

Folly 241

Chapter 241: Fengzi Delivers the Cabinet

Lu Yuanfeng's voice carried an inexplicable surprise and tremor.

The two had parted ways at noon, with Lu Yuanfeng having lunch at his own home. In the afternoon, he helped his third uncle carry courage for the entire afternoon, his mind elsewhere, as if something was bothering him.

When he finally finished his chores and went to the vegetable field to water the plants, he figured out why he was unhappy.

He hadn't seen Shuangshuang all afternoon.

He didn't know what Shuangshuang was doing, whether she had tired herself with work.

After watering, Lu Yuanfeng didn't leave immediately but found a spot to wait for Shuangshuang.

He had a feeling Shuangshuang would come, and when she did, Fengzi was naturally overjoyed.

"What are you doing here?" Mu Shuangshuang widened her clear eyes like a blue wave, asking curiously.

Just now, Lu Yuanfeng must have been resting somewhere; otherwise, she wouldn't have noticed him.

"Nothing... nothing much." Lu Yuanfeng shook his head.

"Alright then, I want to go to the mountain to gather some wild vegetables for our pigs." Mu Shuangshuang grinned at Lu Yuanfeng, chuckling lightly.

"Our?"

"Yes, the pigs were caught by you. Surely you don't expect me to raise them all by myself, do you? Are you trying to take advantage?"

Mu Shuangshuang kept a straight face, pretending to be serious.

If outsiders heard her, they'd definitely think she was talking about a baby rather than pigs. But Mu Shuangshuang, being carefree, didn't overthink it.

"No, I... I'm willing to raise them." Lu Yuanfeng blushed, looking somewhat flustered.

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's hurry up the mountain. If the piglets go hungry, we'll both be in trouble."

Mu Shuangshuang took the lead, heading toward the mountain, but Lu Yuanfeng quickly followed. He helped clear the thorns on the mountain path for Mu Shuangshuang, and when they encountered slippery spots, he reached out to steady her.

All of this made Mu Shuangshuang feel a bit spoiled.

If before, when Fengzi had watered the vegetable field, she felt secure, now she felt protected.

Though she considered herself strong, it was a feeling she hadn't fully appreciated before.

Mu Shuangshuang occasionally glanced at the man beside her. He was tall and full of energy. Standing next to him, she felt especially safe.

But beautiful moments always seem to pass by so quickly. Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng gathered wild vegetables and picked up some wood ear mushrooms and fresh mushrooms, all in the time it takes for an incense stick to burn.

It felt like just a blink of an eye had passed.

When they reached the village path, both hesitated for a long time, especially Lu Yuanfeng, who walked a few steps only to step in place, wearing a hole in the ground beneath him.

Suddenly, Lu Yuanfeng thought of something and quietly said.

"Shuangshuang, you go home first. I'll come find you later. You must be at home."

Lu Yuanfeng repeated his words twice, and before Mu Shuangshuang could react, he jogged back home.

The first thing he did upon returning was to check on the cabinet at home, the one he had made for Shuangshuang.

It was a rounded cabinet coated in red paint, with several shelves. This wasn't what made the cabinet special.

What made it unique was the small cabinet beside it, which had a copper mirror mounted on it. Standing close, he could see his own face.

The big cabinet was meant for Shuangshuang's house, while the small one was Shuangshuang's personal piece. Originally, they were a set, but now he decided to separate them.

But the items were large, so he had to find someone to help. Lu Yuanfeng went to seek Zhao Daniu and Zhao Dahu. Just as they were preparing to leave with the items, Xia Guagua, who hadn't been seen in a while, reappeared.

The moment Xia Guagua saw Lu Yuanfeng holding the small cabinet, her eyes lit up.

"Brother Yuanfeng, the cabinet you're holding is so beautiful."

Lu Yuanfeng paid no attention to her, but just because you ignore someone doesn't mean they'll leave you alone. Xia Guagua reached out to block his path, loudly asking.

"Brother Yuanfeng, who is this for?"

"Get out of my way. Whom I'm giving it to is none of your business." Lu Yuanfeng said.

"Is it for that wench? Did she ask you for it, or did you two do something indecent?" Xia Guagua inquired through clenched teeth.

Lu Yuanfeng's face suddenly turned dark and stormy.

"Can you not talk so disgustingly?"

Lu Yuanfeng's expression changed, and Xia Guagua quickly reined in her temper. She said, "I'm sorry, Brother Yuanfeng, I shouldn't have said that. But could you make one for me too? I think it's very beautiful..."

Xia Guagua lowered her head. This cabinet, especially the copper mirror on top of it, had caught her eye in an instant. If only she could have one too...

Unfortunately, Lu Yuanfeng's kindness was not for everyone. He ignored Xia Guagua, maintaining a stern face, and walked past her without a glance.

Xia Guagua stood there dumbfounded. She had thought Lu Yuanfeng would at least offer some excuse, but he didn't even spare her a glance. Filled with rage, Xia Guagua stormed into Lu Yuanfeng's house, grabbed a pair of scissors, and started cutting the clothes on his clothesline.

"Slut! I'll cut up all his clothes. Let's see how you hook up with him!"

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Mu Shuangshuang was waiting for Lu Yuanfeng in the courtyard. Dinner was being prepared by Yu Si Niang, so she could sit outside, relax, and take a break.

After working all afternoon, she was indeed exhausted. If it weren't to keep herself fit, she would have lain in bed without moving.

A moment of rest, and suddenly two people entered through the side gate of the courtyard, carrying a large rounded cabinet. The cabinet was painted a beautiful red. Once they set it down, Mu Shuangshuang could see who they were.

"Da Hu, Brother Da Niu, what brings you here? And this is...?"

"Fengzi made this. We're putting it in your house, and he'll explain everything when he arrives."

Mu Shuangshuang led them inside. Little Zhi was the most excited, as Mu Shuangshuang had long promised her a new cabinet. So now, she was hugging and kissing it with joy.

Mu Dashan paused his work, equally surprised.

It had been nearly twenty years since they last got new furniture—tables, chairs, cabinets, all were old items discarded by others, and he usually worried they'd collapse at the slightest touch.

Before Mu Dashan could make sense of it all, Lu Yuanfeng walked in from the yard, carrying the cabinet with the copper mirror, slowly approaching Mu Shuangshuang.

"Fengzi, why did you bring two cabinets?" Mu Shuangshuang was surprised and delighted, especially when she saw the copper mirror.

All women love beauty, and she was no exception. Ever since coming to this era, she had only a basin of water for reflection. Making do with its hazy beauty, she'd lasted this long.

Yet, deep down, she'd always wanted to buy a copper mirror.

Chapter 242: Not Letting Go

"The two cabinets are a set. Your room is empty, with nothing in it, so I split the set. The big one is in Aunt Si's room, and the small one is in yours."

Lu Yuanfeng tried hard to sound normal when he spoke, but in reality, the slightly reddened tips of his ears betrayed him.

"Fengzi, come inside, let's discuss this properly."

Originally, it was said that Lu Yuanfeng would make the cabinet, and she would pay according to the village's rules. It should be that way now too. However, this silly boy is really quite silly and probably wouldn't want it, so that's why Mu Shuangshuang suggested discussing it.

This was the second time Lu Yuanfeng had been in Mu Shuangshuang's boudoir. It was just as clean as the last time he visited, with the square tofu block quilts placed neatly in the center.

The room was as refreshing as always.

Lu Yuanfeng placed the cabinet at Mu Shuangshuang's bedside, so when Shuangshuang woke up, she could see the cabinet. There was also something else—a mosquito repellent sachet that Lu Yuanfeng made after asking Zhang Huai Shu about the value of various herbs.

This item is harmless to humans. Lu Yuanfeng hung one of the sachets at the top of Mu Shuangshuang's canopy bed, and tucked the other one into her pillow. After all this, he took a deep breath before going out.

Mu Shuangshuang was already waiting in the yard. As soon as Lu Yuanfeng came out, she gave up her chair and poured him a cup of water boiled with fish mint.

The slightly fishy water went down, and Lu Yuanfeng instantly felt refreshed.

"Fengzi, have you not been resting well lately? Is it because of making this cabinet?"

Mu Shuangshuang noticed it in the morning when Fengzi went to town with her to deliver cold noodles, and he took two breaks in the middle. If it were someone else, it wouldn't be a big deal. But Fengzi never used to take breaks, nor did he ever complain of being tired.

