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First, Xiaocao stir-fried salt, pepper, and anise star. Next, she drained the water and cured the ducks with the stir-fried salt for two hours. During this time, she also heated up the braising sauce, and then marinated the ducks with the old braising sauce for another two hours. The last steps were to cook them and wait for them to cool down. If there was enough time, the time for curing and marinating in old braising sauce should be doubled!

Just as Yu Xiaocao, with the help of her eldest maternal aunt, was busily making the preparations, her eldest granduncle's little eight year old grandson ran through the door panting and shouted, "Xiaocao! Second Uncle said your maternal uncles didn't eat breakfast yet, so just make something simple to fill their stomachs first. They can have a more sumptuous meal in the evening!"

"Yu Zhou, how dare you call me 'Xiaocao'? You should call me 'older sister', understand?" Xiaocao knocked on the kid's forehead. Yu Zhou was the son of her oldest uncle from her eldest granduncle's family. He had a strong and honest appearance, and looked rather cute.

Yu Zhou made a silly face at her and said reluctantly, "Aren't you just a little over two months older than me? Look, you're not even as tall as me. It's so humiliating to call you 'older sister'!"

"Even if I'm older than you by a day, you will still have to call me 'older sister'! Are you going to say it or not? If you don't, I'll go tell Eldest Granduncle!" Yu Xiaocao teased him on purpose.

With a bitter expression on his little face, the little fellow glared at Xiaocao and shouted, "Tattletale!"

Xiaocao estimated that the duck liver and intestine being braised in the pot should be about ready, so she went into the kitchen and cut out a piece. As if she was teasing a little puppy, she grinned and said, "Come on, call 'older sister'. If you call me 'older sister', you can eat this piece of duck liver ah!"

As soon as Yu Zhou entered the door, he had smelled the scent of braised meat. He inhaled deeply and couldn't shift his eyes away from the piece of duck liver. He was about to drool as he asked, "Really? If I call you 'older sister', this piece of braised meat will be mine?"

Yu Xiaocao was inwardly laughing her head off. She had thought that this kid would have a strong backbone, but it seemed like he was also a little glutton. But, she couldn't really blame him. It was already very fortunate that the villagers usually had enough to eat. There really weren't many people who could eat meat dishes when it wasn't some special holiday. It was no wonder that Yu Zhou longed for meat!

"Of course! When did this Older Sister ever go back on my words?" Yu Xiaocao stopped teasing him and looked at him sincerely.

Yu Zhou had long heard of his second uncle's family's braised food. He also often followed his father to the docks, so he had firsthand experience of the popularity of the one copper coin braised dish. In fact, one copper coin wasn't very expensive, but his father was afraid that Xiaocao and her sister would refuse to accept their money. Thus, they had never bought it before.

He had pestered his father many times, but he had never succeeded. Usually, his father would strictly restrict him and his older brother from visiting Second Uncle's house because he was afraid that they would arrive while his second uncle's family was braising food. As a result, he wanted to have a taste of the braised food even in his dreams!

The little fellow was usually a child with a strong backbone, but his heart was slightly wavering in front of delicious food: 'Wasn't it just calling her older sister? Xiaocao is originally older than me, so there's nothing shameful about that.'

With that thought in mind, he blurted out, "Older Sister, Older Sister Xiaocao! This... Is this your family's one copper coin braised food? My father said your family doesn't have it easy, so it's best to save this to sell at the docks!"

Xiaocao saw that he kept swallowing his saliva and his eyes were reluctant to leave the duck liver in her hands, yet he still tried to resist his desire for tasty food. She sighed with emotion inwardly: 'The kids in Eldest Granduncle's family are quite sensible ah!'

"This duck liver was made for us to eat ourselves. Here, taste it for me! How is it?" Yu Xiaocao took a step forward and wanted to stuff the small piece of duck liver into his mouth.

The little fellow covered his mouth, retreated, and shook his head, "Older Sister Xiaocao, your family has guests today. It's better to leave them for the guests to eat..."

"What a benevolent child!" Eldest Maternal Aunt laughed and praised as she kneaded the dough to make flatbread.

Yu Xiaocao said with a broad smile, "Alright! Don't retreat anymore, or else you will step on our family's vegetables! There's still a lot of duck liver and duck gizzard in the pot, so it's fine if you eat one!!"

As she spoke, she grabbed Yu Zhou's arm and shoved the duck liver into his mouth.

Yu Zhou had no choice but to eat the piece of duck liver. The duck liver, which was braised with a special braising sauce, was soft and fragrant. That mellow fragrance lingered on the tip of his tongue for a long time. It was so delicious that he could not help but tremble.

"Older Sister Xiaocao, I heard that you were the one who came up with the idea of braised food! Your culinary skills are amazing!! I have never eaten something so delicious before." Yu Zhou immediately became a loyal fan of Xiaocao's cooking.

Xiaocao smiled. To be subdued with just a small piece of duck liver, he was indeed a little glutton, "Yu Zhou, help older sister with something. Go to the neighboring village's Old Luo's family and buy some tofu for me! I'll treat you to something good later!"

"I can help you go buy the tofu, but you don't have to treat me to a meal! Our family has already eaten breakfast!" The little foodie Yu Zhou took the two copper coins Xiaocao handed to him and skipped out of the front door.

Due to Xiaocao's insistence, the Yu Family had changed their eating habits of eating two meals a day to eating three meals a day. She had already eaten breakfast, but she forgot that her maternal uncles still had the habit of eating two meals a day. It was almost nine in the morning now, so it was time to eat their morning meal!

It seemed like they had to save the salted duck for tonight. As a result, there would be more than enough time to salt the ducks, and it would also be more flavorful by then.

For the morning meal, Yu Xiaocao prepared to make 'duck blood stewed with tofu', 'stir-fried mushrooms with greens', 'braised eggplant', and 'smashed cucumber salad'. The staple food was flatbread made with half coarse grain and half wheat flour. There was also a pot of tomato and egg soup.

After leaving behind a small plate of each dish, she and her eldest maternal aunt carried the food basket and pot, and walked valiantly to her family's field.

Eldest Granduncle's family's farmland was closer to the village, so she had seen her eldest granduncle's hale and hearty figure from afar. The old man was working hard in the fields with his eldest son, eldest grandson, and two daughters-in-law.

"Eldest Granduncle, have you eaten yet? Let's eat together!" Yu Xiaocao was quite close to her eldest granduncle. She felt that her eldest granduncle's family was very kind and compassionate.

Yu Lichun straightened his waist, stuck the hoe in the ground, and looked over cheerfully. He said, "We have eaten already! Xiaocao, are you bringing food over to your father and uncles?"

"Yes! Eldest Granduncle, Oldest Uncle, eat some more with us!" Yu Xiaocao smiled sincerely.

Oldest Paternal Uncle Yu Xi waved his hands at her and said with a smile, "No need! Quickly deliver the food to your father. Don't starve the guests!"

Yu Xiaocao chatted briefly with her eldest granduncle before she picked up the basket again and walked towards her family's farmland. It was true that 'many hands made light work'! The four men and Madam Liu had already turned up more than half of their three plots of land. It looked like they would be able to finish in the afternoon.

"Father—Mother—Eldest Maternal Uncle, Second Maternal Uncle, Third Uncle, it's time to eat!" Yu Xiaocao put the basket on the edge of the field and shouted with her hands around her mouth.

Wang Ergou and his wife was currently eating their meal beside the edge of the field. Wang Ergou sniffed and then looked at Xiaocao's family's food basket with a grin. He moved closer and asked, "Xiaocao, what tasty food did you make? It smells really good!"

Without waiting for Xiaocao to respond, his wife had twisted his ear and pulled him back. She yelled at him, "Are you a child? You actually have the shame to go ask for food? Even if you're not ashamed, I am!"

When Wang Ergou was young, he was also a lazy, good-for-nothing loafer, who engaged in misdemeanors. Fortunately, he married a powerful wife. His wife was born in poverty and had strong self-esteem. She had gotten rid of most of Wang Ergou's bad habits.

"It's alright, Auntie Wang. I cooked a lot of food. Let's eat together." Yu Xiaocao offered.

Wang Ergou was overjoyed and was about to agree but his wife pinched him on his waist. Wang Ergou's wife smiled at Xiaocao and said, "Xiaocao, we're full already. Auntie is very grateful for your offer—Go, go down to the field! We need to finish plowing these two plots of land today..."

Yu Hai, who had arrived at the edge of the field, watched the pitiful-looking Wang Ergou being taken down to the fields to work by his wife. He couldn't help but say, "Ergou'zi is blessed to have such a good wife..."

"Father, you're also quite lucky ah!" Yu Xiaocao winked at Madam Liu's direction.

Liu Pei chuckled and said, "That's right! Isn't it your good fortune to be able to marry my younger sister?"

Madam Liu's face turned bright red from her older brother and her daughter's teasing. She glared at them, and then quickly lowered her head to ladle the soup. Yu Hai, on the other hand, smiled and nodded incessantly, "Yes, that's right. I have accumulated three lifetimes of good fortune to be able to marry Muyun!"

"Why are you acting like them?!" Madam Liu's face was brimming with love as she gave him a chiding gaze. After that, she looked towards the bowl of tomato and egg soup, which looked very appetizing with its red and white colors, and asked, "What's this red thing? It's not chili pepper, is it?"

"There were a few ripe tomatoes in our backyard, so I made a soup with them. It's very refreshing. Everyone should try it!" The soup should be served before the meal. Yu Xiaocao helped distribute the bowls and chopsticks to everyone's hand.

Yu Jiang moved closer and looked at the food basket. He was stunned, "What a sumptuous breakfast ah..."

Yu Xiaocao handed him a bowl of tomato and egg soup and gave him a pair of chopsticks. Yu Jiang didn't know whether he should accept them or not, "I... I have already eaten..."

"Then eat a little more with us! It's unreasonable to not provide a meal for you when you helped out with the work." Eldest Aunt helped urge him. Yu Xiaocao also continued to persuade him.

The duck blood stewed with tofu had conquered everyone's taste buds. The tofu was smooth and tender, while the duck blood was fresh and tasty. As for the braised duck giblets, the duck gizzard was very chewy, and the duck intestines were very delicious. The stir-fried mushrooms with greens had the perfect combination of colors, fragrance, and taste. It was very refreshing and had the perfect mouthfeel. With a thick sauce, the braised eggplant was glossy and flavorful... With the addition of the tomato and egg soup, which they had never eaten before, it was much more lavish than the meals that ordinary people served to their relatives.

"Hey! Didn't we tell you guys to just make something simple? Why did you make so much food?" Liu Pei looked at his wife with slight anger, as if he was blaming her for not stopping Xiaocao. His younger sister's family's living conditions wasn't very good.

Yu Xiaocao hastily said, "Eldest Uncle, all the ingredients were homegrown and gathered on the spot, except for the tofu, which cost two copper coins. You guys have worked hard in the fields, so, of course, you have to eat a good meal. Otherwise, how would you have enough strength to work?"

Yu Hai gave his two elder brothers-in-law a pancake each, and told his own younger cousin, "This duck blood stewed with tofu should be eaten while it's still hot. Our Cao'er's cooking is pretty good. I guarantee that you will want to eat another meal after eating this. Quickly eat! Everyone, quickly eat!"

The men cast away their inhibitions and began eating. They shouted fervent praises as they ate. Yu Hai also chimed in with the compliments, like he was Old Wang selling melons—praising his own products. Yu Xiaocao was embarrassed by their praises. She smiled and said, "Father, I'm worried about Older Brother being home alone, so I'll go back first. Just leave the bowls and chopsticks here. I'll come get them later."

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"Go, go! You don't need to come back later. It's fine to let your mother take back the tableware later. We, as fully-grown men, can finish it soon," Liu Pei said. He poured half a bowl of duck blood stewed with tofu and soaked the flatbread in the stew. Then, he proceeded to gulp down the soup with relish.

Yu Hai also agreed with his eldest brother-in-law's words. He said to Xiaocao, "Hurry and take your eldest maternal aunt back home to eat, or else the food is going to get cold."

After she finished eating, Xiaocao put all her energy into making salted duck. The salted duck that she made was an improved version of the Nanjing salted duck's recipe. After all, she didn't have all the seasoning and spices she needed for the original recipe. However, she realized that she can improve the braised food's taste by using the mystic-stone water to braise the food, making it much tastier than before.

Looking at the time, the marinating and braising process should be completed. Xiaocao looked outside like a thief and she saw her eldest maternal aunt and Xiaolian, who had returned home from selling braised food. They were busy tending the vegetable field, so Xiaocao was at ease as she summoned the little divine stone.

[Why did you call this Divine Stone to come out?] A ray of golden lightning rapidly entered the kitchen, and then a haughty voice emerged within Xiaocao's mind.

Xiaocao bent over and carried the little fellow on the palm of her hand. She gently stroke its fur as she smiled flatteringly at it. The little divine stone felt very comfortable as it squinted its eyes and purred, [Tell me, what do you need this lord to help you with?]

Ever since the little divine stone heard the emperor emeritus, whose alias was Fifth Lord, call himself 'this lord', it had also started to call itself that from time to time, feeling that it seemed rather chic.

"One of the two ducks need to be slightly air-dried. My omnipotent Lord Glutinous Dumpling, can you help me?" Yu Xiaocao used her fingers to scratch the little kitten's chin as she fawned over him.

[Humph! You're bothering this Divine Stone over such a trifle matter?] Although the little divine stone felt very comfortable as Xiaocao scratched him, there was a sense of impatience within its tone.

[Seeing that you have served this lord very well, I'll reluctantly help you again just this once!] The little golden kitten waved one of its paws, and one of the pickled ducks quickly shriveled and dried at a speed that was visible to the naked eye.

When Xiaocao saw that it looked about ready, she quickly told the little divine stone to stop. If the duck was dried out too much, it would also impact the salted duck's taste.

At this time, the men had returned from the fields. She could hear Liu Pei blustering loudly, "Younger Sister, your family's sweet potatoes haven't sprouted yet, right? That's okay since your family doesn't have a lot of land. We can just bring some over from our fields. It won't interfere with the sweet potatoes' growth."

