

## Folly 391

Chapter 391: Feeling Good About Myself

But this joy didn't last long.

Mu Shuangshuang's eldest aunt, Mu Xianxian, jumped out and started scolding Mu Shuangshuang and Liu Zian.

"Oh wow, so that's why Liu Zian refused the marriage with my daughter Miaomiao, it's you, you wicked girl behind it all. You miserable wretch, you even snatched your cousin's man!"

"Aunt, you are really deaf. Shuangshuang already said last time, your daughter Miaomiao's matter with Liu Zian has nothing to do with me. Whether Miaomiao gets married isn't decided by me, and certainly not by you, it has to be Liu Zian's decision!"

"How dare you call me deaf?" Mu Xianxian put her hand on her hip, looking like she was ready to fight.

"You're already like this and not deaf? I've said it so many times. Can you stop asking me the same thing over and over?" Mu Shuangshuang rolled her eyes.

Mu Shuangshuang felt that whenever she encountered people from the Old Mu Family, nothing good ever happened.

Coming right up and throwing dung at me!

"You wicked girl, how dare you talk to me like that!"

After not seeing each other for a while, Mu Xianxian had grown increasingly plump. Perhaps due to the hot weather, she had inexplicable red pimples on her face.

Those pimples grew near her mouth, and when she talked, the pimples kept moving, which was ridiculously hilarious.

But the most ridiculous thing was her talking about Miaomiao; when Mu Shuangshuang saw, she almost got scared to death.

The Miaomiao in Mu Xianxian's mouth was at most around one meter and fifty centimeters tall, but her figure was nothing to be proud of.

Nothing but fat, it was all fat.

Her waist was thicker than her uncle's, with that kind of look, could Liu Zian fancy her?

Obviously not.

Cao Miaomiao, hearing Mu Xianxian call Liu Zian's name, glanced at Liu Zian's lean physique and quickly shook her head.

"Mom, I don't want him, he's so thin, so ugly!"

"..."

Cao Miaomiao's words made Mu Shuangshuang burst into laughter.

Liu Zian ugly? He's definitely got the face of a handsome man, plus he's a scholar, he hasn't done hard labor, isn't this the standard physique?

"Miaomiao, what are you saying, Liu Zian is the top scholar, he'll pass the exam and become a big official in the future." Mu Xianxian whispered a sentence, she couldn't bear to scold her daughter, after all, raising a daughter was really not easy.

Cao Miaomiao ignored Mu Xianxian's words and instead fixed her gaze on Lu Yuanfeng.

As soon as she saw Lu Yuanfeng, Cao Miaomiao began to drool.

Lu Yuanfeng was tall, well-built, and on top of that, had handsome features, Cao Miaomiao pointed: "I want him, he's good-looking."

Mu Shuangshuang couldn't sit still at this.

To think you can lay a finger on my man just like that? You're way out of line!

"Just because you say you want him, doesn't mean he's yours. Please have a look at yourself in the mirror, the way you are, a man would want to avoid you by three steps if not a hundred!"

Mu Shuangshuang always had a sharp tongue. Whoever dared to covet her, she would give an even sharper tongue lashing!

"You..." Cao Miaomiao was furious, turned and cried to Mu Xianxian: "Mom, look at this nasty girl, she's bullying me..."

Cao Miaomiao said as she stomped heavily on the ground, making "thump thump thump" sounds which scared Mu Shuangshuang back two steps.

Oh my, are we having an earthquake?

Mu Xianxian hugged Cao Miaomiao, comforting her, instantly reminding Mu Shuangshuang of when Old Mrs. Mu comforted Mu Xiangxiang, always calling her "my dear".

Oh, curse these people, they really are one family, doing the same damn thing.

Spoiled daughters, spoiled beyond limits!

"Miaomiao darling, what's so good about this dirt poor boy, no land, no money, listen to mom, be with Liu Zian, become an official's wife, want anything, there's nothing missing!"

Mu Shuangshuang wasn't happy. So what if he has no land, he still wouldn't fancy your daughter!

"Aunt, please don't self-delude yourself, alright? Fengzi doesn't fancy your daughter, and Liu Zian doesn't want your daughter either. Why do you need to flatter yourself?"

Mu Xianxian was still trying hard to persuade Cao Miaomiao to want Liu Zian, so she ignored Mu Shuangshuang's words.