"No, I've been going to bed quite early." Lu Yuanfeng flatly denied it.

He finished the cabinet many days ago, but it took several days for the lacquer to dry and lose its smell, otherwise he would have brought it over long ago.

"Really?" Mu Shuangshuang did not believe him.

"Mhm!"

Lu Yuanfeng didn't mention that recently, his father Lu Xiao started causing trouble at his house, first asking for money and then wanting him to do work. Naturally, Lu Yuanfeng didn't want to pay him any attention, so his father made a fuss all night, and he didn't sleep all night.

"Fengzi, I have something to give you." Mu Shuangshuang suddenly said mysteriously.

"What?" he asked.

"Close your eyes, and when I tell you to open them, you can open them!"

After saying this, Mu Shuangshuang rushed into her room. She took out a small golden pouch from under her bed, embroidered with a miniature version of Little Black, although the pattern wasn't embroidered by her.

She was responsible for the drawing, Yu Si Niang for the embroidery, and together they made this finished product.

Gripping the money pouch in her hand, Mu Shuangshuang pulled the still sleeping Little Black from the corner and whispered a few words to it.

The little guy reluctantly went to the mouse hole in the corner, and after a while, it came out with a silver coin in its mouth.

It spat out the silver coin and cast a disdainful glance at Mu Shuangshuang.

Mu Shuangshuang raised her hand, pretending to hit it. Who knew that Little Black, who a second ago was the proud Black Mink, would immediately grovel, making her laugh out loud and ultimately forgive its impudence.

Seeing it had nothing to do, Little Black went back to sleep.

To be fair, others wouldn't believe it, but Mu Shuangshuang entrusted all her money to Little Black.

Since occupying the mouse hole, Little Black had developed a habit of hiding things in it—sometimes it was things from her house, sometimes things it found on its nighttime excursions. And once something was in its care, it never went missing.

Over time, Mu Shuangshuang felt at ease.

After all, anything hidden by humans could be coveted by a thief and stolen.

She stuffed the silver tael into the money pouch and left the room. Lu Yuanfeng still had his eyes tightly closed.

He was always like this. He never argued with what Mu Shuangshuang said, just did as he was told.

This was also why Mu Shuangshuang thought Lu Yuanfeng was particularly good. In this world, even the most powerful leader has moments of being questioned by subordinates, and the smartest person has times when they are underestimated.

But Lu Yuanfeng wouldn't, as long as Shuangshuang said it, wrong would be right.

Mu Shuangshuang slowly stepped forward and whispered to Lu Yuanfeng, "Fengzi, hold out your hand."

Lu Yuanfeng did as told, and Mu Shuangshuang placed the money pouch in his palm. The sensation of the fabric made Lu Yuanfeng slowly open his eyes.

In his palm was a small money pouch, golden yellow, although the craftsmanship wasn't very refined, the embroidered pattern at least revealed the embroiderer's skill.

A money pouch made with two people's handiwork instantly let Lu Yuanfeng know.

The pouch itself was undoubtedly Mu Shuangshuang's handiwork, much like the pigskin bag she gave to Lu Yuanfeng last time. Although tightly knitted, there were lots of missing and skipped stitches.

"Shuangshuang, is this for me?" Lu Yuanfeng asked, barely containing his excitement and disbelief.

"Of course, now that it's in your hand, it's yours," Mu Shuangshuang replied.

Lu Yuanfeng kept looking at the money pouch over and over. But when he touched the contents inside, his expression changed.

"What's inside?" Lu Yuanfeng asked.

"Money, the money for the cabinet. I don't know how much a cabinet costs in the village, so I just put one tael in. You can't give it back, this is my gift to you."

There was a sly note to Mu Shuangshuang's words, as she understood Fengzi very well.

Right in front of Mu Shuangshuang, Lu Yuanfeng took out the silver tael from the money pouch, grabbed Mu Shuangshuang's hand, and solemnly returned the money to her.

"The gift, I really like the money pouch, but I don't like the silver!" Lu Yuanfeng said firmly.

Mu Shuangshuang's stubbornness flared up, insisting on giving it.

"Fengzi, you can't do this. You've worked, and you should get paid. You have to take it."

Lu Yuanfeng had no option but to keep holding her hand, his broad hand engulfing Mu Shuangshuang's petite one.

Honestly, this situation was quite improper. If someone else saw them, they would undoubtedly misunderstand, but each had their own objective.

You won't let me, and I won't let you.

In this matter, Lu Yuanfeng was more stubborn. Shuangshuang could use his silver, but he couldn't use Shuangshuang's silver.

Because he is a man, a real man!

The two remained in a stalemate. But after all, their hands were linked, and both Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng blushed.

Finally, when Mu Shuangshuang couldn't stand the heat any longer, she said, "Fengzi, how about this: I keep the silver here. You can come to get it whenever you want, is that okay?"

"Okay!" Lu Yuanfeng agreed.

"Then...could you please let go of my hand now? It's so hot..."

Chapter 243: Shuangshuang Plans to Counterattack

Lu Yuanfeng quickly withdrew his hand as if shocked, his face blushing. "Sorry, I..."

"It's okay, I'll go cook some pig slop first, you can rest in the yard."

Mu Shuangshuang stepped back a few paces, tightly gripping her hand, muttered a few words hurriedly, and ran off in a particularly awkward manner.

Once in the kitchen, Mu Shuangshuang couldn't help but berate herself: "So grown up already, yet blushing like a little girl. If word gets out, I'll be laughed at to death."

But despite the admonishment, Mu Shuangshuang couldn't deny how strange it felt when Lu Yuanfeng held her hand, indescribably peculiar, yet undeniably present.

It took Mu Shuangshuang quite some time to calm down before she started busying herself with cooking pig slop.

The sound of chopping vegetables immediately filled the kitchen of the third branch.

Standing outside, Lu Yuanfeng was lost in thought, not realizing that his palm was now sweaty, feeling sticky whenever touched.

However, he was in a good mood because he had just noticed that Shuangshuang's face was equally blushing.

Carrying this realization, Lu Yuanfeng returned to his home.

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Since being set straight by Mu Danian, Mu Zhenzhen thought she should return earlier; no matter how tasty the food is at her in-laws', she might not be the one enjoying it in the future. Better to get her hands on fifty taels first and have her brother issue an IOU.

Once her brother passed the exams, she'd have money and status.

The next day, Mu Zhenzhen rose early, packed her bags, dressed beautifully, and without bothering to eat breakfast, went to bid farewell to Old Mrs. Mu.

It wasn't time for breakfast yet, but most of the people in the Old Mu Family were already up.

Mrs. Liu was making breakfast in the kitchen, and one could hear Old Mrs. Mu grumbling from far away.

"You lazy wife of the fourth branch, all you do is eat. I ask you to make a meal and you wake up this late? Are you trying to starve us all?"

Old Mrs. Mu moved a stool to sit outside the kitchen, continually scolding Mrs. Liu.

Inside the kitchen, Mrs. Liu was busy stoking the fire, cooking, rinsing rice, and washing vegetables tirelessly, drenched in sweat, not daring to wipe it away.

She had to mind the kitchen tasks while occasionally responding to Old Mrs. Mu, or else the old lady might come in and hit her.

After hesitating for a long time, Mrs. Liu decided to reveal her daughter's return.

"Mother, Xiao Chu and Xi Xia are coming back from my parents' today. Can I not go out to work this morning? I'd like to care for them, give them..."

Before finishing her sentence, Old Mrs. Mu angrily stood up.

"What's the matter, what's the matter, you want to overturn the skies, huh? What does it matter if your daughter and son are coming back? You think you can slack off and not work then?"

So much work undone at home, yet you, lazy sow, just think of going out to enjoy yourself. Should I ask my son to divorce you, so you can enjoy yourself forever?"

Mrs. Liu's face turned blue and white, and almost cut herself with the knife in hand.

"If you disagree, I'll... go work then."

Mrs. Liu felt bitter inside, knowing her mother wouldn't agree, but the children said they hadn't seen her in a long time, wanting to spend some time together.

But that wouldn't do either...

Mrs. Liu sighed quietly, continuing to prepare breakfast.

Mu Zhenzhen came up and hugged Old Mrs. Mu, acting coquettishly: "Mother, I'm going back today. Is breakfast ready?"

Old Mrs. Mu was bewildered, "Back where? Isn't this your home? You're not thinking of going to Zhuangzi's, are you?"

