

## Gold Chapter 51

### Chapter 51 - Business Venture

It was a beautiful day today. The skies were clear and there wasn't even the slightest bit of wind. Yu Xiaocao pretended to be weak and had Little Shitou support her to the middle of the courtyard to get some sun. When one was acting in a play, one needed to go on for the entire set, ah!

The rays of the winter sun on her body felt as warm and comforting as a mother's loving hand gently stroking her face. Yu Xiaocao was so comfortable that she almost fell asleep. Even the sight of Madam Li peeking through the window didn't annoy her much.

As the sun started to set in the west, Yu Hai and Xiaolian came back. Judging from the incandescent smile on Xiaolian's face, the spoils of the day were good.

Yu Hai picked up his youngest daughter and transferred her from the somewhat chilly courtyard back to the room. After checking the temperature on the kang bed, he went to add some more firewood to the fire pit beneath the bed. He smiled as he watched his two daughters, who resembled each other more and more with each passing day, as they whispered in each other's ears. He said, "You two sisters can continue to talk, Father is going to go up the mountain to chop some more firewood and come back. The older and experienced villagers have all said that this year will be a harsh winter. Being prepared with extra firewood will surely pay off."

"Father, I'll go with you!" Little Shitou had been feeling stuffy after being stuck at home for most of the day. He brought along his little attendant—the little roe deer named Tiny—and eagerly scampered behind his father.

Xiaolian waited until her father had left the home before she looked all around the courtyard and carefully closed the door. Only then did she take off her shoes and went up on the kang bed right next to Xiaocao. She fished out a five tael ingot from her chest pocket and quickly shoved it into her younger sister's hands and quietly said, "Quickly hide the money and don't let Grandmother and Eldest Aunt see! We really caught a lot of game today. In addition to the game from yesterday, we sold them all for five taels! However, when Zhenxiu Restaurant was paying the bill, they didn't give the money to Father and instead gave it to me. Don't you think that's odd?"

What was weird about that? In the past, Xiaocao always took the money when she was doing business with Zhenxiu Restaurant. Last time she even handled the prize of fifty taels. So why would it be any different with the smaller sum of five taels?

Xiaocao put away the money in a very natural manner and replied casually, “Xiaolian, is it worth it to be so happy over these couple taels?”

“What do you mean by a 'couple taels'? Before today, the most money that had ever crossed my hands was about ten copper coins. These are the silvery taels, ah! A whole silver ingot worth five taels!!” Xiaolian realized that the volume of her voice had been on the louder side and hurriedly clasped her hands over her mouth as she looked through the window.

“Eldest Aunt is so annoying. She's trying to eavesdrop on us again! I don't know if she overheard what I said earlier. If Grandmother found out, her top would definitely blow!” Xiaolian had seen Madam Li with a broom coming closer and closer to the west room as she swept the floor. Seeing that the window was open, Madam Li tried to backtrack and went towards the direction of the chicken coop.

Yu Xiaocao spoke as if she didn't care, “If she heard, then she heard. What can she do? We owe Eldest Granduncle at least a few taels of money! I'm also sick right now and will probably need to buy more medicine later. I need to carefully take care of my body so I won't end up with a chronic illness! How much can this little bit of money do?”

She deliberately raised her voice for the last few sentences she spoke, as if she was talking to Madam Li who was in the middle of the courtyard.

Madam Li waited until the window to the west room closed and only then did she get up and spit towards the west room and said. “Bah! She's a bad investment that thinks of herself as a treasure. A few taels is more than enough to marry a wife. But now, all of it is going to feed that medicine guzzling pot in the second branch. She's seriously a bottomless pit. When she was born she should have been thrown to the south slope since raising her is just a calamity!”

The south slopes were at the south side of the West Mountains and were a mound full of random trash and rubble. Whenever a child in the nearby villages died prematurely or had a violent death and couldn't be interred in the family's ancestral tombs, he or she would always be buried there.

Madam Li naturally didn't dare to loudly voice her complaints behind another person's back. Thus, the two sisters in the west room didn't hear her. Xiaolian was currently in the midst of excitedly telling her story of what happened when she met the young boss of Zhenxiu Restaurant.

“Younger sister, you wouldn't believe just how funny that scene was. That young master from the Zhou Family grabbed me as soon as he met me and called me 'Xiaocao'. He even said that he had a business venture that he wanted to find out if I was interested in. At that time, I was so shocked that I couldn't react. I was just thinking of pretending to be you when our father just sincerely told him the truth and sold me out! When the Third Young Master found out I was your twin, his whole face exuded shock and amazement and he could only say 'alike, too alike!'. You wouldn't believe just how hilarious his expression looked at the time!”

Yu Xiaocao waited until her sister chattered to her fill and then said, “Xiaolian, Third Young Master Zhou said he had some business venture that he wanted to talk to me about? Did he say what type of business?”

“Nope, he didn't say! I reckon that when he found out I wasn't you that he thought it would be a waste of time to tell me. Oh right, younger sister! Did they really learn how to make Zhenxiu Restaurant's special oyster sauce themed dishes from you? Father told me that the King of Hell accidentally took you there on accident and gave it to you as compensation. What did he mean by that? Tell me everything!”

Yu Xiaocao had long known that her made up story would someday be transmitted to her close family members. Therefore, she made sure to polish her fabrication about meeting the King of Hell. She told Xiaolian what happened as if she was recalling an old story. In addition, she repeatedly cautioned Xiaolian to not let anyone outside of their family know to avoid having her become a freak in other people's eyes.

Xiaolian pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows, “Do you remember when you first got injured and just woke up and couldn't remember much? Our good Eldest Aunt had told everyone in the village that part of your soul had been captured by a demon. Since part of your soul was gone, you couldn't remember the past. She even said that people with partial souls attracted demons the most. Most of the village girls got scared by her so they all stay far away from me...”

Outside the door, Madam Liu trembled incessantly from rage: 'What a good Madam Li! She always spread malicious rumors about the second branch but this time she spread such a horrible story. If this was truly transmitted to every household, how could my second daughter get married in the future? My poor daughter had even been dragged to the underworld! How scared and helpless she must have felt!'

Then she heard Yu Xiaocao in the room scornfully reply, “Eldest Aunt's wagging tongue must have been previously slapped by the bottoms of an old pair of shoes! Is she not afraid of having it pulled out in hell? Xiaolian, don't listen to her! The reason why I can't remember anything from the past is because I tried a sip of Granny Meng's soup [1] out of curiosity!”

“Younger sister, is the King of Hell scary? Doesn't he have four eyes and two mouths?” Since Xiaolian was only an eight year old child, it was natural she would be curious about new and novel things.

Xiaocao pinched her cheek as Xiaolian scooted closer and laughed, “The King of Hell is just the god in charge of the nether world. He looks pretty much like us humans but is just a little more imposing. The Palace of Hell is a grand and magnificent building. However, it is dim inside and has a gloomy and frightening atmosphere. The truly scary thing is the 18 levels of hell [2]. I only saw up to the third level and didn't dare to look further down...however, there is no need to be afraid, those areas are only for punishing evil people.”

“Mm, mm!” Xiaolian nodded furiously but muttered silently in her heart, 'Eldest Aunt and Brother Heizai are always bullying mother and us. In the future, they are definitely getting punished in hell.'

Seeing that Xiaolian believed her without a doubt, Yu Xiaocao's eyes shifted and she continued, “In the Palace of Hell, I also saw the God of Fortune [3] too! He was wearing a bright scarlet red robe and there was a lucky red hat on his head. His face always had a cheerful smile on it, and he was always playing go with the King of Hell. When he heard I had been taken by mistake, he smiled, rubbed my head and said he was going to compensate me...suddenly there were some weird thoughts that appeared in my head. Those ideas were probably stuffed into me by the God of Fortune?”

Xiaolian suddenly squeaked 'ah' and then quietly said, “Younger sister, you had never been inside the kitchen before, and you had very seldom seen an oyster. Since you unexpectedly were able to make oyster sauce, don't you think that was something the God of Fortune taught you? Then...aren't you the God of Fortune's disciple now?”

Xiaocao merely smiled but didn't bother to reply. From Xiaolian's perspective, it meant that her younger sister tacitly agreed with her conjecture.

“Then...wouldn't the God of Fortune give us some wealth? Little Sister, when we're rich in the future, we can eat steamed white flour rolls and buy meat buns and dumplings everyday!” Xiaolian somewhat exaggeratedly swallowed some saliva and revealed a cute expression on her face.

Madam Liu pushed the door open sadly and hugged the two sisters in her arms. She sighed and said, “Mother doesn't want to get rich. My only wish is Cao'er stays healthy and the rest of you are able to grow up peacefully. That would make me the most happy!”

“Mother, did you hear everything?” Yu Xiaocao felt somewhat dispirited. She didn't intend to have her kind hearted and loving mother to be worried.

“Silly child. In the future, don't hide everything within your heart and let Mother know instead. Although your mother doesn't have many abilities, I will sacrifice my life in order to protect you and your siblings!”

Madam Liu could clearly sense that her youngest daughter was afraid that she would worry, so she didn't tell her the things that happened in the past. Her eyes couldn't help but brim with tears. Her most delicate little daughter would always think of her even when she had fallen sick. As her mother, didn't that mean she wasn't qualified enough? That wouldn't do, she needed to become more strong and become a mother that her children could depend on!

Alright! The three main members of her family had all accepted her somewhat absurd, made-up story. The most important aspect was that she was still young in age, and her descriptions of the underworld and scenes were extremely detailed and precise. The picture she painted was such that it'd be impossible for others not to believe her.

Naturally, Madam Liu also warned her children repeatedly out of fear that the two of them wouldn't know the severity of the consequences should the story leak. If it did, it would cause a whole lot of trouble for her two daughters.

Time passed and before they knew it, another two days had passed. In those two days, Yu Xiaocao, who had been restricted from going outside, worried endlessly about the business venture that Third Young Master Zhou mentioned. If she was able to do business with the Zhou Family, who were imperial merchants, then her money woes would be mostly settled. Even though she couldn't guarantee one hundred percent that she wouldn't lose money, she at least had about eighty percent confidence that she'd earn and not lose.

The uncomfortable feeling within her heart persisted, as if she had a tiny kitten inside her, scratching incessantly. Luckily, Third Young Master Zhou didn't let her wait for too long. On the third day, he arrived at her home.

The splendidly dressed young master cut a stylish figure as he rode a tall horse. Behind him was a dignified attendant who had a noble air about him. Despite that, the around fifty year old man obviously followed and deferred to the young master completely. The delegation entered the village swiftly and caused the frozen village of Dongshan to explode in curiosity.

“Who are they?”

“How would I know? They're not looking for me.”

“Looking for you? From the way you appear, you wouldn't even be fit to take the night soil out for these people!”

“The young master looks quite handsome, ah! It's definitely good to be a rich person. Just look at the material of his clothes, the amount he spent on the cloth alone would be enough to feed us for an entire year!”

“He definitely is from a high ranking family in town! Look at what his attendant is wearing, it's even more dignified and elegant than what Moneybags Wang wears. I just don't know whether these people coming to Dongshan Village is a good or bad thing.”

“Which family was he looking for? Yu Hai's family? For the past few days, Yu Hai has been going to town every day to sell game. Did he offend some noble lord?”

“Don't make false conjectures, you should know how easygoing Dahai is. How could he possibly cause trouble willy-nilly? Judging from the expression on the young master's face, it doesn't look like he's here to settle scores. Stop letting your imagination run wild. Once they leave, just go ask around to find out, right?”

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Little Shitou was crouching in front of the entrance and combing Tiny's fur with his little hands. When he heard the trotting sounds of horses, he lifted his head and looked towards the direction of the sound. He noticed that the youth leading the group looked somewhat familiar, so he couldn't help but squint his eyes to check more carefully.

"Young Master, that five-room house with a courtyard in front is Uncle Yu's residence. From this servant's inquiry, there were only a few households within the entire village with such a big house, but..." Third Young Master Zhou's personal manservant, Simo, paused hesitantly for a moment.

"What?" Third Young Master Zhou had already recognized the little kid in front of the door from afar. It was Xiaocao's foolishly cute younger brother. This should be the place!

Simo also saw the little boy dressed in a patched-up green quilted clothing and sighed, "With Uncle Yu's abilities and the size of this house, the Yu Family should have decent living conditions. However, the clothes on his children were even more shabby than the other children in the village."

"Look, isn't that Miss Xiaocao's younger brother? His worn-out clothes should have been thrown out long ago. Recently, they should have earned at least sixty to seventy taels from selling game to Zhenxiu Restaurant. It's almost the New Year, but they're still unwilling to buy a new set of cotton-padded clothing for the children..."

Zhou Zixu frowned slightly and said, "Uncle Yu doesn't look like someone who would mistreat his children. Could it be that they have some undisclosed difficulties?"

Having personally experienced the struggle for power and constant scheming within his family, Zhou Zixu would think deeply about every situation he encountered. Wasn't his own family like this? Had his grandparents not been around to control the family, with the display of his talent in business over the past two years, the second branch would have been devoured by his greedy relatives long ago. Uncle Yu probably also had his own difficulties that he couldn't express.

"I remember you! You're the third young master of the Zhou Family, right?" Little Shitou stood up and raised his head with a beaming smile.

Zhou Zixu dismounted from his horse, ruffled the little guy's messy hair, and said with a warm face, "Little Shitou, who are you calling 'Third Young Master Zhou'? Call me 'Third Brother Zhou'! If you make a mistake again next time, then I'll punish you!"

"What kind of punishment?" Little Shitou blinked and asked curiously.

"I'll punish you..." Zhou Zixu took a box of pastries from Simo's hands and smiled, "You will be forbidden to eat the pastries that Third Brother Zhou brings over!"

Little Shitou eagerly stared at the exquisite food box within Third Young Master Zhou's hands and slowly read the name on the box, "Lian... ji... Pastry Shop! Is it the 'Lianji' with the biggest storefront and the most expensive pastries in town? Doesn't this box of pastries cost a lot of money?"