Cao Miaomiao cried while shaking her head. "No, no, he's thinner than a chicken, I don't want..."

Aside, Liu Zian's face turned black, back then when he heard someone would give him money for the exams in exchange for marrying into their family, he refused right away.

Liu Zian was not a person who would sell himself for money.

"Aunt Mu, I've made it clear from the start, I, Liu Zian, will not marry into any family or marry someone I don't like."

"Liu Zian, have you been charmed by this nasty girl? Puffing up your face now won't do you any good, aren't you still looking for work in town to make some money? If you kneel down today and beg me, marry my daughter, I'll give you money for the exams, what do you say?"

Mu Xianxian remained concerned about Liu Zian, after taking fifty taels of silver from Mu Dade, though she still had the IOU, she was unlikely to get it back.

Her brother's situation showed he wasn't meant to be an official.

Might as well end up as a laborer.

But Liu Zian was different, his family was poor, he was the top scholar in the town, and she even consulted someone who said Liu Zian had a good fate, destined for officialdom.

Just happened that his fate matched her daughter Miaomiao's.

Liu Zian choked with anger in his throat, unable to speak for a long time.

Being a scholar, he couldn't utter the dirty words from Mu Xianxian's mouth, nor could he be as straightforward as Mu Shuangshuang, knowing how to verbally counter Mu Xianxian.

"No need to worry, Aunt, I've already secured the funds for the exams."

Liu Zian's words, Mu Xianxian obviously didn't believe. She had already inquired about Liu Zian's family situation, his parents had been drained dry from funding his education over the years, and they had many poor relatives, who would lend him money?

"Liu Zian, a real man knows when to bend or straighten. Why not admit that you have no money? Do you want to see your parents worried sick and their hair turning gray for your exams?"

"Do you want them, at their age, unable to eat or sleep for your exam funds?"

"I, Mu Xianxian, am giving you a chance, understand? Become Old Cao's house son-in-law, with good food and drink, buy whatever you want!"

"Do whatever you wish, but I have one condition, you must sever all ties with this nasty girl, otherwise don't even think about stepping into Old Cao's house."

Mu Xianxian spoke a long paragraph, not lacking insults against Mu Shuangshuang, causing Lu Yuanfeng to shout angrily: "Enough, Mu Family Aunt, you speak insultingly toward Shuangshuang, Shuangshuang hasn't said a word, don't you feel ashamed being an elder?"

Lu Yuanfeng coldly kept Shuangshuang as she stood behind him, directly confronting Mu Xianxian with his gaze.

If not for the fact the person in front was a woman, and the aunt of the Old Mu Family, Lu Yuanfeng would've slapped down hard on her.

Chapter 392: Reaping What One Has Sown

"Hahaha..."

Mu Shuangshuang squatted on the ground, laughing so hard she almost split.

It wasn't because of Lu Yuanfeng's words, but because Mu Xianxian was too full of herself.

Liu Zian, kneel!

Cut ties with her, or you won't be allowed through Old Cao's house doors.

Oh my, how can such a person exist in this world?

Mu Shuangshuang laughed uncontrollably, naturally angering Mu Xianxian.

"You cheeky girl, what are you laughing at?"

"Aunt, I think you're really interesting. Didn't all your family's silver go to my uncle's exams? Where's the silver for Liu Zian?"

I see your shoe store selling old shoes all the time, shouldn't have much business, right? How can you be so arrogant to demand Liu Zian carry shoes for you?"

"You..." Being confronted with the truth by Mu Shuangshuang, Mu Xianxian's face turned red with anger.

Indeed, they had no extra silver to give Liu Zian.

It was all because of her damn big brother, but is this something a cheeky girl should mention?

"You cheeky girl, you've got some nerve!" Mu Xianxian shouted, then turned to the street and yelled loudly.

"Everyone, come and see, in broad daylight, these three shameless people fooling around, they're ruining morals, one girl serving two husbands!"

"Look at this girl, isn't she just like a wicked seductress?"

What Mu Xianxian said was actually about shared wives, which was not allowed in the Da Ning Dynasty. The Da Ning Dynasty allowed one husband with multiple wives and concubines, but never allowed one woman serving two husbands because they believed a man is the sky, and a woman is an object. Since she is an object, she can only have one owner.

Unless the object is discarded, there's no reason for the object to choose its owner.

Even though in some remote, unenlightened places, some families, not having enough money for multiple dowries, would earn money together to afford a single wife, but those were rare cases, and once reported, they might face jail time.

