

Gold Chapter 91

Chapter 91

Brother Six keenly caught the brief expression that flickered through Xiaocao's eyes. It looked like she was surprised? He barely restrained his desire to rub at the scars on his face and a feeling of confused doubt settled into his heart. Didn't they already meet each other yesterday afternoon? At that time, the little girl had been so frightened by his facial scars that her face had turned ghost white. How come her reaction today to his face, which was scary enough to make any little kid weep, was simply surprise? He must have misinterpreted her expression!

He briefly glanced at Xiaocao and thought about saying something. In the end, he decided to stay silent and turned around to slowly walk towards the area where people were selling breakfast. Xiaocao looked around her and noticed that not a soul was in sight and quickly followed behind him. She definitely didn't want to stay in that area by herself. If that group of scoundrels suddenly came back looking for blood, then she was dead meat in their hands.

Since Xiaocao was gone for a long time, Yu Hai was starting to get antsy waiting for her by the noodle stand. When he saw his daughter coming back with her tail between her legs next to a stern and ferocious looking man with facial scars, his first thought was that his beloved daughter was being bullied. He quickly limped forward and pushed his daughter behind him. He looked at Old Six warily and said, "Don't be scared, daughter. Father is here and I definitely won't let anyone bully you!"

Xiaocao simultaneously felt touched and tickled by his protectiveness. She smiled apologetically at Brother Six, pulled her father back to the stool to sit down, and explained, "Father, Brother Six wasn't giving me problems. On the contrary, he had just saved me from bullies!"

After that, she broadly sketched out what had happened during that heart-pounding scenario to her father. Yu Hai pulled on her hand and inspected her from head to toe. Only after he didn't find anything out of the ordinary did he slightly relax a bit and say, "The docks are very chaotic, so in the future you're not allowed to wander around randomly! Brother, I was rude to you earlier, but thank you very much for saving my daughter!"

Brother Six's face was as expressionless as before, and he only lightly nodded his head in reply. He opened his mouth for the first time to speak to Old Liu, "I'd like a bowl of noodles in soup without any bean flour noodles..."

Old Liu quickly ripped a piece of dough from a small bowl and skillfully rolled and cut the dough into sections. Within a short period of time, a bowl of delicious noodles was done.

At this moment, Yu Hai hastily took out a portion of braised pig head meat and a portion of pickled fish from the basket. He then placed them both in front of Brother Six's bowl and said, "Brother, eat these two dishes with your noodles. Take them as a token of my gratitude for saving my daughter's life earlier."

Brother Six slightly raised his eyebrows but didn't refuse the offer. However, when he finished eating and left, he had placed two copper coins on the table. When Yu Hai noticed the coins, he wanted to chase after the man to return the money but was stopped by Xiaocao who said, "Father, let it be. He doesn't lack these two copper coins. Get ready, it's almost time for the dockworkers' break to eat their meals!"

Sure enough, when they looked towards the direction of the wharf, they saw a group of rough, old men chattering and laughing as they walked over. A few people who were more impatient walked briskly the whole way and started calling out to Xiaocao from far away, "Xiaocao, give me two portions of braised pig head meat, I want the fatty portions!"

"Xiaocao, Xiaocao! I want a portion of the pig intestines and one of the tripe..."

"Do you have any of the fish from yesterday? I want two of those!"

Despite having heard his son describe the situation over and over to him, Yu Hai was shocked when he saw it in person.

However, Xiaocao had become accustomed to this and calmly dealt with the crowd while also advertising her new product, "Old Uncle Hao, today I also made a new type of food. This is called blood sausage, do you want to buy a portion to try?"

"You have another new type of braised food? Give me a portion of blood sausage!" hollered a young fellow. He was behind the crowd of people surrounding her, and, despite his attempts at jumping around to get to the front, he was unable to squeeze through.

"Give me a portion to try, too!"

"Those of you in the front, don't buy too many at once and leave me a portion of the blood sausages, ah! I absolutely believe in Xiaocao's cooking skills!"

The father and daughter pair worked together to receive the money until their hands started cramping from the effort. They were busy for over an hour without any chance to take a quick breather or break. The crowd gradually dispersed when the basket had about a tenth of the original amount of braised food left.

At this point, Old Liu's noodle stall was also full of people at the tables eating noodles. The father and daughter pair could only find a rock at the side of the road to sit on to rest their feet. Grandma Liu was busy but sent the two of them each a bowl of steaming hot noodle soup. She smiled and said, "Yu Hai, Xiaocao, you two must be thirsty, right? Drink a mouthful of noodle soup and let it wet your throats."

"Thank you, Grandma Liu. There's no need to wait on us, I'm sure you have other things to do right?" Xiaocao took the two bowls from the old woman and gave one of them to her father. The other one she held in her hands as she drank in small sips from the bowl.

At this time, Xiaocao noticed that her Eldest Uncle, Liu Pei, Second Uncle, Liu Han, and her oldest male cousin, Liu Zhiwei, were at a nearby congee stall eating food. She put down her bowl of soup and took out a portion of pickled fish, blood sausage, and braised pig head meat to take over there.

"Eldest Uncle, Second Uncle, Oldest Cousin, you are all eating breakfast right now...Second Uncle, did you come to the docks to find work today too?" Xiaocao greeted the men warmly. In the previous two days, she had only seen Eldest Uncle with Oldest Cousin in the area. This was the first time she had seen Second Uncle at the docks.

Liu Pei and Liu Han raised their heads and grinned at her, "Hey, Xiaocao. How's the business going today? Look, your head is full of sweat, you must be exhausted right?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine! Today my father came with me as well. Eldest Uncle and Second Uncle, here's some of the braised food and pickled fish I made. You should all try some and see how it tastes. I didn't make enough the past two days so I couldn't leave you guys any..." Xiaocao replied somewhat bashfully.

The honest and timid Liu Han shook his hand hastily and said, "Your eldest aunt had packed us some salted vegetables. Earlier I noticed that your braised food sells really well here, so you should keep the food to make money. Your family has a great need for money at the moment..."

Xiaocao smiled, "I made a bit too much food today, so there's still some left in my basket! When we were remodeling the house, Eldest Uncle and Second Uncle were both a great help to us. It's right and necessary that I repay your kindness with my feelings of respect. Please take the food. Oldest Cousin, you should try this pickled fish, I bet you'll really like the taste."

The three men from the Liu Family only brought a few pancakes made from coarse grain and three salted radishes from home for breakfast. At the congee stall, they also bought three bowls of bean soup for one copper coin apiece. Although Liu Zhiwei had a tall and imposing figure, he was only around fourteen to fifteen years of age. This was the time when boys like him constantly hungered for food to eat.

Had the person selling the braised food for one copper coin a portion not been Xiaocao, he would have gone over earlier to queue for the food. Sometimes, he would see his fellow dock workers eating the braised food with gusto, and he could catch a whiff of its tantalizing and appetizing smell. Those were the times when he almost couldn't keep the drool in his mouth.

When he noticed that Xiaocao had already opened the oiled paper packets and the tempting, savory smell of the braised food hit his nose, Liu Zhiwei had to swallow down the saliva that flooded his mouth. He glanced at his father and older uncle. His eyes glinted with a look of pure envy that was the exact same look Little Shitou had whenever he wanted to eat something.

Xiaocao stifled her desire to burst out laughing and snatched the pancake from his hand. She unfolded it flat and put a piece of stir-fried fish and a couple pieces of fatty pig head meat in the middle. She then gently placed the food back in his hands and said, "Oldest Cousin, try it! This was all made by me..."

Back by the noodle stall, Yu Hai had a few more customers come up to him to buy food. After that, other than the portion of braised food reserved for Foreman Sun, the rest of the food had pretty much been sold out. He placed the basket back on the wheelbarrow and walked over to where Xiaocao and the others were. He also urged the men when he got there, "Eldest Brother-in-law, Second Older Brother-in-law, it's only three copper coins worth of food. Xiaocao is showing her filial respect to you, so just eat some!"

Seeing that they couldn't refuse the offer, Liu Pei and Liu Han each used a pair of chopsticks to pick up a piece of braised pig head meat and placed it into their mouths to slowly savor. A burst of delicious flavor hit their tongues. They had never eaten anything so delicious, so it prompted them both to praise the food endlessly. The two brothers then tried only a bite or two of the other two dishes. They left the rest of the food for Liu Zhiwei to eat, as he was still a growing adolescent.

After Liu Pei finished eating breakfast, he took a look at his younger brother-in-law's leg. With sincere concern, he asked, "I've been a bit busy lately, so I haven't had the time to visit you. Does your leg give you any problems after walking so far a distance?"

Yu Hai slapped his left leg a couple of times and grinned, "Not a problem at all! The doctor in town even told me to walk a bit more on it when I have the time! It's all thanks to Xiaocao for massaging my leg every night. Otherwise, I don't think my leg would get better so quickly! Who knows, maybe after more time passes, I can also go to the docks to find some work."

The two brothers from the Liu Family complimented their younger sister and brother-in-law for raising such an obedient and sweet daughter. Yu Hai felt more happy from hearing the praises than he did about his own leg getting better.

The small group of people chatted for a little bit more until it was time to start working again. Yu Hai and his daughter had also gotten enough rest during this interlude. They left the saved portion of braised food for Foreman Sun at Old Liu's noodle stand and prepared to go into town with their wheelbarrow to buy some stuff at the town's markets.

At this point, the solemn looking Brother Six came over. He threw some silver bits at Xiaocao and said, "Tomorrow I have an important client coming over. Are you able to help me prepare some food for them?"

Xiaocao looked at the money in her hands and estimated that it must be around two taels worth of money. She proceeded to ask him more details about his clients. How many people did he plan on entertaining? Were they southerners or northerners? Did they have any specific tastes or requests regarding their food? Brother Six answered her questions one by one. After that, Xiaocao had a good idea on what she needed to prepare.

At this time, Foreman Sun hurriedly rushed over from the docks to here and clearly didn't take any time to catch his breath. He looked at the silver bits in Xiaocao's hands and frowned, "What's going on,

Xiaocao? Is there someone trying to cause trouble for you here? If so, don't feel shy to tell me. You have me behind you!"

Brother Six stared at him with an imperceptible smile on his face until Foreman Sun started to feel uncomfortable. Only then did Brother Six speak, "Foreman Sun, I know what you're thinking about! The larger one's head is, the larger the hat you'll have to wear! Beware of biting off more than you can chew! Xiaocao is someone who does business with everyone and is not just an instrument for you to use to bring in clients! Old Sun, tomorrow's customer isn't someone you can steal just because you want to!"

Foreman Sun rubbed his nose out of embarrassment and said, "Ah Liuzi, don't be so petty! Xiaocao has helped me a bit, so I was afraid that she was being bullied by others..."

Brother Six glanced at him with disinterest and then returned his gaze back on Xiaocao. He said, "Then I'll be counting on you tomorrow..." After that, he turned and left the area.

Foreman Sun took offense to his attitude and sneered while quietly grumbling, "What's he's so proud about? If I had come to the docks to work two years earlier, then I wouldn't have to deal with your blustering—Xiaocao, what did that stupid Liuzi want you to do for him? He gave you so much money, he's not asking you to do something illegal, right?"

Xiaocao looked at him with a faint smile on her face and said, "Older Uncle Sun, he was merely admiring my culinary talent and wanted me to make some delicious food for him tomorrow. He gave me this money to buy ingredients...Older Uncle, the braised food you reserved is back at Grandpa Liu's place. It's getting late, I need to go into town and restock my seasoning and condiment supplies."

Xiaocao's clear and bright eyes seemed to pierce through Foreman Sun's small schemes, and he replied with slight embarrassment, "Then go! Here's the money I owe you for the food..."

It wasn't a special market day at the markets at the docks today, so there weren't a lot of people browsing. Most of the shops were open at the market, and Butcher Wang's meat shop was one of those open stalls.

"Xiaocao, are you here to buy some another pig head and pig offal? How was business today? This uncle has heard that your one copper coin per meat dish is very popular at the docks" Butcher Wang smiled genially as he greeted her.

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Every day Butcher Wang slaughtered a pig. Half of the pig meat went to the restaurants in the area, and the other half was sold at his store. By the time the day ended, most of the other half of meat had been bought out.

As usual, Xiaocao spent six copper coins to buy a pig head. For the tripe and intestines, she persisted on giving him four copper coins for them. As for the pig's blood, Butcher Wang insisted on giving it to her for free.

After lightly rubbing at the silver pieces in the purse that Brother Six had given her, she also bought two catties of pork belly and a large pork bone. Butcher Wang looked at her in surprise and said, "You're buying a lot of meat today. Are you guys having guests over?"

Xiaocao didn't bother explaining and only smiled, "Mhm, I need to take care of a visitor who has some status, so I need to get some stuff to make the table more presentable!"

The bought ingredients were placed in the wheelbarrow that Yu Hai was pushing. She then led them into a shop in town that sold rice and other grains. As they entered the store, they could hear people making a racket. The sounds of the scolding voice of an adult and the wailing of child blended together into a cacophony.

Xiaocao stood at the entrance, listening for a bit. Apparently, the child of the family that ran the store was naughty and accidentally spilled water on a bag of glutinous rice. Although the store's manager did his best to save the rice, over ten catties of rice had been soaked by the water. Everyone knew that rice that had been soaked in water was no good. Even after letting it dry, the rice would still crumble into pieces and powder. Thus, over seventeen to eighteen catties of glutinous rice were no longer sellable!

The shopkeeper's entire family relied on the income from this tiny rice and grain store, and were only barely able to make it from month to month. Suddenly losing seventeen to eighteen catties of glutinous rice meant that they were losing over a hundred copper coins of sales. How could the manager not feel his heart bleed a little? However, on the other hand, he couldn't bear to hit his child, so he could only give the boy a rough scolding.

"Uncle Shopkeeper, I offer you three copper coins per catty for all of this wet glutinous rice. Are you willing to sell it to me?" Xiaocao suddenly interjected after assessing the situation.

Although the sound of her voice wasn't very loud, the noise in the store abruptly cut off and it became silent. The shopkeeper looked at her and then glanced at the adult behind her and softly replied, "Little girl, once the rice gets soaked with water, it won't taste good anymore..."

"Just because it doesn't taste good doesn't mean it isn't edible, right? Shopkeeper Uncle, you can't sell this rice anymore, how about you just give to me at a cheap price? Xiaocao smiled sweetly.

Just as the owner of the rice shop wanted to say something, his wife pulled on his sleeve and spoke instead, "Little girl, this glutinous rice is usually eight to nine copper coins a catty. If you want all of it, the lowest we can go is five copper coins a catty. Otherwise, we'd be better off leaving it for ourselves to eat!"

