

## Gold Chapter 28

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The early morning air was crisp and fresh. Yu Xiaocao deeply inhaled a breath of the moist air as her tail, Little Shitou, walked leisurely with her towards the West Mountains.

"Xiaolian, you're up so early! Are you out to gather some fishwort for pig feed?" Ever since the little divine stone started helping her, Xiaocao's body became more healthy with every passing day. In addition, she often ate on the sly outside of the Yu residence, so her face and body had both gradually fleshed out. Now that her figure had become more like her older twin sister's body, the villagers often mixed the two up.

Little Shitou giddily ran towards the young girl who had mistaken his second sister and said, "Sister Linglong, this my second sister!"

"Second Sister? Xiaocao? Oh my! You're definitely a twin, you look so similar to your sister." Zhou Linglong curled her lips up into a smile and continued to inspect Xiaocao from head to toe.

Xiaocao merely smiled but kept silent. Little Shitou introduced his sister in her stead, "Sister Linglong's family doesn't live far from the West Mountains and is near our old family residence. Auntie Zhou and mother have a good relationship. When you were sick, the eggs you ate were all from Auntie Zhou."

Oh, so she's the daughter of mother's best friend. Yu Xiaocao smiled sweetly at Zhou Linglong and a faint dimple formed on her left cheek. "It's nice to meet you, Older Sister Linglong. On another day I will need to drop by to thank Auntie Zhou. Without her eggs, I would not be able to recover this quickly!"

Zhou Linglong stared at Xiaocao's dimple for a bit and then grinned, "It's just a couple of eggs, nothing worth mentioning—I figured out how to differentiate between you and your twin. You have a dimple and your older sister doesn't..."

Yu Xiaocao beamed a smile at her and said, "Sister Linglong, we're going with Brother Han up the mountain to pick some wild fruits. Do you want to come with us?"

Zhou Linglong revealed the sickle in her hand and shook her head. "I need to harvest some fishwort and then go back home. We have two pigs, and they've been squeaking for their food incessantly. You guys can go and play, just be careful!"

Yu Xiaocao waved her hand at the departing girl, linked hands with Little Shitou, and ran towards the hill where the Zhao Family lived.

The villagers at Dongshan Fishing Village had all worked for generations as fishermen. The Zhao Family had moved in more than twenty years ago as outsiders. Their family residence was located on top of a small hill that was at the foot of the West Mountains. The house was constructed out of rock and had three rooms. A tall fence made of stone enclosed the courtyard and building. Trees surrounded the residence on all four sides, and gardens full of vegetables and fruits bordered the front and back of the building. The entire complex gave off a feeling of a dwelling suitable for a hermit living in the deep woods.

"Brother Han, Brother Han," Little Shitou called out as he moved quietly to push open the wooden door and inserted his head in to take a look. In the middle of the courtyard was the Zhao Family's daughter-in-law, Zheng Fangyin. She twisted her head around and saw the little fellow looking around. The older woman smiled benevolently, "Oh, it's little Yu Fan! Quickly come in!"

Madam Zheng wasn't sure whether her body had gotten injured after birthing her son, but after Zhao Han was born, she was never able to get pregnant again. In the past few months, Little Shitou had gained some weight and had become a strong and good-natured little boy. Madam Zheng, who loved little children, adored his cute and witty character. She had a heart full of maternal love.

"Auntie, Brother Han told us that he was going to teach us how to set traps to catch hares. Second Sister really wants to learn, so we came early... hee hee!" The little fellow rubbed the back of his head in embarrassment while he threw his sister under the bus.

Yu Xiaocao had followed behind her younger brother to enter the courtyard. She surreptitiously jabbed him in the back as her pretty and pale little face beamed an incandescent smile at the older woman. "Good morning Auntie Zhao!"

"Oh, Xiaocao!" Madam Zheng put down the basin full of chicken feed on the ground and wiped her hands on her apron. She tenderly caressed Xiaocao's thin and pointy face. She sighed, "One is bound to have good fortune after surviving a great disaster. Being healthy is more important than anything!"