Yu Hai gulped down a few mouthfuls of cooled boiled water. Then, he smiled and said, "We're not going to plant sweet potatoes this year. Xiaocao said she wants to try and plant some watermelons. She just asked the owner of Zhenxiu Restaurant help her find some seeds."

"Watermelon? Will that thing be filling enough?" The two brothers, Liu Pei and Liu Han, had never heard of watermelons before, so they couldn't help but ask in unison. It was inevitable that farming families would be most concerned about filling their stomachs.

However, Yu Jiang often traveled outside of the village and was more well-informed. So, he had heard of watermelons before, but still asked with slight concern, "I know that watermelon is a kind of fruit. But Second Brother, none of us had ever planted any watermelons before. What if the climate here isn't suitable for planting it? If you have no harvest, what will you do?"

"That won't happen! I have confidence in my family's Cao'er!" This was mainly because the Yu Family had earned some money from their business recently, so they didn't need to rely on that three plots of farmland to make a living. Thus, Yu Hai had unconsciously gained confidence.

Yu Jiang also felt that his little niece seemed very capable, so he didn't persuade him anymore. He smiled and said, "Then that's good! I can't wait to taste it!"

"Third Uncle, there's a lot of new things for you to try in the future! Have you heard of salted ducks? You can try a few pieces later!" With the little golden kitten in her embrace, Xiaocao poked her head out of the kitchen, made a funny face at him, and exclaimed cheerfully.

"Salted duck? I've never tasted it before, is it tasty?" Saliva began to flood in Yu Jiang's mouth when he remembered the duck blood stewed with tofu and tomato egg soup he ate at noon.

Yu Xiaocao raised her imaginary tail in a rather arrogant manner and said, "The products made by Xiaocao are certainly always premium products. I'm developing this dish for Zhenxiu Restaurant. How can it be lacking?"

"What? Did Zhenxiu Restaurant come to ask you for more recipes again? They earned a lot of money from selling the roasted chicken, yet your family didn't even receive anything. This time, you can't let them take advantage of you again. When you sell them the salted duck recipe, ask them to give you a portion of the sales!" Yu Jiang was quite business-minded!

Yu Xiaocao also felt that earning royalties was much more profitable than making them pay a buyout price. She lowered her head and ponder over the feasibility of this matter. However, Yu Hai didn't think that it was a good idea. After all, Third Young Master Zhou had taken good care of them, so how could they raise the price?

At this time, Yu Xiaocao slowly nodded her head. "Third Uncle is right! In one day, Zhenxiu Restaurant can sell at least 30 to 50 salted ducks without a problem. If we earn a mace for each salted duck, then we can earn three to five taels in a day. We will be able to earn over 100 taels in a month and in a year... Wow! I feel like we've been selling my recipes for too cheap!"

Yu Hai hesitated for a moment before he said, "Isn't a mace too much?"

However, Yu Jiang didn't think so. He widened his eyes and said, "Second Brother, do you know how much a roasted chicken costs in Zhenxiu Restaurant? Even the smallest chicken there cost five taels of silver! Five taels of silver!! At most, a chicken would cost them a few dozens of copper coins. This means that they earn a hundred folds of profits! I think that even a mace is still too little!!"

As Yu Jiang thought about the sales and profits that Zhenxiu Restaurant earned each day, he felt injustice for his second brother. If he had been earning royalties from the sales, then his second brother would've become the richest man in Dongshan Village!! It was such a big loss!!!

"Okay, go wash your hands. After finishing the evening meal, we still need to return home!" The evening meal in this era was usually eaten around 4 pm. Madam Han calculated that they would be able to return to the village by the time it got dark. Tomorrow, they still needed to cultivate their own land!

For dinner, in addition to the large plate of salted duck, there was 'stir-fried green tomatoes', 'stir-fried chili pepper with duck eggs', 'string beans salad', and 'sautéed lettuce with oyster sauce'. For soup, she made the light-flavored, light 'egg drop soup with malabar spinach'. The staple food was dried brown rice with sorghum. There was a large quantity of each dish. After all, the appetite of several adult men wouldn't be small!

"Younger Sister, your family's Xiaocao is very capable. Even a skilled person who has been working in the kitchen for over twenty years can't be compared to her! People would drool just by smelling these dishes!" Madam Han sighed as she looked at Xiaocao. If she had a daughter like Xiaocao, even if she didn't have a son, she would still be very happy.

After Madam Han entered the Liu Family, she had given birth to three daughters. Although her father-in-law and mother-in-law didn't say anything, it was Madam Han's sore spot. As she grew older, she gave up the hope of giving birth to a son. But when she saw other people with both a daughter and a son, her heart would feel like it had been stabbed by a needle, feeling a bone-piercing pain.

Liu Pei understood his wife the most. When he saw her lonely eyes, he knew what she was thinking. He immediately changed the subject and said, "Let's eat, let's eat! Even if you're not hungry, just looking at Xiaocao's cooking will make you want to eat at least two bowls of it!"

Liu Han, who was honest and dull, opened his mouth and said, "Younger Sister, your family doesn't have very good living conditions either. We are all one family, there's no need to make so many dishes. A few pieces of coarse flatbread and a plate of salted vegetables is enough for us. Don't make your life more difficult just to make a meal for us..."

Madam Liu felt touched as she looked at her older brothers with a gentle smile and softly said, "Older Brother, you can rest assured! We won't be in a difficult position just by feeding you guys one or two times. The duck and the duck eggs were given to us by someone else. The green vegetables and whatnot are all harvested from the fields, so it doesn't cost much money. You can eat the meal with ease and confidence!"

After they heard what she said, the menfolk no longer held back. Each person held a large and thick porcelain bowl that was filled to the brim with two types of grain and began to gobble the food down without any restraint.

The salted duck's white skin was both tender and plump, but not greasy at all. It was fragrant and tasted delicious. Everyone seated on the table praised Xiaocao's salted duck for being 'fragrant', 'very tender', and 'extremely delicious'. Once again, Yu Jiang seriously reminded Xiaocao that this duck will definitely garner large sales, so she must ask Zhenxiu Restaurant to give her a portion of the sales.

Yu Xiaocao nodded her head repeatedly as she promised him. She was pondering over whether she should personally go to town tomorrow to let Third Young Master Zhou have a taste of the salted duck and ask him about the watermelon seeds.

The whole family was perfectly satisfied with the food. Not long after they finished eating, their maternal relatives said their goodbyes and returned home. They needed to climb over a few mountains to return home. Even those who were accustomed to walking the mountain road needed two and a half hours to return home. By the time they got home, the sky would've been very dark already.

Xiaocao cut the remaining dried salted duck in half, and asked Xiaolian give one of the halves to Madam Mao. She also instructed Xiaolian to tell Madam Mao that the dried salted duck would taste very good if she sliced it into thin pieces and then steamed it. The dried salted duck and the salted duck that they had just eaten tasted the same, but the process to make it was different.

Xiaocao hung the leftover dried salted duck under the eaves. The temperature at night was still very cool right now, so the dried salted duck's flavor won't change even if she left it there for a night.

Early the next morning, Yu Xiaocao woke up and told her parents that she was going to town. In the passing, she would also pick up Little Shitou, who should be having another break from school again.

Due to Xiaocao's apparent capability and maturity, Yu Hai and his wife had gradually stopped treating her as a child. If any matter arose in the family, they would always discuss it with their younger daughter. If they had differing opinions on a matter, they would also subconsciously ponder over their younger daughter's suggestion.

Today, Yu Hai decided that he would go sell braised food at the docks alone and let Xiaolian accompany Xiaocao to town. Since the two sisters had each other as a companion, they weren't lonely on the road to town.

Yu Xiaocao returned to her room and retrieved some money. After that, she took the remaining half of the dried salted duck and led the donkey cart out of the house with Xiaolian. Just as they left their house, they saw Madam Mao hurriedly rushing over. When she saw the two sisters and the donkey cart behind them, as well as the half of a portion of dried salted duck in Xiaocao's hand, Madam Mao immediately smiled from ear to ear. Even though she already knew the answer to the question, she still deliberately asked, "Xiaocao, Xiaolian, where are you sisters going?"

"Auntie Qian, we have some matters to attend to in town," Xiaolian politely replied.

Madam Mao tried to restrain herself, but she still couldn't refrain herself from asking, "Xiaocao, regarding the matter that Auntie asked you about..."

"Auntie, how did the duck that I sent you yesterday taste?" Xiaocao didn't answer her, instead, she asked her a question in response.

Madam Mao smiled embarrassingly and said, "It's neither the New Year nor a holiday, so who would be willing to eat such a good thing? I'm going to take it out to eat when there's a guest at home. Didn't Xiaolian say that it can be kept for a while?"

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"The weather's getting warmer day by day, so it's better not to put it out for too long. Today I'm giving this duck to Third Young Master Zhou to taste. If he thinks it's good, we will then talk about cooperating!" Yu Xiaocao smiled faintly.

"That's good, that's good! Auntie's not going to delay you anymore. Go early and come back early, I'll wait for the good news!" Madam Mao was surprised that Xiaocao was able to come up with a new

recipe this quickly. She hoped that the owner of Zhenxiu Restaurant would be attracted to the recipe in Xiaocao's hands so that her family's slow-selling ducks could be sold at a good price.

The sisters waved farewell to the Madam Mao. They hurried the little donkey towards the entrance of the village.

"Oh my! Aren't you the twin sisters from Dahai's family? Where are you guys going? If you guys are going to town, can you take me along?" A fake sounding voice made the two sisters feel uncomfortable just by hearing it.

Xiaocao looked closely at the person. It turned out to be Madam Xiong, who was usually very close to Madam Li. She was worthy of her surname [1]. Madam Xiong looked tough and she had a stocky build; she had a swarthy complexion and was very rude. She looked even worse than a blind bear!

As the proverb goes, 'birds of a feather flock together'. Madam Xiong was the same as Madam Li. She was lazy, greedy, and was a notorious gossip who talked behind other people's backs. For this reason, almost all the married women in the village have had conflicts with her before. Out of the whole Dongshan Village, it was hard to find a second person who was willing to talk to her besides Madam Li.

Xiaocao didn't want to bring her along. It wasn't only because of her character, but more importantly, because of her weight. She weighed over 200 pounds, and Xiaocao was afraid that she would tire out her Little Gray.

However, they were from the same village. If she didn't bring her along, Xiaocao was afraid that this woman would badmouth her family around the whole village. Xiaocao forced herself to smile and said, "Uncle Liu's wife, come on up!"

Madam Xiong agreed and climbed up from the back of the handcart; her movement almost made Little Gray snap. Little Gray turned around like a human and glanced behind it. It let out a few whinnies. It sounded like it was protesting.

"Is this the dying donkey that your family bought last time? Its fate is pretty good; it didn't die! However, it's still kind of skinny, so it can't do much work!" She didn't think about the effect of her weight on the donkey. Instead, she blamed it on Xiaocao's donkey. She was an annoying woman. Xiaolian was always

blunt with her words. "How much money would it cost to buy a strong donkey? Auntie, if you lend us money, then our family will buy a new donkey..."

"Uh..." Madam Xiong choked on Xiaolian's words. After a while, she replied, "If I had extra money, I would've bought one a long time ago. Even if I don't have the cart, I can ride it when I go back to my parental home!"

Xiaocao thought, 'With your size, don't even talk about a donkey, even if it was the strongest horse, it still wouldn't be able to carry your weight.'

Madam Xiong continued, "Besides, your family sells braised food and vegetables. You guys probably earned a decent amount of money! Everyone in this village knows that the Yu Family's second son has connections with the rich families in town. Even if they just gave you a little money, it would be enough for you to eat and spend. Do you still need to ask my family for money to buy a donkey?"

Yu Xiaocao was too lazy to even bother with her. She pulled on Xiaolian clothes quietly, hinting at her to stop the conversation. However, Madam Xiong had no awareness at all, as she continued to talk. She said, "Xiaolian, what are guys doing in town?"

Xiaocao replied faintly, "Nothing much! We're just buying the ingredients for the braised food."

Madam Xiong continued, "You guys must earn a lot from selling braised food, right? I heard from your older uncle's wife that you earn at least a hundred copper coins in a day. Then don't you guys earn at least three to four taels of silver in a month? Oh my! Even the head of the village may not be as wealthy as your family."

The village head's oldest son followed people everywhere to do business and earned some money. The younger son was a scholar who had passed the county examinations and was highly valued by the previous county magistrate. He became the magistrate's secretary. The village head's family had about 100 mu of good farmland. They were considered a first-class family in the village. By comparing the Yu Family with the village head's, Madam Xiong was roasting Xiaocao's family on fire!

Yu Xiaocao frowned and said in an unhappy tone, "After subtracting the original cost it took for me to make the one copper coin per portion of braised food, how much money would be left over? It's not even enough for the household expenses. Right now, we're going to town to buy some seasoning and

spices. The amount of money we need to buy these items is at least one to two taels of silver. One to two taels of seasoning would only last about a month before it's gone! Uncle Liu's wife, how much profit would we actually earn?"

Madam Xiong eyes whirled as she said, "You also need spices? Which spices do you need? Why don't you tell me?"

Yu Xiaocao tilted her head and looked at her. She said directly, "It's an exclusive recipe. I apologize, but I can't tell you!"

Madam Xiong grumbled a few times and curled her mouth unhappily. She had longed for the Yu Family's braised food recipe for a long time. Ever since she found out that Madam Zhang and her daughter-in-law got the recipe from Xiaocao, Madam Li had been tricked by Madam Xiong's words multiple times. Madam Li had always talked without thinking.

Unfortunately, the recipe had been monopolized by Madam Zhang. Even if she couldn't have a business, she also wouldn't let other people take advantage of it. Also, Madam Zhang heard that the special recipe was already bought by Zhenxiu Restaurant. Although Madam Zhang appeared to be a tyrant at home, in actuality, she was timid and a coward. She was afraid that if she disclosed the recipe, the powerful Zhou Family in Tanggu Town will punish her. So, Madam Zhang burnt the recipe secretly, and therefore, Madam Xiong couldn't get anything out of her.

