

## Folly 261

Chapter 261: Mercilessly Slaughtered

Mu Shuangshuang chose a bustling street market, a place where carriages couldn't reach.

Generally, people who went shopping would bring a lot of money with them, and shopping itself was an activity that consumed energy and was hot.

At such a time, handing over a fan should be able to attract people's attention.

As for whether they would pay or not, that was beyond her control.

Mu Shuangshuang scoped out a middle-aged man who appeared to be in his forties or fifties, wearing silk clothing. After greeting Lu Yuanfeng and Liu Zian, she rushed over.

"Sir, would you like to see a fan? This is a unique fan, one of a kind in the world, a rare find!"

As soon as Mu Shuangshuang spoke, the middle-aged man became interested. "I have never heard of a unique fan before, let me take a look."

The man generously accepted the fan Mu Shuangshuang handed over and slowly unfolded it.

Suddenly, the fan displayed a vivid image of snow-covered scenery. The painting was very lifelike, especially at the center, where there was a woman wearing a sheer dress, barefoot. The middle-aged man immediately felt a coolness rush over him.

The more he looked, the cooler he felt.

"Little girl, how much is this fan?"

The middle-aged man couldn't put down the fan, touching and examining it repeatedly.

"Not much, five hundred wen!"

Mu Shuangshuang took twenty liang for the fan, with a reason. At five hundred wen each, Liu Zian would get six liang, and she could earn four liang.

The middle-aged man hesitated for a moment, but when he looked at the painting on the fan, he decided to pay, took the fan, and left.

Liu Zian was stunned at the side, amazed at how quickly five hundred wen came in.

Lu Yuanfeng wasn't surprised, because everything Shuangshuang did was beyond ordinary understanding.

"Shuangshuang is very capable; this is nothing to her."

It was a bit of showing off as Lu Yuanfeng glanced at Liu Zian while speaking.

After all, he spent more time with Shuangshuang than Liu Zian did and knew her better.

"But why did that person buy it without hesitation? Clearly, the mainstream paintings are landscapes, flowers, birds, insects, and fish."

The paintings Liu Zian intended to sell were mainly these types.

So when Shuangshuang asked him to paint icy scenes, he found it strange.

"Perhaps it's because they're rare. Everyone doing the same thing loses its uniqueness." Lu Yuanfeng replied.

Coincidentally, Mu Shuangshuang came over, nodded in agreement at this sentence: "Fengzi is right, if ten people write the same good article, I'd rather read the eleventh person's slightly worse one."

And when it's hot, people look for ways to cool down. My fan gives a psychological suggestion that makes people feel less hot, as they say, calm heart, coolness."

Mu Shuangshuang's reasoning left Liu Zian dumbfounded. He stared at Mu Shuangshuang, his face full of curiosity.

"Shuangshuang, how do you know these things?"

Logically, Shuangshuang shouldn't understand these things.

Girls from farming families had no opportunity for education, not to mention that the conditions at Shuangshuang's house didn't seem great, and they wouldn't hire a teacher to come and teach.

"I heard it from storytellers!"

Mu Shuangshuang casually threw out a reason, then picked up another fan and went out again.

Liu Zian wanted to offer to teach her these things, but he was afraid that his actions would make Shuangshuang feel he was being too frivolous and abrupt with a fine lady.

For the first time, Liu Zian planted a small seed in his heart.

Mu Shuangshuang sold several fans using the same method. Sometimes, when people thought they were good, they'd buy one for a friend too. As a result, there was only one fan left.

This time, Mu Shuangshuang didn't carefully select her target. She found a man who looked relatively well-dressed, handed him a fan, and used the same introduction.

"You're quite interesting. What, are you planning to get into the straw fan business?"

The voice was exceptionally familiar. Mu Shuangshuang looked up and, unsurprisingly, saw Xue Yi's face, which came with an innate sense of rustic superiority.

Dressed in a pretentious manner, Xue Yi couldn't resist teasing Mu Shuangshuang right away.

"Yes, Manager Xue probably wouldn't care for my little trinket, so I've decided to quit the business."

After selling nineteen fans, Mu Shuangshuang had earned enough money. This last one, she thought of taking back home for Xiao Han to play with.

"Don't go, since you've already chosen me to do business with, you should follow through with the whole process."

Xue Yi took the fan from Mu Shuangshuang's hand, opened the fan, and looked at it, nodding with satisfaction.

"It's a fine painting, but unfortunately, the fan's material isn't good, and the ink doesn't smell scholarly; it actually has a bad odor."

Mu Shuangshuang rolled her eyes, "Manager Xue really loves to joke, but how old are you this year?"

Xue Yi put his hand by his mouth, finding the little girl in front of him more and more interesting.

"I'm twenty-six this year!" Xue Yi answered with a serious expression. (I've adjusted Xue Yi's age to twenty-six, unmarried, and he's not a male supporting character; he just finds the female protagonist amusing.)

"I'm only thirteen this year. You're a full cycle plus one year older than me, is it necessary to keep picking on a little girl like me? If you don't feel embarrassed, I certainly feel it's shameful."

Xue Yi's mouth twitched; it was the first time someone called him shameful.

Considering his reputation in Qingshan Town, he wasn't a big man, but at least a smiling tiger that many feared!

How come he's worthless in front of this little girl?

As the two of them were in a standstill, Lu Yuanfeng sensed something was wrong and was the first to rush over to protect Mu Shuangshuang behind him.

Lu Yuanfeng knew from the beginning that the man from the Xue family wasn't friendly to Shuangshuang, and he feared Xue Yi might do something bad.

"So there's backup, but I'm not planning on bullying you today, little girl. I really like this fan, how much is it?"

From behind Lu Yuanfeng, Mu Shuangshuang peeked out half her head and made a grimace at Xue Yi. "Not for sale... unless you buy the rest of my fans as well."

To help Liu Zian, Mu Shuangshuang still had twelve straw fans that hadn't been sold, and now it was getting late. If delayed further, she would return to the village at the hottest time.

Mu Shuangshuang had two choices: either take the fans back or randomly give them away.

Xue Yi was no fool; even though he knew there must be a catch in Shuangshuang's words, he still nodded. "But you can't purposely raise the price on me; it has to be the same as others."

"Of course, I sold the fan in your hand for one liang to others, and I'm selling it to you at the same price. As for these straw fans, you can determine the price."

Mu Shuangshuang threw the problem back to Xue Yi.

Xue Yi glanced at the straw fan in Lu Yuanfeng's hand, hesitated for a long time before speaking, "One and a half liang, not more."

"Deal!" Mu Shuangshuang nodded with satisfaction.

Slaughtering a sheep doesn't always mean using the knife yourself; handing the knife to the sheep and letting it do the work can also be a good strategy.

Chapter 262: The Damn Little Aunt

When Mu Shuangshuang handed six taels of silver to Liu Zian, she noticed his hands were trembling.

It wasn't just trembling; he had never expected he could earn so much money. Although he pondered for five days before deciding to earn through selling calligraphy and paintings.

But when he actually started selling, he realized things weren't as simple as he imagined.

"Take it, why are you still standing there?" Mu Shuangshuang urged him.

Only then did Liu Zian take the six taels of silver.

Holding this silver in his chest, it felt incredibly heavy. Liu Zian felt he was carrying something very important at this moment.

In fact, this six taels of silver were indeed crucial for him. With this silver, he could attend the Autumn Examination in Qianzhou Prefecture. Although passing was uncertain, at least he had a chance.

Liu Zian secretly vowed that if he succeeded, he would definitely repay the girl in front of him well.

"Thank you, Shuangshuang!" Liu Zian said, concealing his excitement.

"You should thank yourself; people bought the fan because your painting is good."

Mu Shuangshuang always said what she thought. Liu Zian was talented—that was a fact. Plus, she had some little schemes, like she said, she didn't know if Mu Dade would pass the exams.

But one thing was certain: if Mu Dade did pass, with his vindictive nature and Mrs. Jin's stinginess, the third branch would definitely suffer.

As the saying goes, civilians can't fight officials. If Mu Dade really became an official, it would be troublesome.

But if she helped Liu Zian, regardless of how he would repay her, at least there was a chance to stop Mu Dade's persecution.

