

## Folly 161

Chapter 161: This Girl Is Reaching for the Heavens

Boiling a pot of water, Mu Shuangshuang lets it cool before adding salt and rice wine to it, then throws in some ginger and chili peppers. The most crucial element for pickles—the water—is now prepared.

Making pickles is incredibly easy; Mu Shuangshuang puts the cut cucumbers and cabbage stems into a jar and seals it tight.

The pickles made now should be ready to eat by tomorrow morning.

"Lu Yuanfeng, I'm finished here. We can pretty much start the fire and cook the congee now."

"Alrighty!" Lu Yuanfeng responds and starts adding firewood to the stove.

Mu Shuangshuang pours the soaked lychees, glutinous rice, and other ingredients into the pot and adds some rock sugar.

While the congee is simmering, Mu Shuangshuang isn't idle; she chats intermittently with Lu Yuanfeng about their future plans, while Lu Yuanfeng listens intently, occasionally sharing his opinions.

Meanwhile, Mu Shuangshuang's eldest sister-in-law's house is livelier than usual.

"Erzhu's dad, are you sure the girl you saw was our silly lass?" Mu Xianxian's expression turned slightly peculiar, seemingly in disbelief, suspecting her husband had mistaken someone else for their niece.

"Not entirely sure. The last time that girl came to our house, I saw her from a distance, skinny body, shabby clothes.

Today the girl I saw at Jiu Si Xuan looked just like that, but the girl in Jiu Si Xuan clearly seemed paler than your niece."

Mu Xianxian rolled her eyes, quickly recalling the last time she saw Mu Shuangshuang, she still felt doubtful.

"Do you think if this girl really has the secret recipe for cold noodles like the staff at Jiu Si Xuan said, why would my dad still come over to borrow money?"

"You're silly, your dad wants a clean break with us. It looks like your family is going to be prosperous. With this girl's recipe, wouldn't fifty taels of silver be easy to earn?"

I heard the chefs there wanted her to deliver more, but she refused. If she really wasn't rich, who wouldn't want to make money?"

Cao Jianmin racked his brains and conveyed the reason to Mu Xianxian.

Upon hearing it, Mu Xianxian suddenly felt cornered, realizing her father plans to leave her behind and live a better life.

Wishful thinking, since she's Da De's elder sister, she must have her share when there's meat to eat.

"I can't, I need to go to my dad and ask what he really means, thinking of a better life and wanting to abandon me."

Mu Xianxian got up to go out but was stopped by Cao Jianmin.

"That won't do, Xianxian, if you fight with your dad, he surely won't treat you kindly.

If your big brother really qualifies, we'll have no good days ahead.

Then your big brother will have authority, and that silly lass will have money, how can we compete with others."

"Right, we can't fall out, I need to think of a way to get that silly lass's recipe first.

Then get my dad to promise me that he won't forget me when my brother becomes prosperous."

With these thoughts, Mu Xianxian calmed down again.

Her dad is a sentimental person; she plans to take him some unsold cloth shoes from the shop tomorrow, and speak about these things when he's in a good mood.

Mu Shuangshuang is unaware that her plans have unwittingly been discovered by Mu Family's eldest sister, Mu Xianxian.

Of course, Mu Xianxian doesn't know that the third branch has already become independent, now every penny Shuangshuang earns belongs to her, and no one else has the right to say anything.

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The Eight Treasure Congee is prepared, and roughly an hour and a half has passed. Although Old Mrs. Xue has waited long, she has no sign of impatience, but instead looks increasingly expectant at what Mu Shuangshuang is bringing.

Eight Treasure Congee is different from other congees; it's more mixed inside, and if you haven't tried it, it might seem strange.

Xue Yi stands out immediately. "What is this dark stuff? Can it be eaten?"

"Congee, Mr. Xue surely hasn't tried it, but you shouldn't take ignorance for granted, right?"

"You..." Really infuriating, this lass's tongue is truly sharp.

"Grandmother, please drink it quickly; Lu Yuanfeng and I have been simmering this for quite some time."

Mu Shuangshuang bypasses Xue Yi and presents the congee to Old Mrs. Xue.

Old Mrs. Xue eagerly grabs the congee, her eyes occasionally falling on Mu Shuangshuang, even before drinking it she increasingly likes Shuangshuang.

"Mother, you're not really going to drink this stuff, are you?" Xue Yi exclaimed.

"Shoo, shoo, shoo, go away; if you don't drink, don't stop me, old woman."

Old Mrs. Xue takes a spoonful of Eight Treasure Congee and places it in her mouth.

Fragrant, glutinous, sweet yet not cloying, the three flavors melt in her mouth, she can't help but have several more sips.

"Delicious!" Old Mrs. Xue exclaims cheerily, her bowl soon emptied in a few spoonfuls, she places the bowl in front of Mu Shuangshuang.

"Little lass, get me another bowl, this congee is so tasty, has familiar flavors, much better than what Yi hired that Capital chef for."

"Mother, you wouldn't lie just for this lass, would you?" Xue Yi curled his lip.

Once Mu Shuangshuang brings more congee over, after Xue Yi takes a couple of sips, he finally realizes his mother wasn't lying.

This thing is truly delicious.

"Little lass, your skill is really good." Xue Yi sincerely remarks.

"Can you serve me another bowl?"

A pot of congee, apart from Lu Yuanfeng tasting two bowls, the rest mostly went into Xue Yi's belly.

After drinking, Xue Yi's belly is round and full, he keeps patting it while belching.

"Little lass, how about becoming the head chef at our house? I'll pay you ten taels of silver a month."

A second-class maid gets only two taels of silver. Xue Yi's offer of ten taels to Mu Shuangshuang nearly equals Housekeeper Xue's pay.

"Mr. Xue, didn't you previously say this wasn't good, that wasn't good? Why have you changed your mind?" Mu Shuangshuang rolls her eyes.

"Little lass, why bother quarreling this much with an elder; just take it as my poor sight misjudged, can you?"

Xue Yi always lets go easily, and besides, he was originally jesting with Mu Shuangshuang.

"Hmph, can elders bully juniors?" Mu Shuangshuang snorts coldly, having waited for so long for this moment of retaliation, she won't let it go without feeling satisfied.

"Alright, alright, I apologize to you. I'll treat you with respect from now on, okay?"

Xue Yi's meek appearance contrasts sharply with his previous demeanor; Lu Yuanfeng and Old Mrs. Xue chuckle as they watch Mu Shuangshuang and Xue Yi bicker, both unable to see the other favorably, surprisingly finding it amusing.

After much effort to calm Mu Shuangshuang, just when Xue Yi thinks everything is resolved, Mu Shuangshuang speaks up.

"Grandmother, I might not have the time to be a chef; there are many things at home, and I know being the head chef means staying at the Xue Family, I can't leave home for too long."

The family members are yet to explode; if she leaves, who knows how much they'd be bullied.

"Then what can we do? Does it mean I, old woman, won't be able to eat such tasty congee anymore?" Old Mrs. Xue seems disappointed.

"That's easy, long as you take care of yourself well, I'll come over to cook for you whenever I have time!"

Chapter 162: Turning Waste into Treasure

"Really?" Old Mrs. Xue hesitated a little.

"Of course, grandma, just wait and see." Mu Shuangshuang smiled, and continued.

"I also made a jar of pickles in the kitchen, something you probably haven't tried before. But it won't be ready to eat until tomorrow morning.

When you have plain porridge, just add a few pieces of pickle, I promise it'll taste great."

"You girl, you really know how to care for people. I, old lady, am reluctant to let you go." Old Mrs. Xue said with mock anger.

"Haha, I like you too, grandma, but Lu Yuanfeng and I really have to go, there are too many things at home."

"Housekeeper Xue, give Miss Shuangshuang the silver for the lotus seeds, just take out two taels of silver from the accounts, as a thank-you to Miss Shuangshuang for this breakfast."

Xue Yi shot a look at Housekeeper Xue and then spoke.

"Understood!"

Mu Shuangshuang didn't stand on ceremony, with Xue Yi footing the bill, she would definitely not lose out.

Leaving the Xue Family, Mu Shuangshuang walked off with the two taels of silver she got for nothing, smiling ear to ear.

Lu Yuanfeng walked beside her, "Shuangshuang, where are we going now? Going back home?"

Having finished his porridge, Lu Yuanfeng wasn't hungry, so they could head straight back.

"No, today I want to buy some bones to make a good meal for my parents tonight, and also buy some grains at the market.

During the separation, my grandparents didn't give these things to our third branch, I need to get them together early."

As long as the seedlings were planted in the ground, and their third branch's kitchen and pigsty were built, they could fully focus on their own work.