Madam Xiong looked like she was the close relative of a bear, but she wasn't stupid at all. Instead, she was very shrewd. She knew that she couldn't get anything from Madam Li, so she wanted to get the information from the sisters by tricking them, thinking that it was easy to trick the kids. The result was that she got rejected by Xiaocao. Madam Xiong silently cursed the Yu Family's eight generations of ancestors.

After that, the sisters ignored whatever Madam Xiong said, so she stopped looking for trouble herself. The more you paid attention to Madam Xiong, the more she would climb all over you. It was best to give her the cold shoulder.

When they arrived at the entrance of the Tanggu Town, the sisters abandoned Madam Xiong using the excuse that they were going to different places. Madam Xiong even shamelessly asked the sisters when they were going back to the village so that she could have a free ride home.

Xiaocao said, "We need to stay in town for a day. We need to pick up my younger brother in the evening, then we can go back. If Uncle Liu's wife is busy doing something, you can ride the cart from our neighboring village before noon to get back..."

"I have nothing to do! What would I have to do? So, it's a deal! I will wait at the town entrance in the evening and ride your cart home!" What a joke. It cost one copper coin to ride the cart from the neighboring village. With one copper coin, she could buy a big steam bun with it. Madam Xiong wasn't willing to spend it on riding a cart!

The sisters first went to the food market and bought the ingredients for the braised food. Xiaocao went to many shops before she was able to gather all the spices she needed for the salted duck. Then, she bought two fat ducks from the food market. She carried the ducks in her hands as she quickly ran towards Zhenxiu Restaurant.

"Miss Yu, how do you have time to come to the town today?" Zhenxiu Restaurant's manager's whole face was wreathed with happiness when he saw Yu Xiaocao. It seemed as if he saw the God of Wealth. When he saw the ducks that Xiaocao was holding, a flash of golden light flashed in his eyes. He quickly rushed up to her to help her carry them.

Yu Xiaocao was just about to say something when she was cut off by a familiar voice behind her, "Manager Zhou, are there any private rooms left?"

The manager apologized hastily, "I'm sorry, Headmaster Yuan! All the private rooms were already reserved two days ago. Do you want me to...help you make a reservation as soon as possible?"

"No private rooms...it would be fine if I can buy a roasted chicken! It should be no problem for you to give me a roasted chicken, right?" This guest was a real foodie——Great Scholar Yuan Sinian. The one next to him was a potential foodie, Yuan Yunxi.

The manager appeared to be a little embarrassed. Only Head Chief Wang could make the roasted chicken authentically. However, he was busy from morning until night. Head Chief Wang could only make fifty to sixty chickens in a day. Besides the chickens reserved for the private rooms, the other thirty chickens had already been reserved by other customers.

But, as Rongxuan Academy's headmaster and a scholar in this era, he needed to give him some face. The manager hesitated and said, "How about...you wait until the evening and I'll let Old Wang work overtime to make you one?"

Although Yuan Sinian was a veteran foodie, he wasn't unreasonable. He replied regretfully, "There's no need. Old Wang is busy every day, I will not add on to his burden! You help us reserve a roasted chicken as soon as possible. Also, reserve it with a private room, so I can have two roasted chickens! When will Old Wang's apprentices finish their apprenticeship?"

Yuan Yunxi was disappointed but was already mentally prepared. "Grandfather, I told you earlier! Zhenxiu Restaurant's private rooms needed to be reserved in advance. It's no use even if you come early the day of to make a reservation!"

Yuan Sinian raged, "We have nothing to do today, so I just wanted to see if a blind cat can find a dead mouse. But it seems like it's hard to find a dead mouse. Hehe!"

The headmaster turned around and he immediately caught sight of the two identical-looking girls. "Huh? Isn't this...isn't this Yu Fan's older sister? Aren't you the little girl who cooks delicious food? Did my vision blur because I'm too hungry? Why are there two of Yu Fan's sister?"

Yuan Yunxi's steady face twitched. He reminded him, "Grandfather, they are twin sisters. They just look alike!"

"Oh! No wonder! The two of you are twins. I thought I got dizzy from starving myself!" Yuan Sinian laughed as he stroked his mustache. "Which one of you is the better cook? The stir-fried pork intestines from last time made me crave for more. Even Old Wang doesn't hold a candle against the Yu girl..."

"Headmaster Yuan, you overestimating me! I only specialize in making braised food. How can I compare with Head Chef Wang, who has been cooking for over a decade?" Yu Xiaocao had a favorable impression of this foodie who was willing to fight for food, so when she talked to him, she couldn't help but smile.

Yuan Sinian nodded with a smile on his face and said, "You're neither impatient nor arrogant. You have the potential to become a skilled chef! If you become a chef at Zhenxiu Restaurant, I would come every day for every meal..."

"Grandfather, is your salary enough for you to dine out every meal?" Yuan Yunxi ridiculed from the side.

"If my salary isn't enough, don't we still have your father? Isn't it natural for a son to be filial to his father? He is the current prime minister. I don't believe that he can't support my living expenses!" Yuan Sinian glared at him and snorted.

Turning around, he saw the dried salted duck in Xiaocao's hand as she giggled. His eyes suddenly brightened as he asked, "Little girl, what are you holding in your hand? Is it an air-dried duck?"

The leftover meat in this era, such as chicken, duck, and fish meat, were all air-dried. The air-drying process was somewhat similar to the method used to dry the salted duck.

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"This is salted duck, a new dish that I came up with. You can eat it after steaming it in the cauldron and pouring some of the braising sauce on top." The main purpose of Yu Xiaocao's visit was to promote salted duck, so she naturally wouldn't let go of this good chance.

"Salted duck? Xiaocao, you came up with a new recipe?" Zhou Zixu, who looked weary, came in from outside with the county magistrate's son following behind him.

Yu Xiaocao smiled and greeted him, "Third Young Master, where did you go so early in the morning?"

Zhou Zixu replied, "Where else? Of course, I just came back from the construction site at the wharf. It's a critical point for the construction for our factory right now. I have been personally supervising the site these past few days!"

"Thanks for your hard work!" Yu Xiaocao had a certain sense of respect for his young man, who would have been a middle school student in her previous life. Dragons gave birth to dragons, while phoenix gave birth to phoenixes [1]. The son of a mouse was capable of digging holes, while the son of an imperial merchant would be a workaholic when doing business!

Zhou Zixu grinned from ear to ear on his slightly childish face, "If our factory can be completed earlier, all the hard work would be worth it! Do you know, Xiaocao? For just the oyster sauce alone we received over two hundred orders! The production for the oyster sauce hasn't even started yet, but we already got orders for five thousand jars. Many of the orders came from famous restaurants in the south!"

"Young Boss Zhou, your business is really thriving ah! Wonder if this old man has the luck to help Zhenxiu Restaurant taste the 'salted duck' that Little Lass Yu brought over?" Yuan Sinian, who had been staring at the half a portion of salted duck, saw that the two were chatting about business and asked somewhat impatiently.

Yuan Yunxi covered his face—there was no one but his grandfather who would beg for food so righteously! At this moment, he desperately wished that he didn't know this old man who had no shame in front of food.

Zhou Zixu was considered best friends with Yuan Yunxi, so he also had a pretty clear understanding of Grandpa Yuan's temperament. With a sincere expression on his face, he said, "Grandpa Yuan, even if you're not here, this boy will invite you, an influential leader of the gourmet world, to come give us some pointers. In the future, we will definitely need to pass your test before Zhenxiu Restaurant introduces a new dish."

Yuan Sinian was satisfied with Third Young Master's words. He uninhibitedly sat down at a table in the main dining hall. He stroked his beard, squinted his eyes, and said, "Little girl, aren't you going to hurry up and serve the salted duck?"

Zhou Zixu looked at the sky and noticed that it wasn't quite noon yet. They had just eaten breakfast not too long ago, so were they really going to eat lunch now? He could understand Grandpa Yuan's eagerness since he was also looking forward to tasting the salted duck. But, they still needed to let the host make some preparations, right?

"Grandpa Yuan, how can I let you sit in the main hall? I have a private room kept in reserve. Please come with me..."

"Didn't you say that the private rooms needed to be booked in advance? What's this? Manager Zhou, are you looking down on this old man?" Without his persona as a famous scholar, Yuan Sinian was just a gluttonous, stubborn old man.

The head manager smiled flatteringly and said, "Headmaster Yuan, that private room is a place reserved for our boss to rest in. It's not used for guest reservations..."

"Guest reservations? Can those outsiders compare with this old man? Our Yunxi grew up wearing the same trousers as your young master! I'm Yunxi's grandfather so I'm naturally also your boss's grandfather! How can I be considered an outsider?" Yuan Sinian fumed and glared with rage.

Third Young Master Zhou quickly pretended to scold, "That's right! Be more careful in the future. Grandpa Yuan isn't an outsider!! Don't let this happen again!"

"Grandfather!" Yuan Yunxi saw that his grandfather wanted to say something, so he hastily signaled him with a frown.

Yuan Sinian angrily glared at his grandson, and then headed for the second floor.

"This old man is becoming more and more childish as he gets older!" Seeing the old man walking away quickly and vigorously, Young Master Wu smiled and exclaimed in a somewhat rueful manner.

Yuan Yunxi, on the other hand, apologized to Third Young Master Zhou, "Zixu, I..."

"The old man is right. What's our relationship with each other? There's no need to be polite like strangers. Let's all go try Xiaocao's new dish! I'll take Xiaocao to the back kitchen first and then have a couple of drinks with you guys later!" Third Young Master Zhou patted his shoulder and said nonchalantly.

Yu Xiaocao's mouth twitched. 'Why is a group of little brats drinking wine? Does he really think that he's a big boss?' Nevertheless, she just criticized them within her heart and wasn't so foolish as to say it aloud.

"Third Young Master, you should go entertain your guests. I can go to the kitchen myself!" The kitchen was the place that Xiaocao had been to the most in Zhenxiu Restaurant. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that she could find her way over even with her eyes closed.

However, Third Young Master Zhou smiled and said, "It's nothing. We're all close brothers! Manager, serve them some good tea!"

Third Young Master Zhou brought Yu Xiaocao to a secret kitchen in the rear courtyard. Other than Head Chef Wang and his trusted disciples, no one else was allowed to enter this kitchen. In other words, this was the most secret location within Zhenxiu Restaurant!

Seeing that Xiaocao was still holding two ducks in her hands, Zhou Zixu knew that she intended to teach the method of making salted duck, so he led her here.

When Head Chef Wang saw Xiaocao coming in, he acted in an intimate yet respectful manner as if he had seen his teacher. His direct disciple also looked at Xiaocao with bright eyes. He sighed with emotion within his heart, 'It's true that one shouldn't judge a person by their looks. A little girl from a fisherman's family, who was less than ten, was the creator of the famous dishes that supported half of Zhenxiu Restaurant.' If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he seriously wouldn't have believed it.

"Aiyo! Just look at you. It's fine if you just come, why bring gifts?" Head Chef Wang took the ducks from Xiaocao's hands and joked.

"Hey! An additional dish for your boss's lunch! If he likes it, then we can talk about the rest later!" Yu Xiaocao shoved the half a portion of salted duck into Head Chef Wang's hands.

Head Chef Wang wrinkled his brows as he looked at the salted duck in his hands and thought, 'This isn't just an ordinary 'air-dried marinated duck', is it? How can Miss Yu's products not be an exquisite dish? There must be something special about this!'

"Why wait until noon? This fatty can't wait any longer! Feng'er, go steam it... Miss Yu, is there anything else we need to do?" Head Chef Wang consulted modestly.

Yu Xiaocao shook her head and said, "Don't pour out the broth produced when steaming the duck. It tastes better together! Oh, by the way, there's only half a duck! Headmaster Yuan of Rongxuan Academy is still waiting to try the dish!"

Yu Xiaocao had to remind Head Chef Wang so that he wouldn't keep all the salted duck. If that happened, wouldn't that old man, Headmaster Yuan, hold a grudge against her? Old urchin, old urchin! When people got old, they needed to be coaxed!

The duck had already been cooked in brine, so it was ready after being steamed for thirty minutes. If someone accidentally entered the private room at this moment, they would definitely see a strange scene: It wasn't meal time, but a group of people were sitting around a table and staring covetously at the only dish on the table—salted duck. They looked like a pack of wolves surrounding a poor little bunny.

"This old man is going to dive in!" Older people had thicker skin after all. Yuan Sinian was the first to pick up his chopsticks, grab a piece of the snow-white duck meat, and chewed it slowly in his mouth. With his eyes slightly narrowed, he chewed very slowly, and even his beard appeared to be tilted upwards.

"It has a full shape with a plump body and white skin. The meat is tender and compact. The crisp and fragrance of the dish leads to an endless aftertaste." A long time later, under everyone's expectant gazes, Yuan Sinian gradually opened his eyes and moved his lips slightly, as if he was relishing the delicious taste of the salted duck.

While Yuan Sinian was evaluating the dish, Head Chef Wang had already stuffed a piece of duck meat into his mouth. After trying it, he also gave a high appraisal of: "It has crispy skin, crunchy bones, and tender meat. With the perfect amount of saltiness, it's fatty but not greasy and lean but not dry."

Although the three younger ones, including Yuan Yunxi, didn't make exquisite comments, they expressed their appreciation for the 'salted duck' with practical actions.

Seeing that the young fellows were about to devour the duck meat, Yuan Sinian didn't have time to savor the taste anymore and swiftly grabbed the last two pieces of duck meat at once. Under everyone's envious gazes, he leisurely savored the last pieces of the delicacy.

Yu Xiaolian's imagination of what nobles would be like was completely shattered as she watched these so-called nobles nearly fighting for just a piece of duck meat. She inwardly thought, 'He's already so old, but he's not even as reserved and well-mannered as my younger brother!'

"Miss Yu, are you selling this salted duck's recipe to us with the usual conditions?" The head manager had only tried one piece of duck meat, but he couldn't stop thinking about it within his heart. Later, when 'salted duck' is added to Zhenxiu Restaurant's menu, he, the manager, definitely wouldn't miss out on it!

