

Gold Chapter 81

Chapter 81 - Secret Recipe

Right after Madam Li threw the pig head away in a panic, she suddenly felt a long thing fall on her shoulders . Her head and chest had also been hit by something soft . Immediately a horrendous stench arose, like the smell of a pig sty that hadn't been cleaned up, and the scent assaulted her nostrils .

When she could finally clearly see what was on her, she acted as if she had stepped on a bunch of hot coals . She jumped in fright and screamed as if she was a pig at slaughter . Words just blabbered out of her mouth in an unending stream, and she felt like something had exploded near her ears as she continuously retreated .

“You need to die, need to die! I am your eldest paternal aunt, yet you dare to pelt me with such disgusting things! Do you no longer believe in the young respecting the old? If you can treat me this way, then the next time you will treat your grandmother this way!! I want the entire village to know how Madam Liu has taught her kids!!”

Madam Li lowered her head to look at her clothes that were made dirty . The acrid smell of pig feces on her body repeatedly assaulted her nose and made her stomach roll in nausea . She almost fainted at this moment .

Xiaocao smiled sweetly at her, “Eldest Aunt, how did I not show you proper respect? You said you wanted to see what was in our basket, and I was afraid that your eyes weren't so good due to your age, so I especially ‘delivered’ the things in front of you to let you see them more clearly . Now that you see what they are, are you still going to say that Grandfather is secretly giving us money on the sly?”

Without waiting for Madam Li to reply, Xiaocao continued after increasing the volume of her voice, “Eldest Aunt! There was one thing you said correctly, our family really doesn't have much at home! Today I brought my younger brother to the docks because I wanted to see the markets over there . I wanted to find out if I could pick up any vegetables on the ground that other people didn't want or other food like that . Uncle Wang, who's the butcher in town, saw that we were pitiful and gave a pig head to us . As for the pig tripe and pig intestines, Little Shitou and I picked them up from the ground to see if we can eat them after washing them clean . As long as we don't die from eating them, does it matter if it smells a little? It's still better than starving to death . Our family is already at this point in our lives, so why would Eldest Aunt claim that our grandfather is subsidizing us? Do you really want our whole family to die? If my whole family dies of starvation or from freezing to death, will that make you happy?”

After tasting the steamed stuffed buns that Xiaocao had sent her family earlier, Madam Mao's opinion of Xiaocao and her whole family was quite good . At the side, she idly commented, "This is the first time that I've heard of an older sister-in-law forcing her younger brother-in-law's entire family to die in the entire Dongshan Village! Madam Li, if you really want to do this, you'll be famous all around the area! Tsk, tsk, tsk...just look, the children are so hungry that they're willing to scavenge something so disgusting and smelly to try to eat!" The expression on Madam Li's face changed instantly . Her son was only two years away from talking about marriage and finding a wife . If word came out that she had forced her younger brother-in-law's family to death, who would let their daughter marry her son?

Madam Li's mouth opened and closed a few times as if she wanted to say something . The usually gentle and easily persuadable Madam Fang glared at her as if she was her worst enemy . Madam Fang tenderly drew Little Shitou into her arms and wiped the tears in her eyes, and said, "Poor children, you guys can't eat those things . Quickly throw them away . If there's really nothing at home to eat, then I'll lend you guys a few catties of grain to eat . "

Yu Hai felt a pang in his heart and a complicated look crossed his face . He lifted up his head and let the tears in his eyes slowly disappear . He glanced at Madam Li and said, "Eldest Sister-in-law, I can make an oath to the heavens that I have never asked my parents to give me money . Father also has never subsidized us on the sly! When we split our families, I had made it clear, no matter how poor we became or how difficult our lives were, even if we had to beg for food, we would never ask a single thing from the rest of the family! You have seen what is in the basket, if there's nothing else, please go back home!!"

Madam Li had made a fuss for nothing, so she flung her handkerchief down on the ground and left the place covered from head to toe in grime . She needed to find the village idiot's wife to settle the score for giving her bad information .

There was no such thing as a secret in a small fishing village . Before long, word that Yu Hai and his family were desperate enough to gather food that was as smelly as pig poop travelled throughout Dongshan Village .

Yu Hai's eldest uncle, Yu Lichun, went over to the Yu Family's main residence in a towering rage . He screamed and shouted at Old Yu in fury, "This wife is a stepmother, so does that mean you've also become a fake father too? Dahai is your own blood and flesh . Do you guys want Dahai's whole family to forfeit their lives? If that's so, then you are no longer my younger brother!!"

With a dark expression on his face, Old Yu called Madam Li over to scold her profusely . He then told his youngest daughter to bring around ten catties of millet and ten catties of sweet potato starch to his second son's family .

Naturally, Yu Hai didn't take any of it . He had already said that he was not going to take even one iota from the Yu Family, and they weren't desperate without anywhere to go . Thus, in order to avoid anyone calling them hypocrites, even when Old Yu personally came over to discuss the matter, he maintained his current stance on the matter .

After Yu Xiaocao used the pig head and extremely smelly offal to frighten Madam Li into leaving, she immediately started to work on cleaning and preparing the ingredients . It was time to make more braised food .

"Uh...Xiaocao, are you sure that you can use this stuff to make food? Don't waste your time and seasonings if it's not going to work!" Madam Fang reminded her warmly . The rest of the members of the Yu family had long gotten used to her ability to turn trash into treasure, so they didn't say anything .

Madam Mao had actually brought over a small portion of sweet potato starch and some wild herbs that she had dug up today and said, "Quickly stop trying to prepare those things . Listen to your auntie and throw them away, ok? In the future, if there's nothing to eat at home, just go to my place and borrow some . Once the sweet potatoes are harvested, you can return what you ate! Who doesn't have a difficult time now and then? Throw it away, throw it away!" As she talked, Madam Mao enthusiastically pulled the tripe from Xiaocao's hands and turned to head out of the room to throw it away .

Xiaocao started sweating in anxiety! This was the money-making method that she had wracked her brains for . If they threw away her ingredients, then how could she sell more of her braised foods for a copper coin a portion tomorrow? She had promised people at the docks!

Seeing that his second daughter was almost bouncing in anxiety, Yu Hai hastily limped forward and took the pig offal from Madam Mao and smiled, "Neighbor, our family hasn't gotten to the point where we will starve to death . Thank you for your good intentions . Xiaocao has use for this pig tripe as she heard from someone that there's a remedy that can be used on my leg with these..."

Madam Mao glanced at his leg, suddenly realized something, and said, "Ah! So it was supposed to be used for the leg eh...no wonder! If it really could fix your leg, then it doesn't matter how stinky it is, you just have to endure it! Okay, I'll bring the sweet potato starch back home, but you guys can keep the

wild herbs so you can make a soup tonight . Xiaocao, if you want to gather more wild herbs tomorrow, find me, I know a spot where there's a lot of shepherd's purse around!"

Xiaocao promised the outwardly cold, inwardly warmhearted Madam Mao as she sent her off . Madam Fang still stayed behind to say, "Xiaocao, your mother's not home right now . Let me help you prepare these things!"

When Xiaocao saw that there was no way she could persuade the older woman otherwise, she washed out the contents of the offal and cut them into sections . She instructed Madam Fang to turn them inside out and use coarse salt to scrub thoroughly . This helped to remove any lingering odors and excess fat . Madam Fang didn't act as if she thought it was disgusting and rolled up her sleeves and got busy .

Yu Xiaocao then taught Xiaolian how to prepare and clean the pig tripe . She herself prepped the pig's head . The first step was to let the pig head steep in clean water for some time, scrub off any dirt on the outside, and remove hairs until it was completely clean . Next, it had to be boiled in a pot for about fifteen minutes and inspected to see if there was any hair left on the head . At this point, a rough brush was used to energetically scrub the whole surface until it was absolutely clean .

Yu Hai had actually volunteered to take on the task of scrubbing the pig's head . Before he had injured his leg, all of the villagers would ask him to help whenever they were slaughtering a pig . The reason was two-fold . On one hand, he was strong and had a lot of strength . On the other hand, he had learned how to slaughter pigs on his own and really knew how to deal with the hair on the animal . When Yu Xiaocao saw that he was as good as she was, she was able to give him the task with relief .

After making sure the pig head was clean, it was time to cleave it open and take out the innards . This work was naturally also given to Yu Hai . On the side, Xiaocao pointed out where he needed to cut and clean out any junk, such as the ears, the corners of the eyes, the lymph nodes, and nasal polyps . Then, the brain was taken out and placed carefully in a bowl to be used later that night . It could be used to make a stew for the whole family to eat!

Yu Hai removed the bones from the pig head in a practiced motion and split them into five to six pieces . The bone pieces were then put into cold water and washed carefully to remove any debris and bloodstains . This would prevent any odd tastes from seeping into the braised pig head dish, which could ruin an entire pot .

After that, Yu Xiaocao took over . She took the cleaned pig head and put it into boiling water . After blanching it for about twenty minutes, she took it out again and washed it clean . Then she took the blanched pig meat and placed it into a new pot with clean water along with the bones from the head . The combination was boiled, and she skimmed off any foam that appeared until it was about half cooked . Then, she put the meat in the braising sauce she had simmered yesterday and let it slowly stew until the meat was tender and soft . In addition, the meat was also put into the master sauce to allow it to incorporate some more flavors .

As the pig head meat slowly stewed, a rich smell of meat gradually spread from the courtyard out into the open . Even the Qian Family home, which was about two hundred meters away, had been enveloped in the savory scent of braised pig heat . Qian Wu was in the courtyard cleaning rods when he deeply inhaled the smell . He managed to swallow down his saliva with difficulty and said, “Smells so good! Mother, did you smell it too? It’s not the New Years, nor is it a holiday, which family is cooking meat right now?”

Madam Mao had also smelled it and thought about the neighbors in the area . Other than Hunter Zhao’s family at the foot of the mountain, who often ate meat because he was skilled at hunting, there was only Madam Fang’s family, who she didn’t get along with, that could possibly be the source of the smell . Could it be that Madam Fang had a guest come over and they slaughtered a chicken for them? But that seemed wrong . It didn’t smell like the aroma of chicken meat . As for Xiaocao’s family, Madam Mao completely skipped over them . They were so poor that they usually couldn’t eat enough, how could they possibly have any extra money to buy meat?

“You glutton! The next time your older brother comes back for his break, I’ll buy some meat and stew some for you two to eat! Where are you going? Be more obedient and don’t make your mother lose face by going to the Zhou Family!” Hunter Zhao lived a bit farther from them, so it was quite unlikely that the scent of their cooking would waft to here . Thus, there was only one family where the smells could come from .

Actually, there wasn’t any truly large conflicts between Madam Mao and the Zhou Family . It was simply that one family raised ducks while the other raised chickens, and the Qian Family’s ducks and duck eggs were not as popular as the Zhou Family’s chickens . In addition, the head of the Zhou Family liked to peddle goods during the farming off-season and made a lot of money from that . Madam Mao felt it was a bit unfair, and she never learned how to mince her words . After a few encounters, the relationship between the two families slowly cooled and drifted apart .

Qian Wu threw down the stick that was in his hand, dashed out of the gate, and said, “I’m not going to Older Brother Wenhua’s home, I want to find Little Shitou to play!”

When Qian Wu arrived at the gates of the Yu Family's residence, he discovered that the smell of meat was stronger here . Even the red braised pork that his mother made during the New Years didn't smell as mouth-watering and tantalizing as this . He deeply breathed in the air through his nose and set foot into the courtyard .

"Little Shitou, can you smell this? It smells so good!!" Qian Wu shouted as soon as he entered the residence .

Little Shitou bolted out of the kitchen and grinned, "Older brother Xiaowu, you have a good nose! The pig head meat has just finished braising and you ran over . Come here, come here, come here! My second sister will cut a piece of piping hot braised pig head meat and let you satisfy your craving!"

"Wow! So the smell of meat was actually coming from your family ah!! What's going on today for your family to make meat to eat?" Qian Wu almost let some drool slip out of his mouth and onto his jacket . He used the back of his hand to wipe his mouth but his feet didn't move at all .

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Although he was gluttonous, he also knew that Shitou's family didn't have an easy life. Meat was expensive and if they felt it was too precious to eat, what would it mean if he butted into this?

However, Little Shitou grabbed his hand and pulled him into the kitchen enthusiastically. The little boy pointed a finger at the piping hot braised pig head meat that had just gotten out of the pot and smiled, "Arriving early can't beat coming at the right time! Come, try a little of my second sister's talents..."

In actuality, Little Shitou was being devious. He wanted Qian Wu to be the first guinea pig. After all, whenever he thought about the way the pig head looked before it was braised, he felt a little scared to try.

The braised pig head meat was rosy red and had an enchanting smell. The meat looked tender and tasty, fatty without being greasy, and had all the qualities needed to evoke a sense of hunger and yearning from any customer.

Xiaocao seemed to have seen through Little Shitou's plan and smiled knowingly at him. She cut off a small piece of pig head meat from the corner and stuffed it into Qian Wu's mouth before he could say anything.

As soon as it hit his mouth, an explosion of savory flavor and richness occurred. It was so delicious that Qian Wu almost cried tears of joy. It was too delicious!! He had never, in his entire life, eaten meat that was as delicious as this!! Xiaocao's cooking talent had to be better than his mother's abilities by at least a hundred times. It would have been perfect if she was his younger sister. Then he could frequently taste the fruits of her talent.

Little Shitou stared intently at the multitude of expressions that crossed Qian Wu's face and eagerly asked, "How is it? Does it taste good? Does it have any odd flavors?"

Qian Wu forcefully grabbed onto Little Shitou's hand, holding back tears of happiness in his eyes, and replied with complete earnesty, "Shitou, the two of us should switch lives! You can be my mother's son. Didn't you always want to have a little sister, right? I have a little sister just waiting for you at home! I, on the other hand, will go to your family and be Xiaocao's younger brother..."