The owner of the stall was angry and anxious at the same time. He stared at his wife helplessly in worry. However, his wife glared at him fiercely, and the look in her eyes seemed to say, 'if you dare to say anything, then I'll definitely have something to say to you'.

Xiaocao shrugged her shoulders and replied, "If that's the case, then please keep the rice for yourselves to eat! Father, let's go to that other rice stall to take a look..."

The shopkeeper hastily threw off his wife's hand. He rushed forward to block their way and said, "Don't leave! Three copper coins a catty it is, three copper coins a catty it is! There's nineteen catties of wet glutinous rice altogether, and I'll even throw in one catty for free..."

Seeing that the shopkeeper was at least honest and sincere, she gave him fifty-four copper coins and had her father load all of the glutinous rice onto their wheelbarrow. She also asked them how much the wheat flour and regular rice cost, and thought the prices were quite reasonable. So she also bought ten catties of wheat flour and five catties of rice. Thus, she had suddenly spent a hundred and thirty copper coins at the grain store alone.

Luckily, their business had gone pretty well today, and they had earned over two hundred copper coins alone from selling the braised food. If she added the two taels of silver bits that Brother Six gave her, Xiaocao didn't feel bad about spending so much money.

After they stepped out of the rice and grain store, Xiaocao also went to a general goods shop to replenish a small number of seasonings and condiments for the family. She even reluctantly fished out some money to buy half a catty of white sugar. Now, she had pretty much spent all of the money she had earned from selling braised food. However, when she thought about how all of these seasonings would last her for at least half a month, she immediately felt happier at the thought of all the taels she could earn from them.

Yu Hai didn't say a single word as he watched his daughter spend money as if it was water. In fact, the money they had earned that morning hadn't even had a chance to get warmed up in their hands before it all went out. Despite that, not a peep came out of his mouth even when she was buying glutinous rice that had been soaked with water.

On their way, it was Xiaocao who finally asked him why cheerfully, "Father, how come you didn't stop me when I was buying glutinous rice that had been soaked?"

Yu Hai pushed the wheelbarrow with his daughter in it with a satisfied expression and smiled, "Whatever my Xiaocao buys definitely has its uses. Father knows you're not a child who spends money recklessly. Then again, even if you couldn't do anything with the glutinous rice, it still wouldn't go to waste. Even bits and powdery pieces of glutinous rice can be used to make a congee that is more tasty than pancakes made from bean flour!"

Xiaocao grinned, "Thank you Father for trusting me. I really do have a good idea for this rice! Brother Six asked me to help him create a table of dishes for his guest. I want to make something special and unique. I need to help him look good, especially since he saved me from those hooligans. My plan is to make pearl meatballs with them. They'll be fragrant and tasty, shiny and pure, and will be considered a top notch dish whether you're judging it for looks or taste. His clients will definitely like them. If you grind the glutinous rice into glutinous rice flour, it can be used to make desserts...also, also, making some pig's blood glutinous rice cake will also be quite good!"

Seeing his daughter's extremely thin face lit up with happiness as she talked made Yu Hai feel both happy and proud of his daughter—the daughter they had once thought wouldn't reach adulthood has actually stepped it up and shouldered a lot of responsibilities for the family!

When they got home, Xiaocao began to draw up the menu and prepare the ingredients for the food. The pearl meatballs needed small steamer baskets. Something as simple as this type of bamboo tool was not

hard for Yu Hai to make. He took a drink of water and started to chop some bamboo, following the directions his daughter gave him to make the baskets.

Salted egg yolks were needed to make the pearl meatballs so Xiaocao went to the Qian Family and knocked on their door. Madam Mao came out and when she saw Xiaocao, she asked with surprise, "Xiaocao? Why are you at our place at this time?"

Xiaocao straightforwardly replied, "Auntie Qian, do you have any salted duck eggs? If so, can you sell me a few?"

Ducks generally lay fewer eggs in the winter but they were still hard to sell. The problem was that most people didn't like to eat duck eggs because they had an odd smell. In order to keep them from going bad, Madam Mao used coarse sea salt to pickle the duck eggs. She likely still had some left after eating and selling some of her stock.

"I have some! Xiaocao, how many do you want? However, salted duck eggs are one copper coin each, ok!" Madam Mao's personality was just this way. She never tempered her words and always said things in a straightforward way. Xiaocao nodded her head. She actually liked this type of personality. If the duck eggs were offered to her for free, she would feel too uncomfortable to take them. She fished out ten copper coins from her embroidered purse and said, "Auntie Qian, please give me ten for now. In the future if I need more, I'll be sure to come to Auntie's to buy more."

Madam Mao took out eleven duck eggs from the jar and placed them in her basket. She smiled and said, "My son, Qian Wu, went to your house again this morning to beg for food. I don't have anything good in this house, so I'll just give you an extra duck egg!"

Although Madam Mao didn't know how to mince her words, she also wasn't the type of person to take advantage of other people. Qian Wen had eaten two pickled fish earlier that morning which came out to exactly one copper coin. Hence, she gave Xiaocao an extra duck egg.

Xiaocao didn't refuse the offer and thanked Madam Mao instead. When she got home, she went over the menu in her head again. Brother Six's client was a northerner who needed to eat meat with every meal and loved to eat spicy foods...Ah, I got it! Earlier that afternoon, she had caught a large fish at the pond, so she could make that into 'poached sliced fish in hot chili oil' and the fish head could be used to make 'fish head with chopped peppers'!

With the pearl meatballs as one of them, right now Xiaocao had three types of good dishes to serve. Were there any other unique foods she could make? Xiaocao racked her mind for ideas...that's right! Didn't she buy some pork belly earlier? She remembered that Auntie Zhou had made some sun-dried salted vegetables. If she could borrow some, she could make 'steamed pork with salted vegetables'!

These four dishes were all non-vegetarian dishes that contained meat, so she needed to come up with a vegetable based dish to pair with them all! But in this season, where would she get some fresh produce? Xiaocao went into the courtyard to look at the green vegetable shoots that had just opened up under the noon sun. Her heart ached at the thought of harming them so early in their cycle. If she really had no other choice, then she would just pick a few of the larger leaves and make a bowl of 'green vegetables and egg drop soup'.

In a moment she needed to go to the tofu sellers and buy some dried tofu. The plan was to fry it and then marinate it slightly with some of the braising seasoning to successfully make a plate of 'braised dried tofu'. How about...she should also make a plate of spicy and sour cabbage' as well. After all, they were limited by what was in season at this time of year.

Suddenly, a different idea flashed into her head. She could make 'sauteed shredded pork in sweet bean sauce'. This was a dish that she herself had really liked, so it probably meant that they didn't have it in this era, right? It would definitely taste novel and delicious to the people here. Thus, she decided to eliminate 'fish head with chopped peppers' from the menu.

Four meat dishes, two vegetarian dishes, and one soup should be more than enough for two people if she also added a main starch dish—sweet potato with sweet rice flour cakes!

That afternoon, it was still Xiaolian who went with Shitou to the docks to sell the pickled fish. After Yu Hai finished crafting the bamboo steamer baskets, he took the 'fish bait' that Xiaocao had prepared to catch some fish. He had a very important assignment: he needed to catch a fish that weighed at least five catties. The best scenario would be if he could fish up a black carp.

Madam Liu found herself busy with preparing the pig head and intestines that afternoon. They were planning on using those ingredients to make more braised food. When Madam Fang came over to call on them and saw that she had more work than one person could handle, she also rolled up her sleeves to help. They were so busy that the whole household wished they could each grow another pair of arms to finish all that needed to be done.

As for Xiaocao's mission? That was to nap that afternoon as she needed to wake up very early tomorrow to prepare the food for her client.

Surely enough, before the sun came out the next morning, Xiaocao automatically woke up. When she got up from bed, she noticed Madam Liu was extremely busy in the kitchen making breakfast. Madam Liu had wanted to make sure that both her husband and daughter got to eat their fill before they left for the day.

The filling of the pearl meatballs was made of ground meat. Luckily, they didn't need a lot of ground meat, so Madam Liu was able to 'chop chop chop' a few times with a cleaver and the amount they needed was done. Xiaocao seasoned the finely chopped meat and then formed each meatball using some ground meat and half a duck egg's yolk. After forming them, she then rolled each meatball into the glutinous rice and then steamed all of them for about half an hour.

The poached sliced fish in hot chili oil was slightly more complicated to make, and it was also best eaten while hot and steaming. Xiaocao decided to bring the small clay stoves that they had used to concoct her father's medications with them to town. When the moment came, they could use a couple pieces of charcoal and have the dish sit on top of the stove. Being able to eat hot and spicy poached fish with the slightly cold se breeze around them would definitely add to the atmosphere!

With six dishes, one soup, and a staple food to make, Xiaocao and her mother spent almost two hours getting everything ready. Similar to yesterday, Yu Hai pushed the wheelbarrow to town today. The cart held both the braised food they planned to sell today as well as the table of food that Brother Six had reserved.

On the way there, Xiaocao also sat in the wheelbarrow, holding two baskets that held the soup. This was to prevent the soup from spilling out along the way and ruining all of her morning's work!

When they got to the wharf, Brother Six was already there waiting for them. The place he had reserved for entertaining his guest was the area's best building—The Lin Family's Restaurant. Although it was considered the best, in reality it was only three-room building constructed of mud bricks with a tiled roof. Brother Six had reserved the only private room in the restaurant and especially hired Xiaocao bring in the table of food. From this, one could tell that he really regarded this person as an important client.

The customer that Brother Six was inviting over was a steward from Prince Jing's Estate. Imperial Prince Jing was in charge of the vast majority of the country's sea trade. This time, he was managing the transport grain from the south to the north.

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The southern part of the country was a land of fish and rice. For the past two years, the area had favorable weather and since the taxes were relaxed, they even had an abundance of crops leftover. On the other hand, the north had suffered from successive years of drought. Tanggu Town was near the sea, but the farmers in that area had suffered from decreased output from their fields. As for the northwest part of the country, the drought was in full force and nothing could be grown at this point.

Transferring grain from the southern provinces to the north was the brilliant strategic idea of their current emperor. By opening up the imperial treasury, the government was able to buy large amounts of rice and ship it via the sea and river transport to the north. This helped to stabilize grain prices in the drought-stricken areas and lessened the disaster by a good amount. This was also the main reason why there weren't a lot of refugees from the north travelling despite the successive years of drought.

Imperial Prince Jing was the paternal uncle of the current emperor. Although he had mediocre abilities, his heart was in a good place and he was honest. As the person in charge of trade by sea, he often went himself to oversee the operations. In fact, he personally went many times to the south to escort the ships to bring the rice and grain to the north.

The guest that Brother Six was receiving today was a capable person under Imperial Prince Jing. If one wanted to continue to be a part of this shipping business, it was necessary to have a good relationship with this man.

For the sake of keeping the food warm and fresh, Brother Six requested that Xiaocao stay in the building and use the restaurant's facilities on an as needed basis. Xiaocao agreed easily to this request. Her father could more than handle the braised food sales on his own.

By the time the cargo ships had gotten the shore, it was already past breakfast time. Steward Wu from Prince Jing's estate had long gotten tired of spending time on the boat. However, he had previously visited the docks at Tanggu Town many times before, so he was quite familiar with the conditions of that area. The only thing Steward Wu hoped for was to have something warm to eat for breakfast as he stepped onto dry land. Under Brother Six's lead, he arrived at a simple and crude looking restaurant.

"Tell the kitchen to bring out the food!" Although Brother Six's attitude was warm, he didn't come off as being too eager for something. Instead he acted very naturally, which allowed Steward Wu to feel free and unrestrained.

"Okay!" The waiter didn't disappear for long before he appeared with a bowl of lush green and bright yellow leafy vegetables and egg drop soup. He reported the name of the dish, "This is an 'appetizer soup'. These two guests, please take a bowl each and start!"

The private room had one particular guest who seemed to have an imposing manner and clearly had a status that was beyond the ordinary. Although the person didn't order any food from this restaurant, he had given them a decent amount of money. Thus, the manager of the restaurant had instructed the employees of the place to take good care of these guests.

"Eh? Are these green vegetables? Is it the season for green vegetables to appear on the market here?" Steward Wu had just come off the ship, so he felt like the ground beneath his feet was still rocking. When he saw the verdant green of the vegetables in the bowl, he immediately felt better inside and started to have an appetite.

Brother Six was inwardly flabbergasted too. At this time of the year, most farmers hadn't even planted the seeds of green vegetables yet. This Xiaocao, where did she manage to get ahold of these vegetables to make the soup? Despite his inner surprise, he calmly helped Steward Wu to ladle up a bowl of green vegetable soup and smiled, "Steward Wu, have a taste of this soup..."

The 'appetizer soup' had a light and fresh taste. The leaves of the vegetables were tender and soft, and the bright yellow eggs went easily down the throat. Such a fresh and flavorful profile matched entirely with Steward Wu's food preferences. He drank two large bowls of soup without a break and only then did he stroke his beard and smile with admiration, "Good! Good!! This is extremely delicious!"

The second dish was the braised dried tofu. The strong flavors the braising marinade had sunk into each piece of tofu. Even though this dish didn't have any meat, Steward Wu, who only likes to eat meat, still ate several mouthfuls before he stopped.

The third dish, 'pearl meatballs', was covered on the outside with glutinous rice. Each translucent grain seemed to sparkle and glow the way a true pearl would. When bitten into, the perfectly round meatballs had the savory flavor of pork and the distinct, unique taste of duck egg's yolk that blended together harmoniously. With the additional fragrant taste of the glutinous rice added in, Steward Wu, who had travelled extensively around the country, couldn't help but praise this food incessantly, "Ah Liuzi, this 'pearl meatball' is quite tasty and the name is also quite elegant. Did this restaurant switch chefs recently? Where did they get the new chef? He's not any worse than the best chef in the capital! For example, this simple dish of dried tofu, ah, he can even make that taste so good...tell me, if I manage to make him leave with me, do you think the owner here will make a fuss?"

Brother Six laughed, "Steward Wu is being too kind. You've followed his highness, Imperial Prince Jing, all over the country. What kind of culinary delicacies haven't you tried yet? You've been cooped up in that ship for too long, so it made you extremely happy to get ashore. So it's not surprising that you feel like everything you eat tastes good—try some of this salted vegetables with steamed pork, what do you think?"