People's gazes toward Mu Shuangshuang and Liu Zian and Lu Yuanfeng changed, and some busybodies were ready to report them to the authorities, wanting to arrest the three of them.

Mu Shuangshuang's eyes narrowed slightly; she hated nothing more than others ruining her reputation.

Did Mu Xianxian think she could ruin her with just her mouth?

Huh, keep dreaming!

Mu Shuangshuang gave a light cough and loudly said to the crowd on the street, "Everyone, don't be deceived by my aunt. Actually, she just wants to divert your attention to the three of us to steal your money pouches."

"My aunt, when she was a girl at home, liked to steal people's things. Back then, no one stopped her, and she stole until she got married and gave birth to a daughter with a dirty disease."

"My cousin's illness isn't ordinary. If not treated with medicine, her whole body will ulcerate and swell. It's said it even spreads. Look closely at her face, isn't it full of red bumps?"

Cao Miaomiao was overweight, her skin secreted oil vigorously, and now it was summer, acne was common.

But with her face full of pimples, people instinctively retreated.

What a joke, stealing money is minor, but getting sick is serious.

Moreover, looking at the attire of Lu Yuanfeng and his two companions, they didn't seem like those who couldn't afford to marry.

Suddenly, a woman asked, "Girl, with your cousin like that, and your aunt having a habit of stealing, could your cousin be born from someone unclean that your aunt stole?"

This remark stirred the crowd to look at Mu Xianxian with disdain.

Some even began to point and curse at Mu Xianxian, calling her a whore.

Mu Xianxian was so furious she was about to faint. She didn't know how a few words could turn the crowd against her.

"Don't listen to this cheeky girl talking nonsense, she's with the men, she..."

Mu Xianxian tried to explain, but no one believed her.

Lu Yuanfeng said, "Indeed, Shuangshuang and I have mutual affection, but I will definitely marry Shuangshuang in the future and will not share her with any man."

Liu Zian, although saddened by Lu Yuanfeng standing with Shuangshuang, also stood out to defend her reputation.

"I'm Liu Zian, a student from Lushan Academy in the county. Three years ago, I ranked first in the county scholar exam. I have a pure relationship with Shuangshuang, nothing improper."

Liu Zian's name was quite renowned in the town.

After all, for the town to produce such talent, and being first in the county no less.

The crowd believed Mu Shuangshuang even more.

"Folks, remember this woman's face and avoid her in the future to prevent contracting a dirty disease!"

More people joined in cursing Mu Xianxian.

Mu Xianxian's eyes were red with urgency, as she shouted to those surrounding her, "It's not like that, the cheeky girl is talking nonsense, our Miaomiao isn't sick, and I don't steal things."

But as Mu Xianxian approached, everyone scattered as if seeing some plague.

"You filthy woman, stay away, or I'll beat you to death!"

"Yes, beat her to death!"

Someone said, and everyone chimed in.

Inside, an aunt saw Mu Xianxian still approaching, and threw an egg at her with force.

With a "smack," the egg smashed on Mu Xianxian's head, egg liquid flowed all over her face.

"Wow..." Mu Xianxian screamed, then more eggs and vegetable leaves were thrown at her face.

While blocking them, she retreated, cursing Mu Shuangshuang to die a horrible death.

The crowd saw this and started throwing things at Cao Miaomiao, who, being fat and slow, made an easy target.

Mu Xianxian realized her daughter was being bullied and hurriedly reached to pull Cao Miaomiao, only to be pelted herself.

"Folks, let's beat these mother and daughter thieves to death!"

"Stop...you all stop!"

But the crowd, their eyes red with anger, ignored her.

Stumbling, her foot heavy, Mu Xianxian fell forward and He Miaomiao, being hit by something, lunged and landed with a "thud" on Mu Xianxian.

Mu Xianxian let out a miserable scream and fainted.

Mu Shuangshuang glanced over, putting on a shocked expression, and whispered to Lu Yuanfeng and Liu Zian, "Better run, we shouldn't stay here."

Lu Yuanfeng was stunned, then felt a small hand grab his, and she pulled him to start running.

Liu Zian thought Shuangshuang's call to run must have been meant for him too, but she didn't grab his hand.

Saddened but still determined, Liu Zian followed.

By the time they reached the end of the street, Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng were refreshed, but poor Liu Zian felt like his lungs were about to burst.