A couple of imaginary black lines appeared above Xiaocao's head. 'Hey, hey! First of all, Qian Yafang is older than Little Shitou, and thus, she couldn't be his 'younger sister'. Furthermore, Xiaowu, you brat, you're also older than me, the honorable Xiaocao, by a year, ok? How is it possible that you have the nerve to say such shameless things?'

Madam Fang had been helping them prepare the pig intestines and as she was bringing the basin into the kitchen, she heard Qian Wu's childish suggestion and couldn't help but 'pfffft' and laugh, "Wuzi, if your mother heard that you wanted to sell your younger sister and leave home for the sake of eating food, she'd probably beat you until your leg broke!!"

"Xiaocao's cooking is seriously too good. In this lifetime...no, in my previous lifetime and the lifetime before that, I swear I have never eaten meat that has tasted as good as it did today. Shitou, what did you say it was? Is it called braised pig head meat? Does it use the meat from a pig's head? That can't be right, right?? A pig's head is such a disgusting looking thing, how could it possibly be made into something so tasty?" Qian Wu shook his head until it resembled a rattle. He clearly didn't want to believe that the meat he ate came from a pig's head.

When Little Shitou saw Qian Wu's reaction to the meat, he hastily cut off a piece and stuffed it into his mouth. He had believed that the braised blood tofu and braised chicken offal he had eaten yesterday were the tastiest dishes on earth. Who would have thought that the pig head, which everyone avoided like the plague, could be braised into a dish that was even more delicious than braised chicken offal?

After being braised, the meat from a pig's head had the perfect ratio between fatty meat and lean meat. When eaten, the taste of pig's fat and seasonings melded together into an explosion of flavor. The savory taste seemed to permeate into all corners of the mouth and made people feel so happy that they could have almost died.

Seeing their expressions, Xiaocao picked a piece that didn't look very pretty and cut it into enough pieces to fill a plate. She let everyone taste a small bit and also used a pair of chopsticks to try her own handiwork. She placed a small piece into her mouth and carefully chewed it. Mhm, the taste was good and seemed to be authentic. In her previous life, she had almost gotten sick of eaten braised food since that was all she made in her store, but she had never gotten tired of eaten braised pig head meat. Because of that, she had gained a decent amount of weight from it.

In the beginning, Madam Fang was too scared to give it a try. However, after seeing how everyone was enjoying the food with immense pleasure, she picked up the smallest piece of meat with a pair of chopsticks and placed it in her mouth. Immediately, her eyes begin to shine with amazement. The taste of this meat, ah, was more flavorful and delicious than her best dish, stewed pork shoulder. Wherever Xiaocao learned this dish from, it was truly awesome!

"Xiaocao, Xiaocao! How did you make this braised pig head meat? I want my mother to learn from you, is that ok?" Qian Wu ate the meat deliciously as the flavor and oils from the meat filled his mouth. He ate the pig head meat in large bites and didn't forget to sing his praises and talk.

Little Shitou's eyes immediately became wide, and he said, "Second Sister's culinary skills have all come from the gods in her dreams. She can't tell other people! If the god blames her for spreading his secrets and decides to take her abilities away, then you will never be able to eat something as delicious as this again, even if you wanted to!"

Madam Fang thought that was just something that the children made up. She reckoned that Xiaocao had learned a secret recipe from someone and was told not to make it public. Thus, she decided not to ask to be taught as well.

However, Qian Wu had completely believed what Little Shitou told him. Just think about it, in the past, Xiaocao had a very weak body and it was considered a good day when she could get out of bed. How was it possible that she could be able to learn cooking from someone? Also, no outsiders had gone through the village recently. If a god hadn't taught her, then where would she get these skills? After thinking about it, Qian Wu nodded his head furiously and said, "I won't let my mother come here to learn then...Xiaocao, in the future, whenever you make some new type of food, please don't forget to

save a portion for me ah...I won't be a freeloader either, I can help you gather wild plants, steal eggs from wild birds, and when it gets warm again, I can also dig up some clams..."

"It's a deal! When there's something good to eat, I'll have Little Shitou grab you then!" Xiaocao didn't add any more pieces of the pig head meat to the depleted plate. After all, the braised meat was supposed to be sold tomorrow at the docks.

After making sure that the braised pig head meat had been done correctly, Xiaocao started to braise the intestines and tripe. Braised intestines had a delicious taste, tender and soft texture, savory and rich flavor, and had a really good mouthfeel. Braised pig tripe had a sweeter taste, a silky texture without being mushy, and was chewy. Both of these were very delicious and tasty types of braised dishes.

After all of the braised dishes were finished, the whole family all thought that each type had its own characteristics but they were all considered to be very delicious. When Madam Fang was about to leave, Xiaocao made sure to put some braised pig head, intestines, and tripe all together on one plate to let her bring some back home.

Madam Fang knew that the purpose of making all of this food was to sell it at the docks, so she stubbornly refused. However, Xiaocao told her that the ingredients were all bought by the money she had made from selling the chicken offal. If Madam Fang didn't want the meat, Xiaocao said that she would give her money instead. It was only after hearing that did Madam Fang take the plate of food back home.

That night, after Zhou Dacang and his son came back from peddling goods all day, the two of them almost ate the entire plate of braised foods. They praised it endlessly and even wished that there was more for them to eat. They repeatedly told Madam Fang, 'such a delicious set of meat dishes, in the future, you should buy more to eat at home.'

Madam Fang laughed but didn't let out Xiaocao's secret. The village wasn't very big. If Madam Li and Madam Zhang found out Xiaocao's culinary talents, the two of them would definitely come over to make trouble. Neither of them would ever tolerate the second branch of the family doing well!

The next day, Xiaocao and her brother brought the extremely heavy basket to the docks. When they got there, Foreman Sun, who was directing the flow of workers transporting cargo and goods, spotted them immediately with his eagle eyes. He shouted in a loud voice at the dock workers, "Brothers, work hard! After you guys are done transporting the goods on this boat, you all can rest and eat breakfast!! The

brother and sister pair who were selling a portion of a meat dish for one copper coin yesterday are here again!!"

The workers who had tried the braised chicken offal yesterday all felt their spirits rise and their enthusiasm for work increased significantly. In addition, the men who were unable to get a taste of the braised foods yesterday also became more energetic. They wanted to finish transporting the cargo before the other men in order to queue for the food and try the meat that their fellow workers had been praising without end.

The owner of the cargo ship had been shipping goods for decades but he had never seen dock workers work so quickly before. He felt puzzled inside and curiously asked what this 'one copper coin for a portion of meat' was.

Foreman Sun was an old acquaintance of this cargo ship master. He knew that if this cargo ship owner put in a good word for him for the merchant who sold the goods, it would help his business a ton.

He quickly invited the owner of the ship to eat at the only shack in the area that sold stir-fried dishes and had Erzi call the two siblings over and said, "Little girl, can you give me ten portions of the braised meat from yesterday, and also give me two copper coins worth of blood tofu..."

"I'm sorry, Foreman Sun! I brought over a different type of braised food, and I don't have any blood tofu today." Foreman Sun felt very disappointed when he heard Xiaocao's reply. He had been counting on this delicious yet cheap braised food to give him some face and reputation!

The owner of the cargo ship was a bit unsatisfied that Foreman Sun had invited him to eat at such a crude and lowly place. He thought a bit and decided that next time he should recommend Old Six to take the job of unloading the goods...

However, at this point, he heard a young child cheerfully reply, "Foreman Uncle, today's braised foods are even better than yesterday's! I have some crispy slices of pig ear, tender and fatty pig lips, delicious and savory pig offal, and the chewy and fragrant pig tripe...I guarantee you won't regret trying these after one bite!"

When the master of the cargo ship saw Little Shitou, who seemed to be almost the same age as his youngest grandson, he naturally started to miss his youngest and most beloved grandson. Although

Little Shitou was dressed entirely in patched and ragged looking clothes, his face was washed completely clean and he had an incandescent and sweet smile on his face. The shipowner, who spent most of his time on the sea shipping cargo, looked at Little Shitou and smiled, "Little fellow, you have quite a nimble mouth! After hearing you advertise your wares, the gluttonous monster in me is suddenly quite interested!"

Foreman Sun felt vindicated and interjected strategically, "Little girl, give us two portions of everything your younger brother recommended! If we like what we eat, we will also give you an additional reward." The braised foods that Xiaocao brought over this time had been packed together in small portion sizes again. Other than that, she had also packed a few individual packets in anticipation of any special requests from those who ate the food and only liked one of the types.

"Okay!" Xiaocao agreed in a ringing voice.

One by one, the braised dishes were set out. First was the pig ear ribbons that were tossed in a mix of scallions, garlic, and chili oil. The dish had a beautiful scarlet color that raised the appetite. In addition, the pig ear meat glistened under the light and was delicious looking. Then there was the pig offal that had a rich, fatty taste without being greasy. Last, there was the pig tripe that had been sliced into thin sheets and seemed savory and delicious. Xiaocao had especially borrowed a couple of plates from the stall's owner and carefully arranged the food. Although there wasn't a large portion of food, the smell and appearance of the dishes immediately gave people an appetite.

The owner of the ship had grown up in a rural area by the water, and was the type of man who loved to drink alcohol and eat meat. After traveling extensively all these years, this was the first time he had eaten something that was as delicious and as inexpensive as these meat dishes. As he ate from the food, he felt as if he had entered heaven. Before long, over half of the food had been polished off by the old man.

On the side, Foreman Sun continued to toast with wine but he only ate from the stir-fried vegetable dishes. He didn't forget to look at Xiaocao in the eye meaningfully to hint—don't forget to leave me a portion, ok...

"Boss, there's another boat that's about to reach the shore. We should head over quickly and not let Old Six take away the business from us..." Erzi shouted loudly as he ran over, panting heavily.

The master of the cargo ship also knew that the goods on his ship would be completely unloaded very soon. He looked at Foreman Sun and said, "Go and do your work, ok? No need to attend to me anymore! Don't worry, in the future when I have business, I'll make sure to take care of you..."

After receiving his desired result, Foreman Sun contently jogged towards the docks by the sea. Wherever there were people, there would be vagrants. Similarly, wherever there was business, there would be competition. Since Tangu's docks were flourishing and busy, it was natural that there wasn't only one team of dock workers that worked to unload cargo.

Chapter 83 – Famous Scholar

On the docks, there were at least ten teams who worked on loading or unloading cargo from the ships. The largest groups were run by Foreman Sun and Old Six. At their largest, there were at least a hundred or so dock workers working under these two foremen, and they could load or unload five to six ships at the same time. Thus, the biggest customers were monopolized by these two men.

Naturally, these two men regarded each other as their competitor. Their struggle wasn't out in the open, but behind the scenes, the two of them fought over business. Foreman Sun had consecutively acquired the business of two big clients over the past two days with the help of a little girl's food. He was as happy as a clam and started to ponder whether he should carefully bring this little girl onto his side.

The dock workers worked like mad men. Originally it would have taken them around an hour and a half to finish unloading the ship they were working on. However, today they had managed to finish it in less than an hour. The owner of the cargo was amazed and thought that this team of workers were more efficient than the others. Due to that, the man decided to ask for this team the next time he needed his goods to be loaded or unloaded. Inadvertently, Xiaocao had helped Foreman Sun retain another customer.

"Xiaocao, give me two portions of your meat dish today. Yesterday evening, I had brought some of your braised food home to the family, and my two children really loved eating it. My wife even complained, asking me why I didn't buy more of this inexpensive braised food and bring it home!" Her first customer from yesterday, Old Hao, had rushed over to greet her today. His whole body was dripping with sweat but he couldn't be bothered to wipe it off.

"Okay! Two portions of braised food, Shitou, take his money!" Xiaocao had noticed that there was a sea of people running towards her behind Old Hao and quickly gave her little brother some work to do.

“Okay! Uncle Old Hao, two portions will be two copper coins!” Little Shitou stretched out his hand and grinned until his large eyes formed into crescent shapes. He looked like the prime example of an auspicious little boy who brings good fortune.

Old Hao happily paid the money and took the two oil paper packets from them. He then went to buy two steamed rolls and put the braised food between the rolls, eating them in large bites. When he opened the packets, he found out that the braised food today was different from yesterday's packets. In fact, the food from today tasted even better and more delicious than yesterday's. A hint of regret ran through him, he should have bought an additional portion earlier...

He looked back to see where the two siblings were selling their braised food. At this point, the small statures of the two children had long been dwarfed by the sea of people around them. If he tried to squeeze in right now, it was unlikely that he'd be able to buy more. Old Hao sighed and started to slowly take small amounts of the braised food to eat, as if he was afraid that he would miss out on savoring the flavor if he ate too quickly...

“Xiaocao, I want a portion...”

“Shitou, Shitou! Take my money first, haha...make sure you hold onto those two copper coins!”

“I want three portions, make sure to leave me three! You guys are all animals, don't take it all away, I didn't get to try any yesterday...”

“I just paid, give me a portion...hey!! Huzi, why are you pushing so hard? You almost pushed the little girl onto the ground!”

Little Shitou's hand started to ache from all of the money he had to take. He felt like there were countless hands just pushing copper coins to him. Afterwards, he couldn't even tell exactly who gave him money. He frowned and puffed up his face due to his inward distress.

Luckily, the vast majority of the dock workers knew the ways of the world, and none of them cared too much about one or two copper coins. Thus, no one made any trouble for the two of them.

Fortunately, they had prepared more braised food today than yesterday. After the workers all finished their rush to buy, they still had around ten portions of braised food left in the basket. Because they had some manufacturing problems, the portion size of one packet was slightly smaller than yesterday's. However, it was still enough to fill about half the volume of a small bowl and was definitely enough for one person to eat with their steamed buns.

The passenger ship had already reached the store. After all, this area was close to the town and markets. The passengers who disembarked from the ship looked around with curiosity at the bustling scene around them.