Zhou Zixu was somewhat amazed and said, "Oh, Little Shitou is so young, but you can already read?"

Little Shitou shyly scratched his head and said, "When playing at Wuzi's house, I learned a few words from Brother Wen..."

"Little Shitou is so smart! I heard that your second sister is sick?" Zhou Zixu asked.

"Yes! She's very sick. If Eldest Granduncle hadn't lent us money, my second sister might have..." The little fellow lowered his head and appeared to be in low spirits. He and his older sister were both very obedient, but why does their grandmother dislike them?

"Shitou, who are you talking to? Aren't you going to hurry up and gather some firewood while the weather is good? All you know is how to play! Everyday, you're only concerned about eating and not doing any work! Moreover, we have to provide for a chronic invalid! I must owe you people something!" Madam Zhang's jarring shrieks traveled over.

Zhou Zixu couldn't help but furrow his brows, 'He's such a young child, yet he's already being ordered to work?'

Just as he was deep in his thoughts, a mean looking old lady with a fierce gaze came out of the door. With her hands on her waist, she made a stance of a shrew who loudly cursed in public.

Seeing three imposing people in front of her, Madam Zhang forced down the curses that was about to come out of her mouth. In front of the courtyard was Zhou Zixu who was obviously born of noble status, Madam Zhang's originally threatening manner immediately withered down. With her shoulder drooped and head shrunken, she asked in a timid voice, "You... Who are you looking for?"

Simo had disdain for the wicked old woman's double standards and differential treatment, so he had a face of contempt as he asked, "Is this Yu Hai's residence?"



"Yu Hai? Had Yu Hai offended great lords? That damn bastard is always causing trouble for our family! This young master, Yu Hai hasn't returned from hunting in the mountains. Whatever he did has nothing to do with us!" Seeing the grim expression on Simo's face, Madam Zhang was so scared that she spoke incoherently, scolding and breaking off relationships.

Simo was even more displeased and impatiently interrupted her, "Yu Hai isn't home, but Yu Xiaocao should be home, right?"

"Xiaocao? Is she also involved? I knew that wretch was sharp-tongued and would eventually stir up some trouble. Isn't this... That troublemaker is causing trouble for our family..." Madam Zhang was completely bewildered as she murmured.

"Is she here or not?!" Simo's expression was even more ugly when he noticed that his young master had narrowed his eyes, which was a sign of his anger.

"Yes... In the west room!" Madam Zhang trembled in fright when he suddenly raised his voice. They wouldn't be implicated by the noblemen's anger, will they?

Zhou Zixu threw the reins to Simo and walked into the courtyard with his steward. He looked around briefly before he turned to enter the small and cramped west room.

"Third Young Master Zhou, you're finally here!" It was rather dim inside the room and Zhou Zixu's eyes hadn't adapted to the light inside, so he was surprised by Xiaocao's voice.

Zhou Zixu glanced around and saw the simple furnishings in the room. There was a large kang bed, on which the quilts were old and shabby, but tidied up. An old rattan trunk was placed at the head of the bed. Beside the kang bed, there was a wooden table that was about to fall apart. There wasn't anything else in the room besides these simple and old furniture. Even the lowest ranked servants of the Zhou Family had better living conditions than them.

Zhou Zixu's brows were tightly creased and said unhappily, "What happened to the money that you earned? Where did all the money go? The quilt is already so stiff, so how are you still able to use it? Your family had earned quite a lot of money from selling game, so don't hesitate to spend it..."

"Shh... shh..." Xiaocao swiftly pulled on Third Young Master Zhou's arm. If she wasn't so short, she would have already covered his mouth with her hand!

"Third Young Master, I have bad health and easily fall ill, so my family has borrowed a lot of money for my medical treatment. These days, the money that my father earned from hunting wasn't even enough to repay the loan! How can we afford to buy new bedding?" Yu Xiaocao amplified her voice and spoke towards the direction of the door.

Zhou Zixu followed her gaze and saw the harsh-looking old lady and a fat woman in the yard looking into the room from time to time.

He signaled Simo with his eyes. Simo went out of the west room and stood imposingly in front of the door. With a grim expression on his face, he appeared like he was a door god [1] as he stared at the two sneaky women, who were greedily watching them.

The two women were both only fierce at home, so they recoiled in fear and went back to the main room when they saw Simo's stern gaze.

Madam Li looked into the courtyard warily and whispered, "Mother! Who are these people? They look like they came to demand a payment for a debt! Did Second Brother-in-law borrow money from a loan shark? They charge really high interest rates, so lending one tael means that we have to pay back ten taels!"

Madam Zhang couldn't help but panic, and scolded, "Yu Hai refused to tell us how much that wicked girl, Xiaocao's, medical fees cost. Third Daughter-in-law said that there's ginseng in the prescription, so it must be expensive! She's such a waste of money. Even if we sold her, she wouldn't be worth the money of the ginseng! That scourge, if I knew earlier, I would have strangled her and thrown her down the mountain!"

"Mother, what should we do now? They sent three people over, so Second Brother-in-law must have borrowed a lot of money. If Second Brother-in-law can't repay the debt, they wouldn't take the things in our house to pay of the debt, will they? No way! I have to securely hide all my valuables..." Madam Li was somewhat unsettled and wanted to go back to her east room.

Madam Zhang also felt extremely anxious, so she swiftly pulled Madam Li back and rebuked, "What valuable things do you have in your room? Eldest Son wouldn't be keeping a secret stash of money behind my back, right?"

Madam Li's face stiffened and hastily said, "Mother, we wouldn't do that! Dashan is the most devoted and dutiful son, so he wouldn't have such thoughts. Didn't I return to my maiden home recently? My mother gave me a piece of cloth and secretly hid some money in there for me. Mother, you're the most understanding and reasonable. You won't confiscate the money that my maiden family gave me, right?"

In fact, this wasn't something that Madam Zhang hadn't done before. Every time her second daughter-in-law's maiden family came to visit, they would always leave goods or money for her. However, everything eventually ended up in Madam Zhang's pockets. Moreover, she didn't even forget to leave them a warning. If they didn't turn everything in, then she wouldn't pay the medical fees for the two chronic patients of the second branch.

However, Madam Li's maiden family had a stronger background, so Madam Zhang didn't dare to give her the same treatment. Madam Zhang would pretend that she didn't see Madam Li constantly bringing things back from her maiden home since half of the things she brought back would be used by her grandson.

"Alright, alright! Would they care about the few copper coins that you have? If you're so worried, then go. But be careful and don't offend the nobles!" Madam Zhang was also waiting for Madam Li to leave so that she could move the money in the cabinet to a hidden place. She didn't want to send money down to the bottomless pit made by her second son.

Seeing that it had finally quieted down in the courtyard, Zhou Zixu glanced at Yu Xiaocao and sat on the kang bed, "Alright, they're gone now, so stop pretending to be poor!"

"I don't have a choice either! You don't know about our family's situation! The old lady forbids the children from keeping a secret purse, especially our second branch! She's always monitoring us as if we're thieves! If she found out that I have money, wouldn't she turn the second branch upside down!" Yu Xiaocao didn't shy away from talking about the situation in her family.

Every family had their own difficulties. Zhou Zixu shook his head and whispered, "Well, if the money continues to stay in your hand, then it will eventually be exposed. You should just take it out and invest in a business with me!"

He had just made a casual remark, so he hadn't expected that Yu Xiaocao had been waiting for him to make this suggestion, "I had heard from Xiaolian. What kind of business is so difficult for Third Young Master Zhou that you have to pull me into it?"

"Hey! Something that's too difficult for me to handle? Is there anything that I, Third Young Master Zhou, can't do?" Zhou Zixu glared at her and said, "In gratitude for your help, I had wanted to take you along to make a fortune! However, let's just forget it since you said that..."

"No!" When Yu Xiaocao saw that he was going to leave, she hastily pulled him back. She was also joking earlier. If it was something that even the Zhou Family, who were imperial merchants, couldn't handle, then what would a fisherman's daughter like her be able to do?

"Alright! You, Third Young Master Zhou, has a magnanimous heart, so don't be bothered by a little girl like me! So, what kind of business is it? Tell me the details!" Yu Xiaocao smiled and repeatedly bowed with her hands clasped.

Of course, Zhou Zixu wasn't really angry at her, so he smiled and tapped her forehead, "You! Stop putting up this weird act! I want to open an oyster sauce production factory and sell the products to the big restaurants in the neighboring cities. But, as you said, the oyster sauce doesn't have a long shelf life. Thus, I wanted to ask to see if you have any solutions to this problem."

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Yu Xiaocao thought about it and said, "If you want to open an oyster sauce factory, then the shelf life of the oyster sauce will indeed be a problem! It's alright during the winter since the temperature is low in the north. Thus, there's no problem with keeping it for several months. However, it will be rather troublesome for the summer!"

In her previous life, what methods were used to extend the shelf life of food? Yu Xiaocao wrinkled her brows and was lost in her thoughts. Although Zhou Zixu was anxious, he refrained himself from disturbing her.

Yu Xiaocao muttered to herself, "The usual method used to extend the shelf life of foods was to store them in low temperature. However, there's no refrigerator here..."

"Icebox? Is it a box to store ice?" Steward Zhou, who was brought over by Zhou Zixu, couldn't help asking a question.

"Uh... Yes, a box to store ice." Yu Xiaocao just realized that she had verbally expressed her inner thoughts, but it was difficult to explain what a 'refrigerator' was. Thus, she just agreed with Steward Zhou's words.

Steward Zhou pondered for a moment and said, "It's fine to transport goods in the iceboxes during winter. However, the expense will probably be very high in the summer. Besides, how big would the icehouse have to be in order to store a year's worth of ice?"

"There's also another way to extend the shelf life, which is to add a lot of sugar and salt. However, with this method, the taste of the oyster sauce will definitely be affected!" Yu Xiaocao shook her head and denied her own suggestion.

Zhou Zixu, who had come from a family of imperial merchants, naturally knew the importance of a product's quality. He couldn't resist asking, "Are there any other ways?"

"There is also the method of preservation with propolis! However, honey is already so expensive, let alone propolis! It wouldn't cost any less than using ice for the transportation and preservation!"

Propolis? Zhou Zixu had heard of honey. His mother had heard from an unknown source that she could enhance her beauty and maintain her figure by drinking honey water. Thus, she had been drinking a cup of honey water daily since last year. But what was propolis?

"It... It would be great if we can also make ice in the summer." Yu Xiaocao had had the habit of talking to herself since her previous life.

Wasn't ice formed naturally at low temperature? Was it something that could be made? This little girl's imagination was seriously too fanciful. In his heart, Steward Zhou disagreed with the idea of his young master cooperating with a poor little girl to open a factory.

"Third Young Master, have you heard of saltpeter?" Yu Xiaocao suddenly recalled an article called "Ingenious Ice-making Methods in Ancient Times" that she had read in her previous life. It seemed that

since the late Tang Dynasty, when gunpowder was produced, people often mined a large amount of saltpeter.

Since then, there was a precedent of ice-making in the summer. After that, traders, who added sugar to the ice to attract customers, began to emerge. In the Song Dynasty, merchants added fruits or juices in it. The businessmen of the Yuan Dynasty had even added fruit jam and milk into the ice, which was very similar to the modern ice cream. She was curious about whether there were any examples of using saltpeter to make ice in this revised time period.

"Saltpeter? Yes, I know. It's sold in the pharmacy. Can... saltpeter make ice?" Zhou Zixu had also heard her mumbles, so he automatically made the connection when she mentioned saltpeter.

Yu Xiaocao looked at him with approval and nodded, "When saltpeter dissolves in water, it absorbs a lot of heat and lowers the temperature of the water. It can even freeze the water."

"Really? How did you know?" Zhou Zixu was still somewhat skeptical.

Yu Xiaocao was stunned for a moment, and then spoke with a stern expression, "It's none of your business! If you don't believe me, then you can just go buy some saltpeter and try it!"

Steward Zhou stroked his beard, pondered for a moment, and said, "I think I might have seen a documentation that recorded the usage of saltpeter to make ice when I was organizing the ancient books that Second Master had collected before his death."

"Oh? So, it's true that saltpeter can make ice? Steward Zhou, go on!" Zhou Zixu inquired with great interest.

With a bitter smile, Steward Zhou shook his head and said, "Second Master had a large collection of books, so I don't really remember which book I had seen this from. We should listen to Miss Yu regarding the specific details of how to make the ice."

Zhou Zixu's eyes lit up as he looked at Yu Xiaocao, as if he was a child begging for candy, "Xiaocao, don't keep us guessing. Quickly say it, say it!"

"You need to dig a big pond inside the factory, and then put a large vat that is half-filled with water in the center of the pond. After that, put the saltpeter into the pond and fill the pond with water. I've never done this before, so I'm also uncertain about the ratio for the water and saltpeter. You will know after experimenting a few more times." Yu Xiaocao provided them with general guidance, but Zhou Zixu was responsible for carrying out the actual procedures.

Zhou Zixu nodded and thought about how he would do the experiment when he goes back. Steward Zhou spoke up again, "Based on what you said, it seems like we need a large amount of saltpeter. However, the cost of saltpeter isn't low either!"

They had originally come up with the idea of using saltpeter to produce ice in order to reduce the production cost. However, the prime cost didn't seem much less than storing ice in an icehouse.

As expected, the steward in charge of the Zhou Family's external affairs was sensible and had foresight. Yu Xiaocao nodded with a smile, "Steward Zhou is correct! However, saltpeter can be reused. The method of evaporative crystallization can be used to recast the saltpeter that was dissolved in water."

Steward Zhou nodded his head slightly and was inwardly surprised: 'She's such a young little girl. How can she have such vast knowledge and good memory? She's even more knowledgeable than a head steward like him, who boasts about reading a wide range of books. Does the Yu Family have a secret that I doesn't know?'

It wasn't weird for him to be skeptical. At the end of the former dynasty, there was a lot of chaos caused by the war and many aristocratic families had fallen into oblivion during the long process. Could it be that a fallen aristocrat family had settled within this small fishing village?