You're still a little thin, your grandmother...in the future, if you ever want to eat anything, come to Auntie's house. Auntie's cooking skills are not too bad."

"Thank you Auntie! I'll have to bother you in the future then!" Yu Xiaocao would not bluntly refuse a helping hand, especially when it was offered with a genuine and sincere heart. Instead, she received the older woman's care with an even more brilliant smile.

"Shitou, Xiaocao! Why are you both here so early? Have you two eaten breakfast yet?" Zhao Han asked with obvious surprise. The youth had come in through the gate carrying a load of water on his shoulder and had seen the two siblings in the courtyard.

Little Shitou butted in before his older sister could reply, "Our family only eats breakfast at seven in the morning, we don't have time to wait until then! Anyway, it's better for us to leave some room in our tummies so we can eat roasted fish later!"

Madam Zheng linked her hands with the two siblings and lead them into the main room. Her voice was full of disapproval as she chided, "You have a long way to walk before you'll get to the mountains. You're both so young, if neither of you eat breakfast, how would either of you have the strength to get through the day? I've already simmered porridge and griddled pancakes this morning, let's eat together before you go up the mountain."

"Grandpa Zhao!" The two children greeted a white-haired old man who had a long beard and sat upright in a formal, proper posture. The elderly man, Zhao Zixiong, cut an imposing figure. From time to time, his eyes would reveal a majestic aura that could not be entirely hidden. The pair of siblings couldn't help but be a little subdued in his presence.

The old man looked up and saw two children who, despite being dressed in shabby clothes, still radiated an aura of sweetness. He revealed a smile and said, "You two are both good children but it's too bad you're stuck with a father with no backbone. You've both endured hardships!"

"My father's fine! He knows how to fish, hunt, and weave some simple bamboo tools. He really loves us too!" In front of others, Yu Xiaocao naturally had to defend her father's reputation.

Old Zhao raised his bushy eyebrows and chuckled, "You are quite protective of your father! However, it's too bad that your father can't protect your siblings and your mother! If he can't defend the people most dear to him, is he still considered a man?"

"Father-in-law! Don't say such things in front of the children, let's eat now!" Madam Zheng was afraid the brother and sister pair would start feeling awkward and hastily stepped in to change the subject. She immediately served up bowls of congee and plates of flatbread to the old man and the children.

The Zhao Family had kept to the custom of eating three meals a day. Breakfast consisted of a thick porridge made with white rice, while the pancakes were also made with white flour. In addition to that, Madam Zheng had also cooked two vegetables—bacon stir fried with mushrooms and napa cabbage seasoned with vinegar.

Being able to eat porridge made with white rice and white flour flatbread was already a treat, but there was also meat! Little Shitou stared avidly at the sumptuous breakfast in front of him but didn't have the courage to start eating. It was only after Madam Zheng hand-delivered him a thin pancake rolled around some mushrooms and bacon did he raise his head sheepishly to look at his second sister.

Upon seeing the little boy's hesitation, Zhao Han also stuffed and rolled up a piece of flatbread before he placed it in front of Xiaocao. The youth grinned and said, "Eat! We're going to walk a little farther today, so if you two don't eat, you'll become exhausted, right? I don't have the strength to carry the both of you down if that happens."

"Thank you! Please excuse me as I start then!" Yu Xiaocao was tired of eating brown flour pancakes and drinking bean soup every day. She had long missed the taste of eating food made with white flour and white rice. The little girl took the offered pancake, nodded her head at her little brother, and then opened her mouth to take a giant bite.

She had never thought that a plain flatbread made of white flour could taste so delicious. When combined with the salty and savory taste of bacon, it elevated this humble dish into the realms of delicacies.

As Madam Zheng served food onto the two children's plates, she also told her son, "You can't take these two kids into the deep forests of the mountain. There are wild boars, wolves, and other ferocious creatures in those areas. The children need to be protected from harm."

Zhao Han peeled a hardboiled egg, placed it into Xiaocao's congee bowl, and nodded his head. "Mother, don't worry! I've been there many times and the largest animal I've ever seen was either a roe deer or mountain goat. Something along those lines. It's very safe!"

