

Folly 251

Chapter 251: A Home Without Women

Lu Yuanfeng rushed into the house, completely missing what Shuangshuang was saying.

Once inside, he looked for something to cover himself with, but found nothing. The clothes he wore during the day had just been washed and weren't dry yet.

The only thing available was the quilt.

Mu Shuangshuang entered Lu Yuanfeng's room to find him wrapped in a quilt. Though the quilt wasn't thick, in the middle of summer, it quickly made him sweat profusely.

Seeing this, Mu Shuangshuang lost any desire to tease. She set down the basket of vegetables she was holding and rushed forward.

"What are you doing? It's just a bare chest, who hasn't done that before? I'm not shy, so what are you afraid of?"

Mu Shuangshuang forcibly pulled the quilt off Lu Yuanfeng and picked up the straw fan from the bedstand, vigorously fanning him.

"Are you stupid? It's so hot, do you want to heat yourself to death or torture yourself with a rash?"

As she fanned him, Mu Shuangshuang scolded Lu Yuanfeng.

This silly boy, why does he always do such worrisome things? Mu Shuangshuang seriously wondered how he had managed all these years.

In the heat of summer, it's not the heat that's most unbearable, it's breaking out in a rash all over that's truly the worst.

In this era, there's no air conditioning, no rash powder. If you get a rash, you might be too uncomfortable to sleep all night, especially when it gets itchy, it's just like being fried in oil.

Lu Yuanfeng watched the person in front of him. When Shuangshuang gets angry, she raises her voice and furrows her brow. Although she rarely gets angry, when she does, her aura is quite strong.

"Shuangshuang, don't be mad, I... I didn't know what I was doing just now."

Maybe everyone pays attention to their image in front of someone they like. Deep down, Lu Yuanfeng felt embarrassed because he was wearing a pair of torn pants that barely covered his knees. In other words, his outfit was quite indecent to appear in front of Shuangshuang.

"Don't kid me, it's just that you're wearing capri pants and feel embarrassed. But it's nothing, people go about their day in shorts, it's hot and wearing less is normal. Besides, this is your home, you have the right to dress like this."

Lu Yuanfeng hadn't come to see her all day, so she had no idea that Xia Guagua had cut his clothes with scissors beyond recognition.

"Shorts? Who wore shorts in front of you?" A hint of annoyance appeared on Lu Yuanfeng's face, which he wasn't even aware of.

Seeing how concerned he was, Mu Shuangshuang, who was originally a bit angry, suddenly wasn't anymore. She covered her mouth and laughed several times.

After a while, she answered Lu Yuanfeng's question: "No one, I just said it casually, don't overthink it."

"By the way, our family is making dumplings tonight, I brought some for you and Yuanbao. You probably haven't had dinner yet, have you?"

Actually, they hadn't eaten, and the pot was about to burn.

In the kitchen, Yuanbao puffed his cheeks and blew hard at the already burning pot, but instead of extinguishing the fire, the flames grew bigger.

"Second brother, it's bad, there's a fire, the pot's on fire..."

Lu Yuanfeng and Mu Shuangshuang rushed into the kitchen. Covering the pot with the lid, scooping water, and after the fire in the pot was out, Mu Shuangshuang dumped a ladle of water in, finally bringing down the temperature in the iron pot.

"Lu Yuanfeng, you really are something, not even taking care of an oil pot. And look, what are you making here?"

Mu Shuangshuang lifted up a wild vegetable longer than her finger from the cutting board and then the rabbit meat soaking in water in a wooden basin, which was cleaned only to be cut into chunks bigger than a whole potato. She was really at a loss with this man.

Lu Yuanfeng lowered his head in embarrassment. That's his skill level, and previously he and Yuanbao got along just like this, although Yuanbao had also complained about how his cooking tastes bad.

At this moment, Lu Yuanfeng was like a child, admitting his mistake after making one, and Mu Shuangshuang couldn't find fault with him since it's not something one could easily learn to cook in a day or two.

This might be the downside of not having a woman in the house. Mu Shuangshuang rolled up her sleeves and said to Lu Yuanfeng, "You go add water and start the fire, give Yuanbao a bath. I'll redo these vegetables, they're so big they might choke someone. By the time he's done with his bath, I'll probably be finished cooking."

Lu Yuanfeng hurriedly stepped forward to stop her: "It's fine, I... I can do it myself. Actually, the stuff I make isn't all that bad."

He wanted to lighten Shuangshuang's load a bit. He knew she'd been busy with farm work during the day lately. If he occupied more of her energy, she'd really be exhausted. So Lu Yuanfeng told this little lie.

"Not too bad, and Little Yuanbao would be skinny? Look at Yuanbao, he's almost a paper-thin." Mu Shuangshuang instinctively pulled Yuanbao in front of Lu Yuanfeng, pinching his chubby cheeks as she spoke.

Yuanbao nodded cooperatively, "Yeah, second brother, look at how I'm getting thinner here and there. I'm afraid to go out now, thinking if I do, the wind might just blow me away and then you won't find me, second brother."

Mu Shuangshuang and Yuanbao, engaging in eye-opening nonsense, left Lu Yuanfeng with no way to stop them, so he had to listen to Mu Shuangshuang and do as she said.

Mu Shuangshuang re-cut the wild vegetables into small pieces and set them aside. As for the rabbit meat, she cut it into small chunks. Given the heat, you couldn't keep prepared food until tomorrow, or it would definitely go bad.

She thought it over and decided to make stir-fried rabbit with scallions, and a cold dish from the wild vegetables. Dumplings wouldn't fill Lu Yuanfeng and Yuanbao up, so Mu Shuangshuang rummaged around and found a bowl of leftover rice in Lu Yuanfeng's cupboard. She sniffed it, and it was still good, definitely enough for the two brothers.

Marinate the rabbit meat with white wine, ginger slices, and salt. Once Lu Yuanfeng got a pot of water boiled, took Yuanbao out for a bath, Mu Shuangshuang lit up another pot of water, first blanching the wild vegetables and setting them aside.

Then, using the same pot of water, she blanched the rabbit meat. Since the water had the aroma of the wild vegetables, the rabbit would carry their fragrance when cooked.

It had been a while since Mu Shuangshuang cooked by herself, let alone using a stove, so she was a bit flustered. Once she got the stove fire going, she started preparing the stir-fried rabbit with scallions.

This was the simplest and fastest way she knew to cook rabbit meat.

Once the iron pot was heated, Mu Shuangshuang poured several spoonfuls of rapeseed oil in, followed by scallions. When the scallions released their fragrance, she added soy sauce, sugar, and white wine, then tossed the rabbit meat into the iron pot.

The pot sizzled happily, and after a few stirs, the aroma of rabbit meat filled the air. Mu Shuangshuang saw the surface of the rabbit meat had changed color and started to add water.

The blaze in the stove was too intense, not suitable for cooking the rabbit as it was now.

Just as she was about to lower the flame, Lu Yuanfeng came in.

Still bare-chested, his face slightly flushed, but now Lu Yuanfeng dared to look Mu Shuangshuang in the eye.

Chapter 252: Men Work Outside, Women Manage Inside

"Shuangshuang, is there anything you need me to do? I've finished bathing Yuanbao."

"Can you lower the fire for me? I need medium heat."

Mu Shuangshuang has been here long enough to get used to the stove. The large and small fires both need someone to manually remove the wood from the stove. If it's not going to be used later, you have to extinguish the wood with water.

As for the charcoal inside the stove, you have to collect it in a broken clay pot, cover it with an iron lid to isolate the oxygen, then the burning charcoal will go out.

When winter comes and you need to use a stove, this charcoal is a treasure you can't even borrow.

But Mu Shuangshuang had observed that Lu Yuanfeng's house didn't have this. Although his house wasn't lacking in anything, when it comes down to it, they might not be as meticulous as her family.

However, considering two men living together can keep things this clean, it's already quite impressive.

Lu Yuanfeng lowered the fire, and Mu Shuangshuang put the lid on the pot. While waiting for the rabbit meat to stew, Mu Shuangshuang helped Lu Yuanfeng clean the cutting board, bowls, chopsticks, and cabinet one by one.