"It's not that, I..." Liu Zian was about to say more, but Mu Shuangshuang interrupted.

"Enough, it's getting late today. I need to head back with Fengzi, take care of yourself, and I hope next time we meet, you will return in fine clothes."

Mu Shuangshuang didn't say much, tossing her expectation to Liu Zian, and hurriedly walked in the direction of Er Gui Village with Lu Yuanfeng.

On this trip, she made a fortune!

Five taels of silver, instead of saying Liu Zian benefited from her, it was her cleverness that let her ride Liu Zian's coattail.

Lu Yuanfeng looked at the cunningly smiling Shuangshuang with a face full of indulgence; he knew Shuangshuang was a little moneygrubber. Every time she earned money, she showed this expression.

"Fengzi, I'm so happy; I made so much money today." As she spoke, Mu Shuangshuang handed two taels of silver plus nine hundred coins to Lu Yuanfeng. "This is yours."

Lu Yuanfeng refused to accept it. "Shuangshuang, you earned this, I didn't do anything."

Lu Yuanfeng knew how hard Shuangshuang worked, getting up so early in the morning, and yet despite her efforts, she still wanted to share half of the silver with him, especially today's fan selling, where he barely contributed.

"Fengzi, you aren't keeping your word. We agreed; now it's summer, hunting is rare, I call you for business, and we split the silver earned. When winter comes, and there's no business, I'll go into the mountains with you, you hunt, and we split the prey."

Mu Shuangshuang was unhappy; this silly boy was truly naive.

Last time buying cloth, he paid more than a tael, and he didn't mind it.

"Shuangshuang, this time is different."

"How is it different, tell me?" Mu Shuangshuang raised her head, staring straight at Lu Yuanfeng. She wanted to see how this silly boy would explain.

"It just can't happen!" Lu Yuanfeng was anxious, insisting he just couldn't take it.

"Then don't walk with me, we won't cooperate. You are unwilling for this, and that."

After speaking, Mu Shuangshuang strode forward, not even placing her hand on Lu Yuanfeng's wheelbarrow.

Lu Yuanfeng panicked, dropped the wheelbarrow, and chased after her to grab her hand.

"Please, Shuangshuang, I didn't mean it like that. I'm sorry, but I really can't take this silver. I can take the cold noodles money, but not a penny from the fan selling."

Mu Shuangshuang was so angry she could stomp. She wished she could be a shrew, throwing a tantrum and threatening, ensuring Lu Yuanfeng would agree.

In truth, Mu Shuangshuang didn't really want to stop cooperating with Lu Yuanfeng; she just felt he was too honest. If he stayed like this, when would they earn enough silver to send Yuanbao to the school? When would they save enough to buy land?

If a farming family has no land, it's like a fish without water; eventually, there will be problems.

"How about this, I'll exchange this silver for a piece of dry land. You can plant some crops; can you accept this? I already told Uncle Fu I want to buy some dry land."

Dry land was cheaper than paddy fields, but it still needed two or three taels of silver. The money Mu Shuangshuang had could only buy two acres of dry land at most, and the rest had to be saved for Xiao Han's schooling and pay back Zhang Huai Shu.

Thinking about these, Mu Shuangshuang felt overwhelmed.

Originally, Lu Yuanfeng wanted to refuse but swallowed his words under Mu Shuangshuang's intimidating gaze.

The two reached an agreement happily and went back to Er Gui Village.

Mu Shuangshuang, carrying food for the two little ones at home, returned to her yard and heard Little Zhi crying heartbreakingly.

Xiao Han was beside comforting Little Zhi, his eyes were also red.

Mu Shuangshuang rushed over in urgency, "What's wrong with Little Zhi?"

Seeing Mu Shuangshuang, Little Zhi cried loudly hugging her, about to faint.

Mu Shuangshuang noticed a fresh red five-finger mark on Little Zhi's right cheek; a small hand's shape, clearly left by a woman.

Her face turned cold as she comforted Little Zhi in her arms.

Inside, Mu Dashan's eyes were red with anxiety. The red marks on his daughter's face were obviously slap marks.

"Who did this? Xiao Han, do you know who it was?"

This was Mu Dashan's first time getting angry, speaking almost in a shout.

Xiao Han held back tears, speaking while crying: "Aunt stole Little Zhi's fan. Little Zhi refused and wanted it back, but Aunt wouldn't give it back. They fought, and Aunt slapped Little Zhi."

"It's my fault; I didn't protect my sister. I... boo-hoo..." Xiao Han cried, making Mu Shuangshuang's heart ache.

Mu Xiangxiang, she knew it; there wasn't a good one in the Old Mu Family, hitting even children - are they even human?

Mu Dashan struggled to get up from the bed, "I will find Xiangxiang; I have to ask her why she hit our Little Zhi and took things from others – is this justified?"

"Dad, please don't go. They know how to bully you. If you get upset and something happens, what will we do?" Mu Shuangshuang pressed Mu Dashan's hand.

Zhang Huai Shu had advised him not to get upset. If he went there, he would get mocked; if something happened, all her efforts would be wasted.

"Sister, I'll go with you!" Xiao Han stood up, hastily wiping the tears from the corners of his eyes.

"You stay here and take care of your sister. I'll be right back!"

#### Chapter 263: Smashing Little Aunt's Face

Mu Shuangshuang stormed into the Old Mu Family's Mu Dade's chamber. Ever since Mu Xiangxiang came back, she chose the most comfortable room in the chamber.

Now that Mu Dade's family went for the exam, this place has become Mu Xiangxiang's paradise.

At this moment, Mu Xiangxiang was chatting with everyone inside the room.

She held the straw fan in her hand, occasionally playing with it, and occasionally gave herself a light fan, instantly feeling cool.

"Little sister, this is a good thing, can you lend it to your sister for a few days?"

Mu Zhenzhen felt the breeze from the fan, cool, cool, and wanted one for herself.

"Second sister, you must be kidding me, in such hot weather, have you ever seen someone lend a fan to someone else?"

Even if you want it, you can only buy one yourself. This is a good thing I brought back from the town, it's worth an ounce of silver."

Mu Xiangxiang has liked lying since she was young, a little thing in her mouth might become a big deal, just like now, clearly something she snatched from Little Zhi, yet staunchly refuses to admit it.

"Humph, petty, stingy, and to think I was so good to you before." Mu Zhenzhen turned her head jealously, no longer paying attention to Mu Xiangxiang.

Mrs. Lin took the opportunity to flatter. "Xiangxiang must have had a good time at her great aunt's place, look at her face, rosy white, and this waist, so slender..."

Tsk tsk tsk, even as a woman, Sister-in-law is moved, if she goes out, who knows how many lads she'll charm."

Listening to this, Mu Xiangxiang was overjoyed. She put her hand on her chin, and instantly, a layer of face powder came off.

Mu Xiangxiang is indeed quite pretty, also vibrant.

Of course, this is credited to the Old Mu Family's genes. The entire Old Mu Family, from Mr. Mu down to the children, there wasn't an ugly one, even Mu Danian, the most handsome face in the village, showed some of that potential.

But, most people in the Old Mu Family only grew a face, not brains.

Mu Xiangxiang was one of them, her taste in things was a bit touching, maybe she had seen too many girls in the city use rouge and powder, so she did too.

Every time buying the whitest face powder, applying it in a thick layer on her face. Sometimes, with a slightly larger movement on her face, the powder would fall off.

Then applying lip oil on her lips, resembling a blood-red mouth, plus being childlike, she liked colorful clothes, dresses made of floral fabric and green cloth stitched together, as ugly as it gets.

"Haha, Second Sister, you really know how to talk! I'll lend you the fan for a couple of swipes."

Mu Xiangxiang giggled and handed her fan to Mrs. Lin, who took it and fanned her face vigorously.

Ah, finally comfortable, this hot weather indeed needs a fan!

Mrs. Lin hadn't got comfortable for long before Mu Shuangshuang kicked open the door with a "bang", and immediately rushed to Mu Xiangxiang, landing a slap on her face.

"Smack!"

Mu Xiangxiang was stunned by the hit, staring blankly at Mu Shuangshuang, as did Mrs. Lin and Mu Zhenzhen.