He gasped heavily, as if he might die any second.

Seeing his pitiful state, and since he had just spoken up for her, Mu Shuangshuang, who originally wasn't going to invite Liu Zian, generously offered.

"Liu Zian, why don't you join us at Fengzi's friend's place for lunch? I'll cook!"

A glimmer of hope appeared in Liu Zian's eyes, and he said, "I...I have no classes today."

"What are you waiting for then, let's go!"

Chapter 393: Shuangshuang Is Mine

Suddenly receiving such a warm invitation, Liu Zian was overjoyed, and for some reason, a wave of excitement rushed through his heart.

"Mm!" He nodded foolishly, looking at Mu Shuangshuang with a newfound intensity in his eyes.

This look caught Lu Yuanfeng's attention, instantly raising his alertness.

Liu Zian has an interest in Shuangshuang, this was the message Lu Yuanfeng received.

After all, he was just a young boy; the best way to keep others from coveting someone is to make them retreat in the face of difficulties.

"Shuangshuang, you said last time you'd make sweet potato noodles for me. When will you make them? I'll come to your house and join you." Lu Yuanfeng casually said to Mu Shuangshuang beside him.

"Anytime is fine, just let me know in advance when you want to eat them."

Mu Shuangshuang didn't know what Lu Yuanfeng had in mind, she just thought he really wanted to eat them, so she naturally agreed.

In fact, not only Lu Yuanfeng wanted to eat, but she herself wanted to as well.

Sweet potato noodles are indeed a delicacy in rural households, cooked with chunks of five-flavor pork mixed into the noodles and stewed together, a family sitting together enjoying a steaming pot of sweet potato noodles, it's truly a pleasure.

Liu Zian did not understand Lu Yuanfeng's real thoughts, he only saw the two talking to each other as if no one else was around, which felt particularly eye-catching.

He silently followed behind Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng.

When they arrived at Uncle Da Niu's house, Liu Zian's expression had not improved much.

Uncle Da Niu appeared out of nowhere from the boiler room and came up to Lu Yuanfeng like he had seen something rare.

"Fengzi, you're just in time, Shuangshuang mentioned that mandarin duck... thing, I have an idea now, why don't you come with me to take a look?"

The old man swallowed the words "mandarin duck pot" back because of Liu Zian's presence.

Uncle Da Niu had been doing business for many years, understanding people's complex inner thoughts, Liu Zian was a stranger to him, so he was more cautious in his words and deeds.

Liu Zian could see the old man's attitude towards him, but he had no solution.

Mu Shuangshuang cheerfully said to Uncle Da Niu, "Uncle Da Niu, this is Liu Zian, a friend of mine and Fengzi's. We'll all be having lunch here today, don't hold it against me, I eat a lot."

"Haha, eat more, you're so skinny, I was starting to suspect Fengzi wasn't willing to feed you!"

Mu Shuangshuang's words instantly relaxed the tense Uncle Da Niu, and he added some humor to their conversation, his gaze towards Liu Zian became less rigid.

Liu Zian noticed all of this, and his gratitude towards Shuangshuang grew even more.

"Fengzi, what are you standing around for, hurry up and come with me." Uncle Da Niu softly urged.

Lu Yuanfeng looked a bit troubled as he looked at Uncle Da Niu, just about to speak when Mu Shuangshuang cut in.

"Fengzi, I can handle lunch on my own, you and Uncle Da Niu go and work on the iron stuff."

"But..." Lu Yuanfeng was reluctant to let Shuangshuang work alone.

Seeing this, Liu Zian volunteered, "I'll help Shuangshuang!"

No sooner had he spoken than both Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng looked at Liu Zian, remembering how Liu Zian had once nearly shattered the dishes Mu Shuangshuang was washing — if he helped with cooking again, would he end up poisoning someone?

Liu Zian is a scholar, in ancient times, he would live untouched by the mundane world, in other words, as long as he studied diligently, even meals and water were brought to him by his family.

Mu Shuangshuang's uncle had been living a cozy life for years under the reputation of a scholar, without lifting a finger.

Perhaps their reaction was too strong, causing Liu Zian to blush in embarrassment.

"I... I can learn, as long as Shuangshuang is willing to teach me."

Mu Shuangshuang sighed, deciding to entrust the job of lighting the fire to Liu Zian.

This shouldn't cause a big problem, right?