When Xiaocao was making salted vegetables with steamed pork, she had carefully selected slices of pork belly that had an even ratio of fat to lean meat. She also made sure to render some of the fat off the meat, such that the meat would still be tasty without being greasy. Steward Wu had also had a difficult childhood. After eating one piece, he couldn't help but continuously eat several more pieces before he reluctantly set down his chopsticks—who would have thought that even pork could be prepared in such an elegant and delicious way, ah....

After the meat dishes, Xiaocao had them serve up a vegetable dish—'spicy and sour cabbage'. Steward Wu had eaten too many radishes and cabbages in his youth, so he now hated them with a passion. Thus, he didn't seem very interested in eating this dish and managed to try one mouthful with much difficulty. After he tasted it, he discovered that spiciness came with the sour, and hidden in the midst was something savory. The dish was really quite delicious. He thought silently, 'Who has the ability to make even cabbage taste good? This must be a true culinary genius, right?'

Following that came the sauteed shredded pork in sweet bean sauce. What really surprised him was that it came with very small and thin wheat wraps. By wrapping the meat with some scallion strips, it provided a very unique texture and flavor combination. It was inconceivable! Steward Wu couldn't stop himself from eating more.

Don't underestimate this sauteed shredded pork in sweet bean sauce! Just making the meat alone took over seven to eight steps, and it drove Xiaocao crazy while she was fine-tuning the procedure. After experimenting countless times, she was finally able to create a dish that satisfies her desires. However, her efforts were not in vain. Had it not been for his status, Steward Wu would have gone himself to ask the chef what the recipe was!

The final dish on the menu, 'poached sliced fish in hot chili oil', had completely conquered Steward Wu's taste buds. The dish seemed to be filled with the bright red of chili peppers. However, when he was eating it, it was spicy without being too pungent, numbing but not bitter. The fish had been cooked in a way that made it slippery and tender, fatty without being greasy. All of the fishy smell had been taken away but it still had that unique soft and delicate taste that fish meat had. As soon as one ate a bite, it made the person want to continue eating without stopping.

After finishing the entire meal, Steward Wu rubbed at his bulging stomach that almost couldn't bend anymore as he felt extremely conflicted in his heart. Ever since he had been promoted to a steward at Prince Jing's estate, he had pretty much eaten every delicacy and special cuisine that was available. He had never forgotten his manners, even when he had eaten at the restaurants reckoned to be the first or second best in the capital. However, this simple and crude restaurant was unexpectedly a jewel in the rough and had such a fresh and fantastic way of cooking. The next time his master came over, he definitely needed to bring him over to try the food.

"The chef here is quite talented. Let him come over and get rewarded!" Steward Wu leaned back in his chair as he slowly sipped on the fragrant tea that he had brought himself to this restaurant. He suddenly wanted to see this divine chef who could make food that he had never tasted before in his life.

Brother Six poured him another cup of tea and smiled, "The person who made the food really isn't this restaurant's chef. It was someone I found and brought over especially for you!"

"Eh? Liuzi, you really are quite detailed and considerate! Good, good! I'll remember this...I'm extremely curious, where did you find someone who's so talented at cooking?" Steward Wu looked deeply at Brother Six as he asked.

Brother Six didn't attempt to conceal it and replied, "A little girl had appeared on the docks these past few days selling 'a portion of meat for one copper coin'. She has the ability to take ingredients that other people would throw away, for example a pig's head, intestines, and tiny fish, and make them into delicacies that people fight over. This lowly one believed that she was definitely talented at cooking, so I had her come over to help me create a table for you today."

"A little girl? You're telling me that this table of food was all made by a little girl? Then I really need to reward her!" Steward Wu became even more interested in this little girl after hearing Brother Six's story.

In the kitchen, Xiaocao had sincerely started to clean up the area after the last dish had gone out to the guests. When one was borrowing another person's kitchen, it was only right and proper to return it to the original condition...

Just as she finished tidying up the kitchen and was about to leave, the waiter suddenly chased after her and yelled, "Little girl, the esteemed guest inside wants to meet you! He said he really likes the food you made and wants to reward you!"

A reward? Never say no to free money! She had spent time racking her brains to come up with these dishes, and it wasn't easy to make them either. If the noble guest who ate the food thought it was good and wanted to give her some money, it would definitely be more money than she could earn from selling one day's worth of braised food.

Xiaocao scampered after the waiter into the only private room in the building. She gave him an out of place bow and lowered her head as she stood there waiting for her reward.

"Liuzi...are you telling me that the little girl who can make simple ingredients into delicacies is her?" Steward Wu stared at the little girl who was around seven to eight years old that was standing in front of him. She was dressed entirely in shabby yet clean clothes, and her hair had been combed into two braids. Her face was thin but she had fair and clear skin. It was obvious that he couldn't quite believe that a child this young was the creator of such delicious food.

Liuzi, however, very solemnly nodded his head and said, "That is her..."

Steward Wu clearly was someone who had seen a wide aspect of life, so he quickly got over his surprise at the matter. He smiled at Xiaocao and asked, "Little girl, where did you learn how to make this food?"

Xiaocao very slightly raised her head and looked him in the eye for a glance. She replied in a tone that was neither servile nor overbearing, "These dishes were all recipes that I figured out myself. Brother Six had saved my life, so since he needed to receive a noble guest, I naturally used all of my ability to help him."

Steward Wu exclaimed in surprise, "These were all thought up and created by you? It's not a good habit to start trying to trick people at such a young age!"

Despite the obvious censure and displeasure in the man's tone, Xiaocao calmly replied, "My family is poor, and we pretty much can never get a taste of meat or fish throughout the year. This is why when I saw that the butcher was throwing away the pig offal I thought, 'pig offal is still a part of a pig, so it still should be edible!'. When I got back home and pondered about it for a couple of days, I made braised pig head and intestines after adding a lot of spices and condiments to the meat. It not only doesn't have any weird smells but also tastes supremely delicious! From then on, I became interested in cooking and creating new dishes. A set of weird and interesting thoughts started to pop up in my mind. Because my family's ability to buy things are limited, I never had the chance to experiment. Yesterday, Brother Six

gave me money to create an entire table's worth of food. I went back and experimented for an entire afternoon and finally managed to create this table. If you don't believe me, you can bring my father over and ask him. In the past my family almost had nothing to eat, how could we possibly have the money to hire a teacher to teach me how to cook?"

Steward Wu glanced again at the cotton padded clothes and coat on her body that were only cleaner than a set that a beggar would wear. Although he felt the situation was somewhat inconceivable, he didn't continue to pursue this line of questioning and simply labeled her in his mind as someone who was naturally gifted and talented at cooking.

Originally his intentions for meeting the chef was to see whether or not he could tempt the person to work for the Prince Jing's Estate instead. Recently the matriarch didn't have a good appetite and only wanted to eat foods that were novel and refreshing. However, when he saw this skinny and tiny little girl in front of him, he let go of that idea. A child that was only seven to eight years old still needed an adult to take care of them, so how could she leave the place where she grew up to go to the far away capital? If she missed her home and started crying, who would comfort her?

After rewarding Xiaocao with five taels, Steward Wu followed Brother Six, who led him to a nearby guest house for him to get some rest.

Chapter 94

When Brother Six came out of the guest house, he noticed that Xiaocao was still standing there. He raised his eyebrows and asked, "Thank you very much for your help today—is there anything else you need?"

Xiaocao took out a string of copper coins from her embroidered pouch and lifted it towards him, "Brother Six, this is the money leftover from buying all of the ingredients, here take it..."

The table of food only required half a catty of pork belly, a catty of pork leg meat, five duck egg yolks, fish that they had caught on their own, and dried tofu and cabbage that were of little monetary value. Altogether, it only cost about one tael and three hundred copper coins to prepare the whole meal.

However, Brother Six didn't extend his hand to receive the money. He glanced at her hand indifferently and said, "No need! A table of food at Zhenxiu Restaurant would cost at least thirty to fifty taels. When you calculate it, it's I who gained the advantage! Thank you for helping me keep a very big client of mine!"

Xiaocao gleefully put the money back in her purse and patted the bulging pouch. She grinned, "What are you thanking me for? I'm very happy I could help you! It's not early anymore, Brother Six, you should head out and do what you need to do."

By making a few dishes, she was able to earn at least a tael in income. She wished that this type of business could happen several times a month! When she thought of Brother Six's important client rewarding her with five taels, Xiaocao felt even more giddy and ecstatic. She had not only made enough money to pay for her younger brother's school fees but also had some leftover to buy at least two sets of clothes for everyone in her family and the materials to make a couple of warm blankets!

"Cao'er, what happened that made you so happy?" As Yu Hai pushed the wheelbarrow, he noticed that his daughter who was sitting on top would occasionally snigger from time to time, which perplexed him. For the past half year or so, his younger daughter had seemed excessively sensible and mature. Sometimes he felt like there was a soul of an adult living in that thin and slightly built body of hers.

Xiaocao looked around them before she fished out a large piece of silver from her chest pocket. She waved the money in front of her father and said, "Look! What do think this is..."

"Is that silver? What a large piece, it must be worth around five taels right?" A look of surprise appeared on Yu Hai's face as he questioned her, "Cao'er, where did that come from?"

"Brother Six's important client gave it as a reward to me. He said that the food I made was even more delicious than the best restaurants in the capital!" Xiaocao's face glowed with pride, and if she was a little puppy, her tail would have been pointing straight up.

His younger daughter rarely showed her childish side, so Yu Hai chuckled, "Of course, my Cao'er is the best! If I didn't know better, I'd believe that the God of Food had entered your body!"

"Hee hee! It doesn't matter whether the God of Food is with me or if it's the blessings from the God of Fortune, as long as I can make money then it's fine! In about two days, do you think Brother Qian Wen will be coming home for a break? Tomorrow is market day at the docks. We should buy some cloth and cotton and make Little Shitou two sets of new clothing..." Xiaocao chattered happily and words flowed out of her mouth in an unending stream. Seeing that she was happy and excited, Yu Hai simply nodded and agreed with everything she said.

With Yu Hai pushing, the over twenty kilometer road home didn't seem as long as before. They both rested at the midpoint, and Xiaocao rolled up the leg of her father's trouser and started to massage his injured leg with practiced movements. She felt as if her dad had worked too hard walking and said, "Father, we have around seven to eight taels right now. How about instead of getting new clothes and blankets we get an ox cart instead?"

Yu Hai wiped the sweat off his face and drank a mouthful of sweet and delicious water that had previously been boiled. He felt as if all of the fatigue on his body had been quickly washed away. Xiaocao had especially prepared some mystic-stone water for her father to bring along, so it was natural that it had that effect.

When he heard her suggestion, he laughed, "Seven to eight taels is only about enough to buy an ox alone. If we wanted a cart to go with it, even if we provided the wood, it would still require an additional couple hundred copper coins. The money our family has right now is just about enough to buy a donkey cart instead..."

"A donkey is faster than an ox, so it's probably better to have a donkey pull a cart then! Father, how much would a donkey cost? How about we buy a donkey and then have Third Maternal Uncle help us make a donkey cart. In a few days, the vegetables at home should be ready to be sold. If we had a donkey cart, wouldn't it be easier to bring them to market?"

In her previous life, it was rare to see a donkey around, even in the rural areas. She could faintly remember that her family had raised a donkey when she was young. She had even been carried by her father as he drove the donkey cart to go to the town market!

Yu Hai felt his heart skip a beat at the idea. The plots of land in the front and back courtyards were already lush and verdant with growing green vegetables. After growing for over twenty days, the produce should soon be ready to be picked and sold at market. If they didn't have a cart, they would need to rely on someone hauling the vegetables by foot to get them into town. It would be quite an effort!

"One male donkey should be around four to five taels. If we add on the cart, I'd reckon that Cao'er wouldn't be able to wear new clothing then..." Yu Hai looked briefly at his daughter's worn and patched clothing with a pang of guilt. The weather was getting warmer but none of his children had any presentable clothing to wear. As a father, he had really let his children down.

"It's not a problem. If we spend all the money, we can earn more later! We should still buy a donkey first, so that in the future, whether we're going to the docks to sell braised food or going into town, it'll be a lot easier for us to travel!" The corners of Xiaocao's mouth curved up into a grin and a feeling of excitement rushed into her heart—very soon her family would be the owners' of a cart!

"Alright! When we send Shitou to the academy in town, we can conveniently stop by the ox and horse market to look. If there's a suitable animal there, then we can buy one then! In the future, when Little Shitou goes into town, we can drop him off and pick him up easily with the donkey cart. Your mother will also feel relieved too!" Yu Hai made the final decision and could not be swayed from the idea of getting a donkey cart!

For the next couple of days, the entire Yu Family bustled around, busy with their tasks. Xiaocao and Yu Hai went to the docks in the morning to sell their braised food. During that time, Little Shitou would bring his older sister, Xiaolian, to the pond behind their house to catch fish. Madam Liu spent her time in the house working on sewing a couple pieces of clothing for her youngest son. She had seen that the neighbor's boy, Qian Wen, was now wearing a long robe. Thus she copied the style and crafted an indigo-blue colored long robe for her son.

At noon, Xiaocao came back to the house to take an hour nap. When she got up, she helped her mother and Xiaolian to prepare the fish to make pickled fish. In the afternoon, Xiaolian and Little Shitou would go to the docks to sell more braised food.

It was actually quite funny. Xiaolian had been going to the docks for about four to five days now, but none of the customers at the docks had realized the two girls were different people, except for Brother Six. Little Shitou said that Brother Six seemed to be very surprised when he came over once to buy pickled fish, but the man didn't say a word.

Xiaocao and Xiaolian were a set of identical twins. In the past, Xiaocao had a sickly constitution and had stunted growth since birth. Her body was thin and weak, and she had a deathly pale pallor. On the other hand, Xiaolian had followed her mother around doing household chores for years. Although her body was also thin, it had a strong foundation and her skin was tanner. It was still easy to tell the two girls apart, even if they weren't standing right next to each other.

At the present, things had changed. With the little divine stone by her side every day, Xiaocao had been slowly nourished by its power until her body was strong and healthy. She even grew a decent amount of height in the past half year and had almost caught up to Xiaolian, who had previously been half a head taller than her. As for Xiaolian, she had been washing her face every day with the mystic-stone water. In

addition, everything she ate and drank had been touched by the stone's water. Thus, her previously somewhat coarse and tanned skin had been transformed into soft and bright skin.

Now if someone glanced at the two of them, there was hardly a difference between the two. However, those who were familiar with the two girls could still in a glimpse catch the differences. Xiaocao's eyes were always bright and Xiaolian, from time to time, would reveal a cute and silly expression...

From what Shitou was saying, it seemed like Brother Six, who she had only seen a few times, was able to tell the difference between her and Xiaolian with one look? Xiaocao was a bit puzzled by this scenario.