Her face hurt like burning, Mu Xiangxiang reacted after a good while, opened her mouth and started swearing.

"You brat, who let you into my room, don't you have manners! You...you dare hit me."

"Who allowed you to hit Little Zhi, who allowed you to snatch her fan?" Mu Shuangshuang asked sternly, face cold.

Mu Xiangxiang felt guilty, yet the burning pain on her face made her rage extremely.

"Which eye saw me hit that little beast? Don't accuse me without evidence."

Seeing Mu Xiangxiang calling Little Zhi a little beast, this time Mu Shuangshuang didn't hold back, she wrestled Mu Xiangxiang down onto the kang, sitting on her stomach.

Then started slapping left and right, one smack after another, her hands quickly covered in rouge and face powder.

Mrs. Lin's mouth gaped wider than an egg, pointed at Mu Shuangshuang, "You... you..."

Stuttered for quite a while, not forming a complete sentence.

Mu Zhenzhen finally reacted, shouting loudly towards the direction of Old Mu Family inside.

"Mom, it's terrible, Xiangxiang is about to be beaten to death by the brat~"

Mu Shuangshuang heard Mu Zhenzhen's voice, extremely annoyed, grabbed Mu Xiangxiang's shoes, threw them one after another at Mu Zhenzhen's nose, making her cover her face and retreat, yelling.

This big commotion naturally attracted Old Mrs. Mu, she hurriedly tiptoed to Mu Xiangxiang's room.

"You cruel brat, you dare hit my Xiangxiang, I'll take your life!"

Old Mrs. Mu was so angry she jumped, but Mu Shuangshuang was in the heat of the moment, ignoring her entirely.

At this moment, a song popped into Mu Shuangshuang's mind: "My left hand, right hand, one slow motion..."

Mu Xiangxiang cried till her voice was hoarse, Old Mrs. Mu pulled Mu Shuangshuang desperately, trying to drag her off Mu Xiangxiang, yet neither she nor the two could budge Shuangshuang.

Wasted efforts for nothing, Mu Xiangxiang was being crushed on the kang, almost spitting blood, her hands and feet flailing like an octopus, but not pushing Mu Shuangshuang off.

"Mom, Xiangxiang is in pain..."

Old Mrs. Mu wailed from the heart, having no choice, she could only shout at the few men still at home in the Old Mu Family.

"Old man, come quickly, our girl is getting beaten to death!"

"Second, Fifth, stop lying there, hurry and teach the brat a lesson..."

People from the Old Mu Family heard, of course, Mu Dashan in the house did too, he disregarded everything and ran towards the Old Mu Family's chamber with Xiao Han.

In no time, the chamber was crowded with onlookers.

Mr. Mu stepped forward and scolded Shuangshuang: "Shuang, what are you doing, stop immediately!"

Mu Shuangshuang, taking advantage of Mr. Mu's moment of distraction, delivered another slap directly on Mu Xiangxiang's mouth, instantly making it swell.

"Second, Fifth, what are you standing there for, hurry and pull her down!"

With Mr. Mu's shout of anger, Mu Dazhong and Mu Danian rushed over, but Mu Shuangshuang bounced off the kang when they were close, snatching the straw fan from Mrs. Lin's hand.

Mu Shuangshuang's swift movement left everyone unresponsive, Mu Xiangxiang habitually kicked around, and it happened to land a kick on Mu Dazhong and Mu Danian's indescribable parts, one on each side.

Suddenly, the Old Mu Family gained two more injured members.

"Ouch, ouch, ouch..." Mu Danian clutched his lower body, howling like a ghost, bouncing around like a monkey, funny indeed.

Before Mu Danian could recover, Old Mrs. Mu rushed up, forcing away her two sons.

Poor Mu Danian, being knocked over, not lucky, the kicked spot hit the corner of the chair...

Chapter 264: Has Mu Danian Been Defeated?

Mu Danian let out a miserable scream, and his face instantly turned pale. Beads of sweat rolled off his forehead and onto the ground.

But the people of the Old Mu Family had only the weeping and pitiful Mu Xiangxiang on the kang in their eyes and hearts.

Old Mrs. Mu climbed onto the kang, wailing over Mu Xiangxiang with cries of "my sweetheart, darling, mom's treasure," a heart-wrenching display that made one feel sorry just to watch.

Mr. Mu's face was flushed, his eyes bulging as he huffily demanded, "Shuang, what exactly are you doing? What right do you have to hit your little aunt?"

"She deserved it! Who told her to steal Little Zhi's things and then hit Little Zhi?"

Mu Shuangshuang shot a venomous look at Mu Xiangxiang, who was so frightened that she shrank back into Old Mrs. Mu's embrace.

"Yet you can't beat your little aunt so badly. No matter what, she is still your elder." Mr. Mu continued to scold from the side, clearly intending to side with Mu Xiangxiang.

"Grandfather, this is entirely Little Aunt's fault. If she hadn't stolen Little Zhi's things and hit Little Zhi, would I have beaten her? Little Zhi is only five; if something happened to him, who would take responsibility?"

"And who will take responsibility for Xiangxiang's injuries?" Old Mrs. Mu wiped away her tears and loudly berated Mu Shuangshuang, "I've always known you're a troublemaker, picking fights with family members. Are you even human? Look at what you've done to Xiangxiang's pretty face; it's all deformed."

"Grandma, the white and yellow stuff on Little Aunt's face, looking like shit, is rouge and face powder. Don't blame it on me." Mu Shuangshuang rolled her eyes, showing no fear of Old Mrs. Mu.

"Y-you... Mom, listen to her, this nasty girl says I have shit on my face. She bullies me, you have to stand up for me, or I won't live anymore!" Mu Xiangxiang cried and whined in Old Mrs. Mu's arms, occasionally snuggling closer.

Mu Shuangshuang felt nauseated watching this. Mu Xiangxiang was the same age as her, also thirteen.

But because she ate well, she was taller and not as thin as herself, especially her ample bosom.

At a glance, she didn't look like a child, more like a wet nurse!

She really couldn't stand this kind of heavy taste coquettishness.

"You do have shit on your face. If you don't believe me, ask Second Aunt; she feels nauseous just seeing your face."

Suddenly mentioned, Mrs. Lin quickly jumped out to refute, "Nasty girl, what nonsense are you spouting? Although Xiangxiang's face is ugly, it's not shit. Are you blind, can't even recognize rouge and face powder?"

"Listen, even Second Aunt says you're ugly. If I were you, I'd just bash my head and die. Being ugly isn't your fault, but scaring people is."

Mrs. Lin's thoughtless words infuriated Mu Xiangxiang so much her eyes rolled back, almost fainting.

"Mom, the nasty girl is humiliating me..."

Mu Xiangxiang cried again, and Old Mrs. Mu spit with force in Mu Shuangshuang's direction, "You nasty girl, shut up. If you keep talking nonsense, I'll tear your mouth apart."

"I'm just stating the facts. Little Aunt's face is ugly. And the clothes she's wearing, what are they? A sheet or a floral cotton-padded jacket? Red with green is worse than dog shit, don't you know? It's embarrassing just to look at it."

"Fifth, come beat this nasty girl to death. I don't want to see her!"

The Mu Dania in Old Mrs. Mu's mouth was still clutching his sensitive area, unable to get up.

He felt like he was done for, that he'd never be a man again...

"Mom, I'm ruined down there, my branch will be cut off forever..."

"Huh?" Old Mrs. Mu was bewildered, taking a long time to understand what Mu Dania meant.

"Old man, go get a doctor, quickly!"

Being unable to have children was no small matter, far more important than Mu Xiangxiang's issue. Mr. Mu personally went to get a doctor, and everyone else in the room rushed to comfort him.

Everyone's attention was on Mu Xiangxiang and Mu Dania, no one noticing Mu Shuangshuang. Mu Shuangshuang thought to herself that rather than waiting for them to deal with those two troublemakers and then turn on her, she should slip away now.

Once back in her own room, she really had nothing to fear.

Upon leaving, she happened to bump into Mu Dashan coming to the rescue.

"Shuangshuang, you... are you alright?"

"I'm fine. I'm just fine."

Mu Dashan didn't believe her. He stepped forward, carefully inspecting her, and seeing no bruises on her face or hands, reassured that the Old Mu Family hadn't resorted to violence.