“Eh? There's a lot of people surrounding that area, what's going on over there? Ah, Yunxi, go over and check out the situation...”

The person who spoke was an old man with a head full of white hair and a hale, ruddy complexion. He had a full mustache and beard, and his eyes seemed to shine with wisdom. Every move he made was imbued with an elegance that seemed to attest to his scholarly position. However, at this moment, the old man seemed to have a hankering for gossip, which was a bit at odds with his outward appearance.

The person whom he called by the name 'Yunxi' was a young boy around ten years old. He wore a long, white colored robe with a light blue lined jacket over it. His small face was delicately pretty and at first glance could be taken as male or female. His good-looking lips were pursed into a straight line, as if he felt helpless regarding his grandfather's penchant for gossip.

Although he personally had no desire to squeeze into a bunch of rough workers to find out what was going on, he understood his grandfather's personality quite well. If he didn't find out, his grandfather would not give up until he got all of the details. The ten year old youth strolled steadily at a speed that was neither fast nor slow towards the crowd of people.

“Teacher Yuan! You must be tired after travelling so far. There's a horse-drawn carriage over there, please come this way...” A man came over who was dressed from head to toe in ornate and expensive clothing, as if he wanted to make sure everyone around him knew he had money.

Yuan Sinian was a famous scholar from the previous dynasty. In fact, the last emperor of the Yuan Dynasty esteemed him for his scholarly achievements and had invited him several times to come to the imperial palace to teach the imperial princes. However, these offers had all been politely declined with the excuse of poor health. Later on, when the country fell into turmoil and the future was uncertain, he had brought his family to live in seclusion deep in the mountains and had lived in hiding for a few years.

After the Great Ming Dynasty was established, the current emperor emeritus had admired his capabilities and had asked him time and time again to leave his mountain and become an official. However, the old man had refused and could not be easily found. Afterwards, he was moved by the emperor emeritus's persistence and sincerity, and so, he recommended his knowledgeable and experienced son, who was in no way inferior to him, Yuan Guoan. He would later become the person who would always clean up the emperor emeritus's messes from behind, the man who was only under one but above ten thousand, the upright and meritorious prime minister.

When the Great Ming Dynasty was first established, the emperor emeritus, who was still emperor at that time, was obsessed with making war on all borders. If he didn't have the illustrious prime minister as his left hand and the unshakeable imperial tutor as his right hand, it was likely that the Great Ming Dynasty would have fallen apart!

After the current emperor ascended to the throne, Prime Minister Yuan was given the title of a duke with unlimited succession rights. In an instant, he had become the most favored official in the court and had no opposition.

On the other hand, the famous scholar, Yuan Sinian, had just reached the age of seventy, but had long gotten used to his current leisurely life. In the small town of Tanggu, he had established the Rongxuan Academy. At first, he would teach classes every day, take care of his garden, and had a comfortable and leisurely life.

Later on, as word got around about the quality of his teachings, more and more students enrolled. Many high ranking officials from the capital did every possible method they could to use their connections to let their children enter the school. As the academy's student population grew larger and larger, the operations became larger and larger. Furthermore, a lot of famous scholars recommended themselves to the academy to become teachers, among them included his former disciples...

When Great Scholar Yuan noticed that Rongxuan Academy had almost veered from his original vision, he set down a series of stringent requirements for admission. If you wanted to enter the academy, it was possible! However, you either had to pass a series of difficult admission exams or catch his eyes with your talents and potential. Otherwise, it didn't matter what position you had, or how much money you had, this old fellow would still not allow admission...

Although Yuan Sinian was outwardly in appearance the perfect example of a famous scholar, in his bones he was actually a mischievous old urchin. He had an insatiable curiosity and loved to keep up with

gossip. In addition, he loved to eat good food—few people knew about this aspect of him. Otherwise, the parents who wanted their kids to enter the academy would search high and low for delicacies to tempt him. It would truly become chaotic!

Parents who would think of any possible method to fawn on Great Scholar Yuan for the sake of their children's futures could be found everywhere. For example, the fat man dressed in glittering gold at the docks was one of them.

Great Scholar Yuan frowned and secretly rolled his eyes. He coldly snorted and said, “Didn't I say that I didn't need anyone to meet me at docks, eh? Shopkeeper Jin, you are publicly going against my wishes right now!”

Inside he was roasting the man, 'You dummy, how about you use gold to build a suit of armor for yourself? This old man's eyes aren't very good, do you want to blind me with all of the gold on your body?'

The round and plump Shopkeeper Jin's attempt at flattery had gone awry. Immediately, sweat started to roll down his fat and pudgy cheeks. For the past six generations, the Jin Family had all been merchants. Although they had a lot of wealth and material goods, they were still considered within the lowest classes of citizens in the four classes—scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants.

After the current emperor ascended to the throne, he had issued an ordinance that improved the status of merchants in society. The children of merchants could also participate in the imperial examinations. Shopkeeper Jin was overjoyed at the unexpected good news and wanted to hire the best tutor for his son, who had been clever and intelligent since childhood, so he could break away from a merchant's fate.

He had heard that Tanggu Town had Rongxuan Academy, which had been established by a Great Scholar from the previous dynasty who was wise and knowledgeable and conversant in things of the past and present. In addition, the current dynasty's prime minister had been raised and educated entirely by the founder. Shopkeeper Jin had brought his son on a long journey to get to Tanggu Town. To his delight, his son had passed the academy's entrance examination in one try and had formally become a student at the academy.

However, something bad quickly happened. Shopkeeper Jin felt his son had it difficult having to live so far away from home to go to school. In addition, he was afraid his son would feel wronged since this was the first time his son had ever left home. So, he had redone his son's dormitory room at school to be full

of luxurious materials and furniture. Everything had been switched to the best that money could possibly buy, even the ink stones and pens were expensive antiques. In the academy, there were very few who had seen such items.

When Teacher Yuan, who had a moody personality, found out about all of this, he sent Shopkeeper Jin's son out with a remark, "The academy is a place for learning and studying, not a place to take a vacation at. If you're afraid your son can't bear any hardships, then bring him back home to live comfortably instead!"

Shopkeeper Jin was stunned silly. He was counting on his son to bring honor and glory to the family, but who knew after entering the academy for a few days, his prospects had been ruined by his own mistake! His son had been so angry that he didn't eat and drink for a few days in a row and only laid in his bed. Shopkeeper Jin was so remorseful over his mistake that half of his head had turned white overnight. In order to not be the cause of his son's ruin, Shopkeeper Jin every day without fail would go and see what he could do to remedy his mistake.

However, there were very few opportunities to see Teacher Yuan. Before a few days had passed, the academy had closed for the yearly holiday. Teacher Yuan had brought his grandson back home to visit family. However, Shopkeeper Jin was unwilling to give up, and didn't even go home to celebrate the New Years with his family. He stayed at Tanggu Town in hope that he could find an opportunity to redeem himself.

For the whole first month, he stayed at the docks of Tanggu Town, waiting and hoping that Teacher Yuan would be able to see his sincerity and give his son another chance. Finally, he had an opportunity. However, he never would have thought...he apparently had made the scholar unhappy again.

Shopkeeper Jin was so anxious that he wanted to hop around in frustration, but he didn't know what he could do to remedy the situation. As he was worrying himself sick at the side, Teacher Yuan's grandson, Yuan Yunxi, slowly came back and spoke to his gossipy grandfather, "It's nothing really, just someone selling something called 'braised food'..."

"Braised food? It's a type of dish? I've never heard of it, does it taste good? There are so many people waiting to buy some, the flavor must be good!" Yuan Sinian's eyes suddenly glowed in excitement when he heard there was a new type of food to be tried. It instantly destroyed his elegant and scholarly temperament and showed him as a crazy and fanatical glutton.

Shopkeeper Jin, who was in the midst of worrying about how to get Great Scholar Yuan to like him, hastily interjected, "Teacher Yuan, please find a place to sit and rest for a bit, I'll go see what's going on..."

His exceedingly fat body, which looked like a gold colored ball, bolted quickly towards Xiaocao's side. He said, "Little girl, the braised food that you're selling right now, I'll take all that's left..."

Chapter 84

At this moment, Xiaocao only had a few individual packets of braised dishes left in her basket, and she had previously promised Foreman Sun that she was going to leave one pack for him. Thus, she only had a portion of pig ear ribbons, a portion of pig lips, and two portions of pig intestines.

"Okay! That will be four copper coins!" Xiaocao swiftly used a piece of oiled paper and packaged all of the braised foods together. Little Shitou stretched out his hand to receive the money.

Shopkeeper Jin was stunned for a moment. Four copper coins? He had invited Great Scholar Yuan to eat food that cost four copper coins? Wasn't that a little too shameful? This was not showing the proper respect to Great Scholar Yuan! What should he do? Teacher Yuan was still waiting for him over there. Ah, why did he take this upon himself and volunteer to run an errand like this?

"Excuse me, do you still want these braised dishes?" Xiaocao had noticed that when the man was reaching for the money from his purse, he had acted as if someone had paralyzed him and froze. She had inquired quietly as she was a bit confused and perplexed by this change in demeanor.

Little Shitou made an 'I understand everything' expression, and he stated sympathetically, "Older sister, do you think this fat older uncle had gotten his money stolen? I heard that the docks have pickpockets around...Second Sister, he's quite pitiful, how about we give him a portion of braised food free of charge for him to try..."

A few dock workers in their surroundings who had arrived late and hadn't bought any braised food repeatedly asked the man, "Sir, do you still want it? Xiaocao, if he doesn't want any, then sell me a portion—here's the money."

Shopkeeper Jin clenched his jaw and stamped his foot, "Who said I didn't want it? Don't you still have some left in the basket? Give me all that's left!"

Xiaocao hastily replied, "Please don't take offense, these couple of portions have already been reserved by other people. I really only do have four portions left, so I'm really sorry about this. I'll be coming over every day to sell my braised food. The price of one copper coin per portion is my family's specialty. If you enjoy eating it, sir, then please come back again."

Shopkeeper Jin was afraid that Teacher Yuan would lose his patience from waiting too long, so he took the packet of braised food and threw a silver piece that was worth about a hundred copper coins to them. He turned and bolted away, as if something had scorched his butt. Xiaocao held the silver piece and pondered what to do since they likely didn't have enough money from selling food today to give the man his change. When she saw that the fat, glittering man had left, she swiftly called out, "Hey, hey! I haven't given you your change yet!"

"No need to give me change, take the rest as a reward for you!" This type of silver piece was usually used by Shopkeeper Jin to reward lower ranked servants in his residence. In his eyes, this piece was of no more value than a copper coin was in ordinary people's eyes.

Yuan Sinian and his young grandson had already sat down at a nearby noodle stand that was run by the Wang Family. They had ordered two bowls of plain noodles and were slouching as they waited for Shopkeeper Jin to come over.

"What's taking him so long? What if it got sold out? You brat, you know how much I, your grandfather, love to eat, yet you didn't even bother to buy a portion to let me have a taste, hmph! If I'm unable to try this 'braised food', then just you wait!"

At this point, Yuan Sinian had completely shed his scholarly persona and was starting to resemble a stubborn old urchin more and more. Yuan Yunxi managed to resist the urge to roll his eyes at his grandfather and silently sighed inwardly...however, he felt like the little girl who was selling braised food sounded somewhat familiar...

"It's here! It's here!!!" Yuan Sinian immediately sat up straight and changed his posture. Once again, he resumed the outward demeanor of an elegant and mysterious scholar. The corners of Yuan Yunxi's mouth twitched as he looked down.

Shopkeeper Jin had a bright smile on his face as he borrowed a bowl from the noodle stall and politely placed the braised food one by one into it. He then asked, "Sir, would you happen to have any sesame oil? Adding a little bit of sesame oil should help make the flavor even better..."

Xiaocao, who had chased after the man to give him the change, overheard their conversation and smiled, "That's a good idea, if you add a little bit of sesame oil and then put a couple pieces of garlic on top, it will definitely be more delicious! Sir, I have your ninety-six copper coins as change right here..."

Teacher Yuan lightly glanced at the copper coins in her hand and said, "He already said that you can keep the change, so just keep it for yourselves. In any case, this man is so wealthy that even a larger bit of money wouldn't be of a concern to him."

Shopkeeper Jin inwardly quivered in fear! How did he manage to offend this imposing old man again? Was there something wrong with having a lot of money? If Teacher Yuan was willing to accept his son again into the academy, he would gladly disperse his family's wealth and live a poor and impoverished life...

"Ah...Teacher Yuan, they don't have any sesame oil here, let me go somewhere else to find some..." Shopkeeper Jin took hold of this opportunity to escape from this awkward situation. He managed to find a stall that sold stir-fries and threw them another silver piece to take the rest of the sesame oil that the stall had left, which was about half a small bottle's worth.

When Xiaocao noticed that both the brightly clothed fatty and the elegant old scholar were people who lived lives where they didn't have to do much on their own, she naturally started to crush the garlic heads with a practiced air and seasoned the braised foods with sesame oil. Then she said, "Please eat!"

"Okay!" Yuan Sinian used his entire willpower to restrain his hungry desire and unhurriedly stretched out his chopsticks and picked up a piece of sliced pig ear. He then slowly placed the piece of food into his mouth.

Yuan Yunxi, who was next to the old man, once again stopped himself from rolling his eyes. No one understood his grandfather as well as he did. Had there not been other people present, which made the old man aware of his status, he would have long started wolfing down the food in front of him...however, for some reason, this little girl seemed a bit familiar to him!

Before Yuan Yunxi had finished his silent sarcastic soliloquy, he saw that his disappointing grandfather had already thrown away his dignified, reserved air. There were tears in the old man's eyes, and his mouth never stopped moving. The chopsticks in his grandfather's hands picked up food as if it was a

machine driven by an electric motor, and it delivered the braised food into his mouth at lightning speed, as if he was afraid someone would start fighting him for it.