"Steward Zhou, stop overthinking this matter! I have an agreement with Xiaocao to not make a detailed inquiry about anything except for business-related matters. What does it have to do with us how she knew that saltpeter can make ice? Don't make things complicated. I don't want to lose a good business partner!" Zhou Zixu withdrew the smile on his face and faintly said. He naturally revealed the dignified and imposing manner of a noble family's young master.

As if a large bell rang loudly within heart, Steward Zhou was inwardly stunned as he came to a realization. He put aside his sidetracked thoughts and bowed with great respect and solemnity, "Young Master, thank you for your reminder! This old servant is deeply ashamed!"

When Zhou Zixu turned to face Yu Xiaocao, he reverted to a gentle and friendly attitude again, "Now that the problem of the oyster sauce's preservation and transportation have been resolved, we can begin the construction of the oyster sauce factory in early spring. Where do you think we should open the oyster sauce factory?"

"In terms of business, Third Young Master Zhou definitely has more foresight than an eight year old girl like me. So just make the decision yourself!" Yu Xiaocao had also sensed Steward Zhou's examining gaze earlier. Fortunately, the great lord, Third Young Master Zhou, was here to control the situation and prevented her from making a slip. She inwardly alerted herself to keep a low profile in the future and stop standing out so much.

It was impossible for Zhou Zixu to not notice her faint vigilance. However, he instinctively felt that this little girl in front of him was like an undiscovered mine, in which the hidden treasures could only be recovered by digging slowly and deeply. As for how this 'treasure' was formed, there was no need to get to the bottom of this. He didn't want to be regretful later due to a moment of curiosity.

"In my opinion, it's a good idea to build the oyster sauce factory near the harbor. The traffic is very convenient whether it's by land or water. Furthermore, it's near the sea, so it will be more convenient to purchase raw materials!" Zhou Zixu expressed his thoughts and asked for Yu Xiaocao's advice.

Yu Xiaocao, who had learned her lesson, just smiled and nodded silently.

Zhou Zixu's eyes darted around and knew how to make this little girl speak up. With a faint smile on his face, he looked at Xiaocao and asked, "Do you want to invest in the oyster sauce factory?"

Become a shareholder? Wasn't this a modern term? Why would this term come out of Third Young Master Zhou's mouth? Could it be that... this Third Young Master Zhou was also a transmigrator? Yu Xiaocao widened her eyes and looked at him in disbelief.

Zhou Zixu misunderstood her meaning and smiled, "What? You don't know what 'become a shareholder' means? When Jianwen Emperor was still the imperial crown prince, he had established an ocean shipping corporation and pulled many high-ranking officials and noblemen to make an investment. Thus, the term 'become a shareholder' began to spread within the business industry. It just means to make an investment and join in the business."



"Oh..." Yu Xiaocao was frightened by the false alarm and almost broke out in a cold sweat. However, she immediately became interested when she heard that she could invest in the oyster sauce factory.

"But... I don't have a lot of money on hand. I only have less than one hundred taels..." Yu Xiaocao took out her secret stash of money from the corner and scratched her head in embarrassment.

Zhou Zixu looked at the money that was scattered on the kang bed. She had earned all this money from him, so of course, he knew how much money she had. He had originally intended to gift the young girl with a share of the factory, but an urge to tease her had emerged within him at this time,

He coughed and said, "We got the recipe for the oyster sauce from you, so I had planned to give you a share after building the factory. But, since you feel sorry about taking it for free, this money... I'll just accept it!"

The expression on Yu Xiaocao's face immediately stiffened. She helplessly watched as her money was plundered by that evil, 'black-hearted' businessman. Her heart was bleeding!

No way! She, Yu Xiaocao, could accept anything but being forced to suffer a loss in silence!

"Third Young Master Zhou!" She gnashed her teeth and said, "Isn't it too dull for such a large factory to only produce oyster sauce?"

Zhou Zixu's eyes lit up: 'My little ancestor! I was just waiting for you to say that!'

"What? Does Xiaocao have other suggestions?" Zhou Zixu looked at her with great interest.

"I have secret recipes for two more sauces! I wonder if Third Young Master Zhou will be interested in them?" Anyone who was sensible could have felt Yu Xiaocao emphasizing her tone when she said 'Third Young Master Zhou'. Ah, it seemed like the little kitten was bearing its claws!

Zhou Zixu happily moved closer and said, "I'm interested. Of course I'm interested! Quickly tell me about it!"

"Humph!" Yu Xiaocao proudly turned her head away and said, "If you want my two secret recipes, then exchange them with shares!"

In fact, for the establishment of the factory, the recipe for oyster sauce and the two sauces that the little girl had mentioned were all obtained from Yu Xiaocao. The Zhou Family had only provided money and labor.

Zhou Zixu naturally wouldn't give up on an endless flow of treasures for the sake of a small profit. He gallantly exclaimed, "If the two recipes are of the same value as the oyster sauce, then I'll give up half of the shares for the factory!"

Half? Yu Xiaocao had originally planned to only take 20% of the dividend, so this had far exceeded her expectations.

Chapter 54 - Advertise

However, she had received half of the shares when she had only invested a little over ninety taels. Wasn't this a little... like she was demanding an excessive price? She didn't demand the price herself, but there would be more opportunities for cooperation between them in the future, so she should adopt a long-term plan for major returns.

"I don't need half of the shares. I'll just take 40% of the shares! First of all, let's make an agreement that I only need to provide the recipes and won't be responsible for anything else!" With 40% of the oyster sauce factory's shares, she could earn money at home without having to do anything in the future. Was there anything better than this?

Steward Zhou inwardly nodded and approved of his young master's good judgment. The little girl of the Yu Family wasn't greedy despite coming from a poor background.

"Okay! Deal!" Zhou Zixu was extremely pleased, "I'll draw up the contract when I get back. Do you know how to write your own name? For this business deal, will it be a cooperation with you only or with the Yu Family?"

"You have also seen our family's situation! If the entire Yu Family gets involved, then our second branch won't be able to even receive a single penny! So, I hope that nobody knows about this collaboration except you and me!" Yu Xiaocao had planned to depend on this cooperation to earn some private savings! She had to grasp the money within her own hands in order to prevent it from being taken away by the wicked old lady of the main branch!

“Alright! The factory will be a collaboration between you and me!” Zhou Zixu concluded.

The 'Fresh and Delicious' condiment series became famous throughout the Great Ming Dynasty several years later. However, no one would have expected that the brand was created after a brief discussion between a thirteen year old youth and a young eight year old girl...

“But... what are the other sauces? Can you tell me?” It was human nature for everyone to possess curiosity, let alone a thirteen year old youth.

“The first one is 'black bean paste', while the other is called 'broad bean paste'. The black bean paste can be used to make delicious dishes like spareribs with black bean sauce, fried mud carp with salted black beans, braised chicken, duck, pork, and more. The broad bean paste is good for stir-frying eggplants, Chinese long beans, mushrooms, etc....”

As Zhou Zixu continued to listen to Yu Xiaocao's description, he felt that he made the right choice by coming over. This trip not only resolved his problems, but he also received an extra surprise. At this moment, Zhou Zixu, Steward Zhou, and Yu Xiaocao were having a detailed discussion regarding the name and business operation of the condiments production factory.

Unbeknownst to them, time had quietly slipped away.

“Rumble, rumble...”

A strange sound rang out. Little Shitou, who had become drowsy as he listened to their discussion, suddenly sat up and exclaimed, “Ah! My second sister hasn't eaten breakfast yet! She's so hungry that even her stomach is growling!”

Zhou Zixu looked at Yu Xiaocao, who was covering her tummy with an embarrassed expression. He tried to refrain himself from laughing as he said, “I brought some pastries over, so fill your stomach first! I'll visit again to discuss the details of the arrangements after I draw up the contract.”

“No need. A few days later, I'll ask my father to take me to town to buy some things before the New Year. We can talk about the details at that time. Third Young Master, you can also see my family's situation, so I'm not going to ask you to stay for a meal!” Yu Xiaocao was afraid that her grandmother would become suspicious if Zhou Zixu came to visit again.

“Okay! Then I shall take my leave now!” Third Young Master Zhou smiled from ear to ear as he came out of the west room. Yu Xiaocao wanted to personally lead him out of the courtyard.

However, right at this moment, Yu Hai returned from outside and saw the lavishly dressed Third Young Master Zhou. He was momentarily stunned at first, and then he smiled warmly and asked, “Third Young Master Zhou, why are you here?”

Seeing the people from the main room and east room popping their heads out to probe, Zhou Zixu made up a lie, “Did Uncle Yu just come back from town? The weather's really good today, so I'm taking my attendants to the West Mountains to hunt. I came for a visit since I was passing by Dongshan Village.”

“It's not a good day for hunting! If Third Young Master is interested, you can come back in the fall. There will be a lot of game at that time. Moreover, they're fat!” Yu Hai wasn't a dull person either. He had noticed that the three people didn't bring any hunting tools. Thus, he knew that Zhou Zixu had made up an excuse because it was inconvenient for him to speak.

Zhou Zixu spoke up again, “Uncle Yu haven't been sending a lot of game to us recently. The manager of our Zhenxiu Restaurant has complained to me several times already!”

Yu Hai apologetically said, “It's difficult to hunt since the snow hasn't completely melted in the mountains. So I can only set traps outside the forest. It was still alright a few days ago and I was able to catch quite a lot of game every day. However, I'm not sure what happened in these two days. The quantity of game caught in the traps has been greatly reduced. I'm really sorry for any inconvenience this has caused the restaurant.”

“It's not Uncle Yu's fault. Zhenxiu Restaurant is the only restaurant in town with wild game now. This is all thanks to Uncle Yu for taking care of us!” Since Yu Hai was Yu Xiaocao's father, Zhou Zixu's attitude was quite amiable. If it was another hunter, he wouldn't even be able to meet Third Young Master Zhou.

Yu Xiaocao also felt anxious as she listened. Other people didn't know what was wrong, but she did! Without her mystic-stone water, it would be weird if the animals came out during such freezing weather! If they couldn't catch any game, then they wouldn't be able to earn any money. Third Young

Master Zhou had already taken all the money she had! Would her few dozens of taels really make a difference for such a big factory? That guy must have done it intentionally. Absolutely!

It seemed like she really had to find a chance to sneak out and sprinkle some mystic-stone water around the traps!

“Oh? This little roe deer is quite fat! Its meat must be very tender. The rich people in town really likes eating young lambs and suckling pigs. Why don't you sell it to me!” Zhou Zixu's attention was drawn by the little roe deer frolicking in the yard.

As if it understood Zhou Zixu's words, the little roe deer, who had been running around the courtyard, suddenly stopped in its tracks and anxiously hid behind Yu Xiaocao for protection. From time to time, it stretched out its head and peeked at Third Young Master Zhou with its big, dark eyes. When it saw Third Young Master Zhou looking at it, it would tremble and hastily retract its head.

“Interesting! This little roe deer seems very intelligent, so it's also pretty good as a pet! If I take it to the capital, those noble ladies will definitely like it. I can sell it for a good price!” Zhou Zixu was quite surprised by the little roe deer's closeness and dependence on Xiaocao.

Her younger brother treasured the little roe deer from the bottom of his heart. Furthermore, they had already become emotionally attached. Thus, Yu Xiaocao naturally wouldn't sell it for a few pieces of silver. She bent down and caressed the little roe deer's head, and then smiled, “Its name is 'Tiny'. Someone has entrusted our family to take care of it, so our family can't make the decision about selling it.”

Zhou Zixu didn't take it seriously either and casually said, “If you guys want to sell it for a good price, I can help you contact a buyer when I go to the capital later. Alright! You haven't completely recovered yet, so hurry back into the room.”

Zhou Zixu was going to the capital to attend a business meeting with his nominally eldest uncle, who was actually his biological father. The current head of the Zhou Family had two legitimate sons. In terms of talent in business, his second son was somewhat better. Even before he had come-of-age, the second son was already quite successful in the business industry. In a way, without the second son, the Zhou Family wouldn't have gotten the position of an imperial merchant.

Unfortunately, his second son was killed by bandits during a business trip at a young age. Otherwise, it would be hard to say who would become the next head of the household.

His second son had died early, so he didn't even get the chance to get married, let alone leave a descendant! People of ancient times placed great importance on the afterlife. The patriarch of the Zhou Family was afraid that, after he passed away, there wouldn't be anyone to pay respects to his second son. So he decided to let his eldest son shoulder the responsibility of two branches and had him marry a declining businessman's daughter to carry on the family line of the second branch.

In other words, although Third Young Master Zhou was the biological child of the eldest son, he was considered a child of the second branch. Thus, Zhou Zixu could only call him 'eldest uncle'. Every time the eldest son of the Zhou Family saw Third Young Master Zhou, his mood would be very complicated. One of his sons wasn't interested in doing business, while the other one was ambitious but lacked talent.

On the other hand, Zhou Zixu, who inherited the second branch, already had such talent for business at such a young age. The restaurant that he managed was flourishing with business. Moreover, he was also planning to establish a condiment production factory. It seemed like the position of the next head of the household would end up with the second branch. He seriously resented this situation!

Zhou Zixu didn't know that his eldest uncle had such mixed feelings regarding his own talent in business. He followed the first branch to attend the business meeting in the capital and received an unexpected result.

The owners of the restaurants in the capital had long coveted the oyster sauce recipe in Third Young Master Zhou's hands. However, since the Zhou Family were imperial merchants, no one dared to forcibly seize the recipe. During this gathering, there were many people who were planning to stealthily inquire about the recipe. Within the Zhou Family, Third Young Master Zhou was the only one who knew the recipe for the oyster sauce. As a result, Third Young Master Zhou ended up being the main focus of this meeting.

The eldest master of the Zhou Family felt anxious inwardly. His 'nephew' was still so young, would he be able to manage these crafty old foxes?

However, no one would have expected that Zhou Zixu was just waiting for this group of old foxes to bring up the topic!