Mu Shuangshuang didn't want to waste time here and quickly said, "Dad, let's leave quickly. Grandma and Little Aunt have ruined Uncle, and they'll be looking for trouble with me soon!"

Mu Dashan was also shocked, but he couldn't resist his daughter's urging.

In no time, the third branch returned home. Mu Shuangshuang comforted Little Zhi in her arms, promising delicious food for lunch, finally stopping his crying.

As for the Old Mu Family, it had been noisy ever since calling for the doctor, with Mu Danian's wailing like a ghost, only stopping when Yu Si Niang returned home at noon!

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The news of Mu Danian's incapacitation spread quickly. When the villagers finished their work, they gathered to peer over the Old Mu Family's courtyard walls, using ladders to observe from high up.

A few even maliciously took pleasure in their misfortune.

"Finally, the widows in the village are safe. That little rascal Mu Danian used to pinch the butts of passing widows. Now his manhood is gone, he won't dare to be so audacious."

"Ha ha, I heard Mu Danian brought this on himself, crashing into the table like a lunatic."

"That's simple. Maybe he was thinking about women!"

Rumors are like this, changing with every person they pass through.

Mu Danian wasn't actually incapacitated; he just thought he was at the time because it hurt so much.

Zhang Huai Shu prescribed some medicine for Mu Danian and reminded the Old Mu Family of a few precautions.

"Abstain from sex, eat vegetarian, and lie down more, finish all the medication!"

Zhang Huai Shu said with a stern face, like a robot, one word at a time to the Old Mu Family.

"Old Man Zhang, are you sure our Danian isn't really ruined?"

Since he was still an unmarried son, Old Mrs. Mu was more concerned, so she asked again.

"I said there's nothing wrong, why do you keep nagging, old woman? Also, your Old Mu Family is so troublesome; always this problem or that problem, making a fuss over the slightest thing, aren't you afraid of being laughed at?"

Zhang Huai Shu might be the most unlikeable doctor, not sparing any feelings when despising the Old Mu Family.

"You..." Old Mrs. Mu was furious, how could there be such a doctor in this world?

"What about me? You're not thinking of not paying, are you? I'm telling you, it's five coins for the house call, ninety coins for the medicine, not a single penny less, or I'll report you to the government and let your Old Mu Family face a lawsuit!"

Chapter 265: Mu Dashan Protects His Own

Old Mrs. Mu angrily threw ninety-five coins at Zhang Huai Shu. After Zhang Huai Shu picked up the money, she kicked him out, causing him pain and declaring he would no longer treat the Old Mu Family.

"Fine, just don't. Damn swindler, hurry up and get far away from me, or I'll chop you up if I see you again."

Old Mrs. Mu shouted curses at Zhang Huai Shu.

These words, in the eyes of the villagers, only confirmed the evidence that Mu Danian was ruined.

It also made the villagers more convinced that they absolutely shouldn't let their daughters or friends' daughters marry Mu Danian; not marrying is minor, but being a widow is major.

"Mom, it hurts so bad. I want to eat meat..."

Mu Danian was actually not hurting anymore, but realized that such concern was rare; he might as well take advantage and get some food.

Now that Mu Danian's manhood was preserved, Old Mrs. Mu didn't care anymore, her attitude cooled significantly.

"Eat what? When your brother left, he took all the money from the house, where's the money for meat!"

"Alright, things are this way, you should say less." Mr. Mu reprimanded from the side.

"You dead old man, why blame me? Why don't you say anything about what that pesky girl from the third branch did?"

Your heart is really biased, you think that girl can earn money now, has skills, and want to bring her back?"

"You're crazy. Fifth is like this, and you're hurting him. I say something, and you blame me. You're becoming more unreasonable. If you don't want to manage this family, hand it over to the wives of the second and fourth sons!"

Managing the family meant managing money; not managing meant Old Mrs. Mu had to hand over her savings and stash.

"Pah! You wish! As long as I'm alive, no one will manage the Mu Family but me! I'll go check on Xiangxiang now, you dead old man look after your good son. If anything happens again, he can treat it himself!"

Old Mrs. Mu returned to the kitchen, taking the lunch made by Mrs. Liu from the fourth branch to Mu Xiangxiang, inevitably hearing Xinaxiang's grievances.

"Mom, look at my face, is it still presentable?" Mu Xiangxiang pointed at her swollen face, crying.

"There, don't cry, wait till I have time, and I'll sort out that nasty girl, so she won't do any more bad things."

"Yes, yes, best to peel her skin, scratch her face, so she can call me ugly." Mu Xiangxiang nodded vigorously and told Old Mrs. Mu how she wanted Shuangshuang to be punished.

"Alright, alright, my little darling, as long as you don't cry, I'll do whatever you say!"

...

...

All afternoon, Mu Shuangshuang, Little Zhi, and Xiao Han were working hard on the five fen of dry land allocated by the Old Mu Family. Though it was called dry land, it was no different from barren land.

This dry land was originally used for planting cotton, but the weeds grew too abundantly, gradually ruining the cotton. Now, the cotton in the field is the same size as when it was just planted.

It seems like picking cotton in July or August is impossible. Mu Shuangshuang gritted her teeth and decided to pull out all the cotton seedlings and replace them with vegetable seeds from Zhuangzi's family.

"Sister, if you pull out all the cotton, what will we wear in winter?"

Cotton could be used to make cotton clothes, which Little Zhi understood.

But she didn't know why her sister wouldn't keep the cotton.

"Don't worry, we can wear fur clothes in winter. I and Brother Yuan Feng can hunt in the mountains. As for these cotton plants, they're overdue; they haven't yielded by now, and even if they keep growing, there won't be cotton. Rather than wasting land, it's better to turn it into a vegetable garden."

"Mmm!" Little Zhi nodded, somewhat understanding.

Her face had already deflated now, but the tear marks remained; her maturity made Mu Shuangshuang ache.

"Little Zhi, does your face still hurt?" Mu Shuangshuang asked hesitantly.

"It doesn't hurt!" Little Zhi shook her head, but seeing the worry in her sister's eyes, she nodded again.

"It hurts a little bit, sister can blow on it, and it'll be fine." She said, bringing her face closer.

Mu Shuangshuang, holding back tears, blew on Little Zhi's face, comforting her, "In the future, when sister goes out, I'll bring you along, not letting anyone bully you."

"No need, Little Zhi wants to stay home to take care of dad. If Aunt comes again, I'll beat her up!"

The little girl held up her tiny fists earnestly.

Came to think of it, Little Zhi's fist-waving looked cute, Mu Shuangshuang rubbed her head, nodding with satisfaction.

"Good, that's the spirit of my sister! If anyone bullies you, just swing your fists, sister will back you up!"

After this talk with Little Zhi, Mu Shuangshuang felt more energized while working. She calculated that, together with the five fen plot, her family had seven fen and five of vegetable land.

Not only enough for her own family to eat, but when snow comes and the ground hardens, she could take these vegetables to town to sell them for a good price.

After another round of hard work, Mu Shuangshuang finally finished working the five fen plot, and time had reached dusk. She knew continuing was impractical, so she took the two children back home.

At nightfall, Mu Shuangshuang put dinner on the table, when an uninvited guest arrived. Mr. Mu barged into the third branch's kitchen without greeting, wearing a shabby coat, holding a broken pipe.

"Dad, why are you here? Want some dinner?" Mu Dashan invited courteously, then turned his head telling Shuangshuang to serve some rice.

Tonight, there was again meat on the third branch's table—a couple ounces of meat minced and mixed with onions, made into soup.

Mr. Mu's nose was filled with the smell of meat, and he even felt his mouth watering.

But recalling his motives for coming, he hardened his face.

"Third, I'm not here for dinner, I'm here to talk reason. You might not know what Shuang did; she beat up your little sister today, and her face is still swollen."

Mr. Mu feared Mu Dashan didn't know, so he explained again.

Who knew Mu Dashan would actually nod, "I know about this!"

"Since you know, I'll say no more! Xiangxiang wants Shuangshuang to apologize, admit fault, and be her maid for two months, then she'll let it go."

So, Mr. Mu's real purpose in coming was to make Mu Shuangshuang apologize.