"Great, I also want to buy some treats for Yuanbao. I told the Zhao Brothers to prepare their own meals today; I'll settle the bill later."

"Then what are we waiting for, let's go quickly."

No matter when, shopping is a woman's nature. Mu Shuangshuang circled the market a few times and didn't feel tired at all, in fact, she got hooked.

She bought three pounds of bones, costing twelve wen per pound, totaling thirty-six wen.

She also picked up some bitter melon and a winter melon, which collectively cost less than four wen; what's left is the rice.

And indeed, rice in ancient times is expensive, seven or eight wen per pound, buying fifty pounds easily costs three to four hundred wen.

Adding some bits and pieces for stir-fry ingredients, this trip cost Mu Shuangshuang nearly half a tael of silver.

"Sigh, making money is not easy, yet spending it flows like water, truly, in any time and space it's just as frustrating."

In a past life, being a security officer with a pitiful salary and high living costs, if it wasn't for living at her workplace, she couldn't even afford rent.

In this lifetime, even earning a few hundred wen a trip seems futile when buying rice and grains, money just isn't enough.

Thinking of this, Mu Shuangshuang felt even more strongly that she needed to own her land and plant crops herself to cut down on unnecessary expenses.

"Lu Yuanfeng, do you know how much it costs to buy an acre of land?" She needs to find out first, then strive to save money.

"Typically about five or six taels of silver, but if it's good land, it might be more expensive."

Mu Shuangshuang calculated the money in her pocket and realized it's not enough, not to mention buying land, even covering Mu Dashan's medical expenses is hard.

"That's still quite far off. Do you know if there is any undeveloped wasteland in our village? The kind you can plant vegetables on, it's really not cost-effective for us to buy vegetables from outside."

We can't afford farmland, but we can clear wasteland. As long as we have our hands and feet, there's no fear of going hungry."

"I know, there's a piece of wasteland north of the village, full of rocks and wild grass. It's about seven or eight parts of land, and some people have considered clearing it before.

But there's too much work to be done over there, plus the stones seem endless to move, so they gave up. Also, it's close to Niuwei Mountain, so not many people go there."

Lu Yuanfeng's words made Mu Shuangshuang's eyes light up. So what if it's wasteland, she has the hands and feet to turn it into treasure, and being near Niuwei Mountain means it's convenient for fetching water.

Initial planting requires daily watering of the seedlings.

Mu Shuangshuang suddenly realized that piece of land seemed like a gift from heaven for her.

Next, Lu Yuanfeng picked some greens, weighed out two pounds of meat, and the two returned to Er Gui Village with full loads.

The first thing upon returning to the village, Mu Shuangshuang followed Lu Yuanfeng to check out the wasteland north of the village.

It was just as Lu Yuanfeng described, overgrown with weeds, wild grass waist-high with prodigious growth.

Even the ground was tightly surrounded by prickly grass; every step landed on large patches of stones.

Mu Shuangshuang finally understood what true wasteland meant.

"This place is indeed a bit desolate. Lu Yuanfeng, when do you think we should start working?" Mu Shuangshuang rubbed her forehead, feeling a bit of a headache.

"The sooner the better for work, let's start now. I'll handle the prickly grass, you take care of the shorter weeds, but do be careful."

Mu Shuangshuang knew exactly what Lu Yuanfeng meant.

Having been in ancient times for so long, she hadn't seen anyone using gloves for work, perhaps this could be a way to start a business.

Mu Shuangshuang's eyes turned a little, and she said, "Lu Yuanfeng, come early to my house tomorrow, I have something for you."

Lu Yuanfeng agreed happily, nodding his head.

No matter what it was, if Shuangshuang was giving it to him, he'd like it, except if it was money!

Under the scorching sun, the tall and short duo stood in waist-high wasteland, one handling the thorny grass, the other using a sickle to cut the wild grass.

The two worked swiftly, within a short time, they'd cleared a couple of patches of the wasteland.

Lu Yuanfeng noticed that Mu Shuangshuang arranged the cut grass neatly and curiously asked when he had a moment.

"Shuangshuang, why not just scatter the grass? It's going to be dried and burned anyhow."

Mu Shuangshuang shook her head, "Who said I'm going to burn it all, Lu Yuanfeng? Don't forget, it's the harvest rush period.

Those working cattle don't have time to graze, but they can't be underfed, otherwise, they won't work efficiently."

"So you mean to sell this grass to them?" Lu Yuanfeng's face lit up in surprise.

"Exactly, there's nothing wasted here in the mountains. We'll bundle them and sell each for two wen.

It's cheap and saves others time, importantly for us, it's turning waste into a resource."

"You're right, Shuangshuang. Why didn't I think of that?" Lu Yuanfeng lowered his head, a bit embarrassed.

"Of course!" Mu Shuangshuang covered her mouth and laughed secretly, after all, in this world, probably no one else would come up with such an ingenious idea.

"But you're really clever, Lu Yuanfeng, quick to catch on."

The unreserved compliment made Lu Yuanfeng's heart race; he suddenly felt he should say something.

"Shuangshuang, actually I..."

Chapter 163: Indulge Once More

"Huh? What's up?"

Mu Shuangshuang tied up a bundle of grass, her face already covered in sweat.

She looked at Lu Yuanfeng in confusion, she seemed to have just heard him call her name.

"I..." Lu Yuanfeng hesitated, unsure of what the outcome would be if he spoke out. "Nothing, just watch your step, with grass this tall, there might be snakes."

"I understand." Mu Shuangshuang nodded. Before she could cut another handful of grass, a black shadow flashed before her eyes. Her body moved faster than her mind, and with a flick of her sickle, something was sliced into two.

Upon closer inspection, a black and yellow striped banded snake was still twitching on the grass, its blood flowing from where the body was severed.

Mu Shuangshuang quickly retreated a few steps; even when a snake's head is chopped off, it can still bite, let alone a snake merely cut in half.

Lu Yuanfeng's sickle clattered to the ground at his feet as he, with red-rimmed eyes, pulled Mu Shuangshuang over. "Are you okay? Did you..."

Compared to Lu Yuanfeng's panic, Mu Shuangshuang was much calmer.

She gave what she thought was a charming smile. "No, I'm fine, aren't I lucky? I killed a snake with just a swing of my sickle."

Mu Shuangshuang raised her hand, waving it in front of Lu Yuanfeng.

Lu Yuanfeng's forehead and face were drenched in cold sweat, and he suddenly felt a bit despondent. Every time Shuangshuang faced danger, he couldn't help her in time; instead, she always relied on herself.

"Hey, silly guy, are you crying out of fear? I'm fine, and besides, that snake wasn't venomous, even if it bit me, nothing would happen, you..." don't worry!

Before she could finish speaking, Lu Yuanfeng already pulled Mu Shuangshuang into his embrace. Lu Yuanfeng was very tall, and Mu Shuangshuang was petite; their bodies fit together well.

Most importantly, Mu Shuangshuang felt that this hug somehow dissipated all the lingering hostility she had since she transmigrated.

She seemed to quite like this warm embrace.

It was as if, no matter what difficulties she encountered, there was someone to support her and accompany her.

"Lu Yuanfeng, thank you!"

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A sudden hug, a sudden separation, both Mu Shuangshuang's and Lu Yuanfeng's faces were a bit flushed, but they tacitly chose not to speak.

After a long while, Lu Yuanfeng took a deep breath, moved to the mountainside, cut down a roughly two-meter-long pole, and carefully checked the grass, ensuring there were no more snakes before he could finally relax.

Not bad, this kid does have some smarts about him, Mu Shuangshuang thought. If Lu Yuanfeng were in the modern world, he might have been someone in a security team.

"So, what do we do with the snake?" Mu Shuangshuang raised an eyebrow and spoke, with a bit of mysterious liquid dripping from the corner of her mouth.

Seeing her hungry expression, Lu Yuanfeng found it somewhat amusing.

"We can eat it. How about I handle it now, and you take a break?"

"I'll go with you. Let's make something delicious at my place tonight and indulge a bit." Mu Shuangshuang said with a laugh.

"Yes, but I haven't finished building the house for you, and the stove isn't ready yet." Although Lu Yuanfeng nodded, he was still a bit hesitant.

"You just wait and see my skills then."

The dead banded snake was carried by Lu Yuanfeng and Mu Shuangshuang to a small stream. Lu Yuanfeng used a sickle to skin the snake, removed the internal organs and the gallbladder. Using the spring water, he washed the snake meat clean.

"How about we not work anymore today; it's getting late anyway, and it's time to prepare dinner?" Mu Shuangshuang suggested.