"Old grandpa, you should slow down a little! You need to carefully chew the slices of pig ear in order to really taste the food!" The kindhearted and adorable Little Shitou felt sympathy rise in his heart when he saw the Great Scholar stuffing his mouth full with the braised food. 'This old grandpa must not have had the taste of meat in a long time, right? He looks so hungry and gluttonous.' Great Scholar Yuan, with the help of Little Shitou's kind reminder, realized that there were people around him! However, in his eyes, his outward appearance and reputation were not nearly as important as fully enjoying delicious food. But, he was also aware that throwing away appearances altogether may not be a very wise decision in the end.

Gradually, he slowed down his eating speed, and he began to chew each bite thoroughly before he swallowed. As he continued to eat, he slapped the table in praise and said, "Little girl, is this called 'pig ear ribbons seasoned in chili oil'? So fantastic! Bright red color, soft and bouncy texture, savory spiciness, dense flavor...hm, what about this one, what is it called?"

"That is called braised pig intestines!" Xiaocao's voice sounded exceptionally clear and bright as she replied.

Yuan Sinian picked up a piece of the pig intestines and delivered it into his mouth. He slowly tasted the food and continuously nodded his head, "Rich and flavorful taste, chewy and soft texture, fatty without being greasy, this is something a person can eat every day without getting sick of it...very good, very good! Braised pig intestines, eh? So you used animal offal to make it then?"

"Esteemed gentleman is wise, I used the intestines from a pig and many different types of seasoning to braise it into this. It has a savory taste and luxurious flavor, and it's a type of dish that goes very well with alcohol. Braised pig intestines are very versatile, you can eat it cold with seasonings, you can also stir-fry it at high heat, and it can even be used to simmer soup. Every single way has its own unique taste and flavor!" When Xiaocao noticed that the man didn't seem to reject the concept of eating offal, she excitedly introduced the ingredient with its myriad cooking methods.

Shopkeeper Jin was originally going along with the gentleman's judgement and continuously moved his head. However, when he heard what it was, he suddenly froze and his chin almost fell to the floor. Pig intestines? He had actually invited Great Scholar Yuan to eat the intestines of a pig, he was finished, he was finished! His son's chance at regaining admission to the academy was definitely lost now.

—Argh! How could his son have such a fool of a father? Shopkeeper Jin wished he could just slam his head on the table and die at this very moment!

"Good! Good! This old man had previously heard the emperor emeritus reminiscing about the food from his hometown. His favorite dish was 'spicy pig intestines'. When I heard how he deliciously described the food, how soft and delicate, how much the mouth filled with its incredible flavor...listening to it made me want to drool, oh—it almost just dripped straight out..."

"Ahem, ahem!" When the young and accomplished Yuan Yunxi saw how his grandfather forgot his decorum when he waxed continuously about food, he coughed a few times in an effort to remind the old man of his status.

Yuan Sinian eyes widened into round circles, and he resentfully complained, "Why are you coughing right now? Food is the God of the people. In fact, the emperor emeritus himself had once said, 'one cannot function on an empty stomach, missing a meal will make one anxious'. What's wrong with talking about food? Is it shameful to like eating good food? You brat, get away from me, so I don't have to see your face—hmph, what a spoil sport!"

"Eh? You wouldn't be that person...that person..." When Yu Xiaocao got a better look at the pretty young man's face, she instantly recognized who he was. However, she couldn't quite remember his name. "You must be the friend of Third Young Master Zhou, right? Did you just disembark from the ship?"

Yuan Yunxi could finally recall where he had seen that little girl. He smiled faintly and said, "Miss Yu..."

"Good grandson, you know this young lady? How come I've never heard you talk about having a friend who can cook so well?" Yuan Sinian gave his grandson a pointed look and then turned to face Yu Xiaocao with an unexpectedly friendly smile, "Young lady, your braised pig intestines are quite good, where's your ancestral hometown? Are you also from the same hometown as the emperor emeritus? Do you know how to make the delicious and flavorful pig head meat too?"

Yuan Yunxi's delicate eyebrows came together in a frown and his whole face had a helpless expression on it.

Yu Xiaocao had been greatly amused at the interaction between this old rascal of a grandfather and his elementary school aged grandson. She had been watching the two squabble with delight when this

unexpected question sent a chill down her spine. Her smile froze for a split second, and she immediately shook her head, "My ancestors for generations and generations have all lived in a nearby small fishing village. They all relied on fishing to make a living. My family is a bit poor, so I had to figure out how to make food from things that other people won't eat. This is how I came up with the pig ear ribbons and pig intestine dishes. I'm a nobody really, so how could I be from the same hometown as the honorable emperor emeritus..."

She was already certain that the emperor emeritus was a transmigrator like her. Only a transmigrator would change history and establish a Great Ming Dynasty that was completely different from the one she remembered in her past life. Ah what a joke, she had long planned on making a fortune quietly and had no desire to make herself a target. She did not want to get entangled with that well-known transmigrator from her own world.

On the other hand, Little Shitou, who was next to her, replied proudly, "My second sister's braised food is the best. Old gentleman, we had already sold out of the braised pig head meat you were talking about. However, these pig lips are also pretty good. They're fatty without being greasy and are full of savory flavor. If you don't believe me, please try some!"

"Haha! Good, good! Little fellow, you have quite the silver tongue. How old are you? Have you started to learn how to read?" Yuan Sinian lifted some of the vegetables and noodles out of the bowl and pushed some of the pig lips into the bowl. He mixed them together and started to eat the noodles and braised food in large bites.

Little Shitou grinned, "I'm six years old, and my second sister told me that after she makes some money from selling her braised food, she'll send me to school in town to study. Our village is too poor and there isn't a school there to attend. However, our next door neighbor, Brother Xiaowen, often comes back for vacation and teaches me and Brother Xiaowu how to recognize words. I already know how to write my own name and I can read about a hundred and fifty-six characters!"

"Oh? Sounds like you know quite a few characters and can write your own name, that's good, that's good! Can you write your name and let this old man take a look at it?" Great Scholar Yuan apparently was interested in this young child. It had been almost two years since his academy had started having beginner classes for the purpose of instructing clever and bright children in the area.

Chapter 85

Little Shitou confidently dipped a fingertip into some water and wrote his name in large, broad strokes on the wooden table—Yu Fan.

Yuan Sinian ate his braised food with obvious pleasure as he intently watched the little fellow write. When he saw that the boy's handwriting had character and style, he smiled, "Not bad, that child did a good job in teaching! Yu Fan, do you want to come with me to Rongxuan Academy to study?"

Shopkeeper Jin was listening to their conversation at the side and his heart filled with envy and jealousy. This little fellow was quite fortunate. He had an older sister who was talented at cooking. Despite the fact that the boy only knew how to write his own name, Great Scholar Yuan had personally recruited him into the academy. His son, on the other hand, wasn't the most talented person but he had relied on his own abilities to test into the school. It was only because of him...So many regrets, ah, he regretted his previous actions so much!

Little Shitou blinked a couple of times and then beamed a smile, "Old mister, thank you for your good intentions. However, we don't have enough money saved up to pay for my tuition. After we have enough money, then I'll go into town to find you..."

Shopkeeper Jin hurriedly reminded them, "Teacher Yuan is a famous scholar in our times. The Rongxuan Academy that he established is one of the best schools in our whole Great Ming Dynasty. There are many people who want to enroll but have not been accepted! Little fellow, don't miss this opportunity!"

"Wow! Sir, you are truly too incredible!! In the future, I want to be like you and become someone that other people respect!" Little Shitou exclaimed in admiration as he looked at Yuan Sinian. For the first time in his life, the clever and bright little boy had found someone who he admired greatly.

"Haha! Little fellow, what's the point of being like me? Don't you want to become a high-ranking official so that your parents and siblings will never be looked down upon or bullied again?" Yuan Sinian guffawed as he was in a good mood. Speaking childishly was the best way to manifest the inner child in one's heart.

Little Shitou's round face creased in worry from the inner turmoil in his heart and said, "Then...from what you're saying, becoming an official is also not bad. I want to become someone like you, where everyone respects me, but I also want to become a high-ranking official and make sure my parents and siblings live comfortably. Would that be too greedy of me?"

Yu Xiaocao thought his words were too funny, knocked on his head, and said, "You haven't even entered the academy yet and you're starting to think this far in the future? The reason I wanted to send you to school was to let you become a cultured and educated individual. Do you think becoming a government official is that easy? You need to pass many rounds of imperial examinations. Just look at Younger Uncle,

he's already studied for more than ten years and he hasn't even passed the county level exams! If you have a larger head, then you'll have to wear a larger hat. Don't become too arrogant, otherwise when you fall it will hurt more!"

Yuan Sinian placed down his chopsticks. After eating all of that meat, he was pleasantly stuffed, and he stroked his beard in contentedness. He smiled and said, "Little fellow, what your older sister says has some truth in it. However, as people, we should always have a goal and dream to shoot for! Naturally, it needs to be a realistic goal. Idle daydreams and overambitious targets are not a good idea! Alright, it's getting late, we should set out again. Little girl, I always keep my promises. You can send your younger brother to the academy earlier as the school can waive some of the fees and expenditures for the students who receive excellent grades. In addition, we often reward books, writing brushes, and inkstones too. I'd like to say again that the taste of your braised food is really quite good. I'd like to eat it again in the future."

When Shopkeeper Jin saw Great Scholar Yuan getting up to leave, he hurriedly came forward and politely helped him carry the luggage. He thought that Teacher Yuan's mood seemed to be pretty good, so he worriedly opened his mouth and said, "Teacher, everything was my fault. My family has been merchants for six generations, and I only had a son in my middle age. Thus, I dote upon Zhuo'er too much. I will change, in the future I will definitely change! Ever since Zhuo'er has been expelled from the academy, he doesn't eat or drink anymore and almost died this past winter. Can you...possibly give him another chance?"

Yuan Sinian silently looked at the gilded and magnificent carriage in front of him and faintly glanced at him from head to toe. He then said, "One cannot achieve glory and triumph without having been through trials and tribulations. Being a scholar has always been a hard and unprofitable job. It's easy to be extravagant after being frugal, but it's hard to become frugal after becoming accustomed to luxury. I can give you another opportunity, but if Jin Wenzhuo is unable to become accustomed to hardships, then it's better to leave now than later!"

"He can! He can!! My Zhuo'er can definitely bear hardships!! Thank you, Teacher Yuan, thank you..."
When Shopkeeper Jin saw that his efforts had finally produced the result he desired, tears immediately streamed down his face. He was so happy that he couldn't contain his glee as he repeatedly thanked the scholar.

The happy and content Shopkeeper Jin took the stuffed Great Scholar and left the noisy and bustling docks. Neither of them could forget that little girl who sold braised food at the docks. She was the one who had given them their heart's desire and allowed them to obtain happiness...

Thus, Great Scholar Yuan Sinian became a frequent visitor at the Tanggu Docks. He would often take a two hour cart ride from the town to the docks to 'fight over food' with the rough dock workers. Heh heh, naturally, Xiaocao wouldn't let him really squeeze and elbow the workers to buy braised food. After all, he was also her younger brother's teacher!

"Father, Mother! We met Brother Xiaowen's respected teacher from the academy today. He agreed to let me enter the school to study!" Little Shitou was excited the entire way home and incessantly asked Xiaocao if he could really go to town and study at the school. Was this real? He asked so many times that Xiaocao thought it was simultaneously hilarious yet sad at the same time.

Yu Hai was in the middle of chopping firewood and stopped at this moment. He came up, took the heavy basket from his daughter's hand, and then ruffled his son's hair. The smile on his face was full of helplessness and guilt, "Shitou, Father knows you really want to study, but our family's current circumstances are not good enough to allow you to...you're still young right now, let's wait until next year to go to the academy, is that ok?"

Their next door neighbor's, Old Qian, oldest son had gone to the town's most famous academy and passed the entrance exam. This was no longer considered news in Dongshan Village. It was said that Rongxuan Academy had already taught two students who had received the top score, one second place candidate, and one third place scholar in the imperial palace examinations within its first ten years of operating. All of the villagers said that the Qian Family had gotten their chance to produce a high-ranking official!

Luckily, the Qian Family also raised about two hundred ducks at the time of his admission. By selling duck eggs and duck meat to the restaurants in town, they were able to make some money. Otherwise, they wouldn't be able to afford the tuition, which was almost one tael a month. The vast majority of families in the village made nowhere near that much.

Having an extra tael for the family to spend was one thing, but their current circumstances were so dire that, had it not been for Xiaocao selling braised food for the past two days, they would be scrambling to find three hundred copper coins. Ah! He was such a useless father as he couldn't satisfy his child's desire to go to school...

Xiaocao noticed that her father was blaming himself, and so, she stepped forward to pull gently on his arm. She smiled, "The headmaster of Rongxuan Academy liked the taste of this daughter's braised food today. He had promised us that we can hold off on paying the fees for now and then give them what we owe once we earn the money. The headmaster also said that the academy tests its outstanding students from time to time and can even waive the tuition fees for those who do well. The tests occur every three

months. As long as Little Shitou studies hard, all we need to save is about three months worth of tuition for him...Don't be worried, Father, once your leg is completely better and we're past the season when the animals are giving birth, you can go hunting to subsidize the family again. In about a month, our vegetables will also be ready to go to market. Won't we soon make enough to get three months worth of tuition?"

Yu Hai rubbed at his leg that still couldn't take too much weight and lightly sighed. After getting it massaged every day by Xiaocao, his leg had already recovered immensely. Now he didn't need to use crutches to walk anymore, and he could also do some regular work around the residence.

Previously the town doctor had told him that 'the leg cannot be saved', which made him almost want to die. To be able to have his leg recover up to this much, even the doctor from Tongren Medicine Hall felt that it was a miracle. He should really be content with his situation. But, to have his leg fully recovered, to be able to hunt in the mountains, that was his true heart's desire that he couldn't help but wish for.