Mu Shuangshuang sneered, eyes filled with displeasure looking at Mr. Mu.

"Dad, in this matter, Shuang is not at fault; Xiangxiang is the one in the wrong! She shouldn't have taken Little Zhi's things, nor should she have hit Little Zhi! I will not let Shuang apologize."

Chapter 266: Xia Guagua's Path of Pursuing Love

"Third Son, you are indulging and sheltering!"

Mr. Mu's body trembled slightly. Before coming here, he had been full of confidence. Despite the third family being split off, they still respected him as the elder.

What he said, the third son would not dare to disobey.

"Father, just think of me as indulging or sheltering. After all, my daughter Mu Dashan wasn't taken care of for the first thirteen years. She suffered hardships.

For the rest of her life, even if it costs me everything, I will protect her at all costs!"

Mu Dashan's words were resounding and resolute, leaving no room for doubt.

Mu Shuangshuang looked at the man she called "Baozi's father" in front of her, and her heart felt warm. She felt that the purpose of hitting Mu Xiangxiang went far beyond just avenging Little Zhi.

She felt even more that her father, Baozi, had finally awakened.

Not just Mu Dashan, Yu Si Niang also spoke. "Father, you always say our third branch should do more work, but what have we gotten from that extra work?"

Look at the children, how thin they've become! And the third son, he's now full of ailments and cannot do heavy work or stay in the fields for long, yet who in the family has cared for him?"

Little Zhi also rushed forward, pointing at his face: "Grandpa, look at Little Zhi's face, isn't it still swollen?"

Mr. Mu lowered his head. Little Zhi's face wasn't swollen anymore, but the bright red five-finger mark was still glaringly apparent.

And also Mu Xiao Han, he too looked at Mr. Mu.

At this moment, Mr. Mu felt deeply shocked; he vaguely realized he might have done wrong.

He had always thought the eldest son would pass the imperial exams and become an official, different from others, deserving of the best things.

As for the third son's family, being the most honest, even if they suffered some, it would be no big deal. At most, the eldest son, once he becomes an official, could give them more benefits.

Now it seemed he had indeed overlooked the feelings of the third branch.

But making Mr. Mu truly apologize was something he could not do; being over fifty, he valued face above all.

With a sigh, Mr. Mu finally said reluctantly: "I'll head back first; you all eat slowly!"

And thus, the issue with Mu Xiangxiang came to a complete and unremarkable end.

Seeing Mr. Mu leave, the people of the third branch felt as if a weight had been lifted, especially Mu Dashan, who wiped the sweat from his forehead and said softly: "I was so scared just now, I didn't know what made me dare to stand up to our grandpa."

"Dad looked awesome just now. From now on, no matter who bullies us, we should have the same attitude!"

"Yes, Sister is right. It's because we're too honest that we get bullied. My Fourth Uncle's family is the same. Today, I also heard Sister Xiaxia say Grandma made her wash Little Aunt's pants, they're filthy, Sister Xiaxia even cried." Mu Xiao Han answered seriously.

Mu Shuangshuang's lips twitched, instantly realizing what pants Xiao Han was referring to.

In ancient times, women didn't have sanitary napkins but instead used a menstrual cloth, wrapping some grass ash on it during menstruation and placing it in their underwear.

The consequence of this was some unclean things inevitably getting left on the pants.

Generally, everyone washed their own, but there were always some who were thoughtless.

"The saying 'kind people are bullied, submissive horses are ridden' is especially true for honest people being bullied." Mu Shuangshuang added, and after everyone nodded, they each felt increasingly firm in their hearts that, henceforth, they could not be easily bullied.

After the meal, and tidying up, everyone went back to their rooms to rest.

In the middle of the night, Mu Shuangshuang woke up from the heat, took a fan, and fanned herself for a while, finally feeling comfortable.

With the fan in hand, Mu Shuangshuang felt slightly better.

At the same time, Lu Yuanfeng also woke from the heat. He picked up the fan by the bedside, fanned himself and Yuanbao for a while, then took out the sachet Shuangshuang had embroidered for him from under the pillow, holding it with a bright smile.

Soon after, he fell back asleep.

At dawn, a rainstorm came, the rain pounding down with thunder and lightning, lasting the entire morning.

By noon, the rain finally stopped.

The temperature finally dropped, though in the following days, fans would not sell well.

An autumn rain brings a chill, and from now on, every rain will drop the temperature a little more, though it might not be noticeable now, come autumn, this trend will become clearer.

"Sister, I want to go out and play for a bit," Little Zhi rushed out, pointing at Yuanbao and Mu Shuangshuang who were waiting for him by the side door and said.

"Alright, but take Xiao Han with you."

Mu Xiaohan was still holed up indoors. Mu Shuangshuang had read him the first few pages of the "Ritual" in her spare time. This guy did nothing but hold a book and write those few characters on the ground.

It hadn't even started, yet he was already this diligent. How would he manage in the future?

The road is long; everything must be done in moderation.

"But Brother Xiao Han wants to study!" Little Zhi said puzzled: "Won't he not want to go out?"

"Then you should act cute. Brother Xiao Han likes you so much, he'll surely listen to you, and Sister also has some big things to do."

Mu Shuangshuang wanted to see if, after the rain, there were any wood ears on the grass in the mountains. If there were, dinner wouldn't be a worry.

With a basket in hand, Mu Shuangshuang left the courtyard, only to unexpectedly run into Lu Yuanfeng who also had a basket.

"I heard from my grandma that there are wood ears after the rain. I think you might want to gather some as well."

"Haha, we're on the same page. I also plan to gather some." Mu Shuangshuang shook the basket in her hand.

"Let's go together then!"

There really were quite a few villagers gathering wood ears. Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng found a piece of grass only to see that most of the wood ears had already been picked, and only some newly sprouted ones remained.

Wood ears only appear for a limited time, usually after rain, and when the sun comes out, these fungi are quickly dried out. So harvesting wood ears is a task that tests one's speed.

"There's nothing here anymore. Let's head towards Niawei Mountain to the north. There, the grasslands and forests are more abundant, and hardly anyone dares to go there, so surely there'll be untouched ones!" Lu Yuanfeng suggested.

"Alright, let's go together!" Mu Shuangshuang nodded.

As the two talked and laughed, Xia Guagua with a basket stood not far away. She watched the scene angrily and crushed the wood ears at her feet to pulp, drawing curses from the villagers.

"You woman from another village, wasting like this, how did your parents teach you?"

"None of your business, mind your own tongue, or face getting it cut off!" Xia Guagua retorted and quickly chased in the direction of Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng with her basket.

As she was about to catch up to Lu Yuanfeng, an idea crossed Xia Guagua's mind, and she suddenly cried out. As Lu Yuanfeng and Mu Shuangshuang ahead turned around, she intentionally acted as if tripping over something, falling towards Lu Yuanfeng's arms...

Chapter 267: Bad People Cannot Be Tolerated

"Watch out!"

Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng spoke almost simultaneously, then exchanged a quick glance and swiftly moved apart.

By the time Xia Guagua came to her senses, the person she intended to pounce on was no longer in front of her. Having exerted herself too much, she couldn't stop in time and plunged headfirst into the muddy ground, resembling a clumsy fall.

Her face and hair were covered in mud, and her beautiful clothes were unrecognizable from their original color.

"Mu Shuangshuang, you're too much!" Xia Guagua yelled at Mu Shuangshuang as she lifted her head.

Mu Shuangshuang rolled her eyes. This Xia Guagua was just too amusing. She tried to leap at Lu Yuanfeng in broad daylight and got dodged, then blamed her for the fall. Really, what a joke!

Seeing Mu Shuangshuang remain silent, Xia Guagua shouted even louder, "How dare you push me! I know you're jealous of my good looks and my childhood friendship with Brother Yuanfeng, but you... you can't just harm me like this!"

Xia Guagua's words caught the villagers' attention. Initially, everyone was busy picking the local fungus and paid no heed to this side, but when they looked up, all they saw was Xia Guagua covered in mud.

Meanwhile, Mu Shuangshuang, the accused, stood there with arms crossed. Compared to her, Xia Guagua instantly seemed like the underdog.

