

## Folly 231

### Chapter 231: Feeding the Pigs

"Dad, Mom, you keep eating, finish up and rest early, I'm going to the town in the morning."

Mu Shuangshuang finished her wild vegetable porridge and started preparing things to feed the pigs in the evening.

The wild boars on the mountain are somewhat different from domestic pigs; not only are they pitch-black in appearance, but the boars might even grow tusks.

Fortunately, the diet of wild boars is quite varied, and Mu Shuangshuang could still find things to feed them.

Mu Shuangshuang used some swill, added some wild vegetables, and the leftover porridge from dinner, and took it to the pigsty.

The little wild pig must be hungry; as soon as Mu Shuangshuang approached, it started squealing. Its reactions seemed no different from domestic pigs, except it was darker and uglier.

After finishing its meal with a grunt, the little pig found a corner and went to sleep.

At this moment, Mu Shuangshuang pondered what would be best to feed the little pig.

In modern times, most piglets eat pig feed, which certainly won't work in ancient times. But she had seen people in the village raise pigs, mostly using alfalfa or amaranth, and mustard greens seemed to work too.

As the saying goes, predecessors plant trees, descendants enjoy the shade. Since others have found a way, she just needs to follow it. If worse comes to worse, she could plant some corn or something; raising pigs is also good.

Mu Shuangshuang made up her mind; she took one last look at the pigs in the sty and returned to the kitchen.

While she was feeding the pigs, Yu Si Niang had already finished eating. She brushed the dishes with loofah pulp one by one, laid them neatly on the stove, and covered them with a clean cloth once the water dried.

The third branch's kitchen was newly built, temporarily having nothing—no cabinets, no tables to place things, the dining table was the one moved out from Mu Dashan's room, which had undergone countless "surgeries."

"Shuangshuang, I'm going to take the medicine to your father first, call me when you start making cold noodles."

"Alright, no problem, Mom, you go ahead, Dad's health is the priority!"

Exhaustion turning into illness isn't a severe disease, but it can't be ignored. If you don't recuperate well, it can damage the core, leaving one as good as useless.

"I'm going right now!" Yu Si Niang took a clay pot out of the stove; previously, when the family didn't cook, she used firewood to burn on the stove, brewing medicine in a Chinese medicine pot, often getting criticized by the Old Mu Family, plus she had to keep an eye on the fire constantly.

Now it's different, as you only need to place the clay pot with medicine in the stove while cooking, and when the meal is ready, the medicine in the pot is done too.

It was truly killing two birds with one stone, although these clay pots were more commonly used by peasant families for porridge or stewing chicken soup, making the porridge sticky and fine, and sweet and savory.

Chicken soup is even better; supposedly, the bones can be boiled soft, tasty enough to swallow your tongue.

Mu Shuangshuang drooled at the thought of these foods.

No way, tomorrow she must catch a brood of chicks. By then, she could have eggs and hens, and wouldn't have to sit alone by the stove, looking at an empty clay pot, drooling.

Fengzi had a saying that was right, if you can plant and raise it yourself, just do it yourself, it might not promise wealth, but definitely won't leave you hungry.

But right now, she had more important things; she was going to town to do business tomorrow, and it was high time to prepare to grind green beans.

The green beans had softened after soaking all afternoon; Mu Shuangshuang placed them in a bamboo sieve and set them aside, then cleaned the stone mill.

From the yard came the loud voice of Mrs. Lin.

"Third family's, Shuangshuang's second aunt is about to choke on a fish bone, and you still won't go and see."

Looks like it's another troublemaker again.

Mu Shuangshuang continued her work as she saw Yu Si Niang stepping out the door.

Yu Si Niang curiously asked what was wrong with second aunt, only to be dragged by Mrs. Lin towards the Old Mu Family, Yu Si Niang naturally unwilling, shook off Mrs. Lin's hand, and retreated a few steps.

With this very move, Mrs. Lin started shouting loudly. "Dad, Mom, the third family's, you know how to save second aunt, hurry and come."

With Mrs. Lin's senseless shouting, Old Mrs. Mu and Mr. Mu brought Mu Zhenzhen out.

Yu Si Niang became flustered, knowing nothing about saving anyone.

"Third daughter-in-law, you said you can save Zhenzhen?" Old Mrs. Mu came with a barrage of accusations.

Making Yu Si Niang's head spin.

Yu Si Niang quickly denied, "Mom, I don't know."

Unexpectedly, this sentence provoked Old Mrs. Mu's rage. "Yu Si Niang, Zhenzhen is in this state and you still joke around? Zhenzhen isn't your sister, right? The third isn't your husband, right? How did our Old Mu Family marry such a lazy, heartless wife like you, with such a poisonous heart..."

Old Mrs. Mu scolded endlessly, Mu Shuangshuang put down the dipper in her hand and stepped out.

Simultaneously stepping out was Mu Dashan, who had just taken the medicine.

"Mom, what are you doing?"

Mu Dashan's chest felt tight, and his expression didn't look good.

Ever since the family split, there hasn't been peace; there was always something every three days, couldn't his mom let the third branch have a single peaceful day?

"Third, you're just in time, Yu Si Niang is heartless, she..."

Old Mrs. Mu was cut off halfway by Mu Dashan. "Mom, I heard it from inside, it was second sister-in-law who was shouting senselessly."

"Third, you're just like that brat, pouring dirty water recklessly, obviously it's Yu Si Niang..." Mrs. Lin said sheepishly.

"Grandma, did you hear what my dad said? My mom never claimed to know how to treat second aunt, second sister-in-law is lying herself, to bring you to the third branch for trouble."

Old Mrs. Mu, upon hearing this, looked at Mrs. Lin skeptically, with eyes exuding poisoned anger.

"Mom, I wasn't..." Mrs. Lin attempted to explain, but the more she explained, the guiltier she seemed.

Without another word, Old Mrs. Mu slapped her, making Mrs. Lin's head dizzy and seeing stars.

This time, she played herself as the fool.

The third branch couldn't save anyone, so Old Mrs. Mu began to cry loudly while holding Mu Zhenzhen.

A display of deep mother-daughter affection, truly emotional.

Mu Dashan stared enviously at the two for quite a while.

After a while, he helped Yu Si Niang back into the room.

"Actually, there's a way to save second aunt."

Mu Shuangshuang felt it was about time to lay out her conditions.

"Shuang, you can?" Mr. Mu's eyes lit up with hope.

"Can, indeed, but Grandpa might not know how second aunt got choked on the fish bone. After we treated everyone to lunch, there was half a bowl of braised pork left and a boiled fish. When we returned, the braised pork was gone, only a fish head left, even the bowl was licked clean."

As Mu Shuangshuang spoke, she fixed her gaze on Mu Zhenzhen, indicating to the Old Mu Family that the thief was Mu Zhenzhen.

Mu Zhenzhen held her throat, wanting to curse but didn't dare to open her mouth; speaking would cause her throat to burn painfully.

Chapter 232: Duck's Saliva

Mr. Mu's face alternated between blue and white; after all, speaking of sneaking others' leftovers was a disgrace.

Especially since Mu Zhenzhen even licked the bowl.

The atmosphere instantly became tense as Mr. Mu remained silent, contemplating how to resolve the situation.

Mu Zhenzhen whimpered, clutching her throat, looking as ugly as she felt.

Mr. Mu sighed and suddenly spoke. "Shuang, if you can cure your second aunt, we'll... we'll give you fifty pounds of grain."

Having dealt with Shuangshuang a few times, Mr. Mu knew that if Shuangshuang brought up the matter, she wouldn't be satisfied with just a fish or some braised pork, so he figured he'd make the offer himself.

To prevent Shuangshuang from demanding even more unreasonable things later on.

Mr. Mu's words left everyone stunned.

Was he out of his mind, offering fifty pounds of grain? To the third branch?

Right now, Mu Shuangshuang was finding it hard not to laugh. How confident Mr. Mu was to think that she'd help this mere second aunt of hers?

But fifty pounds of grain, it might be worth considering.

"Grandfather, are you talking about grain with or without husk? Sweet potatoes or rice?"

Mu Shuangshuang grinned at Mr. Mu, as expected, his face darkened further.

"You cheeky girl, dream on! We're not giving you any grain."

