

## Fields of Gold Chapter 19

"Don't forget about me, Brother Han!" When Little Shitou heard that they could possibly eat meat, he immediately jumped up and circled around Zhao Han with admiration.

Zhao Han pinched the little boy's cheeks and grinned. "Of course! I would never leave our Little Shitou behind!"

"Brother Han, why are you like my second sister? Both of you really like pinching other people's cheeks for some reason." Little Shitou pouted as he scampered away from the youth. The little boy held his face between his two hands and had an aggrieved expression on his face.

Seeing that all of her children were laughing and playing happily, Madam Liu glanced at the sky to check the time. "Go on and play. I still haven't finished washing the bed sheets so I need to go back to the stream. Don't play too rough and remember to come home to eat supper!"

The custom of having three meals a day started after the ascension of the first emperor of the current dynasty. Decades had passed since the start of the custom, and so, having breakfast, lunch, and supper was customary among the upper classes and in upscale restaurants. However, most peasants still stuck with having two meals a day: once in the morning and once in the evening. The reality was that they couldn't afford to eat more frequently. This was something that Yu Xiaocao found very difficult to stomach.

"Mother, don't worry! I'm here to watch over younger brother and younger sisters!" Yu Hang promised. Although he really wanted to tag along with Brother Han to check the traps, he still remembered that they were responsible for gathering firewood.

He had just found out from Xiaolian that grandmother had thrown a tantrum when she didn't see him in the morning. In order to appease her, his mother and sister had to take on more chores at home.

Zhao Han was well aware of the particular circumstances of this group of siblings. He turned to Xiaocao and Little Shitou and beckoned them to follow him. "Do you guys want to follow me to check the traps?"

"Yes! Yes!" Little Shitou, who was still a young child, immediately agreed without thinking.

On the other hand, Yu Xiaocao felt guilty when she saw her older sister and brother working hard to find firewood. When Yu Xiaolian saw her hesitate, she smiled and said, "Little sister, you're still too weak right now! Do you really think you can help us with this? Don't be a bother and cause more trouble for us by staying here!"

"Second Sister, we can still help them collect firewood when we hike down the mountain later!" Little Shitou had a clever mind and quickly found an excuse to persuade his sister.

In her previous life, Yu Xiaocao had lived on the plains, so she had never experienced hunting in the mountains. Now that she had the chance, she couldn't resist satisfying her curiosity. After hesitating for a second, she decided to follow the two boys, "Older brother, Xiaolian, I'll help you guys as soon as I can. I swear I'll come back soon!" The traps that Zhao Han had set were all along the periphery of the mountain range, away from the deep forests where more ferocious animals lived. In fact, even larger game was scarce in this area. This was why he was comfortable with bringing two small children along with him.

It was still summer right now, so the temperature outside was scorching, especially out in the open and under the blistering sun.

However, underneath the cover of the trees, it was shady and cool, almost as if it was autumn. The chilly air felt comfortable after sweating the whole morning. Yu Xiaocao started to wonder if this would be a good place to escape to when the weather got even hotter.

"Be careful, Xiaocao! There's a trap right in front of you, so be careful not to fall in!" Zhao Han warned suddenly. He had noticed that the little girl was looking around curiously and was not paying attention to the ground at her feet. How could she be so inattentive in such dangerous surroundings?

A trap? Yu Xiaocao bent over to inspect the ground more carefully. To her surprise, there was one patch on the ground that looked different from the rest of the terrain. She had to admit that this Brother Zhao had some pretty good skills. Had she not looked carefully, she wouldn't have been able to find the trap.

"Are you not afraid that some of the villagers might get hurt from your traps here? Other people go through here too." Yu Xiaocao asked, a concerned look on her face.

Little Shitou giggled and interjected, "Second Sister, besides you, the entire village knows the marks that the Zhao family uses on their traps. Even the three year olds in the village know what to look for. Look at the knotted string over there. If you ever see this, it means that there's a trap nearby and you have to be careful!"

At this moment, Yu Xiaocao noticed that on a nearby tree, there was indeed a grass rope woven into a distinctive knot. She rubbed her nose sheepishly in embarrassment.