Sympathy for the underdog is usually a natural instinct, especially when people don't know the full story. The side that seems weaker always manages to elicit unwitting compassion.

Now, the villagers were caught up in this sympathetic sentiment, looking at Mu Shuangshuang with accusatory eyes.

"Xia Guagua, don't be too much. It was you who fell on your own, how can you blame it on Shuangshuang?" Lu Yuanfeng chided Xia Guagua in a low voice, frowning.

"Brother Yuanfeng, why are you always siding with her? She's so vile and even hit me. Are you... are you entranced by her?" Xia Guagua looked at Lu Yuanfeng with deep affection, putting on a wounded expression in her eyes.

Being outside with many people around, Xia Guagua was sure Lu Yuanfeng wouldn't do anything to her, so she spoke with confidence, even casting a provocative glance at Mu Shuangshuang.

Xia Guagua's words led the villagers to point fingers at Mu Shuangshuang, their eyes revealing some disdain.

Lu Yuanfeng clenched his fist, addressing Xia Guagua's repulsive face, "Stop your nonsense here. Shuangshuang never even touched you. You were the one who came over to us and fell on your own!"

When his clothes were cut like that, Lu Yuanfeng told himself that he could never be soft-hearted when it came to Xia Guagua.

He thought after she did such a shameless thing, she wouldn't appear again. Who would've known she would start targeting Shuangshuang?

Utterly shameless!

Xia Guagua's face, smeared with mud, turned ferocious. She couldn't understand why, even now, he would stand by the despicable woman before her.

What's so good about her, exactly?

As she thought of this, the hatred in Xia Guagua's heart grew more intense. Suddenly, she knelt before Lu Yuanfeng, crying, "Brother Yuanfeng, please, don't hit me. I... I won't tell others about Sister Shuangshuang's disgraceful deeds, I..."

Seeing this, Lu Yuanfeng's face twitched as he raised his tightly clenched fist, intending to slam it hard onto Xia Guagua's face.

But before he could touch Xia Guagua's face, Mu Shuangshuang stopped him.

"Fengzi, her face is too dirty, don't soil your hands."

Obediently, Lu Yuanfeng pulled back his hand, though his face remained frosty. He stared intently at Xia Guagua, resolved that if she dared to slander Shuangshuang again, he'd smash her with a punch.

Mu Shuangshuang looked at Xia Guagua with a half-smile. This woman's acting skills were quite remarkable; in modern times, she might even win an actress award or something.

"Xia Guagua, with all your crying and fussing, claiming I've done some disgraceful thing, what exactly do you mean? If you can't say, it proves you're just trying to defame me, and I won't be polite."

She didn't care about the villagers' gossiping gazes. If not for her parents' reputation, she would've long smashed that woman's face.

What Xia Guagua called disgraceful things were merely words off the top of her head. She hadn't thought through what they specifically referred to. Being pointed out by Mu Shuangshuang made her panic, but she quickly regained composure.

"Those scandalous deeds you've done, you know them well." Xia Guagua gritted her teeth.

"I have no idea. Why don't you tell, Xia Guagua!" Mu Shuangshuang pressed closer, suddenly turning to the crowd, "Uncles and aunties, you know, how would one be punished for ruining someone's reputation in our Da Ning Dynasty?"

A nosy young wife exclaimed loudly, "Naturally, by cutting off their tongue and making them kneel to apologize!"

"Well said, Xia Guagua slandered me today. Everyone bear witness, if I hit her later, it's because she's slandering me!"

As soon as Mu Shuangshuang finished speaking, she backhanded a slap with a crisp "smack" sound. Xia Guagua was stunned; she hadn't expected Mu Shuangshuang to actually hit her.

Mu Shuangshuang, disdaining the mud on her hand, shook her hand gently.

Lu Yuanfeng took out the cloth from his basket and handed it to Mu Shuangshuang, his concern evident from his expression: "Wipe it off, your hands are dirty!"

"Mhm!" Mu Shuangshuang wiped her hands clean right in front of Xia Guagua.

Owing to Mu Shuangshuang's prior words and the fact she actually slapped Xia Guagua in front of everyone, the spectators' doubts were dispelled.

Such scandalous deeds aren't things everyone dares to do, especially not the honest daughter from Old Wang's third family. She definitely wouldn't commit such acts.

The villagers just treated it as a joke, watching Xia Guagua perform a solo act. With the show over, they went back to their own tasks.

Their gazes became friendly; Mu Shuangshuang knew the incident didn't affect her anymore.

She reunited with Lu Yuanfeng, heading towards Niuwei Mountain in the north.

Xia Guagua remained where she was, crying bitterly. She couldn't accept being slapped by Mu Shuangshuang, moreover... moreover, she gained no advantage.

After crying for some time, her view was suddenly obscured by a shadow. Xia Guagua hoped it was Lu Yuanfeng coming back for her. She lifted her head expectantly, only to see a face she least wished to see—Wang Fugui.

The son of Old Wang, the man with the most farmland in the village, relied on his family's land and wealth. He loved nothing more than visiting the town's brothel to toy with women or finding village wives and widows.

For a few silver taels, engaging in some disgraceful matters."

"Hey, isn't this Xia Guagua from the neighboring village? What happened? Bullied, covered in mud like this, let your brother take a look!"

Chapter 268: I'll Listen to You

Xia Guagua has been called an outsider since arriving in Er Gui Village because she still isn't registered there.

"Get away!" Xia Guagua slapped away Wang Fugui's hand with a flick, a hint of disgust flashing in her eyes.

By now, the villagers had already left, leaving only Xia Guagua and Wang Fugui in the surroundings.

Xia Guagua felt fear in her heart, but her hatred for Mu Shuangshuang was stronger.

If it hadn't been for that slap, she definitely wouldn't have cried, nor stayed here so long.

"Stop pretending. You were just cozying up to that kid Lu Yuanfeng, why can't you do the same with me? Anyway, it's all about embracing, what's the difference if it's one or two?"

As he spoke, Wang Fugui reached out to touch Xia Guagua's face, like Mu Shuangshuang, he also had mud on his hand, but he wasn't angry at all—instead, he found it intriguing.

Just imagine, a beautiful body wrapped in mud, with skin as smooth as an egg underneath...

The more he thought, the drier Wang Fugui's throat became, itching to deal with Xia Guagua then and there.

Suddenly, Xia Guagua burst into tears, cursing Wang Fugui for bullying her, calling him inhuman.

For some reason, Wang Fugui felt a pang of sympathy in his heart. Most women he'd encountered pursued his money without saying a word, diving into his embrace, enjoying the moments even more than he did.

Not like this delicate young woman before him.

"Alright, alright, I give up to you today. Tell me, what will make you agree to let me pamper you?"

Xia Guagua suppressed the urge to vomit and told Wang Fugui, "Mu Shuangshuang, help me teach that ugly woman a lesson, I want her to lose face in Er Gui Village!"

"That's no problem, she's just a rustic girl, leave it to me, I'll crush her easily. But after that, you have to make sure to spend time with me."

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Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng reached the foot of Niuwei Mountain and saw a large patch of ground ears, Mu Shuangshuang picked up a bamboo basket and started harvesting with great enthusiasm.

Lu Yuanfeng kept close by, the two worked with nimble hands and soon collected half a basket.

After the rain, the earthy smell was thick in the air, and the harvested ground ears were hard to preserve, so Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng decided to call it a day and head back.

Since they were quite near their vegetable garden, Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng decided to check it out.

The garden was full of vibrant greenery, while the vegetables were still seedlings, their growth was promising, undoubtedly due to the effort Mu Shuang and Lu Yuanfeng had put in.

"At this rate, we might have some small cabbages to eat soon," Mu Shuangshuang said with excitement, feeling happiest seeing how the vegetables had grown.

She had always seen others planting vegetables, but doing it herself was a first for her!

"Yes, we won't need to care about others' opinions anymore," Lu Yuanfeng nodded in agreement.

"By the way, Shuangshuang, did Uncle Fu give you any answer regarding the dry land you mentioned last time?" Lu Yuanfeng asked curiously.

"Not yet, he said he'll let me know if he finds a good one. I'm considering buying an acre, planting some vegetables, and when the time comes, I'll plant rapeseed there."