"Yes, yes, you're so smart, mother. I'm going back to Zhuangzi's family. I've been out so long; if I don't return, others will laugh."

Old Mrs. Mu's face muscles tensed, angrily retorting, "My daughter, I'd like to see who dares to spread rumors. I, the old lady, will rip their mouths apart."

Mu Zhenzhen felt delightful inside, thinking her mother wouldn't let her suffer.

"No, mother, I heard my brother needs money, and I think Zhuangzi's family has some. Once I return and get it, my brother will have money for the exams." Mu Zhenzhen said.

Talking about silver, Old Mrs. Mu's eyes lit up, her face breaking into a big smile.

"That's true, Zhuangzi's family hasn't contributed anything these years; it's time for them to pitch in. When the eldest becomes an official, it would barely count as their merit too."

"Ha-ha, that's right, mother. When my brother becomes an official, I could be an official's daughter, and Zhuangzi's mother wouldn't dare bully me then."

Outside the upper room, Old Mrs. Mu and Mu Zhenzhen indulged in their dreams of the future, laughing merrily soon after.

Sighing with relief in the kitchen, Mrs. Liu was about to wipe her sweat away when Old Mrs. Mu noticed her.

"You lazy wife, thinking of slacking again? Even sows are more diligent than you. Don't delay Zhenzhen's journey by not getting her breakfast ready, or I'll skin you alive."

Old Mrs. Mu's scolding resumed, and under a straw fan in the latrine, Mu Shuangshuang felt increasingly justified in her decision to split households. If not, it would be their third branch getting cursed as livestock.

Sadly, the fourth branch lacked courage and daring.

Since Xiao Chu and Xiaxia were returning, the fourth branch's days would only get harder.

Ah, Mu Shuangshuang sighed, applying more force in her hands.

Suddenly, hurried footsteps sounded outside the latrine; Mrs. Lin ran clutching her behind, rushing towards the latrine only to find the door closed, so she cried out.

"Who's in the latrine, hurry up and get out, I'm going to burst."

Initially planning to get up, Mu Shuangshuang decided to mess with Mrs. Lin.

She cried out, "Second aunt, what are you shouting for? I just came to the latrine, and your yelling is making me hold it back."

"You brat, it's you. Hurry and get out, I need to go."

Mrs. Lin held her stomach, jumping in place. Last night she got hungry and ate leftovers.

Who knew, early in the morning, she'd react, about to soil her pants.

"Eldest aunt, can you stop yelling? You're disrupting my business."

Mu Shuangshuang continued fanning herself, speaking leisurely.

Squatting so long was tiring, so she cleaned her bottom, stepped off the latrine board, covering her nose while fanning.

Ever since getting the straw fan, she hadn't felt hot using the toilet; plus with Fengzi's mosquito repellent, mosquitoes dared not bite her.

Mrs. Lin angrily stopped yelling, hoping Mu Shuangshuang would hurry up.

Yet after a moment of silence, a storm brewed in her belly, she couldn't resist softly pleading.

"Shuang, second aunt was wrong before, shouldn't have scolded or hit you, please hurry out. I'll do whatever you ask!"

"Really?"

Chapter 244: Explosion Explosion Explosion!

"Of course it's true!"

Facing such an important life matter, Mrs. Lin had no choice but to compromise.

"Alright then, squat around the outhouse and bark like a dog. Once you're done, I'll come out."

"What?" Mrs. Lin almost spat blood from anger. She fiercely spat towards the outhouse door. "You wish! You stinky girl, don't push your luck. You actually want me to... Ow, it hurts!"

Halfway through her words, Mrs. Lin's stomach started to ache like needle pricks.

The churning stuff in her stomach was about to spill into her pants.

She cursed loudly. "You stink girl, fine, you win!"

After cursing, Mrs. Lin reluctantly squatted down and barked twice towards the outhouse. "Woof woof~"

Mu Shuangshuang clutched her stomach, almost laughing herself into a fit. It's said that when you need to use the bathroom, it's urgent, more urgent than hunger, which can wait, but when you need to go, it won't wait.

"Are you done?" Mrs. Lin asked, clutching her own stomach, struggling to speak clearly, sweat, the size of beans, started to trickle down her forehead.

All because of the unrelieved stuff inside her.

"Second aunt, your voice is too low, I didn't hear it." Mu Shuangshuang nonchalantly picked her ear.

This almost made Mrs. Lin spit blood from rage.

"You stinky girl, you just wait and see!"

"Second aunt, feel free to come in, anyway, I'm not the one feeling uncomfortable and needing to poop, it's not me suffering."

As Mu Shuangshuang spoke, she had already lifted her foot, ready to kick as soon as Mrs. Lin came in, then we'd see who's more powerful.

Mrs. Lin twitched a few times and then barked a few more times like a dog.

"Woof woof~" Her voice was trembling!

She weakly asked the Mu Shuangshuang in the outhouse, "Shuang, are you done? I really need to poo..."

"Alright, alright, I'm putting my pants on, second aunt, no rush!"

After a while, Mrs. Lin saw that Mu Shuangshuang still hadn't come out, she anxiously stepped forward to pull on the outhouse door, but somehow couldn't open it, and suddenly she let out a fart...

Instantly, a foul stench filled the air...

Finally, Mu Shuangshuang pushed the door open, vigorously waving the fan in her hand to disperse the smell.

"Second aunt, I'm done, go on in!"

But Mrs. Lin had already soiled herself, and because of the unfinished business inside her, her stomach made a crackling sound!

Mrs. Lin stood awkwardly at the side, not knowing what to do, unable to move because if she did...

"Second aunt, you take your time, I'll head back first!"

Mu Shuangshuang waved her fan as she walked away, her face beaming with a spring-like smile.

Before she could get far, Mu Danian rushed over, holding his backside, in a flustered hurry as well.

As he neared Mrs. Lin at the door, he couldn't help but cover his nose with a disgusted look.

"Second sister-in-law, what are you doing? Why didn't you poop in the outhouse, you..."

Mu Danian nearly gagged, feeling utterly gross, losing any intent to use the outhouse himself.

Mrs. Lin blushed furiously, wanting to explain to Mu Danian but not daring to move, awkwardly staring at him.

"Second sister-in-law, you... don't gross me out, you..."

Mu Danian stepped back multiple times, finally stopping next to Mu Shuangshuang.

"Hey, Shuang-girl, what are you holding, let your fifth uncle see."

Feeling safe from Mrs. Lin's odor, Mu Danian leaned closer to Shuangshuang, enjoying a refreshing breeze that made him almost sigh with relief.

"What do you think it is, fifth uncle? It's a fan, obviously, something that can make a breeze." Mu Shuangshuang gave Mu Danian a look, as if saying he was out of touch.

Mu Danian nearly blew a gasket from irritation.

This stinky girl always loved to annoy him.

"Come on, let your fifth uncle see, how come it looks different from the fans I've seen in the town."

Mu Danian thought that what Shuangshuang held was a good item, shaped like a disc, but fanned out a breeze much stronger than those paper fans in town.

He recalled how he would leave the outhouse drenched as if he'd worked all morning.

If only he could have such a fan, he wouldn't fear the heat while doing his business again.

"No way, this fan is precious. What if my fifth uncle breaks it?" Mu Shuangshuang rolled her eyes at Mu Danian, speaking crossly.

"Why are you so stingy, girl? Looking wouldn't break it. Besides, I'm your fifth uncle, so what's wrong with letting me take a look?"

"I said no, so no. If you want one, fifth uncle, buy it yourself!"

Having said that, Mu Shuangshuang waved the fan and headed towards her own place, not paying any attention to Mu Danian behind her.

Mu Danian stomped around, furiously cursing at Shuangshuang before finally calming down.

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Meanwhile, Mu Zhenzhen, having eaten two eggs and drunk three bowls of soup, patted her full belly and stepped out of the Old Mu Family's gate. At the village entrance, she first looked to see if there were any bullock carts.

Usually, sometimes with market days or people renting out carts, she could catch a ride.

Dahuo Village is on a fork in the road that leads to the town; getting a cart ride could save her more than half the journey.

Sure enough, at the village entrance, a man was waiting with his bullock cart, occasionally glancing towards the village as if expecting someone. When Mu Zhenzhen approached, she recognized it was Liu Wangcai.