The two of them stuck three pieces of wood into the ground where they planned to clear the land, as a sign to others that someone was already cultivating there, and no one else could touch that land in the future.

Whoever clears the land owns it, according to the village's long-standing rules.

Lu Yuanfeng used a wooden stick to lift the two bundles of grass Mu Shuangshuang had cut and brought them to Fugui's house, which had plenty of fields and owned an ox. Once there, he stated his purpose, and Wang Fugui's father immediately handed over four copper coins to Lu Yuanfeng without any hesitation.

"Good boy, you're quite clever."

"Uncle Wang, don't say that, I'm just trying to earn some pocket money for Yuanbao." Lu Yuanfeng replied respectfully.

"You've worked hard, so it's right to earn money. But my family needs ten to fifteen days to finish harvesting. Do you want to supply grass for our old ox during this time? Three bundles of grass a day, and I'll pay you daily, how about that?"

Wang Fugui's family had the most fields in the village. While other families ate gruel mixed with wild vegetables, they could afford white rice and even had some to waste.

"Alright, then I'll bring a bundle over for Uncle Wang tomorrow at noon."

This batch of grass was enough for their old ox to eat for two meals.

"Good boy, it's wise to save some money and get a wife early, unlike my son Fugui, who wanders around all day and doesn't even want to marry."

Wang Dali got a headache when talking about his son, who at twenty was still goofing around in town and never stayed home.

"Uncle Wang, don't worry, Fugui is sensible, he'll come back when he's had enough fun."

"Ah, let's hope so!"

With four copper coins in hand, Lu Yuanfeng left the Wang family courtyard. Mu Shuangshuang was waiting at the corner with the processed snake in her hand. As he approached Mu Shuangshuang, he shook the four copper coins in his hand and then directly stuffed them into Mu Shuangshuang's pocket.

"What are you doing? This money should be split evenly." Mu Shuangshuang, holding the snake, couldn't easily reach her pocket, so she had to let Lu Yuanfeng take out his share.

"It was your idea, and you cut the grass, so the money should be yours."

"You're trying to make me angry! We agreed to split it evenly in town. If you act like this, don't come to my place." Mu Shuangshuang stomped her foot in anger and gave Lu Yuanfeng a hard look. Reluctantly, Lu Yuanfeng took two copper coins out of her pocket.

"I got it, don't kick me out." Lu Yuanfeng said pitifully.

"That's more like it, let's go to your place for supplies first, or it'll be too dark to finish cooking dinner."

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Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng brought a bunch of things home. Since they took a backpath, the people from the Old Mu Family didn't notice, but Little Zhi, holding Little Black, came running over excitedly.

When she saw the snake in Mu Shuangshuang's hand, she closed her eyes in fear, and Little Black, whom she was holding, was flung out.

Unlike Little Zhi, after Little Black fell to the ground, its first reaction was to rush over and scratch Mu Shuangshuang's instep, looking pitifully at the skinned banded snake, almost drooling.

"Hiss hiss hiss hiss!" (Feed me!)

"Hiss hiss hiss hiss!" (Can't hold back any longer!)

Mu Shuangshuang stared at Little Black for a moment, subconsciously imagining Little Black's thoughts.

"Damn, you little brat, you're the one who needs looking after."

Little Black looked at the sky speechlessly; it hadn't thought of anything at all!

Chapter 164: Life is Prosperous and Thriving

In the corner, the poor Little Black was being punished again, this was Mu Shuangshuang's way of reprimanding it.

Every night before bed, but this time it was moved to the afternoon.

Little Zhi's eyes darted around in their sockets and then she whispered to Mu Shuangshuang, "Sister, just let Little Black play with me. Don't punish it, okay?"

"No way!" To dare imagine her as the one cleaning up, she had to teach this little thing a good lesson otherwise it'd be uncontrollable.

Little Zhi's face immediately fell.

She pouted her lips and obediently stood in front of the wall with Little Black.

"Then I'll be punished with Little Black, Sister hurry and make dinner, once it's ready, Little Black won't have to stand here anymore."

Next to her, Little Black wanted to jump up and give Little Zhi a hug, but it didn't dare, Mu Shuangshuang was too sharp. If it moved its little black legs, it'd get caught and get another round of beating.

No matter what Little Zhi said, Mu Shuangshuang remained unmoved. She thought to herself that standing for a while would also strengthen Little Zhi, so there was no need to let Little Black go.

"Shuangshuang, I've brought back the water, where should I put it?"

Without a proper kitchen, many things were inconvenient, but now the Mu Family's water also had to be fetched by themselves.

Luckily their home was close to one of the three wells in the village, so it didn't take long to fetch a bucket of water.

"Just put it on the ground, I'll quickly set up a simple stove."

A few blocks of mud-brick stacked, leftover wood chips and wood from building the house piled next to it, Mu Shuangshuang's makeshift stove was done.

A stove couldn't be simpler. It was fine for one or two meals, but in the long run, it wouldn't hold up.

Everything like the chopping board was borrowed from Lu Yuanfeng's house; Mu Shuangshuang hadn't gotten around to buying her own.

"I'll chop the bones, you wash the vegetables!"

Lu Yuanfeng, acting like the host, assigned the lighter tasks to Mu Shuangshuang.

"Alright, but let me chop the snake, I know how to get it flavored right."

When it came to cooking, Mu Shuangshuang was naturally better equipped than Lu Yuanfeng, he had no argument, and the two divided the tasks and got busy.

The snake meat had already been cleaned, Mu Shuangshuang simply needed to chop it into segments. The white snake meat, once cut, was placed in a large bowl and set aside.

Taking advantage of the moment, Mu Shuangshuang began handling the bitter melon. The bitter melons bought from town were not big, much smaller than the premium ones she had eaten in her previous life, so handling them took no effort.

With one slice, the bitter melon was halved, the seeds scooped out, and Mu Shuangshuang began cutting the bitter melon into strips, then placed them in a bowl, and gave them a wash.

Since the aim was to preserve the original taste, Mu Shuangshuang didn't soak the bitter melon in salt water, so all the bitterness was locked in, guaranteeing an authentic flavor.

Once Mu Shuangshuang finished preparing the small dishes, Lu Yuanfeng had also chopped the bones.

Building a fire, Mu Shuangshuang diligently cleaned the large iron pot on the mud bricks with a loofah sponge.

"All of you stand back, it's very hot here."

Even though evening was approaching, the heat in the air remained. Standing by the stove, a wave of heat wafted over; even she felt the heat, so naturally, she wanted to keep Lu Yuanfeng and Mu Xiaohan at a distance.

Mu Xiaohan had been playing all day and just returned home.

He carried in his hand some wild greens he'd just picked from the mountain. Coming into the house, he was just in time for all this bustling activity and curiously wanted to take a look.

"Xiao Han, you came back just in time, go over to Yuan Feng's house and call over Little Yuanbao. Everyone's eating at our place today."

"Sure thing!"

Mu Xiaohan had been out playing with Yuanbao, so calling him was a delight, and in the blink of an eye, he was gone.

Mu Shuangshuang poured two scoops of rapeseed oil into the iron pot, and added the chopped garlic and ginger. With a sizzle, the aroma of rapeseed oil and the garlic-ginger blend together as she poured the cleaned snake meat into the pot.

As the snake meat still had moisture, entering the hot pot triggered a crackling fry, and Mu Shuangshuang started to stir-fry the meat.

The fragrance was so enticing that Little Zhi, punished and standing aside, kept swallowing her own tongue.

Bone soup, snake stew, and bitter melon, it was Little Zhi's first time seeing so many good dishes. Indeed, splitting up was a good thing!

After a few dozen stirs, Mu Shuangshuang covered the pot and reduced the stove's fire, waiting for the snake stew to slowly cook.

Once the snake stew was ready, Xiao Han and Yuanbao also returned. Hearing about the food, Yuanbao nearly sprinted there, his plump body jiggling, which was somewhat amusing.

"Sister Shuangshuang, Sister Shuangshuang, you made something delicious?"

Yuanbao exclaimed, only to be hushed by a gesture from Mu Shuangshuang.

By now, it was late in the day, and the Old Mu Family should be having dinner. They couldn't afford to let them overhear.

Mu Shuangshuang guessed right, while in the Old Mu Family's main house, everyone except the third branch and Mu Dade were munching on stir-fried greens and fermented bean curd.

Not a hint of mince meat in the dishes, the lack of oiliness left a deficiency in taste.

"Ugh, what is this stuff, can't even eat it without a bit of meat!"

Mu Zhenzhen threw down her chopsticks in dissatisfaction and complained to everyone.