Zhao Han skillfully switched the conversation topic for her. "It looks like this trap hasn't been tripped, let's go further in to check on the others. Xiaocao, if you start feeling tired, make sure to tell me."

Yu Xiaocao raised her voice in assent and followed Zhao Han closely. The three of them went deeper into the forest. The light dimmed perceptively the further they walked, and the underbrush became more thick and unruly. Fortunately, there was a worn path in the forest so they didn't have to push through too much vegetation.

Little Shitou grabbed a long tree branch and used it to constantly whip the lush underbrush. Not only would this drive away any snakes but it could also startle some hidden pheasants to run out in the open.

"Wait a moment!" The handsome Zhao Han called out. He instructed the two siblings to stay where they were while he disappeared into the nearby brush.

The forest in the mountains was thick with trees and other plants. Branches criss-crossed against each other and blocked any sunlight from reaching the ground. Occasionally, some beams of light were able to escape through the cracks. There were a couple beams right now that lit up this little grove. Above them a bird suddenly spread out its wings and flew away. It cried eerily as it left. The two kids noticed that a bush started shaking not too far away from them, as if there was something walking through there...

"Second Sister... are you afraid right now?" Little Shitou asked with a trembling voice. He scuttled closer to her and pulled on her hand. His eyes were large with fright as he scanned the area around him.

Yu Xiaocao deliberately teased him. "Little coward! Didn't Brother Han tell you? We're on the outskirts of the deep forest. Most big game won't come here, let alone anything big and mean! Didn't you just say you were going to 'protect your older sister'? Why are you scared now?"

Little Shitou let go of her hand, ashamed, and started to tear a piece of grass apart with his fingers. He softly muttered, "When I grow up, I'll make sure to protect Second Sister—oh, look, Brother Han's back now!"

Xiaocao turned to face the direction that Zhao Han had left earlier. Sure enough, after the brush rattled a bit, Zhao Han's tall and steady figure appeared in front of them.

"Look what I have! What do you two think this is?" The youth asked as he dangled something in his hands in front of the two little kids.

Little Shitou hopped up and exclaimed in a voice that echoed, "Pheasant eggs! Second sister, he has Reeves's pheasant eggs! Eggs are so tasty, and they're great for strengthening the body!"

"Here, take them. In a bit we'll cook some eggs to eat!" Zhao Han grinned as he put five pheasant eggs into the two siblings' hands. Afterwards, he continued to lead the way through the forest.

All of the traps he had set earlier were placed in the dense undergrowth. From time to time, the young man would walk off the dirt path to inspect his traps while the brother and sister pair stayed on the trail. After inspecting more than ten traps in the past two hours, Xiaocao was starting to feel exhausted.

Luckily, their trip was not in vain. One of the traps had caught a freshly killed wild hare, while Zhao Han was also able to shoot down a fat and plump turtledove.

"You guys must be tired now. I bet you both are also hungry. I know a good place for us to stop at and make some food." Throughout the journey, Zhao Han had kept a close eye on the two siblings.

Little Shitou's condition was not bad. He spent most of his time running around like crazy with the other kids from the village, so he had a decent amount of energy in his little body. On the other hand, Yu Xiaocao had a weaker constitution. The difference between the two wasn't surprising. For someone who had been sickly since the day she was born, it was a miracle Xiaocao could walk so long on a rough, mountain trail.

Zhao Han knew this area of the forest like the back of his own hand. He led the two siblings through the dense underbrush. After tramping through the forest for another quarter-hour, Yu Xiaocao suddenly noticed that they had walked into an unexpected area. They were in a beautiful valley that seemed to appear from nowhere.

The sides of the valley were bracketed on both sides by the mountains. Verdant green leaves shimmered in the sunlight, and the valley seemed to be carpeted lushly with vegetation. A small creek gurgled happily through the valley. The flowing water cut through the grass like a dark blue thread in a piece of fine brocade. Even the air seemed more clear and fresh here!

"Wow! This is amazing! It's such a beautiful place!" Yu Xiaocao deeply inhaled the fresh air into her lungs and breathed out dreamily.

Zhao Han smiled and watched indulgently as the little girl plunged into the long grass and rolled around comfortably. To him, she looked like a cute little cat, spoiled and adorable.