From the moment she came in, she was as busy as a spinning top. Several times Lu Yuanfeng tried to help but was refused by Shuangshuang.

"Fengzi, men should focus on external matters, women on internal tasks. Let me handle these delicate chores. You go see what else you can do."

The phrase "men external, women internal" made Lu Yuanfeng feel as sweet as if he had eaten honey. He even had a misconception that Shuangshuang belonged to this home...

Realizing what he was thinking, Lu Yuanfeng blushed deeply. Unfortunately, Mu Shuangshuang was too busy with her work to notice.

Finally, Mu Shuangshuang finished her tasks. She had estimated the time and thought the rabbit meat should be ready by now. After lifting the lid, she poked the rabbit meat with chopsticks; it felt tender and fully cooked. She started to dish it up.

Yuanbao's nose was always sharp. As soon as Mu Shuangshuang finished the rabbit meat, he rushed in.

He had been enduring mosquito bites for a long time to create an opportunity for his second brother and didn't want to miss the chance to be the first to taste the rabbit meat.

"Sister Shuangshuang, is it ready? Let me try it first."

While saying this, Yuanbao had some unknown liquid dripping from the corner of his mouth. Mu Shuangshuang just liked Yuanbao's genuineness, speaking his mind as soon as he thought of it.

"Sure, but it's very hot, so be careful."

After putting the rabbit meat on the table, Mu Shuangshuang started to make a cold dish of wild vegetables, heat dumplings, and reheat the leftover rice. After a busy time, the meal was finally ready, and Mu Shuangshuang was sweating all over.

"Hurry up and eat. It's getting late today. I should head back."

Actually, Mu Shuangshuang hadn't been there long, only about half an hour with cooking and chores, but it indeed got dark.

"Sister Shuangshuang, won't you have dinner with my second brother and me? If you're not here, I don't feel like eating."

Yuanbao set down his chopsticks, pouting, and Lu Yuanfeng also stood up, saying, "Stay here and have a bit to eat. You've been busy for so long, you should eat some of what you made. I'll take you back afterward."

"But..." Mu Shuangshuang hesitated. Her family was waiting for her to eat dumplings. Even though she said she didn't know when she'd return and they shouldn't wait for her.

But she knew her family well. If she wasn't there, they wouldn't have dinner regardless.

"Shuangshuang, we'll eat quickly, and then I'll take you back so as not to delay you."

Lu Yuanfeng picked up the prepared bowls and chopsticks, piled a large bowl of rice full for Shuangshuang, and kept adding rabbit meat to it until it was a little mound. Mu Shuangshuang was truly hungry.

Looking at the aromatic rabbit meat in front of her and that large bowl of rice, Mu Shuangshuang couldn't resist. She quickly ate so she could go back quickly.

Once Mu Shuangshuang sat down, most of the rabbit meat went back to Little Yuanbao, as it was indeed delicious, melting in the mouth, and rich but not greasy. If she had time tomorrow, she would definitely catch a rabbit with Little Black to nourish her parents.

Yuanbao slurped his food, talking with his mouth full, "Sister Shuangshuang, you have no idea; I'm the happiest person on earth. Whenever you cook, I get to eat the most delicious food in the world, it's simply the best!"

"You little rascal, you speak so nicely. If I don't cook more good food for you, I would feel guilty for these compliments."

Yuanbao quickly shook his head, "I would never lie. If it's good, it's good, if it's not, it's not. Lying would turn me into a pig.

Just like my second brother, he has no clothes to wear because that woman Xia Guagua cut all his clothes with scissors. I was just about to tell you."

"Yuanbao, don't talk while eating." Lu Yuanfeng frowned with displeasure.

"Yuanbao, what did you say? Your second brother is wearing shorts not because it's hot but because his clothes were... were cut by Xia Guagua?"

Mu Shuangshuang was about to explode with anger. That Xia Guagua was simply crazy, doing such disgraceful things, even cutting someone's pants.

"Yes, yes, but Second Brother threw her out and said if she dared to come again, he would tell the villagers what she did."

Yuanbao had become quite the traitor, and he said everything he needed to say and even things he shouldn't, spilling it all out like beans, every single detail.

The more Lu Yuanfeng glared at him, the more enthusiastically he spoke. By the end of the meal, Lu Yuanfeng's face had turned several shades darker.

"Fengzi, I won't help you clean up the dishes. You can tidy them up on your own later! I brought two eggs; you can make them for breakfast tomorrow.

Yuanbao is still growing, so take care of him. Also, don't always glare at him. If anything, talk to him properly."

Mu Shuangshuang, like a nagging mother, laid out things for Lu Yuanfeng to remember. Lu Yuanfeng listened attentively, and when she finished, he went to the backyard. A moment later, he returned with a big gray rabbit in his hand.

"I was going to bring this to you today, but it's inconvenient for me to go out like this..." Lu Yuanfeng said.

"I got it. If it's inconvenient, don't send me off. The village is so small; I'm familiar with all the roads, I won't get lost."

Mu Shuangshuang didn't refuse the rabbit from Lu Yuanfeng because she knew it was useless to refuse. Lu Yuanfeng was very stubborn about these things.

"Mm!" Lu Yuanfeng nodded lightly.

But as soon as Mu Shuangshuang stepped out, he followed. He didn't dare to walk too close to Shuangshuang dressed like that, but he couldn't be too far. Otherwise, if something happened, he feared he wouldn't reach her in time.

Thankfully, Mu Shuangshuang finally arrived home.

Chapter 253: Xiao Han Throws a Temper Tantrum

Mu Shuangshuang returned home, and just as she expected, the family was waiting for her alone.

Mu Shuangshuang felt quite embarrassed, apologized to everyone individually, and started busying herself with serving dumplings.

At Lu Yuanfeng's house, she really didn't eat her fill, so now she had to have a couple of dumplings to pad her stomach.

"Sis, why were you gone for so long?" Xiao Han asked.

Mu Xiaohan was still holding that book in his hand; he clearly remembered that his sister had promised to teach him to read tonight, but he had waited for so long, and she didn't return.

"I ran into a bit of trouble at Yuan Feng brother's house, and I helped him make dinner."

"Oh!" Xiao Han responded indifferently, then headed towards his own room.

Mu Shuangshuang furrowed her brows and curiously asked Yu Si Niang, "What's wrong, is he upset?"

Yu Si Niang also looked helpless: "There's nothing we can do, this child is very stubborn. I already told him you wouldn't be back for a while. But he wouldn't listen, insisting that you promised him, that you'd definitely come back soon to teach him to read.

So now, as soon as you come back, he's sulking and hasn't even eaten his dumplings."

Mu Shuangshuang knew she might have gone a bit overboard with this matter, so she handed the rabbit to Yu Si Niang.

"Wow, such a big rabbit, where did it come from?"

"Fengzi gave it; he said it's for dad and you to nourish yourselves. I also feel you've really been working hard lately, always planting rice and doing farm work, and dad's been making straw fans without rest."

"Such a polite child." Yu Si Niang shook her head with a smile. "Let's invite him over tomorrow and make a few more dishes to thank him."

When Yu Si Niang said this, she was actually creating an opportunity for Shuangshuang and Fengzi, but Mu Shuangshuang didn't understand the underlying reason.

"Okay, I got it! Mom, I'll go call Xiao Han now. It's late at night, he should eat, and dumplings aren't easy to make; who knows when we'll make them again."

"Go ahead, we'll wait for you to come and eat dumplings together." Yu Si Niang urged.

When Mu Shuangshuang entered the room, Mu Xiaohan was lying quietly on his bed.

Ever since the weather got hot, Yu Si Niang and Mu Shuangshuang used wooden boards to make a separate bed for Xiao Han. Although the boards were hard, it was much more comfortable than several people squeezing onto one bed.

"Xiao Han, are you mad at sister? I didn't mean it, will you forgive me?" Mu Shuangshuang asked pitifully.