Right now, Mu Shuangshuang's household needs to buy oil, so every time Yu Si Niang cooks, she uses oil sparingly, worried that they'll run out and have to buy more.

"Hmm!" Lu Yuanfeng nodded, hesitated for a moment, then spoke. "I'm thinking about buying two acres of paddy fields, but I don't know if Uncle Fu has any good ones."

Buying paddy fields was an idea Lu Yuanfeng had suddenly after meeting Liu Zian.

Though he could get by on hunting, he knew he couldn't rely solely on that in the future, especially if more family members joined—hunting alone wouldn't suffice.

Lu Yuanfeng hoped to start accumulating some assets from now on, just in case... just in case...

Lu Yuanfeng kept the rest of his thoughts to himself, afraid that saying them would disrupt the natural relationship they currently had.

"Buying paddy fields is a good investment, if you don't have time to farm, you can rent them out, plus you're right, growing our own food is the way to go."

Having land meant their food supply was secured, no need to buy rice.

"When I go to buy the land, you must come with me, help me choose, whichever you like, that's what I'll buy."

Lu Yuanfeng was so excited, he almost couldn't contain his joy.

"Of course, I'm not only going to help you choose the land, but I'll also help with the fertilization." Mu Shuangshuang gave Lu Yuanfeng a look that said everything, then cheerfully headed home.

Talking about fertilization, Mu Shuangshuang hadn't dared to mention it before, but now she did because they had pigs at home. Pig manure, combined with some rotting leaves, piled together and covered tightly, held at the right temperature, made excellent fertilizer.

Lu Yuanfeng's heart was filled with joy, looking forward to the future with hope and anticipation.

Back at home, Mu Shuangshuang saw Mu Dashan still making straw fans and couldn't resist speaking, "Dad, it's getting cold, stop making straw fans, take a good rest."

"I know, but if I don't make them, I have no way to earn money. Your mother asked if she should go back to Wealth Master Zhang to work short-term, but I didn't let her, thinking I should work harder so she doesn't have to suffer too much."

Being home bound was Mu Dashan's hidden pain; even though it had been just half a year, this was indeed the hardest time for the family, as days passed and their rice and grain supply dwindled rapidly.

Though the third branch earned some money, it didn't cover everything, even the simplest greens had to be borrowed or bought. If he didn't work hard, all the pressure would fall on his daughter and wife.

Mu Shuangshuang sighed and took the straw fan from Mu Dashan's hand.

Lately, Mu Dashan had worked day and night on straw fans, his hands full of blisters from the sun palm fibers, and he needed various tools—Mu Shuangshuang had seen Mu Dashan so hurt that he couldn't hold chopsticks to eat.

"Dad, let's stop this. Weather's cold, and straw fans don't sell well anymore. You should rest and take care of your health, that's more important than anything."

"It's okay, I'm not tired. These don't sell for much, but I'll just make more, even if it's just one penny each, it's better than sitting around idle," Mu Dashan shook his head.

Living with the Old Mu Family all these years, he knew too well how helpless it was without money. If not for his capable daughter ensuring they weren't starving, he might have gone back, begging his parents not to divide the family.

#### Chapter 269: Making Century Eggs

Mu Shuangshuang looked on with a heavy heart. She also knew that making straw fans wouldn't last for long. Once the weather cooled, even if they were given away for free, people might not want them.

Perhaps she needed to think of a new way to make money.

As she was contemplating, Zhao Yun's voice sounded from outside the yard.

Mu Shuangshuang glanced at Mu Dashan, sighed, and then walked out.

Zhao Yun had a basket in her hand, likely bringing some vegetables for Mu Shuangshuang again. These days, Zhao Yun had been bringing over some greens every few days. At first, Mu Shuangshuang could accept it, but after a while, she felt embarrassed.

It's said that food given as charity doesn't last long; she'd been accepting it for so long that even with thick skin, she felt awkward.

"Aunt Xiao Yun, please stop bringing us vegetables. I haven't even finished the ones you brought yesterday, I..." Mu Shuangshuang refused directly before Zhao Yun could speak.

But Zhao Yun waved her hand and said, "These are not greens, they're duck eggs. And this time it's not my idea; our Da Long said there are too many duck eggs at home and asked me to bring some to you."

A warmth spread in Mu Shuangshuang's heart. She hadn't exchanged many words with Da Long, but each time he saw her, he sweetly called her sister, without any awkwardness.

"Then Aunt Xiao Yun, please wait a moment. I'll get some snacks for Da Long."

Lately, whenever Mu Shuangshuang went to town, she would bring back some snacks. Originally, they were for Little Zhi and Xiao Han to have as midnight snacks, and she had given some to Da Long before. But now that they were giving something again, she felt it necessary to reciprocate to accept the few duck eggs.

"You silly girl, why divide things between our families? Didn't you just buy something for our Da Long to eat? Keep these for Little Zhi and Xiao Han."

Zhao Yun shook her head in refusal, but couldn't resist Mu Shuangshuang's persistent persuasion. In the end, she took some food and went home.

Mu Shuangshuang now had a plan in mind. In the evening, she would make stir-fried wood ear with duck eggs, and save the remaining eight duck eggs to eat slowly.

Suddenly, a thought flashed in Mu Shuangshuang's mind. Since they were duck eggs, she could make salted duck eggs or century eggs. Both of these could be preserved for a long time and were delicious with meals.

Quickly recalling the process in her mind, Mu Shuangshuang decided to try making century eggs, as vinegar-glazed century eggs were her favorite, and she remembered Fengzi's house had some sodium carbonate.

Sodium carbonate wasn't particularly common. Lu Yuanfeng had bought some from an old master in the village when he was learning to tan hides. After he stopped, he had no use for it.

As for the other ingredients, most were readily available. Mu Shuangshuang hurried to Lu Yuanfeng's house and explained her idea of making century eggs.

Lu Yuanfeng looked at her, baffled, "What kind of egg?"

Lu Yuanfeng had heard of chicken eggs, duck eggs, goose eggs, and bad eggs, but century eggs were new to him.

"Yuan Feng, don't joke with me. Century eggs, made with alkaline clay, with the yolk looking dark and like chicken droppings!"

Mu Shuangshuang thought Lu Yuanfeng was joking, so she described it in a particularly disgusting way.

But Yuan Feng still stared blankly at her, without even a hint of disgust.

Alright, it seemed he really didn't know.

Given their rarity, Mu Shuangshuang suddenly thought that if she made century eggs well, she might even earn some Silver from it.

"Although I don't know what you're talking about, if Shuangshuang wants to make them, let's buy a few more duck eggs and make more."

While chicken eggs had fallen in price, duck eggs were not too expensive. Moreover, Lu Yuanfeng knew that Old Zhong at the village entrance raised more than a dozen ducks. Every day, Old Zhong would take time to let them out and then bring them back, easily gathering over a dozen eggs each day.

"Sure, then this time I'll make... fifty!"

Fifty duck eggs only cost twenty-five coins. If they sold well, she could recoup her costs.

"Alright, I'll take a basket and put some straw in it to cushion the eggs we buy later!"

Together once more, Lu Yuanfeng couldn't keep from smiling widely. He didn't have extravagant desires now; seeing Shuangshuang once a day was enough, twice would be even better.

At the village entrance at Old Zhong's house, Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng explained their purpose, prompting Old Zhong to instruct his wife to fetch some eggs.

"Yuan Feng, to be honest, these eggs aren't from today or yesterday; they've been here for three or four days."

Old Zhong was very candid. People in the village often came to buy eggs, but they were shrewd and would come after Old Zhong returned with the ducks, just in time to buy the eggs laid that day.

No one bought the eggs that were one or two days old, and Old Zhong's family couldn't eat that many.

"It's fine, Grandpa Zhong. We'll still pay the standard price provided by everyone else, one coin for two eggs. Fifty eggs for twenty-five coins."

"Then I won't be responsible, okay? Once you've bought these duck eggs, unless they stink, you can't come back asking for an exchange."

After doing business for a long time, Old Zhong also looked out for himself because many would return to exchange eggs over minor flaws, sometimes over a tiny spot or because of age.

Living in the same village, he found it hard to refuse.