When Xiaocao saw that her father had lowered his head and was thinking deeply about something, she turned her attention to Little Shitou. She rubbed at his little face that was gradually gaining some flesh and grinned, "Our Little Shitou just needs to wait a few more days. After I make more money, I'll make you two new pieces of clothing and then you can attend school with a spanking new wardrobe! When our next door neighbor Brother Xiaowen gets back, we can ask him what we need to prepare for the academy. We definitely can't let Little Scholar Yu Fan get bullied there!"

Little Shitou was apparently very pleased with the nickname "Little Scholar Yu Fan" and laughed happily, "Second Sister, you don't need to prepare anything! I heard Brother Xiaowen talking about it. The academy has a place for its students to live and a place for them to eat. You also don't need to make new clothes for me. The people at the academy only despise those who are inelegant not those who are poor! As long as I do well there, no one there would dare to slight me!"

"Hm, they laugh at those who are inelegant but not the poor, is that a phrase you had learned from Brother Xiaowen? Little brother, you've also seen how good our business is. Don't you think making you a couple of new clothes is a drop in the bucket now? No need to talk more, just bring out our purse and count how many coins we got today." While they were walking back home, the little fellow had felt the heavy purse the whole way back. The jaw-splitting grin on his face seemed to be permanently there, and he looked like a little money grubber.

Madam Liu and Xiaolian put down their embroidery and took the basket that held the pig heat meat and intestines. They smiled at Xiaocao, "Go rest a bit! Let us do the cleaning, okay! Relax, although we may

not be able to help you with creating the seasoning but we can definitely be your assistants in everything else!"

Xiaocao was also happy to let them do the hard work and gleefully counted the money with Little Shitou. Their haul from today was clearly much better than yesterday's. They managed to sell all of the braised food for a total of a hundred and thirty copper coins. If they added the mace of silver that Shopkeeper Jin had given them, then they had earned more than two hundred copper coins today!

At the docks today, she had asked about the prices of items in town. A bolt of homespun cloth at the market sold for around two hundred and thirty-four copper coins. If they got Little Shitou a few feet of cloth and then about half a catty of cotton to make two pairs of cotton-padded clothes, it shouldn't be a problem financially anymore. However, they currently didn't have enough money to buy the four scholarly essentials of ink, brushes, paper and ink stone. She had heard that those things were quite expensive!

Apparently, they needed to work hard for a few more days to make it! Xiaocao stared blankly at the pile of copper coins and was racking her brain for other ideas to make more money.

"Second Sister, can the small yellow croakers we caught yesterday be braised into something that we can sell? The older uncles at the docks had all asked me whether we would be selling braised food in the afternoon!" Little Shitou was also trying to think of solutions for the same problem that bothered Xiaocao.

Having a daily income of two hundred copper coins had given him a taste of sweet success. If they continued on their trajectory, after five or six days, they would have enough to pay for his tuition fees! With a stable income at home, he could also study at the academy with ease. It was a pity that they could only buy one pig's head and one pig's worth of offal from the market a day. Those ingredients didn't make enough braised food to last for the whole morning!"

Small yellow croakers? She actually knew quite a few methods to prepare this fish, such as: 'dry fried small yellow croaker', 'salty and crunchy small yellow croaker', sweet and sour small yellow croaker'...these types of dishes were all very delicious but they took a lot of time and effort to make. In addition, they needed to spend money to not only buy the small yellow croakers but also the seasonings and oil used in the recipes. If they were sold for a copper coin per two pieces and they subtracted the manufacturing costs, she'd bet that they wouldn't make much profit...

Oh right! She knew another method of making pickled fish, which only needed ordinary small fish. There was a pond behind their house, which had an abundance of resources that she could take advantage of!

She remembered that Qian Wu and Little Shitou had caught many palm-sized crucian carps and sharpbelly last time and brought them back to make soup. The little crucian carps and sharpbelly had a lot of small bones, but the bones would become soft when made into pickled fish. So the bones could be chewed and eaten together with the meat. Yes! That was it!

"But... is there any way to catch a large number of small fish?" Yu Xiaocao couldn't help but worry again.

Suddenly, Little Shitou's joyful screams sounded beside her ears, "Quickly look! There's a wild bird drinking water from our water tank!"

Xiaocao looked up and saw a snow-white bird with slender, long legs. It stood on the edge of the water vat and leaned forward to drink water in the vat. In early spring, the weather was gradually becoming warmer. These past few days, there had been unknown birds visiting their home to borrow water from the vat to drink.

The little divine stone had once proudly told her that the wild birds were attracted to the spiritual energy in the bathing water inside the water tank. Regardless of whether it was an animal or plant, spiritual energy was a good nourishment for them. However, if the concentration of energy was too high and the organism was too young, it would be overpowered by the energy and explode...

Yu Xiaocao's eyes suddenly lit up at that thought—Didn't that mean that if she used the little divine stone as bait, she would be able to lure a school of little fish?

[Stinky Master, bad Master! You're going to use me as a bait again. I won't let you off!] Out of nowhere, a little golden kitten suddenly jumped onto her shoulder and fiercely snarled at her.

After it acknowledged its master, Xiaocao and the little divine stone's minds had become interlinked. So, the little fellow could immediately sense all her thoughts.

[Alright, alright! I won't use you as bait anymore!] Xiaocao hastily pacified the angry kitten, [But, Little Glutinous Dumpling, you'll have to help me think of a way to lure the small fish into the trap.]

The little divine stone snorted proudly and said, [There's no need for me, this celestial stone, to personally do anything. Isn't my bathing water the best bait? As for how to use it, do you really need me to answer such a stupid question?]

After hearing its words, Yu Xiaocao immediately stuffed the two hundred copper coins into her purse and told Madam Liu to put it away safely. The remaining money was left as pocket money for family expenses. After that, she pulled Little Shitou into the kitchen and filled a jar with mystic-stone water. She went to Yu Hai and asked, "Father, do we have a fishing net at home?"

"Fishing net? No! What do you need it for?" Yu Hai soaked the pig head in the water from the vat. The water from the vat had the spiritual energy from the little divine stone, which enhanced the taste of the braised pig's head.

Xiaocao smiled mysteriously and said, "Of course I'll have a use for it! I just thought of another way to make money again. Just wait and see!"

Yu Hai stretched out his hand, which he had touched the pig's head with, and wanted to pinch her nose, but Xiaocao nimbly dodged him. He smiled and said, "What kind of net do you want? I can just make it for you right now!"

Yu Hai didn't have much to do, so he would often help the villagers weave some fishing nets at home. Thus, their family naturally didn't lack nets. Xiaocao instructed him heat a bamboo strip until it turned into a circular shape and fasten it onto a bamboo pole. After that, attach a fishing net onto the round bamboo strip to form a pocket—a simple net was formed.

"Are you two going netting? It's quite hard to catch the big fish in the pond behind the house, so be careful and don't fall in... Do you want Father to come with you guys?" Yu Hai saw the kids going out of the backyard and worriedly cautioned.

"No, we're just experimenting first. If we succeed, then we'll ask for Father's help..." Xiaocao's voice sounded from behind the house, while Little Shitou also made an elated cry.

When the sister-brother pair arrived at the pond, Qian Wu, who was tending the ducks by the river, saw them and swiftly rushed over. He asked, "Xiaocao, Xiaocao! How come you have time to play by the river today?"

Little Shitou acted like a little adult and said, "Go, go, go! Do you think we're like you, who only cares about playing! We're here for serious business. Go away! Don't delay us from catching fish!"

"Catching fish? I'm really good at that! Let me help you!" Qian Wu immediately forgot about his task of tending the ducks and shamelessly insisted on helping.

Xiaocao was worried about other people discovering the secret in her jar, so she smiled and refused, "Xiaowu, if Auntie Qian sees you leaving the ducks aside and playing by yourself, your ears will definitely suffer some pain. You should just go back to tend the ducks!"

Qian Wu touched his ears, pouted, and sat on the shore, feeling aggrieved. He smacked the water with the bamboo pole in his hands to vent his anger, which scared the ducks to flee in all directions. Madam Mao saw this scene and shrieked, "Stinky brat, I told you to tend the ducks, not to send the ducks away! If the ducks are too scared to lay eggs, you can anticipate being spanked!"

Qian Wu touched his butt, and then reluctantly looked at the siblings who had walked far away. He sighed heavily and resigned to his fate of tending the ducks.

Xiaocao chose a hidden area, put the crock into the water, and anxiously looked at the surface of the water. This jar was the place where Little Divine Stone often 'bathed'. Thus, it had accumulated a large amount of spiritual energy over time.

After the jar was placed in the water, the energy inside gradually overflowed. In a short time, ripples began to appear on the surface of the water...

"Second Sister, quickly look! A lot of small fish are swimming over! That's so amazing. What kind of bait do you have in the jar? It works so well!" Little Shitou tried to suppress the joy in his voice and whispered.

His voice didn't frighten the school of fish that were gathering over. On the contrary, more and more little fish were gathering due to the overflow of spiritual power. They all swam towards the mouth of the jar in succession.

When Xiaocao placed the jar in the water, she had only submerged a small portion of the opening in the water. Although the fish had followed the spiritual energy over, they were unable to enter the crock. Thus, they were eagerly flapping their tails and swimming around the crock.

As more the fish gathered, the more densely they surrounded the jar. Xiaocao lifted the net in her hand and gently scooped towards the place with the most fish. If it was like before, the fish would have already scattered in different directions. However, they were attracted by the spiritual energy and ignored the looming danger. They opened their mouths as if they wanted to absorb more of the pure energy.

Xiaocao slowly raised the net in her hand from the bottom of the water. In the net that had a diameter of thirty centimeters, there were dozens of small fishes, including grass carp, crucian carp, and sharpbelly... But, most of them were still grass carp and crucian carp. The bigger ones were around half a catty, while the smaller ones were only about the size of Little Shitou's small palm.

"Wow! So many fish were caught in such a short time! Wasn't that too easy! Second Sister, Second Sister! Let me try!" Little Shitou took the bucket over and received the fish that Xiaocao had caught, and was very eager to try.

Xiaocao put the net into the little guy's hand and laughed, "Move slowly when you're netting the fish. I'll go bring another bucket over. If we catch more fish, we'll have something to sell tomorrow afternoon!"

Little Shitou lifted the net enthusiastically and carefully extended it towards the school of fish. He asked in a low voice, "Older Sister, these fish have a lot of bones, so I'm afraid that people might find it too troublesome to eat. It might not sell well!"

"Don't worry. I have a plan!" Xiaocao looked at him with a gaze that read 'believe me', and then left with a smile.

When she came back again, more than half of the bucket was already filled with fish. The water in the bucket also came from the water vat, so there was also spiritual energy in it. So, the fish were still very lively even when they were squeezed together in such a narrow space.

The siblings had caught two full buckets of fish in less than two hours. During that time, a fish that was half a meter long had also appeared. Unfortunately, their net was too small. They had caught the fish's tail, but the big fish had escaped with a swing of its tail. The siblings felt that it was rather regretful, since they would have been able to eat an extra dish for dinner if they had caught the fish.

When they returned home, the Yu Hai couple and Xiaolian had already finished cleaning the pig's head and intestines. Madam Liu pointed at the remaining pot of pig blood and asked, "We didn't know what to do with this, so we didn't dare to touch it..."

Yu Hai, on the other hand, looked at the siblings with amusement and exclaimed, "Oh! There's quite a lot in the buckets! How many fish did you guys catch? Let me see. Are we eating it for dinner?"

However, Little Shitou excitedly said, "We're not going to eat these fish ourselves. We're selling them! Second Sister said that she could solve the problem of the fish having too many bones! Father, look, we caught a lot of fish!"

Yu Hai went over to take a look and saw that it was really true. He had originally thought that the kids were just going to play when they asked him to make a net for them to catch fish. He hadn't expected that they would bring back two buckets of fish two hours later. Looking at the densely packed fish heads in the bucket, there must be a lot of them inside.

"Oh! There's really quite a lot! How did you guys catch them?" Yu Hai was stunned. Even if he was the one who had cast the net, he still wouldn't be able to catch so many fish in such a short period of time. How did the kids do it?

Little Shitou swiftly answered, "It's Second Sister! Second Sister made a new type of bait that attracted all the fish. All we have to do was to catch the fish with the net on the shore!"

Yu Hai looked at his younger daughter with a complicated gaze. His daughter was becoming more and more capable. As her father, he felt both proud and ashamed.

Xiaocao looked at the sky and said, "Why don't we clean the fish first? We might be able to rush to the docks and sell them before dinner! We can work on the pig's head and intestines later in the evening!"

The family worked together to scrape the gills, take out the intestines, and clean the fish. Little Shitou couldn't do this work, so he continuously fetched water with a small basin and helped them clean the small fish with the water.

Ha! They had really caught a lot of fish this time. There was a full tub! However, Xiaocao didn't have time to be happy about this. She pickled the cleaned fish with salt.

"What's next?" Xiaolian finally had time to catch her breath and asked with a happy expression on her face.

"It needs to be cured for about thirty minutes, and then we need to prepare it to be fried!" Xiaocao smelled the fishy smell on the hands and rushed to clean it with water. After being busy for the entire day, she felt somewhat hungry. She dug out a hot baked sweet potato from under the stove, which was specially prepared for her every day.

Chapter 87 – Pickled Fish

Madam Liu felt slightly worried, "We need to fry it with oil? Do we have enough oil at home? Should I... go borrow some from your Auntie Zhou's house?"

Xiaocao thought about it and said, "Yesterday, we didn't use much of the one catty of soybean oil, so it should be enough! But, we need white sugar to make pickled fish. It might be too late to buy it now... I wonder if Auntie Zhou has some..."

The Zhou Family was known as one of the more well-off families in the village. The husband was a capable earner outside, while the wife had also earned a decent amount of money by raising chickens. Madam Fang was never harsh and strict towards her children. If they wanted to borrow sugar from someone in the village, her family was probably the most likely to have it.