Fifty pounds of rice would be worth four hundred wen in town. If it's sweet potatoes, it would still cost fifty wen. Old Mrs. Mu was always so stingy that she'd grumble for days over losing a single hair, let alone losing so much grain outright.

"You hush, the girl's like this, and you're still haggling over these things?" Mr. Mu barked in anger, turning to Mu Shuangshuang. "I'll give you fifteen pounds of rice and thirty-five pounds of sweet potatoes."

Mu Shuangshuang calculated in her mind; these items might be worth over a hundred wen, enough.

"Thank you, Grandfather. To save Second Aunt, we'll need duck saliva."

Ducks particularly like eating snails and earthworms; their saliva can soften bones much better than vinegar.

"What, eating duck's saliva? Such disgusting stuff? That stuff eats earthworms, crap, and maggots." Mrs. Lin exclaimed on the side.

Unsurprisingly, her words brought Mu Zhenzhen to tears.

Mu Zhenzhen always loved her appearance. Even at Old Mu's house, even if she only came out for three meals a day, she would apply makeup and come out pristinely clean.

The thought of drinking duck saliva was nauseating to her.

"Say less, life is more important than anything else in times like this." Mr. Mu scolded, frightening Mrs. Lin into shrinking her neck and stepping aside.

"Shuang, you aren't..." Mr. Mu hesitated for a moment before speaking.

He didn't quite believe that duck saliva could dissolve fish bones and worried that Shuang was just messing with his daughter, so he hesitated to ask.

"If you don't believe it, Grandfather, there's nothing I can do. Second Aunt's eyes are already bulging; if the bone isn't removed soon, she might either die or become mute."

Duck saliva is just a temporary disgust; refusing to drink it would be much worse than just a moment's nausea.

Mu Shuangshuang believed that the Old Mu Family understood this logic!

At this point, Mr. Mu didn't hesitate any longer. He said, "Second daughter-in-law, go... go borrow a duck from Yutou's house, hurry!"

"Dad, why should I go? It wasn't my idea, whoever suggested it should go." Mrs. Lin muttered unwillingly.

"I told you to go, so you go! Stop whining, or there'll be no dinner for you."

At the mention of food, Mrs. Lin thought of that bowl of stir-fried pork with chili and swallowed nervously before rushing off to Zhang Yutou's house.

There were more people raising chickens than ducks in the village.

Duck eggs sold cheaper than chicken eggs; at the lowest point, two duck eggs sold for a wen, so naturally, fewer people raised them.

Zhang Yutou's family raised five ducks, simply because their son, Zhang Dalong, liked to eat a duck egg every day.

After a while, Mrs. Lin returned with a black-and-white-feathered duck, reeking, and almost as soon as she reached the yard, she tossed the duck at Mu Shuangshuang and wiped her hands vigorously, as if the duck carried some virus.

Mu Shuangshuang held the duck, patted its feathers, and then spoke. "Mother, go inside and get a bowl to catch the duck's saliva."

Yu Si Niang went inside and soon came out with a small earthen bowl, Mu Shuangshuang held the duck's head near it, and with the hand that had stroked the duck's feathers, she reached into the duck's throat.

Mr. Mu wanted to stop her but was too late.

Duck saliva trickled down Mu Shuangshuang's hand, soon filling half the bowl.

"Alright, take this for Second Aunt to drink. It must be swallowed!"

"..."

At this moment, even honest Mu Dashan felt disgusted.

Mu Zhenzhen shook her head desperately, stepping back as if she'd rather die than drink it.

"Grandfather, hurry and make Second Aunt drink it. If she doesn't drink it soon, her throat will be damaged."

After hesitating for a moment, Mr. Mu finally spoke. "Dazhong, Danyan, pry open your sister's mouth and pour it in!"

"Alright~"

With the combined brutal effort of Mu Family's second and fifth, Mu Zhenzhen was forcibly made to swallow that half bowl of saliva.

Soon after, the fish bone softened and was swallowed. Only, the duck saliva also went into her stomach.

Dirty hands, dirty saliva...

Thinking about it, Mu Zhenzhen hunched over and began to vomit furiously.

"Ugh..."

She retched until her stomach was empty, even bile came out.

Still felt nauseous...

The Old Mu Family members, seeing Mu Zhenzhen leave, didn't linger. Mrs. Lin followed them back for dinner, unwilling to return the borrowed duck.

Mu Shuangshuang watched them leave and, once they were out of sight, crouched on the ground, laughing so hard she almost fell over.

It's no surprise that Mu Zhenzhen felt disgusted, even she found it disgusting.

Her hand stank from touching the duck, and even she didn't dare smell it.

"This girl, always so mischievous." Yu Si Niang shook her head helplessly, but her words carried no reproach, just a hint of affection.

Mu Dashan chuckled, "It's better this way than not speaking or smiling before.

I actually think Shuangshuang's personality is something we don't have."

Clear loves and hates, never taking a loss.

Mu Dashan wanted to learn from Shuangshuang, but a nature nearly thirty years in the making wasn't something that could change overnight.

Chapter 233: Mrs. Lin Kills a Chicken

At night, the Old Mu Family was enveloped in tranquility once again.

After grinding green beans and tidying up the kitchen, Mu Shuangshuang lay down to sleep.

But there was one person who, instead of sleeping, tossed and turned as if on a griddle.

"What's wrong? Do you have maggots? You keep moving and others can't sleep?"

Mu Dazhong opened his sleepy eyes and scolded Mrs. Lin.

"Daddy Gou Dan, I feel our mother is too biased. Any tasty food either goes to the first branch or to Gou Dan's Second Aunt.

That dish of stir-fried pork with chili on the table today was taken away by mother, saying Gou Dan's Second Aunt can eat tomorrow, and everyone can share. Isn't it clearly meant for Gou Dan's Second Aunt for tomorrow?"

"What can be done? My mother runs things; she likes my second sister, so of course, good things go to her."

Mu Dazhong was also annoyed inside, but what could be done?

Mu Zhenzhen was his sister, and as her older brother, he couldn't exactly chase her away, nor did he have the right!

"You're all kids; why is mother so biased? You had your blood sucked by leeches and still work for the family but can't even have a bite of meat.

But Gou Dan's Second Aunt, she does nothing. We've been working while she hasn't even flipped over in bed, and just thinking about it makes my whole body ache."

"What can you do if you ache? If you have what it takes, make Daddy Gou Dan's parents like you too, or have a son like the eldest brother!"

Mu Dazhong was truly frustrated inside, so his words carried a hint of resignation.

The eldest brother's imperial exams hadn't gotten anywhere, and suddenly, the poorest third branch had food. With endless chores at home piling up, Mu Dazhong felt a chill.

"Daddy Gou Dan, don't think like that. Parents may be biased, but we can't just swallow it down. At worst, at worst..."

Mrs. Lin bit her lip, "At worst, I'll borrow some from my family, and our family can start a business. When we have money, we won't have to bother with parents."

This thought occurred to Mrs. Lin today. Over the years, she's been exploited by the old woman, with every bit of silver patched to Mu Dade's hole, yet not a decent meal.

"Oh, come on, like your brother, who's lost money in business all his life; do you think he can turn around?"

Mu Dazhong sarcastically mocked Mrs. Lin, then lay down to continue sleeping.

Mrs. Lin trembled with anger, thinking of the dish of stir-fried pork with chili at night, craving it intensely.

She got up and took an embroidery needle, walking towards the chicken coop...

Early the next morning, the Old Mu Family experienced another strange event: one of their chickens had died, with feathers scattered all over the coop.

Old Mrs. Mu nearly fainted upon hearing the news.

Last time, a chicken was stolen, and she mourned for a long time. Now another one was dead.

"Such sin, death to those who steal, oh dear..."

Old Mrs. Mu cursed all morning, as usual, only stopping when Mu Zhenzhen was woken by the noise.

"Mother, why are you yelling; can't sleep anymore."

Mu Zhenzhen was quite resilient, having recovered almost entirely overnight, speaking without a hint of throat pain.

Seeing the dead chicken on the ground, her eyes lit up.

"Mother, the chicken's dead; we have to eat it quickly."