When another uncle [1], intentionally or unintentionally, mentioned the 'oyster sauce', Zhou Zixu used this opportunity to raise his voice,

“Uncle Fang, the recipe for the oyster sauce belongs to my friend and this nephew has promised that I won't disclose the recipe. But, after the New Year, I'm planning on establishing a condiments factory with the oyster sauce as the main product. Other than oyster sauce, there's also two new condiments. If uncles are interested, please give a lot of support to my condiments factory!”

When the group of business tycoons heard the news, they were stunned at first. However, someone immediately asked, “Nephew, do you mean that you're going to produce oyster sauce and sell them?”

“Yes!” Zhou Zixu disregarded his eldest uncle, who was anxiously trying to stop him, and nodded his head in affirmation.

Zhou Zixu's eldest uncle felt extremely angry within his heart! He had prepared to open a big restaurant in the capital with oyster sauce as the main theme. He believed that with the oyster sauce, which was their exclusive recipe, his restaurant would surely occupy a stable place in the capital.

He had only learned of his nephew's plans for an oyster sauce factory today. If he had found out earlier, he would definitely do everything possible to stop him. But the news had already been spread out, so there was nothing he could do now!

“That's great! You definitely take after your father! In those days, the second son of the Zhou Family was daring and insightful. I didn't expect for his son to also have such courage at a young age! My dear nephew, when your factory opens, this uncle will definitely support you!” Boss Fang of Juxian Restaurant patted Zhou Zixu's shoulder and smiled until his eyes narrowed.

“I heard that there are two more condiment recipes. Is it also from the same person?” After receiving a confirmation, Boss Fang proudly said, “There absolutely will not be any problems then! As for our cooperation for these three condiments, let's talk in detail later!”

The other merchants who owned restaurants naturally wouldn't let Boss Fang dominate in this business. Hence, they all swiftly expressed their desire to cooperate with Zhou Zixu. Even before it was out in the market, the 'Fresh and Delicious' brand of condiments had already become a hot trend within the capital.

The eldest master of the Zhou Family watched as the second branch's Zhou Zixu become the center of attention for this gathering. He was both proud and vexed. His heart was filled with complicated and mixed emotions.

#### Chapter 55 - The New Year

Yu Xiaocao, who had become one of the shareholders of the leading condiment production factory in the future, spent the following days pondering about how to get to her parents to let her out of the house to get some fresh air. That was the only way she could get the chance to add some mystic-stone water around the traps that her father had set. Ay! At times, it was quite troublesome to have overly anxious parents!

However, she failed to achieve her goal in the end. It wasn't due to her parent's opposition, but the arrival of another snowstorm. This snowfall wasn't inferior to that of the first snow. The entire mountain village was covered in a thick layer of whiteness.

At the Yu Family's old residence, half of the roof had been crushed by the snow. Under Old Yu's insistence and supervision, the three brothers of the Yu Family worked hard against the snowstorm for three to five days and finally repaired the old house.

Old Yu had fled to Dongshan Village as a refugee with his father when he was still a young child. The Yu Family's old residence was a two-room cottage made of mud and straw that was built with the enthusiastic help of the villagers of Dongshan Village. It was full of Old Yu's yearning for his deceased father, as well as his childhood memories. The four siblings of the Yu Family were all born and raised in this old house.

Therefore, even though the Yu Family had moved into the newly built new five-room house, they hadn't abandoned their old residence. Old Yu would frequently visit the old house. They also made repairs once or twice every year. Otherwise, it would have already become a wasteland.

It had snowed too much, so it was impossible to go hunt in the mountains. Yu Xiaocao's plan to earn some money before the New Year by catching some game was delayed. Furthermore, the price for goods had also reached a new height before the New Year. Every day, Madam Zhang would sigh deeply while she calculated the family's food rations.

Fortunately, the whole family was just staying at home during the winter, so they didn't need to do any physically demanding work. The Yu Family had two meals per day, which were reduced to only eating dry pancakes in the morning and a bowl of disgusting bean paste soup in the evening. Moreover, the coarse grain pancakes eaten for breakfast wasn't an all-you-can-eat meal.



The men each had two palm-sized pancakes, while the women were only given one piece each. But the children were given even less. Madam Zhang had even stopped giving Yu Caidie a secret portion of eggs. They were a family of over ten people, who couldn't make any income for the entire winter. During the cold winter, even the family's chickens didn't lay much eggs. They were just idly sitting and eating at home, while slowly using up their money. How much money would they have to waste to fill in this bottomless pit?

Madam Zhang glared furiously at Yu Hai and his daughter. If they hadn't gotten into a debt for that wicked girl's medical fees, with the money that Yu Hai had earned from selling game, their family would had had enough money for a lavish New Year! Their situation wouldn't be like right now, in which they had to count their food rations before preparing each meal!

“Second Son! It's going to be the New Year is a couple days. It just stopped snowing today, so take advantage of this time and go to town to buy some things we'll need for the New Year! First of all, we don't have much millet flour. Buy more millet flour back, so we can stock them up at home. Also, no matter what we'll need to make some dumplings for the New Year. So buy some wheat flour and two catties of meat...”

Madam Zhang made a bunch of requests but didn't take out any money.

Yu Hai was about to agree when his youngest daughter pulled on his sleeve. He looked over and noticed that his daughter was signaling at him with her eyes. Yu Hai immediately understood his daughter's meaning. After all, he was already accustomed to being obedient to Madam Zhang for over twenty years. Thus, he fell into a state of hesitation.

However, when he saw his daughter's pitiful gaze and thought about the resolution he had made to himself recently, he finally said, “Mother, I'll go to Eldest Uncle's house to borrow the sleigh—but the money for the New Year goods...”

As soon as money was mentioned, Madam Zhang immediately pulled a face that was even longer than a donkey's face, “A few days ago, didn't you go to town to sell game every day? You must have earned a lot of money. Why are you still asking me for money when you have money yourself?! Second Son, there's no precedent of anyone having private savings within our family! This is a rule that no one is allowed to break!”

“Grandmother, the snow that had accumulated in the mountain forest hadn't even melted yet, so there wasn't a lot of game to be caught. We caught very little game during those couple of days! So, aren't you very clear about how much money we can earn? It's almost the New Year, so of course we have to pay off our debt first. After repaying the money that Eldest Granduncle lent us for my medical treatment, we didn't even have enough money for the medication! Fortunately, Doctor Sun took pity on us and allowed my father to buy the medicine on credit! Father! After the New Year, you have to go up the mountain more frequently in order to pay back the dozen or more taels that we owe Tongren Medicine Hall! Our family still needs Doctor Sun to help treat our illnesses in the future!”

Xiaocao knew very well that her father had already made great improvement since he was able to openly ask Madam Zhang for money. So, she interjected and stated everything that needed to be said.

A dozen or more taels? Madam Zhang gasped in astonishment and looked at Xiaocao with a piercing gaze, as if her eyes were daggers. If she could, she seriously wanted to cut that jinx into pieces!

“Tsk! To use a dozen or more taels for a minor illness, it seems like our family really do have someone born with a noble young lady's life. It's a pity that she has reincarnated into the wrong family. She has the body of a noble lady without the fate to enjoy it! Oh my, those twenty-something taels is nearly enough for a whole family to use for an entire year while living frugally! Tsk-tsk...” Madam Li clicked her tongue in disapproval as she ceaselessly fanned the fire.

Yu Hai recalled his family's indifference when his daughter was on the verge of death. They didn't spend any of the family's money for his daughter's illness, yet they still had to endure mocking remarks from them. His expression immediately turned grim and he muttered in a muffled voice, “Eldest Sister-in-law don't need to worry about what kind of life my daughter has! We didn't use a single penny of yours for my daughter's illness!”

“Oh! He's getting angry at me now! You didn't spend any of my money for your daughter's illness, but I, Li Guihua, also didn't use any of your money for food or drinks! What rights do you have to yell at me?! Do you think that I'll be easy to bully?” Madam Li wasn't someone who would suffer any losses, so she clasped her waist and hollered back.

Yu Hai was originally bad at arguing with people, so he didn't know what to do when he saw her acting like a shrew.

But Yu Xiaolian couldn't tolerate her, “Eldest Aunt, you're allowed to criticize others with a mocking tone, but other people can't even say a word about you! What kind of logic is this? Is there anything

wrong with what my father said? A lot of money was spent for my sister's medical treatment. So, what's wrong with a father earning money for his daughter's medical fees? Even two hundred taels isn't as important as my younger sister's life, let alone twenty taels!"

Madam Zhang's glared at Xiaolian with her beady eyes. She threw the broom in her hands at Xiaolian's direction and shouted, "Why is a child butting in when the adults are talking? Second Son, is that how you teach your children?"

Yu Xiacao cried out in shock and exclaimed, "Grandmother, what are you doing? It's not enough that you've caused me to become seriously ill, but you're also going to hit my sister! Grandmother, you should think more carefully about your actions. If anything happens to my older sister, you won't even get the chance to grieve over the money!"

When money was mentioned, even though Madam Zhang had a belly full of anger, she didn't dare direct her rage towards the children again. If something happened to the children during the New Year Festival, based on how much Yu Hai doted on his children, he would definitely take his children to see a doctor. Even if they had to owe more debts, he would still get medical treatment for his children. As a result of that, she wouldn't be able to get any money out of Yu Hai for the next spring and summer seasons.

Old Yu, who was silently standing on the side, finally spoke up! "Everyone, stop! Aren't you guys afraid of becoming a laughingstock for others during the New Year?! Wife, it's not like you don't have any money, so stop thinking about taking the little money that Second Son has! Hurry up and take out the money. It's more important to buy the New Year goods!"

"Would the meager amount of money in my hands even be enough for them to use?" It was more painful for Madam Zhang to have money taken out of her hands than it would be to cut off her flesh.

Old Yu impatiently said, "You're always talking about money, money, money! To you, even a single copper coin is bigger than a millstone! Can't we just earn all the money back when the coastal waters thaws in the spring? After the New Year, Eldest Son and I will go out to the sea, while Second Son goes into the mountains. Won't we be able to make up for our winter expenses?"

Madam Zhang couldn't escape this situation, so she reluctantly opened the cabinet's lock while grumbling. She took out a string of copper coins and several silver bits, which were about the size of a fingernail. She reminded Yu Hai, as if she was afraid that he would spend the money recklessly, "Everything is really expensive nowadays, so don't buy too much food. We have sweet potato flour at

home. Although eating too much of it may cause heartburn, it's still very filling! As for wheat flour and meat, just buy enough for one meal of dumplings..."

Yu Xiaocao looked at the money in her hands. Her mouth twitched as she inwardly thought: Even if they wanted to, this wouldn't be enough money to buy a lot of things! Did she really need to repeatedly warn them?

Yu Hai took the money and left the house silently. It was a rare sunny day. Although the snow on the ground went up to the calves, there were still many people going to town to buy New Year goods. After days of heavy snow, most people hadn't had the chance to purchase the goods needed for the New Year. Thus, they wanted to take advantage of this good day to buy the things that they need.

Yu Hai's eldest uncle had originally planned to go to town today. However, seeing that his eldest nephew wanted to borrow the sleigh and that the good weather would probably last for more than a day, he decided to go to town on the next day.

Yu Hai didn't dare to buy too many unnecessary things and directly went to the grains shop to purchase fifty catties of millet flour and five catties of wheat flour. After that, he went to the butchers and got two catties of meat. The money that Madam Zhang gave him wasn't enough, so he used some of his own money to cover the cost.

While walking on the street, he encountered the manager of Zhenxiu Restaurant. The manager knew that the little girl of the Yu Family was someone who his young master highly valued, so he naturally acted very warmly towards Yu Hai. Seeing that simple New Year goods that Yu Hai had purchased, he bought some snacks and candies from the pastry shop. He insisted that Yu Hai accept them, saying that Third Young Master Zhou had ordered him to buy them for Miss Yu and her younger brother.

Yu Hai bought some meat buns and went to the carpentry shop to visit his son. He also left some copper coins for his son. However, Yu Hai wouldn't have expected that his son would be reluctant to use the money that he had received from the family and saved them up instead, which led to a disaster that almost cost Yu Hang's life.

The New Year was slowly approaching. On the morning of New Year's Eve, Madam Liu was busily working in the kitchen with her two daughters. The two catties of meat that Yu Hai bought were mostly fat. Madam Liu cut out some of the fat to make lard, and then left the dregs of fat for the evening when they needed to mix it with cabbage to make stuffing for the dumplings.

Winter vegetables were usually either radishes or cabbages. Yu Xiaocao had already predicted that there wouldn't be enough food at home for the New Year, so she grew some bean sprouts at the edge of the kang bed. She had also made some handmade vermicelli with the sweet potato flour.

With the sweet potato vermicelli, their dishes for the New Year didn't seem as dull. Stewed cabbage and radish with vermicelli [1], stir-fried sour cabbage [2], braised radish [3], stir-fried black fungus and cabbage [4], crispy radish salad [5], and dry-fried bean sprouts [6]... They also cut a few slices of pork to cook with the bean sprouts and vermicelli [7], making another home-cooked dish. For the soup, they made cabbage and bean sprout soup [8].

When the dishes were served, even the picky Madam Zhang was visibly surprised. She never knew that so many dishes could be made with radish, cabbage, and a few bean sprouts.

As for the taste, it was pretty obvious based on everyone's reactions. No one had time to talk as they were all just diligently eating, which was the biggest affirmation for the dishes.

Old Yu seldom had the chance to drink alcohol, so he poured a cup for his three sons and said with satisfaction, "Second Daughter-in-law's culinary skills have improved again!"

#### Chapter 56 - A Disastrous Year

"Daughter-in-law can't take credit for the dishes. Xiaocao was the one who came up with these dishes." Madam Liu looked at her daughter proudly and gave her some vermicelli. Her daughter was so clever to be able to make such delicious vermicelli with the sweet potato flour. Her daughter should eat more as a reward!

They had made a decent amount of each dish. Madam Zhang was enjoying the delicious dishes, so she didn't make any jarring remarks regarding Madam Liu giving her children more food. She had originally thought that they would spend the New Year frugally, but she hadn't expected that such simple ingredients could also make a lavish New Year meal.