After they finished breakfast, Zhao Han took the two kids, who had accidentally eaten too much, to a twisted and windy road that snaked up the mountain.

"When you're setting traps, the first thing you need to do is to discover which routes the hares like to go on. Hares will often stick to using the same route...see here, there's a small worn path in the underbrush that a hare left behind!" Zhao Han pointed at a slightly messy patch of grass as he patiently explained the process.

Yu Xiaocao eagerly replied, "Then we should set a trap here! Who knows, maybe by the time we get back we'll have a rabbit in the trap!"

Zhao Han laughed, "This area is too close to the open outside, so there won't be a lot of rabbits coming through here. How about we walk a little bit deeper into the woods before we try?"

"We should take the opportunity now to practice first. How should a trap be set? Brother Han, teach me quickly!" Yu Xiaocao refused to let go of any opportunity. After all, didn't she have a secret weapon?

Zhao Han raised his thick eyebrows and an indulgent smile crossed his face before he said, "Okay! We have plenty of rope with us, so let's set one here!"

He inspected the area around them first and then broke off a fork-shaped branch from a nearby tree. He trimmed off miscellaneous twigs and pruned it until the middle of the fork was clear. The youth explained as he cut, "When you're choosing a branch, make you find one that can handle the weight of a running hare. Otherwise, you won't be able to successfully catch one."

Yu Xiaocao nodded her head in silence as she tried to engrave the instructions inside her head.

Zhao Han placed the pruned branch on the hare's trail and made sure it was in the exact middle of the path. This would ensure that the hare would dive straight in-between the forked branch when it came by again.

"If we add the rope noose to this, would the trap be ready then?" Little Shitou watched the whole process with increasing interest and felt that it was quite easy to set traps.

Zhao Han ruffled the little boy's hair and replied, "We still need to insert a couple more branches on the sides of the trap. The purpose of adding those sticks is to prevent the rabbit from swerving past the lasso. By plugging up all the other escape routes, the hare can only go into the noose."

The youth then brought out the rope, tied a loop, and inserted it onto the forked branch. The lasso was about ten centimeters [3] above the ground. Yu Xiaocao used her own hand to measure the distance and memorized how far it was. In the future, this would be her ticket to making money!

"Brother Han, the noose looks so big, won't the rabbit be able to escape?" Little Shitou asked anxiously as his innocent large eyes looked at Zhao Han.

Zhao Han looked at him and then looked at Yu Xiaocao who was also staring at him. "It won't. Do you see the knot in the rope? Once the hare runs into the lasso, the more it struggles, the tighter it will get. If we made it larger, not only would rabbits be unable to escape but also wild boars!"

The pair of siblings nodded their heads in unison. Their eyes were full of worship as they stared at the slender and young youth.

The thirteen year old Zhao Han felt satisfied having the two kids adore him so much. He proudly waved a fist and said, "Let's go! The deeper we go, the more prey there is for us to catch!"

As Zhao Han turned, Yu Xiaocao took this window of time to open her water sack and sprinkled a couple drops of her mystic-stone water around the trap. After that, she caught up with the two boys as if nothing had happened.

[Stinky Xiaocao, naughty Xiaocao! Don't you know you're wasting precious resources? This is the water that I, this heavenly stone, bathed in. It contains more restorative power than an old ginseng root! And you're using it to lure wild rabbits!"]

The spirit came out of the multicolored stone in its familiar tiny golden kitten form. It climbed onto Yu Xiaocao's head. Other than its master, no one else could see it.

Xiaocao placated the arrogant spirit mentally, [Little Glutinous Dumpling, once we trap some game, I will reward you with some water taken from bamboo roots grown in the deep mountains. Didn't you say that the water from there would restore your spiritual power faster?]

Actually, the best way to restore its power was to help its master and gain its master's gratitude. However, the spirit never said it out loud as it was afraid that its master would give it more missions that it deemed beneath itself.

Seeing that the arrogant spirit had finally calmed down, Yu Xiaocao's steps became much lighter. She could finally concentrate on learning how to set traps.