However, she quickly put that thought to the back of her mind as other ideas came to the forefront. Because they could earn almost three hundred copper coins a day, the whole family labored busily with an optimistic outlook towards the future.

Time passed quickly until it was the day that Qian Wen was coming back for his break. In this time period, possibly due to the influence of the transmigrator who established the current dynasty, all of the schools in the country were using the modern day schedule: five days of study with two days of break. Other than the people who rented apartments in town to live in, most of the other students boarded at the dormitories. On the first day of the week, classes started at 7 am in the morning, and on the fifth day, classes ended at 5 pm. This meant that those who lived close to home could spend three nights and two days there!

Yu Hai intentionally brought some braised food over to the Qian Family when he called on them. He wanted to ask them for guidance and get help in determining what Shitou need to bring to school and other such details.

When Qian Wen found out that Little Shitou had been accepted into the academy by the recommendation of the headmaster, he felt simultaneously happy for the little boy and a tiny bit of envy grew in his heart. The headmaster of Rongxuan Academy was the most famous scholar of his generation. All of the students in the academy had wanted to enter the school based off of his reputation.

However, the headmaster rarely taught the beginner classes. In fact, even the intermediate and higher level classes were infrequently graced by his presence. Great Scholar Yuan only gave out pointers and coached the students who were close to participating in the metropolitan civil exams.

If one could catch Great Scholar Yuan's attention, then obtaining first place at the examinations would not be difficult at all. The graduates from the academy who had achieved first to third place in the imperial examinations had all been personally guided by the headmaster himself.

Little Shitou had just turned six but was bright and eager to learn. He frequently came over to Qian Wen's residence to learn how to read and write characters. The little fellow learned quickly and only required one to two repetitions before he could remember it. Qian Wen would have never expected that the boy would be so lucky that the headmaster would recognize his talent while selling food at the docks...

The early morning of spring had a chilly nip in the air. The branches of willow trees by the road had already started to become tender and flexible. One could occasionally see a few strands of green within the patches of withered grass. All of this combined started to make people feel like spring had finally arrived.

On the days when Old Zhang wasn't delivering firewood to town, he could always be found at the crack of dawn at the crossroads with his ox cart. Rides were offered to a few villagers who needed to go to town and the cost for the ride was one copper coin a person. Old Zhang could make some spending money from this.

Usually, it was considered a good day if he could earn around ten to eighteen coppers from his ride services. The vast majority of villagers were frugal and didn't want to spend that one coin, so they mostly used their own legs to get to town.

Today was the end of the two day break for students. There were a few children in the nearby villages who all studied at the schools in town. Although most of them weren't at Rongxuan Academy, having scholarly talents alone was enough to make their parents proud. Those families who were able to pay the schooling fees naturally didn't lack that one copper coin for the ox cart ride. Thus, all of those parents who dearly loved their children would always spend a copper coin to let them hitch a ride to town whenever Old Zhang wasn't hauling firewood.

Old Zhang was flabbergasted when he saw Yu Hai and his two kids next to Qian Wen. He asked curiously, "Dahai, are you going into town to get your leg checked out?"

Yu Hai's entire face was wreathed in happiness as he shook his head, "No, Older Uncle Zhang. My leg has already healed. Cao'er and I are bringing Shitou to town to go to school!"

"He's going to town to study? The yearly tuition is quite a lot, isn't your family..." Old Zhang didn't continue his train of thought and merely looked sympathetically at Yu Hai.

Yu Hai's expression didn't change and continued to smile brightly, "The academy told us that we can delay paying the first two months of tuition. After a few days, when my leg is completely better, I'll go hunting in the mountains. Won't I have the schooling fees then? No matter how hard or rough it gets, I can't hold my children back!"

"You still dare to go up the mountain?! The last time you came back you were all bloody! It truly scared the heck out of all the villagers! Just be a little bit more poor, ah, who knows what's in those mountains? The less you go the better!" Old Zhang begged Yu Hai to reconsider out of concern.

Chapter 95 - Entering School

In the past, the young men of the village often went into the mountains to trap some hares and kill some pheasants because they had seen Hunter Zhao and Yu Hai make money from hunting. However, ever since Yu Hai had his accident, other than the highly skilled Hunter Zhao, most of the other villagers didn't dare to go into the mountains anymore.

Old Zhang had lived in Xishan Village for many decades and this was the first time he had heard that a vicious animal like a wild bear was in the mountains! Even though the wild bear had been killed, who knew what other ferocious animals and creatures lived in the mountain?

Yu Hai grinned, "It's not a big deal. As long as you don't go deep into the mountains, you won't have any issues. People in nearby villages go through the forests by the mountains every day. After all these years, have you heard of an accident occurring? At that time, it was because we had not been careful and alarmed a bear who had just woken up from his winter nap. Without precautions...in the future, as long as we're more careful we'll be fine."

Old Zhang simply sighed and shook his head. He took out two of the three copper coins given to him and said, "Your children don't take up much space, so you only need to pay for one person. Your family doesn't have an easy life..."

Xiaocao thanked Grandpa Zhang. Although her family currently didn't lack the one or two copper coins, all of them still felt grateful for Old Zhang's kindness and good intentions. The two siblings chose a middle spot on the ox cart and leaned their backs against Little Shitou's bag as they squatted down. Yu Hai sat next to Old Zhang in the front and spent the time chatting with him about nonessential things. Qian Wen sat next to the two siblings as he quietly read aloud from a book. His head bobbed gently with the cart's movements.

The ox cart started and stopped several times. When it passed by the third village, the cart was finally full of people going into town. Xiaocao and her younger brother had been squeezed solidly into the middle of the vehicle and couldn't even extend their legs out. Although it was uncomfortable, Xiaocao felt that it wasn't the right time to complain. Qian Wen apparently seemed to sense her discomfort and decided to switch places with her. This allowed her to sit at the side of the cart and dangle her legs down. It was certainly more comfortable than curling up her legs.

Xiaocao smiled gratefully at Qian Wen. Meanwhile, Little Shitou had managed to squeeze himself in between his father and Grandpa Zhang. He had taken Old Zhang's bullwhip and was using it to draw pictures in the air...

It hadn't reached breakfast time when the cart arrived in Tanggu Town. Xiaocao had carefully cradled a delicate woven basket the entire road there. Inside the basket were some gifts that she planned on giving to the academy's headmaster. With Qian Wen to guide them, the three of them managed to go straight to Rongxuan Academy.

The main gate to the school was large and spectacular, and on the top of the gate was an inscription board with 'Rongxuan Academy' written on it. In fact, those words had been personally written by the emperor emeritus himself. The schoolyard had been designed along symmetrical lines and had a deep courtyard. The main building was built on the central axis, and the classroom that the headmaster personally taught in was located at the exact middle of the complex. The other lecture halls were divided into two rows at the sides. The dining hall, worship hall, and ancestral hall were ordered around the left and right of the main wing.

The layers of sights within the courtyard gave off a wondrous and marvelous atmosphere. There was a pond with a stream, a stone bridge, and pavilions...a person walking around could hear the faint cadence of students repeating the words they read in their books. This was a place that dripped of culture and learning, and people visiting couldn't help but feel a sense of deep reverence and fascination...

With Qian Wen's guidance, the three of them managed to smoothly enter through the academy's main gate. As they walked through the secluded and quiet avenue, they couldn't help but walk more lightly than they usually would.

It was currently the meal time at the academy, so Qian Wen directly brought them into the 'canteen courtyard'. The area was split into two courtyards. One of them was naturally the place where the students were able to eat food. The other smaller area was a bit more elegant and it was for the teachers.

Xiaocao tightly squeezed on the handle of her basket and joyfully followed Qian Wen from behind. When they arrived at a round gate shaped like the moon, they were stopped by a student who was dressed in a black robe, "Student, this is the courtyard where the teachers eat. If you want to partake in a meal, please go over there."

Qian Wen respectfully gave a greeting and quietly replied, "Brother, if you don't mind, could you report to the headmaster and tell him that the little boy from the docks that he had accepted into the school is here to report for duty..."

The headmaster had personally accepted a new student? The youth wearing the black robe peeped inquisitively at the little boy who was wearing an entire set of brand-new cotton padded clothes and the man and little girl who were clothed shabbily. He paused for a second and then nodded, "Please wait a moment here..."

Inside the canteen, Headmaster Yuan was having a snack with the academy supervisor and the official of rites and history. When he heard what the student prefect reported, his eyes immediately lit up and sillily asked, "Is the girl that's with him about seven to eight years of age? Did she come empty-handed? Did she really not bring anything?"

The academy supervisor was considered an old friend of his and knew that he never received other people's gifts. Flabbergasted, he silently asked himself why his old friend would ask something like that. Isn't this...isn't this making it obvious that you want something from her? What sort of person could make his old friend do something so out of character? The official of rites and history also gave the headmaster a bewildered glance.

The student prefect secretly peeked at the headmaster and quietly replied, "The little girl had a basket in her hands. There was a piece of rough cloth covering the top, so I don't know what's in the basket."

Inside his heart he felt that this was not right and proper. The three of them looked like they came from an impoverished family, what kind of poor gift could they give? Could be a few chicken eggs, or a bunch of dried vegetables, at most it'd be an old hen. What was there to look forward to?

Yet, when the headmaster heard his reply, his expression became even more excited. The old man stood up abruptly with a 'whoosh' and paced around a few steps as he guffawed, "Looks like this little girl has some sense in her head! Quickly, quickly, let those people come in!"

Qian Wen felt even more surprised when he found out that the headmaster would personally receive the Yu Family. Just what kind of talent did Little Shitou have that made the esteemed headmaster favor him so much?

However, when the three esteemed scholars of the academy came out to personally receive them, Qian Wen felt extremely privileged to be able to bask in the glory of others. He bowed deeply to the headmaster, academy supervisor, and the official.

Headmaster Yuan noticed that he was wearing the uniform of a student: a long gown. He smiled at him and nodded his head, "Are you a student in the junior class? What's your name? Are you from the same hometown as Yu Fan and his sister?"

They had to admit, Headmaster Yuan had a formidable memory. After all these days had passed, he could still clearly remember Little Shitou's full name. As for being able to recognize Qian Wen as a student in the junior class, that wasn't because he had an impression of Qian Wen. Instead, the classes at the academy: primary, junior, middle, and advanced, all had different uniform colors.

The children in the primary class wore long robes that were an ink-blue color. The primary class had seblue, the junior class was azure blue, and the advanced class wore a pale moon-blue. By looking at the seblue uniform Qian Wen was wearing, Headmaster Yuan could tell in a glance what class he was in.

Qian Wen respectfully bowed to Great Scholar Yuan in a reply to his question. Headmaster Yuan stared obviously at the basket in Xiaocao's hands and carelessly encouraged Qian Wen with a couple of sentences. The boy felt overwhelmed with favor by his attention. The old man waved his hand in dismissal to let Qian Wen go eat a meal and then he smiled toothily at Xiaocao. He rubbed his hands in anticipation, "Little girl, what's in your basket? The greedy monster inside my stomach is already rumbling, quickly take it out..."

The academy supervisor and official of rites looked at each other and then simultaneously turned their heads away— we don't know this shameful man, we don't know him...

“Esteemed headmaster, you really have a good nose! I brought over some braised pig head meat and pickled fish. Do you want to try them?” Xiaocao took out two plates of tantalizing braised food from the basket and placed them on the table in front of the three important figures of the academy.

“Braised pig head meat? Is that the dish that the emperor emeritus loves the most? That's fantastic...ah! You two, didn't you both say that you were full? If you're full, then leave, quickly leave now...” Headmaster Yuan protected the two plates of food like it was his beloved treasure. He wanted to keep his beloved food away from the two hungry wolves that were his old friends.

The academy supervisor and official of rites had been friends for him for a long time, so they naturally knew what type of personality he had. They looked at the table full of food that had been barely touched and the wine cups that had only a sip taken out. The two of them looked at each other bitterly and silently got up to leave—it looked like they needed to have the kitchen make another table of food.

The two men glanced at the raggedly clothed Xiaocao and thought, 'This little girl looks like she comes from a very poor family, yet she can bring out something that our old friend, who disdains the food from the imperial kitchen, likes so much? Isn't it just a plate of pale red meat and a few messy looking strips of fish? Does he really need to protect them?'

The supervisor and official both sat down at a nearby table and sat face to face drinking wine as they watched Headmaster Yuan's movements and expressions. They first saw him pick up a piece of pork with the skin on it and carefully chew the bite to taste. His eyes closed in pleasure, and his body language showed that he was very satisfied with the taste of this dish.

It was just a piece of pork, how delicious could it be? Could it possibly be that their old friend's taste buds had degenerated and he was no longer that picky? The two men then saw the headmaster pick up a fish about the size of a young child's palm. A fish that size had a lot of thin bones, right? Eating it had to take a lot of effort, they needed to see how their old friend would eat this.

Headmaster Yuan evidently also had some doubts, and he asked the little girl a couple of questions. After hesitating for a short period of time, he then popped the fish into his mouth. Supervisor Meng and Official Yao felt like they could feel the multitudes of small fish bones piercing their mouth and both of them coughed to clear their throats.

As for their old friend, Headmaster Yuan, his eyes, which had originally been opened wide, and slowly closed into a line with his chewing movements. This type of expression clearly showed that he was enjoying the taste of a culinary delicacy.

Ehhhh? How come when their old friend was eating the fish he didn't spit out a single fish bone? And he also didn't seem to get poked by any bones? Is the fish the type that didn't have any bones? That couldn't be right. Official Yao, who had grown up in the rural country, had recognized early on what type of fish that was used. It was a crucian carp and it definitely had a lot of tiny bones!

This little girl, what kind of spell did she cast on the headmaster that he could eat fish with tiny bones in it without any sign of pain or suffering...

Official Yao couldn't sit there anymore! That can't do, he needed to figure out what was going on. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to eat and sleep for the next few days!

Official Yao quickly stepped over to Headmaster Yuan's table and snatched a little fish when the old man was in the midst of speaking warmly to Xiaocao. Before the other man could object, he quickly stuffed the fish into his mouth.

Headmaster Yuan was immediately stunned. He had known Official Yao for almost fifty years, and he knew that his old friend had come from a poor family. Thus, Old Yao didn't have any expectations for food, as long as he could eat his fill, then he was content.

Today Old Yao knew that there was something special to be had. He knew that the little girl's fish had to be a dish of unique taste and splendor. Thus, he didn't care about his reputation and had snatched food from his plate. After being stunned for a second, Headmaster Yuan snarled, "Old Yao! You're really too much! How could you steal the pickled fish that the little girl made especially for me as a sign of her filial respect? I...I...I'm super angry at you!!"

