ground echoed. When he lifted his head, people could see a purple mark forming on his face, "I was wrong, I admit my guilt! I am willing to pay for all of Yu Hang's medical fees! If, on the off hand, things get worse, then I will take charge of all of his funeral expenses!"

"Pah! Surnamed Zhang, stop cursing my older brother!! Is being well off really that great? You should know, everything that people do here on earth is seen by the Heavens!! If you sin too much, don't be surprised when the Heavens decide to punish you!!" When the lightning had struck, Yu Xiaocao had been shielded behind her father. Now, without the slightest bit of fear on her face, she walked forward a step with the flash of lightning behind her. It made her seem as if she was a child sent by the Heavens.

Yu Yunxi had been standing for a long time in the midst of the crowd. He serenely watched the slightly-built, fearless girl in the middle who had a cold expression on her face. A faint sense of respect for her rose in his heart along with another indescribable feeling.

Although Shopkeeper Zhang wanted to refute the little girl in front of him in his heart, he continued to kowtow to the heavens and admit his wrongs. As he apologized and repented, the dense lightning in the skies slowly dissipated and the thick, dark clouds in the sky gradually disappeared.

After witnessing this phenomenon, the townspeople of Tanggu Town soon had a saying based on this event, 'If you do bad things you'll get punished by lightning'.

Yu Hang, who had been diagnosed as a hopeless case by the doctor from Tongren Medicine Hall, slowly opened his eyes after the black clouds scattered. With a very weak voice, he called out at Liu Muyun, who had been sobbing endlessly, "Mother..."

The people surrounding them all commented one after another, "The Heavens have eyes! The gods have not only punished the evil person but also saved Yu Hang's life..."

"Are you awake, Xiaosha? What part of you feels uncomfortable?" Yu Hai softly asked his weak son as he supported his wife who was crying tears of joy.

Yu Hang barely managed to squeeze out a placating smile on his supernaturally thin face and replied with great difficulty, "Father, Mother! I'm okay, I'm sorry for making you two worry..."

"It's all my fault, it's all my fault! If I had made you come back earlier, then you wouldn't have encountered such a bad fate..." Madam Liu had cried so hard that her eyes had swollen up until she almost couldn't open them. After the crazy rollercoaster events of the day, she felt physically and emotionally exhausted.

Yu Xiaocao noticed that her older brother was struggling in an effort to sit up and hastily stopped him, "Older Brother, you broke three of your ribs! Doctor Sun had just done his best to bandage you up, but you're absolutely not allowed to flail around!" Mother, it's a good thing that Older Brother has woken up, so stop crying. Your body is not very healthy, so if you keep crying, it'll make Older Brother very worried for you."

"Older Brother, let's go home! Father and Shitou will protect you, so there will be no other bad people who can bully you!!" Little Shitou's eyes had turned as red as a rabbit's eyes. He slightly sobbed as he tried to comfort Yu Hang. Yu Hang did his best to smile back at him.

However, Yu Xiaocao had turned around to face Shopkeeper Zhang, who was picking himself up from the ground, "Shopkeeper Zhang, we're going to take my older brother back home. Do you have any problems with that?"

"Ah...usually, if the apprentice leaves the store before finishing their training, a penalty fee needs to be paid..." Shopkeeper Zhang secretly shot a glance at the dark clouds near the horizon as he stood up with great effort. He barely managed to steady his weak legs as he patted himself on the chest.

When Third Young Master Zhou heard the news, he had hurriedly rushed over from the docks. He dismounted from his horse when he got there and broke through the crowd. He came just in time to hear Shopkeeper Zhang's shameless comment, so he coldly snorted and said, "Surnamed Zhang! We haven't even settled your debt from injuring someone, so how do you have the face to ask for a penalty fee?! How about this, let's go to the county magistrate's office and settle things there?"

Everyone in town knew that Zhenxiu Restaurant's business had been roaring hot. After all, there was a three month wait to reserve a private room there. In addition, with the imperial merchant Zhou Family behind the young master, how could Shopkeeper Zhang not know the status of this youth in front of him?

"Third Young Master Zhou, what sort of relationship do you have with Yu Hang?" From Zhang Dongming's perspective, one was the son of a prosperous, rich family, and the other was the son of a poor fisherman. There was not much in common between the two. However, judging from the tone of Third Young Master Zhou's voice, why did it sound like he was on the side of the Yu Family?

Zhou Zixu casually brushed off some dust from his clothes as he inquired about Yu Hang's current condition. In addition, he learned the whole story of what had happened, including all of the details. Only then did he slant a sidelong glance at Shopkeeper Zhang, who he had coldly ignored the whole time. He stated solemnly, "This young girl, Miss Yu, is someone I consider to be my younger sister! Whoever wants to bully my younger sister is telling me that they don't want to have a good relationship with me, Third Young Master Zhou!"