Mu Xiaohan still maintained his position without moving, but in the dark room, his soft breathing could still be heard.

Mu Shuangshuang wasn't sure if he had cried. She sat on Xiao Han's bed and gently rubbed his hair.

"Xiao Han, sister knows you're upset, but please trust me. I promised to teach you to read, and I will. But we shouldn't rush at the beginning when it comes to learning. Do you know what happens if you try to pull seedlings up to make them grow?"

Mu Xiaohan still didn't respond, so Mu Shuangshuang simply told him the story of pulling up seedlings, and finally Mu Xiaohan reacted. He croaked, "Sis, isn't our life good now? Why do you have to get married?"

Xiao Han's words left Mu Shuangshuang bewildered. When did she say she was going to get married?

So when she asked Xiao Han in return, Xiao Han said, "I overheard mom and dad saying they want to match you with Yuan Feng bro, I... I..."

Mu Xiaohan was so anxious he couldn't speak smoothly.

At this moment, Mu Shuangshuang realized the source of the misunderstanding. No wonder every time Lu Yuanfeng was around, Xiao Han was always indifferent, although he used to admire Lu Yuanfeng and thought he was amazing.

"Xiao Han, sister understands your worry. You're afraid our family will end up like before, being bullied, right? You fear I won't care for you once I'm married?"

Now that his concern was guessed accurately, Mu Xiaohan felt embarrassed and didn't speak or dare to speak.

"Sister can promise you, our family's current situation will only get better. You're my brother, and I will always care for you. But it doesn't mean you can always rely on me for everything. You must have the ability to protect yourself; even if I'm capable, there will be times I can't look after you.

As for marriage, it's just natural and inevitable. When you've read more books in the future, you'll understand. It's not only me who has to get married; you'll also have to take a wife later. We have to move forward, not backward.

And in this matter, your Yuan Feng brother is the most wronged. Not to mention that he and I haven't even started anything, even if something happens, it's far off in the future. It means you're resenting someone for a future that's uncertain. Do you think your actions are justified?"

Mu Shuangshuang took this opportunity to share her thoughts with Xiao Han. Xiao Han finally understood that he had been too stubborn and liked to dwell in his stubborn thoughts.

"Sis, I realized my mistake. I'll go apologize to Yuan Feng bro tomorrow." Xiao Han wiped the wet tears from the corners of his eyes and said resolutely.

"Yes, knowing your mistake and correcting it shows potential, but let's solve the major problem—eat and drink our fill before saying more."

When Mu Shuangshuang and Xiao Han entered the kitchen, Yu Si Niang had just finished cooking the dumplings. She had set five bowls on the table, with Mu Dashan's bowl having two extra dumplings compared to the others, all with six dumplings, plus a full bowl of wild vegetable soup beside it.

Seeing Mu Shuangshuang coming, Mu Dashan smiled and took one dumpling from his bowl and placed it in hers. "Shuangshuang worked the hardest, have one more."

Then he placed another one in Little Zhi's bowl: "Little Zhi is the youngest, dad will give you the other extra one."

Mu Shuangshuang quickly stepped forward and put the dumplings back in Mu Dashan's bowl and added one more to the bowls of Yu Si Niang, Little Zhi, and Xiao Han.

She said, "Dad, mom, don't be polite. If we talk about hard work, everyone worked hard. I had some delicious food at Fengzi's house; I'm not even hungry."

After she finished speaking, she picked up her bowl and quickly ate the three remaining dumplings, put down her chopsticks, and drank a bowl of wild vegetable soup at lightning speed.

Before Yu Si Niang and Mu Dashan could react, Mu Shuangshuang's bowl was already empty.

Yu Si Niang panicked, "You silly girl, how could you eat like that? Eating so quickly, what if your stomach hurts later?"

"No problem, mom. I'm a grown person; it's not like I'd choke to death."

Mu Shuangshuang's words reminded everyone of the last time Mu Zhenzhen got a fishbone stuck and Mu Shuangshuang had forcibly given her duck saliva.

They looked at each other, not daring to laugh. But in the end, they couldn't help but burst out laughing.

In the kitchen, a wave of satisfied laughter rose...

Chapter 254: The Eldest Uncle's Family Is Leaving

After the family finished eating dumplings, they all prepared to rest.

Mu Shuangshuang and Yu Si Niang stayed in the kitchen to clean up the dishes and wash the pots and spoons.

Mu Shuangshuang cleaned the last bowl and said to Yu Si Niang, "Mom, last time you said you were making clothes for Fengzi. Are they done?"

She remembered that Yu Si Niang was making clothes for Lu Yuanfeng last time, and she wondered if they were finished.

"Not yet. I've been working on them whenever I have spare time lately. But the top is done; just the pants need hemming. Is he in a hurry to wear them? If he is, I can sew a bit more tomorrow and should finish them."

Mu Shuangshuang shared what she knew with Yu Si Niang. As expected, Yu Si Niang was also very angry.

"This Xia Guagua turned out to be such a person! I used to think she was quiet,"

In front of others, Xia Guagua appeared quite quiet, occasionally dressing beautifully to show up and sometimes wearing very simple clothes to help the other brothers of Old Lu Family with work.

Lu Yuanfeng's real father, Lu Xiao, didn't have land and spent most of the month messing around outside. If it weren't for Gu Jiulian's strict grip on money, their family probably wouldn't be doing well.

"That's an unbarking dog that's scarier than a barking dog," Mu Shuangshuang said.

Yu Si Niang nodded in agreement, "But it's not impossible for Fengzi and Xia Guagua. After all, Xia Guagua's last name is Xia, and she wasn't originally registered in the Lu family's genealogy. On the surface, they aren't siblings."

"Mom, do you mean that if Xia Guagua uses some tricks, Fengzi could marry her?"

Mu Shuangshuang felt a sourness in her heart, especially when thinking that Lu Yuanfeng might marry Xia Guagua, the feeling became even more apparent.

Unable to help it, she scolded herself in her heart: Mu Shuangshuang, what are you thinking about? When someone gets married, how is it your business? Just focus on yourself.

But it seems it doesn't work!

Yu Si Niang noticed Mu Shuangshuang's unusual reaction and was relieved.

She had said those things on purpose to see her daughter's reaction. If you like someone, it's impossible to stay indifferent when you hear they're marrying someone else.

"Yes, Shuangshuang, you need to keep an eye out and not let anyone take advantage. Let me share some gossip with you. Your uncle's wife got married to him because she climbed into his bed. Originally, your uncle had a childhood sweetheart."

Later, that person heard about it and, in a fit of anger, married someone in the county. Your uncle panicked and then married your aunt."

Gossip was a term Mu Shuangshuang taught Yu Si Niang. She explained that gossip refers to various little things, mainly private matters of others. At that time, her mother seemed very righteous, but now it seems she also enjoys gossip.

"Mom, your gossip is quite interesting. Did my uncle want to become an official just because of that little childhood love?"

They say a man's first love leaves the deepest impression because he couldn't have it and because he was immature and naive at that time.

And with her uncle's personality, it's possible.

"I don't know. I haven't heard the family mention it," Yu Si Niang answered.

"It's late. Mom, you should go rest. Give me Fengzi's pants. I'll hem them and send them to him first thing tomorrow."

"Can you handle the needlework? What if when Fengzi wears them, the seams come undone? He'll really be exposed," Yu Si Niang looked skeptical.

"Well, if he's exposed, he's exposed. He's a grown man; it's not a big deal for him. Besides, it's not that my needlework is bad; it's just not perfect. Making pants for him is his blessing," Mu Shuangshuang replied firmly.

"Alright, alright, I'll get them for you!"

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After staying up half the night, Mu Shuangshuang finally finished hemming Lu Yuanfeng's pants. She was so tired that she fell asleep as soon as she hit the bed, and after waking up, the yard was bustling with noise.

The noise was coming from the Old Mu Family's side. Mu Shuangshuang was very curious. After getting dressed and washing up, just as she was about to go over and listen, Aunt Xiao Yun, who was also watching the commotion, pulled her aside.