Having not eaten all night, Mu Zhenzhen was already hungry, and she's been coveting the Old Mu Family's chicken for ages. Now with the opportunity right in front of her, it'd be a waste not to eat.

"Right, Mother, Gou Dan's Second Aunt is right; we should deal with it quickly, or it'll spoil soon," Mrs. Lin chimed in, her eyes darting to the chicken on the ground now and then.

Last night, she used an embroidery needle to jab and kill the chicken, all because the old lady never gave her anything tasty.

This chicken is so fat, she should at least get a taste of the broth.

Old Mrs. Mu was angry, but the chicken was already dead, and what could she do?

"Mrs. Lin, process the chicken, Zhenzhen, go back to your room and sleep for a while. I'll call you later to eat the chicken."

Mu Zhenzhen left happily, and Mrs. Lin angrily picked up the chicken and headed towards the fourth branch, kicking the door open.

"Mrs. Liu, process this chicken; once you're done, head to the fields. Don't think about shirking."

Mu Dajiang opened his mouth to speak, but Mrs. Liu pulled on his sleeve.

She looked at her husband with a pleading gaze, hoping he wouldn't argue with Mrs. Lin.

Once Mrs. Lin left, the silent Mu Dajiang sighed. "Why didn't you let me speak to her?"

"Let it be, husband. Second sister-in-law is just like that; if you argue with her, she'll definitely make you work more. Besides, I heard from my mom that Xiaxia and Xiao Chu are coming back in the next few days. If she gets angry, what if she bullies them?"

They say motherly instincts can be strong, but that's just how some express love.

Mrs. Liu felt that avoiding trouble with Mrs. Lin might make life easier for her children.

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In town, Mu Shuangshuang and Fengzi delivered cold noodles, then went to the market to sell fans, only to encounter the scholar Liu Zian again.

Just like last time, Liu Zian wandered the streets with a book rack on his back, head down, looking lost in thought.

Seeing he was about to bump into Mu Shuangshuang, Fengzi quickly pulled her aside, avoiding the collision.

Liu Zian noticed he'd almost knocked someone over and, upon looking up, saw Mu Shuangshuang's radiant smile.

Liu Zian was somewhat surprised; from their last meeting, he remembered the person before him was incredibly skinny, wearing a loose, tattered garment as if a child had stolen adult clothing.

But now, her complexion is rosier, and even the flesh under her chin has grown.

And yet, she possesses a breathtaking beauty.

Especially those dark eyes, pure like a serene lake.

Realizing he'd been staring at the young woman too long, Liu Zian's face flushed red.

"Miss, long time no see!"

Liu Zian spoke abruptly, realizing he didn't even know her name.

"Long time no see!" Mu Shuangshuang nodded.

This scholar seemed interesting, always with an air of disarray.

Could it be that ancient scholars were all unappreciated talents?

Standing nearby, Fengzi felt a sudden surge of irritation.

This scholar never looked at him, instead staring at Shuangshuang for ages. If he had no intention, Fengzi wouldn't believe it.

"Shuangshuang, didn't you say you wanted to look around? Let's go quickly; it'll be hot later if we delay back home."

"Yes, let's go!" Mu Shuangshuang responded to Lu Yuanfeng, and they left without bidding farewell to Liu Zian.

Chapter 234: Fengzi Gets Jealous

Liu Zian was stunned; he had never thought there would be a girl who would disregard him like this.

He started studying early and passed the Scholar exam on his first try. Although his family was poor, in the surrounding ten miles, no girl who knew his name treated him with anything but respect.

Recently, a family with the surname Cao even wanted him to marry into their family. If he married their daughter, he wouldn't have to worry about his exam expenses in the future.

But Liu Zian refused. A true man has things he will do and things he will not do.

Even if he needed money, he couldn't sell his dignity or his character!

After pondering for a moment, Liu Zian suddenly made a move he himself couldn't believe.

He rushed forward and blocked Mu Shuangshuang's path. "My name is Liu Zian, the first Scholar from Liu Family Village."

Mu Shuangshuang's eyes widened. "And then?"

This "and then" left Liu Zian blushing furiously.

Mu Shuangshuang was very puzzled. This Liu Zian was really interesting; not only did he voluntarily tell her his name, but he also deliberately mentioned that he was a Scholar.

Could it be that he wanted her to sponsor him or something?

Having seen many scammers, she always preferred to be cautious.

"I... I..." Liu Zian stuttered, unable to say a word for a long while.

Fengzi instinctively frowned. A man's eyes were continually on Shuangshuang.

If this man really liked Shuangshuang, then his status and position would be much higher. Scholar, scholar, Champion Scholar — these were probably what girls dreamed of!

He had nothing other than his strength and the experience from being in the military. He didn't even have the most basic land of a farming family.

"Fengzi, let's go!" Mu Shuangshuang felt that if they waited any longer, they still wouldn't hear Liu Zian speak normally.

Liu Zian became anxious when he saw Mu Shuangshuang was leaving and said, "Miss, can you teach me how to make money?"

Liu Zian did indeed lack money to take the scholarly exam, but he felt that his purpose in saying this was not just for the money; deep down, he wanted to spend more time with this girl before him.

Her aura particularly attracted him.

"Why do you think I can teach you how to make money?"

Mu Shuangshuang was very curious. A Scholar was considered a pillar of the country's future, so he shouldn't be too short of money.

Moreover, Liu Zian was quite good-looking, fair-skinned, and had a face that suggested a future in government service.

This so-called government service was something Mu Shuangshuang thought of out of boredom. In her past life, she was a small official, and although it was almost like doing odd jobs, she had seen a lot.

This Liu Zian had a full forehead and a body full of righteousness, unlike those who would die young.

"I don't know either. I just feel like... you can!" Liu Zian expressed his thoughts honestly.

This sincerity piqued Mu Shuangshuang's interest.

"I'll think about it and see if there's a way to help you."

Mu Shuangshuang closed her eyes, pondering what a scholar could do to make money.

Doing business was definitely out of the question. His gentle manner would certainly get him ripped off at the market.

Yet business was the quickest way to make money.

Beside Mu Shuangshuang, Fengzi looked calm on the outside, but inside, waves of turmoil surged.

The scholar before them was indeed just an outsider, yet Shuangshuang was willing to find a way for him. This... this was not like Shuangshuang's usual self.

People can be like this sometimes: afraid of not obtaining before they get it.

Then, once obtained, they're afraid of losing it.

"Shuangshuang, why don't I go and borrow some money for him? I can still..." Fengzi didn't want Shuangshuang to exert herself, and if she insisted on helping Liu Zian, he would prefer it be him who helped.

"Fengzi, what foolishness are you talking about? If we can help, we will; if we can't, we won't!"

With no familial ties, Mu Shuangshuang certainly wasn't going to lend money to Liu Zian.

"Are you willing to sell your talent?" Mu Shuangshuang asked.

Perhaps her choice of words was a little harsh, and Liu Zian hesitated instantly.

"I suppose your calligraphy and paintings aren't bad? Other than selling your art, I really can't think of what else you could do."

Selling writings and paintings should be considered a survival method for literati. Mu Shuangshuang knew even great literary figures like Su Shi and famous names like Zheng Banqiao had sold paintings.

As for this Liu Zian, he was quite pedantic, unwilling as he might be.

Liu Zian smoothed his sleeves, hesitating repeatedly, and still he refused.

"Thank you, Miss, Zian... will find his own way!"

Mu Shuangshuang wasn't surprised by this answer. After all, if Liu Zian had agreed immediately, it wouldn't have fit his noble and aloof image.

However, as a consequence, he also cut off the opportunity she was offering.

"Then you handle it yourself; I'm leaving now!"

This time, Mu Shuangshuang didn't give Liu Zian a chance to catch up, leaving with Lu Yuanfeng, disappearing down the street.

When they reached the corner, Lu Yuanfeng stopped.

"Shuangshuang, why did you try to help Liu Zian just now?"

Shuangshuang knew Lu Yuanfeng would ask and had already prepared an answer for him.

"Because he's quite interesting!" Someone trying to break free from fate's shackles, yet bound by them — she was curiously fascinated by whether Liu Zian would eventually take the imperial exams.

"Interesting?" Lu Yuanfeng silently repeated the word in his heart, feeling more bitter than swallowing a bitter melon.