Mu Zhenzhen knew him too, before getting married, they used to play together. Back then, she was pretty, while Liu Wangcai was ugly. Not only did he have sores on his head, but in summer, his dandruff fell like rain.

"Hey, Wangcai, what're you doing here? Waiting for someone?"

Liu Wangcai looked up to see Mu Zhenzhen, dressed neatly with rouge on her face, lighting up his eyes, almost making him drool.

"Zhenzhen, what are you doing here? Haven't you gotten married?"

Mu Zhenzhen raised her hand to cover half her face, pretending to be shy. "Yes, I did. What about you? Got yourself a bride?"

Liu Wangcai was already married, but charmed by Mu Zhenzhen's beauty, he shook his head like a rattle drum.

"No, I'm still single. Hehe, your husband sure is lucky, marrying such a beautiful wife, he must treat you like a treasure."

Being complimented on her looks, Mu Zhenzhen laughed heartily, then coyly said, "A woman considers her husband her sky. How can I let him pamper me, of course, I'm the one pampering him. Otherwise, I'd be gossiped about."

By the way, Wangcai, where are you heading? Can you take me to Dahuo Village? I'm in a hurry to get back to my in-laws' today."

"Hop on, I don't have anything to do today, I can chat with you along the way." Liu Wangcai smiled.

So the two of them headed off in the direction of Dahuo Village.

After a while, Liu Wangcai's wife, with her family, rushed to the village entrance, only to find Liu Wangcai had long gone.

Chapter 245: Second Aunt Was Divorced

Although they had an ox cart, Mu Zhenzhen and Liu Wangcai, under Liu Wangcai's intentional delay, reached Dahuo Village at noon. After saying goodbye at the village entrance, Mu Zhenzhen hurriedly rushed home for lunch.

Before entering the house, she deliberately wiped the sweat off her face with a handkerchief and tidied herself up before pushing open the gate of Zhuangzi's family courtyard.

She tried pushing, but it wouldn't move, which left Mu Shuangshuang stunned.

"What's going on? They only lock the courtyard gate at night."

All three of Zhuangzi's brothers were strong, especially his second brother, who used to be a famous hunter in the area, so Zhuangzi's family didn't worry about thieves.

After pushing several times and failing to open the gate, Mu Zhenzhen noticed Xiao Mizi inside the courtyard, enjoying a bowl of rice. Glancing inside, she could faintly see heaps of meat piled in the bowl.

Mu Zhenzhen swallowed hard and called out to Xiao Mizi inside. "Xiao Mizi, open the door for your third aunt, I'm back."

Unexpectedly, Xiao Mizi didn't even lift his head, as if he hadn't heard her.

"Hey, you little brat, gone deaf or something? How about you open the door for me?"

Mu Zhenzhen cursed quietly. Xiao Mizi was the apple of Zhuangzi's mother's eye, so usually, Mu Zhenzhen wouldn't dare curse loudly for fear of being reprimanded by her.

Although she had been married into the Zhao family for several years, Zhuangzi's mother had never actually acted against Mu Zhenzhen, but Mu Zhenzhen knew she had a reputation as the village's first shrew, so she was somewhat wary.

"My grandma said you aren't my third aunt anymore and told me not to open the door when I see you."

Under Mu Zhenzhen's cursing, Xiao Mizi lifted his head, glanced at Mu Zhenzhen, then went back to eating.

Outside the courtyard, Mu Zhenzhen was hopping with rage, but there was nothing she could do. Xiao Mizi was known to be stubborn since young. He said he wouldn't open it, and that was that.

Just like the old lady inside, stubborn to the core.

Mu Zhenzhen threw her bag and luggage into the courtyard and started climbing the wall.

Courtyard walls in rural households weren't generally high. With a bit of effort, they could be climbed over. It took all of Mu Zhenzhen's strength to finally climb onto the wall, but before she could find a decent spot to land, Zhuangzi's mother came out.

"Xiao Mizi, full yet? There's still lots of meat in the bowl, shall we eat more?"

Xiao Mizi shook his head and looked in Mu Zhenzhen's direction. Mu Zhenzhen met his gaze, freaked out, and gestured for him to stay quiet.

"Granny, just now this person said she's my third aunt and called me a little brat."

Zhuangzi's mother tensed up, initially thinking it was an intruder, and was about to call her sons from inside the house. When she looked up and saw it was Mu Zhenzhen, her anger surged instantly.

"You wretched woman, you have the nerve to come back? Our Zhao family doesn't have a daughter-in-law like you."

Startled, Mu Zhenzhen fell off the wall, almost crushing her backside.

Given that she'd been discovered, she decided not to hide anymore.

"Mom, I'm back. Why did you tell Xiao Mizi I'm not her third aunt? Why wouldn't I be?" Mu Zhenzhen asked with displeasure.

"You have the nerve to ask? If not for you, our Zhao family nearly lost Xiao Mizi?" Zhuangzi's mother cautiously shielded Xiao Mizi behind her.

Inside the house, hearing such noise, Zhuangzi's father and the other brothers came out, each looking fierce enough to scare Mu Zhenzhen. But remembering the Zhao men were honest, she plucked up her courage.

"Dad, Big Brother, Second Brother, Zhuangzi, I'm home."

Zhuangzi turned away and went back inside, never coming out again.

Mu Zhenzhen's face stiffened, but quickly she forced a smile.

"Everyone's having lunch. Just in time, I'm hungry too. After eating, I want to discuss something with everyone."

Mu Zhenzhen picked up her luggage from the ground and headed toward the kitchen. She had just reached Zhuangzi's second brother when his thick arm barred her way.

"Second Brother, what are you doing?" Mu Zhenzhen asked, bewildered.

"What am I doing? You wretched woman, you think you can come and go from our Zhao family as you please? Since you left for your family's doghouse, don't expect to step foot in our house again."

The Zhao brothers were indeed honest, so when it came to cursing or bickering, it fell to Old Jiang and Zhuangzi's mother.

Having been insulted repeatedly, Mu Zhenzhen's temper flared.

"I'm telling you all; don't offend me. Today I, Mu Zhenzhen, came to borrow money for my big brother's examination expenses. You must prepare fifty taels of silver for me, or when my brother becomes a scholar, none of you will benefit."

Mu Zhenzhen puffed out her chest, looking smug.

"Humph!" Zhuangzi's mother jumped up and spat at Mu Zhenzhen. "I've lived for so many years, seen many shameless people, but never one as shameless as you."

Mu Zhenzhen, I'm telling you, you've been divorced, so don't step into our Zhao family's door again, or if you dare, I'll tear your mouth apart."

"Old hag, don't think I'm afraid of you. Try cursing once more."

"So what if I cursed? You lazy, barren hen, our Zhuangzi has terrible luck for eight generations to end up with such a jinx as you. The Old Mu Family, no-good folks, wicked people. They'll never amount to anything."

When Zhuangzi's mother cursed the Old Mu Family, she excluded the third branch, as she was particularly fond of Mu Shuang, and naturally wouldn't curse her.

In the courtyard, Zhuangzi's mother and Mu Zhenzhen were brutally cursing each other, just as lunchtime arrived.

Soon enough, villagers came by.

The crowd pointed fingers at Mu Zhenzhen. On normal days, relying on her looks, Mu Zhenzhen frequently bullied village wives, so now the women took the opportunity to kick her while she's down without holding back, speaking as harshly as possible.

"Look at her, that errant hen. Always dressed so provocatively, who knows whom she's trying to seduce. Better watch your men, ladies, lest she ensnare them."

"Exactly, I just came from the village entrance, saw a man driving an ox cart, dropping her off. Bet she hooked up with him..."

Their words grew nastier. Mu Zhenzhen turned her head and shouted at the people outside the courtyard. "You ugly women, what are you staring at? Ugly folks should stay indoors, you mud-legged peasants, always mud-legged peasants!"

Such shouting was a bad idea, as the women scrambled to charge into the courtyard, each screaming to tear Mu Zhenzhen's mouth apart. If not for the courtyard gate, they'd likely rush inside.

Angered, Mu Zhenzhen yelled at Zhuangzi inside the house.

"Zhao Zhuangzi, you spineless fool, I've been married to you all these years, ridden and oppressed by you, but now your wife is in trouble, and you hide inside like a coward — you're no man..."

Chapter 246: A Very Awesome Sister

Inside the house, Zhuangzi, who was panting and leaning against the wall, completely gave up his feelings for Mu Zhenzhen because of her words. He took the divorce paper, which he had prepared a long time ago, and walked out of the house.