"Okay, Shuangshuang and I understand. Thank you, Grandpa Zhong."

Lu Yuanfeng paid for the eggs and helped Mu Shuangshuang carry them back to the third branch. Mu Shuangshuang laid out the prepared materials one by one, and Lu Yuanfeng watched with curiosity about what the century eggs Shuangshuang spoke of actually were.

"We need to first clean the duck eggs; you know, duck eggs often have quite a bit of duck poop." Mu Shuangshuang found it a bit amusing as she spoke, but with Lu Yuanfeng there, she maintained a bit of seriousness.

"Actually, making century eggs is quite simple; we just need to prepare the alkaline clay mix."

Before Lu Yuanfeng, Mu Shuangshuang put sodium carbonate and salt into a small clay pot, pouring in boiled water. Once they were fully dissolved, she added quicklime and wood ash in batches.

During this process, she kept a close watch on the quicklime dissolving in the clay pot. Once the lime fully "dissolved," she stood up.

"The most crucial step, the alkaline clay mix is ready! Now let's coat the duck eggs."

In the alkaline clay, Mu Shuangshuang added a layer of rice husks. Each duck egg was rolled in the clay, coming out looking completely different.

"Is it done just like that?"

Lu Yuanfeng was extremely surprised. He thought making century eggs would be a complex procedure.

"Yes, it's that simple. That's why I'm doing it. In two months, we can eat the duck eggs."

Lu Yuanfeng laughed along with Mu Shuangshuang, also growing curious about the century eggs in the pot.

Two months, he eagerly awaited, hoping time would fly by, sparing him the daily anticipation.

Chapter 270: One or Two Pieces of Meat

At dinner, Mu Shuangshuang had just finished preparing and setting the food on the table when the exhausted Yu Si Niang returned.

She had spent half the day planting seedlings for Old Mu's fourth family, finally finishing that acre of land.

In the afternoon, Xiaxia couldn't go on and stood crying on the edge of the field, breaking Mrs. Liu's heart. She immediately asked Yu Si Niang if she could split from the family and follow Shuangshuang in business.

Everyone in the Old Mu Family knew about Shuangshuang's business since the last incident with the elder aunt, so it's normal for Mrs. Liu to know.

But it wasn't her decision to make, she could only say she'd ask later.

"Mother, have you finished planting the seedlings in that field?"

Mu Shuangshuang typically showed concern for Yu Si Niang, simultaneously helping rub her back and shoulders. After a day's work, one most needs someone to loosen the muscles.

"My daughter is so good, she knows how to care for her mother." Yu Si Niang sighed with comfort.

"Well, of course, look whose daughter I am. If I don't care for you, who will?" Mu Shuangshuang blinked playfully.

"That's right, a daughter cares for herself, others don't matter. That field was finished today, but your fourth aunt told me she wants to split the family."

"Can they really let go of the fat piece from Uncle?" Mu Shuangshuang pointed to the core of the issue in one sentence.

The fourth house's family didn't seem particularly bad, Mu Shuangshuang remembered, but they'd been severely exploited by Old Mrs. Mu over the years. Mrs. Liu's parents no longer sent things over, only taking Xiaxia and Xiao Chu to raise them well each year.

But even if they looked plump and healthy, at Old Mu's house, they had to turn from fat into skinny.

"This..." Yu Si Niang hesitated, she really hadn't asked.

The fourth branch was miserable, but they still had hope in their eyes, and that hope was the brother going to Qianzhou Prefecture for the exams. If he became an official, they'd get servants, and the fourth branch wouldn't have to work anymore.

Moreover, because of this brother, Xiaxia might even find a good family.

"Mother, Uncle and Aunt want to split the family simply because life is tough now. If you really let them go, they wouldn't want to. After all, following Uncle could mean a chance of rising from poverty."

Mu Shuangshuang truly felt the fourth branch's idea wasn't wrong. Had she not had modern thinking, she'd also place her hopes on Uncle.

After all, when one achieves success, their whole family benefits, no matter how tough life is day-to-day, it's the end result that matters.

"Oh my! I didn't think of that. I thought your fourth aunt genuinely wanted to split the family and join us in business."

"Did she say she wanted to join us in business?" Mu Shuangshuang was intrigued, not because she thought it impossible, but because she saw progress in her fourth aunt.

During their most difficult days in the third branch, Aunt had taken out her only penny. It's impossible not to be touched, and these days, she thought of helping the fourth branch when they struggled.

"Yes, she said it herself. I didn't know how to answer, just told her I'd ask you."

Yu Si Niang didn't mind people laughing at her for always asking her daughter about everything, as she had already said, the household authority was given to her. Whatever she said was final.

"I don't have objections, I just fear all the money they earn would end up in my grandma's stack."

With Old Mrs. Mu's hawk-eye inspection abilities, she'd rummage through each room every few days, checking for hidden private money. It's improbable for the fourth branch to save money.

As soon as Mu Shuangshuang finished speaking, the sound of Old Mrs. Mu's shouting came from the backyard.

"Mrs. Liu, is this the meal you prepared? Tell me, where did the ounce of meat go?" Old Mrs. Mu stood, hands on her hips, glaring fiercely at Mrs. Liu.

Tonight, Mu Xiangxiang had been pestering for meat, so she went to Wang Erma's and bought an ounce. Who would have thought that it had been snatched from the table by stray cats, causing Old Mrs. Mu's lungs to explode with anger, kicking Mrs. Liu repeatedly.

Mrs. Liu was prostrated on the ground, continuously apologizing but unable to earn Old Mrs. Mu's forgiveness.

Mu Xiangxiang watched the commotion with amusement. "Fourth sister-in-law, honestly, a piece of meat that big, whose fault is it if you don't keep it safe? And this meat, it's not like it disappears just like that. You have to compensate!"

Mrs. Liu lifted her head with tears in her eyes, looking pitifully at Mu Xiangxiang. "I don't have money."

"Well, it's not my concern. I still want my meat broth. If you don't bring it back, don't bother returning. I'll have my fourth brother divorce you!"

"That's right, Xiangxiang's right. It's your fault, so you have to bear it. Otherwise, just get out of this house." Old Mrs. Mu rambled on, forcing Mrs. Liu into the corner of the kitchen.

"Mother, quit the nonsense, just kick her out!" Mu Xiangxiang pointed at the cornered Mrs. Liu, insisting on eviction.

Old Mrs. Mu's rage hadn't dissipated, and with her daughter's instigation, she indeed grabbed Mrs. Liu and threw her outside. Xi Xia, returning from work in the vegetable garden, encountered this scene and clutched Mrs. Liu, crying heartbrokenly.

The culprits twisted their hips, returning to their rooms.

Mrs. Liu's tears fell heavily: "Xi Xia, how does mother find that ounce of meat? Mother has no money..."

"Fourth Aunt, I have some here, take it!"

Mu Shuangshuang appeared before Mrs. Liu with a chunk of meat, even though her family hadn't bought any tonight.

She heard the old lady's shouting, Yu Si Niang mentioned Aunt Xiao Yun's family bought some meat, likely having leftovers. Mu Shuangshuang ran over to borrow some and returned.

"Shuangshuang, I..." Mrs. Liu was choked up, unable to speak.

"Don't worry, this isn't just the ounce. You need to make the broth quickly, let Xiaxia drink a bowl first, then bring a bowl to Uncle. At home, don't be too quiet, don't always wait until the last to eat, and end up with no washing left in the pot."

Mu Shuangshuang felt heartache, for anyone wouldn't do the wicked things Old Mrs. Mu did. Such behavior, put in modern terms, was abuse.

But this was ancient times, and she couldn't just rush up and give the old lady a beating, at most letting her suffer small losses.

As for the fourth branch, she felt these were only the beginning. When her uncle returned, the issues would multiply.

Mrs. Liu trembled as she took the meat, following Shuangshuang's advice, she cut the meat outside the ounce and immediately started making the broth, serving the first pot to the fourth branch, and they shut the door to sneak a sip each.

The broth was fresh, delicious, and the fourth branch family believed this was likely the tastiest broth they had in their lives.

"Honey, when do you think we can take out a big chunk of meat like the third brother's family?" After the broth, Mrs. Liu still smacked her lips.

"Perhaps soon!"