"Shuangshuang, I heard your second uncle got the money. He's planning to go to Qianzhou Prefecture for the exams tomorrow!"

Mu Shuangshuang was confused. Her uncle was taking exams. Why was it so lively at home?

"I heard if Uncle gets money, he'll first go to the county to find a good teacher to teach him,"

Mentioning money, Mu Shuangshuang suddenly understood. Maybe yesterday Old Mrs. Mu yelled for so long, she got something out of Mu Xianxian.

She glanced at the group from the Old Mu Family and noticed Mu Xianxian wasn't present. Maybe she suffered a big loss and went home angry.

"Well, we wouldn't know, but apparently, later the village head will bring a witch to exorcize your house. Then the children who study in the village will kneel before your uncle, hoping to pass the exams in one go like him."

At this moment, Mu Shuangshuang really wanted to laugh. Like her uncle, who took fifteen years without passing the scholar examination?

However, she wouldn't say this to outsiders, not even to Aunt Xiao Yun.

Mu Dade still held some prestige in Er Gui Village. After all, he's the only scholar in the village and doesn't need to kneel before the County Magistrate. It's normal for folks to respect and fear him.

"Haha, Aunt Xiao Yun, are you going to check it out too? Have Da Long pay respects as well?" Mu Shuangshuang teased.

"Me? Our family won't bother. Da Long doesn't seem cut out for studies. He just got up and went to play with Yuanbao from the Old Lu Family. He won't be back until noon." Speaking of her son, Zhao Yun's face had an affectionate smile.

Zhao Yun really cared for Da Long and didn't have high expectations for him, only hoping he'd be happy and healthy. But she'd still witness the excitement.

Mu Shuangshuang felt she hadn't rested enough, just about to take another nap, when Mu Yingying spotted her and walked straight over.

"Little brat, you heard it just now, right? My dad has the money, and he can finally go to Qianzhou Prefecture. When he becomes a scholar and then a champion scholar, you can spend your life as a country bumpkin!"

Mu Yingying raised her head high, like a proud peacock.

"You said we should wait, so what about others? Just watch the show," Mu Shuangshuang said lazily, her answer filled with disdain.

"You... do you think my dad won't pass?" Mu Yingying questioned.

"That's what you said. I didn't say anything."

"You..." Mu Yingying clenched her fists in anger, staring at Mu Shuangshuang as if she wanted to eat her alive.

But Mu Yingying didn't dare approach, knowing Mu Shuangshuang's strength.

Suddenly, a thought came to her mind, and Mu Yingying shouted loudly, "Grandfather, Grandmother, come quickly, Shuangshuang said Dad won't pass the exam!"

Chapter 255: Just Like You

Mu Shuangshuang knew that Mu Yingying was up to something. She guessed Yingying was going to the county with Mu Dade tomorrow and wanted to show off one last time. If she could drag Shuangshuang down, she'd do it.

Old Mrs. Mu came storming in, as Mu Dade was her precious darling. Anyone saying he wouldn't pass the exams was like slapping her in the face. So Old Mrs. Mu pointed at Mu Shuangshuang's nose and asked.

"You ungrateful brat! Spouting nonsense early in the morning, why are you saying your Uncle can't pass?"

"Granny, I'm also curious why my Uncle can't pass. He's destined to become a Champion Scholar, and you're destined to be the lady of an official's family."

Old Mrs. Mu's expression softened a bit, but she still asked unhappily, "Then why did Yingying just say that your Uncle won't pass?"

"Granny, Sister Yingying is hard of hearing, you know that. Last time you asked her to weigh two liang of meat, didn't she hear it as two jin? In the end, you had to personally go back and return the one jin and eight liang of meat."

Mu Shuangshuang was all smiles. If Mu Yingying liked to bring up old grudges and talk nonsense, couldn't she do the same?

Old Mrs. Mu's face immediately turned black.

Shuang had brought up something she still remembered: when she went to return the meat, the way Wang Erma looked at her. If her eldest daughter-in-law hadn't stopped her, she'd have beaten that foul-mouthed girl back then.

"Ying, your mother is receiving guests in the front. Don't just stand there idly. If you make trouble again, don't expect me to save your mother's face!"

Mu Yingying didn't expect that with just a few words, Mu Shuangshuang could redirect their granny's anger towards her.

She blushed, stiffened her neck, and said, "Granny, it's not like that. Just now Shuangshuang was saying my Dad couldn't pass and that the third branch was waiting to laugh at the Old Mu Family."

"Sister Yingying, if you walk the night too often, you're bound to encounter a ghost. Similarly, if you yell about a wolf too many times, the wolf might really come. Don't curse Uncle just to drag me down; he's your real dad."

Mu Shuangshuang prided herself on her quick wit, especially against someone as timid and brainless as Mu Yingying.

Mu Yingying instinctively covered her mouth, afraid that what she said might come true.

Old Mrs. Mu was sharp and quickly understood the situation. She grabbed Mu Yingying's wrist and said, "Spit quickly!"

Mu Yingying didn't immediately react and just stared blankly at Old Mrs. Mu.

"Are you deaf? When I tell you to spit, you spit! Or do you actually want your Dad not to pass?"

Mu Shuangshuang knew that spitting had its superstitions. If a rural person said something they shouldn't have, spitting would make it non-binding.

Old Mrs. Mu would do anything for Mu Dade, even climb a mountain of knives or swim through a sea of fire, so she naturally believed in such things.

Forced to spit, Mu Yingying finally relieved Old Mrs. Mu.

"Ying, you better remember what you should and shouldn't say. If you go cursing people again, I'll tear your mouth apart!"

Old Mrs. Mu returned to the courtyard and continued to entertain their guests.

Mu Yingying stomped her feet in anger, but what else could she do?

Mu Shuangshuang, looking smug, returned to her room. When she came out again, she carried a basket covered with cloth, filled with new clothes for Fengzi.

It was Mu Shuangshuang's first leisurely morning stroll through the village since everyone had gone to the Old Mu Family home to watch the drama. On her way to Fengzi's house, she didn't encounter a single villager.

However, it was still quite hot, getting hotter by the day. After a few steps, Mu Shuangshuang felt her clothes soaked through with sweat, perhaps it was going to rain.

When she arrived at Lu Yuanfeng's house, he was just about to leave, carrying a pair of bamboo baskets on his shoulder without a headscarf, seemingly ready for work.

Mu Shuangshuang was overjoyed, thinking her timing was perfect.

"Fengzi, are you going out?"

Lu Yuanfeng was surprised to see Mu Shuangshuang. She usually wouldn't come over so early.

"I'm free today, so I planned to help your family transplant rice seedlings. I've prepared the baskets already."

"Huh?" This time it was Mu Shuangshuang's turn to be surprised.

Helping with the farm work?

Although it wasn't unheard of, in this hot weather, especially at the end of the busy farming season, Mu Shuangshuang declined. "We only have two plots of land. My mother and I can finish the work in two hours, you don't need to come."

Mu Shuangshuang and Yu Si Niang working together didn't exhaust themselves like at the Old Mu's. When they were tired, they took breaks and even did some straw fan crafting at home.

Just by making straw fans, Mu Dashan alone earned nearly five or six hundred coins. If this kept up, the third branch might even buy a better plot of dry land to grow sweet potatoes or soybeans.

Fengzi stood still, demonstrating his decision to help.

Mu Shuangshuang, not having time to worry about this now, said, "Just come with me to your house first. My mom finished making your clothes, so try them on to see if they fit. If not, I'll take them back to adjust."

Mu Shuangshuang didn't mention that she herself sewed the pants, not wanting to explain more.

The two went into Fengzi's house, where Mu Shuangshuang removed the cloth covering the basket and handed over the clothes.

Fengzi's heart was pounding, as if he received some kind of treasure.

He hesitated standing there, before finally speaking, "Shuangshuang, I haven't bathed yet. How about I change into them tonight after a wash?"

Lu Yuanfeng couldn't remember the last time he wore new clothes made from new fabric. Ever since joining the army, he hadn't seen his family, and the clothes issued were mostly second-hand. The better ones were reserved for soldiers in higher positions.