Even his steps lost energy.

Initially, Mu Shuangshuang didn't notice. After shopping for a while and buying some things, she realized that Lu Yuanfeng had been exceptionally quiet today. Several times, when she asked for his opinion, he didn't respond, causing Mu Shuangshuang to become anxious.

"Fengzi, are you sick?"

Admittedly, Mu Shuangshuang felt a bit embarrassed too. Lu Yuanfeng had spent the entire morning helping her transport cold noodles, without taking a break.

Although she was now making more cold noodles than before, earning nine hundred coins per trip, once split between two people, each only got four hundred and fifty coins.

It looked like a lot, but it wasn't much in reality.

Buying a piece of cloth casually cost over a tael of silver, and food cost eight coins per pound...

"No... no!" Lu Yuanfeng shook his head in denial.

He dared not speak of his discomfort, fearing Shuangshuang might be developing feelings for Liu Zian.

"Bend down a little," Mu Shuangshuang said seriously to Lu Yuanfeng.

Lu Yuanfeng, puzzled, bent down slightly, and Mu Shuangshuang reached out to touch his forehead.

The soft sensation spread from Mu Shuangshuang's palm to his forehead, that unfamiliar feeling of satisfaction filling his entire body.

Lu Yuanfeng trembled, his gaze at Mu Shuangshuang becoming a mix of complexity and \*\*\*!

He liked the girl in front of him!

Loved being with her!

Even more, he liked how she looked anxious worrying about him!

Chapter 235: Either Traitor or Thief

"No illness, huh? Why are you not speaking anymore."

Mu Shuangshuang muttered to herself belatedly.

She didn't notice at all how ambiguous the position where she and Lu Yuanfeng were standing, and how she had placed her hand was.

Lu Yuanfeng didn't dare to move, allowing Shuangshuang to touch his forehead repeatedly.

Within this short moment, Lu Yuanfeng's face flushed from red to the roots of his ears, his heart pounding as if it would jump out.

He lowered his head, completely not daring to look at Shuangshuang in front of him.

Unexpectedly, the sour emotions in his heart vanished all at once.

In his mind, he thought only of how Shuangshuang cared about him.

"Shuangshuang, you... you just find that Liu Zian interesting, right?" Lu Yuanfeng asked again, still uneasy.

Mu Shuangshuang suddenly understood a bit—could Lu Yuanfeng really think she was interested in Liu Zian? Was this why he was just unhappy?

"Haha, Fengzi, you wouldn't have misunderstood something, would you?" Mu Shuangshuang laughed, staring at Lu Yuanfeng.

Sure enough, the young man's earlobes were flushed red.

"When I say interesting, it doesn't mean I like him. It's merely that the contradictions in him are particularly obvious. On one hand, he wants to make money and pass the imperial exams, while on the other, his thoughts are bound by those very exams.

I want to see in the end whether reality will defeat noble virtues, or virtues will defeat reality."

If Liu Zian could gather the fees for the exams, he would be an exceptional talent in the future.

But if, because of his current thinking, he's unwilling to trade paintings for travel expenses, then his journey with the exams might end here.

This was Mu Shuangshuang's intuition, an inexplicable intuition just like Liu Zian's.

"Mmm!" Lu Yuanfeng nodded heavily, now completely at ease and wouldn't ask about anything else anymore.

After strolling around the market, Mu Shuangshuang picked up some spices needed for cooking, like star anise, cinnamon, and pepper, hoping that next time when she cooks, the lack of these would not affect the taste of the big dishes.

When they rushed back to Er Gui Village, the time, as usual, was early, and there was about an hour until lunchtime. Mu Shuangshuang was eager to rush back to turn the cucumbers at home into cucumber skin.

She just didn't expect to be baffled when she was suddenly greeted by Mrs. Jin upon returning home.

"Shuangshuang, you're back. What did you buy? Let Auntie take a look."

Mrs. Jin was all smiles. If she hadn't entered through the side door, Mu Shuangshuang would really think she'd walked into the wrong door.

"Auntie, what are you doing? What have you set your eyes on from our third branch? Let me say this upfront, we only have a few fish left, and they're small too, probably not enough to nourish you.

As for the meat, I guess you'll have to dig it out from my second aunt's stomach. But considering my second aunt's efficient intestines, that meat is probably already turned into waste by now."

Mu Shuangshuang spoke as simply and bluntly as ever. A flash of disgust crossed Mrs. Jin's face, and she felt nauseous, but remembering her purpose, she quickly composed herself.

"Shuangshuang, what are you saying? How could Auntie want anything from you, a child? The fish you caught yourself is naturally yours." Mrs. Jin laughed off Mu Shuangshuang's words.

That creepy smile and her face that didn't match her smile made Mu Shuangshuang's goosebumps fall to the ground.

The person in front of her smiled more purely than a white lotus, as if she completely forgot who wanted to sell her for money to her husband back in the day. Forgot all about how she wanted to eat her alive when she fought back.

Has the sun risen from the west today? Is Mrs. Jin finally here to soften up?

"Auntie, if you're done, I'll head back to my room. I still have to cook later."

Actually, it was early to cook at this hour, but Mu Shuangshuang simply didn't want to see this aunt because she was too repulsive.

"What cooking? Your older aunt is coming home today, and your little aunt is coming along too. Your granny made good food and invited your third branch to join." Mrs. Jin said.

"Then please tell my granny that I've already prepared dishes, so I won't be attending today."

Offering excessive hospitality for no reason usually means ulterior motives.

Mu Shuangshuang refused Mrs. Jin, but unexpectedly, this shameless person directly shouted toward Mu Dashan inside the house.

"Old Three, Shuangshuang's older aunt and little aunt are back. Mom and Dad said it's rare for the whole family to be together, so they want to invite the third branch over for a meal and chat!"

Mrs. Jin knew Mu Dashan well, understanding what he had always desired.

For years, even if Old Mrs. Mu and Mr. Mu were biased, he hoped one day to be recognized by them.

So the moment she spoke, Mu Shuangshuang knew that they had no choice but to attend this Hongmen feast today.

"Auntie, you should head back first. I'll call my mom to go with me once she's back."

Hearing this, Mrs. Jin left satisfied.

With the situation like this, Mu Shuangshuang didn't think much more and returned to the kitchen to wash her face before starting to prepare dried cucumber skin.

Dried cucumber skin has always been Mu Shuangshuang's favorite, crispy and a great side for rice, and most importantly, it's simple to make.

Mu Shuangshuang removed the thorns on the cucumber skin in the kitchen, cleaning them thoroughly.

Then she removed some of the seeds and the thicker cucumber flesh, sprinkled salt, and marinated the cucumbers evenly.

Speaking of, salt was always a headache for Mu Shuangshuang. In the Da Ning Dynasty, the salt and iron were monopolized by the court. To prevent illegal merchants from selling secretly, they even regulated the amount of salt that could be bought and sold. That's probably why last time, when she stole a jar of salt from the Old Mu Family, Old Mrs. Mu beat up Mrs. Lin.

The cured cucumbers needed to be left for a day and then taken out to dry the next day.

With nothing else to do, Mu Shuangshuang blanched the vegetables in water, soaking them in a small wooden basin, waiting to use them to cook fish in the evening. One way or another, she had almost processed all the vegetables taken from Zhuangzi's mother.

Yu Si Niang returned just in time for Old Mu Family to have Mrs. Liu call people over, and Little Zhi also returned from Lu Yuanfeng's house.

These past few days, it was rare for the two little ones to separate and play together. Ever since Xiao Han got those few books, he rarely went out, not caring whether he knew the characters or not, he just held the book and read it.

Even when Mu Shuangshuang mentioned that Granny invited the third branch over for dinner, he was a bit reluctant, picking up and putting down the book in his hands.

"If you don't want to let go, then hold onto it. Don't worry about what others think!"

"Sister..." Mu Xiaohan's eyes flashed with a touch of emotion.

He really didn't want to let go of what he was holding in his hands, even reluctant to do so for meals or sleep.

"It's okay, come next spring, I'll send you to school. My brother Mu Xiaohan doesn't need to care about anyone else's opinions to study!"

#### Chapter 236: Dead Sick Chicken

The Old Mu Family was much livelier than usual due to the return of Mu Xianxian and Mu Xiangxiang.