Mrs. Lin had been displeased for a while but didn't dare say it until now. With Mu Zhenzhen speaking up first, she chimed in.

"Exactly, Mother, everyone's working so hard. Why don't you get us some meat, at least to satisfy our craving? If there's no meat soon, I'll waste away."

"Eat, eat, you only know to eat, even the sows in the pigsty know to contribute meat, what do you know?" Old Mrs. Mu glared and began cursing at Mrs. Lin.

Mrs. Lin's face flushed alternately between green and white.

"Mother, please buy me some meat, I'm too hungry to eat. I beg you, I promise I'll get Zhuangzi to get up and work tomorrow morning."

Mu Zhenzhen got up and went over to Old Mrs. Mu, coaxing as she wrapped her arm around hers.

Hearing Mu Zhenzhen's plea, Old Mrs. Mu's spirit was lifted, she smiled, "Alright, alright, whatever our Zhenzhen wants to eat, we'll make it happen. I'll get you some meat tomorrow."

Such favoritism left the remaining members of the Old Mu Family visibly displeased, especially Mrs. Jin.

At a time when the Old Mu Family couldn't even gather money for her, the idea of eating meat was laughable, she thought with disdain.

"Mother, Dan Dan's father was asking yesterday about the travel expenses, if we can't gather them, he won't sit for the exam."

"Nonsense, this exam isn't something he can just decide not to take!" Mr. Mu's face darkened further as he slammed his chopsticks down hard.

Currently, this father couldn't eat or sleep well, his mind entirely occupied with his son's affairs, who could understand how heartbroken he was?

If his son didn't take the exam, wouldn't all these years of effort be in vain?

Chapter 165: Mrs. Jin and Second Aunt Quarrel

"Dad, Dandan's dad isn't saying he won't take the exam, just that without silver, he doesn't want to embarrass himself."

Mrs. Jin spoke bluntly. She was just short of saying that if they had silver, they could go and buy the exam questions.

But she couldn't, the fewer people who knew about this, the better!

"I say, big sister-in-law, pushing Dad and Mom like this every day isn't right. The family only has those few acres of land, which have all been used for my big brother's expenses.

If you keep this up, such a big family will all end up starving."

I heard your parents' family is quite well-off, why don't you go ask them for money, after all, my big brother is your husband."

Mu Zhenzhen, known for her sharp tongue, immediately rendered Mrs. Jin speechless.

Of course, she knew her family's side could lend that money, but Mu Dade was the son of Mr. Mu and Old Mrs. Mu, not her parents', even if he passed the exams, her parents wouldn't have the right to enjoy the benefits.

On the contrary, this whole family was counting on her to provide money for a good life.

Why should she? Providing both people and money.

Mu Dade is her husband, so the silver should naturally come from the Old Mu Family.

"Zhenzhen, you're wrong to say that. A daughter married out is like water spilled, no matter how shameless I am, I can't go back to my parents for money, or how would they laugh at me?"

Mrs. Jin's initially unintentional comment ended up angering Mu Zhenzhen.

"I say, big sister-in-law, what are you talking about? What's this about a married daughter being like spilled water, and can't ask parents for money? You're calling me shameless, saying I shouldn't be back, right?"

"Zhenzhen, how could you think that? That's not what I meant."

"Not what you meant? Then why did you call me a married daughter?" Mu Zhenzhen insisted.

At this moment, the rest of the family felt satisfied.

Mu Zhenzhen the second aunt and Mrs. Jin were the two most troublesome people in the family. Now that they were fighting, everyone was just one step short of setting off firecrackers in celebration.

Mrs. Jin's gentle image had long fallen since the last time the third branch split. No one saw her as harmless anymore, instead, when Mrs. Jin stuck her nose in the air, everyone quickly turned away for fear of being dragged into trouble.

"What did I say about you?" Mrs. Jin was beginning to feel unhappy.

Who would have thought that Mu Zhenzhen would deny everything with open eyes, "Dad, Mom, look, big sister-in-law is bullying me, she said Zhuangzi and I are outsiders, and we shouldn't come over to help."

Mrs. Lin spat loudly in her heart, ptooeey!

This Mu Zhenzhen was shameless, she only came to the Old Mu Family for three things: eating, sleeping, and defecating. She didn't even wash her own clothes. Thinking about her daughter Qingqing doing the washing for her second aunt, including even soiled undergarments, made Mrs. Lin's blood boil.

Of course, Mrs. Lin's anger did not mean Old Mrs. Mu would be angry, she glanced at Mrs. Jin and said, "Oldest daughter-in-law, Zhenzhen rarely comes, plus she's your second aunt, give her a break, stop talking nonsense, who are you hinting at with your words?"

"Mom, I didn't!" Mrs. Jin explained.

"Stop telling me these things, I don't believe you!" Old Mrs. Mu said directly.

Too outraged to eat, Mrs. Jin left the main house. Mu Dandan and Mu Yingying, seeing their mother leave, naturally refused to eat either. Anyway, the Old Mu Family's food wasn't good, they might as well wait until they got home for an extra treat from their mother.

"Mom, mom, wait for me." Mu Dandan caught up with Mrs. Jin, exclaiming anxiously.

"Why are you following me out? Not eating?" Mrs. Jin asked displeased.

"Mom, the food grandma made isn't tasty at all, I won't eat it. Plus, they bully Mom, just looking at it gets on my nerves."

"Me too, me too, Mom, we're family. Once Dad passes the exams, we'll move out and won't live here anymore." Mu Yingying chimed in.

With the support of her two daughters, Mrs. Jin felt better.

"Don't worry, I will make sure your grandparents pitch in all that silver, if they can't, they can forget about a good life."

Mrs. Jin still wanted to work it through Wang San. If Mu Shuangshuang couldn't be married off, there was still the matter of Mu Qingqing. The second branch wanted a good life so badly, she couldn't believe they would pass on such a big opportunity.

"Yes, we trust you, Mom!"

...

After finishing the bone stew and winter melon soup, having cooked the rice, Yu Si Niang returned from her work.

Dragging her tired body, the moment she stepped into her home, she felt completely at ease.

It was almost dark, if it weren't for the rising moon, it could have been pitch-black.

"Smells so good!"

By the aroma of the food, Yu Si Niang was sure it was coming from her home.

Her home wasn't far from the main building, but because of a outhouse blocking it, she usually couldn't smell the food from there.

Yu Si Niang was very curious, when did they start cooking at home?

Weren't the stove and kitchen not even set up?

"Mom, you came just in time, I was just about to go look for you."

Mu Shuangshuang came in through the side door, carrying a big empty bowl. Having just come from Zhao Yun's house, she brought them a bowl of snake meat and a bowl of spare rib winter melon soup, then hurried back without much time for a chat with Zhao Yun.

"Good girl, you're cooking at home now?"

"Yes, I bought some stuff in town this morning. I was craving, so I set up a stove at home and made something delicious. It's just ready, wash your hands, then we can eat."

Speaking of which, Lu Yuanfeng came out from Mu Shuangshuang's room, lifting a curtain, "Fourth Aunt, Shuangshuang, the food's ready, come in and eat!"

The meal was eaten in Mu Dashan's room, first because there was a kang that could seat several people, and second, because there were many mosquitoes in the summer, eating outside would attract them like flies.

A mended eight immortals table, a few chairs brought over from Lu Yuanfeng's house, and with the family plus Lu Yuanfeng's brothers, they all gathered to start eating.

Mu Dashan sat on the kang, with a quilt cushioning his back, feeling quite comfortable.

Looking at the table full of abundant dishes, his eyes turned slightly red.

Snake stew, bone soup, bitter melon, greens, only four dishes but the kind he had never tasted in his life."

"Dad, Mom, why are you just staring? Eat!"

Mu Shuangshuang's saliva was almost dropping, and so were the children's. It was rare to see meat, particularly dishes made by Mu Shuangshuang which smelled so wonderful, yet as their parents hadn't moved, the kids dared not either.

Little Black, however, had long run out of patience, hissing and calling non-stop, it climbed onto Little Zhi's chair, then to Little Zhi's shoulder, staring straight at the table spread.

Compared to the more reserved room occupants, it was more direct, stretching its paw to grab food but was caught by Mu Shuangshuang.

"Little thing, none of us have eaten yet and you're already thinking of eating the good stuff? Deserves a slap!"

Little Black whimpered in grievance, lowering its head and whining.

"Sister, poor Little Black, let it go!"

Chapter 166: Gou Dan Gets Up in the Night

"Little Zhi, it's not pitiful at all. I just fed it."