Yu Xiaocao glanced at Third Young Master Zhou with a slight smile and didn't say anything.

After experiencing the popularity of the roasted chicken, Zhou Zixu naturally knew the value of this dish. He understood very clearly that with the roasted chicken and salted duck, it wasn't an exaggeration to say that Zhenxiu Restaurant's 'business would be flourishing every day'. The recipes for these two dishes were created by this indifferent and quick-witted young girl. In the future, she might have even more novel and delicious recipes. If he wanted to cooperate with her for a long time, he naturally had to adopt a long-term plan to secure bigger returns. Thus, it wasn't suitable to buy a recipe with merely three hundred taels.

"I have a proposal. Xiaocao, let me know what you think about it!" Zhou Zixu was someone who worked on important matters, so he swiftly thought of an idea for discussion.

Yu Xiaocao looked at him and still had an indifferent smile on her face as she said, "Third Young Master, please speak!"

"Let's take it as you, Xiaocao, making an investment with the salted duck and roasted chicken recipes. In the future, you will receive 10% of the profits for each roasted chicken or salted duck sold. You can either be paid monthly or annually. What do you think?" A 10% profit of a roasted chicken would be five mace, which was four times more than the dividend that Yu Xiaocao had expected. Hence one could clearly see Third Young Master Zhou's sincerity.

Everyone at the table knew about the hot sale of Zhenxiu Restaurant's roasted chicken. She would receive five mace per roasted chicken sold. Based on the calculation of a minimum of fifty chicken sold daily, she would receive over seven hundred taels in a month. In a year... Even Yuan Sinian, a great scholar who regarded money as dirt, couldn't help but silently gasp.

Yu Xiaocao wasn't an insatiably greedy person, so she shook her head with a smile, "Third Young Master, you're being too courteous!! I have already sold the recipe for the roasted chicken to you. It has nothing to do with me how much you earn. Though I am a daughter of a peasant family, I can still adhere to the two words: 'sincerity and honesty'!"

Yuan Sinian stroked his beautiful beard and gently nodded. Not many people would be able to reject a yearly income of around a thousand taels. As expected, the upbringing of this Yu Family was very special. With an older sister like this, Yu Fan's character wouldn't be too bad either. Yuan Sinian couldn't help but think about accepting this student, as his last disciple.

Chapter 135

Although numerous students had attended Yuan Sinian's lectures since he established Rongxuan Academy, strictly speaking, he only had three formal disciples. Now, one was an elder official in court, and another was the chancellor of the Imperial Academy. One of them wasn't interested in politics but he had become a great scholar who wasn't inferior to him. Those who were accepted by him to be his formal disciples would surely achieve a successful future!

Yu Xiaocao didn't know that she had inadvertently paved the direct road to success for her younger brother. She just treated everyone around her, who she thought was worthwhile, with her most sincere attitude.

"As for the recipe of the salted duck... let's just do what Third Young Master suggested. I'll accept dividends for a period of ten years. After that, no matter how much Zhenxiu Restaurant earns, it will all belong to you guys!" Yu Xiaocao concluded.

The head manager, who originally thought that the young boss had suggested a deal that put Zhenxiu Restaurant at a disadvantage, felt that the proposal was acceptable after he heard Xiaocao's words. In the future, Zhenxiu Restaurant would have more and more branch restaurants, and thus the sales of the roasted chicken and salted duck would be a large and unpredictable number. If they gave the Yu Family 10% dividends from each branch, wouldn't the Yu Family become leeches stuck on Zhenxiu Restaurant? Moreover, ones that they couldn't get rid of? At this time, the head manager admired his young boss's keen perception of people more and more now. Miss Yu really was Third Young Master's noble benefactor!

Yuan Sinian coughed and reminded, "Little Lass Yu, didn't you bring two ducks here just now? Will it be ready by noon? With so many people sharing the few pieces of duck earlier, it wasn't even enough to fill the gaps between my teeth!"

The others all looked at him with contempt: 'You ate more than half of the plate of duck, yet it still wasn't enough to fill the gaps between your teeth? How big are the gaps between your teeth?'

Yu Xiaocao smiled and said, "The process of making salted duck is very complicated and time-consuming. It takes six to eight hours just to cure and braise the duck. If we start making it now, I'm afraid we'll have to wait until the evening to eat it!"

"Slow work yields fine products. Uh-huh, this old man can understand! Then... let's just have a simple lunch, and wait until the evening to have a feast! Little Lass Yu, I wonder if this old man has the luck to try the roasted chicken personally made by you?"

Everyone covered their faces in shame: 'Headmaster Yuan! Great Scholar Yuan! Prime Minister Yuan's father!! Does your son know that you're so shameless?' Yuan Yunxi's pale face was burning hot as he looked at Yu Xiaocao with an apologetic gaze.

Yu Xiaocao felt that this side of Headmaster Yuan was quite cordial. She nodded with a smile, "Okay! I don't have anything to do today, so I'll help Head Chef Wang do some work in the kitchen while the salted duck is being cured! Third Young Master Zhou remember to give me a salary ah! My hourly wage is very high!!"

Seeing her mischievous smile, Zhou Zixu went along with her and said, "No problem! With Great Master Yu's culinary skills, no matter how high your hourly wage is, it will be worth it!"

The process of making the salted duck naturally didn't need to be explained in detail. Head Chef Wang and his two most proud disciples, Yang Feng and Liu Bi, turned into the best students. With their eyes wide open and ears pricked up, they desperately wished that they could memorize every little detail of Xiaocao's actions and everything she said. Head Chef Wang was afraid that he couldn't remember everything, so he got a charcoal pen and paper, and carefully recorded each step.

During the salting and braising process, Yu Xiaocao helped make the roasted chicken while also not forgetting to give pointers to Yang Feng and Liu Bi, who were still apprentices. Her explanation was concise and vivid, which made it much easier to understand. At this time, many of the confusion that the two men had were quickly cleared up.

Yang Feng and Liu Bi originally had a very hard time understanding how a little girl under ten years old was able to make their teacher regard her with such high esteem. But, at this time, they were already admiring her from the bottom of their hearts. In terms of their actions and attitude, they were already treating her like she was their teacher.

Under the guidance of Yu Xiaocao, the roasted chicken made by Yang Feng and Liu Bi, both in appearance and taste, had reached the standard of masters. In the future, they could make savory and delicious roasted chicken without anyone's guidance, which was one of the things that they had gained today.

The process of making the salted duck was the best way to reflect the original flavor of the duck. The cooking method was simple and natural. They just needed to drain the grease and get rid of the fishy smell, while keeping the delicious meaty taste and tender texture. To put it bluntly, only the process of stir-frying salt and preparing the braising sauce was slightly more difficult. The most valuable thing was still the secret recipe for stir-fried salt and the braising sauce. As long as one could master them, it wouldn't be hard to make the salted duck.

At dusk, after the repeated braising process was completed, Yu Xiaocao boiled the water in the pot, and put ginger, scallion, star anise, pepper, cardamom, and duck into the pot at the same time. When the water came to a boil, one needed to quickly control the heat and stir the pot. Despite her small stature, her little hands were like Thousand Hands Guanyin [1]. She still seemed relaxed and comfortable as she flipped seven or eight ducks at the same time.

In fact, it wasn't really a big deal for Xiaocao. In her past life, she had prepared over twenty ducks at the same time by herself without any problems, let alone a mere seven or eight ducks.

After the seven or eight salted ducks that Yu Xiaocao was working on was ready and were in the natural cooling process, she examined the results of Head Chef Wang and his students' cooking. She noticed that the most talented was Liu Bi. It was his first time making salted duck, but he was skilled and at ease when preparing two ducks at the same time.

In terms of appearance and taste, the salted ducks that he made didn't seem like they were made by a novice, who was making it for the first time. She reckoned that after practicing a few more times and becoming more familiar with the process, he could graduate from apprenticeship!

Second was Head Chef Wang, who had been a veteran cook for decades after all. He still had some advantages during the process of making the salted duck.

As for Yang Feng, he was relatively weaker in comparison. But, he was more talented than Liu Bi in the preparation of roasted chicken. They could each be responsible for one dish and complement each other. She had to admit that Head Chef Wang was quite sharp-eyed when accepting students.

"How is it? Is the salted duck ready yet?" Yuan Sinian and his grandson, who had followed the scent over, and Young Master Wu, who also stayed at Zhenxiu Restaurant, looked covetously at the dozens of salted ducks lined up in a row. They couldn't help but secretly swallow their saliva.

Yuan Sinian looked over all of the ducks and smiled while stroking his beard, "Let this old man guess which ones were made by Little Lass Yu—this one, this one, and... these. Did this old man guess correctly?"

Head Chef Wang clasped his hands in admiration and said, "You have sharp eyes! Please tell us, how did you know?"

"The ones that Little Lass Yu made has whiter skin, red meat, and looks more glossy. These two looked the closest to the ones the Little Lass Yu made but they're not as glossy. The color isn't as uniform on these two, which should be the result of not moving in a coordinated manner when stirring. As for the remaining two, heh! This old man will not comment on them!" He was definitely worthy of being a well-known gourmet. He hadn't even tasted them yet, but he was already able to point out everyone's strengths and weaknesses based on the appearance on the ducks.

Head Chef Wang and his students felt a sense of enlightenment and sudden realization dawned upon them. They immediately memorized their own shortcomings and did their best to correct them in private. As for Yang Feng, he felt somewhat dejected and despondent.

One shouldn't lose confidence in the things they do, or else they wouldn't be able to achieve anything. Yu Xiaocao hastily took out the roasted chicken that Yang Feng made and asked Yuan Sinian to critique it.

After tasting it, Yuan Sinian spoke highly of it and praised, "As expected of the creator of the roasted chicken. Your skills are excellent."

It turned out that he thought it was made by Yu Xiaocao! This was enough to show that Yang Feng's skill in making roasted chicken had far surpassed his teacher's.

Yu Xiaocao looked at Yang Feng, who had regained his confidence, and giggled, "Headmaster, Yuan, you're wrong this time! I wasn't the one who made this roasted chicken. It was made by Older Brother Yang Feng! It seems like Older Brother Yang Feng has already excelled his own master! Head Chef Wang, you will have an excellent assistant in the future!"

Yuan Sinian nodded incessantly, "Each one has something that he excels in. Head Chef Wang, you have great disciples ah—can we eat now? We ate a simple lunch at noon, so this old man has long been hungry!"

He was indeed a glutton, who had to mention the word 'eat' in every three sentences!

Third Young Master Zhou ordered the kitchen to use all their best skills and prepare a table of good food. Of course, they wouldn't leave out the roasted chicken and salted duck that Yu Xiaocao personally made.

At this time, Yu Xiaolian also came back after picking her younger brother up at the academy. Little Shitou, who had grown taller during this time, was wearing the seblue colored uniform of the academy's primary class. When he greeted Headmaster Yuan and his senior brother, he really looked like a handsome little scholar. Yu Xiaocao looked at the adorable Little Shitou and couldn't help but ruffle his hair with her evil claws.

Little Shitou dodged while complaining that his second sister had messed up his hair!

"Young Master Wu, County Magistrate Wu is calling for you to go home!" A waiter of Zhenxiu Restaurant, who was so busy that his forehead was full of sweat, came up to report.

Young Master Wu, Wu Zifan, covered his face. Didn't he sent someone to report to his father already? He already told him that he was staying at Zhenxiu Restaurant to try their new dish, so why did he come look for him? Wait! Could it be that his father heard about Zhenxiu Restaurant's new dish so... He never expected that his normally strict father was also a glutton.

But, when he looked at how Headmaster Yuan was staring covetously at the salted duck, he came to a realization—everyone who posed as a dignified gentleman on the outside were all actually gluttons inside!

When County Magistrate Wu came in, he still assumed the manner of a stern father. After staring fiercely at his son, his eyes were attracted by the fragrant roasted chicken and alluring salted duck on the table. He, who usually acted in a rigorous manner, actually didn't greet Headmaster Yuan first this time. However, Headmaster Yuan was completely focused on the delicacies on the table, so he didn't even notice that there was an extra person in the private room. Ay! Seriously!

Needless to say, the sumptuous meal on the table, especially the novel and delicious salted duck, received unanimous applause. The two foodies, County Magistrate Wu and Headmaster Yuan, shared the same interest in food and vied to increase interest for their favorite dishes by composing a poem for the dish.

After dinner, Headmaster Yuan set his mind on the remaining salted ducks. He didn't know how to write the word 'courtesy' at all and bluntly said, "Little Lass Yu, I'm taking two of the salted ducks that you made later. Young lad of the Zhou Family, get someone to pack them for me!"

When County Magistrate Wu heard this, he offhandedly asked about how many ducks Little Miss Yu made. After he got his answer, he looked at Third Young Master Zhou with a meaningful gaze, 'Xiaoxu ah! You are close friends with my son, so isn't there something you should do?'

With no other choice, Third Young Master Zhou could only let his heart bleed and give four of the remaining seven ducks to the two of them.

Yu Xiaocao looked all this with amusement and said nonchalantly, "Salted duck tastes the best around the Mid-Autumn Festival every year because the ducks were made during the season when osmanthus flowers were blooming. Thus, it is also called: osmanthus duck."

Chapter 136

Yuan Sinian's eyes lit up and he said, "This name is good. It's much more elegant than salted duck! Let's just call it osmanthus duck! Around the Mid-Autumn Festival this year, this old man will come try Little Lass Yu's cooking again. It's settled then!"

Yu Xiaocao didn't know whether to laugh or cry. 'Headmaster Yuan, who promised you?' Ay, she could only blame herself for being so talkative and ended up incurring a 'debt'!

When the three siblings came out of Zhenxiu Restaurant, the sun was already setting in the west. Third Young Master Zhou was somewhat worried and said, "It's pretty late already. You guys still need to go through a mountain road on your way back to Dongshan Village. It's better to stay a night in town and go back tomorrow!"

Yu Xiaocao flatly refused him. If her doting old father didn't see his children coming home tonight, he would be terribly worried. Ay! One of the bad things in ancient times was that communication was inconvenient. If there was a phone, they could just make a call, and everything would be settled.