The family was laughing and chatting about humorous childhood stories, even Mu Danian, who was usually quite critical, held back for once. He was smarter than his other brothers in the Old Mu Family.

He knew exactly whom to please for personal gain, and right now, Mu Xianxian, who had a store in town, was the one he was trying to cozy up to.

"Elder Sister, where did you buy this beautiful golden hairpin? It must have cost quite a bit! Elder Sister not only looks beautiful but also has better taste in clothing and jewelry than others."

Mu Danian's flattering words made Mu Xianxian laugh uncontrollably, covering her mouth.

"Fifth, your sweet tongue is still the same. As your sister, I brought each of you a pair of shoes today, with this year's best styles from the store, they're worth quite a lot."

Mu Xianxian had spent a lot of time preparing for this visit, meticulously dressing herself up. She used the finest cosmetics, and even her clothing was a silk dress most popular among the girls in Qingshan Town.

The golden hairpin in her hair was the most expensive part of her ensemble and the driving attraction on her journey here.

Mrs. Lin and Mu Dazhong eyed the hairpin with drooling mouths.

Old Mrs. Mu, being a senior, desired it as well but tried not to be obvious.

In fact, Old Mrs. Mu was not as concerned about this oldest daughter as she was toward Mu Xiangxiang and Mu Zhenzhen because Mu Xianxian has never been close to her and treated her disdainfully.

Whenever Old Mrs. Mu washed dishes or touched things, Mu Xianxian would rewash them separately, and this tendency was only directed at her.

Since learning this, Old Mrs. Mu had been lukewarm toward Mu Xianxian.

"Mom and Dad, and everyone else, take a look, do you like the shoes!"

Mu Zhenzhen signaled the maid, who brought out a box of shoes.

She picked a few pairs and handed them over to everyone present, especially delivering to Mu Danian herself since he had complimented her.

Mu Danian was initially in a good mood, for with his elder sister's arrival, the house was filled with good food along with free shoes. But as soon as he saw the shoes in his hand, his mood soured.

The styles of the shoes given by Mu Xianxian were outdated, not to mention the fabric on the surface had black spots, clearly a substandard item that couldn't be sold.

Mu Danian's expression changed slightly as he placed the shoes on the table and refused to touch them.

Just then, the neatly dressed third branch entered from outside, and Mu Xianxian promptly went up to greet them.

"Oh, Shuangshuang, you've come back; it must have been tiring in town today. I, as your big aunt, brought you some shoes for the third branch. See if you like them."

Mu Xianxian picked a few pairs of shoes from the box, trying to hand them to Mu Shuangshuang, only to be refused.

"Big Aunt, all of us in the third branch are slender and can't wear such large shoes. You should see who in the family they would fit and give them to whoever can wear them!"

A stiff smile appeared on Mu Xianxian's face as she awkwardly touched the golden hairpin on her head.

"Shuang, no matter what, it's your big aunt's rare gesture of goodwill. Even if you don't wear them, take them back to make your second aunt feel better." Mr. Mu scolded Mu Shuangshuang lightly.

Unexpectedly, Mu Xianxian took the initiative to speak kindly on behalf of Mu Shuangshuang.

"Dad, don't blame Shuangshuang. She's justified. It's rare for me, as the big aunt, to come back, and I'm not well-versed with the shoe sizes of the third branch. Tomorrow, I'll send down a few craftsmen to measure your sizes and make some anew."

Mr. Mu looked at Mu Xianxian with approval, seeming proud of his eldest daughter's insight.

"Everyone's just standing around; hurry and eat, let's eat!"

At Mu Xianxian's call, everyone went to the main house to sit. This time, it was enough to be considered a grand reunion of the Old Mu Family. Except for Mu Dazhong's eldest son apprenticed in town, all of Old Mu's family and the fourth branch's son and daughter were present in the main house.

The adults sat at one table, the children at another, but Mu Shuangshuang was brought to sit with the adults next to Mu Xianxian.

A pot of chicken captivated everyone's gaze as soon as the lid was lifted.

Old Mrs. Mu stood up and addressed everyone, "This chicken was specially prepared by the fourth sister-in-law because we knew Xianxian and Xiangxiang would be coming back today. It tastes wonderful.

Da De, you read a lot and need to eat more. And Zhenzhen and Xiangxiang, didn't you say you love chicken the most? This time, make sure you eat more of it."

There was only that one chicken, and Old Mrs. Mu went through naming her favorite children one by one, without mentioning the others at all.

The rest were left feeling awkward, their enthusiasm for eating chicken all but evaporated.

The most disappointed was Mu Dashan; he thought that after coming back, he would be respected by his parents, at least his name would be called at the dinner table.

Mu Shuangshuang thought this meal was not even as good as eating at home; Old Mrs. Mu and Mr. Mu were blatantly currying favor with Mu Zhenzhen and Mu Dade.

Since that was the case, Mu Shuangshuang decided not to be polite.

She grabbed the ladle first and served herself a bowl of chicken soup, then tore off a piece of chicken, much to Old Mrs. Mu's surprise.

Normally, all the food and main dishes in the house were portioned out by her, and she felt reassured.

This time, she believed that if she didn't portion out the food, the others wouldn't dare touch it. Who would have thought this pesky Shuang girl dared to do so right in front of her.

"Grandma, why are you staring at me? Do you want me to serve you some soup?" Mu Shuangshuang asked with a cheerful smile at Old Mrs. Mu.

Old Mrs. Mu was about to lash out when she was stopped by Mr. Mu.

He gave Old Mrs. Mu a stern glare, trying to remind her of the situation.

Fuming but unable to speak out, Old Mrs. Mu continued staring daggers at Mu Shuangshuang, nearly popping her eyes out of her sockets. Mu Shuangshuang, unfazed, continued to eat the chicken. When she spotted the chicken's small perforations, she spat it out quickly.

"Grandma, what kind of chicken is this, with so many holes?"

Mu Shuangshuang's question made Mu Xianxian, who was about to eat some chicken, put down her chopsticks, and everyone focused on examining the stewed chicken.

Indeed, the chicken skin was uniformly filled with pockmarked holes, particularly on the wings, where the holes covered most of them.

"Mom, you didn't give us a sick chicken, did you?"

Mu Danian chimed in, causing those with weaker stomachs to turn away.

"No... of course not..." Old Mrs. Mu mumbled, her tone lacking confidence.

Hearing this, the group figured it was likely true and avoided touching the large bowl of chicken soup, except for Mrs. Lin, who continued eating and gnawing away, her mouth covered in oil.

"Second Aunt, why do I feel the holes in the chicken were..." Mu Shuangshuang hesitantly ventured a guess while Mrs. Lin, still eating, shivered in fear.

"You little brat, why are you calling me? I didn't stab it to death with a needle!"

Chapter 237: The Eldest Aunt's Ambition

As soon as Mrs. Lin finished speaking, she realized she had misspoken. She reached out to slap her mouth and awkwardly smiled at everyone present. "I was joking, I didn't know it was stabbed with a needle, I..."

The more Mrs. Lin tried to explain, the worse it got. Old Mrs. Mu threw down the bowl and chopsticks in her hand, stepped forward, grabbed the collar of Mrs. Lin's clothes, and began to pull hard, simultaneously slapping her back.

"Second son's wife, so it was your doing, you smelly woman. How dare you use an embroidery needle to kill my chicken. Spit it out, spit it all out."

With a few presses and slaps, Old Mrs. Mu forced the chicken Mrs. Lin had just eaten out of her stomach before it reached her stomach.

"Ugh..." The fresh chicken soup and chicken meat that Mrs. Lin vomited covered the floor of the room.

"Wretch, if you ever use such lowly tricks again, I'll beat you to death. No dinner for you tonight."

Having punished Mrs. Lin, Old Mrs. Mu finally felt satisfied, and the anger in her heart subsided quite a bit.

But the others in the room couldn't handle it, especially since it was meal time. Mu Xianxian and Mu Dade stood up in disgust, implying that they would skip this meal.

The two of them looked at each other and decided it was more important to get down to business.

"Shuang, I heard you've been delivering something called cold noodles to the Jiu Si Xuan in town recently and made quite a bit of money. I heard that after the third branch moved out, you built a kitchen for the family, raised pigs, and bought cloth. Tell your aunt how you make that stuff."