At this moment, Headmaster Yuan put down his chopsticks and threw himself at his old friend who was still chewing on the fish that he loved. Official Yao continued to eat the fish that had melted completely in his mouth, yet his hands were not idle. He continuously managed to dodge and repel his old friend's 'offense'.

Chapter 96 - Haggard

Two elderly men, who were around seventy years old, were unexpectedly fighting over a fish in public like they are a child. When the teachers in the canteen saw this side of the famous scholar, his grand and dignified image within their hearts instantly toppled down. Good gracious! Was that really the aloof and mysterious Headmaster Yuan? He was obviously an old urchin!

Taking advantage of the time when his old friends were pushing and blocking each other, Supervisor Meng also came over. He had just tasted a piece of braised pig head meat when he was pushed away by his friend who was trying to protect his food. Great Scholar Yuan was so angry that his face had turned red. He loudly shouted, “Good! You are all stealing my culinary delicacy! This old man! This old man will break off relations with you both!”

Xiaocao and her father were both stunned by the scene. If they weren't in Rongxuan Academy, she would've thought that Great Scholar Yuan was an impostor. This... they were the three most important people of Rongxuan Academy. If they become hostile towards each other because of the braised food she had brought, then she would have sinned greatly.

She hurriedly walked forward and persuaded, “Headmaster Yuan, please quell your anger. If you don't mind, every time Little Shitou returns after break, I will bring some small side dishes for you.....”

Headmaster Yuan had been waiting for her to say this, so when he heard her words, his anger turned into happiness. He said, “Good girl, this old man didn't misjudge you. You really have a good heart! Shishu, have you finished eating? If you're done, then bring Yu Fan to the primary class's dormitory and help him settle down.”

Shishu was slightly astounded within his heart. He was just a small new student from the primary class, yet the headmaster had asked him, his personal assistant to personally find a place for him to settle down. It was apparent how much the headmaster valued this small child!

Although Shishu was surprised, he didn't reveal any of his feelings on his face. He replied with a 'yes', and said to Yu Hai and his children, “Please come with me!”

The headmaster's personal assistant, Teacher Shishu, actually came to the primary class to help a new student named “Yu Fan” to complete the enrollment procedure. He had also personally arranged a room for the new student in the dormitory. This news quickly spread throughout Rongxuan Academy. Everyone was very curious as to who the new student was, to be able to make Teacher Shishu do all of that for him.

Little Shitou didn't know that he had already become well-known on his first day at the academy. At this time, he had just happily set his little bag down on his bed in the dormitory. He reached out his hands and touched the loose and soft new bedding. Seeing that the dormitory was complete with a desk and stool, he immediately felt that he was very privileged to be able to live and study in such a comfortable

environment. He secretly made a firm resolution to study hard and not disappoint his parents and older sisters!

Xiaocao looked at her little brother's roommates. One of his roommates was about ten years old, while the other one was slightly younger and looked around seven or eight years old. There was no contempt reflected in their eyes upon seeing the ragged clothes that she and her father were wearing. At such a young age, they already had a sense of propriety, and were neither arrogant nor rash. Thus, Xiaocao's tensed heart finally relaxed.

Little Shitou had just settled down when Qian Wen came inside the room with a porcelain bowl in his hand. The two students from the primary class hurriedly got up to greet their senior.

Qian Wen slightly nodded his head towards the two younger students, and then said to Little Shitou, "I got some food for you. Eat it quickly because there's a morning reading class later. The primary class had already started school about a month ago. So, if you have anything you don't understand, you can come and find me. I live in the third room from the left over there."

Little Shitou was very worried when he heard that he had missed out on nearly a month of class. So, when he heard Qian Wen offering to help him, he replied, "Thank you Brother Xiaowen. I will frequently ask you for guidance if you don't feel like I'm a bother. I have already eaten breakfast, so you should bring the food back to eat yourself!"

"The evening meal starts around three in the afternoon. Since you ate breakfast so early in the morning, if you don't eat something now, how will you be able to endure until the afternoon? You won't be able to learn anything with an empty stomach!" Qian Wen pushed the porcelain bowl towards Shitou, urging him, "Quickly eat!"

Xiaocao saw that the rice inside the bowl was made with a mixture of white rice and millet. Although there were only radishes and white cabbage topping it, they had used a decent amount of oil to stir-fry the vegetables, which was about the same as the living standards of ordinary families. She suddenly asked, "Brother Xiaowen, how much does one serving of this meal cost?"

"It's only one copper coin for a bowl of white rice mixed with millet and vegetables. If you want white rice only with the same vegetables, then it will cost two copper coins. It will be five copper coins for white rice with meat... If you don't want rice, it can be exchanged for steamed buns. There are buns made with wheat flour, as well as mixed grains..." Qian Wen understood her meaning so he reported all the prices of the food from the canteen to her.

As the saying goes, 'be thrifty at home and spend liberally while traveling'. So of course Xiaocao wouldn't mistreat her younger brother, who was studying away from home. He had a two-day break after every five days of studies. She set aside eight copper coins daily for his meals and counted an additional ten copper coins as allowance, and thus gave Little Shitou fifty copper coins in total.

Qian Wen was somewhat surprised to see Xiaocao giving Little Shitou fifty copper coins. His living expenses for five days was merely thirty to forty copper coins. His family's living conditions were much better than Xiaocao's, but she was still willing to give her brother that much money.

Little Shitou looked at the string of coins her older sister handed to him and refused to take it all no matter what. He said, "Second Sister, just two copper coins is enough for me to eat for a day. Why are you giving me so much money? Our family isn't rich. In order to earn enough money to pay for my school fees, everyone in the family has been busy without rest. You can just give me ten copper coins for five days!"

Xiaocao pulled him aside and resolutely gave the string of coins to him. She said, "Just take the money first. If you can't use it all up, then use the rest to buy paper and brushes. Shitou, you are at an age when your body is growing. Don't always think about saving money and eat something good from time to time! You should know about your second sister's ability. The money I earn from selling braised food is enough for our family's living expenses. Quickly take the money, or else I'm going to be angry..."

Little Shitou's eyes reddened as he accepted the money. Sniffing his nose, he said, "Father, Second Sister, rest assured because I will definitely study hard..."

"Studying is important, but your health is even more important! You're still young and you have never left home before, so you must learn to take care of yourself. Remember to dress according to the weather..." Xiaocao's eyes were tearing up. It was as if she had returned to her previous life when her younger brother had left home to study in another part of the country. However, she was unable to send him off at that time because she had to take care of her braised food shop. Thus, all her worries and concerns were turned into successive words of caution.

Little Shitou wiped away his tears and tried to dispel their reluctance to part with laughter, "Second Sister, you really are Mother's daughter. Even the words you say are the same as hers!"

Yu Hai forced himself to smile and said, "Isn't it because both your mother and older sister care about you? They're worried about you... Alright, quickly eat. Don't be late for your first class." He turned towards Qian Wen, solemnly cupped his fist together, and said, "Xiaowen ah, Shitou is still young and he is also new to the academy. Please help me look after him."

Qian Wen hastily bowed in return and laughed, "Uncle Dahai, I would've looked after him even if you didn't ask me to! Don't worry! Besides the teachers in the academy, there are also staff who oversee student life for each row of houses. There's also a doctor dedicated exclusively to the academy. If any of the students have a headache or fever, he can receive free treatments from the doctor. Uncle Dahai, Shitou is very hardworking, so he won't have any problems!"

Xiaocao came out of Rongxuan Academy with reddened eyes. Ever since she transmigrated into this unfamiliar world, she had always been accompanied by this sensible and clever little boy.

When she was bedridden, he had gotten bird eggs for her, chatted with her and laughed with her. When they dug for wild herbs, he held a little basket and worked even harder than her. He had always stayed by her side when they went to the docks to sell braised food...

In her heart, she had already regarded Little Shitou as her real younger brother. He only six years old, yet he had to stay in town to study at the academy all by himself. She was extremely reluctant to part with him and didn't feel reassured at all.

Yu Hai felt very happy about the deep bond between the sister and brother. He comforted her, saying, "Cao'er, don't be sad anymore. You will be able to see him after five days. At that time, let's come early to pick him up! Didn't you say you wanted to go to the ox and horse market? Let's go!"

Xiaocao rubbed away the tears in her eyes, sniffed her nose, and cheered up, "Let's go visit Eldest Brother at the woodworking shop first... Mother made a new pair of shoes for him. Let's give him the shoes."

The father and daughter pair went to the main street and arrived at Zhang Ji's Carpentry Shop. Perhaps it was because Yu Hai was present, the shop assistant had an ugly expression on his face but he didn't deliberately make things difficult for them. He immediately called Yu Hang out.

After not seeing her older brother for a few days, Xiaocao felt that her brother had gotten even thinner. There was a sense of weariness within his withered and yellow complexion. Although he forced himself to appear energetic in front of them, they could still see how exhausted he was.

“Older Brother, is it tiring to be an apprentice here? Or is it because you aren't feeling well? Your complexion doesn't look good...” Xiaocao asked with concern. After all, Yu Hang was only eleven to twelve years old. Most of the work in woodworking shop required physical strength, so it was considered strenuous work for a young boy like Yu Hang.

The sensible Yu Hang was afraid that he would make his family worry, so he laughed heedlessly and said, “Business has been doing well these past few days. Even the head craftsmen had to work overtime. I'm merely an assistant who stayed up a little later. After the busy period passes, I will be fine!”

Yu Hai sighed deeply as he looked at his son who was acting like an adult. He wanted to say something but after hesitating for a while, he swallowed back his words. Xiaocao looked at her father and said, “Father, our family's daily income is very good now. We also lack people helping at home. Why don't we bring Eldest Brother back home?”

Yu Hang didn't wait for his father's response and interjected, “Second Sister, I am really fine! Which head craftsmen didn't start as an apprentice? After enduring for two years as a newcomer, I will be able to start learning woodwork. Don't worry, your older brother's health is great!”

Xiaocao stuffed the bundle she was holding into her older brother's hands and said, “Older Brother, this is a pair of shoes that mother made for you. There's also a hundred copper coins inside. Take it.....”

Yu Hang lowered his head and looked at his shoes which had his toes exposed. He quickly replied, “I will take the shoes, but take the money back! Our family isn't well-off. I have enough to eat and drink here, so I don't have any need for money.”

Xiaocao stubbornly stuffed the string of coins into her brother's hands and said, “Xiaolian and I take turns to sell food at the docks. Our business is doing very well, so our family's circumstances aren't as difficult as you think. In just a few days, we were able to scrape together enough money for a month's worth of tuition for Little Shitou. So, a hundred copper coins isn't much. When you're away from home, it's best to have some money on you for emergencies.”

Yu Hai also urged, “Your younger sister is right. Just take it! You are growing right now, so buy some food and eat it when you're hungry at night... We won't delay you any longer. Quickly go in.”

After leaving the woodworking shop, the father and daughter didn't speak for a long time. When they were almost at the ox and horse market, Xiaocao finally said, "Father, after a few days, let's bring Eldest Brother back. It's hard to live as an apprentice....."

Yu Hai nodded his head and replied, "En." After that, he didn't say anything else and just sighed.

Chapter 97

The ox and horse market was located in the northmost part of the town. It was an open area that was surrounded by wooden fences. At this time, ox and horse market bustled with activity. People who sold oxen, horses, and mules had all gathered here. The air gave off the smell of animal feces, making it smell very unpleasant.

"I'm selling a calf! This calf is just two months old. It's very sturdy! Brother, I can sell the calf to you at a cheaper price if you want it."

"Brother look at my mule. It's only two years old and so it's the perfect time for it to start working..."

"There seems to be a problem with your mule's legs. It can't walk so what do I need it for?"

"The calf is too small. I want a calf that will be able to work at the beginning of spring..."

"Uncle, look at my..."

...

Her ears were full of various kinds of sounds. However, Xiaocao felt that the noises felt very familiar. On her way, she had asked a few people regarding the price of their oxen and mules. But all their prices were on the high side. It was just like her father had said, if they hadn't paid for Little Shitou's school fees, then they might have been able to buy one. But even then, they still won't have enough money leftover to equip it with a cart.

It was not known if the Heavens was deliberately setting itself against Xiaocao, but she didn't see many people selling donkeys after circling around the market once. Occasionally there would be a family that

was selling a donkey; however, their asking price was beyond reasonable limits. Their asking price was even higher than the price of an ox.

"Hey! It's bustling with noise and excitement over there. Let's go and look..." Yu Hai also knew that it was not easy to reach a deal when buying an animal. So unlike Xiaocao who had a glum look on her face, when he saw that there was a crowd of people in front of them, he immediately pulled his daughter's hand and squeezed into the crowd.

Like he was conferring a favor, a man said, "Pedantic scholar, your donkey is sick to the point that it's about to stop breathing. Yet you're still asking for such a high price. Who will buy it? Let it be. Forget about it. I'm a kindhearted person. I will take pity on you and pay eight hundred copper coins to buy your donkey cart!" The middle-aged man with a shrewd-looking face looked at the donkey which was as skinny as firewood.

Xiaocao, who had squeezed through the crowd, saw a youngster crouched down in front of a donkey. The youngster was around sixteen to seventeen years old, and he wore the uniformed long gown from Rongxuan Academy. The donkey was so thin that there were only bones left. It was weakly lying on the ground because it didn't even have the energy to stand up. If its abdomen wasn't still moving up and down, she would've thought the donkey was dead. The youngster's face was full of melancholy as he shook his head. He quietly said, "No, no! It already takes one tael of silver to make a donkey cart. My father is waiting for the money I earn from the donkey cart to save his life! Eight hundred copper coins aren't even enough for two packets of medicine..."

The middle-aged man impatiently asked, "Pedantic scholar, how much money do you want to sell this half-dead donkey for?"

"Three...three taels of silver! My father is very sick. He needs this money to see a doctor..." The young scholar appeared to understand that his asking price was somewhat excessive, so his voice was almost inaudible.

But he also had no choice. All the valuables in the family had already been sold off to pay for his school fees. They had relied on this donkey cart to help people carry their goods or transport people around to town to earn money to survive. However, he had never expected that five days ago, the donkey had started vomiting and had diarrhea. It was very sick, so they found a few veterinarians. But none of the veterinarians were able to help. His father was anxious and suffered from excessive internal heat and ended up catching a cold. Now, his dad couldn't get out of his bed.

There was no money at home to invite a doctor, so he brought the sick donkey to the market to try his luck...