Madam Li stuffed a mouthful of food into her mouth as she said, "Xiaocao came up with them? She's the one only in the family with the leisure to think of these things."

Yu Xiaocao glared at Madam Li: 'This fat woman never has anything good to say. She's making it seem like she's a gluttonous person who only thinks about eating!'

“Stop talking so much if you don't have anything good to say. You won't shut up even when you're eating!” Yu Dashan had noticed his second brother's displeasure and hastily reprimanded his wife.

Madam Zhao, who seldom ate together with the Yu Family, had several small plates placed in front of her. The food inside were exactly the same as everyone else. Madam Zhang knew that her youngest daughter-in-law was very particular about eating and didn't like eating from the same plates as everyone. Thus, a separate set of the dishes was specially prepared for Madam Zhao and her son.

Little Doudou sucked a strand of vermicelli into his mouth with much effort, and then chewed it with a smile on his face. He beamed a smile at Xiaocao and said, “Second Sister's cooking is the best! Doudou likes this really long thing. It's very tasty!”

“This is vermicelli! Since our Doudou likes it, Second Sister will make some more for you to take back to town!” Yu Xiaocao never had any resistance towards cute children. Although it was quite laborious to make vermicelli, it was also good to have an improvement to their meals with a new type of dish.

“Yes, yes! This year's yield of sweet potato is very high. We have enough sweet potato flour until the harvest in the fall. If we make some more vermicelli, we'll have another type of dish to eat during the winter! The stewed bean sprouts and vermicelli tastes very good!” Madam Li sucked on the grease on her chopsticks, and then she used her chopsticks to rummage through the dishes. When she found a piece of fatty meat, she immediately stuffed it into her mouth.

Heizi, who sat beside her, had even stood up. He wiped his snot on his blackened sleeve, and then poked around in the dishes with his chopsticks. It seemed like he would never stop until he found a piece of meat.

Seeing the dirty appearance of the mother and son pair, no matter how delicious that homemade dish was, Yu Xiaocao still didn't want to eat it anymore. With her head lowered, she concentrated on eating the dry-fried bean sprouts in front of her. She was seriously about to vomit if she looked at them any longer.

Dry-fried bean sprouts was made with bean sprouts that had just grown about one or two centimeters. After heating the lard in a hot pot, dried chili pepper was put into the pot and stir-fried. After that, bean sprouts, seasonings, and garlic sprouts were added into the pot and stir-fried. With the refreshing taste

of the bean sprouts and the addition of lard as a base ingredient, it was natural that the taste wouldn't be bad.

Unexpectedly, Madam Zhang was the first one to comment on Madam Li and her son's unsightly eating manner, "How are other people supposed to eat when you guys keep picking and choosing in the dishes? If you're going to keep doing this, then go back to your room to eat! Stop being so loathsome here!"

As she spoke, she also glanced at her youngest daughter-in-law's direction. It turned out that Madam Zhang, who had been paying attention to her youngest daughter-in-law and grandson, noticed that from time to time Madam Zhao would look at her eldest daughter-in-law in disgust. Madam Zhao, who was originally enjoying the meal, had suddenly set down her chopsticks. Thus, she finally spoke up to stop Madam Li and her son's unsightly behavior.

Seeing that the meat in the dishes were mostly gone, Madam Li finally stopped searching with her chopsticks. However, she still wolfed down the rest of the dishes, as if there was someone fighting over them with her.

The New Year Eve lunch ended shortly after this small episode. For this meal, Madam Zhang didn't limit how much everyone could eat. Thus, even if the staple food was still coarse grain pancakes, the entire family still ate with a rare sense of satisfaction. The main reason was that it was a more sumptuous meal than in the previous years.

After the meal, Madam Zhang's heart ached at the sight of the swiftly depleted food and muttered endlessly. With a grim expression, she finally stopped her complaints when Old Yu scolded her for 'being so fussy even during the New Year'.

Dumplings were usually eaten in the evening during the New Year celebration. The Yu Family didn't buy a lot of meat in the first place, so even when the stuffing was mixed with a lot of cabbage, it still wasn't enough to fill everyone's stomach.

There were only two types of fillings in the Yu Family's dumplings, which were pork with cabbage and lard mixed with cabbage. On the evening of New Year's Eve, the men were given twenty dumplings each, while the womenfolk got ten each. The children received half of what the women got.

With only five small dumplings, even the three year old Little Doudou wasn't full, let alone Yu Xiaocao and the others. Yu Heizi wasn't satisfied after he finished his portion, so he swiftly stole one of Little

Shitou's dumplings when he wasn't paying attention and stuffed it into his own mouth. He disregarded Little Shitou's angry cries and approached Yu Xiaocao and Yu Xiaolian.

Yu Xiaocao swiftly pulled her siblings to their father's table and stayed beside him. In the presence of Old Yu and their father, Yu Heizi naturally didn't dare to act rashly. He could only brazenly go ask his own mother for more dumplings.

Madam Li was a greedy woman, who wasn't even willing to share her dumplings with her own child. Thus, she begged her mother-in-law shamelessly, "Mother, Heizi is a growing youth, who can eat as much as an adult. So five dumplings isn't even enough as an appetizer. Mother, this daughter-in-law doesn't dare request that he gets the same amount as the men. Just give him five more so that he'll have the same amount as us!"

Madam Zhang looked up toward Madam Liu and nonchalantly said, "If you can guarantee that no one will complain that I'm being biased, then I don't mind giving him five extra dumplings since it's the New Year."

Madam Liu had never liked arguing with others, so she said in a quiet voice, "Heizi is a growing youth, so who dares to say anything about him getting five more dumplings? However, he shouldn't steal his younger siblings' dumplings."

"What does a child know? Younger Sister-in-law shouldn't argue with a child. Mother, I'll go give Heizi the dumplings." Madam Li not only didn't discipline her child, but she was also annoyed at Madam Liu for being difficult. Ay, it was true that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree!

Madam Liu quietly entered the kitchen and divided her ten dumplings among her children. She put four dumplings into her youngest son's bowl, and then split the remaining six dumplings between her two daughters.

Yu Xiaocao held her own bowl tightly and said, "Mother, I'm a light eater. Five dumplings are enough for me! If you give us all your dumplings, you'll starve tonight. Even if you give me the dumplings, I won't be able to finish them."



Xiaolian chimed in, "Mother, you seldom eat dumplings throughout the year. Moreover, you've been busy the entire afternoon. If you can't even eat a bite of the dumplings you made yourself, do you think that we, your children, will be able to eat?"

"Mother, take the dumpling back. I don't want it!" Little Shitou quickly returned the dumplings that were in his bowl.

"You guys eat! Mother ate too much for lunch, so I'm not hungry right now!" Madam Liu picked up the dumplings and put them in her children's bowls.

While the four of them were pushing back and forth, Yu Hai had come out with his bowl of dumplings. When he saw this scene, he felt both sad and touched. In the end, he made the decision to fairly distribute all the dumplings that the second branch had received. The children received eight dumplings each, while he and his wife each got ten.

"Ten dumplings aren't enough for such a grown man like you? I'm used to eating light meals in the evening, so I'll feel uncomfortable if I eat too much dumplings. Here, I'll give you a few more. I'll just drink more of the dumpling soup later..." Madam Liu's heart ached for her husband and was reluctant to eat the dumplings that she had received.

"There's no way you will be full with just ten dumplings. Quickly eat, or else it's going to be cold!" Yu Hai went into the kitchen with a bowl and asked Madam Zhang to ladle a bowl full of dumpling soup for him. He swiftly drank the bowl of soup and filled his stomach first before he ate the dumplings. In this way, after eating the dumplings, he would be considered somewhat full.

On the first day of the New Year, since all the villagers knew about Madam Zhang's stingy disposition, not many children came over for New Year greetings. Apart from Eldest Granduncle, Hunter Zhao, and several close family friends, the second branch of the Yu Family also felt too ashamed to bring their children to give New Year greetings to others.

Yu Xiaocao and her siblings didn't receive any red envelopes [1] from their own grandparents, but her eldest granduncle gave them two copper coins as lucky money. When they arrived at the Zhao Family's residence, Madam Zheng specially filled the embroidered pouches that she made with around one mace [2] worth of silver bits and gave a pouch to each child.

Yu Xiaolian looked at the embroidery on the pouch and loved it very much. Seeing the admiration on her face, Madam Zheng agreed to teach her how to do embroidery.

On the way home, Madam Liu whispered to her husband, "Based on the aura that Madam Zheng emits, she obviously didn't come from an ordinary family. Just look at the embroidered pouches. Even the ordinary families in town won't be so particular as to give the children lucky money in embroidered pouches, let alone people in the village."

"It's not only Madam Zheng, but also Uncle Zhao and Older Brother Bufan. Their martial arts skills don't seem like skills of an ordinary hunter's family. There must be some hidden reason as to why Uncle Zhao's whole family is living in seclusion within the mountains. But this isn't something that we should inquire about. We should just interact as usual. There's no need to act in a deliberate manner."

Yu Hai had long been aware that the Zhao Family, whether it was their eating habits, living conditions or behaviors, would unconsciously reveal the manners of a noble family. The men of the Zhao Family all exuded the orderly and dignified aura of a soldier. During the later period of the former dynasty, the imperial court was prodigal and immoral, and thus many righteous officials decided to live in seclusion. The Zhao Family might have been one of those families.

As the days passed by, the winter made it apparent that this year was doomed to be disastrous. In January, the snow almost never stopped. Many families had insufficient food reserves and were only able to eat one meal a day. So they were already quite lucky if they were able to survive starvation.

However, there were quite a few people who had died of starvation and froze to death because of the successive heavy snow. Moreover, there were even incidents in which none of the family had survived. Even in the city, there were incidents of people dying of starvation...

Fortunately, in Dongshan Village, except for several weak and elderly people who had failed to survive the cold winter, there wasn't a phenomenon in which a large number of people died of starvation or froze to death. However, the situation in the village wasn't optimistic either.

At this time, Madam Zhang deeply regretted being so stingy before the New Year and didn't allow her second son to buy more foods to stock up. They had already used up all the millet flour at home. The only thing that they had at home that could satisfy their hunger was the sweet potatoes in the cellar and the sweet potato slices, which could only be grinded into sweet potato flour.

Every day, they either ate sweet potato gruel or sweet potato cornbread. Even if they occasionally tried something different, it was just directly using the dried sweet potato to make porridge. The digestive

system of the elderly wasn't very good, so they would get heartburn after eating sweet potato on a daily basis. However, if they didn't eat it, they would be facing the danger of starvation. Thus, Yu Xiaocao had no choice but to mix the mystic-stone water into herbal medicine and fed it to her family in order to nourish their intestines and stomach.

The continuous snowstorm had caused the roads to be blocked. The town's food reserves were also facing a crisis due to a problem with the dispatch. Furthermore, the price for grains remained high without any signs of decline. White rice and wheat flour had become as expensive as meat!

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With great difficulty, they managed to 'endure' it until the beginning of spring. Once spring began, it finally stopped snowing. The sun that had been gone for around two months had finally showed itself. The snow covering the mountains melted slowly. However, the occasional short burst of wind from the sea was still piercing cold. On top of the mudflat and the reef surrounding the shore, a fisherman appeared in the middle of the cold wind, shivering in the cold but he persisted on gathering seafood at the sea.

'Summer night, winter white' is an authentic line of verse from what people who gather seafood say. Due to the influence of the receding tide and the change in temperature, the best time to gather seafood was during the summer nights and winter mornings. During the winter, the temperature was the most suitable for gathering oysters. The oysters were very fat in this season, and they would be able to harvest a lot. They just needed to gather oysters once, and they would be able to eat oysters for many days.

To the villagers of Dongshan Village, who had just experienced a food shortage because of winter, this was a favor from the sea. The abundance of oysters from the sea was no different than sending charcoal in snowy weather. People who came to gather seafood at the sea each brought their own wicker basket or a small bamboo basket. The basket would either be hung over the neck or straddled over the arm. They held a small shovel in their hand as they searched for their 'prey' on the reef. There were even villagers who, despite the frigid cold seawater, would enter the shallow water with their fishing net and try to catch fish. It was a bustling sight to behold.

"Xiaocao, your boots look very warm. Are they waterproof?" Zhou Shanhu, who had invited the Yu sisters to gather seafood at the mudflat, enviously looked at Xiaocao's deerskin boots. Although she didn't recognize what material the boots were made of, she knew that it wasn't something a regular family would be able to afford.

Yu Xiaocao saw that everyone was wearing tattered and old cotton shoes. Some people were even afraid that their only pair of shoes would become wet from the sea, so they wore only straw sandals

with their bare feet. The chilly air from the cold spring season combined with the ice-cold seawater froze their little feet. Their feet would become red and some would even have frostbite.

She was a little embarrassed by this as she shrank her feet back. In a small voice, she said, "Years ago, my father killed a deer and sold it to a restaurant in town. My body wasn't good at that time. My father took less money for the deerskin and asked the restaurant owner to use some of the deerskin to make boots. So, when I came out to gather seafood today, my father insisted that I wear them..."

Zhou Linglong secretly tugged at her little sister's clothes. She smiled at Xiaocao and said, "Years ago, your serious illness almost frightened Auntie Liu to death. You should wear warmer clothing otherwise your family members would worry. Shanhu, don't stare at other people's feet. Once father comes home, we can ask him to buy you a pair of boots too."

Zhou Linglong and her little sister were the daughters of Madam Liu's best friend, Auntie Fang. Auntie Fang's husband, Zhou Danian, started off as a peddler and their family raised dozens of chickens. So, their family's financial situation was considered to be quite outstanding within Dongshan Village.

Zhou Shanhu was only one year older than Xiaocao, but she was a very sensible child, "Older sister, I was only looking at her shoes. Boots are very expensive. Moreover, the cotton shoes at home are already quite warm and a pair of boots can buy so much food!"