Mu Xianxian's words made Mu Shuangshuang's heart skip a beat. She had been making cold noodles for quite some time, and no one from the Old Mu Family had noticed.

Several times, Mr. Mu saw her and Lu Yuanfeng pushing a wheelbarrow down the street, thinking they were just fetching some worthless wild goods from the mountains to sell in town. He never asked about it.

But now Mu Xianxian came right up, so sure she had made money and wanted to know how it was done, she must have investigated. Could it be, she knew I delivered cold noodles today?

"Auntie, what are you talking about? Cold noodles are just for kids to play with, I'm just messing around, how could it make money." Mu Shuangshuang laughed openly, with a hint of caution in her eyes.

"Oh, making eight or nine hundred copper coins at a time is just child's play now, is it? Since that's the case, Shuang, teach me, your fifth uncle, how it's done, so I can earn nine hundred copper coins a trip too."

At this point, Mu Shuangshuang knew, it turns out the Old Mu Family invited them for dinner to ask for the recipe.

And they joined forces, it really is a trap like the Feast at Hongmen.

Mu Shuangshuang glanced at Mu Dashan with the corner of her eye and saw him staring in shock at the people from the Old Mu Family. She finally felt relieved.

Her "Baozi" dad is good at everything, just that he values emotions too much—blood ties, kinship. If back then Mr. Mu and Old Mrs. Mu hadn't gone too far with the division of family property, Mu Dashan probably would have given his heart to Mr. Mu and Old Mrs. Mu.

These days, she sensed her dad becoming more assertive, starting to protect their third branch.

People have to grow, grow little by little, better than standing still.

"Shuang, I'm not going to hold grudges about the past, you should hurry up and hand over the recipe to your aunt.

Then your aunt can start a cold noodle shop, maybe she'll make a lot of money, and you might end up with some meat for your third branch."

The onlooker laughed at that, holding the recipe in her own hands, earning nine hundred a time, couldn't they afford a piece of meat?

"Grandma, are you joking? Can I casually give away a recipe? If I do, what will our third branch eat later? We can't possibly survive on Northwest wind!"

Mu Shuangshuang questioned with a sneer.

Next to her, Mu Dashan's face turned pale. When Old Mrs. Mu asked for the recipe, he suddenly felt he was a big joke.

He thought he could earn money now by making straw fans, and his parents would value him. Who knew it was still about draining the third branch's blood.

"Shuang, your grandma didn't mean that. She just thinks you're a little kid, with limited ability, delivering cold noodles, you can only go every three days.

If you don't have a place to live or eat in town, if you give us the recipe, we can expand. You make nine hundred a day, in our hands, it could be nine taels, ninety taels..."

Mu Xianxian painted a grand future, making the Old Mu Family drool.

Nine taels of silver every day, that's two hundred and seventy taels a month. Who knows if they could see that much silver in a lifetime, but now it could be seen in a month.

So everyone looked at Mu Shuangshuang with greedy eyes.

"Shuang, we're blood brothers with your third brother, even broken bones are connected. Fifth uncle hasn't married yet, if you hand over the recipe, when your aunt makes money, she'll find me a wife, and you'll gain a fifth aunt."

Mu Danian looked at Mu Shuangshuang earnestly, with a sincere expression.

The others nodded in agreement.

Beside him, Mu Dashan was shaking, thinking how foolish he was to believe his mother and father would invite him to dinner. They never valued him.

How muddle-headed he was...

The more Mu Shuangshuang listened, the more amusing she found it. She's seen plenty of shameless people, but it's the first time she's seen such shameless motives expressed this way.

The Old Mu Family saw Mu Shuangshuang remaining silent and continued. "Shuang, we were wrong before, we shouldn't have called you a smelly girl. Look at you now, not only are you not smelly, but you're also skillful. If you hand over the recipe, we'll..."

"Do you really think I'm a fool? If the recipe goes out, what else is there for me? Would the third branch even have any food left?" Mu Shuangshuang coldly glanced at everyone present, making it clear that she was not cooperating, not going along with it.

"You... you stubborn girl, I talked nicely, but you refuse, and now you dare to put on airs with me.

You think your third branch making a bit of silver is great, don't forget, your father came from my womb. If you don't agree, he will, and then old granny, let's see your swagger."

Old Mrs. Mu spat on the ground, glaring fiercely at Mu Shuangshuang.

"Old three, you big man, why are you hiding like a turtle? Say it, will you let your daughter hand over the recipe today, or you're no son of mine."

Old Mrs. Mu's final weapon spewed out, leaving Mu Dashan defenseless and nearly collapsing, his chopsticks falling to the ground and rolling far away.

After a long while, Mu Dashan took a deep breath and finally spoke.

Chapter 238: Go Dream!

"Mom, the formula was developed by Shuangshuang, as her father, I won't interfere, nor can I."

After Mu Dashan finished speaking, he glanced at Old Mrs. Mu.

"You never treated me like a son, only thought of me when there was work to do. Do you remember this scar on my face? It happened while plowing the field. Do you remember what you said back then?"

[What does such a small wound count for? Seeing a doctor costs money, just smear some ash on it, it's not like you're a Golden Noble.] Do you know how much it hurt me? Not because you didn't get a doctor for me, but because your words felt like those of a stranger."

Old Mrs. Mu remembered the incident. It was during the busy double cropping season, and when Dashan was injured, she indeed said those words.

But so what?

He's her own child, born from her, so she can't say such things?

"Dashan, are you settling scores with me? Then calculate how much you've eaten and worn from me over these years?"

Mu Dashan was stunned, his throat felt like something was stuck, and he couldn't speak.

"Grandma, if you have to count, then count how much work my father did and how many wages my mother earned, why don't you count those?"

Mu Shuangshuang always hit the nail on the head with her words, always leaving Old Mrs. Mu speechless.

Old Mrs. Mu clutched her chest, taking a long time to catch her breath, and her breathing became rapid.

"You little beast..."

"Enough, Grandma, I'm speaking the truth. If you don't like to hear it, I won't say it anymore. Our third branch will go back home for dinner anyway, afraid of choking on the food here."

Mu Shuangshuang supported Mu Dashan, ready to leave. After watching the commotion for a long time, Mu Xianxian and Mu Dade realized if they didn't do something, the people would leave, and they wouldn't get the formula.

"Mom, what you said just now wasn't right. Third brother has contributed a lot to this family over the years. Without him, it's impossible to finish the family work. I've needed his help a lot during my exams all these years. And Shuangshuang, making such a good formula on her own isn't easy, you shouldn't have spoken to her that way."

Mu Dade, acting like a savior, lectured Old Mrs. Mu, making her face red with discomfort. But he was her favorite son; even though she was upset, she had to endure it.

After saying this, Mu Dade deliberately looked at Mu Dashan's expression, thinking Dashan would be grateful to him as before, at least for speaking on his behalf.

But no, Dashan's face showed rare indifference, like he saw right through him.

"Dad, Mom, I'm leaving it here today: the formula belongs to Shuangshuang. However she wants to use it, she can. If she thinks it's okay to give, then she can give it. If not, then she doesn't have to give it.

And from now on, our third branch will be led by Shuangshuang. She'll make the financial and decision-making calls!"

"You'll be the death of me. A grown man not leading, handing over to a little girl, you... you're simply shaming our Old Mu Family." Old Mrs. Mu cursed angrily.

At this point, Mr. Mu stood up.

"We're all family, why the shouting? Aren't you afraid of being laughed at by others? Old woman, say less, and Shuangshuang, think it over. I think your aunt is right, state your terms, and then give the formula to your aunt."

Mr. Mu, in his dealings with Mu Shuangshuang, understood well enough that Shuangshuang wasn't someone who did things for no reason. She was sure to want some advantage out of everything.

"Since Grandpa put it that way, I won't beat around the bush. Earlier, Aunt said the formula earns nine silver a day, which totals to two hundred seventy silver a month. As the holder of the formula, taking half shouldn't be too much. So, Aunt, give me forty-eight thousand and six hundred silver, and I'll sell the formula to her."