The middle-aged man sneered at him and rudely said, "You want me to pay three taels of silver for that sick donkey? Little scholar, you must know that a big healthy male donkey costs only five taels of silver. And your donkey...tsk, tsk! I'm afraid that even if you kill it and sell its meat, you wouldn't be able to even get a few taels of silver. I am already showing consideration towards you by paying eight hundred copper coins for that sick donkey!"

"Yeah, yeah! Who would pay three taels of silver for a donkey that's about to die?"

"Eight hundred copper coins is too little. That amount isn't even enough to buy a donkey cart. If it's me, I wouldn't be willing to sell it either....."

"This child is too pitiful. Looking at the attire the young boy is wearing, he must be a student from Rongxuan Academy. If he didn't urgently need money, he probably wouldn't be here and letting people point and gossip about him....."

The onlookers that were surrounding him were divided into two parties. One party said that the youngster had become insane thinking about money, while the other party sympathized and felt pity for the youngster.

The young scholar's face was pale. His gaze looked crazed as he stared at the donkey which was struggling at death's door. He continuously said, "No, no...my father is waiting for the money I earn from selling the donkey to save his life. He is waiting for me to save his life....."

Yu Xiaocao was somewhat touched by the young scholar's filial piety as she looked at him. She thought back to the time when her father was between life and death. She recalled how grief-stricken they were and how helpless the entire family felt. Xiaocao shouted for the little divine stone in her mind, [Little Glutinous Dumpling, will you be able to save this donkey?]

A mini golden kitten squeezed itself out from Xiaocao's chest region of her tattered cotton-padded jacket. It stretched its little head and lazily glanced at the donkey and in a tender but an unhappy voice, it said, [Smelly master, what do you take me for? You used me as fish bait and to save people. Now, you want me to rescue a domestic animal. I'm unwilling! I, your father, will go on strike!]

Imagine a very small kitten with one of its legs crossed over its other, holding its two front legs, with its head tilted to the side, and calling itself 'daddy'. The scene was quite cute but also a bit weird.

Xiaocao patiently worked on it, "Little Glutinous Dumpling, the Goddess of Spirits had thrown you into the mortal world because she wants you to learn and gain experience in the mortal world. The so-called saying, 'saving a life is more meritorious than building a seven-floor pagoda'. If you do good and kind deeds, your achievements will allow you to return to the Goddess Nuwa's side!"

The little divine stone recalled how every time it had helped Xiaocao do something, its power would restore itself in different degrees of magnitude, especially the time when it had saved Yu Hai. After saving Yu Hai, the little divine stone was able to materialize a physical body. It felt that what Xiaocao had said was very reasonable. So, it unwillingly said, [As long as the donkey hasn't stopped breathing, then I can save it...]

With the Divine Stone's guarantee, Xiaocao stepped forward and said to the young scholar, "Can you let me take a look at the donkey?"

The young scholar's lifeless expression suddenly became full of expectation when he heard Xiaocao's words. As if he was looking at his savior, he said, "Little girl, you...do you want to buy my donkey?"

But when he saw the cotton-padded jacket that was full of patches that Xiaocao was wearing, his expression dimmed again. He forced his greed away and said, "Little girl, my donkey is sick. It's best if you don't buy it..."

Xiaocao saw that even though he had fallen in such a dire situation, he still had a kind and honest heart. She smiled, "My father and I had learned some medical treatments for domestic animals. If the donkey can be saved, then I will buy it."

"Okay, good! Look at the donkey. My donkey is very capable, it's not even three years old yet. Before it was sick, everyone had said that my donkey was a good one." A fire of hope once again ignited in the young scholar's eyes as he stared at Xiaocao's every movement.

Xiaocao squatted in front of the donkey. She extended her hand to place between the donkey's nose and mouth. Hot streams of air sprayed at the palm of her hand as the donkey breathed. Although its breathing was weak, it was clear.

It's good if it's still breathing! She borrowed a broken bowl that domestic animals used to drink water. She allowed Yu Hai to take off the water bag that was tied to the side of her waist and poured the mystic-stone water from the water bag into the bowl.

The donkey seemed to be able to feel the spiritual energy from the water as it raised its head with difficulty. One mouthful after another, it slowly drank the mystic-stone water from the bowl in Xiaocao's hand. After it finished the bowl of mystic-stone water, it powerlessly lay on the ground. Although the donkey didn't have any more strength to stand up, its eyes were clearer and livelier than before.

"How is my donkey? Little girl, can my donkey be saved?" When the young scholar saw the donkey, that hadn't drunk water or eaten grass for a long time, drinking the bowl of water, the fire of hope in his heart burned even stronger.

The middle-aged man with a shrewd-looking face made cynical remarks at the side, "The veterinarians from the ox and horse market all said that the donkey is incurable. What can a silly little girl be capable of? I advise you to quickly sell the donkey before it takes its last breath. Otherwise, it'll be bad luck for you when it dies later. When it dies, I won't spend eight hundred copper coins to buy it."

The young scholar acted as if he didn't hear the middle-aged man ridiculing him. He looked at Xiaocao as if she was his last chance at life. He wasn't even aware that his fingernails had pierced through the skin at the palm of his hand as he tightly clenched it into a fist.

The outsiders thought that Xiaocao was taking pity on the donkey as she stroked the donkey's boney ribs. But, in fact, she was using the multicolored stone on her wrist to help the donkey sort out the illness inside its body. In a space where other people couldn't see, soft rays of golden light entered the donkey from the multicolored stone. In less than a moment, the donkey was able to lift its head and its eyes were full of spirit again.

Xiaocao smiled and nodded at the scholar, "The donkey isn't very ill. I will buy it! It's three taels of silver, right?"

"Y-yes!" The young scholar was in a daze as he stared at the silver that Xiaocao had handed to him. He seemed to be in disbelief that his sick donkey that was about to go to heaven would actually fetch him three taels of silver. For a moment, he foolishly stood there because he wasn't sure what to do.

Xiaocao saw that he didn't move for a while, so she thought that he wanted to go back on his words. She whispered to him, "What's wrong? Didn't you say that your father is waiting for this money to save his life? Why aren't you hurrying to him?"

"Oh! Yeah...thank you, little girl. Benefactors, please leave your names behind. In the future, I would like to repay your kindness!" The young scholar made a big bow towards Xiaocao and her father.

Xiaocao replied, "What kindness are you talking about? You are selling something, and I am merely buying it. This is a fair trade. There is no need to repay anything. Go quickly, your father's illness can't be delayed!" Fang Zimo missed his sick father. Seeing that the two didn't want to leave behind their names, he bowed towards them again and left the market while tightly holding onto the silver.

The middle-aged man, who couldn't take advantage of the scholar, sourly said, "Little girl, you are still young. There are all kinds of people in this world. There are many who pretend to be sick in order to gain people's sympathy. You were tricked by others and yet you still haven't realized it."

"Thank you, uncle, for the reminder! However, the scholar is wearing a long gown from Rongxuan Academy. Rongxuan Academy accepts students based on their moral character. I believe that he is not a swindler." Xiaocao wasn't an eight-year-old child who could easily be tricked. She had spent three taels of silver to buy both the donkey and the donkey cart. This was much cheaper than buying a donkey and then asking someone to build a donkey cart for her.

The middle-aged man gave a final glance at the relatively new donkey cart. He coldly snorted, "You will suffer losses if you turn a deaf ear to your elders. I only reminded you because I believe that you probably saved up money for a long time to be able to save up three taels of silver. I didn't want you to have a dead loss in the end!" After he finished speaking, he swung his sleeve and left.

Xiaocao raised her eyebrows and disdainfully curled her lip. He couldn't take advantage of the scholar so he could only say a few hateful words. His moral character is really...

However, Yu Hai was a little worried as he asked, "Cao'er, the donkey is very weak. It can't even stand up so how can we bring it back home? Your Grandpa Zhang's ox cart can't fit the donkey..."

Xiaocao confidently said, "Don't worry. I have a feeling that when we go back in the afternoon, the donkey will be able to walk on its own! Father, there isn't much seasoning left at home. There is a shop in the food market that sells cheap seasonings. Let's go look."

Chapter 98

After paying for a month's worth of tuition for Little Shitou and an additional three taels to buy the donkey cart, Xiaocao had about four taels left in her purse. She decided to take advantage of being in town to buy whatever else her family needed.

The father and daughter pair deposited the donkey cart at the entrance of the ox and horse market and paid the attendant five copper coins. Xiaocao had especially given the old man her water pouch and repeatedly instructed him to give the donkey a bowl of the special water every hour.

The two of them then went to the town's largest food market. At the market, the selection of vegetables and produce was as pathetic as before. The vast majority of vegetables on sale were cabbages, radishes, and sweet potatoes. It was obvious that all of them had clearly been stored in people's cellars for a long time. There also weren't a lot of people selling meat or chickens.

Xiaocao first went to the general store to buy some spices, soy sauce, and vinegar. This time, she had a decent amount of money on hand, so she could weigh each seasoning separately. She bought two ounces of each spice she needed, which would last her for about ten days.

In addition, she also brought along seven to eight bamboo tubes of differing sizes which had all been made by her father. As soon as she entered the stall, she gave the shopkeeper the new containers to replace the ones she had borrowed from him last time. She then asked the shopkeeper to put a catty of soy sauce into each of the remaining large tubes

The shopkeeper had only remembered that she was the little girl who had bought seasonings previously when she returned the bamboo tubes to him. He smiled, "Little girl, did you finish using the spices so quickly? Your family must sell food to other people, right?"

"That's right! How did you know?" Xiaocao gave him the weights of the condiments that she wanted and smiled sweetly at this honest and kind shopkeeper.

The shopkeeper grinned, "Other than selling food, what normal, average family would be willing to spend so much money to season their food? Oh ho! You're buying more spices than last time, looks like you made some money! Congratulations ah!"

Xiaocao flashed a grin at him and said, "I sold some appetizers at the docks and managed to make a little money. I'm not sure when I'll have enough money to be like you, Uncle Shopkeeper, and open up a store in town."

The shopkeeper guffawed and said, "This older uncle is also only making a little money, just enough to survive that is. Don't think that it's all sunshine and rainbows opening up a place. When you add up the rent and money spent on goods and other things, there's really not much leftover, right? Don't look down at selling food. In fact, as long as you make good salted and pickled vegetables, you can still make a good amount of money. Do you see that pickled vegetable store over there? They've been flaming popular these past two days. In fact, my wife really loves that stall's sweet and crispy dried radishes and spicy pickled cabbage. If she doesn't have any with every meal, she won't be able to finish her food..."

"The town is truly a good place to earn money, even salted and pickled vegetables can sell out so quickly!" Yu Hai exclaimed in wonder as he left the general store.

Xiaocao smiled knowingly and said, "Father, when we make enough money one day, we can also rent a stall here in town. The store would only sell different types of braised dishes. As the only stall in town to sell braised food, we can definitely make money that way..."

Yu Hai happily replied, "When our family has more money, we should buy some more farmland. We only have three plots of dry, sandy land. The yield from the land is not enough to feed our whole family."

"Once we open up a stall in town and make some money, we can buy more farmland then! Father, most of the land in our village is dry and sandy. If we want to buy land, we should buy plots that are closer to town. At that time, we can even move our entire family to town. That way we can avoid Eldest Aunt coming over to bother us all the time..." Xiaocao really despised Madam Li's bad habits and small tricks. The woman also had a gossipy tongue that never stopped, and she never had anything good to say of others.

Yu Hai frowned and quietly reprimanded her, "How could you say something like that about your eldest aunt. Be careful to not let anyone else hear you, they'll start saying that you're a bad child."

Xiaocao sneered slightly and grumbled inwardly, 'Isn't Eldest Aunt the most shameless one around here? She's completely a troublemaker!'

Suddenly, they heard a familiar sounding voice calling out to them, "Brother Dahai, Xiaocao! You guys are also in town now? Looks like you've bought a lot of things ah!"

Xiaocao twisted her head around to look and saw that their neighbor, Madam Fang, was waving her hand at them. The basket in front of her had a couple plump and fat hens in it, and the basket next to it was empty.

"Auntie Zhou, did you come to the market again to sell chicken eggs? Business is doing okay?" Xiaocao scampered a couple steps forward and stopped by Madam Fang's side. She smiled sweetly at the woman as she asked.

Madam Fang helped her brush away a few stray hairs from her cheek and smiled, "It's not bad! The chicken eggs all sold out and there are only a few chickens left. Did you guys hitch a ride on Old Zhang's ox cart to get here? How was the academy? Was Little Shitou able to enter without any problems?"

"With Brother Qian Wen guiding us, it went pretty smoothly. We don't have enough seasonings at home, so we went to the food market to look around. Auntie Zhou, please continue with what you need to do, but will you be going back to the village on the cart too? We bought a donkey cart today!" Xiaocao was very happy and excited that they were able to buy a cheap donkey cart. She couldn't help but tell Madam Fang the good news as soon as she could.

Madam Fang replied with an astonished look at her face, "Wow, Xiaocao! You only worked for a few days and you managed to buy a cart? Then when we go back, Auntie Zhou will have to take advantage of you..."

Yu Hai, who was standing at the side, hastily interjected, "Madam Fang, don't listen to her! When we were at the ox and horse market, we saw a classmate of Shitou's who desperately needed money and was selling a sick donkey. Xiaocao thought the animal looked pitiful, so she spent three taels to buy the animal and the cart. That donkey looks pretty ill in my opinion. I don't know if it's savable or not!"

After finding out they had spent three taels to buy a half-dead donkey, Madam Fang wasn't sure what she should say. Instead, she smiled and commented, "Our Xiaocao has an especially kind heart! Good things come to good people. That donkey definitely will get better..."

Right at this time, a person came up to ask Madam Fang how much she was selling her hens for. Xiaocao hurriedly said, "Auntie Zhou, do what you need to do! In the afternoon, we'll go back home together, ok!"

After saying their goodbyes to Madam Fang, the father and daughter pair walked off. Before they had gone a few steps, they were stopped by someone. Jiang Yu, the young lad who ran the pickled vegetable store, came out of his stall with a large smile on his face and greeted them, "Benefactor, benefactor, please wait for a second!"

Yu Hai felt perplexed inside. This young fellow didn't look familiar at all to him. When did he help this guy? Who would have thought, Yu Hai had assumed wrongly. The person that the young man was thanking wasn't him.

"Ah...you are the fellow that runs that pickled and salted vegetable store, right?" Xiaocao pointed her finger at the pickled vegetable shop that was in the vicinity. Inside, there were several people buying pickled vegetables. A middle-aged man, who looked very similar to Jiang Yu, was currently bustling around helping out the customers inside.