Seeing that she had already decided to leave, Zhou Zixu quickly fetched his beloved horse from the stables and insisted on sending them home. In his eyes, the eldest of the three siblings wasn't even ten yet. If they encountered any mishaps on the way, there wouldn't be anyone to help the three children. He was worried!

However, he also didn't consider the fact that he was only thirteen or fourteen years old as well. What would he be able to help them with? But his concern was quite heartwarming.

Yu Xiaocao declined several times, but she couldn't defeat Third Young Master Zhou's determination. Thus, a donkey cart accompanied by a little red horse rushed into the distance under the boundless red sky. The silhouette looked very harmonious, as if it was a freehand landscape painting...

Little Gray's constitution had been transformed by the mystic-stone water. It was very healthy now and its speed wasn't inferior to the little red horse that Third Young Master was mounted on. If Xiaocao wasn't about to vomit due to the jolting of the cart, Little Gray would have gone even faster.

Seeing that Xiaocao seemed to feel unwell, Third Young Master Zhou said with a slight sense of concern, "I already reserved the rubber wheels for you, and it is estimated to be done by next month. At that time, you won't feel as uncomfortable when traveling long distances anymore."

"Thanks a lot, Third Young Master!" Yu Xiaocao's small face was ghastly pale and her lips seemed to have lost all the colors it originally had. Despite feeling so uncomfortable, she was concerned about the watermelon seeds, "Third Young Master, last time I asked Brother Xiaoduo to send you a message about helping me get some watermelon seeds. Are there any updates?"

Zhou Zixu nodded slowly and said, "I saw it in a gardening store in the prefectural city last time, so I have already sent someone to go buy some. So don't worry! When have I ever procrastinated on your matters? When the seeds arrive, I'll have Xiaoduo bring them to you!"

At this time, the sky had already darkened, and the cart had also entered rugged mountain road. On both sides of the curved road were tall trees and shrubs that were as tall as a person, from which came

faint crowing of night birds. In the quiet and dark mountain forest, it sounded especially forlorn and bitter, and made one's hair stand up on end.

The Yu Family's old residence was at the foot of the West Mountains, so they had heard the crying of all kinds of birds. Thus, they weren't really scared. However, it was different for Third Young Master Zhou. When had he ever gone to the mountain forest at night? He was obviously nervous about the crowing and cooing of the night birds.

"Don't be scared. It's just the cry of an owl! Owls are useful birds that can catch field mice!" Yu Xiaolian suppressed her laughter and comforted Third Young Master Zhou, while secretly laughing at him for being so timid in her heart.

Zhou Zixu somewhat regretted not bringing a handy weapon with him. Had he brought along his bow and arrows, which he practiced with every day, he wouldn't be afraid. He looked at the dark shadows of trees surrounding him and felt somewhat scared as he asked, "In this mountain... will there be wolves?"

"Wolves? Probably?? But, ferocious animals usually hide deep within the mountains, unless it's a year of disaster and they can't find food. They only come down to harm the villagers when they can't find food in the mountains. There's a lot of pedestrians on this road every day, so there probably wouldn't be a pack of wolves or anything appearing randomly." Yu Xiaocao comforted him. After all, he was just a thirteen or fourteen year old child. Moreover, he was a young master who was used to being pampered and living a leisurely life. Hence, it wasn't disgraceful to be scared.

"In front... what's that bright glow? I heard that wolves' eyes glow at night. Could it be..." Zhou Zixu secretly swallowed his saliva and his hands, which were holding the reins, was sweating slightly. He looked around to see if he could find a club or something that could be used to protect the three siblings with.

Little Shitou giggled and said, "Older Brother Zhou, have you ever seen a wolf with one eye glowing? Wouldn't that be a one-eyed wolf then? Moreover, wolves' eyes are bluish green at night. The light in front is a pale-yellow color, so it's obviously someone walking at night with a lantern."

"That's strange. Who would walk on the road with a lantern this late at night?" Yu Xiaocao muttered to herself.

As the donkey cart steadily progressed, the pale-yellow light got closer and closer. The person carrying the lantern seemed to have heard the clattering of the horse's hooves and the rumbling of the cart, and called out with slight hesitation, "Is it Xiaocao?"

"Father? Second Sister, it's Father's voice!!" Little Shitou paused for a moment, and then cried out cheerfully.

"Father! It's us!!" As if she had found a pillar of support, Xiaolian shouted loudly towards the light.

The donkey cart swiftly arrived at the location of the light and they saw Yu Hai holding a white paper lantern. He stood at the side of the road and breathed a long sigh of relief, as if he got rid of something that was weighing on his mind.

"Father, why did you come?" Yu Xiaocao moved over and waited for Yu Hai to get on the cart before asking.

Yu Hai glared at the three siblings and scolded, "Why did I come?! Look at what time it is. The moon is already hanging up high on the treetops, yet you guys still aren't home. Can your mother and I not be anxious? I reckon you guys were having too much fun in town and forgot to come home!"

Zhou Zixu hastily explained for the siblings, "Uncle Yu, it was my fault! Xiaocao was teaching Head Chef Wang and his students how to make osmanthus duck. It took quite a lot of time, so they ended up coming back late. If you need someone to take responsibility, then I should be the one to blame!"

Yu Hai was completely focused on the three siblings since he was afraid that something had happened to them, and thus he had just noticed that Third Young Master Zhou was escorting the siblings back. He quickly expressed his gratitude, "We have troubled Third Young Master. It's already quite late, so you should go back quickly!"

Zhou Zixu looked at the pitch-dark road and agreed, but for a long time, he was reluctant to turn around. Seeing this, Xiaocao turned to her father and said, "Father, it will take Third Young Master over two hours to get back. It's dark and windy at night, so it's really quite worrying. Aren't we almost home? Why don't we let him stay for a night? It will also be closer if he goes directly to the docks from our house tomorrow morning!"

Seeing that Third Young Master Zhou wasn't much older than his eldest son, Yu Hai really did feel somewhat worried to see a half-grown child going back by himself. Thus, he said to Third Young Master, "Third Young Master, if you don't mind, you can stay over at our house for a night. What do you think?"

"Many thanks to Uncle Yu! I'll be troubling you guys then!" Zhou Zixu smiled gratefully at Xiaocao. Little Sister Xiaocao was indeed a very considerate person. Her suggestion was exactly what he had hoped for.

After passing this section of the mountain road, the large tree at the entrance of Dongshan Village could be seen. A dark figure could faintly be seen pacing under the tree. Needless to say, that familiar figure was Madam Liu, who was worried about her children.

Madam Liu saw that Third Young Master was here, so she didn't say anything and only said with concern, "You guys must come back earlier in the future. Your father and I felt so anxious while waiting for you guys ah!"

Yu Xiaocao jumped off the cart, pulled on Madam Liu's hand, and acted like a spoiled child, "Mother, you can rest assured that this won't happen again!"

When they arrived home, the hot water was already ready on top of the stove. After Third Young Master Zhou and the Yu siblings finished bathing, they soaked their feet in hot water and warmed up their bodies.

That night, Third Young Master Zhou, Yu Hai, and Yu Hang slept on the kang bed in the main room, while Madam Liu, Xiaolian, Xiaocao, and Little Shitou stayed in the east room. Little Shitou protested, "Mother, I'm also a boy. I want to sleep on the same kang bed as Father and Older Brother!"

"Men and women don't sit at the same table after the age of seven. You're only six years old, so there's no need to be so particular about that. Hurry up and sleep!!" Yu Xiaocao disregarded Little Shitou's protest, took off his outer garment, and shoved him into the blankets. Little Shitou wailed and resisted but was suppressed by the women in the family.

Next door, Third Young Master Zhou was lying on the warm kang bed as he looked at everything in the room through the dim oil lamp. Although the house had been renovated, it still looked old and worn-out. However, the room was furnished in a simple and neat manner.

A layer of wallpaper was pasted on the cob wall, which looked like it was about to peel off, beside the kang bed. The cotton inside the mattress under him had already hardened, but it had been washed until it was clean and fresh. The quilt, which he was using, should be newly made. It was fluffy and soft and had the delicate scent of Chinese honey locust...

Zhou Zixu thought he wouldn't be able to sleep in a different environment, but he hadn't expected that he would start to feel sleepy within fifteen minutes. While he was half-asleep, he could faintly hear the sound of unconstrained snoring beside him. He didn't feel that it was noisy, and he slept even more comfortably instead.

Since his birth, he had always lacked a father figure in his life. If he had a father in his life, would he also be like Xiaocao's father and love him from the bottom of his heart? Would he also be accompanied by the sound of snoring as he slept?

Zhou Zixu woke up to the merry singing of the birds. When he first opened his eyes, he seemed to have forgotten where he was, and appeared somewhat confused.

"Pfft——" He was suddenly startled awake by a girl's burst of laughter.

When he looked up and saw Xiaocao standing by the door and smiling, he panicked slightly and hastily shrunk into the quilt.

"Why are you hiding? It's not like you're naked... Ai-yo! Mother, why did you hit me?" Yu Xiaocao experienced sorrow after joy. She clutched her head and pouted with a wronged expression.

Madam Liu tapped her head as if she regretted that her children didn't live up to her expectations. She chided, "Just look at you! Is that something a girl should say? Aren't you afraid that Third Young Master will laugh at you?! I reckon you should stop running around so much and learn some proper manners."

"Mother, Third Young Master isn't a stranger. Aren't I just making a small joke with him?" Why make such a fuss? Yu Xiaocao blinked her innocent eyes and did her best to act cute.

Zhou Zixu interceded for her, "Auntie, Little Sister Xiaocao is still young. Besides, the current emperor had proposed to improve the status of women. So there's even a women's academy in the capital. Nowadays, women aren't encouraged to never leave the house and stay inside all day anymore."

"Girls can also go to school? Later, let's send Xiaocao and Xiaolian to study in school. Our Xiaocao is very smart, so maybe she can pass the examination and become a female county official!" Yu Hai guffawed with a proud expression on his face.

Madam Liu glared at him, "You, why are you also making trouble? Third Young Master is talking about the capital. Where is there a women's academy in our little Tanggu Town? It's enough for a girl to recognize a few words. What's the point of them studying in school?"

Chapter 137 - To Convince

"Mother! You really have the feudal way of thinking, such an old fogie!" Yu Xiaocao stuck out her tongue at her mother.

Madam Liu continued to glare at her, "Then you shouldn't eat the breakfast that this old fogie made, just go and stay hungry!"

"Mother, I was wrong! Mother is the kindest, most beautiful, and most open-minded mother in the world..." Yu Xiaocao mournfully cried as she circled around Madam Liu as if she was a lively little rabbit. On the side, Yu Hai watched her antics with amusement.

Zhou Zixu gazed at the whole scene with a bit of envy. If he had also been born in such a loving household, even if the family was more impoverished, he would still be incredibly happy...

"Is Xiaocao home?" The sound of a slightly raspy, youthful voice came from over the walls. Immediately, a tall figure that was dressed in a set of simple black clothing appeared at the gate opening.

Yu Hai saw the fellow first and greeted him happily, "Oh it's Xiaohan ah! Quickly come in! Cao'er, stop teasing your mother and come over. Xiaohan is looking for you!"

"Brother Han? Do you need to go to the prefectural city to deliver the wild geese? I'll go to the back courtyard and grab them for you." There was still some time before the deadline for the prefectural magistrate's request for his son. Both of the wild geese were living at Xiaocao's home, and she fed them small fish, shrimp, and mystic-stone water every day. Now, they were even plumper than they were

when they were first caught. In addition, their feathers were sleek and glowing with health, so they seemed much more lively and energetic.

Zhao Han greeted Yu Hai and his wife and then smiled at Xiaocao, "Don't rush about right now. Tomorrow we'll start preparing for our trip to the prefectural city. My family isn't good at raising animals, so let's not mess around with those two wild geese. It's better for them to spend an extra day at your place!"

Yu Hai watched as his daughter chatted with Zhao Han and quietly spoke to Madam Liu, "Xiaohan, that child, has always treated people courteously. It's obvious that Sister-in-law Zhao knows how to raise children. Muyun, do you think that Xiaohan treats our youngest daughter a little differently...our family and Older Brother Zhao's family, perhaps we could strengthen our ties with a marriage..."

"Don't speculate idly! Cao'er is still young and who knows what the future will be like? It's fine that you can talk about this in front of me, but you absolutely cannot let anyone else hear you talk. It'll ruin our daughter's reputation!"

Madam Liu also liked Zhao Han. However, per her intuition, she had a feeling that the Zhao Family wasn't from a humble background, especially the madam of the family. Her every movement indirectly revealed that she had a noble background, so it was obvious to Madam Liu that things were not simple. If her hunch was correct, then the Zhao Family had an extraordinary background and were not one that their Yu Family could marry into.

Zhou Zixu, who had just walked out of the room, managed to overhear Yu Hai's words, and he felt a bit uncomfortable in his heart. The look in his eyes as he inspected Zhao Han turned a bit resentful. 'He's only from a hunter's family. No matter how much education or manners he has, he's still a crude person. How could he possibly be a good match for his younger sister Xiaocao?'

The still immature youth interpreted the discomfort in his heart as a desire to protect his younger sister. In Zhou Zixu's eyes, his younger sister Xiaocao was even more precious than those so-called young ladies from the wealthy families in town!

Zhao Han saw Zhou Zixu out of the corner of his eye, and he wasn't quite sure what to think of this young master from the Zhou Family. Why did he stay over as a guest at the Yu Family's? However, he restrained the questions within his heart. Instead, he nodded and smiled politely at Third Young Master

Zhou. Unexpectedly, he received a look full of dislike from the other youth. Zhao Han felt even more perplexed inside, 'When did I ever offend Third Young Master Zhou? Ah, the thoughts of a young master from a rich family are hard to understand!'

Zhao Han offered the little roe deer that was in his arms and sighed, "Didn't I say that my family is not suited to raise animals? Tiny was only at my family's place for a little bit and has become so listless. We made sure to offer it the best fodder available, but it doesn't seem to want to eat any! Just look, it's gotten so skinny that you can see its rib bones."