Over forty thousand silver, it was only calculated by Mu Shuangshuang for thirty years. Since the Old Mu Family wanted to make money off it, she'd help them out—but she'd have to ensure she was full first.

"What? Forty thousand taels, why don't you go rob instead?" Mu Xianxian's pretty facade finally cracked as she screamed, causing the powder on her face to nearly fall to the floor.

"I'd love to rob, but doing illegal things, Grandpa and Grandma wouldn't let me, lest it affects Uncle's official career. What to do then?"

"You... you crazy girl, I won't bring out forty thousand taels to buy your broken formula."

Not to mention that she didn't have it, even if she did, she wouldn't take it out.

Even a fool wouldn't pay so much for something uncertain of profit.

"Then that's it, Grandpa, you've heard, Aunt doesn't want it, I can't help anymore."

"Mom, let's go!" Mu Shuangshuang once again supported Mu Dashan's hand and called out to Little Zhi and Xiao Han sitting at the small Baxian table. "Little Zhi, Xiao Han, hurry up too, sister is making something good for you today."

"Hey!" The two little ones jumped quickly from their chairs at the sound.

Mu Xiaohan, holding a book, only gained attention from Mu Dade when passing him.

"Shuangshuang, if you hand over the formula, I... I'll tutor Xiao Han, and he'll definitely pass the exams as a scholar."

"No need, I've already found Xiao Han a teacher, Liu Zian from Liu Family Village. He approached me voluntarily, wanting to be Xiao Han's teacher."

Liu Zian was the top scorer in that cohort, also competing in scholar exams this time.

If Mu Dade claimed not to know him, it would be too false.

Moreover, his former teacher had predicted if Qingshan Town were to produce a Champion Scholar, it must surely be Liu Zian.

Mu Dade still harbored doubts about how Mu Shuangshuang knew Liu Zian, yet Mu Xianxian was already jumping in frustration.

"I wondered why Liu Zian refused to marry into our Old Cao's house, was it your doing? Was it you who convinced that shabby scholar to refuse? You're so ruthless, daring to..."

Back then, Mu Xianxian gave up on Mu Dade because her mother-in-law said Liu Zian from Liu Family Village was a rare talent, only impoverished, unable to afford exam costs.

But if acquired, he wouldn't be less than a Champion Scholar, at least a scholar.

With this mindset, they took silver, sought elders, yet were harshly refused, almost causing Miao Miao to lose face entirely.

"Aunt, why do you always shove the blame on me? Is it my decision who Liu Zian marries? If I had such capability, would I still be wrestling with you over four thousand taels for a formula?"

Mu Shuangshuang spoke casually, as though forty thousand taels were nothing but a feather.

Yet, the calmer she was, the angrier the Old Mu family became.

After all, her bloodthirsty image had already emerged, a little more didn't matter.

"Shuangshuang, are you truly unwilling to help your uncle this once?" Mu Dade laid aside past dignities, abandoning superiority, and stared straight at Mu Shuangshuang.

"It's not I who won't help, it's Aunt who won't help you. Either the money comes, or nothing more needs to be said!"

Chapter 239: Home-Cooked Meal is Delicious

Mu Shuangshuang threw out those domineering words, then helped Mu Dashan and took the two little kids back home, leaving the people of Old Mu Family steaming with anger.

This trip really refreshed Mu Shuangshuang's worldview.

She learned that if Old Mu Family tries to make nice in the future, she must be vigilant, or else she'll be sold and still help the sellers count their money.

An entire afternoon was tossed around, not only did she not eat lunch, but she also wasted so much time.

Mu Shuangshuang rested for a moment before saying to her family, "Dad, Mom, you go take a nap first, I'll go to the kitchen to make something to eat, I figure by the time you wake up, lunch will be ready."

Mu Dashan was still deep in the pain and self-blame from earlier, unable to extricate himself.

Yu Si Niang softly spoke comforting words beside him, but they were of little use.

This time Mu Shuangshuang didn't say anything, because in this kind of situation, simply guiding won't help; the decision still lies with Mu Dashan.

"Sister, let me help you cook!" Little Zhi gleefully followed Mu Shuangshuang to the kitchen.

With such little time, if they want to make a meal, it has to be simplified.

Mu Shuangshuang thought for a while and decided to make egg pancakes. Last time, the pancakes only had chili added, nothing else, so this time she could make an upgraded version.

Mu Shuangshuang took three eggs from her room, cracked them, and used chopsticks to beat them thoroughly, ensuring that when lifted by a chopstick, there's no feeling of long strands.

She added some chili sauce, along with the veggies she blanched in water at noon, cut into small pieces, and finally added flour, stirring continuously.

The liquid mixed together in the large sea bowl, once the lumps were eliminated, were shaped into round pancakes, set aside on a cutting board.

Mu Shuangshuang lit the cedar twigs in the stove and added some firewood inside; making egg pancakes required a low flame, if the fire is too big, the outside of the pancake would burn, while the inside would remain raw.

She added rapeseed oil to the hot pan, and when the oil was hot, Mu Shuangshuang put the prepared pancakes into the pan, instantly the frying sound of "sizzling" oil erupted, and the fragrance spread swiftly.

Little Zhi sat on the kitchen doorstep, resting her chin on her hands, watching Shuangshuang prepare lunch. Smelling the aroma of the egg pancakes, she drooled.

Mu Shuangshuang fried four pancakes at a time, and after frying eight of them, she began to prepare the main dish for today—loofah soup.

Loofah is abundant in summer, with a special advantage of cooling and detoxifying, which is great for farming families busy with harvesting and planting.

Meanwhile, loofah could be stored for several days, making it an excellent choice for the third branch family, currently without fresh vegetables.

She sliced the loofah, diced the garlic, and once the oil was hot in the pan, she added the garlic to sauté the aroma, then the loofah slices, adding water when they were half-cooked.

Mu Shuangshuang added a ladle of water to the iron pot, covered it, and just waited for the soup to boil before it was ready to eat.

"Little Zhi, go call brother and mom to get up and eat."

Mu Shuangshuang prepared Mu Dashan's lunch of two egg pancakes and a bowl of loofah soup, Yu Si Niang had already gotten up from her nap.

"Mom, you and Xiao Han wash your faces first, the weather is so hot, who knows when it'll rain."

The end of double harvest didn't bring the expected heavy rain, instead the weather got hotter; Mu Shuangshuang now wished for a straw fan every day, or life would be unbearable.

The meal was set on the table, unsurprisingly eliciting another round of praise from Yu Si Niang, who said, "Shuangshuang's cooking is really tasty, I think I can't compete, if she gets married in the future, I won't get to eat it."

"Then Mom should eat more now, or there won't be anyone to cook for you later." Mu Shuangshuang pretended to be serious, unexpectedly causing Yu Si Niang to burst out laughing.

Little Zhi grinned listening to her mom and sister joke around, sometimes joining in, while Xiao Han kept his head down eating, his book warped from being pulled, yet he wouldn't let go.

The egg pancakes Mu Shuangshuang made tasted indeed good, with the aroma of eggs and the spiciness of chilies; with one bite, the whole taste buds seemed to melt, especially when paired with a bowl of loofah soup, it was simply a pleasure.

Thus, homemade food is the best; no matter how sumptuous others' food is, it can't fill you up!

After lunch, Yu Si Niang cleaned up the kitchen, while Mu Shuangshuang prepared pig feed, fed the little pig, and after all the hustle and bustle, it was time to head out for afternoon work.

Mu Shuangshuang and Yu Si Niang dressed appropriately and headed out, while a bunch of labor from Old Mu Family were still stirring things up at home.

"Dad, Mom, didn't you say the oldest sister and Xiangxiang would be back today, so no need to work? Look, it's so hot, why don't we skip work and do it early tomorrow?"

Mu Danian just came out of the latrine, all sweaty; this short time nearly killed him in the latrine, so there's no way he'd go in such hot weather.

"Exactly, Mom, you always say it's important to keep promises, if you force us to work now, wouldn't that be breaking your word?" Mrs. Lin foolishly chimed in, because she also didn't want to work.

"You filthy stupid woman, quit being foolish here. Anyone else can skip, but you must go for me, old lady."

Old Mrs. Mu was still thinking of the chicken Mrs. Lin had killed, so her words were harsh.