Xiaocao grinned at the young man, "Looks like business is going well right now!"

Jiang Yu happily replied, "It's all thanks to you, benefactor. The recipes for pickled and salted vegetables that you gave me have all been made and are on the market. Everyone likes the taste, and the new products attracted a lot of new and old customers. My father has been talking constantly about you these past few days and keeps telling me that we need to personally express our gratitude to you. Earlier when you were talking to the other person over there, I thought you looked familiar. When I got closer, I discovered that it was you. Benefactor, please come to our store to sit and chat a little..."

Yu Hai looked at his daughter, flabbergasted. When did his little girl become this family's 'benefactor'?

Jiang Yu was too enthusiastic and warm, so Xiaocao was unable to decline his invitation. Thus, she followed him into the pickled and salted vegetable store. Inside the shop, the unique smell of pickled and salted vegetables surrounded her. Compared to the previous time, it smelled a lot more appetizing.

"Old Jiang, can you give me half a catty of the savory and spicy dried radish and half a catty of the sweet and spicy...what? The savory and spicy one is all sold out? When will it be back in stock? In about two days?! Then just give me half a catty of the sweet and spicy then...and then add half a catty of the spicy cabbage!" A stout-looking woman who looked about forty revealed a disappointed expression when she heard the savory and spicy dried radishes had been sold out.

Another old man who was in his fifties shook his head and smiled, "Shopkeeper Jiang, your family's salted and pickled vegetables now taste better and have a better flavor than when your wife was alive. Did you get the advice of someone talented?"

Shopkeeper Jiang was weighing the requested pickled vegetables as he smiled and replied, "Of course, that's what happened! We actually did have a really great person give us some tips. Elder Uncle Lu, you know that my wife had died suddenly and unexpectedly. So all of her recipes went with her to the grave. My son and daughter had only learned some basic and simple pickling methods from her. You, of all people, should know that my store, had it not been for you old clients still helping us out, would have long gone out of business by now."

At this point, he couldn't help but shake his head due to his heavy emotions. The other old man sighed for a bit and then Shopkeeper Jiang continued, "A few days ago, my son had gotten the help of a talented individual. That person gave him a few pickling recipes and when we made them we found out that the vegetables were even more delicious than the ones my deceased wife had made...make sure to hold on tight to these pickled beans and spicy cabbage! If you think they taste good, please come back again!"

The old man chuckled gently, "Even if you didn't say anything I would still come back! My old wife, after eating a whole winter's worth of cabbage and radish, doesn't have a good appetite right now. When she ate the spicy cabbage I bought two days ago, she even ate an extra two bowls of food. Now, she can't even eat a meal without having some of your spicy cabbage on the table!"

A young matron at the side interjected in agreement, "Isn't that so! My youngest at home has almost turned your sweet and crispy dried radish into a snack. If I don't give it, he throws a tantrum! Luckily, your family's pickled vegetables are cheap and are of good quality, otherwise I wouldn't be able to afford his habit!" She then urged the shopkeeper to weigh out a catty of the sweet and crispy radish for her.

Shopkeeper Jiang humbly smiled and said, "It's not good to eat too much pickled vegetables. It's better that he eats more of his regular meals. After a couple of months, the newly grown vegetables will hit the market. Make sure your child eats more green vegetables..."

"Father! It really was our benefactor! I invited her back!" Jiang Yu walked in joyfully with a large grin on his face.

Shopkeeper Jiang saw Yu Hai behind his son and rushed out, forgetting that his hands were still sticky from vegetable pickling juice. He grabbed Yu Hai's hand and repeatedly said, "Benefactor! I finally had the chance to meet you! You are truly the savior of our little store!"

An awkward expression crossed Yu Hai's face as he stared blankly at his hand that was now covered in pickling juice. Jiang Yu promptly pulled his father away and bashfully smiled in embarrassment, "Father, you're thanking the wrong person. The person who taught me the recipes is the little girl behind him. You're thanking our benefactor's father."

Shopkeeper Jiang laughed hollowly as he said, "It's all the same, all the same! Ah...good brother, you have a daughter who has the heart and kindness of a Bodhisattva!"

Yu Hai modestly replied, "You're too kind, too kind! She's always liked experimenting with cooking since she was young, so she has a bit of talent in this area."

Xiaocao rolled her eyes in her heart and silently said, 'Father, are you trying to be modest here? Why does it seem like you're actually boasting right now?'

Jiang Yu took out the most recent account books and spread them open for Xiaocao to look at. He enthusiastically said, "Benefactor, although the recipes you taught me use more spices and condiments than other recipes, but the flavor of the products are very good. Even though we spend a little more to make them, we can still set a slightly higher price and customers will still buy them. Over the past few days, the best sellers were the savory and spicy dried radish and spicy cabbage. A lot of people also really like the pickled beans..."

The youth was afraid that Xiaocao couldn't read, so he chattered constantly to describe the sales. Xiaocao glanced at the books. Although it was written in the traditional style, she could recognize the

vast majority of the characters. It was obvious at a glance how many catties of pickled and salted vegetables they sold as well as the profit they made.

In just a few days, a tiny pickled and salted vegetable store actually had an income of forty-five taels and a profit of twenty taels. It made her want to sigh in sorrow—it was much easier to make money in town!

Right now there weren't any other people in the store, so Shopkeeper Jiang took out five taels and said, "Benefactor! At that time we had come to an agreement that we would split our profits 20-80. These are your dividends from the past few days, please kindly accept them, benefactor."

Chapter 99 – A Chance Encounter

Originally the plan was to give out dividends once a month. However, Shopkeeper Jiang had noticed that the father and daughter in front of him were wearing shabby clothes and thought that they were embarrassingly short of money, so he decided to give out the money early.

Yu Hai refused to take it and shook his hand, "We can't take this, we absolutely can't take this! It's only a few recipes for pickled and salted vegetables, so how can we take your money?! You guys had to do all of the labor and buy the ingredients. We haven't done anything to earn the money. If this came out, wouldn't people criticize us behind our back?"

Shopkeeper Jiang hastily replied, "Brother, you are wrong! Why do you think the new Zhenxiu Restaurant in town can compete against the established Fulin Restaurant? Isn't it because they have a few unique and special dishes that other places don't have? That's how they attracted a lot of customers over. If Zhenxiu Restaurant had wanted to sell the recipes of their new dishes, I believe that even if they set the price to over a thousand taels per recipe, there would still be people willing to buy them! I have never seen anything like the recipes that your precious daughter gave us, so they are absolutely worth it! If you wanted to make these pickled vegetables and sell them in town yourself, you would have made much more money than what I'm giving you. However, your daughter has a kind heart and only wanted twenty percent of the earnings. If you calculate it out, we are the ones taking advantage of you! Brother, quickly take the money, you guys deserve it...what's wrong? Do you think it's too little?"

Overwhelmed with the situation, Yu Hai couldn't help but back away from the enthusiastic man. He glanced at his daughter out of embarrassment, silently asking her to help. Xiaocao quickly interjected, "Uncle Jiang, at the time, I had already come to an agreement with Brother Jiang Yu. We were supposed to receive dividends once a month, but it hasn't been a month yet, right?"

Shopkeeper Jiang obviously had done a lot of business so he suavely replied, "I just felt really happy after making some money! Just take these five taels as start of a great beginning, it'll bring good fortune to us! In the future, we'll divvy out the money once a month as agreed upon!"

There were people in the store who wanted to buy some pickled vegetables, so Shopkeeper Jiang stuffed the five taels into Yu Hai's hand without saying anything, and lifted up the cloth curtain to help them. Yu Hai hesitated as he wasn't sure what to do with the money. Xiaocao merely smiled, "Since Uncle Jiang said it this way, then let's just take the money!"

When Jiang Yu saw the father giving the money to the seven to eight year old girl, he thought it was odd, 'Is he not afraid that the little girl might lose the money...'

Right after that interlude, Xiaocao dictated a few more recipes for pickled and salted vegetables to Jiang Yu and had him write them down. This time, the recipes were of a different variety than the previous ones she gave him. The recipes were for: red pepper paste, sweet bean paste, and, the more complex, shitake mushroom sauce, and peanut and sesame seed sauce.

Jiang Yu acted as if he had just received the most precious treasure in the world. He carefully placed the handwritten recipes into his pocket. Once he and his father learned how to make them, he would destroy his written copies. This way, these unique and flavorful products could only be made and sold at their store and would become their trade secret...

Xiaocao bid her farewells to Jiang Yu and walked out of the inner room. When she came out to the main room, she saw a handsome young man dressed in brocade who was looking at the vats of fermented vegetables in the store with a frown on his face. Shopkeeper Jiang was at his side, patiently explaining the different types of products that were available.

The attendant next to the youth quietly said, "Third Young Master, if you wanted to eat salted and pickled vegetables, you could have just ordered me to come here. There's no need for you to personally be here, right? ...be careful, don't get your clothing dirty!"

The youth raised his head to look over at Xiaocao when he heard some noise. A look of surprise crossed his face, as if he was astonished that he would meet her here.

Xiaocao grinned widely when she saw that his eyes were opened wide with surprise, “Third Young Master Zhou, you're finally back from the capital, eh? When did you come back?”

Apparently, this finely dressed young man was the youth she hadn't seen for almost a month, the third young master of the Zhou family—Zhou Zixu. As she approached, Zhou Zixu abruptly said, “What the heck, Yu Xiaocao. You clearly have some good recipes for sauces in that head of yours, but you don't even invest in your own production. Instead, you privately started cooperating with someone else!”

On the other hand, Yu Xiaocao recalled that all of the money she had painstakingly saved up had been lured away by this bugger at the end of last year. Had she had some cash on hand when their branch split from the family, then their circumstances wouldn't have been so bad! The Zhou Family was the richest family in Tanggu Town. Did they really need her tiny stash of cash to start up a condiment factory? This bugger must have deliberately wanted to cause her trouble!!

“As soon as I entered the restaurant today, I overheard the people in the kitchen making a racket. Can you guess what it was about? Apparently, they were arguing with each other on how to make a small plate of food! Zhenxiu Restaurant's purchasing staff had bought a plate of small fish at the docks!!” Third Young Master Zhou gritted his teeth as he frowned at Yu Xiaocao. A bitter and worried expression surfaced onto his face.

“What's wrong? How does me selling some snacks at the dock in any way affect what you're doing?” Xiaocao couldn't understand why he was looking at her with such an aggrieved expression in his eyes. She was the person who should have been annoyed, right?

“I heard this dish was called 'pickled fish', right? How did you make this? The small bones in the fish are so soft that it's indescribable, and the taste is incomparable! This truly is a magnificent dish that is full of flavor!”

Third Young Master Zhou had also tasted one piece that day and thought that the flavor profile was very good. When the head chef of Zhenxiu Restaurant tried it, he could tell that it had been first been fried and then steamed. However, no matter how much he tried, he was unable to make a result that tasted as authentic and good as the original. In fact, he even pondered inwardly. 'I never would have thought that such a simple looking pickled fish would require such a tricky technique to make perfectly.'

As soon as the words came out of his mouth, the youth seemed to realize it didn't sound right and abruptly corrected himself, “I wasn't trying to make you tell me your secret method. I was mostly

wanted to show my surprise, that's all. How do you have the time to stroll the market today, Xiaocao? Why didn't you go to the docks to sell braised food instead?"

Xiaocao smiled, not all offended, and said, "Third Young Master is too complimentary. My crude method is nothing special, it definitely won't be able to be taken out in more formal situations. Today my mother and Xiaolian went to the docks while my father and I ran some errands in town——Third Young Master Zhou is buying some pickled vegetables today?"

Third Young Master Zhou nodded his head and replied, "Recently, our family's matriarch hasn't had a good appetite and has no interest in eating. Earlier on the streets I overheard that this store's pickled and salted vegetable products have a good flavor, so I wanted to buy some and show some respect to her..."

After she had a good understanding of the elderly lady's preferences, Xiaocao recommended that Third Young Master Zhou buy some sweet and crispy radishes. They were crunchy and had a fresh taste; thus, they were the best for increasing a person's appetite.

Third Young Master Zhou nodded his head and then had the store weigh out some radishes for him. He also asked the manager what the other products in the store tasted like. With the help of Shopkeeper Jiang, he got to taste a few different types of pickled vegetables. Afterwards, he selected the ones he liked: wine-marinated beans and spicy cabbage. When he settled the bill, he also took out a piece of silver that was worth around two taels.

Oh alright! If you wanted to find someone who was rich and had money to spare, that's your guy right there!

"I heard that your branch of the family had split off from the rest? Separating is good. We don't have to surreptitiously give you the dividends after the factory is up! If you have any other difficult situations, don't worry and come to me for help!" Zhou Zixu said with a face full of sincerity.

'Is it a little too late to be saying these words? When we had just separated families, I would have shamelessly asked you for some help, pride be damned. But now...we've already survived the most difficult situation, what's the point in making these promises now?'

With just these few thoughts, Yu Xiaocao quickly dismissed Third Young Master Zhou! Before Zhou Zixu left, he didn't forget to remind her that she had some stock in their condiment factory. She needed to think up more condiment and seasoning recipes up! She shouldn't just place all of her efforts on a small pickled and salted vegetable shop!

After waving goodbye to Third Young Master Zhou, Xiaocao went to a cloth shop that Jiang Yu and his father had recommended and bought a few bolts of cotton cloth that differed in color. She also got four blankets worth of quilted fabric and spent almost a tael on ten catties worth of cotton filling.

Cotton had become a commonly grown crop during the previous Yuan Dynasty. At the initial start of the Great Ming Dynasty, the country was still settling down from the chaos of war, and vast acres of land had been left fallow. Thus, the output of cotton had decreased dramatically, and prices had risen without falling. After the current emperor ascended the throne, he energetically encouraged the people to open up land and start farming. He implemented a series of policies that lowered taxes and reduced the forced labor requirements. The prices of grain and cash crops slowly decreased and stabilized a bit. However, for the vast majority of the poverty stricken commoners, the price of cotton, which was seventy copper coins a catty, was still considered a somewhat luxurious purchase.

After the father and daughter pair finished buying cloth and cotton, it was already ten minutes to 3 pm. With a giant bag of cotton to haul around, it would be hard to shop around even if they wanted to. Thus, the two of them headed in the direction of the ox and horse market to retrieve their donkey cart with their large and small bags of goods in tow.

The old man who was helping them keep an eye on the donkey took their five copper coins and looked at the skinny, sick donkey that was lying on the ground. He silently prayed that the animal wouldn't fall over dead right this minute.