"Zhenzhen, this is the divorce paper for you. You... better leave our Zhao family quickly."

Mu Zhenzhen was stunned. The person in front of her, with a chubby figure and fat flying across his face, used to always be accommodating to her, yet now he dares...

"Zhuangzi, do you know what you're saying? I'll give you a chance, apologize to me and make me happy right now, and I'll forgive you! Otherwise, don't ever expect me to pay attention to you again."

Mu Zhenzhen marrying Zhuangzi was completely like a fresh flower stuck on cow dung, so Zhuangzi, the cow dung, had been accustomed to being submissive in front of Mu Zhenzhen over the years, and Mu Zhenzhen was also used to having a cowardly person yielding to her.

"Zhenzhen, the divorce paper is here. Whether you want it or not, we can't go back. My mother has already arranged a marriage for me, and the eighth day of next month she'll be moving in."

Zhuangzi spoke with ease, but Mu Zhenzhen's face had already twisted in anger.

"You... you even dare to marry another woman, are you being fair to me?"

"Bitch, did you hear what my son said? Get lost quickly!" Zhuangzi's mother started to chase Mu Zhenzhen away. If Mu Zhenzhen hadn't climbed the wall today, she absolutely wouldn't have let her in.

"Exactly, quickly leave our Dahuo Village, our Dahuo Village doesn't have a slut like you, Mu Zhenzhen." The crowd watching the excitement outside joined in, shouting and cursing.

Originally, everyone thought, this time Mu Zhenzhen should be beaten. Who knew she wouldn't give up and not only didn't give up but became even more arrogant.

"I spit on you! I haven't wanted Zhuangzi from your family for a long time. He's fat, ugly, and greasy! Besides me, Mu Zhenzhen, I don't believe anyone else could tolerate him. And I'm young and beautiful, I can easily marry into a good family. Just wait, I'll make you regret it then!"

Mu Zhenzhen stomped Zhuangzi underfoot, harshly humiliating him.

Actually, Mu Zhenzhen wasn't sad at all at this moment. She was expressing all her thoughts from the bottom of her heart. If she really separated from Zhao's family, she wouldn't be at a loss; she could just find another one, even if she hadn't had children, she was still good-looking.

"You shameless woman, I'll beat you to death today." Zhuangzi's mother waved her hands and was about to hit Mu Zhenzhen, and Mu Zhenzhen was not to be outdone, the two ended up wrestling together in the courtyard, rolling back and forth.

Pulling hair and kicking bellies, they were locked in a fierce fight.

The men of the Old Mu Family stood by, not intervening, because they thought as men, they shouldn't hit women.

In the end, it was Zhuangzi's mother who won, throwing Mu Zhenzhen out like a piece of rag. The village women, seeing this, wrapped up their kicks.

A few daring ones even tore open Mu Zhenzhen's bag, taking clothes, jewelry, and even her rouge box. When Mu Zhenzhen was released, the only thing left in her sight was a bag broken into pieces.

Enraged, Mu Zhenzhen stomped on the spot, cursing in front of Zhuangzi's house for a long time.

When Mu Zhenzhen returned to the Old Mu Family, it was already dusk. Her clothes were ripped, her hair turned into a bird's nest, her face was blue and purple, utterly disheveled.

In the twilight glow, even her shadow appeared lonely.

Mu Shuangshuang was returning from the fields, just in time to encounter Mu Zhenzhen in this state. She wasn't curious at all; Yu Si Niang asked symbolically.

"Zhenzhen, what happened to you?"

Mu Zhenzhen pouted her mouth and held Yu Si Niang, bursting into tears. "Wow... Third sister-in-law, I... I've been divorced by Zhuangzi!"

It was the first time Mu Zhenzhen sincerely called Yu Si Niang sister-in-law, Yu Si Niang was moved with compassion, gently patting Mu Zhenzhen's back, "It's ok, our Zhenzhen is pretty, isn't there anyone you'd want? Zhuangzi's conditions aren't as good as yours, so he should be the one regretting..."

Mu Shuangshuang had long known about Mu Zhenzhen being abandoned; with a personality like Zhuangzi's mother, it's a miracle she hadn't come to the Old Mu Family to cause trouble.

Mu Zhenzhen's marriage failure wasn't because she didn't have children, but because she didn't treat people as people. With such a good mother-in-law, she was still so arrogant and lazy. If not being divorced, then who would be?

Ignoring Yu Si Niang comforting, Mu Shuangshuang walked alone on her way home.

She had to make dinner early. Tonight, she wanted to prepare some dumplings, stuffed with vegetables, chives and meat, and also the mushrooms they picked yesterday, mushroom stuffing.

On the way home, Mu Shuangshuang detoured to Wang Erma's and weighed three taels of mixed fat and lean meat, contentedly prepared the dinner.

Back home, Mu Shuangshuang took the cooked pigweed, mixed with some leftovers, fed the piglets. The little creatures seemed to have adapted to this lifestyle, munching on the pig food.

Unfortunately, grain was very precious in ancient times, otherwise, she could learn from modern people to feed pigs with leftovers.

Since Mu Shuangshuang started cooking, her family had never wasted food; even Little Zhi and Xiao Han never left a grain of rice in their bowls after eating, let alone have leftovers for feeding pigs.

Fortunately, there was still a good thing for feeding pigs—rice bran. Mu Shuangshuang thought about asking around in the village tomorrow to see who had rice bran, and buy some back. It's best for feeding pigs.

After feeding the pigs, Mu Shuangshuang started preparing dinner. She was trying to balance meat and vegetables, see if it could improve the family's complexion; working so much every day, they shouldn't go unfed and unclothed.

Mu Shuangshuang mixed the flour with water and was about to knead it when Xiao Han walked out of the house, still holding that book.

He stared at Mu Shuangshuang for a long time before daring to ask. "Sister, you said last time, would Liu Zian be my teacher, is it true?"

Xiao Han lowered his head, looking at his shoes; there's a big hole in them, and his toes were protruding out.

He didn't think life was particularly hard, but he didn't want to burden the family. If the teacher required money before teaching him, he wouldn't study.

"Does Xiao Han want to learn to read?" Mu Shuangshuang stared at Mu Xiaohan, her kneading hand stopped.

Mu Xiaohan hesitated for a moment before nodding.

From the time he saw those books, he felt he liked books.

Mu Shuangshuang took the book from his hand and pointed to the characters on it, saying, "This book is called 'Ritual,' it's basically about some etiquette and rituals, you could also call it Zhou Rites!"

Xiao Han was stunned by Mu Shuangshuang's words, "Sister, you know how to read?"

But soon, Mu Xiaohan denied it; if Sister knew how to read, how would he not know?

"This is what Sister wants to tell you next, you must listen carefully!"

Chapter 247: Second Aunt Wants a Free Meal

Xiao Han held his breath. He knew that what his sister was about to tell him must be something very important.

Meanwhile, Mu Shuangshuang was observing Xiao Han's reaction. She had been pondering whether or not to teach him some simple characters before he started school.

This way, even if he started school in spring, the gap between him and the other children wouldn't be too large.

Especially since lately, Xiao Han had been holding onto the book "Zhou Rites" all day, which was enough to show that he liked reading. Sending him to school wouldn't go against his nature and preferences.

"If I told you, Xiao Han, that I really knew how to read, would you find it strange?"

Xiao Han nodded, then shook his head.

Reason told him that his sister shouldn't know how to read, but emotionally, in Xiao Han's heart, his sister was capable of anything, so it wasn't strange if she could read.

"Hmm, I'll tell you, but you mustn't tell anyone else, okay?"

At this, Mu Xiaohan nodded heavily. He extended his pinky finger towards Mu Shuangshuang and said, "Pinky promise!"

Although Mu Shuangshuang found Xiao Han's action childish, she still cooperated and hooked fingers with him.

"Alright, I'm going to say it now!" Mu Shuangshuang feigned seriousness. "Actually, ever since I bumped my head by Second Aunt, I've been able to do things I couldn't before.

For example, cooking. Sister never cooked before, but now I can. For example, reading. Sister didn't know how before, but now I know a little bit.

But I firmly believe it's a gift from above, so I can lead our family to a better life and not be bullied!"

Mu Shuangshuang thought her explanation was quite far-fetched, but she had no choice. Suddenly waking up with skills she didn't have before was better than letting others find out she was a traveler, right?