"They are catching fish over there, let's go and have a look!" Yu Xiaocao didn't want to talk anymore regarding the boots, so she changed the topic of their conversation.

When she walked closer, she realized it was actually her Third Uncle, Yu Jiang, and the expert fisherman of Dongshan Village, Uncle Shuanzhu, who were catching fish. They were enduring the bone-chilling cold water as they pulled the fishing net to catch fish. Someone else was responsible for pulling a part of the fishing net on the shore while Yu Jiang and Shuanzhu took turns holding the other end of the fishing net as they slowly walked into the water. After the water line reached their chest, they would walk in a semi-circular arc as they went back to shore. The rest of the people would take over the net as they worked together to pull it to the shore.

There wasn't much harvest to be had in this one fishing net. Besides a few fish that were worth approximately a tael each, there were only a few palm-sized fish that were stuck on the lines of the net. Once the two men got to shore, their wives gave them boiling hot ginger soup. They also wrapped themselves in thick layers of cotton-padded clothing and drank a few mouthfuls of ginger soup before they entered the sea to pull the net again.

"I know a place where the reef is hidden. Let's go there and look. But when we go there, we have to be careful." This was the first spring tide since the beginning of spring. There were too many people who came to gather seafood today. Some people came all the way from town with their tools to try their luck. There were more people on the reef gathering seafood than available seafood. The children had searched for seafood for half a day, but they didn't harvest much.

Yu Xiaolian knew the place that her sister was talking about. Last year, when they were gathering seafood there, they had even saved a person. The children chatted and laughed as they walked towards the steep cliffs. Sure enough, there was a lot of seafood.

"An oyster's shell is very sharp. Sometimes, with just slight contact with the skin, the skin would be scratched by it. You must be careful when you gather oysters. Xiaocao, you and Shitou don't have much strength so why don't you two gather other seafood products?" Zhou Linglong was a young lady now; she knew how to take care of the younger children.

They lowered their heads and pried open oyster shells. In a short while, their baskets and tiny buckets were all full. Zhou Shanhu happily said, "We harvested a lot today. If we can harvest this much every day, then we won't have to worry about making ends meet or starving during springtime!"

"My father said that the reef would only be revealed when the tide recedes a lot. Every month, there will only be low tides twice. So how can we come every day? Besides, aren't you afraid of vomiting after eating seafood every day?" Yu Xiaolian was also very happy. She pondered what kind of delicious dishes her little sister would make with these oysters.

After experiencing a shortage of food and vegetables in the winter, Yu Xiaocao used different ways to prepare meals, saving food yet still making it delicious. Everyone in the family praised her cooking. She can turn ordinary radishes and white cabbage into different dishes. So, she definitely would be able to make something delicious using the oysters. Xiaolian was full of expectations towards Xiaocao's cooking.

Yu Xiaocao thought of how her business with Third Young Master Zhou would improve after the beginning of spring, so she turned to Sister Linglong and said, "I heard that the Zhou Family from the town intends to build a workshop on the dock. They would be accepting large amounts of oysters. In the future, when you are free, you can go gather and pry open oysters and sell it to them. You will be able to earn some money to buy needles and thread."

When Zhou Linglong heard that, her eyes immediately brightened. She asked, "Is this news reliable? Usually, people who accept seafood aren't very willing to accept oysters. They would continuously lower the price of the oysters. Due to this, the villagers don't really like to gather oysters. I hope that the price that the Zhou Family's workshop will not set a very low price for the oysters."

Xiaocao and Shitou's basket was also full from gathering other kinds of seafood. Xiaocao was very satisfied with today's harvest. Besides small seafood like goose barnacles, mussels, and water-snails, she has also gathered a dozen sea urchins. She was ready to make a stew from the sea urchin. It would be delicious and nourishing. To her surprise, she actually managed to gather a sea cucumber today. 'Four Seafood Treasures' was a type of exotic delicacy that required abalone, sea cucumber, shark fin, and fish maw. Sea cucumbers were definitely a good find.

The three siblings walked with the Zhou sisters on the soft sandy shore. They laughed and chatted as they went in the direction of Dongshan Village.

They hadn't even entered the village when they saw Auntie Shuanzhu hurriedly rushing toward the seashore. When she saw Xiaocao and her siblings, she accelerated her speed more, rushing towards them. She said, "Xiaolian, Xiaocao, something happened to your father. You have to quickly return home!"

"My father? What happened to him?" Yu Xiaocao's grip on her basket tightened. Her heart was thrown in chaos.

The family was struggling through winter. In the past few days, the snow in the forest mountain had finally began to melt. Madam Zhang urged Yu Hai to hunt in the mountains. Early this morning, Yu Hai invited Hunter Zhao to hunt. Everyone said that the beginning of spring wasn't a good time to hunt. This is because when wild animals enter the breeding season, they were especially violent. Could it be...

"Your father was bitten by a bear. His entire body is covered in blood. One of his legs was almost bitten till it was gone... You should quickly go home and have a look!" Thinking of the condition Yu Hai was in, Shuanzhu's wife couldn't help but shiver.

As soon as Shitou heard that, he immediately cried out and burst into tears. He threw his basket down and ran back home. Yu Xiaocao and her sister tried to suppress their panic-stricken hearts as they left their basket full of seafood and rushed back home side-by-side.

The Zhou sisters picked up the Yu sibling's baskets with their free hand. They carried the baskets as they hurriedly walked in the direction of the Yu Family's house.

Shuanzhu's wife followed along with the Yu siblings. She couldn't help but comfort the children, "Don't worry. Your third uncle and Uncle Shuanzhu already borrowed the donkey cart from the neighboring village. They went to the town to get a doctor. Maybe your father's injury isn't as serious as it looks!"

Yu Xiaocao suppressed the fear and sorrow in her heart. Her steps were getting bigger and bigger as she ran. In the past six months, Yu Hai's doting and tolerance were still vivid in her mind. Although their days were bitter, her parent's love and affection gave her the courage to continue to live in this strange world.

Although Yu Hai had a lot of filial piety and wasn't very good with conversations, he unconsciously became Xiaocao's backbone. He was also the pillar of the second branch. She really couldn't imagine how the second branch would fare in the Yu Family once her father was gone.

Father, you mustn't let anything happen to you! Wait for me to save you! Yu Xiaocao was firmly holding her only life-saving straw in her hand—the multicolored stone. Since it was capable of using its remaining magical power to bring her soul from a different world to this world and allowing her to reincarnate, then it must have a method to save her father.

[Master don't worry! If your father still has one breath left, this Divine Stone can pull him back from the gates of hell!] The little divine stone appears to detect her indecisive state of mind, so it put away its usual air of arrogance and haughtiness. It was full of self-confidence as it promised her that it'll save her father.

Due to the great snow, the mountain was sealed. During the entire winter, the little divine stone didn't get a chance to soak in the spring water from the mountains. However, it sensed that the snow also contained spiritual energy. The spiritual energy within the snow was not any less than the energy in the spring water. Every day, the divine stone would make Xiaocao collect the snow from the bamboo leaves and melt it for it to bathe. After nurturing its spirit for half a year, it stored enough spiritual energy to save a dying person.

With the little divine stone's promise, Xiaocao's restless heart finally calmed down. Xiaocao prayed to the deities for a blessing. She prayed that her father would hang on until she returned home!

The road home seemed very slow and long. As a result from fiercely running, Xiaocao's chest felt as if it's about to burst. She opened her mouth and tried to take in big breaths of air. However, in other people's eyes, it seemed as if she was unable to breathe.

Yu Xiaolian sobbed, "Little sister, go slower. Something already happened to father. I don't want anything to happen to you. I will go home first to take a look; you can slowly walk....."

"No...hu hu...no need! I...It's because I usually don't exercise...hu hu hu...so I'm like this! Don't worry...I know my body best...hu hu..." Yu Xiaocao gasped for breath. Her two legs felt like they weighed as much as lead. Yet she didn't have any intention of stopping to rest.

With great difficulty, she finally arrived in front of her own family's door. She used up the remainder of her strength to push open the heavy door. Their courtyard was crowded with villagers who came over to help. When they saw Yu Xiaocao and her siblings, they acted on their own initiative and made room for them to enter.

"Father!" Yu Xiaocao rushed through the door of the west room. She pushed aside Eldest Aunt's plump body and threw herself at the side of the kang bed.

There wasn't a trace of blood on Yu Hai's pale face. His body was covered with cotton patches which were stained with blood. The cotton patches were hardening into little pieces after being stained with blood. Only a few strips of bandages remained on his right trouser leg which exposed his badly mangled right leg.

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No! That can hardly be called a leg anymore! The skin on his right leg was nearly all peeled off, revealing the bloody muscle tissues and thick, white bone inside. The most severely injured part of his leg was the thigh; a piece of flesh had been torn off. Blood was ceaselessly pouring out of the artery on his thigh. If Zhao Bufan hadn't tore off a piece of cloth and tied it around his thigh, it was likely that Yu Hai would have lost his life due to excessive blood loss before he reached home.

"Xiao... Xiaocao." Madam Liu was crying so hard that she was barely able to breathe. If she hadn't eaten an entire winter's worth of medicine, Madam Liu would have already fainted. She grabbed her younger daughter tightly as if she was grabbing onto her last life-saving straw. "Right! Xiaocao, didn't you study medicine under Doctor You? Quickly save your father!"



Yu Xiaocao had never seen such a tragic and bloody scene in neither of her lifetimes. Thus, she was stunned for a moment and didn't know where to start.

[Master, you must stop the bleeding first! If all his blood flowed out, even an immortal wouldn't be able to save him!] When the little divine stone saw the frightened expression on its master's face, it quickly reminded her to stop the bleeding.

"I, what should I do?" Yu Xiaocao remembered from the surgeries in her previous life that large wounds were usually sutured to stop the bleeding. However, her father's leg was riddled with injuries. What should she do?

[Put my body near the wound on his thigh to make it easier for me to use my spiritual powers!] The little divine stone could only guide its owner through the process step-by-step.

Yu Xiaocao took out all the medicine for external injuries from the medicine box. She used a high concentration of the mystic-stone water and mixed it together with the medicine. When the mixture turned into a paste, she carefully applied it on her father's wounds. As she applied the medicine, she tried to get the multicolored stone on her wrist as close to the wounds as possible.

A faint golden light emerged from the multicolored stone and slowly enveloped Yu Hai's entire leg. Although the naked eye couldn't see any change, the ruptured veins and torn flesh were unwittingly nourished by the Divine Stone's spiritual power. In other words, even though his leg looked as appalling as before, his leg would heal twice as fast in the future.

Yu Hai's legs were shrouded in the golden light for half an hour, exhausting the last of the little divine stone's spiritual power. Yet it didn't forget to haggle with Yu Xiaocao, [The next time you go to town, remember to bring me to Tongren Medicine Hall. All the spiritual power I had accumulated is gone again! I'm very tired, I need to sleep.]

Before it even finished talking, the last rays of golden light returned to the multicolored stone. There were no more movements from the little divine stone. Although Yu Xiaocao was also worried about the little divine stone, she was even more worried about her father's injury.

On the kang bed, Yu Hai's face was still pale. His breathing was faint, and his legs were covered in wound paste. But, it didn't look as frightening as before.

"Oh my! He has such a serious injury. Even if you manage to save his life, his right leg will probably still be crippled! Tsk tsk..." Madam Li, who came to enjoy the bustling scene, fanned the flames as she shook her head and clicked her tongue.

Old Yu, who had a bellyful of anger, finally found someone to vent on, "He already became like this, yet you still making sarcastic remarks! Get lost!"

No matter how thick-skinned Madam Li was, she couldn't stand being berated by her father-in-law in public. She couldn't help but mutter in a low voice, "I wasn't the one who told him to go up the mountain, so why are you yelling at me? If you want someone to blame, blame him for not being careful... ouch!"

Madam Li didn't even finish speaking yet when Little Shitou knocked against her. Little Shitou's eyes were brimming with sadness and hatred as he firmly stared at Madam Li. His father was injured for this family. Yet Eldest Aunt still said those words! Father's injury wasn't worth it at all!

Little Shitou looked like a young wounded beast. Met with Little Shitou's eyes, Madam Li who was usually crafty and bossy, felt somewhat guilty as she retreated. Under the villagers' dissatisfied gaze, she left the west room with her tail between her legs.

It seemed as if the things happening around Yu Xiaocao didn't concern her at all. Her entire focus was on her father's well-being. She took out a bottle of high-concentration mystic-stone water from the medicine box. With Madam Liu's help, they slowly opened Yu Hai's mouth and carefully fed it to him.

Fortunately, not a drop of the mystic-stone water was wasted. Yu Hai had unconsciously swallowed the water. If he was unable to even swallow water, Xiaocao would've felt that everything was hopeless. With her understanding of the mystic-stone water's properties, she had faith that her father would survive the injury.

Auntie Shuanzhu looked at the medicine bottle in Xiaocao's hand and said nothing. Her husband had a serious illness during the winter. If Xiaocao didn't take out that life-saving medicine, he would've probably died. This medicine was the fruit of Doctor You's painstaking effort of his lifetime. It should be able to protect Dahai's life, right?

Yu Xiaocao also gave her mother, who was refusing to leave even when she was staggering, a few mouthfuls of mystic-stone water. Her mother's old illness had just gotten a little better, she couldn't allow her to fall ill again at this critical juncture.

"Second Sister, will father die? I'm so scared!" Little Shitou, who wasn't even six years old yet, had already become aware of how fearful death was. Tears were filling up his eyes as he snuggled against the only calm member of the family—Yu Xiaocao.

At this moment, Madam Zhang was hiding inside her room, not interacting with anyone. Old Yu walked back and forth in front of the west room. He could only sigh as he didn't have any idea as to what to do. Yu Dashan stayed in the west room, but he wasn't any help at all. Yu Caidie's crying was like raindrops on a pear blossom, she didn't look dependable at all. Younger Uncle and his family had left at the beginning of spring. They borrowed a donkey cart and returned to town already. In this large family, besides Yu Xiaocao who was calmly applying medicine to her father's wounds, no one else had any idea what they should do.