Even though he wasn't doing too poorly in the army, he never wore the best clothes.

"Look at you, we aren't short on just this one new piece. My mom made another one for you, I'll bring it over next time."

Mu Shuangshuang forcibly pushed Lu Yuanfeng into his room, and he shook out the clothes.

He lightly touched the fabric, which felt very soft and breathable.

The embroidery on the top was particularly good, and when Lu Yuanfeng saw the stitching at the hem of the pants, he seemed to discover something. He took the small pouch Shuangshuang gave him from his bedside and compared it to his own accessory pouch.

Compared to the stitching of the three items, it was exactly the same style.

Lu Yuanfeng clutched the pants tightly, unwilling to let go for the longest time.

Everything from Shuangshuang, he cherished!

Chapter 256: Stingy

Lu Yuanfeng came out of the house, Mu Shuangshuang had been waiting for quite a while.

If the customs of this era weren't so restrictive, she would've wanted to rush in to see if the clothes didn't fit or something, wondering why it took him so long.

Lu Yuanfeng was feeling quite nervous inside as well. He deliberately tidied up several times and confirmed everything before daring to come out.

"There shouldn't be any issues, right? Are the pants too tight?"

Mu Shuangshuang was anxious. She had sewn the pants overnight and couldn't guarantee there wouldn't be any problems.

Seeing Shuangshuang like this, Lu Yuanfeng quickly waved his hand: "It's a perfect fit, especially the pants; wearing them is extremely comfortable."

Mu Shuangshuang nodded with satisfaction, unable to resist feeling proud.

"Of course, you should know the skill of the person who sews clothes."

Lu Yuanfeng was in such a good mood that he was reluctant to take off these brand-new clothes. His eager eyes lingered on the new outfit, unable to look away.

Seeing this, Mu Shuangshuang joked: "Fengzi, why don't you wear these clothes today?"

It's not just Lu Yuanfeng; Mu Shuangshuang herself, when getting new clothes, would feel reluctant to take them off.

"No way, I need to go work later, better change into some old clothes."

Mu Shuangshuang actually quite agreed with Lu Yuanfeng's words. It's a busy time now, going here today and there tomorrow, sometimes even needing to go up the mountain. If they got damaged, it would be a pity; better to wait until not working to wear them.

"Alright, it's getting late, I need to go back to make breakfast. Have you eaten yet?"

Naturally, Lu Yuanfeng hadn't eaten yet. In the morning, Yuanbao was eager to play with some village children, and he made breakfast with one of the eggs Shuangshuang brought for Yuanbao without eating the other himself.

Lu Yuanfeng's silence was seen by Mu Shuangshuang as consent.

Thinking for a moment, she suddenly said: "How about this, you change clothes and come to my house for breakfast. I haven't started cooking yet."

Breakfast would be porridge and some pancakes, enough to last till noon.

"I won't go." Always eating at Shuangshuang's house, Lu Yuanfeng felt a bit embarrassed.

"You're crazy, skipping breakfast and planning to work all morning? Either make your own breakfast in the future or come to my house, and bring Yuanbao along."

Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Dinner can be lighter, but breakfast shouldn't be skipped.

But in farming households, the schedule's often upside down — waking up early to work till noon, stomach growling, no nap at midday, and then at night, gobbling down a large bowl of rice before collapsing into bed.

This lifestyle is particularly unhealthy.

Without waiting for Lu Yuanfeng to hesitate, Mu Shuangshuang directly said: "If you don't come, don't expect me to pay attention to you in the future."

With this tried-and-tested tactic, Mu Shuangshuang could always get Lu Yuanfeng to compromise. Once at Shuangshuang's house, Lu Yuanfeng was never idle; while Mu Shuangshuang cooked in the kitchen, he went to the nearby mountain to gather firewood.

After one meal, Lu Yuanfeng collected two large bundles of firewood, enough for Mu Shuangshuang to cook for several days.

When everything was ready, Yu Si Niang started helping with setting the table, serving Lu Yuanfeng a big bowl of porridge.

"Fengzi, you need to eat more. You're still growing, can't starve yourself; and don't overexert at work. Your third uncle suffered from both, and most times can only lie in bed now."

Yu Si Niang spoke with emotion, especially after hearing in the morning that the main house borrowed some silver, making her even more inclined.

Clearly, the Mu Family could borrow silver, but they had to sell her daughter and work her husband to exhaustion until he fell ill.

Yu Si Niang was truly unwilling to accept this.

"Si Niang, don't worry, yesterday Uncle Zhang returned, and I asked him to come at noon to see Uncle Dashan, I'm sure it'll be okay."

Lu Yuanfeng was quite meticulous about these small matters, and hearing his words made Mu Shuangshuang feel warm inside.

Vocally, she began urging everyone to finish their food quickly, and soon after breakfast was finished, they all prepared to head to the fields to work.

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The Old Mu Family was busy banging around at this time, probably inviting the witch to drive away bad luck or something, and from far away, they could hear Old Mrs. Mu's hearty laughter.

Old Mrs. Mu was very happy today; every year at this time, she was very lively, and those who wanted to cozy up to her family came over in droves.

The village head stood in the center position, giving blessings, while Mr. Mu smiled and replied with grateful words.

After a while, a group of children rushed in, starting to say auspicious words.

Usually, at times like this, food is brought out.

Mr. Mu nudged Old Mrs. Mu, asking softly: "Old woman, did you buy the seeds and pancakes I told you to yesterday?"

Old Mrs. Mu rolled her eyes with displeasure: "Buy what, buy? Eggs have dropped to a penny each, those seeds are insanely expensive. And the pancakes, you don't know, just a little costs several pennies, so expensive."

"Are you crazy, this is the farewell party for the son organized by the villagers, we should prepare good food and drinks, you've prepared nothing, how should our Mu Family save face?"

"Let it be if it's embarrassing, besides, they're just a bunch of little brats, who cares what they say."

The group of children below had already grown impatient, led by Yuanbao, they started shouting.

"No peanuts, candies, we won't leave then!"

Initially, it was just a bunch of mischievous kids coming in for snacks, but once the Mu Family stalled, each turned into a wild pony, spinning around the Mu family's main room, chasing each other, kicking up a cloud of dust in the room.

"You dead old woman, even the things I instructed you to do were ignored; now you've offended these little ancestors, how can we be at peace? Go get some money out, give each kid a penny, and let them off first."

Hearing silver was to be used to settle matters, Old Mrs. Mu was furious: "With your pathetic savings, playing up as a big family, giving money, why don't you just take my life instead?"

Old Mrs. Mu was known for being stingy; giving money to the kids was more unbearable than death for her.

In this situation, Yuanbao gave Da Long a look, and the two started singing.

"Old Scholar, shameless!

At such an old age taking exams

Golden nest

Silver nest

Ending up in a puppy's nest!

Old Scholar..."

Yuanbao's talent for doggerel was unmatched in the village; no matter who heard it, they'd chuckle.

So when he started, the villagers clutched their stomachs, laughing heartily, while Mr. Mu's face went from blue to white.

Originally, it was just the two kids singing, but soon after a bunch of kids joined in chorus, impossible to stop.

Inside, hearing the doggerel, Mu Dade was so furious that the cup in his hand was flung out, completely infuriated!

Chapter 257: Night Talk About a Good Life

A joyful event had turned into a scandal, catching the Old Mu Family entirely off guard.

Finally, it was Mr. Mu who forcibly made Old Mrs. Mu take out some silver, distributing it to quiet the children down.

His own son hadn't yet passed the scholar exam and was ridiculed by others, leaving Mr. Mu feeling ashamed and lacking confidence.

Although everyone maintained a façade of politeness, the originally planned kowtow by the children had been canceled, fearing their own sons might end up like Mu Dade, unable to pass after fifteen years of trying, making even the title of scholar seem lackluster.

After seeing off all the guests, Old Mrs. Mu continued to curse angrily.

"Those little bastards, really have such filthy mouths, saying such despicable things. I wonder how their parents raised them."