With this thought, Mu Shuangshuang took the ingredients into the kitchen, and Lu Yuanfeng went off to the boiler room to get busy.

Mu Shuangshuang laid out the items one by one on the table.

Lamb, pork, some green leafy vegetables, and a fish, Uncle Niu's family had prepared quite a lot of stuff. Mu Shuangshuang felt a bit reluctant to start, but with four grown men to feed, if she didn't prepare enough dishes, someone might go hungry.

"Shuangshuang, what should I do?"

Liu Zian looked at the unfamiliar scene in the kitchen; his parents never let him near this area, and his mother was more straightforward about it, as long as he studied well, if he passed the exams and became a big official, naturally there would be servants to handle life matters.

"You, light the fire." Mu Shuangshuang was busy picking vegetables without turning around.

Afraid Liu Zian wouldn't know how, she added a sentence. "Just throw some firewood in the stove, toss in some dry grass, and that's it."

Liu Zian stood there at the stove for a long time, looked at the pile of arranged firewood, picked a few thicker ones, stuffed a bunch of dry grass inside, but couldn't find anything to ignite the fire.

"Shuangshuang, what's used to start the fire?"

"See if you can find something that looks like stones on the stove, rubbing two of those should work."

"Found it, found it!"

Liu Zian excitedly held two black stones, looking at them with curiosity.

He tried using the flint stones, but sparks didn't fly, and after several tries, his hand began to blister from the friction, still without success.

Not wanting to give up, Liu Zian tried a few more times, finally managing to produce some sparks, but each time he tried to move the flint to the stove, the fire went out.

After finishing with the vegetables, Mu Shuangshuang saw Liu Zian still squatting by the stove, with no fire and a cold pot.

She walked over, instantly bewildered by what she saw.

The stove was stuffed by Liu Zian with large logs, dry grass laid atop them, and he, sweating profusely, tried to start a fire, but each attempt ended without a spark.

"Liu Zian, I'll handle the fire lighting!"

Engrossed in trying to start a fire, Liu Zian jumped at Mu Shuangshuang's sudden voice, instinctively standing up right as Mu Shuangshuang was leaning down.

With a "thump", Liu Zian's head hit Mu Shuangshuang's chin, making her well up with tears from the pain.

This Liu Zian wasn't here to help; he came to hurt someone.

Clutching her chin, Mu Shuangshuang was on the brink of tears.

Liu Zian panicked, struggling to check Mu Shuangshuang's chin.

"Shuangshuang, let me see, I... I didn't mean it, does it hurt?"

Looking at his worried face, Mu Shuangshuang was helpless. It wasn't Liu Zian's fault; it was the era's, nurturing a person to be so pampered and scholarly weak.

She had always heard that scholars in ancient times were so fragile they couldn't even truss a chicken, and while she used to doubt that, Liu Zian's arrival made her believe, or rather, living with the Old Mu Family had shown her to what lengths a family would go for the imperial examinations.

"It's okay, it's okay, I'll handle the fire, you just watch."

Chapter 394: The Kitchen Was Almost Burned Down

Picking up the flint from the ground, Mu Shuangshuang took out all the firewood from the stove and selected some small dry twigs from the pile again.

Mu Shuangshuang was a qualified teacher. She earnestly told Liu Zian, "The hardest part of making a fire is twofold: one is igniting it, and the other is controlling it."

"For ignition, it's best to use small twigs, because once the dry grass burns, the twigs catch fire easily. When the fire is strong, switch to larger firewood."

Mu Shuangshuang repeated this as she demonstrated. Her voice carried a unique sweetness, like a gentle mountain spring, making Liu Zian find her words pleasant every time he listened.

He watched Shuangshuang, as she filled half the stove with twigs, then stuffed some dry grass beneath them, picked up some dry grass again, lit it outside the stove, and then stuffed it back in to ignite the dry grass.

The fire gradually started up, seeming really simple, yet it was all novel to Liu Zian.

After Mu Shuangshuang got the fire going, she added a bit of water to the pot and began to knead the flour. The coarse flour, which had just been bought, needed constant kneading after adding water. Since there was no time for fermentation, she could only choose the simplest method—constantly slamming the dough.

In between, she added oil to the dough once and continued slamming the dough on the table.