Xiao Han stared at Mu Shuangshuang for a while, then suddenly put down his book and hugged her waist tightly. With a hoarse voice, he said, "You'll always be my sister, right? Just like now?"

Mu Shuangshuang's body trembled slightly, feeling the wetness of Xiao Han's tears on her abdomen.

She couldn't help but think: Always... a sister?

Of course!

"Silly boy, if I'm not your sister, then who am I?" Mu Shuangshuang gently patted Xiao Han's back, speaking comforting words to soothe his emotions.

After a long while, Xiao Han regained his composure and flashed a bright smile. "Then, how about you start teaching me to read tonight, sister!"

"Sure, but you have to help sister make dinner first. We're having dumplings tonight, and once we're full, we'll have the energy to study."

Speaking of dumplings, Xiao Han couldn't help but swallow, taking a moment to react.

Dumplings, in a peasant household, were definitely a delicacy. Other than during the New Year, there wasn't really an opportunity to have them.

Moreover, back when Old Mrs. Mu was in charge, the good stuff in her hands was never for the third branch.

So when Mu Shuangshuang mentioned having dumplings, it was natural for Xiao Han to be skeptical.

"Xiao Han, you'd still be responsible for managing the fire. Later, we'll use medium heat. Sister will knead the dough and make the filling. We'll aim to finish the dumplings before sunset."

Mu Shuangshuang chose this time because she wanted to send a bowl to Lu Yuanfeng's household as well. He refused to stay for dinner yesterday, so Shuangshuang had no choice but to use this method.

You don't come, I'll just deliver!

She washed the mushrooms, greens, and chives cleanly, setting them aside separately. Three taels of meat were also divided into three portions.

Soon, the sound of chopping vegetables could be heard from the kitchen. It wasn't time to tend to the fire yet, so Xiao Han picked up a twig from the courtyard and doodled on the ground with it.

The characters he wrote were the same ones Mu Shuangshuang had just mentioned, "Ritual."

For a poor child, learning while also saving money was necessary, especially since Mu Shuangshuang had only bought a single brush and a few sheets of Xuan paper from Liu Zian and hadn't yet purchased ink.

Mu Shuangshuang kneaded dough and made dumplings in the kitchen, occasionally glancing at Xiao Han as he sketched on the ground. With such a studious younger brother, she felt delighted, yet concerned. Being too engrossed in one thing didn't always bode well.

At that moment, Yu Si Niang returned with Mu Zhenzhen.

Mu Zhenzhen was crying badly and refused to return to Old Mrs. Mu. Yu Si Niang thought of letting her stay in her quarters for a while, calm down, and then take her back.

She fetched water for Mu Zhenzhen to wash her face, and after gauging her emotions had calmed, she tentatively asked, "Zhenzhen, do you want to tell your parents about that matter?"

The matter Yu Si Niang referred to was naturally the one about being dismissed.

"Who says I won't tell? I absolutely will, and I'll make sure it's known far and wide."

Mu Zhenzhen thought of making sure everyone knew she had been dismissed because she borrowed silver for her brother. Her brother owed her this engagement for his entire life. If her brother ever soared high, he shouldn't forget her.

Besides, it was much better at home — food and drinks daily, without needing to work. She had no desire to return to Zhuangzi's family's miserable den, where they humiliated and dared to strike her.

Someday, she wanted the Zhao family to know her worth.

While pondering these things, Mu Zhenzhen heard the sound of chopping vegetables coming from Shuangshuang's kitchen. Seeing Shuangshuang busy in the kitchen, she asked, "Third sister-in-law, what's Shuang doing?"

"Shuangshuang said she's making dumplings for dinner." Yu Si Niang responded to Mu Zhenzhen but had no intention of inviting her to stay.

"Haha, then I came at the right time. Third sister-in-law, I'm having dinner at your place tonight!"

"This..." Yu Si Niang looked embarrassed. She had stopped earlier to comfort Mu Zhenzhen because she looked pitiful and had called her third sister-in-law, making her heart soften.

But that didn't mean she intended for Zhenzhen to stay for dinner.

"Third sister-in-law, don't tell me you're being stingy over one meal? Don't tell me you're reluctant to part with that bit of meat?" Mu Zhenzhen looked at Yu Si Niang with disdain.

At this point, she reverted to her old self, sharp-tongued and inconsiderate of others' feelings in her words and actions.

"No, no..." Yu Si Niang hurriedly waved her hand.

She didn't want to be called stingy but the food was prepared by Shuangshuang, and whether or not someone was invited depended on her daughter. Besides, her daughter didn't like this second aunt, so she probably wouldn't want her to eat for free, and something might happen later.

"That's settled then. I can't eat much anyway. Moreover, I was dismissed today, so as a sister-in-law, isn't it right for you to make something nice to comfort me?"

Shamelessly, Mu Zhenzhen decided to stay for dinner herself.

Meanwhile, preparations for dinner in the Old Mu Family were also underway.

Mrs. Liu wasn't alone in her efforts today; her daughter Xiaxia had returned and was helping her in the kitchen, picking vegetables and washing rice.

Chapter 248: Poison You to Death

Xi Xia is Mrs. Liu's first daughter, and besides, Mrs. Liu doesn't have any bias towards sons over daughters.

So, over the years, she's treated Xi Xia like a treasure.

But no matter how much of a treasure, she couldn't escape Old Mrs. Mu's casual ordering around.

There you go, Xi Xia just got home and Old Mrs. Mu rushed her off to plant rice seedlings in the field. An afternoon later, the fair-skinned Xi Xia returned from her mother's family got her skin peeled by the sun, with her face and wrists visibly darkened by several shades.

"Mom, the vegetables are picked, does Xi Xia need to do anything else?" Mu Xi Xia held a wooden basin filled with vegetables for tonight and two taels of meat.

Mu Xi Xia, still scheming to get the recipe from Mu Shuangshuang, sent her maid over to fetch herself three days later. With her around, and now the pampered Mu Xi Xia back as well, Old Mu Family would likely have meat at every meal.

But as for who would get the meat, that's not something Mrs. Liu could decide.

"No need, good girl, go rest in the room and keep an eye on your little brother."

After all, Xia Xiaochu is only two and a half, he may speak and walk a bit but accidents can't be ruled out.

"Alright, Xi Xia will go now."

Mu Xi Xia wiped the sweat about to trickle into her eyes, left the kitchen, ready to check on her brother, but unexpectedly, she was caught by Old Mrs. Mu.

"Xia girl, where you off to? Kitchen work all done?" Old Mrs. Mu questioned with a stern face, all gloomy.

"Grandma, my mom asked me to check on Xiaochu, as for the kitchen work..."

Before she could speak, Old Mrs. Mu interrupted, "You two, both the same, lazy and mischievous, eat without doing.

You think my Old Mu Family, like you Liu Family, let you raise yourself fat at home? Hurry up and tidy your second aunt's room, it's such a mess, like a pigsty."

Old Mrs. Mu ranted and cursed a bunch, leaving Mu Xiaxia with tears welling up instantly. She turned back, glancing at her mother still working in the kitchen.

Mrs. Liu had her back turned to her daughter, unwilling to turn around, for fear she'd not hold back her argument with the old lady. But she knew if she dared utter a word, her daughter's life would only get harder.

"What are you standing here for? Go do your work!" Old Mrs. Mu shouted angrily, leaving Mu Xiaxia helplessly to tidy up Mu Zhenzhen's room.

Sure enough, Mu Zhenzhen's room was just as Old Mrs. Mu described, no better than a dog's den. The quilt was tossed on the floor, the only chair in the room lay knocked over in a corner, and beside the kang, it was unclear if it was leftover food or something else.

Green mold had grown on it, likely left uncleaned for days.

Mu Danian stood at the doorway, waiting for Xiaxia to clean up the room, so he can return to his own room. He finally wouldn't have to live in that pigsty. To think of himself as the most handsome in Er Gui Village, tormented by mosquitoes these days, it left Mu Danian feeling deeply unconvinced.

Luckily, he's smart enough, managing to trick his second sister away. Otherwise, where could he find comfortable days to live?

Little did Mu Danian know, Mu Zhenzhen was eagerly waiting for the freshly cooked dumplings from Shuangshuang's house at that moment.

The dough had risen well, now it was just time to roll out the skins, fill, and cook them.