Madam Liu took off her apron and smiled, "I'll go ask. About how much do you need?"

Xiaocao replied, "It's just seasoning, so a small handful it enough..."

"A small handful? Cao'er, you don't know about the price of white sugar, do you? One catty cost two hundred sixty copper coins! The small handful that you want is probably dozens of copper coin!"

Although your Auntie Zhou indulges her children, she won't buy so much of it." Yu Hai couldn't help but remind her.

Xiaocao stared at him in shock, "What? Sugar is that expensive! Oh my, an ordinary household seriously wouldn't be able to afford that..."

Madam Liu rolled her eyes and laughed, "White sugar isn't something that commoners eat. What kind of fish dish are you making? It needs such an expensive condiment. Will you even be able to get a profit?"

Xiaocao looked at the hundred or so fish pickled in the pot and made the calculation in her mind. If she sold each fish for one copper coin, she would be able to earn sixty or seventy copper coins without a problem. However, without seasoning the pickled fish with sugar, it wouldn't taste as good. If she put a little less... it should be okay?

"Mother, I'll go to Auntie Zhou's house with you." Xiaocao took a few bites of the sweet potato in her hands, and then stuffed it into Little Shitou's hand. She stood up and followed Madam Liu out the front door.

After walking around three hundred meters from their house, they knocked on the Zhou Family's front door. A handsome youth, who was twelve or thirteen years old, opened the door. He had a healthy tan and a pair of crescent-like eyes. The corners of his lips were curled up slightly, which gave off the impression that he was smiling even when he wasn't. He appeared very likeable and eye-catching at first glance.

"Wenhua! Why didn't you follow your father to sell goods today?" Madam Liu was slightly surprised to see the teen and couldn't help asking.

Zhou Wenhua coughed a couple times and a heavy breathing sound came from his chest. He suppressed the itchy sensation in his throat, swallowed his saliva, and said, "When I came back yesterday, I took off my clothes because I felt hot. As a result, I caught a cold and didn't feel very well. So, my father told me to rest at home for a few days. Cough, cough... Auntie Yu, Little Sister Xiaolian, are you guys looking for my mother?"

Madam Liu asked with concern, "Have you seen a doctor yet? Don't drag a minor illness into a major illness just because you have a good constitution."

“Doctor You had already checked on my condition and opened a prescription. I've taken two doses of medication and feel a lot better now. Cough, cough... Mother! Auntie Yu and Little Sister Xiaolian is looking for you...” It seemed like Zhou Wenhua firmly believed that she was Yu Xiaolian, so Xiaocao just smiled and didn't correct him.

Madam Fang came out of the house and saw the mother-daughter pair. She smiled and said, “Xiaocao, you came back from the docks! How was business today? Your braised food tastes so good, so there must be a lot of customers. Wenhua, this is Little Sister Xiaocao, not Xiaolian. Xiaocao has a slightly paler and smoother complexion than Xiaolian. She's also a little shorter. If you don't look closely, it might be hard to distinguish them. It's also reasonable for you to make a mistake.”

Zhou Wenhua touched the back of his head in embarrassment for recognizing the wrong person. His mouth that smiled frequently curled up and he said, “So it's Little Sister Xiaocao ah! In the past, Little Sister Xiaolian was always the one who came with Auntie Yu, so I thought it was her. I heard from Shanhu that your health has gotten better now. Congratulations!”

The twelve or thirteen year old youth was already such a good speaker. As expected, he had the quality of a good salesman. Xiaocao smiled at him and said, “The last few times I came, Brother Wenhua wasn't at home. It's inevitable for you to have mistaken since it's the first time we've met. Sometimes, my mother also mixes us up when she isn't paying attention! Well, there's nothing I can do since we have the same face.”

Zhou Wenhua was amused by her seemingly helpless expression. His chest had felt stuffy due to his illness, but he felt a lot more comfortable now.

“Auntie Zhou, do you have any sugar at home? I want to make a new dish, but I'm lacking a few condiments...” Xiaocao looked at Madam Fang expectantly, fearing that she would say no. If they really didn't have it, then she probably wouldn't be able to make the pickled fish today...

Madam Fang smiled and said, “What a coincidence! If you came a day earlier, then we really wouldn't have any. Yesterday, when your Uncle Zhou came back from selling goods, he got forty or fifty copper coins worth of sweets for the children. Since he had the money, he might as well buy more meat, or white rice and wheat flour. But, he bought that expensive stuff instead... Linglong, bring the remaining sweets from yesterday for Little Sister Xiaocao to try!”

Though Madam Fang was complaining, there was a hint of smile in her eyes. To Madam Fang and her husband, it didn't matter if they had to suffer a little, but they couldn't let their children be like their younger selves, inexperienced and ignorant. They didn't want them to be treated like country bumpkins when they go to town.

Xiaocao took a look at Zhou Linglong's hands and realized the so-called white sugar were chunks of sugar similar to that of rock sugar. No wonder it cost one copper coin per piece.

She chose an egg-sized piece of sugar from the pack. It was about an ounce of sugar, which would cost around fifteen or sixteen copper coins. She smiled and said, "Auntie Zhou, I want to use the sugar to make food, and then sell it at the docks. How much was this chunk of sugar? I can't let you guys suffer losses when I'm making money..."

Madam Fang looked at her and smiled, "With our family's relationship, why are we talking about money? Your Brother Wenhua isn't feeling well and doesn't have any appetite. Yesterday, he ate the braised food that I brought back and had endless praises for it. He even ate another bowl of rice. When you complete your new dish, just make sure to send Auntie some!"

Xiaocao thought about it and nodded, "Alright! Even if you don't say it, I won't forget to let you guys have a taste. Thank you very much then. It's getting late, so I need to go back to fry the fish..."

On the way back, Madam Liu didn't say anything, but inwardly muttered: 'Although the fish didn't cost any money, the seasonings and oil cost at least thirty or forty copper coins... Would we really be able to make a profit?'

Upon returning home, Xiaocao first prepared all the necessary seasonings and ingredients. When the fish was almost done being salted, she poured in half a catty of soybean oil in the cauldron on the stove and heated it up. She sprinkled some water into the pot when smoke began emerging from the pot. This would remove the fishy smell in the soybean oil.

Then, put out the fire under the stove and wait until the heat of the oil was reduced to seventy percent hot. At that time, put in the salted fish and fry them one by one.

The stoves in the countryside usually had two cauldrons, one on each side. Normally, one was used to cook dishes, while the other was for steaming rice. Xiaocao put the chopped scallion, ginger, and garlic

into the other pot and spread it out evenly into a layer. The fried fish was placed orderly on the bottom of the pot, with the bigger ones on the bottom and the smaller ones on top.

After taking out half of the oil that was used to fry the fish, put the remaining oil into the fried chili shreds and stir-fry to get an aromatic scent. Then, add in vinegar, sugar, yellow wine, scallion, ginger, garlic, pepper, fennel, Chinese cinnamon, and other spices. After that, she sprinkled some soy sauce in it. Seeing that there wasn't enough water in the soup, she added an appropriate amount of mystic-stone water inside and cooked it on high heat.

When the soup was ready, she poured it onto the fish in the other pot and covered it tightly with the wooden lid. She had even specially instructed Little Shitou to pick up several rocks to put on top of the lid. After it was simmered over low heat for about thirty minutes, she extinguished the fire under the cauldron and opened the lid to let it cool down.

The pickled fish tasted the best when it was cooled. Xiaocao picked out several smaller ones and let her parents, Xiaolian, and Little Shitou taste them. The pickled fish had a savory and sweet taste that also had a hint of spiciness. It brimmed with the fragrance of the oil. After being fried and stewed, the bones in the fish had already become so soft that they just melted in the mouth. Even the fish's head could be chewed and swallowed without any problem. No parts of the fish would be wasted.

"It's pretty good! Delicious!! Go and give some to your Auntie Zhou..." Madam Liu couldn't bear eating another fish after she tried one. All these fish needed to be sold for money!

Xiaocao filled a plate with over twenty pieces of fish and told Little Shitou to send it over. She got a ceramic jar and put all the remaining fish inside. She had to rush to the wharf and sell all the fish before the dockworkers went home for dinner.

Xiaolian saw that she had been busy selling and cooking food all day long and didn't even have time to rest. Thus, she said, "Little Sister, why don't I go to the docks with Little Shitou?"

Xiaocao had gotten up early in the morning and rushed to the docks. When she finished selling the braised food, she went to the market to buy pig's head and other ingredients and seasonings. She didn't even have time to catch her breath when she got home and went to catch fish. After that, she cured the fish to make pickled fish. Thus, she must have been really tired today.

Considering the fact that she would have to walk for nearly two hours, she seriously didn't know if she could make it. These past couple days, Little Shitou was already familiar with the selling process, so there probably wouldn't be any problems. However, she was still worried and reminded them,

“For the bigger fish, sell them two for one copper coin. Try to sell the bigger ones first. Later, if the smaller ones don't sell very well, then sell three for one copper coin. Anyways... just try to sell as much as possible.”

Little Shitou confidently said, “Don't worry! I will definitely accomplish my mission!”

After watching Xiaolian and Little Shitou leave, Xiaocao didn't rest either. She had to braise all of the cleaned pig's head, pork tripe, and pig intestines in order to sell them tomorrow morning.

Seeing that the pig's head and marinade were already in the pot and just needed to be simmered over low heat, Madam Liu urged her daughter to quickly go rest,

“I can take care of the rest... In the future, you just need to be responsible for the preparation of the marinade. We can take care of the rest. You don't have to do everything yourself! Your health just got better, so don't tire yourself out!”

Xiaocao nodded and said, “Okay, okay! I know Mother is better at controlling the fire than me! I'll just be a supervisor then!”

When she went out of the kitchen, she saw her father making a new net pocket. So, she went closer and said, “Father, it's still early, so why don't we go catch some more fish in the pond?”

Yu Hai was slightly interested, but he looked at her with concern and said, “Aren't you tired? You should go back to your room and rest for a while! As for fishing, I'll go try it out tomorrow morning...”

Based on her observation these past few days, Xiaocao had noticed that her family had the typical 'strict mother and loving father' combination. Generally, Madam Liu took on the 'bad cop' role and was responsible for disciplining and rebuking the children. On the other hand, Yu Hai was the one who pampered and spoiled the children, especially Xiaocao. He rarely refused her requests.

Chapter 88 – Father and Daughter

Xiaocao hastily acted like a child shamelessly. She went up to him and shook his arm, while saying, "Father, I'm not tired! Moreover, I just need to prepare the bait and put it into the pond. You can do the rest. You're one of the best fishermen in the village, so you're definitely better at catching a few fish than me! Let's go, let's go! We can catch some more fish and raise them in the empty water vat in the backyard. Tomorrow afternoon, we can make more pickled fish and sell them!"

Yu Hai couldn't reject her pleading. Without Madam Liu's knowledge, he stealthily took Xiaocao to the pond via a shortcut in the backyard. Their backyard wasn't as good as their foreyard. It was surrounded by a fence that was made with bamboo and branches. On the fence, a back door was specially opened for easy access.

Xiaocao specially got some bean flour and mixed it with vegetable oil. Then, she cut it into small dices to serve as bait. Little Shitou was still young and naïve, but her father was an experienced fisherman. She couldn't let him know that she was luring fish with the mystic-stone water.

From her room, she got the earthenware jar, which the small multi-colored stone laid in. The little golden kitten was lying beside the jar and stretching its back. When the little divine stone saw her, it grumpily said, [What are you doing now? I can't believe you using such good mystic-stone water to catch fish. You're just recklessly wasting such a heavenly gift! You're going to be struck by thunder!]

Xiaocao made sure no one was around and said, "Little Glutinous Dumpling, what's there to be afraid of? Don't I still have you? Aren't you the celestial stone that Goddess Nuwa meticulously smelted? Doesn't the God of Thunder and Goddess of Lighting have to give you some face? Let's go, don't you like to swim? I'll let you swim to your heart's desire when we get to the pond!"

[No, don't! Don't directly put me into the water! That might attract unknown species! Don't you just need some small fish? It's enough to just use the water in the jar!] These past few days, Little Divine Stone had gone to the depths of the mountains and chosen a deep pond with pure spiritual energy to cultivate. However, it hadn't expected that it would attract wild animals in the mountains. A python had dived into the deep pond and almost swallowed its body.

Little Divine Stone was afraid that Xiaocao would directly throw it into the pond. If it got swallowed by a duck or fish, wouldn't it have to take a one-day tour in the animal's intestines? That's so dirty and stinky! No way, it doesn't want to!

Xiaocao fastened it onto her wrist again and asked softly, "Is this how my father's leg will be like from now on?"

The little golden kitten flew to the top of her head and laid on top like it was a hen resting in its nest, and then proudly replied, [You're looking down on this divine stone's abilities. Your father's leg will get even better. However, the damage to the veins and bones were too severe. So, a full recovery is impossible. In the future, he might walk with a limp, but it won't be too obvious!]

When Xiaocao arrived at the backyard with the 'fish bait' in the mystic-stone water jar, Yu Hai was already waiting there. Considering the inconvenience of his legs, the father-daughter pair chose a relatively lower slope and went down to the pond.

While Xiaocao placed the 'bait' into the pond, Yu Hai was slightly concerned and asked, "Cao'er, what if the jar floats away like this? Let's tie a rope on the mouth of the jar!"

"I'll go get a rope!" Xiaocao thought that he had a point, so she stood up and wanted to run back to the house.

However, her father stopped her by saying, "You don't need to go back... Wait a moment!"

Yu Hai pulled several withered and yellow weeds from the pond and rubbed them together with his dexterous hands. A long grass rope was swiftly formed within his hands. Xiaocao inwardly marveled, 'Don't underestimate the wisdom and ability of ancient people.'