Yu Xiaocao rolled her eyes inwardly, 'Surnamed Zhou ah, when did this girl become your younger sister? At most, we are only a couple of business associates, okay?'

Zhou Zixu seemed to be able to sense her inner thoughts and turned around to look at her reassuringly before he turned back to faintly smile at Shopkeeper Zhang. For a split second, it seemed like the small and frail looking figure of a young man had suddenly become tall and lofty.

In order for Shopkeeper Zhang to be able to conduct business as easily as a fish swimming in water, he naturally had a good sense of who he could offend and who he had treat carefully. Although Third Young Master Zhou was young in age, the patriarch of the Zhou Family regarded him highly. It was obvious that this young man's future would be bright in the future.

Furthermore, Third Young Master Zhou had a close relationship with the son of County Magistrate Wu, and he was in the wrong in this situation. If they really did bring this to the county magistrate's office, Shopkeeper Zhang was afraid that the one who would lose would still be him...

Zhang Dongming immediately showed off his acting skills by 'changing expressions to fit the situation'. A large smile crossed his face as he said cloyingly, "I really didn't have the eyes to tell the difference between trash and treasure. Since Third Young Master Zhou is helping us settle our differences, this dumb one will return the apprenticeship contract back to the Yu Family in consideration for Third Young Master Zhou's reputation..."

After seeing the extent of Yu Hang's injuries, Third Young Master Zhou was angered and aggrieved at how vicious Shopkeeper Zhang was to the young boy. He cut off Shopkeeper Zhang's flattery short and frostily replied, "Shopkeeper Zhang, there is no need to do this out of concern for my reputation. We can find out who is truly at fault at the magistrate's office! Simo, please go to the county magistrate's office to report a case, tell them that the Zhang Ji Carpentry Shop's shopkeeper had seriously hurt someone while drunk..."

"Wait a moment, wait a moment!" Although it was a chilly spring day, Shopkeeper Zhang suddenly felt cold sweat dripping down his bruised forehead. He immediately bowed deeply and repeatedly pleaded, "Young Master Zhou, tell me what needs to be done and this lowly one will immediately obey!"

Third Young Master Zhou glanced back at the silent and taciturn Xiaocao and quietly asked, "Xiaocao, how do you want to handle this Shopkeeper Zhang..."

"Shopkeeper Zhang violently beat up my older brother and caused injuries serious enough that he almost died. In addition, he also caused severe psychological damage to him. We'll waive the psychological fees. As for the fees for medications, nursing, disability, and nutrition...he needs to pay for all of these to repent for his mistake. Furthermore, Shopkeeper Zhang falsely accused my older brother of stealing from him and damaged his reputation. He must sincerely apologize to my brother in front of everyone here!"

Zhou Zixu watched as the tiny figure in front of him, with her hands clasped behind her back, pretended to have the demeanor of an adult. Everything she said had made sense, and it only made him feel that she was an adorable little girl. He couldn't help but soften his gaze towards her and reveal a warm and gentle smile on his face.

"Did you hear all of that? Medication fees, nursing costs...all of it. Given our status as fellow townspeople, I'll cut a deal with you. Pay out a hundred taels as a courtesy okay? That won't be considered too expensive, right?" Third Young Master Zhou was as gentle as a spring day towards his friends, but towards his enemies, he was as severe and ruthless as the cold winter day.

Originally he had wanted to extort the man for around three hundred to five hundred taels, but he was afraid that Xiaocao and her family would then be slandered as blackmailers. So he modified his request to a more reasonable one hundred taels as compensation for Yu Hang's injuries.

Shopkeeper Zhang obviously couldn't say anything at this point. His heart dripped blood at the thought of the terms but he still kept a smile on his face as he nodded furiously, "Not too much, not too much! Young Master Zhou's terms are very fair, very very fair!"

Third Young Master Zhou took the banknote worth a hundred taels from Shopkeeper Zhang's hands and then turned to face Yu Hang, who was lying in the donkey cart. He hinted, "The compensation has been paid in full, so quickly apologize now! We still need to go back to the medicine hall to check on his condition again!"

Shopkeeper Zhang really didn't want to apologize to his poor and humble apprentice. However, if he didn't do it, it was likely that he'd be brought to the county magistrate's office——in that case, then he'd really lose his face and reputation. After considering the facts, he decided to assume an air of sincerity and figuratively pinched his nose as he apologized to Yu Hang.