Little Black is living comfortably. Every meal is meat or meat. Just before she went to Zhao Yun's house, she fed Little Black a piece of snake meat she had saved.

It's already had a full meal, and now it still wants to cause trouble.

No way!

"Alright, sis, when can we eat, Little Zhi is so hungry!"

"We're hungry too," Xiao Han and Little Yuanbao said at the same time.

"Mom, Dad, I know you are reluctant to eat, but these things, once cooked, are meant to be eaten. If we leave them until tomorrow, they'll spoil."

Only then did Mu Dashan and Yu Si Niang pick up their chopsticks, and Mu Shuangshuang ladled a bowl of snake soup for each of them, generously giving them the snake meat.

Mu Dashan stared at the snake meat in the bowl, swallowed, thought a bit, and suddenly asked, "Did your grandpa and grandma eat?"

With one sentence, the originally good atmosphere fell into a deadlock. Little Zhi and Xiao Han lowered their heads, and Yu Si Niang said nothing.

But Yuanbao earnestly said, "Uncle Dashan, you yourself can't get enough to eat, why bother with others? Besides, Grandpa and Grandma Mu have a Scholar son; they're not going hungry."

Yuanbao's words were exactly what Mu Shuangshuang and Yu Si Niang wanted to say.

From the moment the family split, Yu Si Niang only had her own children in her heart. The Old Mu Family gave nothing to the third branch, clearly wanting to starve them.

Since that's the case, she didn't need to pour her heart out for the rest of the Old Mu Family.

But Yu Si Niang couldn't say such things, after all, they were Mu Dashan's parents, her in-laws, and saying such things would invite retribution.

"Yuanbao, eat more. Don't be polite, treat this as your home."

Mu Shuangshuang picked up a piece of snake meat for Little Yuanbao and said softly.

Mu Dashan sighed heavily, wanting to say something but ultimately remained silent.

"Dad, what Little Yuanbao said makes sense. It's already very difficult for us to survive as the third branch now.

If we keep worrying about this and that, we won't be able to get by ourselves."

"Do you remember last year uncle's birthday? Rarely did the family sit together and eat the same thing, but Grandma insisted that Uncle get full before we could pick up our chopsticks."

This was something Yu Si Niang told herself; Mu Shuangshuang had no memory of the original owner. Many things, she only knew by subtly probing, asking, and guessing.

"It's not that we're being unfilial to Grandpa and Grandma, but our third branch has so many difficulties at present.

We don't have food, and even if we split that acre of land, it's not necessarily enough to sustain our family..."

Mu Shuangshuang rambled on, feeling both sad and useless inside.

He hesitated, he struggled...

Gou Dan, who got up at night and relieved himself in the outhouse, suddenly smelled a tempting aroma. Following the scent, he walked to Mu Dashan's house and kicked open the door.

"Wow, Uncle and Aunt, delicious food, Gou Dan wants to eat, Gou Dan wants to eat!"

Gou Dan sniffed the mucus at the tip of his nose, swallowing saliva while speaking unclearly.

Yu Si Niang felt a bit embarrassed. Although eating at home wasn't a big deal, if Old Mrs. Mu knew, it wouldn't be a good thing.

"Gou Dan, Aunt will give you a bowl of soup. Can you keep it a secret for Aunt?" Yu Si Niang stood up first and said to Gou Dan.

Mu Shuangshuang originally wanted to kick Gou Dan out directly, as he often bullied Xiao Han and Little Zhi, but since her mother spoke, she had no choice but to support her.

Gou Dan only cared about having food and didn't pay attention to what Yu Si Niang was saying. Seeing her serve him, he impatiently picked up the bowl and stuffed it into his mouth.

He burned his mouth, cried out twice, and then continued eating.

At this moment, Mu Shuangshuang suddenly felt pity for the other members of the Old Mu Family. Regardless of their demeanor, when it came to food, anything slightly delicious ended up in Mu Dade and Old Mrs. Mu's mouths.

The others didn't even get a bone without meat. The thick and savory broth was quickly gulped down by Gou Dan.

Gou Dan handed the bowl to Yu Si Niang. "Aunt Si, Gou Dan wants more. I want meat, give it all to me, or I'll tell Grandma!"

The story of the farmer and the snake is just like now.

Gou Dan, having tasted a bit of sweetness, wanted everything for himself. It was too selfish.

"Gou Dan, we haven't even eaten yet. One bowl should be enough for you!" Yu Si Niang's expression had already turned a bit unpleasant.

Gou Dan is a child; she couldn't argue.

But children couldn't play tricks on her either!

"Aunt Si, if you don't give it to me, I'll tell Grandma!"

As soon as he finished speaking, Mu Shuangshuang stood up, grabbed Gou Dan's collar, and threw him outside.

She glared at Gou Dan fiercely, "Gou Dan, you better not talk nonsense, or I'll beat you!"

When it came to Mu Shuangshuang, who had beaten him countless times, Gou Dan was naturally afraid.

But food, at this moment, attracted him even more.

"Hmph, I want meat!"

"Smack!" Mu Shuangshuang hit Gou Dan on the butt, and the fiery pain made him wail and run away.

Yu Si Niang panicked and asked Mu Shuangshuang, "What should we do? He's definitely going to Grandma to tattle."

"It's okay, Mom, leave this to me. You all keep eating; I'll be right back."

Mu Shuangshuang headed straight for the stove, because when Old Mrs. Mu came out, she'd pass by.

Gou Dan ran all the way to tattle to Old Mrs. Mu, who didn't believe him. She knew the third branch's limited resources.

Besides, without pots or stoves, how could they eat?

But thoughts were thoughts; she couldn't resist Gou Dan's wailing and rolling.

She lifted Gou Dan's collar and angrily headed toward the third branch's house. Passing by the stove, she saw Mu Shuangshuang preparing to light a fire and shouted angrily.

"You stinky girl, what are you doing, stealing my firewood?"

"Grandma, I'm hungry, naturally making food," Mu Shuangshuang said with a matter-of-fact face.

She wasn't afraid of Old Mrs. Mu now. After the family split, Old Mrs. Mu couldn't control her.

"Eat, eat what? Get lost, get lost, get lost!" Old Mrs. Mu chased Mu Shuangshuang out of the stove room.

"Grandma, you can't do this. Our third branch hasn't eaten yet!"

Mu Shuangshuang shouted again, Old Mrs. Mu kept staring at her with a predatory gaze, pretending to be difficult, she finally left.

Old Mrs. Mu looked at her like she was indeed starving, not as Gou Dan said, secretly eating meat at home and not sharing it with everyone else.

"Pah, you little brat, lying again. Watch me beat you to death!"

With another round of scolding, Gou Dan wailed and howled, finally admitting he had lied before Old Mrs. Mu stopped.

The matter wasn't over yet. Old Mrs. Mu, worried that once she left, Mu Shuangshuang might steal firewood again, told Gou Dan, "Tonight you guard the stove room all night. If that stinky girl comes to steal firewood again, I'll skin your dog hide!"

Chapter 167: Is Fengzi in your heart?

I don't know if it's because of the incident with Gou Dan, but Mu Dashan didn't mention sending food to Old Mrs. Mu and Mr. Mu again.

Instead, he settled down to enjoy dinner in peace.

During this meal, the people from the third branch, along with Lu Yuanfeng and his brother, ate heartily. The pot of snake soup was consumed to the point that not even the bones remained, and not a drop of the broth was left.

Mu Shuangshuang happily cleaned up the house and washed the dishes outside. Lu Yuanfeng helped her by holding the lamp, occasionally adding water or lending a hand.

Yu Si Niang carried a basin of water into her room, and while helping Mu Dashan wash his feet, she started to talk to him.

"Shuangshuang's dad, how long has it been since we've lived such a comfortable life?"

"This kind of life, I never dared to imagine. It's because our daughter is capable."

Mu Dashan's face showed both relief and appreciation.

Who would have thought that the best meal Mu Dashan ever had was all thanks to his daughter's efforts? Without his daughter, the third branch probably wouldn't have even a meal to eat.

"Yes, Shuangshuang's dad, Shuangshuang is truly a good daughter. I think what Shuangshuang said today was right. Look, even a child like Gou Dan is so selfish.

He ate from our third branch and still tried to bite back at us. If Shuangshuang didn't have the ability to stop her grandmother, who knows what kind of trouble would have arisen tonight.

Even though we've split the family, whatever we do should be our freedom. We should boldly let others know that with Shuangshuang, our third branch's life isn't lacking at all."

"I understand what you're saying. I... I won't do that in the future." Mu Dashan's face turned a bit red.