With the rope and her father's help, Xiaocao placed the jar farther away. She held the net in her hand, ready to catch fish.

In the afternoon, Xiaocao and younger brother had caught hundreds of fish in less than two hours. Yu Hai had initially thought that she had a new and good method of fishing. But, when he was a child, he had also placed bait in a jar for fishing. Even after fishing for the whole morning, it wasn't always possible to catch more than a dozen fish. Was this how his daughter caught fish at noon?

In the midst of his doubts, the fish nearby sensed the spiritual energy and swam towards the ceramic jar one after another, as if they were on a pilgrimage. It was impossible to drive them away. Seeing that there were more and more fish gathering, Yu Hai was stunned inwardly, 'This was too incredible!'

While he was hesitating, Xiaocao had already picked up the net and carefully scooped up the fish. Oddly enough, when the usually nimble fish actually didn't escape when the net approached them. Each time his daughter lowered her net, she was able to scoop up several fish.

Yu Hai stared absentmindedly at his daughter's pretty little face. He recalled how she seemed like a completely different person ever since she hit her head last summer. There were always endless ways to make money in her mind.

After they split from the main family, she first planted vegetables in their yard. Originally, he pitied his daughter and couldn't bear to reject her. Thus, with the mindset that they would only waste a few bags of seeds and not wanting to disappoint her, he did his best to support her. As a result, the vegetable gardens in front of the house were covered in green in just a few days. The greens with a short-term growing period such as spinach were almost as long as his finger. Tender green buds had also already sprouted for vegetables with a long-term growing period, which was extremely gratifying.

After that, she made braised food, specializing in braising things that others didn't eat or didn't want: chicken innards, pig intestines, pig head meat... Today, she had even brought back pig blood to make something called 'blood sausage'. He thought of the braised pig brain from the other day, which was something really disgusting to look at, but she had actually turned it into a supreme delicacy.

Now, she used small fish with a lot of tiny bones that nobody else ate to make the incredibly crispy and tender pickled fish. Her method of fishing was the most astonishing part. What was in the jar to make all the fish do the opposite of their usual habits and actively gather over? Even a novice fisherman would know that this kind of phenomenon shouldn't exist.

What had his daughter encountered when she was injured and unconscious? Could it be that what she said about meeting the God of Fortune at the Palace of Hell was true? Did she really get 'golden hands' after receiving luck from the God of Fortune?

However, Yu Hai didn't suspect that his daughter's soul had changed. Wasn't it even more unbelievable to reincarnate in another person's body than to visit the Palace of Hell and drink Granny Meng's soup by mistake?

No! He couldn't let anyone else know about his daughter's abilities. If someone with devious intentions found out, they would definitely catch her and burn her alive, as if she was a monster! His precious daughter, who had been plagued by misfortunes since birth, had been on the verge of death numerous

times. As her father, he hadn't fulfilled his duty and failed to protect his family in the past. Hence, from now on, he had to serve as his daughter's protective umbrella and get rid of all possible dangers for her.

“Cao'er, in the future, just let Father do the fishing after you prepare the bait! When you go sell braised food in the morning, I will go catch the fish and your mother can clean them. So, you can make the pickled fish when you get home in the afternoon. Doesn't that save a lot of time?” Yu Hai suddenly said.

Xiaocao briefly stopped the actions of her hands, which were scooping fish. She could feel Yu Hai's gaze lingering on herself for a long time. Hence, it was inevitable that she felt somewhat nervous at that time. She knew it would be hard to fool her father, so she had already thought of an explanation within her mind. But, she was worried about whether he would believe her. She hadn't expected that even after Yu Hai witnessed this strange scene, he didn't ask any questions and took up the task of fishing in the future.

He had such an unimaginable trust and love for his daughter!

Xiaocao felt so moved that she almost wanted to cry. She smiled slightly, nodded her head heavily, and said, “Okay! Everyone says that Father is an excellent fisherman, so you're definitely better at fishing than me! Well, I'll leave the hard work to Father then!”

“We're a family so there's no need to mention that. In terms of hard work, you're the one who have been working the hardest these past few days! I don't even know what this family would be like without you...” Yu Hai ruefully sighed.

Indeed, Xiaocao's major change was what kept the family intact. He had a young son and a sickly daughter. His wife was capable, but disease-ridden. Furthermore, he was considered a half-cripple. If it hadn't been for the great change in Xiaocao, Xiaolian wouldn't be able to carry such a mountainous burden alone.

Fortunately, the heavens didn't abandon them. They gave his wife and daughter a healthy body, while also letting his leg gradually recover. They also bestowed his daughter with the ability to survive...

A joyful smile appeared on the corner of Yu Hai's mouth. He waved the net in his hands and scooped up the fish in a swift, accurate, and steady manner. His speed was a lot faster than the inexperienced

Xiaocao. The net in his hands was relatively sturdier, so they were able to catch a big fish that weighed five catties.

By sunset, the father-daughter pair had returned with fruitful results. Xiaocao tottered with a bucket full of small fish as she walked under the golden sunset. The reflection of the sunset caused her little face to appear flushed, while her eyes were tinted with a gold color.

Yu Hai carried two buckets full of fish and limped behind her. From time to time, he would ask, "Are you tired? If you can't carry it, give it to Father. My left hand is still empty!"

"I can carry it!" Xiaocao carried the bucket with a broad smile. Although her shoes got wet due to the swaying of the bucket and the heavy bucket in her hands hurt her arms, she was still very happy. Today, the distance between her and her father seemed to have drawn closer. Their originally weak affection seemed to have gradually gotten stronger because of her father's safeguard.

Madam Liu, who had already finished braising the pig head and large intestines, finally noticed that the room was empty when she went to call Xiaocao for dinner. The kang bed was cold and the quilt was neatly folded. Just as she was wondering where her daughter went, she heard the laughter of her husband and daughter from the backyard.

Madam Liu went around the house and saw the father-daughter pair coming in with buckets in their hands and a broad smile on their faces. She couldn't contain the hint of smile in her eyes, yet she said, "Cao'er, didn't I tell you to rest? Why did you go fishing again? Husband, you too! Don't you know how to care for the child? Don't tire out our daughter!"

"Mother! I'm not tired! Besides, I didn't do much and just sat on shore and played. Father was the one who caught all these fish! Look! We also caught a big fish. We have an extra dish for dinner!" Xiaocao grinned proudly.

Madam Liu smiled helplessly and walked over to her. She took the bucket in Xiaocao's hands and poured the contents into the cracked vat in the backyard. After that, she lightly tapped her forehead and said, "You! You're risking your life for money! Are you hungry? Let's not wait for Xiaolian and Shitou and eat first..."

“Let's wait until they come back and eat together! They will be back soon. It's more lively when the whole family eats together! I'll go make a fish head stew and braised fish fillet. Let's eat a good meal tonight!” Within her heart, Xiaocao had gradually regarded this place as her home. She believed that with her own efforts, this family would surely get better and better.

Chapter 89 – Tuition

In the evening, the whole family sat around a round table. They were drinking delicious fish head stew and eating fragrant braised fish, while happily talking about their results for today.

“Second Sister! At the beginning, when we were selling the pickled fish, everyone just looked at the fish and was unwilling to buy them because the fish were too small. So, I took a small one and ate it in front of them. I told them that the fish bones had become very crispy and tender, so it was alright to eat them. After that, they were finally willing to take out money and buy them.” Little Shitou drank a big mouthful of the fish stew and felt extremely pleased in his heart. A month ago, the crude grain pancakes had never been able to satisfy his hunger. When had he ever lived such a good life, to be able to eat fish every day?

“At the beginning, I was really worried because they didn't buy much. Fortunately, those who bought the pickled fish all said it was very tasty. Many of them also bought another one to take home for their children to eat! Uncle Hao bought five servings at once. He ate one himself and took the rest back home. He said that there was a lot of work at the docks recently, so he wanted to spend the money that he had earned on his family. With such cheap and delicious food, if he didn't buy some back, he will be scolded by Auntie Hao!”

Little Shitou's crisp voice filled the entire room, while everyone looked at him with a smile. Happiness was really just that simple...

“More than a hundred fish were completely sold out in less than thirty minutes. The leader of another group of dockers, Brother Six, also bought five servings. Foreman Sun almost fought with him in order to get the last portion of pickled fish!” Little Shitou proudly said, “So, I divided the last serving of fish and gave a free fish to each of them to put an end to the fight. Second Sister, I'm really clever, right?!”

Xiaocao tapped the tip of his nose and praised him, “Yes! Our family's Shitou is the best. You're only six, but you're already so smart. It's no wonder that Teacher Yuan, who has such discerning eyes, likes you!”

Little Shitou felt even more proud of himself and kept chattering endlessly. In the end, he squinted his smiling eyes and said, “Second Sister, guess how much money we earned at the docks today? Guess...”

Xiaocao was very clear about the quantity of fish they had. But, she deliberately frowned, pretended as if she was thinking very hard, and intentionally guessed the wrong amount, "Fifty copper coins? At most sixty copper coins..."

Little Shitou couldn't restrain his excitement and immediately reported today's earnings, "No, you're wrong! It's one tael and seventy-eight copper coins!! Look, this is one tael! It's my first time seeing so much money. The shiny silver is so beautiful!"

The little fellow impatiently took out the purse that he had been holding in front of his chest. He took out the piece of silver and put it on the table. The family gathered around and looked at the money with a surprised expression.

Xiaocao wondered, "Xiaolian, Shitou, did you guys meet a tycoon this time? To pay you one tael, he's even more generous than Fatty Jin from this morning."

Little Shitou was very pleased with himself as he touched the silver bits. His eyes were narrowed as he smiled, "Second Sister, what's a tycoon? Is it edible?"

Xiaolian glanced at him and said, "Let me explain instead. As soon as we reached the docks, we encountered the son of the county magistrate. He had even mistaken me for you. Young Master Wu had gone to the docks to pick someone up. He tasted our pickled fish and thought that it tasted very good, so he packed some to go. However, he had come out in haste and didn't bring any loose change. He also didn't bring a manservant with him, so he just gave us a piece of silver. I told him that I didn't have enough change for him, but the ship he was waiting for had arrived. Thus, he told us to just keep the change."

"Hehe, we sold five servings of pickled fish for one tael. It would be great if we can encounter such a foolishly-generous spender every day!" It was unknown where Little Shitou had learned the term 'foolishly-generous spender', but he had used it in quite a fitting situation.

Madam Liu scolded him jokingly, "You little money-grubber! You were lucky to have met two generous, wealthy people today. But, this lucky encounter was like a pie-in-the-sky. Do you really think it will happen every day? I'll keep this piece of silver for you. In a few days, when you go study in town, you can also go pay the tuition!"

Since they had even for the first month's schooling fees, Little Shitou felt even more elated. He was so lively for the entire night that he couldn't even fall asleep.

After dinner, Xiaocao took Madam Liu and Xiaolian and taught them how to make blood sausage. She had already sliced up the clotted pig blood and boiled a large bowl of plain pork broth with various seasonings. After it cooled down, she added it into the pig blood. After that, she put in chives and stirred it evenly. Afterwards, she stuffed it into the cleaned small intestine and tied it securely with a string. Xiaocao had purposely saved the pig's small intestine by instructing her mother not to put it in with the rest of the braised food.

After stuffing the blood sausages, cook it in plain water and then stew it on low heat for fifteen minutes. When it was ready, soak it in cold water until it cooled down. When cooled, remove the string before eating. The method of making blood sausage was relatively easy, and the taste depended on the combination of seasonings used for the plain pork broth. However, Madam Liu and Xiaolian were both people who constantly worked in the kitchen. Thus, they had swiftly mastered the ratio needed for the seasonings.

She drank a cup of highly concentrated mystic-stone water before bed and had a great sleep. On the next morning, Xiaocao felt energized and refreshed. The fatigue on her body had been swept away. Today, she needed to bring a lot more food to sell at the docks. In addition to the braised pig head, large intestine, stomach, and blood sausage, there was also over a hundred small fish.

In the past two days, according to Xiaocao's observation, there would be at least two to three hundred dockers transporting goods on the docks. Grandpa Liu, who sold noodles, said that February and March were the busiest months at the docks. Most businesses didn't transport goods in December and January. The New Year celebrations was one of the reasons. The other reason was because the coastal waters of the northern regions were frozen, making it difficult for ships to sail. So, in February and March, when the weather was warming up again, the merchants began transporting goods that they had accumulated over the winter from the south to the north.

Her one copper coin braised food was delicious and cheap, so she wasn't worried about not being able to sell them whatsoever!

"Cao'er, Father will go borrow a handcart from your Uncle Qian. Today, let's go to the docks together!" Yu Hai saw that the braised food and pickled fish had filled two baskets and looked quite heavy. He was afraid that the two kids would be tired, so he suggested.

Xiaocao called for the little divine in her mind, [Little Glutinous Dumpling, can you hear me?]

[What do you want? I'm sleeping, so stop bothering me!] The little divine stone grumpily said.

[I'll just bother you for a moment with a question. With the current condition of my father's leg, can he walk for a long time?] Xiaocao felt somewhat worried and asked.

Little Divine Stone hmphed and said, [His leg, veins, and bones have all grown well. More exercise is beneficial to his recovery process. Don't worry, it's fine for him to go to the docks.]

Madam Liu, who was beside him, asked with concern, "Is your leg okay? Don't people say that it takes a hundred days to recover after injuring the veins and bones. It hasn't even been a month yet, will you really be alright?"

Yu Hai kicked his left leg and said, "It's my own leg, so I'm very clear about its condition. As long as I don't do any heavy labor, it should be fine. I'm just pushing two baskets while walking, so it's alright..."

Under his insistence, Madam Liu had no choice but to let him go. When they were leaving, she reminded Xiaocao to help her father push the cart and don't let him do too much work.