"Mother, I think today's incident is quite strange, why did those kids decide to cause trouble now?"

Moreover, that Yuanbao, his second brother is quite close to Shuangshuang, and Zhang Dalong's father, Zhang Yutou, is also quite friendly with the third brother. I saw Zhao Yun deliver a basket of vegetables to their house yesterday."

Mrs. Lin shifted the blame onto Mu Shuangshuang, and those in the Old Mu Family who held grudges against Mu Shuangshuang naturally agreed.

"That Shuang girl is really uncouth, doing such vile things just to make our lives difficult. If you ask me, find Shuang girl and sell her to the mountains as a bride, let them teach her a harsh lesson," Mu Dalian said sinisterly.

Whenever Mu Shuangshuang was mentioned, everyone became agitated, as far too many had suffered at her hands.

"Calm down! We're already embarrassed enough. Remember, today's trouble was your mother's fault. If she had listened and prepared some snacks, those kids wouldn't have acted out. Don't just blame others; reflect on yourselves," Mr. Mu chastised.

Despite having some grievances against Shuangshuang, Mr. Mu was not someone easily swayed without reason.

After getting scolded, everyone felt increasingly uncomfortable but didn't dare express their anger towards Mr. Mu, choosing instead to redirect their animosity towards Mu Shuangshuang.

Mu Dade remained silent throughout, bearing the brunt of today's incident. Despite years of exams without any extra pressures, the money spent on his education now felt burdensome.

Yet, that satirical poem, like a curse, relentlessly reminded him of his failures over the years.

Mrs. Jin noticed her husband's unusual mood and waited until nightfall before asking about it.

Mrs. Jin brought a basin of hot water, placed Mu Dade's feet inside, and while washing them, began to inquire about his day.

"Dear, are you feeling pressured?"

Throughout years of marriage, Mrs. Jin shared a tacit understanding with Mu Dade, although there remained an unresolved issue between them.

That issue was the gossip from Yu Si Niang about Mu Dade's childhood sweetheart, Ruan Xiao Jiao.

Even though Ruan Xiao Jiao married years ago and had not contacted Mu Dade, that obstacle remained, haunting Mu Dade in the silent hours as he pondered his childhood love.

Mrs. Jin's attitude was extremely sincere; over the years, she had been nothing but supportive, from cooking and mending clothes to dealing with unpleasant chores ordered by Old Mrs. Mu.

"Sigh, of course there is pressure. I'm not young anymore; the ancients said a man should establish himself by thirty, yet I'm in my thirties and have achieved nothing. I don't know if this time will be any different..."

"Stop speaking negatively. We'll get the exam papers from the county and go to Qianzhou for the exam. I spoke with my parents yesterday, they're willing to give us fifty more taels. With a hundred taels, we'll have enough for this journey."

"Alright!" Mu Dade's tense expression relaxed somewhat, his confidence returning.

With the papers in hand, why should he fear?

"This time you will surely pass. I'll make sure everyone who underestimated us learns the error of their ways," Mrs. Jin declared fiercely.

Moreover, she planned to teach that girl Shuangshuang a lesson, proving Jinyin'er wasn't someone to be bullied.

"Yes, I must pass this time, I'll make those people shut their mouths!"

Mu Dade regained his confidence, now full of hope for the future. With silver and exam papers, who knows, he might even emerge as the top scorer this Autumn Examination.

As for Liu Zian, he was destined to be defeated!

"Dear, if you pass, will you really take your parents and brothers with you when you assume office?"

Should Mu Dade achieve the scholar title, two paths lay ahead. One, go to the Capital for the final exams and possibly stay on as a Capital Official.

The other, earn the title and use connections to become a steward or a minor official locally.

Regardless, both paths were promising.

"My parents have sacrificed much for me, and the second and fifth brothers will surely cause a ruckus if they're not taken along. Putting up with their behavior could be troublesome."

In truth, Mu Dade hoped not to bring them, but he couldn't vocalize such things.

"Dear, think carefully. Our parents are peasants. In official circles, they might cause trouble. Our mother is greedy, what if she takes what she shouldn't?"

"Better to leave them in Er Gui Village, sending some silver annually for their support.

Mrs. Jin spoke sensibly, and Mu Dade readily agreed.

"That's settled, once I pass, I'll only take Yingying and Dan Dan. Dealing with family is a matter of money, really not a big deal."

Old Mrs. Mu and Mr. Mu would miss out on comfort, as would the brothers; they could only dream of basking in the luxury of following their eldest brother.

"Yes, let's do that!"

Reassured, Mrs. Jin no longer worried about being overshadowed. She moved efficiently, lifting Mu Dade's feet from the basin, wiped them dry on her stomach, and placed them back on the bed.

The main Mu residence doesn't sleep on Kang beds.

Those wealthy and high-status sleep on beds, while rural peasants use Kang beds.

Using the leftover water from Mu Dade's wash, Mrs. Jin quickly bathed her feet, then lay down beside Mu Dade...

Chapter 258: A Human-Like Appearance

The next day, early in the morning, everyone in the Old Mu Family was called to see Mu Dade off.

Even the third branch that had already split off was woken up.

Of course, this group didn't include Mu Shuangshuang. She had gone to the town to deliver cold noodles with Fengzi before dawn and wouldn't return until around noon.

The weather, compared to yesterday, was even hotter.

The people of the Old Mu Family stood under the shade of the trees, each one of them overwhelmed by the heat, calling out loudly.

The carriage arranged by Mrs. Jin to take Mu Dade to the county was already waiting early in the morning. But due to the amount of stuff they had to bring, the coachman was getting impatient.

Fifty coins to the county, that was his fare. But with weather this hot, if the horse dies on the way, fifty coins won't cover it.

"Mr. Mu, Old Mrs. Mu, you should hurry up. It's been an hour since morning. If we're not leaving, tell me promptly so I can take the next customer. Don't just occupy the latrine without using it, and they're not even a scholar or a Champion Scholar yet."

The coachman knew the status of the person he was transporting, Mu Dade.

Mrs. Jin had deliberately mentioned her husband's situation to get the carriage rental to find a clean and spacious carriage. She also mentioned her husband prefers cleanliness and won't just sit in any carriage.

This was why this coachman came to take him.

"How are you talking like that? We've paid, so what's wrong with waiting?" Old Mrs. Mu rolled up her sleeves, ready to argue with the coachman.

"Ha, paying money lets you act high and mighty? If my horse dies from heat on the way, you're done for!" The coachman responded fiercely.

Mr. Mu stepped forward to mediate, politely saying, "I apologize. It's rare for my son to go to the county, and since he's preparing for exams, he has quite a few things to bring."

"Mr. Mu, I only talk to you because you're polite. I've taken exam-goers before, but none of them were as grand as your son.

You know Liu Zian, the first scholar of Qingshan Town, right? I was the one who took him to his scholar exam. He brought nothing but a roll of books, and he still got first place."

The coachman had seen the world and felt the Old Mu Family was already wasting his time. He could cancel the hire anytime without refund.

Mr. Mu's face turned blue and then white.

To be criticized at his age was indeed embarrassing, but there was no denying Da De was late.

"Second, go see what's going on with your older brother, why isn't he ready yet?"

Mu Dazhong, who was originally standing under the shade, naturally didn't want to step out into the roasting heat.

"I'm not going. The sun is so big, stepping out would fry me. My older brother has hands and feet, he doesn't need someone to carry him."

Seeing Mu Dazhong's reluctance, Mr. Mu turned to Mu Danian and said, "Fifth, you're the youngest here, you go!"

"I'm not going either. If my second brother isn't going, why should I?"

With both unwilling to go, Mr. Mu reevaluated everyone standing under the shade.

By the old locust tree at the door stood the second branch family, the third wife and two children, and the fourth family along with the fifth. Zhenzhen and Xiangxiang were still sleeping in, and no one woke them up.

Apart from the second and fifth, Yu Si Niang was halfway in the sun, carefully shielding two children like her. Similarly, the fourth one was alone under the sun, protecting his two kids well.