"I'm not blaming you. You're the head of our family, and you can do whatever you want." Yu Si Niang teased with a smile, her hands moving more swiftly as she washed Mu Dashan's feet.

"Hehe..." Mu Dashan suddenly laughed, looking at Yu Si Niang with warmth in his heart.

"By the way, Si Niang, Shuangshuang has been spending a lot of time with Lu Yuanfeng lately. Do you think there's something there?"

Mu Dashan is honest but not foolish. During dinner, Lu Yuanfeng kept serving Shuangshuang dishes with meat while eating bones himself.

If that doesn't indicate interest, Mu Dashan really doesn't know what does.

"I'm not sure either, but the two kids have indeed been quite close.

A few days ago, Xiao Yun asked me if we wanted to match with the Old Lu Family. I wasn't sure, so I just said they were good friends."

"But this is truly a tricky situation. Shuangshuang is still young now, and there's no issue with being with Lu Yuanfeng for now.

But if she gets a bit older and they spend a lot of time together, it might invite gossip."

When it comes to Shuangshuang's reputation, both Mu Dashan and Yu Si Niang couldn't stay calm.

The world is vast, but the daughter matters most.

"How about you find a time to ask Shuangshuang what she thinks, and I'll ask Lu Yuanfeng?" Mu Dashan suggested, gathering his thoughts,

"If they're both interested, let's find a matchmaker early to settle things, and they can marry when the time comes."

Mu Dashan was scared by Mrs. Jin and didn't want his daughter to end up in someone else's hands.

"Okay, I'll speak with Shuangshuang later!"

Outside, Mu Shuangshuang packed the washed dishes into a bucket, so Lu Yuanfeng could take them home later. Little Yuanbao was already tired, rubbing his eyes continuously.

Mu Shuangshuang glanced at the sky; the stars were few, and it was indeed late.

"Lu Yuanfeng, you guys should head back. Be careful on the road. Give Little Yuanbao a bath tonight, and you don't have to come to work tomorrow."

"Alright, you should rest early too, Shuangshuang."

Once Lu Yuanfeng and Little Yuanbao left, Mu Shuangshuang began to take a bath. In the hot days of the Midsummer, the bathwater didn't need to be heated. A basin or bucket left under the sun for a few hours was warm enough to use at night.

The only downside was that this kind of sun-heated water could easily damage the wooden buckets.

After washing up quickly, Yu Si Niang knocked on Mu Shuangshuang's door.

"Shuangshuang, are you asleep? Can I come in?"

Mu Shuangshuang got up from the bed and opened the door. Yu Si Niang, much like her, was also fresh from a wash, wearing clean clothes.

As she entered Mu Shuangshuang's room, Yu Si Niang also brought along a cup of cooled tea.

"Are you thirsty? Want some tea?"

"Mom, just leave it on the stool. I'll drink it later."

There wasn't a table in Mu Shuangshuang's room, just a low stool that she had hammered together from wood the night before, not yet polished, but better than standing.

"Mom, do you have something to tell me?"

Coming this late at night, Yu Si Niang was obviously not just bringing water, there must be something else. So Mu Shuangshuang boldly guessed.

"Did Dad say something? Does he think Shuangshuang is selfish?"

"No, no, your dad didn't mean it that way." Yu Si Niang quickly waved her hands.

"Your dad is just used to being good to your grandparents all these years. It's not like he doesn't know what kind of people they are.

There are some things a mother shouldn't say, but I don't want you to be unhappy. Whatever your thoughts are, I'll support you."

This unconditional support and trust made Mu Shuangshuang feel warm inside, happier than eating anything delicious.

"Thank you, Mom!" Mu Shuangshuang said with a big smile.

Yu Si Niang sat next to Mu Shuangshuang on the bed, pulling her into her embrace. Her thin hands gently stroked Mu Shuangshuang's hair.

After a period of resting, although Mu Shuangshuang hadn't gained weight, her complexion had improved, and her hair was smooth, no longer like the dry grass it once was.

With someone combing her hair, Mu Shuangshuang started to feel sleepy.

"Mom, why don't you sleep with me tonight? We can have a little chat."

Ever since Mu Shuangshuang sorted out her own room, she and Yu Si Niang hadn't had much chance to talk.

"Alright, I'll talk to your dad first, so he can keep an eye on Little Zhi at night."

Little Zhi was restless at night and, if not watched, could roll off the bed, so everyone would put her near the inside. Even then, there were still times when she wasn't attended to properly.

"Okay!"

When Yu Si Niang returned to Mu Shuangshuang's room, she was already feeling sleepy. She had worked all morning in town and cooked for a large family in the evening.

To say she was tired was an understatement.

Yu Si Niang gently approached Mu Shuangshuang's bedside, placing her hand on Mu Shuangshuang's back, and before Mu Shuangshuang could react, she started massaging her shoulders.

"Mom, you don't need to do this. I'm not tired."

"Silly girl, how could I not know if you're tired? I saw you struggling a bit to lift your arm while eating."

Mu Shuangshuang was deeply moved by Yu Si Niang's attentiveness. She became even more convinced that there was a bond between mother and daughter, and Yu Si Niang understood her emotional and physical changes.

"Thank you, Mom. I'll massage you later as well. You've worked hard too."

"By the way, Mom, what did you want to ask earlier? We can chat over that topic now."

Yu Si Niang opened her mouth and asked, "Shuangshuang, what do you think of Fengzi as a person?"

Chapter 168: Making Straw Fans

"He's good, honest, and a decent worker. He can hunt and fix houses."

Mu Shuangshuang blurted this out without even thinking.

"So, what do you think about him becoming part of our family?"

Yu Si Niang asked directly, not spelling it out, but it was close enough.

"Do you want to adopt him as a godson?"

That was the first thing that came to Mu Shuangshuang's mind.

It wasn't that she was slow to react; it's just that at thirteen or fourteen, she was still studying and never thought of such things.

"Cough, cough..." Yu Si Niang choked on her own saliva and coughed lightly a few times before speaking. "I've seen you and Fengzi together, and I wonder if you like him. If so, I can find a matchmaker early and get things settled for you."

"..."

"Mom, what did you say? I'm still so young; why talk about marriage? Besides, the reason I'm close to Lu Yuanfeng is that we're good friends, and now we're business partners, so it's inevitable we have contact.

Don't overthink it. Marriage should just let nature take its course."

Mu Shuangshuang felt there was quite a gap between her way of thinking and that of the older generation. What she thought was normal might seem like a big deal to others.

Should she maintain some distance with Lu Yuanfeng?

While she was contemplating it, Yu Si Niang spoke up. "I get it. Actually, I'm not just talking about Fengzi. If you like anyone else, tell me, and I'll make arrangements so no one else snatches them up!"

Yu Si Niang's earnest words made Mu Shuangshuang realize there was no need to distance herself from Lu Yuanfeng. No matter who she was close to, there would probably always be gossip.

If that's the case, she might as well be herself. She'll interact as she pleases!

"Mom, got it. Let's get some sleep. I have to go check the fields tomorrow."

—

The next day, early in the morning, Yu Si Niang told Mu Dashan about Mu Shuangshuang's thoughts. Mu Dashan could only sigh and give Shuangshuang as much freedom as possible.

"Daughters grow up and have their own ideas. As parents, the least we can do is not hold her back. But Shuangshuang said she would teach me how to make straw fans today. I wonder if she still remembers."

"Of course, I remember. I'm up already, aren't I?"

Mu Shuangshuang cheerily opened the door, carrying a pile of sun-dried bulrush leaves.

"Mom, are you going to town today?"

Last night Mu Shuangshuang was half-asleep and thought she heard Yu Si Niang say she wouldn't be going any time soon. She wanted to double-check.

"Yes, I talked to the steward at Wealth Master Zhang's place. In the coming days, we'll be planting rice seedlings and will be busy with farmwork."

"Then you should learn with us. It'll be faster with the three of us."

Placing the leaves on the floor, Mu Shuangshuang picked up one and pointed to two outermost bulrush leaves.

"These two are extras. They need to be cut; once they're trimmed, the fan will look rounder and nicer."

Separating the leaves, Mu Shuangshuang picked up the scissors and neatly trimmed the excess leaves and branches.

"Mom, Dad, you try. Follow what I did, and cut in an arc with one snip."

"Sure thing!"

Yu Si Niang was the first to try. Her hands moved swiftly and with such skill that she picked it up immediately, leaving Mu Shuangshuang surprised. Mu Dashan only needed one go to trim the leaves beautifully too.

No doubt, Yu Si Niang and Mu Dashan were the types who wouldn't go hungry.