The handcart was a wooden wheelbarrow. Yu Hai hung the cart's rope on his shoulder and firmly held onto the handles with his strong hands. He strode forward as he steadily pushed the handcart. Despite his limp, his legs were longer than Xiaocao's, so his one step was two or three steps for her! Xiaocao could barely catch up to her father, let alone help him push the handcart.

Yu Hai, who was used to doing hard labor, had been idling at home for nearly a month and felt that his bones were rusting. He finally had the chance to help out, so his whole body was naturally full of energy. He turned around and saw his daughter panting for breath, so he stopped and said with a smile, "Come up, Father will push you!"

Xiaocao hastily shook her head and said, "Father, I can walk myself! Your leg hasn't fully recovered yet and you're also pushing a cart full of braised food..."

Before she had even finished speaking, her father had already lifted her up with one arm and placed her on the wheelbarrow. Although she had been carried several times in the past half of a year since she had transmigrated, it was the first time that he had slipped her under his armpit and lifted her up. Xiaocao felt slightly embarrassed and looked around to make sure no one saw it.

“Ha, do you really think that you can tire me out with that weight of yours? Cao'er, you need to eat more. You only have bones on your body and there's barely any meat!” Yu Hai's heart ached and felt remorseful as he nagged. In his mind, he planned to buy some white rice and wheat flour back for the children after they finished selling today's braised food. It was the children's growth period, so they shouldn't eat coarse grain flatbread all the time like them...

Being escorted by her father, Xiaocao walked for a while, and also sat on the cart that her father pushed for a while. When they were resting on the road, she eagerly helped massage her father's left leg and asked Little Divine Stone to quickly help relieve his fatigue. It was still early when they arrived at the docks.

“Good morning, Grandpa Liu!” Xiaocao cheerfully greeted the kind and gentle old grandfather. These past few days, her business had been booming, so it was inevitable that some people were green with envy, especially those who sold pickled vegetables and stir-fried dishes. From time to time, they would make jealous remarks, but Xiaocao was too lazy to argue with them and just ignored them. Grandpa Liu was the only one who was kind to her from the beginning to the end. He would always warmly bring a stool over and let the siblings rest on it.

Grandpa Liu, who was working hard on kneading the dough, heard the sound and looked up. He smiled and said, “Oh, it's Xiaocao. You came pretty early today. Are you tired? Come sit down and rest for a while. Oh? Little Shitou didn't come with you today?”

“No! My father came with me today!” Xiaocao smiled as she pointed to Yu Hai, who was parking the handcart by the roadside.

Old Liu looked at Yu Hai, who had limped over. A sense of realization flashed in his mind: 'It's no wonder that they would allow two young children to come and sell things. It turns out that their father's leg...'

“Xiaocao's father, quickly come and rest. You must be tired after walking such a long way.” Grandma Liu came out of the shack and greeted him warmly.

Yu Hai was stunned for a moment, but he immediately smiled and thanked them, “Thank you! You must be the Grandpa Liu and Grandma Liu that Xiaocao often mentions? I must thank you two elders for taking care of them these past two days. Many thanks, many thanks!”

“No need to thank us! Xiaocao and her younger brother are both very capable. Ever since she came here, my noodle business has been doing much better!” Old Liu wiped his hands and exclaimed.

He was right. In the past, there wasn't anything good to eat at the docks. Thus, most of the workers on the docks usually brought food from home. At most, a few people would pool in some money and buy some pickled vegetables to eat together. However, most people wouldn't even come to this side at all.

Ever since Xiaocao's one copper coin meat dish became popular among the dockers, many people who had bought the meat dish would also buy a bowl of hot noodles from the nearby noodle stall. It was much better to eat a warm bowl of noodles with meat dish than to eat the hard to swallow dried rations. Other than the noodle stalls, the business of the steamed buns stalls nearby had also gotten a lot better. However, those who sold pickled vegetables were full of resentment.

Chapter 90 – Brother Six

With Foreman Sun's help, Xiaocao's eldest uncle and eldest cousin from the Liu Family were able to find work every day. At times, they would also bring her second uncle with them. They earned over a hundred copper coins per person every day. Eldest Aunt also stopped selling pickled vegetables since she wasn't able to make much money from selling them anyways...

Seeing that her father was chatting fervently with Grandpa Liu, Xiaocao stood up and strolled around. During these past couple of days, she had been focused on earning money and hadn't had the time to tour the docks.

Tanggu Docks had only begun to develop in the past few years after the current emperor ascended the throne. When the current emperor was still a teenager, he had liked venturing in the seas. He had also personally supervised the making of ocean-going vessels. After he ascended the throne, he vigorously developed ocean shipping and formed a strong navy to combat pirates and protect the shipping vessels. As a result, the shipping industry had flourished in the past five or six years.

As the closest docks to the capital, the development of Tanggu Docks was naturally a matter of course. But, it was still a rather new wharf. Although it was big, it looked very simple and many of the constructions hadn't been completed. However, merchants with foresight seemed to have set their eyes on the docks. Allegedly, the Zhou Family had already selected a location near the docks to build a branch of Zhenxiu Restaurant.

As Xiaocao wandered around, she had walked far from Grandpa Liu's noodle stall and arrived at the place where the dockers were hired. It was the most lively here every day before dawn. Over a hundred short-term laborers would gather here, waiting to be selected by the foreman. However, at this time, people were already busily working on the docks, so there was barely anyone here now.

“Hey! Your name's Xiaocao... right?” Several guys, who appeared like good-for-nothing rogues, blocked her path.

Yu Xiaocao looked around and frowned inwardly. She warily looked at the guy with a face that says 'I'm a bad guy', and asked, “What can I do for you?”

The leader, who wore a cotton-padded jacket that was seventy percent new, had his hands tucked in his sleeves and coldly stared at Xiaocao with his rat-like eyes. With a crafty smile on his face, he said, “I heard that your one copper coin meat dish is selling pretty well at the docks.”

“It's nothing special. It might seem like I'm selling a lot, but we sell it for a cheap price and don't get much profit. So, we don't earn much!” Xiaocao didn't believe he was here to congratulate her on her prospering business, so she secretly stayed alert.

Behind the rat's eye, a skinny guy with a protruding mouth and ape-like chin jumped out and shouted, “Who cares if you earn any profit! You're selling things on our Brother Shark's turf! Did you pay respect to the boss? Did you pay the protection fee yet?”

Yu Xiaocao understood very clearly now. Her business had been doing too well these past two days and caused others to become envious. Thus, people had come to extort money! She looked around and moaned in her heart. She couldn't find a single person nearby at this time. What should she do?

“Protection fee? I'm new here and haven't heard anything about needing to pay a protection fee in order to do business on the docks.” Yu Xiaocao stalled for time as she tried to think of ways to get away from this group of scoundrels.

The man who was known as Brother Shark showed a thug-like smile and said, “Just because you didn't hear about it, doesn't mean that it doesn't exist! Stop with the bullshit and give me the money!”

“Okay, okay! I'll pay... How much do I need to pay?” Xiaocao showed weakness in order lower her opponent's guard.

Brother Shark and Skinny Monkey looked at each other triumphantly, and then demanded an exorbitant price, “Ten copper coins for a day. If you're paying monthly, we'll just take two hundred copper coins per month!”

Shit! Two hundred copper coins? Even the best business on the docks wouldn't be able to pay two hundred copper coins a month for a protection fee! It seemed like these local bullies only aimed at her.

Yu Xiaocao pretended to be terrified, glanced at the location of the pier and her father, and inwardly measured the shortest distance to get there. With a sobbing tone, she said, “Big brothers! This little sister has just arrived today. I haven't even opened my business yet, so where would I get ten copper coins to give you? How about... after I finish selling the meat dishes today, I'll pay the monthly fee all at once. What do you guys think?”

Skinny Monkey moved closer to Brother Shark and whispered into his ear, “This brat came with a tall and strong-looking man today. If we let her go back, it will be over then!”

These guys were lazy good-for-nothing punks around the docks. They usually bullied the weak and feared the strong. They also occasionally engaged in petty theft. They had extorted money from nearly all the old, weak, women, and children who sold goods on the docks. Most of the peddlers had come from nearby villages, so they didn't dare to speak out against these local hoodlums.

There were some bailiffs who maintained order at the docks. However, these local rogues always acted very good when the bailiffs patrolled the area. They would hide in some unknown corner and only come out when the bailiffs were gone. Thus, most of the people who were blackmailed would just spend some money as a way to buy peace.

This group of hoodlums had heard from an unknown source about the Yu Siblings's recently booming business. They had planned to wait until the siblings finished selling their food, and then rob all their money by coaxing and threatening them. But, they hadn't expected that an adult would come along today. Moreover, he was tall and strong and didn't seem like someone they could bully. Hence, they changed their plans, stopped the little girl, and tried to extort as much money as possible.

“How much money do you have on you? Give them all to me!” Brother Shark fiercely demanded.

Xiaocao shook her head timidly and quietly moved to the side. As if she was about to cry, she said, “My father has the money. I don't have a single penny on me. Big brothers, please let me go. I really don't have any money...”

As she spoke, she suddenly squatted on the ground and grabbed some sand. She threw it at the hoodlums' faces, and then hastily ran towards the docks with all her might.

She used all the strength in her body, while only thinking about one thing—run, run! As long as she ran to a crowded place, these rascals wouldn't dare to be so reckless.

However, reality was cruel. With Xiaocao's short legs, how would she be able to outrun several adult men? It only took a few steps for them to catch up with her.

Being surrounded once again, Xiaocao felt vexed and cursed in her heart: Damn it! It seems like she couldn't avoid getting a beating.

Brother Shark, who was supported by Skinny Monkey, rubbed his eyes with one hand and started swearing. Earlier, Xiaocao had thrown all the sand at his face, so he couldn't see clearly now.

“Damned brat! You're refusing a toast and asking to be forced to drink a forfeit! Go and teach her a lesson!!” Brother Shark's eyes were in pain, so he kept tearing up and couldn't see anything. Thus, he angrily shouted.

“Ah!”

“Ai-yo!!”

“Mother, save me!”

At the beginning, Brother Shark was very proud and confident. 'That damned brat actually dared to throw sand at me! She needs to be taught a lesson!'

Uh? Something wasn't right! Why do the screams sound so familiar, as if they were coming from his group of buddies? What was going on?

“Six... Brother Six...” Beside him, Monkey's stuttering voice could be heard and his hand that was supporting him was also shaking incessantly...

After Shark issued the order, Xiaocao immediately held her head and squatted down. She was waiting to feel the pain on her body, but the punch and kicks that she had anticipated didn't happen. She curiously looked up upon hearing a series of screams and noticed that the hooligans were all lying on the ground, wailing in pain.

She blinked a few times and looked at the tall figure in front of her—broad shoulders, slender figure, half-old clothes that couldn't hide his charisma. Wow! Was this the legendary scenario of 'a hero rescuing a beauty'? Cough, cough... Okay, it was more of 'a hero rescuing a little girl' right now...

“Six... Brother Six...” She saw Skinny Monkey shaking like a quail, and he was so scared that he just hadn't pee his pants yet. She was even more curious about the identity of the hero who saved her.

Xiaocao stood up and watched as the hero kicked them one by one and sent Skinny Monkey and Shark flying. She worshiped him even more within her heart.

The pain in his stomach caused Shark's tears and snot to all flow out. His tears finally washed out the sand in his eyes. He blinked his red and swollen eyes vigorously and finally saw the person who had come to fight for justice. Enduring the pain, he hastily got up and weakly called out, “Brother Six...”

The man who was called 'Brother Six' didn't have any expression on his cold face. He stared at him with an icy gaze that could almost freeze a person's blood. Brother Shark felt a chill run down his spine and collapsed on the ground like a dead dog.

Who didn't know Brother Six on the docks? He used to be a beggar who had taken food from vicious dogs when he was a child. At the age of ten, with a fierce force, he killed a wolf with his bare hands.

At sixteen, the youth called Liuzi [1], with several brothers of beggar origin, had defeated the tyrant on the docks and opened up the path to his own career. With his ability, he was able to monopolize the docks. But he wasn't greedy and only held onto several important customers. He left the rest to be divided by the other foremen. Later, Foreman Sun gradually accumulated his own network and got rid of a lot of the smaller forces. Over time, the current situation was formed...

Nevertheless, on the docks, the words of the man, who was respectfully known as 'Brother Six', was even more powerful than the bailiffs. Even the bailiffs had to give him some face. The hoodlums on the docks had been beaten up by him in the past, so they were so scared of him that they would run away whenever they saw him.

Shark and Skinny Monkey were one of them. They were merely insignificant people who weren't even qualified to compete with Brother Six, but they had heard of his prestige. They hadn't expected to bump into him today. Skinny Monkey trembled as he thought of Brother Six's cruelty and suddenly felt a warm sensation on the area around his crotch...

"Scram! Don't let me see you guys at the docks anymore, or else..." Brother Six narrowed his eyes, which were fierce like wolves. His voice was light, but the effect was very strong!

Shark promptly got up from the ground and replied, "Yes, yes! We'll scam immediately, scam immediately! We promise to never step onto the docks again..."

He was so scared that his legs became limp. He rolled several times on the ground, and then crawled away on both hands and feet. The others also resented their parents for not giving them two more legs and desperately ran away, as if they were being chased by a hungry wolf that wanted to bite their butts.

“Uh... Thank you!” Yu Xiaocao had heard the name 'Liuzi' from Foreman Sun. She only knew that he was a competitor of Foreman Sun and didn't know anything else. Based on those rascals' attitude, this Liuzi definitely wasn't someone easy to deal with.

Brother Six turned around slowly and lightly nodded at her. Xiaocao finally had a clear look at his face. He had profound facial features. His eyes and eyebrows made him look a little mixed. He had a tall nose and slightly thin lips. He had uniformly tanned skin due to long-term exposure to the sea breeze and sun. If it weren't for the scar stretching from his left eyebrow to the corner of his lips on the right side of his face, he would definitely be a super icy, handsome man.