Mr. Mu sighed and finally pointed at Mu Dajiang, "Fourth, go call your older brother. And if he has anything he can't manage, you help him carry it."

"Alright, I'll go right away!" Mu Dajiang stepped out and walked towards Mu Family's eldest.

After a while, he returned carrying a large bundle on his back, which seemed so heavy that even a man like him was nearly bent over.

He was sweating profusely and gasping for breath.

Nobody wanted to help; Mu Dazhong and Mu Danian acted like they hadn't seen him, not moving at all.

Finally, Mrs. Liu and Yu Si Niang couldn't stand it any longer. They ran over to help, preventing Mu Dajiang from being worn out.

"So much stuff. Won't it crush my horse to death?" The coachman said worriedly.

From the moment Mu Dade's things were loaded onto the carriage, he felt the wheels of his cart sinking.

Mu Dajiang chuckled and wiped the sweat from his brow. "Sorry, my older brother said he has a bit more stuff and might need a while. He's willing to pay double."

Upon hearing double the fare, the coachman decided to tolerate it, figuring he's basically transporting two passengers.

However, while the coachman could endure, Old Mrs. Mu couldn't. Upon hearing about the extra charge, she rushed forward to argue.

Mr. Mu feared another argument might cause the coachman to leave, so he stopped Old Mrs. Mu, refusing to let her stir things up.

And so, another three incense sticks' time dragged on, with everyone feeling hot enough for their heads to steam, eager to leave. But without Mr. Mu's word, who dared to walk away?

"Oh dear, oh dear, I can't make it, I'm about to die..." Mu Danian clung to the tree trunk, groaning as he feigned illness, just as Mu Dade finally arrived.

Today, he was dressed in luxurious attire, a purplish-red silk suit. His hair was well-tied with a Jade Token covering, even his boots showed hints of gold thread.

This splendid outfit was something none had seen Mu Dade wear before, attracting everyone's attention, especially Mu Dazhong and Mrs. Lin, who were most obvious about it. Mu Dazhong stared fixedly at the Jade Token on Mu Dade's head.

As for Mrs. Lin, the few strands of gold on Mu Dade's shoes glinted yellowly in the sun, so dazzling she couldn't even bother to wipe her drool.

"Dad, I'm really leaving this time. You and Mom must take good care of yourselves at home. Once I succeed, I'll come back to fetch you both."

Mr. Mu's eyes instantly reddened. Having such an accomplished son, he hadn't lived in vain.

"Well, well, this is the silver your mother and I prepared. It's not much, only ten taels, but it should be enough for meals in Qianzhou Prefecture. Don't skimp on the way, spend it however you like!"

Mr. Mu had been holding a worn box all morning, which nobody had paid much mind to before. Hearing it was silver, everyone turned jealous.

A family usually unwilling to buy even a tael of meat suddenly produced ten taels of silver; his dad was really something.

In their hearts, everyone cursed Mr. Mu a thousand times, but Mu Dade still accepted the small black box.

"Thank you, Dad. We're leaving now; you and Mom don't need to see us off!"

Chapter 259: Si Niang's Kindness

Mr. Mu watched reluctantly as Mu Dade boarded the carriage and rode off into the distance, eventually disappearing in the direction of the village entrance.

At this moment, Mr. Mu felt both emotional and gratified, his back bent from years of labor, with a deep yearning in his eyes for his son to succeed.

Old Mrs. Mu felt similarly; it was her favorite son going off to take the exams, such an important matter that she had to watch to ensure he left safely.

"Dad, Mom, elder brother has disappeared from sight. Can we go back now? This heat is killing me. If we don't go back, I'll be roasted," Mu Danian complained loudly beside them, looking very displeased.

"Fifth, why so impatient? Is the field work done? If you're in such a hurry to go back, quickly finish the rice transplanting for this old woman. Don't always think about slacking off; your elder brother is about to become a scholar, so the family has to set a good example for me."

Old Mrs. Mu scolded Mu Danian loudly, and indeed, her words now carried a slight air of an official's wife.

But Mu Danian wasn't buying it at all.

"Mom, let Fourth Brother do this work; he's free. I still have to find my friends. We've been at this double-harvest effort for so long, if we don't meet soon, we'll lose touch."

Mu Danian had always been lazy, and the friend he mentioned was none other than Chen Hong from Tie Dao Village. The two hadn't been close for a while, and Mu Danian couldn't hold back any longer.

After saying this, Mu Danian slipped away, leaving Old Mrs. Mu there cursing and swearing.

Seeing this, Mu Dazhong quickly said, "Dad, Mom, I promised to help Uncle Chen fix his roof yesterday, so I can't do the house chores. Let Fourth Brother's family handle it!"

"Mom, I promised Zhang Huolang to embroider two handkerchiefs by tomorrow, I can't delay any longer, I have to go and work now!"

In no time, the people under the old locust tree scattered, leaving only the fourth branch, Yu Si Niang, and the two elderly Mu family members along with a few kids.

Mr. Mu looked at Mu Dajiang with difficulty and then said, "Fourth, your second brother and fifth brother are both inherently lazy, this family relies on your hard work."

Mu Dajiang chuckled twice and immediately agreed to the task.

"Dad, Mom, it's hot. You should go back and rest! I can finish that plot in two more days."

Beside him, Mrs. Liu felt her eyes prick with tears; that rice field was the largest plot of land the Old Mu Family had. Although they called it an acre, it was much more than that. But what could she do? Her parents-in-law were biased.

When Old Mrs. Mu and Mr. Mu returned home, Mrs. Liu hugged Mu Xiaxia and began sobbing.

Next to her, Xiao Chu also began to cry, clinging to Mrs. Liu's leg and calling "Mommy" incessantly.

Mu Dajiang was at a loss, standing there stunned, and could only look at Yu Si Niang for help.

Yu Si Niang comforted Mrs. Liu earnestly. She understood Liu's suffering. Before splitting the family, all the work was left to the third branch.

Everyone else rested while the third branch worked.

Everyone else ate good food while the third branch could only watch longingly.

But now it's different, their third branch had separated.

"Jinhua, don't cry. It's a good thing my family's fieldwork is done. I'll come and help you transplant rice later."

Yesterday, thanks to Fengzi's help, Yu Si Niang's double-harvest work finished earlier than many in the village, and she finally felt at ease.

"Third Sister-in-law, that's not right. How can we let you help with the work? The third branch has branched out and doesn't need to do much for the family anymore."

Mu Dajiang hurriedly waved his hand but couldn't reject Yu Si Niang's persistent offer.

She said, "It's still early. Fourth, go prepare the field. Later, let someone coming back from the village latrine take a message for me and Jinhua."

Mu Dajiang sighed, feeling warmth in his heart. After bidding goodbye to Yu Si Niang, he hurriedly went to work in the field.

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Shuangshuang delivered cold noodles in town and then started setting up a stall to sell fans.

Perhaps because of the increasingly hot weather, today's fans were more popular than usual, with a long line forming in no time.

Supply and demand drove the value up, so Mu Shuangshuang quickly raised the price, selling each fan for six coins.

Out of forty fans, more than half were sold in no time, and those who bought fans left satisfied.

Lu Yuanfeng held a fan, occasionally fanning the sweating Mu Shuangshuang. His own clothes were soaked, but he didn't mind.

While Mu Shuangshuang worked, she felt a cool breeze behind her, knowing it was Fengzi helping to fan her. When she finally had a moment to breathe, Mu Shuangshuang stopped him.

"Fengzi, you fan yourself as well. Don't just think about me. You can drink the water I brought."

Lu Yuanfeng didn't have a water bottle, so he never brought water when coming to town. Mu Shuangshuang was different, using bamboo cylinders to make water bottles for each family member, always carrying water in them when going out.

Lu Yuanfeng licked his dry, cracked lips and shook his head to refuse. "No, I'm not thirsty."

"You say you're not thirsty, but your lips are cracked." Mu Shuangshuang handed her water bottle to Lu Yuanfeng, fearing he wouldn't drink, she added, "It's alright, we'll fill it up at a nearby house later, no need to worry."