In his younger days, the old man was a good hand at raising animals. Now that he was older, he no longer could keep up, so he set up an area for people to leave their animals and carts. Every day he could earn a decent amount of money. If his business hadn't been slow today, he would not have accepted this arduous and thankless task to watch over a sick donkey.

In accordance with Xiaocao's instructions, he made sure to give the donkey a bowl of water to drink every hour. He thought it was a little bit odd that the donkey wouldn't even sniff at other types of water and instead only happily drank the water that was in the little girl's pouch.

After drinking two bowls of water, the donkey, who had been close to death's door, seemed to be more and more energetic with every passing minute. By the time it had its third bowl of water, it could actually stand up and even whinnied a couple times, asking him for some food to eat.

Was it possible that there was some medicine that was put in the water pouch? In a moment he needed to ask them who had made it, it was actually quite efficacious.

The five copper coins paid for not only the board of the donkey but also its feed and water. Although they had given him their own water, he still needed to give the donkey fodder from his own stores. After eating its fill, the little gray colored donkey knelt back down to take a nap. Despite its obvious thinness, the animal still looked rather lively.

When it was almost three in the afternoon, Yu Hai's silhouette with the slight limp appeared in front of the old man's sight. The father and daughter pair both were loaded down with large and small bags; they had clearly bought a lot of things.

The little donkey seemed to have a connection with them, and, as soon as it saw its little master, it immediately stood and opened up its large, limpid eyes. It cheerfully whinnied at the two people in front of it. "Little Gray, are you okay?" Xiaocao ran swiftly to the little donkey's side. She used her right hand, which had the multi-colored stone on her wrist, to gently pet its back, and have the little divine store to heal it from head to toe again.

The little donkey comfortably closed its eyes and rubbed its head continuously on Xiaocao's arm. The expression on its face was obvious——so comfortable ah!

Yu Hai exclaimed in surprise, "It really got better! Looks quite energetic too! I'm not sure if its able to walk all the way home though...Cao'er, we should have Old Zhang help us bring our goods back today."

The little donkey whinnied spiritedly a couple of times as if it was trying to say that it was okay. Xiaocao smiled and patted its head, "Father, by this time, Grandpa Zhang's cart is probably all full with people now. Where would he have room to put our stuff? In any case, cloth and cotton isn't very heavy, so let's try to have Little Gray pull it home."

Yu Hai skillfully put the cart harness onto the donkey and then placed all of their goods onto the cart. After thinking a bit, he helped his daughter onto the vehicle. If the donkey couldn't pull the cart, he

could help it by pushing the vehicle on the side. After all, his daughter was only eight years old and had been running around all day. He didn't want her to get more tired by walking all the way home. This was the first time Yu Hai had led a donkey cart. However, as they left the ox and horse market, the little donkey seemed to really understand what he wanted and closely followed behind him and didn't need any direction from him at all.

Chapter 100

When they exited the city, Yu Hai saw someone selling hot cakes and so he bought some. Everyone in the family had already gotten used to Xiaocao needing a meal at this time. By the time they got home, they would have likely missed the meal time. His daughter was probably dying of hunger now.

Xiaocao sat on the donkey cart with her back against the bag full of cotton. Her legs dangled down the sides of the cart as she nibbled on the delicious hot cake. She looked leisurely and content.

"Brother Dahai, Xiaocao!! I saved you two a spot, come quickly!" Outside the town gates, Madam Fang had been waiting on Old Zhang's ox cart for a while. It looked like business had gone well today for her as the baskets in her hands were completely empty. Both the eggs and live chickens had been sold out.

Old Zhang gaped in astonishment when he saw Yu Hai leading the donkey cart. He tapped his tobacco pipe on the side of his cart shaft and said, "Ah, Dahai! Where did this donkey cart come from? Did you guys actually buy it?? It's not that I'm trying to criticize you but when you're buying a donkey, you should choose one that is plump and healthy...this donkey, are you sure you can keep it alive?"

Yu Hai smiled, "Uncle Zhang, although this donkey is on the thin side, it is quite lively. I previously was able to spend several days with a person versed in veterinary medicine, and when I saw that this donkey didn't have any critical defects, I knew that it will be fine after nursing it for a few days. If the donkey wasn't skinny, how could I get it for a good, cheap price?"

Old Zhang then asked how much they had spent on the donkey and cart, and Xiaocao told him they had only spent three taels. The old man nodded his head, "Three taels for all of this is not considered expensive. It would probably cost the same amount of money to commission a donkey cart. Even if the donkey is unable to survive, you guys wouldn't be losing out too much anyway...Brother Dahai, did you buy this donkey cart for..."

Whenever Old Zhang was not hauling firewood to town, he would bring people from the villages to town for a fee. On a good day, he could even make twenty to thirty copper coins. When he saw Yu Hai's donkey cart, the first thought that came to his mind was, 'Is Yu Hai trying to cut into my business bringing people to town? After all, a donkey cart is definitely faster than an ox cart.'

Xiaocao smiled and hurriedly dispelled his fears, "Grandpa Zhang, isn't Shitou studying at school in town now? With a donkey cart, it will be a lot easier to visit him. We have also grown some vegetables in our front and back courtyards. In the future, it'll be easier to sell those vegetables in town with a cart."

When Old Zhang heard the little girl chattering about this and that but not mentioning anything about using the donkey cart to carry people into town, he was able to dispel his worries.

On the road home, Yu Hai was afraid that making the thin donkey work too hard would cause it to become exhausted, so he adamantly refused to sit on the cart. Despite all her efforts, Xiaocao was unable to convince him. She only managed to make him compromise and had him sit on Old Zhang's ox cart. The donkey was very perceptive and blindly followed the ox cart from behind. Other than a slight break in the middle to give the animal another drink of the mystic-stone water, contrary to Yu Hai's fears, the donkey didn't collapse from exhaustion.

Xiaocao's family lived at the foot of the West Mountains, so they had to traverse through more than half of the village when coming back from town. The news that Yu Hai's family had bought a donkey cart had traveled throughout the village before the two of them had even got home.

Madam Li teetered on her bound feet as she trotted back home. When she told her mother-in-law what she found out, she also added her own embellishments. After her failure the last time she tried to scheme against the second branch, she had learned her lesson. This time, she decided to make her mother-in-law attack the second branch by stating that her father-in-law was subsidizing them. They had only split off from the main family for a short period of time, so how could they possibly buy a donkey cart?!

When Madam Zhang heard Madam Li's accusations, her sparse eyebrows immediately snapped together in a frown, "They bought a donkey cart? You're certain?"

Madam Li nodded her head furiously and replied, "I am absolutely sure. The whole village knows already so they're only hiding it from us! Mother, just think about it, one donkey costs around five to six taels. When Second Brother-in-law split from the family, his leg was also injured, so how would he be able to earn the money to buy a donkey and cart? Perhaps Father is privately..."

Madam Li didn't elaborate further beyond that point but Madam Zhang clearly understood what she was implying. The old woman stated hesitantly, "I'm in charge of all of the money at home! If you said

that the old man had around a dozen copper coins in his hand, that would be believable. However, if you're saying that he has a few taels to subsidize Second Son, then I don't think that's possible!"

When Madam Li saw that her mother-in-law hadn't flown into a rage as she would like, she started to become anxious, "Mother, if it were not for Father privately subsidizing them, Second Brother-in-law's family wouldn't even have enough food to eat. How could they possibly have the money to buy a donkey cart? We've been catching fewer fish these days, but what about before? When Second Brother-in-law's leg was still good, he always gave the money he earned from selling game to Father. If he didn't give all of it to you and had about eight to ten taels on hand, maybe..."

"Ah, what!!" When Madam Zhang thought that the old man was sneakily giving money to Second Son's family behind her back, anger bubbled within her until it exploded. She violently threw her sewing from her hands into the basket and screamed, "I thought it was fishy that Second Son didn't make a fuss when we were splitting the family! Apparently he had been greasing up that stupid old man on the down low! That's not okay, they need to spit out whatever they had swallowed earlier!!"

Madam Zhang stomped furiously towards the road leading to Xiaocao's family's home. Madam Li smirked proudly as she wiggled her fat waist from behind. When Old Yu's eldest brother's, Yu Lichun, eldest daughter-in-law, Madam Liu [1], saw the expression on the two women's faces as well as the direction they were headed, she knew they were going to cause trouble for Yu Hai. As she silently cursed in her heart, she hurried back to the village to find Old Yu, who was playing go.

When Madam Zhang and Madam Li arrived at the residence, Xiaocao's whole family was busily preparing the pig head and pig offal. Madam Liu raised her head and saw Madam Zhang furiously charging in. Her heart squeezed painfully and she hastily got up and timidly said, "Mother, when did you come over?"

Madam Li stared at the wooden basin that was full of the smelly pig intestines and could only remember the last time she had disastrously tried to cause trouble for them, only to have herself fall into trouble instead. When she had gotten home that time, she had washed her feces stained clothes several times. However, no matter how often she washed it, she always felt there was a disgusting stench stuck on the clothing. Madam Li suddenly noticed that a pig intestine was in Xiaocao's hand, who was facing her with a faint smile on her face. The woman hastily retreated until she was behind Madam Zhang, covered her nose, and said, "When can't mother come over to visit? Are you telling me that we have to make an appointment just to come over to Second Brother-in-law's house?"

Madam Zhang huffily snorted, "I heard that Second Son's family has hit the jackpot and had recently bought a donkey cart. As his mother, shouldn't I come over to congratulate you guys?"

Suddenly the expression on her face twisted, "Second Son's wife, tell me the truth! How did you guys manage to weasel out so much money from that old man? I was wondering why your branch agreed so easily to splitting the family! Apparently you guys had another trick up your sleeves, eh!!! I'm telling you all, if you guys don't tell me where that old geezer is hiding money, I swear I'll make your lives hell!!!"

Madam Liu was shocked by the accusation and hastily replied, "Mother, what do you mean? Where would we get money from him? When we split from the family, we only got two taels and we also borrowed some money from my maternal family. All of it was spent on fixing up the house. Father doesn't have any money in his hands. Other people likely don't know how much money there is at home, but how could you not know?"

"Well apparently I don't know where the money is!! If it were not for that old geezer giving money to you guys on the sly, how could all of you earn enough money in such a short amount of time to buy a donkey cart? Look at you, one's lame, the other's sickly, and the rest are tiny children!"

When Madam Zhang found out that a donkey cart cost around five to six taels, she felt like her heart had been scooped out, dripping blood. Every day the old man and her eldest son went out to catch fish, but the amount they caught was less than before. The amount of money they made was barely enough to cover the family's expenditures. How long ago had the old man secretly been saving those five to six taels?!

Madam Liu had a gentle personality, so she obviously couldn't argue against Madam Zhang. She was so emotional that tears almost came pouring down her face. She quietly tried to explain, "Mother, the money that we used to buy the donkey was all earned from Xiaocao selling braised pig head meat and pig intestines at the docks. If you don't believe me, go to the docks and ask around. Everyone knows about our braised meat, which is sold for one copper coin a portion."

Xiaocao slapped her forehead and lamented silently, 'Oh my gosh, Mother! You are seriously too honest, aren't you? In just a few sentences, you basically sold out our entire family, ah...'

"One copper coin for a portion of meat? Second Sister-in-law, who are you trying to pull the wool over, ah? A catty of pork is around twenty copper coins. At that price, how many pieces of meat can you get for one copper coin? Not enough to even get a taste! On the outside you look so honest and sincere, but who would have thought you'd even try to trick Mother!" Madam Li had a self-satisfied expression on her face as she sarcastically remarked on the side.

"Eldest Sister-in-law, I'm not trying to trick Mother! If you use seasonings to braise pig intestines and the meat from the pig's head, it actually tastes pretty good. We can earn around twenty to thirty copper coins a day...if it wasn't for this, our whole family would have starved to death by now..." Madam Liu wasn't completely naive and didn't tell them the whole truth: that they actually were earning around two hundred to three hundred copper coins a day.

However, getting twenty to thirty copper coins per day was enough to make Madam Zhang and Madam Li salivate with envy! Madam Zhang inched a bit closer to the wooden basin full of dirty, disgusting, only fit to feed dogs, pig intestines but was pushed back by their stench. She sneered and said, "What people would buy something so disgusting and smelly? Do you really think this old woman is stupid and easy to cheat? Even if you guys earn around twenty to thirty coins a day and not spend any on food or drink, it's still not enough to buy a donkey cart after only saving for ten days!"

Yu Hai had been in the rear courtyard settling the donkey down under the shed. When he heard the commotion, he quickly walked over and quietly said to Madam Zhang, "Mother, we bought a donkey that was so sick that it almost died. The previous owner didn't want the animal anymore, and we only had to pay enough money to cover the cart. We only spent around three taels total. If you don't believe me, you can go to the rear courtyard and take a look..."

At the back of the house, Little Gray was comfortably lying on the ground under the sun after drinking some more mystic-stone water. From Madam Zhang's angle, she could only see an extremely emaciated donkey that had barely any meat on it listlessly lying down on the ground. She thought it clearly didn't have any energy to even stand up and, thus, she started to somewhat believe Yu Hai's words.

However, she couldn't just come here without grasping any advantage she could get. Her eyes whirled around as she said, "Second Son, ah. Your family is capable and hardworking to be able to earn twenty to thirty copper coins a day. But you guys don't even know how to help the rest of the family out. Your mother and father almost don't have enough food to eat yet you're throwing money away buying a sick donkey that's about to die. Are you not afraid of other people accusing you of being unfilial?!"

Xiaocao wanted to laugh out of rage and was unable to keep her mouth shut as she retorted, "Grandmother, don't forget that we had already separated families! When we split, we only got three plots of sandy land, two taels, and an old, run-down house that wasn't even livable. In addition, when we split, we had a contract written out that spells it out very clearly. Each year, we only need to give you five hundred catties of grain or one tael and five hundred coins. Grandmother, we haven't even planted sweet potatoes yet, how are we supposed to help you?"

Madam Zhang had greedily kept the three hundred taels Yu Hai had risked his life for but wasn't a little bit ashamed as she confidently asserted, "Can't you guys sell pig offal to earn money? Then just give the recipes for the braised pig head meat and pig offal to us. Don't hide it from us. Even though we already split, we are still one family. It's better to give us the advantage than to let outsiders find out instead..."

Xiaocao felt a bit helpless. They were trying to sever their only chance of survival! She was inwardly ecstatic that the weather was on the colder side today as all of the vegetables in the back garden had been covered up with the straw mats. Otherwise, if Madam Zhang and Madam Li had seen them growing, they probably would have wanted to put their grubby hands on them. It was obvious, there was nothing these two women wouldn't be ashamed to do.