Time seemed to pass by particularly slowly in anxious times. Whether it was the Yu Family or their fellow villagers, they were all awaiting the arrival of the town doctor.

At last, a donkey cart dashed through the village entrance. When the driver of the donkey cart heard that the injury of the patient was very urgent, he didn't bother about his donkey's well-being and rushed his donkey all the way here like it was a horse. After rushing for an hour, he was finally able to bring the town doctor here.

The doctor who came was the divine physician from Tongren Medicine Hall, Doctor Sun. The moment he stepped off the donkey cart, he immediately took his medicine box and hurriedly walked through the courtyard door, asking, "Where is the wounded person? Quickly bring me to him!"

The fellow villagers led Doctor Sun to the west room. Originally, the lighting in the west room wasn't very bright. Now, with so many people crowding at the entrance, the room looked even darker than usual.

"Everyone besides the next of kin will have to leave the room to avoid disturbing the patient!" Doctor Sun was very dissatisfied with how noisy it was inside the room. He was frowning as he drove the people out.

When Doctor You saw Yu Hai's injury, he inhaled a cold breath of air. After practicing medicine for many years, it was rare to see such a serious injury. He hurriedly sat next to the kang bed and put his right hand on Yu Hai's pulse.

After taking his pulse for a while, Doctor You let out a deep sigh. He turned to face Madam Liu and her daughters who had their eyes fixed on him. Doctor You said with a serious expression, "His pulse is very weak. His arteries are hollow like onion-shoots and the main cause of his condition is the loss of blood and the injury to his yin..."

"Doctor, can the children's father be saved?" Madam Liu's current state of mind was in a mess as she anxiously inquired about her husband's condition.

Doctor Sun carefully reexamined Yu Hai's injury. He wrinkled his eyebrows even more after the examination and replied, "The external medicine applied on his wounds to stop his bleeding is quite effective. If the medicine wasn't applied on time, he wouldn't have been able to wait till I arrive. However..."

When Madam Liu saw the heavy expression on Doctor You's face, she felt her heart sink and nearly fell into the abyss, "Doctor Sun, you are a famous doctor from town. Please, you must save my children's father! I beg you!"

"It's not that I don't want to save him. The problem is whether I can save him or not. The wound on his leg is too big. In addition, all the flesh and tendons are torn apart and are peeling off. Even if I want to save him, I don't know even know where to start with all the wounds he has!" Many years ago, Doctor Sun had seen a patient with similar injuries. He did his best to save the patient. But in the end, the patient couldn't survive the high fever he got after his wounds got infected, and died.

When Madam Liu heard what Doctor Sun had said, she couldn't breathe and fainted next to the kang bed. The three children were crying as they helped their mother lie down on the kang bed.

Yu Xiaocao tried her best to suppress the sadness and anxiety rising inside her heart. She asked in a calm yet stubborn voice, "Doctor Sun, is there no hope in treating him?"

Doctor Sun looked at Yu Hai's bloody, mangled right leg and sighed, "Right now, we have to amputate his injured leg for him to have the opportunity to even live. However, even when coupled with my medicine, he only has a 30% chance of surviving."

"Is it possible for him to survive without amputating his injured leg?" To Yu Hai, who was omnipotent when going up the mountain and down the sea, losing one of his legs was no different than a bird with broken wings. He would suffer his entire life if he lost one of his legs.

Doctor Sun shook his head and said, "The surface of the wound is too big. With long term exposure to the air, the chance of the wound getting infected will significantly increase. If he gets a high fever because of the infection, even the Daluo Immortals [1] might not be able to save him. These are the only two options you have, you'll have to choose one for him!"

Yu Xiaocao didn't have a lot of mystic-stone liquid remaining in the bottle in her hands, but she still had a full jar of mystic-stone water. She was confident that she could keep the wound clean and uninfected. However, she still didn't feel reassured, so she asked, "If his wounds don't get infected, does that mean he won't have to amputate his injured leg?"

"Yes. But if he amputates his injured leg, he still has a 30% of survival. However, if he doesn't, then we can only wait for a miracle... I will prescribe him some medicine first. It's better to take a little medicine than do nothing at all!"

For over twenty years, Doctor Sun had never felt as powerless as he did today. If Hua Tuo [2] was alive today, he might be able to save Yu Hai's injured leg. But he was also hoping for a miracle as the one Yu Xiaocao experienced; Xiaocao had completely recovered from the illness she carried since she was a fetus.

Doctor Sun gave Old Yu the prescription. He reminded them once again, "Whether he is keeping this leg or not, you have to make a decision early!"

When Doctor Sun had just finished speaking, Madam Zhang immediately rushed into the main house. She pulled on Old Yu's arm and shouted, "Old Man, you can't amputate Dahai's injured leg! Let's first not talk about how low the 30% chance of survival is, even if he is lucky enough to survive, what's the point of living if he doesn't have one of his legs?"

Old Yu immediately became unhappy after hearing that. He yelled at his wife, "What do you mean there is no point in living? As the ancient saying goes: 'It's better to have a bad life than a good death!' It's obviously more important to save his life! You only care about your money!"

"What do you mean I only care about my money... I was just thinking about letting Yu Hai make the decision himself once he wakes up! I'm just worried that our kind intention will lead to hatred!" Madam Zhang was so frightened that she quickly explained. This was the first time in decades that Madam Zhang had seen Old Yu this angry.

However, Madam Zhang was the only one who knew her real thoughts. In the past, a large part of the family income came from selling the game that Yu Hai hunted. Now that he was seriously injured and couldn't keep one of his legs, how would he go up the mountain or to the sea? He could only lie in bed like a useless person and live as a parasite. Moreover, there was a lot of children in his family. His wife was also weak. If his injured leg really got amputated, didn't that mean that Yu Hai's family would be depending on her to feed and raise them? Where would she get that much spare money to raise those good-for-nothings?

## Chapter 59

The villagers in the yard were all either friends with Yu Hai and his wife, or neighbors who lived close by. When the second son of the Yu Family was carried home due to a serious injury, Madam Zhang hid and claimed to be poor at the mention of paying for the medical treatment. However, no one was surprised by her actions since it was already a common occurrence for the villagers.

Shuanzhu's wife couldn't help but feel somewhat sad within her heart. She had heard the elders at home talking about Madam Zhang. Madam Zhang was Old Yu's second wife after his wife's death, and she was also the cousin of Yu Hai's deceased mother. At that time, when the newly widowed Madam Zhang was driven out by her cruel in-laws, it was Yu Hai's bedridden mother who had graciously taken her in. Later, when Yu Hai's mother died of illness, Old Yu saw that Madam Zhang was rather sincere as she took care of Yu Hai and his older sister, so he married her as his second wife.

The eldest son, Yu Dashan, was Madam Zhang's son from her previous marriage and only two months older than Yu Hai. The third son, Yu Bo, and the youngest daughter, Yu Caidie, were Madam Zhang and Old Yu's biological children.

When Yu Hai's mother was still alive, Madam Zhang had acted hypocritically and treated Yu Hai and his older sister even better than her own son. Thus, when Yu Hai's mother was lying on her deathbed, she had entrusted her children to Madam Zhang. However, shortly after Yu Hai's mother passed away, Madam Zhang exposed her true colors.

Under the pretext that the family was in bad circumstances, Yu Hai and his older sister were only given porridge, which was so diluted that a person's image could be reflected in it, and a small piece of bean paste pancake every day. In front of Old Yu, she would pretend that everyone was eating the same food. However, she had actually kept the good things for her own children to secretly eat at night.

When Yu Hai was young, he had climbed trees to get eggs, gathered wild fruits, and searched for seafood in the sea because of hunger. When he got older, he learned how to catch pheasants, wild hare, and small game in the mountains by himself.

Being pure and filial, he had never selfishly enjoyed the pheasant and wild hare that he caught by himself. He always took them home and had his father prepare it for the entire family to eat. However, Madam Zhang would pick out the drumsticks and hare legs for her own children to eat. Thus, Yu Hai and his older sister could only eat the parts without much meat. When Old Yu chided her, she would respond plausibly by saying: 'Our third son and youngest daughter are still young, so Second Son should yield to his younger siblings...'

When Yu Hai was in his teens, he began to go fishing in the sea with Old Yu. Within two years, he had become one of the best fishermen in the village. Every time he went to the sea, he caught much more fish than the other people. Moreover, he often caught rare and precious fish species. Hence, the wealthy families and famous restaurants in town all liked to buy the fish that he had caught.

Yu Hai also frequently hunted in the mountain with Hunter Zhao. They would bring back some game every time, but most of the time, Madam Zhang was unwilling to let the family eat them. So, most of them were sold in town in exchange for money, which was securely kept in her own purse.

Gradually, the Yu Family moved out of their shabby ancestral home and built a five-room tiled residence at the east side of the village, near the sea. In the past two years, they had also replaced their broken fishing boat with a new boat. With Yu Hai's abilities, the Yu Family had leaped from a well-known poor family to a relatively well-off family in the village.

Madam Zhang had complete control over the family's finances. It was impossible to even get a single penny out of her hands. Even the money used to purchase groceries for the family was meticulously calculated over and over again. Every day, they ate coarse grain pancakes, bean porridge, and pickled vegetables. At times, they would just cook the vegetables from their garden in boiled water, without even adding any oil. Except during the New Year, there wouldn't be any trace of meat at home.

Even the people that rarely worked and the poorest families in the village ate better food and wore warmer clothes than their family. There wasn't anyone in the village who didn't know that the old lady of the Yu Family was like a mouse entering an oilcan— an entrance without an exit.

The eldest daughter-in-law's, Madam Li, maiden family lived close by and had decent family circumstances. Furthermore, Madam Zhang had taken almost all of the family's resources to prepare the betrothal gifts in order to get this marriage for her eldest son. From time to time, Madam Li would take her son back to her maiden home to eat a sumptuous meal. She always returned with various bags, which were all snuck into her room. However, Madam Zhang would just turn a blind eye to her behavior. As a result, both mother and son ate so much that their body turned into the shape of a ball. They were completely different from Yu Hai's wife and children, who all looked emaciated and haggard.

Yu Hai had chosen Madam Liu as his wife by himself and asked his father to hire a matchmaker to arrange the marriage. At that time, the fat and ugly daughter of a general store owner had taken a fancy to Yu Hai, who was tall, handsome, and capable. They had already invited someone to tell Madam Zhang that they didn't need betrothal gifts. Moreover, they had also prepared a dowry of thirty taels.

For ordinary families in the fishing village like the Yu Family, their annual expense would only be about three to five taels. Although they got a decent income from fishing every day, they had to pay for the third son's, Yu Bo, schooling fees. Moreover, they had to prepare the money needed for his future examinations. They also had to prepare for their youngest daughter dowry. At that time, thirty taels was quite a large sum of money to the Yu Family, so of course Madam Zhang was interested.

Just when she made up her mind to agree with this marriage proposal, Yu Hai and Madam Liu's marriage had been settled. Madam Liu came from an average family and her older brothers had just recently gotten married, so they only gathered several taels as her dowry after making much effort. It was naturally far worse than the thirty taels that the general store owner had suggested. The thirty taels that she was about to receive had suddenly disappeared, so of course Madam Zhang would view Madam Liu as an eyesore.

After Madam Liu married into the family, she became responsible with nearly all the chores at home. She had to cook, do the laundry, and gather fishwort and firewood. She also had to feed the chickens and pigs. Moreover, she was also responsible for taking care of the family's two plot of land. Even when she was pregnant, Madam Zhang didn't allow her to rest. She scolded her throughout the day, while nitpicking at everything she did.

Before Madam Liu had completed her confinement period [1] after the birth of her youngest son, Little Shitou, she had already been ordered to wash clothes in the ice-covered river. As a result, she had fallen



ill and suffered the lingering effects of the chronic disease. During the winter and rainy days, she would cough incessantly. Sometimes, she coughed so much that she would have trouble breathing and her face would turn blue due to the suffocation. Furthermore, she had nearly died on several occasions.

Every year, Madam Liu had to see a doctor and take medication for her illness, which was a major expense. Moreover, Yu Xiaocao was born with a weak constitution and would constantly fall ill. Each time Madam Zhang had to pay for their medical fees, it was as if someone dug up her ancestral grave. The old lady would scold them every day while saying that she was raising two medicine guzzling fiends who were bottomless pits...

In the past, seeing Yu Hai's ability to earn money, Madam Zhang would make complaints, but she still took out money to pay for the medical fees.

Due to Madam Zhang's persistent urging today, Yu Hai had followed his close friend, Zhao Bufan, to hunt in the West Mountains. However, they had inadvertently disturbed a bear that was hibernating within a cave. In order to save Hunter Zhao, Yu Hai's leg was bitten severely by the bear, and his back was also scratched into a bloody mess. He seemed as if he was barely breathing now.

However, he was considered rather lucky. Even though his blood vessels had nearly ruptured, he was able to endure until the doctor arrived from town. They had originally thought that the best physician in town would provide them with some good news. However, after examining Yu Hai's injuries, Doctor Sun of Tongren Medicine Hall only shook his head and said, "Do what can be done and leave all else to fate." After that, he reluctantly wrote a prescription for them, while saying that the medication probably won't be effective and that they were only seeking peace of mind.

A dosage of medicine cost approximately one tael and it might not be able to save the life of the Yu Family's second son. There was no way that Madam Zhang would let the money that she painstakingly saved up be wasted. With a family filled with sick and weak people, if Yu Hai couldn't wake up, they would all become burdens for the Yu Family in the future. If Yu Hai survived with an amputated leg, he would also just be a burden to the family since he had lost a leg.

Shuanzhu's wife had already seen through the current situation. If Madam Zhang could make the decisions, then she would definitely kick Yu Hai's entire family out of the house without hesitation. However, Old Yu was still had the final say within the family. Furthermore, Madam Zhang was afraid that the other villagers would gossip, so she didn't dare to brazenly mention this suggestion.

Ay! How would Yu Hai's family survive under Madam Zhang's control in the future? Shuanzhu's wife couldn't help but worry for them!