"Tiny? Did Tiny get sick?" Little Shitou came out from the back courtyard and felt his heart ache at the sight of the listless little roe deer.

When it saw its playmate, Tiny seemed to become more energetic and used its head to rub Little Shitou's arm. A pair of large and limpid eyes looked piteously at Yu Xiaocao as if it was trying to say, "I won't eat the green vegetables anymore, please let me come back..."

Yes, that's right! This little roe deer couldn't restrain itself from eating the alluring green vegetables that had been watered with mystic-stone water. When the family wasn't careful, it ate a whole patch of green vegetables and had been banished away by Yu Xiaocao to Zhao Han's family. Because Xiaocao had solemnly entrusted the task to him, Zhao Han did his best to take good care of the little roe deer and even bought some of the highest quality feed for it.

However, the little roe deer thinned down with each passing day. If another seven to eight days passed, then it would no longer be able to walk without stumbling. If it still didn't go back home, then he was afraid that the next time Yu Xiaocao saw the deer she would only see a tiny little corpse...

After she saw the little animal's current state, Yu Xiaocao felt her heart soften as she rubbed the little creature's head. She quietly said, "Are you going to eat the vegetables in the future then? Make sure to remember, you absolutely cannot touch anything that is growing in the fields. You got that?"

The little roe deer acted as though it could understand everything she was saying and cheerfully nodded its head. It quickly became much more energetic. Yu Xiaocao laughed and scolded, "You crafty little thing! You know how to injure yourself to gain people's sympathy eh! You've truly become more sentient."

When Zhou Zixu saw Xiaocao smile brightly with her dimples showing when she talked to Zhao Han, the uncomfortable feeling in his heart increased. He scampered over and interjected, "This little roe deer looks pretty clever!"

Hearing the little roe deer getting complimented made Little Shitou feel like he was getting complimented instead. He lifted his chest proudly and said, "Tiny is very well-behaved and never poops around. It can even understand what we say!"

Zhou Zixu continued to praise the little roe deer. As the other people were talking, Yu Xiaocao washed a few vegetables and took off a few leaves before sprinkling some mystic-stone water on top. The little roe deer stared at the leaves unwaveringly and had a completely gluttonous look on its face.

Yu Xiaocao had Little Shitou put the little animal down. The little roe deer first looked at her and only after it got her approval did it rush towards the vegetables leaves and gobble it down happily. As it ate, its shaggy little tail waved happily and both of its ears twitched. It looked incredibly adorable!

"Brother Han, when we go to the prefectural city tomorrow, will Uncle Zhao be going too?" Yu Xiaocao asked quietly as she stood next to Zhao Han, watching the roe deer eat.

Zhao Han smiled and nodded his head, "Yup! The prefectural city is too far from here, so my father doesn't think it's safe for me to go alone!"

Yu Xiaocao pursed her lips and replied somewhat enviously, "The furthest I've been to is the town, I've never been to the prefectural city..."

Zhao Han apparently had heard her hint within her words and looked at her gently, "How about...I could talk to Uncle Yu and see if you could also go with us to the prefectural city?"

Yu Xiaocao's eyes lit up and she secretly glanced at Yu Hai, who was picking vegetables from the fields. She quietly replied, "Do you think that it'll work? The prefectural city is so far from here that we can't get back in the same day. My father will definitely not agree to this."

Zhou Zixu felt rather resentful about Zhao Han 'abducting' Yu Xiaocao. He frowned and earnestly interjected, "Brother Zhao, Younger Sister Xiaocao is not related to you by blood. Although she's young, she's still a girl and is not suited to spend the night away from home."

When she heard Zhou Zixu say that, Xiaocao immediately felt that her hopes were even more uncertain. She pouted her lips in unhappiness.

Zhou Zixu tried to console her, "My family has a small residence in the prefectural city and the renovations are almost finished there. I can bring you to the prefectural city to play and conveniently find a good location to establish a branch of Zhenxiu Restaurant."

A smile stayed on Zhao Han's face but the expression in his eyes as he looked at Zhou Zixu had cooled down perceptibly, "Please excuse my question, but if Xiaocao isn't suited to go to the prefectural city with us, then why is it okay to go there with you? You may have a residence in the city but it's not Xiaocao's family's home. If she stayed there, wouldn't that be the same thing as spending a night away from home?"

"You! Xiaocao is like my younger sister; she's not an outsider!" Zhou Zixu refused to be cowed.

"Pfft—How come I have never heard of Uncle Yu having an additional son?" Zhao Han rebutted fiercely.

"You...how absurd!" Zhou Zixu angrily replied.

"You're the one that's—being completely unreasonable!" Zhao Han's words held a lot of anger.

Yu Xiaocao watched as the two boys continued to fight and felt that it was quite amusing. She couldn't help but let out a peal of laughter. The two youths each looked at her. She waved a hand and managed to stifle her giggles, "You guys continue, just ignore me over here!"

Zhou Zixu and Zhao Han silently looked each other in the eye. For whose benefit were they arguing for?

When Yu Xiaocao noticed that the two youths were finally able to calm down, she made her final plea, "Father, I want to go to the prefectural city tomorrow with Uncle Zhao and Brother Han. Maybe I'll think of a new way to make money along the way?"

Yu Hai heard her plea but before he could answer, Madam Liu butted in to express her thoughts, “Is the town not enough for you that you have to go to the prefectural city? It takes several days by foot to get there. It's already quite tiring for your Uncle Zhao and you want him to help take care of you, a little girl? I absolutely refuse to give you permission!”

Yu Hai had a look of 'there's nothing I can do' on his face. He said, “Your mother is right! Our family is not so poor that we have no options. We don't need to send you, a small girl, to the prefectural city to find work. Relax a bit, you still have your father here!”

In an effort to pull them out of poverty, a little girl who hadn't reached the age of ten had to make braised food, sell her recipes, and even figure out a method to cause vegetables to grow faster. She was so busy that she was getting stretched out like a rubber band. He was really afraid that she might snap under all of the pressure.

Now, their family could sell braised food and vegetables to have a stable income and some savings. They were even on the verge of buying a few shops, so they were no longer considered poor. Thus, they really needed to let his daughter rest a bit.

“But Father...I really want to go to the prefectural city to become more experienced and knowledgeable!” Yu Xiaocao did her best to use every trick in her book to act like a spoiled child. She knew her father was particularly vulnerable to these methods.

Sure enough, Yu Hai's heart softened. He secretly approached his wife and quietly said, “Muyun, Doctor Sun himself had said that our Xiaocao is not a person with an ordinary destiny. She's only nine years old yet she has earned almost two thousand taels. In the future, she will definitely be even more prosperous. As her parents, even though we may not be able to help much, we absolutely cannot pull her down!”

“What do you mean by she won't have an ordinary destiny? Don't forget that Xiaocao is a girl and will need to marry someone in the future! If she was a boy, then I, as her mother, would absolutely support her!” Madam Liu still believed in the old traditional values such as, 'a woman's virtue is to have no talent'. She felt that girls should spend more time at home doing needlework, managing the house and such, but there was no point in spending too much time out in the public.

When Zhou Zixu saw that Xiaocao was about to cry, he immediately forgot his previous position and hurriedly interceded, "Auntie, your beliefs are a little too outdated! It's no longer considered shameful for women to go out of the house and do business. For example, Jiang Siniang herself established the store, 'Exquisite Garments', that is famous and known to everyone in the capital. Even the noblewomen in the capital have a difficult time getting her to make them a piece of clothing that was personally designed and sewn by her. In fact, all of the emperor's imperial consorts want her to enter the palace to create clothing for them! I believe that Xiaocao's future accomplishments, will absolutely not be inferior to Jiang Siniang's! She can only be better!"

Chapter 138 - Plans Settled

Yu Xiaocao stealthily gave Zhou Zixu a look that said, 'you're doing it right!', and continued to plead her case. Her large eyes seemed more innocent and pitiful than a little deer's, so anyone looking at her would feel his or her heart soften.

"Third Young Master, are you saying the truth? Then, does Jiang Siniang's parents really allow her to go out and show her face in public?" Madam Liu had been somewhat persuaded by his words.

Zhou Zixu raised an eyebrow at Zhao Han and then continued, "Our current emperor is in favor of raising women's status in society ah! I heard that after Jiang Siniang became well known for her deeds, the emperor himself had even praised her with this line: 'women are just as capable as men in all they do'. Jiang Siniang's parents were also like Auntie in the beginning and didn't support her. However, after she received the emperor's approval, they slowly began to change and no longer tried to stop her. Now, Jiang Siniang's mother will even help manage some tasks at her store when she has more work than she can get done!"

"But...if a young girl spends all her time out in the public, how could she possibly have any marriage prospects in the future ah!" This was the thing that Madam Liu worried about the most.

Zhou Zixu chuckled, "You don't need to worry about this. With Jiang Siniang's current reputation, there are people lining out the door asking to marry her. I even heard that the current prime minister's eldest son, who is also the eldest grandson of the town's Rongxuan Academy's founder, adores Jiang Siniang for her talents and abilities. He even found someone to act as a matchmaker and it's rumored that they're pretty close to announcing an engagement!"

"Someone who sells her work for a living is in talks about getting married to the prime minister's son? Are you trying to deceive Auntie here?" Madam Liu felt as if she was listening to some mythical story and found it incredibly hard to believe.

“If you don't believe me, then go around and ask other people! Now all of the nobles in the capital no longer want to find a daughter-in-law who is from a wealthy family and follows the three morals and four virtues. Instead, they want to find a woman who is talented, confident, and strives for constant self-improvement. The emperor himself had said: 'a truly beautiful woman is one who is confident and independent!'”

When Yu Xiaocao heard Zhou Zixu describe the current emperor's mentality, she admired and felt extremely curious about this fellow transmigrator who was sitting at the top. In a country that had already experienced the Tang Dynasty's Wu Zetian seizing the throne, the fact that he was willing to raise women's status in society and advocate for women's rights truly meant that he might encounter harsh opposition!

Zhou Zixu continued to persuade her, “Auntie, with Xiaocao's abilities and a few more years, she absolutely can become one of the best culinary talents in the country! Jiang Siniang managed to conquer the country with her embroidery and designing abilities, but Xiaocao has enough talents to also become famous. Auntie, you absolutely cannot restrict Younger Sister Xiaocao in a little town like Tanggu. Wouldn't that be ruining her potential to become a famous chef?”

Madam Liu couldn't tell the north from the south after hearing Zhou Zixu's convincing arguments. She hesitantly looked at her husband and then softly said, “Husband...how about you accompany Cao'er to go to the prefectural city tomorrow?”

“Thank you, Mother! Mother, you're the best!! I love you the most!!!” Xiaocao became wild with joy. She threw herself at Madam Liu and kissed her mother's face several times.

Madam Liu was caught off guard and fell onto ground into the vegetable field, crushing a few heads of leaf lettuce! She half-laughed and half-rebuked her daughter, “Child, what made so crazy? Quickly get up!!”

On the side, Yu Hai felt a burst of jealousy, “Only your mother is good? Then what about me, your father, am I no longer good? Don't forget, your old man will be the one painstakingly accompanying you to the prefectural city tomorrow!”

Yu Xiaocao immediately changed her target and placated her jealous father, “Father is also the best! Xiaocao is really too fortunate to have the world's best father and mother!”

“Such a toady!” Little Shitou sourly remarked. He only had two days of break, so he had lost his chance to go to the prefectural city.

Yu Hang leisurely walked up to his little brother and rubbed his small head, “In the future when you have passed the county level exams and need to take the provincial level exams, then you'll have your opportunity to go to the prefectural city. If you feel envious right now, then use your own efforts to achieve your goals!”

Little Shitou wrapped his hands into tight fists and firmly asserted, “Older Brother! The prefectural exam is not my ultimate goal. My ultimate goal is—to reach the imperial court examinations! I will certainly make my parents and second sister proud of me!”

“Yes, Older Brother believes in you! Don't give yourself too much pressure, as long as you do your best, then you won't have any regrets!” Yu Hang didn't want his little brother to lose his innocent heart due to throwing himself into his schoolwork. In addition to raising his confidence, Yu Hang also wanted to give the little fellow some warmth.

This was the first time that Zhou Zixu and Zhao Han saw Yu Xiaocao reveal her childish side. They both thought that it was cute and refreshing and couldn't help but simultaneously reveal gentle smiles.

Zhou Zixu took the lead, “Xiaocao, Uncle Yu, are you guys really going into the prefectural city on foot tomorrow? Even if you walk for the whole day without rest, you may not be able to get there by dark. Can Younger Sister Xiaocao endure a journey like that?”

Xiaocao was afraid that her father would get the idea, again, that she shouldn't go, and hastily replied, “We have Little Gray ah! It shouldn't be a problem for it to pull the four of us in the cart!”

Zhao Han couldn't help but chuckle at the eager expression Xiaocao had on her face, “My family has two horses at home. If Uncle Yu knows how to ride a horse, then my father and I can take one while Uncle Yu and Xiaocao ride the other.” “Wow! Brother Han has horses at home? And two of them? Brother Han's family is really rich ah!” Because the start of dynasty occurred after a long and lengthy battle, the price for a horse had risen without stopping. This meant that, for an average family, buying a horse was similar to buying a new car in the modern times. The cheapest and most ordinary horse on the market would cost at least a hundred or so taels to purchase.

Yu Hang gently knocked on his little brother's head and smiled, "Why are you feeling envious? It's not like our family can't afford to buy a horse now, but it's more like we don't need one! After you pass the county level exams, we'll buy you one!"

Perhaps it was due to a boy's temperament, but Little Shitou had always liked horses, even when he was very young. After he heard his brother's suggestion, his eyes lit up, "Older Brother, is that a promise? But isn't our family's money all in Second Sister's hands right now?"

Yu Hang pinched the little boy's face and discovered that it felt quite nice. No wonder his little sister liked abusing this little fellow's face so much! He stopped pinching after the Little Shitou protested and confidently replied, "After I completely recover, I will also help the family earn money. Do you really think that your eldest brother won't be able to save enough money to buy you a horse by the time you pass the county examinations?"