Yu Si Niang stepped into the kitchen from outside, wearing an apologetic look on her face, she approached Shuangshuang and said, "Shuangshuang, just now your second aunt said she'd have dumplings at our place, mom..."

Yu Si Niang felt embarrassed to say it herself, she's not the kind to let people bully her, never yielding to Mrs. Lin, but Zhenzhen was different, her husband's sister, her daughter's second aunt. The familial ties here weren't easy to dodge.

"If she comes, she comes, you rest assured mom, I definitely won't make things difficult for second aunt."

As if! Mu Shuangshuang thought of the dry mustard she and Lu Yuanfeng bought on the street; it was about time to use it. Sucking down food at her house, you ought to have the awareness to pay the price.

She remembered clearly, her second aunt had eaten their leftover food.

Yu Si Niang seeing her daughter had no objections, didn't say anything further.

"Shuangshuang, mom will roll the skins, you make the dumplings, let's hurry up and savor some hot dumplings sooner."

"Alright, just as well, I wanted to see mom's skills."

Mu Shuangshuang made dumplings herself, she's pretty skilled at rolling, back in the institute for New Year's, the group would make dumplings together. At that time, her dumplings often received praise.

Thinking back, it felt as if these things happened just yesterday.

Yu Si Niang's skill in rolling skins, while not as good as Mu Shuangshuang's, was still quite fast; in a few strokes, a thin and pretty dumpling skin was ready.

Mu Shuangshuang sprinkled some flour on the dough board, watched the dumpling skin glide over the flour before starting to fill. Different fillings required different shapes, ingot shapes, regular shapes, and floral shapes, Mu Shuangshuang did them with ease.

The pinched dumplings were set aside, waiting for a potful. Then, Mu Shuangshuang took out dry mustard she had hidden in the corner of the kitchen, chopping it into bits with a kitchen knife, finally mixing it with some filling.

She separately made four dumplings, larger and prettier than others.

Mu Shuangshuang started cooking the dumplings, she preferred using raw fillings, so once the water boiled, she added another round of water. Once it boiled again, she began scooping the dumplings.

Outside, Mu Zhenzhen smelled the fragrance of the dumplings, grabbed a bowl and chopsticks without a word, very casually picked out a few dumplings.

Mu Shuangshuang watched her pick the four dumplings with mustard, then stopped her from taking more.

"Second aunt, there's many in our family who haven't eaten yet, isn't four enough for one?"

Mu Zhenzhen wanted to say a potful wasn't enough, but Mu Shuangshuang was holding a kitchen knife, the blade aimed at her, somehow it was rather intimidating.

"Fine, don't give then, stingy, miser!" Mu Zhenzhen rolled her eyes at Mu Shuangshuang, hiding in a corner, she quickly picked and stuffed the dumplings into her mouth before they cooled.

A pungent taste gradually spread in her mouth, flooding the entire oral cavity, the spicy smell slowly attacking towards the nose, a rich aroma stinging her eyes, Mu Zhenzhen retched suddenly.

"Ah, spicy, so spicy..."

Mu Zhenzhen was hopping on the spot, flailing about, tears and snot smearing across her face, more embarrassingly than when seen on the roadside earlier.

Mu Shuangshuang laughed heartily, holding her belly, "Second aunt, I told you, don't casually eat others' food. You never know if someone might poison the meal. Next time, don't steal our leftover food, that's for our black pig, people can't be snatching from pigs, right?"

Mu Zhenzhen was furious but her eyes kept tearing, feeling all sorts of discomfort.

Nasty girl, you win!

Chapter 249: The Fourth House Wants to Split

Mu Zhenzhen ran crying to the Old Mu Family just as they were having dinner. A bowl of meat soup was placed in the most prominent spot; Old Mrs. Mu first served Mr. Mu, then Mu Xiangxiang, and then Mu Dazhong.

Finally, it was Mu Danian's turn. He watched Old Mrs. Mu's hand holding the soup ladle, ready to ladle it into his bowl.

Mu Zhenzhen burst in. "Mom, save some for me."

Old Mrs. Mu quickly withdrew her hand, picked up the entire bowl of meat soup, and placed it beside herself.

"What's wrong, my dear daughter? What happened? Did someone bully you? Or did someone hit you?"

Mu Zhenzhen's face was flushed, her hair was a mess, and her clothes were torn, as if she had been beaten up. Old Mrs. Mu held Mu Zhenzhen, calling her sweetheart, and started crying fiercely.

The others also stepped forward to comfort Mu Zhenzhen.

Only Mu Danian felt like the sky was falling; the meat that was so close to his mouth had flown away.

It was clearly his turn! How could it just disappear?

Mu Danian was extremely frustrated. Why was he so unlucky, and why couldn't this wretched second sister come in a little later?

The Old Mu Family members acted as if they had encountered a major life and death event, showing extreme concern for Mu Zhenzhen.

But apart from Old Mrs. Mu and Mr. Mu, there weren't many who were genuinely concerned.

Mrs. Jin anxiously asked, "Zhenzhen, did you borrow the fifty taels of silver?"

In the morning, Mu Zhenzhen left in a very high-profile manner, which made Mrs. Jin feel hopeful that her husband might still be able to borrow those fifty taels of silver, but now her sister-in-law returned looking very disheveled.

Hopefully this time, it hadn't failed again.

Mu Zhenzhen covered her eyes, sobbing. "I'm sorry, sister-in-law, I borrowed the silver, but it got stolen halfway, and they even took my jewelry and clothes. If I hadn't run fast, I would've lost my life."

"What? The silver's gone?" Mrs. Jin's face turned ashen, and she grabbed Mu Zhenzhen's sleeve to question her. "How could such a big thing happen and you come back alone? Why didn't you let Zhuangzi accompany you back? You know how important this silver is to your brother, you..."

Mu Zhenzhen looked bewildered. She was just leveraging the situation; even if she did borrow the silver, she would have to think it over carefully before deciding whether to give it, so why was Mrs. Jin speaking to her like this?

Before Mu Zhenzhen could speak, Mu Xiangxiang chimed in. "Sister-in-law, my second sister is already like this, why are you saying such sarcastic things, making it sound like my second sister wanted to be robbed. If you're in such a hurry to find silver for big brother, go borrow it from your home, don't use my second sister as a scapegoat, she's a living person, she can feel pain."

Mu Xiangxiang was the Old Mu Family's only unwed daughter, and being young, she was treated extremely delicately. With her joining in, Old Mrs. Mu directly kicked Mrs. Jin.

"Move aside, you vile woman, don't get in the way here."

Mrs. Jin was kicked to the ground, Mu Dandan and Mu Yingying rushed up to help her, Mu Yingying opened her mouth and was about to argue with Old Mrs. Mu, but Mrs. Jin pinched her arm.

"Patience in small matters leads to peace in big matters!"

She had to endure it; once her husband became a scholar, she could break away from these shameless, poor relatives.

"Sweetie, Zhenzhen, don't cry, mom has already taught your sister-in-law a good lesson. If you have any grievances, tell mom, mom will help you out."

Mu Zhenzhen wasn't truly sad in the first place. She cried because of the strange taste of the dumplings at the third branch, which suffocated her. Crying made her feel better.

"Mom, Zhuangzi divorced me, saying I... saying I focused too much on my maternal family. Those fifty taels of silver were the last connection between us; from now on... from now on I can't go to Zhuangzi's place anymore."

"What? That lazy wretch dared to divorce you? I'll confront him, see if I don't carve up that brat. He ate so much of this old woman's rice, and says he'll divorce my daughter just like that!" Old Mrs. Mu shot up, ready to rush out, but was stopped by Mu Zhenzhen.

"Mom, please don't go, I couldn't bear the shame!"

The members of the Old Mu Family were somewhat shocked by the news of Mu Zhenzhen's divorce.

After all, a woman getting divorced wasn't a glorious thing, especially now when the Old Mu Family had Mu Dade aiming for the title of Champion Scholar.

People say a divorced woman is worse off than a dog (in ancient times), and even if it turned into a big deal with the husband's family, it might not end well.

"Then what should we do?" Old Mrs. Mu was at a loss.

"Let big brother take the exam. If he becomes a scholar, I will go to Zhuangzi's house and show them how blind they were to dismiss me."