"Next, you need to flatten the fan handles a bit with the hammer." After demonstrating, Mu Shuangshuang handed the tools to Mu Dashan and Yu Si Niang.

They worked smoothly, and with a few efforts, had the handle done, looking no different from Mu Shuangshuang's.

"Parents, you make as many as you can for now. Once they're done, they need to be smoked with sulfur."

The initial steps could be done separately, but the final step could be done together.

It was Mu Dashan's first task, so he took it seriously. Yu Si Niang intended to help make a few more, but then Old Mrs. Mu came stomping over.

"Third daughter-in-law, starting tomorrow we're planting rice, so no going to town. Every idle person in the house must help, or if you don't work, you won't eat at home."

Maybe Mr. Mu said something, because Old Mrs. Mu didn't mention Mu Dashan's name, which surprised Mu Shuangshuang.

"Mom, I told Wealth Master Zhang's steward that starting today, I'm not going to town."

"Not going, yet you dare rest at home. Get busy for this old lady. There's piles of clothes waiting. Delay it any longer, and everyone will end up working naked."

"I'm going, I'm going!" Yu Si Niang nodded, hastily instructing Mu Dashan before getting ready for work.

"Granny, it's barely dawn. Everyone's still asleep. My mom hasn't even had breakfast. What's the rush? At least wait till she eats something!"

"Hey, you rebellious brat, daring to talk to me like that," said Old Mrs. Mu as she advanced on Mu Shuangshuang, hands on her hips.

Yu Si Niang quickly pulled her behind her.

A protective stance.

"Move aside, that brat needs a lesson!" Old Mrs. Mu shouted.

"Grandpa, Grandma's going to hit someone. Come quickly!"

"Grandpa, Grandma's ignoring your authority and going to hit someone!"

Mu Shuangshuang shouted, facing the still-sleeping Mr. Mu. She had long wanted to confront Old Mrs. Mu. Before the family split, she feared Old Mrs. Mu's retaliation, but with no such concerns now, she feared nothing.

Mr. Mu awoke with a start at Mu Shuangshuang's shout. Annoyed by the recent financial issues, he was further riled by this altercation, especially with his oldest son involved. Mr. Mu couldn't sit by any longer.

In a hurry, he put on a coat and pulled Old Mrs. Mu away.

"What are you doing? Have you gone crazy, that brat dared oppose me."

"Aren't you ashamed enough? Old Li asked me yesterday if Da De has any hope in his exams, wondering if it'll be like before.

"Look, everyone's watching our Old Mu Family. If you keep causing trouble, no one from our family will dare face the outside world after losing face."

"Hey, you old fool, you blame me for causing trouble while letting that brat off..."

All the way, Old Mrs. Mu cursed, repeatedly trying to shake off Mr. Mu's hand, but he held on tight.

"Shuangshuang, don't retaliate against your grandma in the future. Just ignore her."

Yu Si Niang understood Old Mrs. Mu well. If her daughter stepped on her toes, there would be consequences.

"Mom, our silence is the reason we get bullied so badly. No matter the issue, you and dad say nothing.

When you suffer and stay quiet, they think you're living too comfortably and start making trouble for you."

Chapter 169: Cheerful Fun

Mu Dashan's temperament is just as Mu Shuangshuang said.

Crying and hurt, one bears it alone.

After a long time, even Mr. Mu and Old Mrs. Mu thought this son was made of iron and couldn't be broken.

When there's work, Mu Dashan is always the first to be thought of.

Being honest is one thing, and another is that he never complains.

In comparison, Mu Shuangshuang's second uncle Mu Dazhong and fifth uncle Mu Danian complain much more.

Before they even get hurt, they start shouting nonstop. People like them give the impression of being fragile; naturally, Mr. Mu is reluctant to command them.

The saying "a crying child gets milk" is not wrong!

Yu Si Niang felt her daughter was right. Thinking back to what was said, as long as she helped plant rice for the Old Mu Family, the other matters were not the third branch's concern anymore.

"You're right. I'll listen to you. Today I'll stay home and make straw fans. When you get back in the evening, we'll use the fans together."

...

Just after breakfast, Brother Zhao came to Shuangshuang's house. A few days ago, people from the Old Mu Family didn't notice these two brothers, but today they finally did.

Early in the morning, there was banging and clattering. Upon inquiry, it was learned the third branch was preparing to build a kitchen and a pigsty. Upon further questioning, there was talk about the third branch wanting to raise pigs in the future.

Building a kitchen is understandable, but Mrs. Lin couldn't comprehend building a pigsty. The Old Mu Family doesn't even have a single pig, so why should the third branch have money to raise pigs?

Mrs. Lin, while washing clothes, spoke sourly, "I don't even know where the third branch got the silver to build a house. They're the poorest in the family, and they talk about raising pigs. How ridiculous, drowning in debt yet dreaming of good days. It's simply a dream!"

"Old Four's wife, tell me, isn't the third branch even worse than that doghouse of yours?"

In the courtyard, Mrs. Liu was turning over rice when she heard Mrs. Lin suddenly speak. Her heart felt a bit unsettled.

But she didn't dare refute Mrs. Lin; Mrs. Lin is even more difficult to deal with than Old Mrs. Mu, holding grudges, selfish, and with a vicious tongue.

"I say, Old Four's wife, I've said so much, can't you say something? At least cough or fart, show some respect, I am your second sister-in-law after all.

Also, when will your Xiaxia be back? Don't let our second branch do everything; you're too selfish as a mother..."

"Second sister-in-law, I really didn't, Xia Xia's grandmother wanted her and her brother to stay for a few more days, and as a daughter, I couldn't refuse. Please believe me." Mrs. Liu explained.

"I can believe you if you wash these clothes alone. I'm going to sleep."

Mrs. Lin flicked her hands, wiping soap liquid on her pants, and went straight into the house.

Mrs. Liu was extremely aggrieved, but she didn't dare to argue with Mrs. Lin. She could only watch as Mrs. Lin went to rest alone.

Ever since the third branch separated, all the inside and outside work of the Old Mu Family fell on the shoulders of the fourth branch. Mu Dajiang came back every day covered in bruises, soaking in the paddy fields these days, even his feet blistered.

"Old Four's wife, hurry and work, don't dawdle like you're giving birth."

Old Mrs. Mu held a small bamboo basket, the small bamboo basket containing the breakfast for Mu Dade. With exams approaching, Mu Dade's appetite suddenly increased. A bowl of noodles in the morning was not enough, several buns and eggs were necessary, so today's breakfast was much later than usual.

"Mom, I'll start working right away, I'll start working right away..."

"Pah, none of you are reliable, just lazy." Old Mrs. Mu muttered softly before leaving.

This directly angered Mrs. Liu to tears.

When Mu Shuangshuang came out with a wooden bucket, together with Little Zhi and Xiao Han, she saw Mrs. Liu alone under the old locust tree in the courtyard washing clothes, sweat dripping from her forehead and her eyes red.

Looking further, not far away, Old Mrs. Mu was truly heading towards the direction of the big house, knowing well Mrs. Liu must have been scolded by Old Mrs. Mu.

"Little Zhi, take the cloth to give fourth aunt a wipe, let her rest for a bit, don't get exhausted."

Mu Shuangshuang handed the cloth to Little Zhi. The recent days of the fourth branch's life were something Mu Shuangshuang heard from Yu Si Niang. Yu Si Niang had subtly brought up the idea of letting the fourth branch separate, but the fourth branch had no intention, so Mu Shuangshuang and Yu Si Niang did not intervene.

"Okay then, Little Zhi will go now."

Little Zhi stubbed her bottom, walking step by step to Mrs. Liu's side. "Fourth aunt, wipe your face, don't work too hard, you're already sweating."

Mrs. Liu paused her hands washing clothes, and said softly, "Ah, Little Zhi is so good. What are you all going to do, holding a bucket and a pair of tongs?"

"Sister says we're going to the fields to catch loaches and crayfish."

"Your Sister Xiaxia really likes catching crayfish too." Mrs. Liu thought of her daughter, looking at the kids of the separated third branch, sighed, and continued washing clothes.

Mrs. Liu's scene was just an interlude before Mu Shuangshuang set out. She took Little Zhi and Xiao Han, heading onto the footpaths between the fields.

On the paths, no matter male or female, old or young, everyone was working. Men were plowing, women planting rice seedlings, children pulling seedlings in the fields.

Mu Shuangshuang felt this was what a home should be like, a family working together for the same goal, rather than like the Old Mu Family, where everyone seemed like a demon ready to devour.

"Sis, can we catch loaches and eels?" Xiao Han was very curious; these creatures live in dirt, usually needing to be dug out.