Little Shitou remembered that his oldest brother was always reliable and never promised more than he could provide. He nodded his head eagerly, "Eldest Brother, I believe in you! I will just wait until you buy me a horse then!!"

On the other hand, Yu Xiaocao was still negotiating the way they should travel to the prefectural city. Zhou Zixu looked somewhat worriedly at Yu Hai and said, "Uncle Yu says he knows how to ride a horse, but because he doesn't do it often, he's out of practice. If Xiaocao is also riding pillion with him, it won't be very safe, especially for such a long journey, right?"

Zhao Han apparently also had some misgivings. He thought for a bit before he suggested, "How about we get up earlier and ride the horses to town. Aren't there always horse carts in town in the morning that are going to the prefectural city? The carts all have rubber wheels, so Xiaocao would also be more comfortable sitting on one."

"I could also ride Little Gray too! Little Gray is very well-behaved and is also fast on his feet!" Usually when there wasn't anything important going on, Xiaocao and Little Shitou would climb onto Little Gray's back and let the donkey run around the mountain roads a couple of times.

Although Zhou Zixu wasn't entirely happy with the idea, he still honored Xiaocao's choice. He spoke to Yu Hai, "Uncle Yu, you should ride my horse there! My mother had especially chosen a more docile horse for me to ride. Thus, you can all have one person per animal, and it'll be easier that way."

“Okay! Let's just do it that way!” Yu Xiaocao cheerfully decided on the arrangements. Then she immediately started to plan what she needed to bring on the trip. ‘We need to take some water ah, dried rations and other stuff like it. We absolutely need to bring some money for traveling expenses, and it cannot be too little...’

“Xiaocao, do you plan on bringing that ginseng to sell?” The ginseng that Little Glutinous Dumpling found had to be at least five hundred years old and was worth quite a lot.

There were a lot of wealthy people in the prefectural city, so it wouldn't be difficult to find a buyer. However, it was possible to become a target for some of the more unscrupulous people. Although Zhao Han had confidence in his and his father's abilities to fight off some small thieves, he was afraid that Xiaocao might become scared from such a situation. Her body had always been weak. Receiving a fright would only cause problems for her.

“Ginseng? What sort of ginseng?” Zhou Zixu couldn't help but ask after seeing the solemn expression on Zhao Han's face.

Xiaocao carelessly replied, “The last time I was in the mountains, I managed to dig up a ginseng that is on the older side. I'm planning on selling it for money.”

“If it's a very old ginseng and you're not hurting for money, I advise you to keep ahold of it. In the future, it'll act as a guarantee against a bad situation. After all, old ginseng are objects that can only be discovered but cannot be bought in a place like Tanggu Town.” Zhou Zixu liked to prepare for the far-off future. Xiaocao and her mother had weak constitutions. With an old ginseng at home, if anything bad happened, it could be the difference between life and death.

Zhao Han nodded his head in approval, “I also believe that's the best way! After all, it's a ginseng that's over five hundred years old...”

“A ginseng that's at least five hundred years old? You want to sell it? Are you stupid or crazy?? Keep it, you have to keep it!! Did you know that Tongren Medicine Hall in town, which is a very large pharmacy, rarely sees a hundred year old ginseng, let alone ginseng that's at least five hundred years? If you need money, then come to me first! You absolutely cannot sell that ginseng!!”

When Zhou Zixu heard how old the ginseng was, he almost exploded in astonishment. For a family like his, which had been accumulating treasures for several hundred years, their storeroom only had one ginseng that was over five hundred years old. If they didn't cut a few pieces off of the ginseng to simmer into medication for the most recent illness that his grandfather had, then the elderly man might not have survived! Ginseng that was at least five hundred years old...those who had money couldn't find any on the market, and they wanted to sell it? That would truly be an astronomical waste!

“We're not going to sell it, okay! Why are being all agitated now?” Yu Xiaocao rolled her eyes inwardly. However, it was better to keep it! Although she currently had the little divine stone as her ace in the hole, it would likely restore all of its spiritual energy one day and leave. Without her godly cheat item, that old ginseng may be the item that could save her entire family.

After confirming the departure time for tomorrow with Xiaocao and her father, Zhao Han said his farewells and left. He also needed to go home to prepare for the journey to the prefectural city.

As for Third Young Master Zhou, after eating a simple yet delicious breakfast at the Yu Residence, he sat on the donkey cart with Yu Hai, who was on his way to the docks to sell braised food. When they got to the docks, he went directly to the oyster sauce factory construction site at the docks. At the most crucial moment, he absolutely would not feel relieved if he wasn't there to supervise everything himself!

At this time, the Yao Family's and Zhenxiu Restaurant's horse carts had arrived at the Yu Family Residence. The tomatoes that everyone had once rejected were now their most popular produce.

Tomatoes that had been watered with mystic-stone water were incredible. No matter if they were eaten raw, stir-fried, stewed in soups, they all tasted amazing. When eaten raw, they were refreshingly sweet and sour, with lots of juice. They not only quenched the thirst but also had a delicious texture. When cooked, they were very versatile and could be used in a multitude of dishes. Some examples included: stir-fried tomatoes with scrambled eggs, tomatoes stir-fried with tofu, tomatoes stir-fried with rice cakes, tomatoes stewed with brisket...Yu Xiaocao could make over ten dishes with tomatoes that all had different flavors.

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Yu Xiaocao taught Zhenxiu Restaurant how to cook tomatoes in a few ways. By doing so, she had managed to attract many unexpected customers to the restaurant. The rarer something is, the greater its value. Naturally, the Yu Family's tomatoes were sold at a very expensive price, almost at the level of some extremely rare fruits. The Yu Family's small patch of tomatoes helped them earn quite a bit of wealth.

Although it was now the regular season for produce to hit the market, the Yu Family's vegetables excelled not only in taste but also in freshness compared to the other offerings. Consequently, even though the Yu Family's produce was slightly more expensive than other people's, the Yao Family and Zhenxiu Restaurant still solely bought from them.

Of course, now that it was in season, the vegetables were much cheaper than they were at the start of spring. The days of selling vegetables at a price higher than pork were gone for now!

As the first rays of the morning sun illuminated the top of the West Mountain, the birds still in their nests started to chirp and sing. Yu Xiaocao crawled consciously out of bed to wash her face. Little Shitou huddled within the blankets and watched her enviously.

"If there's anything you want, Older Sister will buy it for you in the prefectural city!" Yu Xiaocao told Little Shitou in a sisterly tone.

Little Shitou thought for a bit and then shook his head, "There's nothing I want, no need to spend money on snacks or toys. If there are any cheap stationery items, like brushes and paper, buy some of those for me. I feel like my calligraphy, compared to the other students in my dorm, is less elegant."

"The students who share a room with you are either from scholarly or wealthy families. For the most part, they likely started learning and practicing at the age of three. How old were you when you got to hold a brush? It's not shameful for you to be a little behind them!" Yu Xiaocao believed that having a competitive spirit wasn't a bad thing but having an obsession with getting first place wasn't good either.

Little Shitou flipped over in the bed and remarked cheerfully, "I'm not comparing myself to other people. The teacher also said that having elegant handwriting will be very helpful for me when I take the exams in the future. I already started later than other people, so I really need to work hard to catch up vigorously. If stationary items are cheaper in the prefectural city compared to town, then please take this opportunity to get more so I have some spares in case! You don't need to spend the family's fund, I have more than enough pocket money to cover the cost!"

Ever since Little Shitou had gone into town to study, Xiaocao had never stopped giving him pocket money. Every week he received at least thirty to fifty copper coins as pocket money. However, the little fellow was thrifty and hated to spend it. Instead, he saved it up to buy brushes, ink, and paper. However, his second sister was too thoughtful and he was never short of those items. Thus, his little purse had over several hundred copper coins in it now.

Yu Xiaocao walked over, pinched his small face, and grinned, "Keep the few coins you have in your purse and use it to buy some snacks! You don't need to worry about getting stationary. After all, you have Second Sister ah! Your second sister has money now and, in the future, will have even more! Just focus on studying and you don't need to think about the rest!"

After the osmanthus duck at Zhenxiu Restaurant became famous, the Yu Family had at least a thousand taels of income every year. Not only could they afford to send one child to school, but if they also wanted to send every child at home to school, it wouldn't be too expensive for them. Being wealthy and prosperous was truly the way to live!

"Uncle Yu, where's Xiaocao? Can we set out now?" The sound of Zhao Han's voice reached both siblings' ears.

Little Shitou gently laughed, "Second Sister, stop touching my face! Don't make Brother Han get anxious from waiting too long!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" Xiaocao hurriedly grabbed her small cloth bundle that she had packed the day before and rushed quickly out of the room.

Madam Liu was in the middle of giving the dried rations to her husband when she saw Xiaocao still wearing the clothes she had on yesterday. She frowned, "Didn't I make you a new set of clothing? Quickly change into it!"

"This set is pretty good ah! Don't need to change..." Xiaocao looked at the clothing on her body. Although it was crafted from rough homespun, it didn't have any dirt or patches on it. What's the point in changing?

Yu Hai chuckled, "Your mother told you to change clothing, so you should go change! Wearing new clothing when you head out on a trip will give you good luck."

Yu Xiaocao wanted to argue more but she was pushed by her mother back into the room. Madam Liu took out a brand new, embroidered, cotton-lined coat and bottom from a chest made of rattan. The short jacket was pale blue in color with flowers embroidered at the collar and waist. It was paired with a deep blue pair of culottes that reached the ankles. Although it was technically a pair of culottes, it didn't

look any different from a regular skirt. However, it really did have pant legs, and this type of clothing would make it easier for a person to ride a horse or walk long distances.

Although the clothes were made out of cotton cloth, the cloth was of better quality and weave. After washing and starching, it held its shape very well and made the wearer look quite stylish. This was the first time since she had transmigrated over that Yu Xiaocao was able to wear a set that was so formal. She turned a few times in front of Madam Liu, admiring herself. Her two hands went to frame her face as she beamed a smile, "Mother, am I pretty?"

"Alright, stop showing off your looks! Sit down, Mother will help you style your hair into two buns." Madam Liu had deft and nimble hands. Before long, she finished styling Xiaocao's hair and used a long band of ribbon to decorate, tying it into a large bow.

With the waist of her short jacket emphasizing her slender and delicate waist, two hair buns, a tender and pale snow-white face, and a pair of large, limpid dark eyes, Xiaocao looked incredibly adorable.

When Zhao Han, who was in the midst of harnessing up the little donkey with a horse saddle, saw the dressed up Yu Xiaocao, he almost didn't recognize her. He looked closely at her for a bit before he joked, "Oh! Where did this beautiful girl from a humble family come from? Looks so cute and adorable!"

Yu Xiaocao opened her eyes wide and put both hands on her hips. She lightly said, "Brother Han, are you trying to flirt with me?"

Zhao Han's face immediately turned bright red, and he couldn't meet her gaze, "...I was sincerely trying to compliment you!"

Madam Liu hit Xiaocao on the back and soothed Zhao Han, "Don't pay any attention to this little girl. She likes to say weird things from time to time. I really don't know what to do with her! Everyone should quickly head out now, otherwise you might not make it to the prefectural city before it gets dark!!"

Xiaocao's back hurt quite a bit from the hit, so she pouted and muttered under her breath, "If you hadn't told me to change clothes, then we would almost be at the town right now. I was only teasing Brother Han a little, but you hit me so hard. Am I really your biological daughter?"

"We picked you up from a sweet potato patch!" Madam Liu scolded huffily. After escorting her daughter and husband to the gate and helping her husband support Xiaocao onto Little Gray's back, she repeatedly reminded them, "You two don't have great equestrian skills. Ride a bit slower and be careful on the road!"

The saddle on Little Gray's back was the one that Zhao Han used when he was a kid, so it fit perfectly on the little donkey's back. Fortunately, when Madam Liu was sewing the new clothes, Xiaocao had her change the skirt into culottes. This made it easy for her to sit astride on the saddle. The legs of the culottes were wide and spacious, so it looked like two sides of a skirt arranged around the saddle. The fabric swayed along with the donkey's steps.

At the beginning, Xiaocao felt a bit nervous riding on the donkey's back. The father and son from the Zhao Family deliberately went at a slower pace to match the Yu Family's comfort level.

Gradually, Xiaocao got the hang of it and no longer sat stiffly in the saddle. The little donkey felt its master relax, and its steps became much more cheerful and at ease.

After consuming lots of mystic-stone water, Little Gray's intelligence was not any less than the two fine steeds from the Zhao Family. It didn't need Xiaocao's commands at all and had a fast and steady gait. It was even faster than Yu Hai's steed, and ended up at the front of the group.

Xiaocao didn't feel like she was being jolted on this ride, even though they were still on the same rugged and craggy mountain roads. It was much more comfortable than sitting on the donkey cart. It sparked a thought for Xiaocao: 'Next time I go into town, maybe I should just ride on the donkey?'

Before long, Yu Hai's equestrian skills also improved, and the speed of the group gradually increased. The Zhao father and son pair were amazed that the Yu Family's donkey, no matter what the speed or distance, was able to keep up with the three horses.

Because the little donkey was more capable than they expected, the four of them arrived at the prefectural city two hours earlier than they had predicted.

The prefectural city was a city and thus was livelier and larger compared to Tanggu Town. Its streets were wide and smooth, with shops boarding both sides. The sun was slowly setting towards the horizon, and its lingering glow illuminated green tiled roofs, red colored walls, and the spaces between buildings.

There was a three-story building crafted from red bricks with a green-tiled roof, a shop sign fluttering high in the wind, and the sounds of horse carriages surrounded them...all of this showed that the prefectural city was prosperous and flourishing.

Yu Xiaocao held the reins of the little donkey as stood on the road, watching the stream of people around her bustling busily. There were some who were elegant, some who were fresh, some who were sincere, and some who were experienced. Her ears were filled with the sounds of peddlers bawling their wares punctuated by the occasional high-pitched neigh of a horse. It was the scene of a golden age, flourishing beyond her dreams...