Mrs. Lin awkwardly smiled and stepped aside, inwardly cursing, "Old crone, it's just a chicken, worth remembering forever? Moreover, she spat it out, didn't eat anything."

Old Mrs. Mu urged a few times, seeing nobody move, she took a broom from behind the door and wildly swung it at Mu Danian's group, finally chasing them out.

As they walked, Mu Danian grumbled in annoyance and then sighed.

"Second brother, I truly think our life isn't worth living; look, during lunch, all the good food went to big brother, second sister, and Xiangxiang.

Big brother is okay, we still rely on him to make money, but look at second sister, already married, eating and drinking here every day, eating a lot but not working, why should we do the work to feed a stranger?"

To Mu Danian, a married daughter is like spilled water, Mu Zhenzhen now is an outsider, one who'd snatch things from them.

"Isn't that right? I haven't liked Mom's ways for a long time, biased way too much. Big brother is fine, but now with Xiangxiang back, we're really in for it." Mu Dazhong, looking sallow, also felt extreme dissatisfaction with Mu Zhenzhen.

"Husband, Fifth, why don't we send Gou Dan's Second Aunt back?" Mrs. Lin suggested.

"Second sister-in-law, you speak lightly; last time Dad said to let Zhenzhen go back, Mom threw a tantrum and wouldn't agree." Mu Danian rolled his eyes, disagreeing.

"Well, I've got it! I know how to send Second Sister back!"

#### Chapter 240: Thoughtful Fengzi

With a shout, Mu Dazhong immediately caught the attention of Mu Danian and Mrs. Lin.

The two looked eagerly at him, expecting an answer from his mouth.

"We can have Zhenzhen go back on her own, then even if Mother has any objections, she won't say anything," Mu Dazhong said, looking very proud of himself.

"Second Brother, come on, your method won't work at all. If Second Sister was willing to go back, why would we be so worried? As far as I'm concerned, instead of wondering when or how Second Sister will go back, we should think about how to help Big Brother borrow those fifty taels of silver."

Mu Danian had it all figured out now. If his big brother became a scholar, with all the secrets he knew, his big brother wouldn't dare give him a hard time. Then, he'd be the undisputed man in charge.

Not even that little brat would dare mess with him, and the entire Er Gui Village would have to bow before him.

The most urgent matter now is to get Big Brother the money to buy the exam questions.

"Fifth, your idea is also a waste of breath. That brat won't give a single cent, and Third also seems to have gone crazy, handing all the household affairs to that little brat, so what can we do? We certainly won't throw the brat into the mountains to feed the wild beasts, right?"

Throwing Shuangshuang into Niuwei Mountain to feed the beasts was an idea Mu Dazhong had a long time ago. Back then, the girl didn't dare to speak or resist, so he could just do whatever, and assuredly no one would know. But now, he can't guarantee what that brat might do.

If it comes to worst, he'd lose everything.

The three of them deliberated but couldn't come up with a solution. Finally, Mrs. Lin inadvertently mentioned that Zhuangzi's family had over twenty acres of land and was in a good financial condition, which sparked an idea in Mu Dalian.

"Second Brother, how about we trick my Second Sister into coming back? Have her borrow fifty taels of silver from Zhuangzi's family. Even if she can't borrow it, with the stubborn nature of Zhuangzi's mother, I'm afraid she'll never let Second Sister out again."

"I agree!"

Mu Dalian nodded decisively, one less person means they could eat more.

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In the evening, the first thing Mu Dalian did when he returned home from work was to knock on Mu Zhenzhen's door.

The place where Mu Zhenzhen was originally staying was her own room. If she weren't staying there now, he wouldn't be living in that mosquito-infested storage room.

"Second Sister, open the door, it's Dalian."

Mu Dalian wore a flattering smile and gently knocked on the door.

Mu Zhenzhen angrily got up from bed, opened the door, and said to Mu Dalian with displeasure, "Fifth, why are you yelling? Can't a person sleep?"

Hearing Mu Zhenzhen's words, Mu Danian glanced at the sun, which was almost setting, feeling really frustrated inside. They were outside working hard all day, exhausted and sunburned, while the person in front of him peacefully slept all afternoon.

Other than defecating and eating by herself, tasks like laundry and cleaning were all done by others.

"Haha, Second Sister, I'm sorry, I just came to see how you're doing."

Mu Danian put on a face of obsequiousness and smiled at Mu Zhenzhen.

"Just as you see. Your bed is not comfortable at all, it's exhausting. And it's so hot during the day, why don't you find someone to get me a lotus leaf fan? It's so hot!"

Mu Zhenzhen complained and vented, almost driving Mu Danian mad.

"Second Sister, I actually came to tell you something. Big Sister has been staying at our house these days. Mother said that from now on, all the good things in the house would be reserved for Big Sister. I just overheard Big Sister saying that it's not good for you to not get married and still stay at home, that it disgraces the Old Mu Family."

Mu Zhenzhen is typically gullible, believing whatever others say. As Mu Danian spoke, he watched her facial expressions carefully. Sure enough, upon hearing Mu Xianxian criticize her, Mu Zhenzhen's face immediately turned sour.

"Little bitch, doesn't she remember why she married Big Brother-in-law back then? Loose woman, slut, dares to criticize me and report me. I'm going to find her!"

Mu Zhenzhen couldn't care less about her unwashed face and unpowdered complexion, rolling up her sleeves, she was ready to find trouble with Mu Xianxian.

"Hold on, hold on, Second Sister! Why are you looking for her now? Don't forget, our elder sister's family has money, and Mother is still counting on her to borrow money for Big Brother to rise in rank. If you offend Big Sister, Big Brother's promotion could be in jeopardy."

Mu Danian grabbed Mu Zhenzhen's arm, really fearing this shrew would cause trouble. After all, doing such inciting things, if Mother found out, he would definitely be skinned.

"Fifth, you're right. But if I don't tear that slut's face to pieces, who knows how she'll badmouth me next? What if Father and Mother kick me out?"

"Second Sister, you don't need to worry about that. This is my room. You can stay as long as you want. No need to worry about Father and Mother, even if the King himself comes, I'll dare to say no," Mu Danian patted his chest, guaranteeing this, making Mu Zhenzhen deeply moved.

"Fifth, you truly care about your sister, but what should we do now?" Mu Zhenzhen was as anxious as an ant on a hot pan.

"Second Sister, I've heard Zhuangzi's family is quite wealthy. If you could manage to get that fifty taels for Big Brother, then he would owe you a favor. When Big Brother becomes a scholar, you'd be the person he's most considerate about. Would Big Sister still dare speak ill of you then?"

Mu Danian step by step led Mu Zhenzhen into his trap. Mu Zhenzhen, foolish as she was, only thought about how to humiliate Mu Xianxian, someone she never got along with since childhood, without considering anything else.

"Fifth, I understand now. I'll go back early tomorrow and ask that old hag for money. Once I get those fifty taels, I'll come back. Then I'll have Mother kick that slut out."

Mu Zhenzhen vowed passionately, in her mind, she's already imagining herself getting the fifty taels, her brother becoming a scholar, herself adorned in gold and silver, and trampling Mu Xianxian below her...

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Mu Shuangshuang returned from planting rice in the fields and went to the vegetable garden with her wooden bucket. Busy these days, the vegetable garden was tended by Lu Yuanfeng, and she wondered how the vegetables were growing.

When Mu Shuangshuang arrived, small green leaves had already appeared on the vegetable rows, and there was moisture in the small ditch, indicating it had been watered not long ago.

Mu Shuangshuang felt warmth in her heart, as Lu Yuanfeng always managed to handle things she hadn't thought about yet, completely sparing her any effort.

The only thing was that this simple-minded fellow always kept what he did to himself.

People say, if you do good deeds, don't leave your name, don't let anyone know; he truly is the best practitioner of this.

"Forget it, forget it, thinking too much just makes my head hurt!"

Mu Shuangshuang shook her head, looking at her empty wooden bucket, thinking that since she was here, she might as well pick some wild vegetables on the mountain, even if it's just to feed the family pigs, it would be necessary.

As Mu Shuangshuang stepped in the sunset's afterglow, preparing to go up the mountain, a familiar voice called out to her from behind.

"Shuangshuang, you're really here..."