"But we have no travel expenses!" Old Mrs. Mu furrowed her brow, sighed, and then said. "That stubborn girl from the third branch has a heart of stone; she won't hand over the formula even if it kills her, and the third son is despicable. Sigh, why did I give birth to such an ungrateful child? If I had known, I should've strangled him at birth...."

Mu Dajiang, the old Mu family's fourth son, felt a pang in his heart listening to Old Mrs. Mu's curses.

He had a premonition that someday his mother might curse him like this too.

Mu Dajiang glanced at his daughter Xiaxia's bowl, containing half a sweet potato, a few black soybeans, and two greens, which was worse than what Shuang used to eat.

Mu Dajiang suddenly had an idea; maybe the fourth branch should consider separating.

Otherwise, the children might really starve to death.

Mu Zhenzhen felt she had stirred up enough emotion, so she got to the point. "Mom, why not let big sis advance the money first? Let big brother write her an IOU, and when he becomes a scholar, he can pay her back."

Mu Xianxian, who was watching with interest, stiffened her face and quickly said. "Mom, I'd like to lend it, but as you know, Jianmin and I's shoe store hasn't been doing well recently, and I don't call the shots in the Cao Family, you see...."

"Big sis, stop making excuses. You know full well whether you manage the accounts at the Cao Family; otherwise, you wouldn't be looking to take a recipe from Shuangzi."

Mu Zhenzhen was quite articulate at this point, exposing all of Mu Xianxian's tricks.

Mu Xianxian's face shifted colors, but she still wouldn't relent.

She had refused her father's request for money back then. If she agreed now, wouldn't she be slapping herself?

And she only wanted the recipe; if her family couldn't get it, she wouldn't give in. At worst, she wouldn't want the recipe anymore.

"Dad, Mom, since Xianxian's been staying here for a night, the household might be running behind. I'll head back early tomorrow morning. If there's anything you'd like to eat, let me know, and I'll have the servants bring it to you when I get back."

This was Mu Xianxian's usual tactic: avoid a situation when she couldn't refuse. At worst, she'd never come back again, and since Xiangxiang was brought back, there'd be one less mouth to feed, saving a considerable amount of money for her own family.

Chapter 250: Fengzi Wears Cropped Pants

"Xianxian, don't give me all this nonsense. I, the old lady, understand all of this. You're just afraid that Dade won't pass the exam, and you won't get your silver back. But if Dade does pass, wouldn't you want to live a prosperous life with him?"

Old Mrs. Mu glanced at Mu Xianxian.

The woman she gave birth to, she knows just what's in her gut.

She hadn't mentioned it before because the eldest daughter had helped the eldest son and Xiangxiang a lot over the years. But now, at this critical moment, she's still trying to shirk responsibility, which Old Mrs. Mu couldn't tolerate.

Mu Xianxian naturally wanted to enjoy the prosperity with Mu Dade, but she had spent quite a lot on him over the years, and what was the result?

All for nothing. He took the exam once, failed once, and this time, it would be fifty taels.

With fifty taels, she could buy ten acres of land in the countryside, lease it to others, and earn a considerable income.

Old Mrs. Mu knew her eldest daughter wouldn't easily agree, so she slapped her own thigh, sat down on the ground, and started bawling.

"There's no justice! Raising a daughter who doesn't care about her family! All these years of food and drink, fed to an ungrateful wolf. I don't want to live anymore, Mu Xianxian, you heartless, unfilial child..."

Old Mrs. Mu slapped her thigh loudly, her voice wailing like a pig being slaughtered. Mu Shuangshuang, who was boiling the last pot of dumplings in the room, had a tremor in her hand and accidentally broke the skin of one dumpling, the chive filling spilling out, green and vibrant.

"What's wrong, Shuangshuang, what is it?" Yu Si Niang curiously asked.

"What else? Grandpa and Grandma are just forcing Aunt to get money for Uncle's journey,"

The voice of Old Mrs. Mu was so loud that the whole Er Gui Village probably heard it.

She was really going all out for an uncle, but who knows if that uncle of hers, when he soars to greater heights, will remember the old lady who shamelessly begged for his exam fee.

Yu Si Niang also sighed. Over the years, the entire Old Mu Family revolved around Shuangshuang's uncle. Whenever he had any ailment, the family's silver poured out like water, and other households wouldn't get new clothes for years or eat meat for a year.

Everyone seemed crazed and thought it was normal.

Yu Si Niang used to think so too, feeling that since the uncle worked so hard at his studies, giving him more wasn't a big deal. If the uncle really succeeded, the little ones at home could escape their fate as mud-legged peasants.

These scenes were always vivid in her mind. Now, she feels she was foolish, as no matter how well-fed or warm others are, she would still starve or freeze.

She sighed and suddenly got curious. "Shuangshuang, do you think your uncle will pass the exam this time?"

After all, this was something that had troubled Yu Si Niang for decades, and she also wanted to know the outcome.

"Who can say for sure? By logic, even a pig would have finished gnawing at an old tree after three years. My uncle has been at the imperial exams for fifteen years. If he still can't pass, it would be worse than a pig or dog."

Mu Shuangshuang was always straightforward when speaking, and Yu Si Niang, for some reason, found herself wanting to laugh after hearing her daughter's words.

"But in my estimation, even if my uncle passes and becomes an official, it won't be long-lasting."

Someone as sly and ambitious as Mu Dade is bound to fall at his own hands sooner or later.

Moreover, the Old Mu Family had practically built Mu Dade's ascent with bodies. If he didn't take these people along, would others just let it slide?

Obviously not!

Mu Shuangshuang's analysis was sound, and Yu Si Niang nodded continuously, agreeing that Shuangshuang was right—someone else's luxury and wealth, no matter how beautiful, weren't hers.

"Mom, instead of worrying about whether Uncle will pass, why not hope that our Xiaohan might surprise us and become a Champion Scholar?"

Xiao Han raised his head from the ground upon hearing his sister mention his name, his face blushing, clearly shy.

"Sister, I'm just writing for fun; I'm not that great!"

"Xiao Han, why be shy with your sister? What don't I know about you? We need confidence, just like Yuanbao, who recently said he wants to be the first Champion Scholar of Er Gui Village."

And undoubtedly, Little Yuanbao, though never having seen a book, confidently claimed he was Champion Scholar material and said Mu Dade was like an old workhorse of the village, no matter how much work he did or grass he ate, he'd never compare to the young and robust calves like them.

Mu Shuangshuang was quite curious about that cheeky boy, wondering where he picked up such things.

"Mom, the dumplings are ready. I'll take a bowl to Fengzi's house, and you pick some to take over to Aunt Xiao Yun's."

After all, these were people who had helped her. The chives for today's dumplings were even sent by Zhao Yun.

In life, isn't it all about reciprocal respect?

"Alright, it's getting late, be careful when you come back. Change into your embroidered shoes in the house and don't step on a snake."

Mu Shuangshuang only had one pair of embroidered shoes. For everyday work, she'd wear straw shoes, but those weren't safe for walking at night, and Yu Si Niang's advice made sense.

Mu Shuangshuang went inside to change her shoes, washed her hands, helped Lu Yuanfeng prepare a special sauce, took two eggs, and headed out.

It was the hour just when the sun set, and after the last ray of dusk disappeared over the horizon, Er Gui Village embraced another night.

As Mu Shuangshuang walked along the roadside, the cicadas and frogs chirped incessantly. For others, it might be a nuisance, but for someone like her, accustomed to modern life with dwindling species and vanishing frogs and cicadas,

it was actually an enjoyment, a feeling she could never experience in modern life.

Upon arriving at Lu Yuanfeng's house, Mu Shuangshuang was surprised to find a mud fence being built outside, indicating that Lu Yuanfeng was planning to make a courtyard wall.

He had talked about it before but never acted on it. What changed his mind now?

Could it be that Xia Guagua did something again?

"Fengzi, Yuanbao, are you home?"

It wasn't quite time to light the lamps yet, but the house was already dark. Upon hearing Mu Shuangshuang's voice, Lu Yuanfeng hurriedly dashed out of the kitchen.

He hadn't realized what he was wearing.

Lu Yuanfeng was shirtless, with shorts down to his knees. Upon seeing Mu Shuangshuang, he blushed and then remembered his attire, dashing back inside in a fright.

Mu Shuangshuang got a good look; what Lu Yuanfeng wore resembled capri pants.

"Wow, Fengzi, you're into fashion now, wearing capri pants! Hurry up and let me see where you bought those pants; I want a pair too!"