Zhao Bufan had previously visited the prefectural city, so he was already used to the sight of all of the people. He softly consulted the Yu father and daughter pair for their opinions, "Brother Dahai, should we find a place to lodge first, or should we walk around first?"

Yu Hai looked at his daughter and asked, "Cao'er, what do you want to do?"

"How about we first find a place to stay first. We should feed Little Gray and the horses, and also freshen ourselves up. It won't be too late to look around after doing that!" In any case, they were going to stay at the prefectural city for two nights, so they had all of tomorrow to walk around. They didn't need to try to fit everything in tonight.

Zhao Han immediately expressed his approval, "Xiaocao, I know a night market in the area. It's pretty exciting at night with a lot of snacks from different provinces and you can even find some good deals too. You will probably like it!"

"Okay, okay! We'll go stroll around the night market tonight and eat some snacks!" In her previous life, Yu Xiaocao had started working to support her family when she was fifteen to sixteen years of age. She was always busy and had very little time to do things like walk around a night market and taste snacks. In this life, she still needed to make money; however, she could also take the time to have some fun and enjoy the scenes of life.

The group of four found a clean inn to live in that was near the night market that Zhao Han had mentioned. The prefectural city was considered a large city, so the expenses there were naturally higher. Although this small inn was located at a relatively remote area, it cost a hundred and fifty copper coins a night. In total, for four people, it came out to six hundred copper coins a night, which didn't include food and drink expenses. For two nights, more than a tael would be spent!

Yu Xiaocao first went to the back courtyard and made sure to take good care of Little Gray and the three horses. On the way to the city, in order to conserve the animals' strength, Xiaocao had fed them almost all of the mystic-stone water that was kept in her personal water pouch.

The inn provided fodder for the animals. The three horses had a decent appetite. They had only had some water during the whole journey, so they had long been hungry. When the fodder came out, all of them ate it with delight. However, the little donkey had been raised by Xiaocao, so it was much pickier. It impatiently stomped its hooves and disdained the provided fodder as below its status.

This little inn was run by a family. The person in charge of feeding the animals was a young girl about the same age as Xiaocao. When she noticed that the gray donkey didn't want to eat, she asked Xiaocao, "Is this donkey not feeling well? How come it doesn't want to eat food ah?"

Yu Xiaocao smiled, "My family's Little Gray has been spoiled rotten by me. It doesn't like eating food that's given to it by outsiders. Little sister, give the fodder to me, I'll feed my donkey."

The little girl also had to go into the kitchen to light the fire. When she heard what Xiaocao said, she placed the fodder from her basket into Xiaocao's hands and said, "Then I'll have to inconvenience you, guest!"

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Yu Xiaocao waited until the young girl walked far away. Only then did she sprinkle the remaining water from her water pouch onto the fodder. She placed the improved fodder into the feed trough in front of Little Gray. The little donkey licked her hand and then cheerfully started eating. The other three horses apparently could tell that the fodder in front of Little Gray was different and stretched out their necks. If they didn't have their lead ropes pulling them back, they would have long started fighting over the food with Little Gray.

Xiaocao shook her water pouch, showing that it was completely empty. She stroked Third Young Master Zhou's little red horse and softly said, "Just accept these less than ideal circumstances for tonight, I'll make sure to give you guys something good to eat tomorrow!"

Little Gray somehow knew that its own food was being eyed with jealousy by the other three horses, so it rapidly inhaled all of the fodder until the trough was swept clean. Satisfied, it opened its mouth and nickered a few times. The other three horses had nothing to fight for so they had no choice but to eat what was left in their own food bins.

Zhao Han had finished moving their items into the room and came over. He noticed Xiaocao in the back courtyard and asked, "Xiaocao, do you want to rest a bit?"

"I'm not tired, let's stroll around the vicinity!" Although riding a donkey for a long distance was hard and tiring, Xiaocao had her cheat item: mystic-stone water. Just drinking a mouthful was enough to energize her and eliminate fatigue.

The small inn was in a location where the commoners of the prefectural city lived. Nearby, there were shops that sold small goods that were almost the same price as the same goods in Tanggu Town. However, they had varieties of cloth material and designs of jewelry that could not be found in the smaller town.

At one of the shops in the vicinity, Xiaocao immediately noticed a thin cotton cloth that caught her eye. It was dyed with an elegant pattern that reminded one of tree branches. If Madam Liu had a piece of clothing made from this cloth, she would definitely look very stylish. The cloth sold in Tanggu Town were either dyed a simple color or over-the-top with bright colors and patterns that could seem garish on some people. She needed to buy more of this type of simple yet elegant material to bring back home.

Xiaocao was never extremely frugal with her own spending. In addition, the price for the cloth was not expensive, as it was about the same as those found in Tanggu Town. But, there was more variety. She asked the shopkeeper to cut her ten feet of each cloth that she liked. Behind her, Zhao Han soon found his hands full of cloth bundles.

Not far from them, there was a small silverware store. Xiaocao remembered that when her mother was doing her hair she had lamented that they didn't have any hair ornaments. They could only use leftover scraps from sewing clothes to tie a bow onto her hair.

All girls loved to dress up, so Xiaocao stepped into the silverware store without any hesitation. Inside the store, there was a twelve to thirteen year old girl at the counter. Although she was average looking, she had a business-like demeanor.

When she saw a customer step in, the girl didn't judge the person by the way she looked and still warmly greeted her, "Little sister, do you want some jewelry? Where are your parents?"

This was the first time that Yu Xiaocao had entered into a silverware store. Her eyes looked avidly around and were caught by the glittering and shining pieces of jewelry in the store. With her family's current financial situation, buying gold ornaments would be a bit too ostentatious and inconsistent with Xiaocao's desire to stay under the radar. She still needed time to implement more money-making schemes.

She smiled at the shopkeeper girl and went to the display counter that had silver ornaments. The display had a layer of dark colored cloth at the bottom, which made the silver jewelry inside seem more bright and shiny.

At this point, the shopkeeper girl saw Zhao Han, who had just entered the store. Although Zhao Han was only around twelve to thirteen years of age, he had a sturdy and tall body from practicing martial arts all year round. In the young girl's eyes, Zhao Han had become Xiaocao's older brother who was taking his younger sister around shopping.

The two of them were only wearing clothes made of the most ordinary type of cotton cloth, but the workmanship was very fine, especially the set on Xiaocao. It emphasized Xiaocao's fine and slim figure, making her look like a slender and elegant flower. She really had the air of a beautiful girl born from a humble family.

The girl attentively recommended Xiaocao some pieces of jewelry in the case, "Little sister, this is a pair of earrings shaped like lilacs. The design is quite lively and really suits girls around your age. Do you want to try..."

She picked up the pair of silver lilac earrings and gestured towards Xiaocao's ears. Only then did she notice that the little girl's ears had not been pierced yet, so she smiled apologetically at Xiaocao. She placed the silver earrings down and picked up a set of jewelry decorated with pearls.

Xiaocao noticed that the pair of lilac earrings had fine workmanship. The tiny lilac flowers seemed vivid and lifelike and glimmered gently in the last rays of the setting sun. Because she had a weak constitution since she was young, Madam Liu wasn't willing to pierce her ears. However, Xiaolian had pierced ears. This pair of lilac earrings really fit Xiaocao's tastes, and she asked the girl about the price. They were only twenty copper coins, so she immediately bought them.

Following that, she picked out a pair of twining silver bracelets for Madam Liu as well as a Yulan magnolia [1] hairpin made of silver. She had heard Xiaolian mention that their mother had originally had a Yulan magnolia hairpin just like this one that was brought over as her dowry. However, when Xiaocao

had fallen ill as a child, they had sold it to get the money to pay for her medicine. This silver hairpin should help soothe Madam Liu's previous regrets!

Naturally, Xiaocao didn't forget to buy things for herself and picked up a pair of pearl and coral bracelets. She also chose a similar style for Xiaolian, just with different colored pearls. Finally, she also bought a few headbands that were embroidered with gold thread. She wanted to gift these to the sisters of the Zhou Family as well as Qian Wu's younger sister.

Picking out items here and there had unexpectedly racked up a bill of six taels. The young shopkeeper girl was a bit worried that this pair of 'siblings' didn't bring enough money with them. After all, the clothes they were wearing were not the type that the children from rich families would wear. What sort of ordinary family would give their children five to six taels of money for buying jewelry? Even in the prefectural city, an ordinary family's dowry for their daughter would not exceed ten taels worth of jewelry.

The young girl felt somewhat anxious but kept a smile on her face, "Altogether, it comes out to six taels and two hundred copper coins. My shop's jewelry is all self-made, so I'll just waive the small change. Just give me six taels in total!"

Six taels total? This is absolutely not expensive! The pair of bracelets and silver hairpin had to weigh almost two ounces total. If the shop also had to pay for a silversmith to shape these items, then the shop really wouldn't have much profit. Fortunately, this shop made all of its own items, so it saved a bit on the wages for the smith.

Xiaocao took out her embroidered money pouch and fished out an ingot of silver worth around ten taels. She then took the smaller pieces of change and stuffed them into the pouch. Xiaolian had actually embroidered this pouch, so it had a unique sunflower design on the outside.

The shopkeeper girl was interested in the design on the pouch. After getting Xiaocao's permission, she sketched the pattern out. The girl was the daughter of an old silversmith and had a lot of talent in creating and making silver jewelry. The jewelry she made were not only delicately pretty but also had a lot of liveliness.

The sunflower embroidered on this tiny pouch inspired her limitlessly. Not long in the future, sunflower inspired jewelry would become very popular for a period of time in the prefectural city. This tiny silver crafts shop also gradually became more famous. Thus, the jewelry that this little girl made would also become more liked by masses...

The sky had already become dark. After they left the jewelry store, Xiaocao felt bad having Zhao Han carrying all of these packages around while accompanying her to the night market. So, they went back to the inn and put the newly bought items away. Yu Hai was afraid that it wasn't safe for the two children to wander around at night, so he also came out with them.

The night market that Zhao Han recommended was really quite lively. It was brightly lit and multitudes of people swarmed around. Shops and stalls lined both sides of the street and each booth had two lanterns hanging on the awning. Occasionally, the flame within the lanterns would flicker a bit and made the lighting in the area take on a dream-like splendor.

The night market not only had people selling all sorts of trinkets and gadgets, but also many stalls of snacks that ranged from the northern to southern provinces. There were sticky rice cakes, wontons, stuffed glutinous rice balls, flaky pastries, rice noodles...the three of them ate snacks down the whole street until all of their bellies were about to burst. All three of them exclaimed and rubbed their tummies in discomfort.

Only when the night market was about to close did Xiaocao reluctantly leave. She commented wistfully, "Although the food here has an authentic flavor, I believe I could make food that is a hundred times tastier if I lived nearby."

"Eh? What sort of ideas do you have? Tell us. If it's feasible, we can also sell them at the docks!" Zhao Han had also tried Xiaocao's food and believed in her culinary talents completely.

Xiaocao smiled somewhat reminiscently, "I want to create skewer hotpot. Anything can be put on bamboo skewers, such as meat, vegetables, eggs, seafood...I also want to simmer a pot of spicy and savory soup to go with it...that being said, I'm starting to feel hungry again!" Yu Hai looked at his daughter, who seemed to have stars whirling around in her eyes, gently patted her head, and chuckled, "There are already people at the docks measuring up the area. Before long, they will start doing construction. Third Young Master had said that in the future the docks will become the largest port in the north. There will absolutely be much more people there than before. In the future, we can have a shop there selling braised food as well as the skewers in soup that you were talking about!"

"How about...you first make some, and I can help you try them. If they are truly as delicious as you say, you absolutely can make money off of them!" Zhao Han felt the gluttonous monster inside him rear its head when he heard Xiaocao's descriptions. Who knew how long it would take for the port to finish construction, so didn't that mean he had to wait an unknown period of time to satisfy his cravings for

skewer hotpot? The best scenario would be for Xiaocao to first make some, so he could eat to his heart's content.

"Not a problem! Tomorrow, let's buy some spices and seasonings in the city. When we get back home, I'll make some for you to try!" The materials to make food skewers could be found anywhere. For example: Chinese cabbage, green vegetables, romaine lettuce, tofu, mushrooms and other such vegetables were quite cheap. As long as one simmered a tasty soup, you could boil whatever you wanted in it. What a treat!

The three people started to walk back towards the inn as they continued to discuss skewers simmered in soup. Suddenly, someone blocked their way. This person had a tall and imposing figure, which showed that he had done martial arts since he was young. He stared at Zhao Han for a good while before he asked somewhat emotionally, "Excuse me, younger brother, are you surnamed Zhao?"

Zhao Han stopped smiling and pursed his brows. He replied cautiously, "You, do you recognize me?"

"No, no! Little brother, you look very similar to my teacher, and my respected teacher's surname was Zhao..." When the large man didn't hear him refute, he became even more excited. His fierce looking eyes started to hold back tears.

Zhao Han actually didn't look much like his father and took after his grandfather instead. The Zhao Family all seemed to have a natural talent for martial arts. Even though Zhao Han was only a preteen, a group of five to six ordinary men wouldn't be his opponent.

Zhao Han carefully sized up the large man in front of him and apparently made a decision. He stowed away his suspicious nature and asked in a low voice, "Excuse me, but are you surnamed 'Fang'? The 'Fang' from the word for house?"

"Yes, yes! I am your martial uncle, Fang Zizhen ah! Ah, esteemed teacher...is your grandfather's health still okay? Where have you all been living in hiding, I've been looking for you all for over twenty years..." The large man couldn't restrain himself and clasped Zhao Han's shoulder. A smile that almost split his face open blossomed wide. Zhao Han naturally knew of Fang Zizhen. His grandfather had adopted an orphan and treated him like a son, teaching him everything he knew. He was taught the Zhao Family's familial martial arts. It was said that before Fang Zizhen went missing, his martial arts abilities were on par with his grandfather's. If there wasn't that bitter and desperate battle, it was likely that Martial Uncle Fang would even exceed his grandfather's abilities.