Most of the time, good people are still around, so Mu Shuangshuang believed she could still ask for some tea.

If it didn't work out, they could just buy a pot of iced tea, it was only a coin anyway.

Unable to resist Shuangshuang's urging, Lu Yuanfeng picked up the kettle. It wasn't his first time drinking from Shuangshuang's bottle; the last time was during rice harvesting when he helped her carry rice stalks, and she feared he was too tired, so she gave him her water bottle.

Grasping the same water bottle for a second time, Lu Yuanfeng felt a bit nervous, his hands trembling slightly. What was more important was that knowing Shuangshuang had used the bottle made him so nervous his breathing became uneven.

He held the bottle, watching Shuangshuang bargaining with others and doing business.

She was very capable, whether it was farm work or cooking, or doing business, it seemed that as long as she was there, she could finish all the work on her own.

Lu Yuanfeng himself was not good with words. When he first started doing business, he always got cheated and had no idea how to reclaim his losses, but Shuangshuang was different. She had been in business for so long and never miscalculated a single copper coin. Everything was neatly organized.

Such a girl, probably every man in the world likes her!

Suddenly, Lu Yuanfeng felt a bit uneasy. He often thought he had nothing, and he had no right to express his affections in front of Shuangshuang.

With a sudden twinge of sadness, Lu Yuanfeng opened the cap and took a small sip of the tea from Shuangshuang's kettle.

The fishy taste of *Houttuynia cordata* spread instantly on his taste buds!

Suddenly, Mu Shuangshuang said curiously, "Fengzi, look over there!"

Chapter 260: Helping Liu Zian

Following Mu Shuangshuang's word, Lu Yuanfeng looked in the direction she pointed.

He saw a young lad in grey coarse clothing, holding up a painting, occasionally asking passersby if they wanted to buy his art.

The boy's face flushed when he spoke, and after being rejected, he didn't linger but quickly moved on, taking a long time to gather the courage to ask the next person.

"Oh my, how can someone be so clumsy in this world." Mu Shuangshuang held her forehead, expressing helplessness along with a sense of exasperation.

In no time, she noticed that Liu Zian only approached those who looked poorly dressed but had soft expressions, the kind of people who seemed like "nice people."

The problem was, these people didn't have Copper Coins in their pockets and lacked scholarly knowledge, they simply wouldn't buy.

Those interested in buying paintings are, if not people of culture, at least well-dressed, right? Otherwise, who would have the spare money to buy such things to display at home?

"Perhaps he thought those people would be easier to talk to!"

What Mu Shuangshuang observed, Lu Yuanfeng also noticed.

"Wow, Fengzi, not bad, your observation skills are sharp, and your insight is amazing." Mu Shuangshuang gave a thumbs up, sincerely praising Lu Yuanfeng.

Even Mu Shuangshuang admired his responsiveness to certain things.

She didn't consider herself because this was her line of work; her job was just like this, focusing on details and comparing sharpness.

But Lu Yuanfeng wasn't, although he had spent a few years in the military. However, Mu Shuangshuang believed that ancient military camps definitely didn't teach such things.

In other words, his insight was either innate or formed through constant accumulation over time.

Lu Yuanfeng scratched his head in embarrassment, and the bitterness in his heart disappeared instantly, as he suddenly pointed generously at Liu Zian and asked, "Shuangshuang, why don't we help him out? I heard your uncle has already gathered the travel expenses to Qianzhou Prefecture."

"Not only has he gathered the travel expenses, but he has also gathered a lot! I heard my uncle's mother-in-law secretly gave him fifty taels, and given the character of my grandparents, they might give all their savings to my uncle.

I reckon my uncle has at least a hundred and ten taels of Silver in hand now."

This time it was Lu Yuanfeng's turn to be surprised. Not to mention that a peasant family couldn't bring out a hundred taels of Silver, even people in these towns probably hadn't seen what a hundred taels looked like in their lives.

The Old Mu Family was indeed generous.

"But Liu Zian wouldn't need that much Silver, would he?"

A hundred taels, even painting till one's hands are worn out, wouldn't necessarily earn that.

"He doesn't need it. Judging by his appearance, I reckon five taels of Silver would suffice."

Liu Zian isn't like her pretentious uncle, who also wants to hire teachers; the guy probably only needs a couple of Silver for carriage money, and some paper, pens, and food and accommodations.

With some frugality, five taels of Silver would be enough.

But even so, given Liu Zian's stubbornness, even with a year, he probably couldn't make five taels of Silver.

"Forget it, let's go take a look." Mu Shuangshuang packed up the remaining twelve straw fans, tidied up the stall, and headed in Liu Zian's direction.

At this moment, Liu Zian's head was buzzing, and his vision was getting blurry.

After being out for nearly a morning, he hadn't sold a single painting and almost got beaten up.

Just as he mustered the courage to approach the next person, a shadow cast over him, and he looked up to see Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng standing together.

"Miss Shuangshuang, what are you doing here?"

Liu Zian's face lit up with surprise, not expecting to run into her like this.

Lu Yuanfeng, who had been ignored, coughed lightly to remind Liu Zian not to overlook him.

Only then did Liu Zian, flustered, greet Lu Yuanfeng. "Brother Lu, fancy meeting you, are you also doing business today?"

The words "doing business" sounded awkward coming from Liu Zian's mouth, grating to Mu Shuangshuang's ears, so she got straight to the point.

"Liu Zian, have you sold any paintings?"

Liu Zian turned his head and shook it. "Nope!"

"How much travel money do you think you need for the exam?" Mu Shuangshuang asked.

Liu Zian didn't understand why the girl in front of him was asking this; he thought Shuangshuang was going to give him money and quickly shook his head. "I won't use your money."

"You wish! Why would I pay for your exam?" Mu Shuangshuang rolled her eyes. This guy wasn't close to her, yet his presumption was quite intimate.

Was she someone who just lends money to anyone?

Liu Zian felt his face flush with shame over his presumptuousness, and while he wanted to apologize, he didn't know how to start.

Lu Yuanfeng struggled to hold back his laughter; he had to admit that Shuangshuang's disdainful expression was quite charming.

"When Shuangshuang asks, just answer, maybe she knows a way to help you make money." Lu Yuanfeng helped explain for Mu Shuangshuang.

Only then did Liu Zian, with a flushed face, speak, "About six taels of Silver."

Mu Shuangshuang nodded satisfactorily; it matched her estimation. "Here's the deal. The three of us will sell fans for a morning; if we earn less than six taels, all the Silver goes to you; if it exceeds six taels, the rest goes to me and Fengzi."

"What?" Liu Zian's mouth gaped wide; he looked at Mu Shuangshuang in disbelief, seeming to doubt her words.

Mu Shuangshuang was always lazy to explain; after all, in this situation, making money for Liu Zian equated to making money for herself.

Of course, she was absolutely confident in Liu Zian's painting skills; with a bit of guidance, she might be able to earn a nice profit.

"So where are we going now?" Lu Yuanfeng asked.

"To where they sell fans, I want to buy twenty folding fans, preferably without any designs."

"Aren't the fans we have good enough?" Lu Yuanfeng asked.

"Fengzi, I just praised you for being smart, why have you turned foolish? Six taels of Silver isn't a small amount; normal sales won't meet it, so we have to target wealthy buyers. Have you ever seen a rich landlord holding a straw fan?"

A fan is a must-have for literati and wealthy people's pretensions, especially in this hot weather, it's easy to sell.

Moreover, if done properly, there might be unexpected results.

Mu Shuangshuang and the others quickly found a fan shop, where Mu Shuangshuang paid for twenty blank folding fans, each costing her twenty wen, which almost pained her to death.

"Shuangshuang, are you sure about this?"

Liu Zian, following Mu Shuangshuang's instructions, was nervously painting on the fans; with each one completed, his expression turned more serious.

It was the first time he painted in this style, not that it wasn't doable, it just was entirely different from what he usually painted.

"Of course it's fine, just you wait and see!"