"Of course, let's go find Fourth Uncle first, he's plowing now."

During plowing, it's a process of turning the soil, and with sharp eyes, one can always catch some missed loaches and eels.

After walking several paths, they finally found Mu Dajiang among the men working.

Mu Dajiang held the plow in his left hand and the cow rope in his right, occasionally stopping to raise the plow.

"Fourth Uncle, Fourth Uncle!" Mu Shuangshuang carried the wooden bucket and went down the field path. Her eyes were fixed on the soil Mu Dajiang had just turned over, truly spotting a small eel. Her claws stretched out and she grabbed the eel, tossing it into the bucket.

"Why is Shuangshuang here?" Mu Dajiang stopped the cow, smiling gently, his tone very soft.

"I'm here to catch loaches and eels." Mu Shuangshuang shook the wooden bucket in her hand, the eel inside still moving.

Mu Dajiang nodded; he usually spoke little. Seeing his nephews and nieces, he greeted them, but didn't know what else to say.

After thinking for a while, he finally spoke to Mu Shuangshuang. "Follow me, I've seen quite a few loaches before."

"Okay."

As Mu Shuangshuang talked, Mu Xiaohan followed down, but Little Zhi, being shorter than Xiaohan, would easily slip into the water in the deeper part of the field, so Mu Shuangshuang only let her stay on the bank.

Even so, Little Zhi's eyes were fixed on the field, spotting a loach and jumping up, pointing at the spot and shouting.

"Sister, brother, there's a loach, beneath Fourth Uncle's feet, beneath Fourth Uncle's feet..."

Chapter 170: One Hundred Thousand Whys

Little Zhi's cheerful shout carried a special infectious energy.

Xiao Han and Shuangshuang followed her instructions, stepped forward to find, but Xiao Han was too anxious and accidentally fell into the field. When he got back up, he already looked like a mud person.

"Haha, Brother Xiao Han turned into a mud person, Brother Xiao Han turned into a mud person."

Mu Xiaohan wiped the mud off his face, saw Little Zhi laughing so happily, he couldn't help joining in the laughter.

Children are just children, a tiny thing can make them laugh endlessly.

Mu Shuangshuang joined the laughter, her hands moved swiftly, and along with Mu Dajiang, they picked through an acre of ground, harvesting about a dozen small loaches and three small eels. They weren't big, but definitely enough for a meal.

"Sis, are we still following Fourth Uncle?"

Mu Dajiang had switched tasks by now, and he was probably going to plow the field soon, which would take him a while to finish an acre.

"No, the fields don't only have eels and loaches. Let's check the ditches to see if there are crayfish and snails. Didn't Sister bring a fire tong? It's perfect for digging crayfish holes."

Ancient ditches were muddy channels. Crayfish were not luxury items like today. During the double harvest, everyone was busy with field work, so there were fewer people catching crayfish and snails.

Finding a spot where the water was shallow, Mu Shuangshuang went down into the ditch and lowered her head to observe the bubbling holes.

Suddenly, a crayfish with a hard shell and stout pincers appeared in front of her eyes.

She laughed, stretched out her hand, and quickly picked up the crayfish.

"Hey, it's an old friend, long time no see."

This crayfish had cooperated well with Mu Shuangshuang last time, almost ruining Mu Yingying's face. At that time, Mu Shuangshuang had said she would deal with the crayfish, but secretly let it go without the Old Mu Family knowing.

After all, crayfish are not like Little Black, they are not as human-like. When Mu Shuangshuang touched its back, it waved its large pincers, wanting to pinch Mu Shuangshuang's flesh.

"Okay, okay, I don't mean any harm. If you stay here, sooner or later you'll be eaten. Why not come back with me, and I'll take good care of you."

Mu Shuangshuang thought that now, there was a vegetable patch at the foot of Niuwei Mountain. That place was not often visited by people, so putting the crayfish there would be good. If the environment was favorable, maybe a big brood could be bred.

"Sister, I remember it."

Xiao Han pointed at the crayfish, laughing aloud, "It taught a lesson to..."

Before Mu Xiaohan could finish speaking, Mu Shuangshuang made a shushing gesture. "Xiao Han, you know, I know, and the old crayfish knows, it's enough."

"Mhm!" Mu Xiaohan nodded lightly. His sister must be worried about causing trouble if people found out, and he understood this reasoning.

The old crayfish was tossed into the wooden bucket, and Mu Shuangshuang continued to search for crayfish holes. If she thought there might be crayfish, she'd test the spot with the fire tongs. Sometimes she'd catch an old crayfish, other times nothing. This went on, and the morning passed.

The three of them, except for Little Zhi on the bank, Mu Shuangshuang and Mu Xiaohan had both become mud people, covered in mud patches. They laughed at each other endlessly.

"Come on, Xiao Han, let's go wash up, or when we get home, Dad and Mom would be worried."

Before leaving, Mu Shuangshuang only said she was taking two little kids to see the field without mentioning what they were going to do. First, she was afraid Mu Dashan and Yu Si Niang would stop them since parents generally don't want their kids playing in water.

Second, she was worried other members of the Old Mu Family might follow. Yesterday, Gou Dan warned Mu Shuangshuang that if anyone meant harm, whoever they were, they'd be beaten as soon as they went in, and once beaten painfully, they'd stay well-behaved.

Old Mrs. Mu's method to rein in the wives was through beating and scolding. Even Mrs. Lin, known for her feistiness, was subdued, proving the truth that brute force settles everything.

"I want to go by the creek where the water is clear. Is that okay?"

Xiao Han spoke with more of a negotiating tone, unlike Little Zhi. Xiao Han was a little man, his speech and actions carried a boy's steadiness. The only thing was that he seemed mature for his age, generally laughing less obviously.

Today was probably the most he had laughed, the most radiant smile yet.

If Little Zhi was like a little cotton candy, sweet and soft, then Mu Xiaohan was definitely a sugar cake. Despite the name, he wasn't sweet but had a soft texture and filled the belly nicely.

Of course, these two were her beloved little brother and sister.

"Of course, we can try and see if we can catch some fish."

...

The spring water flowing down from the mountaintop was cooler than regular river water, clearer too. Mu Shuangshuang had gone there many times to catch fish, but every time she didn't catch much.

Once that pool of lake water became muddied, the fish would hide in the crevices of rocks and catching them would not be easy.

Mu Shuangshuang held a stick, staring at the water surface for a while. Occasionally, one or two fish would swim to her feet. They were relatively small, and Mu Shuangshuang kept waiting for bigger fish.

Finally, as the little ones on the bank lost their patience, a decent-sized white carp swam near her feet. Mu Shuangshuang applied force with her hand, and with a swoosh, the stick pierced the fish's back.

"Wow, Sister caught a fish, so impressive..."

Little Zhi was always the one to cheer the loudest. Seeing Mu Shuangshuang catch a fish, she clapped her little hands till they almost wore out, revealing a gap-toothed smile, silly yet incredibly cute.

"Yes, we have lunch secured. Xiao Han, you can wash the mud off yourself now."

Mu Shuangshuang chuckled softly, climbed up the bank from the creek, and tossed the impaled fish onto the bank, hiding the long stick in a nearby spot.

This long stick was one she had carved last time, with a particularly sharp tip, perfect for spearing fish. That's why Mu Shuangshuang found a spot in the grass to store it away.

After washing off the mud, Mu Shuangshuang sat by the bank, watching Xiaohan's drenched clothing, hugging themselves, seemingly cold.

"Xiao Han, take off your clothes. I'll find a branch to hang them out, and they'll dry soon."

The day's temperature was high, and it would take some time for the clothes to dry. Mu Xiaohan was still young and couldn't afford to catch a cold. If he got a heat cold, who knows how troublesome it could become.

Xiao Han blushed, hesitated, and just wouldn't take off his clothes. Moreover, he turned his head away, not looking at Little Zhi nearby.

"Oh, so he's shy. Little Zhi, turn around; Brother Xiao Han is going to take off his clothes, and he doesn't want you to see."

"Why doesn't he want me to see? Yesterday when Brother was washing his bottom, I saw it." Little Zhi squatted on the ground drawing small circles, her eyes still fixed on Xiao Han.

"Because you're a girl and Brother Xiao Han is a boy. If you look at him, he'll feel shy."

"Then why can Sister look?" Little Zhi pondered aloud.

"..."

"I'm not looking for fun, Xiao Han needs someone to handle his clothes, right? If I turned my head, who would help him?" Mu Shuangshuang explained righteously.

Actually, she had a tiny wish to see what a handsome guy's bath scene looked like.

Xiao Han was indeed a rare handsome boy.