There was a heavy scent of blood drifting in the air. Yu Hai, who was lying on the bed, looked deathly pale and was barely breathing. Every time he went hunting in the mountains, he would be able to earn at least four or five hundred copper coins. But now he was only covered with a worn-out cotton quilt that was faded and patched-up.

It was dark and cramped inside the west room, which was mostly occupied by a kang bed. At the head of the bed, there was an old rattan case, while a table held up by numerous planks was placed on the side of the bed. And that was all. Yu Hai and his wife, who were the main laborers in the family, had to live in this crowded room with several children.

Yu Hai was still alive, yet the second branch was already being treated in such a way. If...

"Hurry up and pay Doctor Sun for the medicine!" Old Yu, who was dragged into the main room by Madam Zhang, suddenly shouted. The villagers in the courtyard looked at each other speechlessly. Had Madam Zhang seriously shed all pretense of cordiality and refused to pay for Yu Hai's medications?

"It's five taels! Even the doctor had said that it was probably useless to eat the medicine! Doesn't Xiaocao have Doctor You's medicine box? We can just use some of the medicine inside to have peace of mind. Five taels is enough for a month's supply of brush and ink for our third son!" Madam Zhang's growl sounded like a female beast guarding her child.

Old Yu's voice sounded once again, "Do you think I don't know how much money you have saved up? If there is even a glimmer of hope, we should do our best to make our last efforts. Otherwise, will your conscience be at ease? Aren't you afraid that Xiaocao and her siblings will resent you?"

Madam Zhang was unwilling to comply, "It's not that I don't want to save him, but the doctor already said that taking the medicine won't help. So, why are we still wasting our money? It's better to just save the money and help Second Son raise his children..."

As the old couple argued in the main room, the neighbors in the yard looked sympathetically at the west room and shook their heads incessantly.

"Uncle Yu——" A man with a strong-built, who emitted a strong sense of vigor and appeared valiant, entered the gate of the Yu Family's courtyard. He was the person that Yu Hai had saved today, Zhao Bufan.

When Madam Zhang heard his voice, she immediately rushed out of her room. Although she appeared thin and petite, she was actually quite strong. She grabbed the front of Zhao Bufan's clothes and hollered at the top of her voice, "You damned Hunter Zhao! If it weren't for you today, would our family's Yu Hai be lying on the bed and on the verge of death? I don't care! Our second son got injured because of you, so your Zhao Family should be responsible for the medical fees! Also, if anything happens to Yu Hai, then your Zhao Family will also be responsible for taking care of the widow and orphans of the second branch!"

At the end of the day, Madam Zhang had never cared about Yu Hai's life and death. The only thing that she was ever concerned about was money, money, and money!

"Don't worry, Auntie! Brother Yu Hai have saved me from this misfortune. If it hadn't been for him, I would have died long ago! I, Zhao Bufan, am an honest and dauntless man, who will never act ungrateful and treacherous! I have already killed the bear that injured Brother Yu Hai and sold it in town..."

With a greedy expression on her face, Madam Zhang interrupted Zhao Bufan before he had finished speaking, "Hunter Zhao, please come into the room to talk!"

Disregarding the bear's fur and gallbladder, the bear's paws and meat alone could be sold for quite a large sum in town.

## Chapter 60

In a way, her family's second son had exchanged his life to get this bear, so no matter what, she wasn't going to let the Zhao Family reap all the benefits! As Madam Zhang urgently hurriedly Zhao Bufan into the room, she was also inwardly calculating how much money she could get.

Zhao Bufan gently shook her hands off, strode towards Old Yu, and then unfolded the heavy bag within his hands in front of him.

Madam Zhang was immediately dazzled by the shiny silver. She was so stunned that her droopy triangular eyes were about to pop out. A bag full of silver ingots, which were worth ten taels each, would add up to at least two or three hundred taels!

Madam Zhang was an extremely stingy person, who was unwilling to spend too much money on clothes and food. There was a free laborer like Yu Hai to earn money throughout the day and Madam Zhang had been meticulously saving money for over a decade. However, after deducting the daily expenses and Yu Bo's schooling fees, she had only saved up a little more than one hundred taels over all those years. Yet, a single bear was sold for two or three hundred taels!

"Is this the share that our second son deserved? Oh my, I didn't expect a bear to be so valuable..." Madam Zhang grinned so widely that her old face had turned into a chrysanthemum. Her eyes had narrowed into a slit, while she exposed a mouth full of crooked, yellow teeth.

Zhao Bufan dodged Madam Zhang's hands that were reaching for the bag of money. He handed the bag of money to Old Yu and solemnly said, "Uncle Yu, this two or three hundred taels is all the money that I got from selling the bear, which is also the money that Brother Yu Hai deserves! If it weren't for him, the person lying on the kang bed would be me!"

Old Yu didn't take the money, sighed deeply, and said, "You two are as close as real brothers. I believe that if Dahai was the one in danger today, you would also do the same and rescue him! You guys have always split the earnings from hunting equally, so it shall be the same today!"

"Old man! Our Dahai is still lying on the bed and waiting for the money to save his life! Our second son has risked his life to get this money. Moreover, if Hunter Zhao takes the money, then all the villagers will gossip so much about him!" Seeing that her husband had gave out half of the money with a few words, Madam Zhang got worked up immediately! 'Fifty-fifty? That would be one hundred fifty taels! Most people probably wouldn't have that much money even if they saved up money for over a decade!'

Zhao Bufan, as if he didn't see that Madam Zhang was hopping mad beside him, shoved the bag into Old Yu's arms and said, "Uncle Yu, I only have one request! Brother Dahai had risked his life in exchange for this money, which was something that Auntie had also mentioned earlier. Thus, I hope that at least half of the money will be used for Brother Dahai and his family. This shouldn't be a difficult request!"

"Yes... Of course! The money will be used to treat my second son's injuries. If anything happens to him... then the money will be saved for his children's marriages!" Old Yu was Yu Hai's biological father, so there was still familial affection between them!

Madam Zhang grabbed the money from her husband's hands and held it in her arms happily. She replied in agreement, "Hunter Zhao, you don't have to worry! Yu Hai is our Old Yu's biological son, so how can we treat him badly? See, we have already invited the best doctor in town. A single dose of medication prescribed by him costs more than one tael! I'll go pay for the medicine first. You guys continue talking!"

With three hundred taels in hand, Madam Zhang no longer hesitated to pay five taels for the medical examination and medication. She swiftly settled the bill, and then asked Yu Jiang to send the doctor back to town on his donkey cart.

"Everyone should go home! Dahai needs to rest quietly to recuperate. When he wakes up, I'll let everyone know!" It was inconvenient with so many people in the yard. She must prevent the three hundred taels from falling into the eyes of the greedy! Once money reached Madam Zhang's hands, it was like throwing a meat bun at a dog—it would never return!

In the west room, Madam Liu had already woken up and silently weeping as she stood beside her husband. Xiaolian and Little Shitou, who were accompanying their mother, had also cried until their eyes were red and swollen. Thus, Xiaocao would check on Yu Hai's condition from time to time, while she decocted the medicine on a small mud furnace outside the room.

The sun had set in the west. The Yu Family had missed both the morning and evening meals. Except for the second branch, who had no appetite, everyone else was already starving. With Yu Hai's three hundred taels, Madam Zhang naturally didn't have the face to order the second branch around for the time being. So, she shouted at the east room, "Li Guihua, you lazy woman! Do you know what time it is right now? Quickly go cook dinner! Do you want to starve us to death?"

Madam Li and her son had secretly eaten some snacks inside their room. When she heard the noise, she reluctantly came out of the room and slowly lit the fire to cook. Yu Caidie glanced at the west room with her reddened eyes, and then quietly entered the kitchen to help cook dinner.

This was a sleepless night for the entire second branch in the west room. They all stayed beside Yu Hai for fear that the pillar of their family would suddenly collapse.

At the break of dawn, Yu Hai, whose breathing had originally stabilized, suddenly had a high fever. His pale and bloodless complexion had turned as red as a soldering iron, while his breathing became short and rapid.

Madam Liu's, who hadn't slept the entire night, face was without a trace of blood. There were also dark, heavy bags under her eyes. Her originally thin and weak body appeared even more fragile.

Madam Liu couldn't stop her tears from falling down as she looked at her husband's flushed face. The words that Doctor Sun had said yesterday still lingered beside her ears: 'If he gets an infection or fever, then it will be difficult to save his life!'

"It's so hot! Father has a fever! I'll go ask Grandfather to call for a doctor!" Xiaolian wiped the tears on her cheeks and knocked on the door of the main room. Shortly afterwards, Yu Dashan was woken up and told to go fetch the doctor from town.

Yu Xiaocao, who didn't dare to close her eyes throughout the night, felt lightheaded as she brew the second dose of medication for her father. She added two more drops of the mystic-stone water inside, while she anxiously called for the little divine stone within her heart, [Glutinous Dumpling, Glutinous Dumpling, are you here?]

[How many times have I told you? Stop calling me, this divine stone, 'Glutinous Dumpling'! It's such an insult to my status as a celestial stone!] Little Divine Stone responded lazily.

[Didn't you say that my father will be fine after your being treated by you? Why did he suddenly have a fever again?] Yu Xiaocao asked uneasily.

[It's normal to have a fever! He consumed too much of the mystic-stone water! I have already told you that if a healthy person takes in a high concentration of the mystic-stone water, then they will at most be more energetic and vigorous. But for someone like your father, who have suffered a serious injury, it will be difficult to endure the high concentration of energy within the mystic-stone water at the moment. Hence, he has a fever now!]

The little divine stone answered nonchalantly, but it was inwardly thinking about whether it would get any benefits from it saved its master's father this time. If the shackles locking its powers could loosen up a little, then it might be able to...

"Then will anything happen to my father now?!" With Yu Xiaocao's knowledge, she still understood the meaning of 'too much is as bad as too little'. There would be side effects from taking too much

medication, so would there also be negative consequences from consuming too much mystic-stone water?

Little Divine Stone's train of thoughts were interrupted, so it impatiently replied, [What can happen? At most, he will just sleep for a few more days! I, this divine stone, can guarantee with my character that he will be fine, so what are you still worried about? Stop being so anxious about groundless matters! I need to rest for a certain period of time, so don't bother me!]

With the little divine stone's guarantee, Yu Xiaocao's unsettled heart had finally calmed down. She stared at the medicine that was decocting, at a loss: 'There's also mystic-stone water within this pot of medicine. Should I still feed this medicine to Father?'

Since the little celestial stone had already promised that there was no side effects and he would just sleep for several more days, then... there wasn't any harm in sleeping for a few more days, right? Don't people say that sleeping more would help the recovery of wounds?

By the time Doctor Sun arrived again, Yu Hai's fever was already gone. However, there were still no signs of him waking up.

Doctor Sun carefully examined his condition and checked his wound again, but he was still not optimistic, "If the patient doesn't wake up within two days, I'm afraid that the chances of him waking up in the future will be very slim! Even if he wakes up, I don't think we can keep his leg... However, it's a good sign that his fever has gone down! He will still need to continue to take the medicine. If anything comes up, you can find me in town!"

Several days has already passed after that, but there still wasn't any signs of Yu Hai waking up. Most of the family no longer held any hopes, except for Yu Xiaocao. She was the only one who knew that the condition of her injured father, who had been declared dead by the doctor, wouldn't worsen anymore. Furthermore, he had also been fed mystic-stone water every day, so he could still survive even if he didn't eat or drink anything. Yu Xiaocao firmly believed that as long as he drank a few more bowls of mystic-stone water, her father's injury would gradually be healed sooner or later.

It had been three days since the little celestial stone used up all its powers to treat her father's injury, but it had only recovered its spiritual form.

Look, that little golden ball of light was happily frolicking in the spring water and patted its chest in assurance, [Don't worry. If you hadn't fed him so much of the mystic-stone water, he would have woken up long ago.]

When the little divine stone heard from Xiaocao that the doctor told them that her father's leg needed to be severed, it replied in disdain, [Don't listen to that quack. This divine stone will be merciful and use a little more of my spiritual power. In a month, your father will definitely be able to walk with that leg of his. But... he did hurt the tendons and bones in his legs, so he might walk with a limp in the future.]

Even if he walked with a limp, it was fine as long as he was alright! Over the past few days, Yu Xiaocao had come to a clear understanding that her father was the main pillar of their second branch. If he collapsed, then the entire second branch would also fall apart.

Madam Zhang, who had been silent for a couple days, also didn't have any hopes for Yu Hai's recovery. She began to shout again, "What time is it? No one is feeding the pigs, nor is there anyone gathering firewood. Are we still going to get on with life? If you're not going to work, then get the hell out! Our family doesn't accept any slackers!"

Madam Liu, who always remained in a state of anxiety these days, would hastily get up from the kang bed whenever she heard Madam Zhang's screams. The continuous days of worry and hard work had caused Madam Liu's complexion to be even more pallid than Yu Hai, who was lying on the bed.

Seeing this, Yu Xiaocao hastily said, "Xiaolian and I can take care of the household chores. Mother, you should lie down and rest some more! Don't worry, it's already the best news that Father's condition hasn't worsened. Father wouldn't bear to part with such a virtuous wife and such intelligent children like us. My father is an upright and fearless man, so he will definitely be able to get through this obstacle! Mother, you should have confidence in Father!"

"Little girl! Who praise themselves like you?" Madam Liu's anxious heart had somewhat settled as she pretended to glare at the little lass. Although there were endless work and scolding in this family, her husband was genuinely good to her. As long as her husband could safely survive this misfortune, she wouldn't complain even if she encountered any hardships.

Madam Liu bowed her head and silently looked at Yu Hai. After so many years, it was her first time looking at him so carefully. For the five days that he had been unconscious, he looked really serene, as if he had fallen asleep. It was as if he would suddenly open his eyes at the next moment, smile at her foolishly, and then call out her maiden name—Muyun.



Hopefully, as Xiaocao had said, he could survive this hurdle...