The "bang bang" sound was heard, and Liu Zian glanced at Shuangshuang. The midday sunlight streamed into the kitchen through the window, shining on Mu Shuangshuang's young, tender face. Bathed in sunlight, she smiled softly. Seeing her glowing, Liu Zian completely forgot what he was supposed to be doing.

As the flames leapt from the stove and caught the dry grass on the ground, nearly setting the nearby dry firewood on fire, Liu Zian backed up, screaming sharply.

"Shuangshuang, fire, it's caught fire..."

Mu Shuangshuang couldn't care less about the dough in her hand, and rushed over with a basin of water.

After dousing it with water, the mouth of the stove was soaking wet, and Liu Zian's face was covered in black ash, looking somewhat comical out of nowhere.

But Mu Shuangshuang couldn't laugh, she was scared.

This Liu Zian was no help at all, and if he stayed any longer, the kitchen might really burn down.

"You, stand aside and don't come near the fire!"

Mu Shuangshuang couldn't help but raise her voice at Liu Zian. After speaking, she realized they weren't that close for her to scold him casually.

"Liu Zian, let's leave the stove to me. We can't afford anything happening, or both Uncle Da Niu and you would suffer great losses."

Liu Zian deflated like a punctured balloon, his whole demeanor softened.

"Shuangshuang, am I really that useless? I can't even make a fire?" Liu Zian finally managed to voice his thoughts to Mu Shuangshuang, who was busy dealing with the situation.

"Not at all, everyone has their strengths. Your primary focus is studying for exams, so it's normal not to know other things." Mu Shuangshuang replied unconvincingly.

In fact, she believed that no matter how specialized one's skills were, one should never forget basic survival instincts. It's like cooking: you might not make elaborate dishes, but you should at least know how to make fried rice or cook soup, right? You can't always depend on others to feed you.

These days, everyone can leave, and the time spent living alone always outweighs the time spent being taken care of in a group.

"Shuangshuang, be honest, okay? Although I'm not as competent as Lu Yuanfeng, I genuinely want to treat you as a friend. I hope you'll be truthful with me. I won't get angry."

Liu Zian didn't know why he said that, but he felt that Shuangshuang was different with him than with Lu Yuanfeng.

In front of Lu Yuanfeng, she was carefree, and her words and actions conveyed a sense of freedom and ease.

Yet, when facing him, Liu Zian felt Shuangshuang was too reserved, even—

Liu Zian felt Shuangshuang held back with him, as if he would rather she point out his mistakes than say things like everyone has their expertise.

Mu Shuangshuang was indeed at a loss because, while she had seen people seeking challenges, she had never met anyone like Liu Zian, who willingly sought critique.

"Since you asked, I'll speak frankly. I think you should learn some basic skills, at least to ensure that if your parents aren't home, you won't starve. This means, at the very least, you should know a bit about cooking and preparing meals.

Moreover, your health doesn't seem particularly strong, so you need to exercise more. Studying doesn't always require sitting down; you can take your books, go for a run early in the morning, recite while running..."

Mu Shuangshuang spoke a lot, originally thinking Liu Zian would get angry, but to her surprise, he mumbled the points to himself, as if truly planning to implement them.

Suddenly, Mu Shuangshuang felt much better; a child willing to learn is always a good child.

"Shuangshuang, thank you. I think I know what to do now!" Liu Zian expressed his heartfelt gratitude.

But these things were nothing significant to Shuangshuang. She added more kindling to the stove, continued kneading the dough, and once it was nearly ready, she began pulling noodles.

A lump of dough transformed into strands, from thick to thin, in her hands. Standing beside her, Liu Zian found it all fascinating. When the pot of water started boiling, Mu Shuangshuang had finished pulling the dough.

She added more kindling, began placing the pulled noodles into the pot, and watched as the white noodles rolled in the bubbling water. After a while, Mu Shuangshuang added water to the stove again.

Cooking noodles was a skillful task too. Cook them too long, and they turned mushy; cook them too short, and they remained raw. Mu Shuangshuang typically started adding water after half a minute of boiling. Adding water twice, and when it boiled again after twice, the noodles were just right—not overcooked nor undercooked.

The noodles were scooped out strand by strand, placed into a basin of cold water. In no time, the cold water basin was full of noodles.

Setting the noodles aside, Mu Shuangshuang began preparing today's highlight: braised lamb.

Mu Shuangshuang was quite happy to prepare the meal. After cutting the lamb into pieces, she cleaned them thoroughly. Fresh water in the iron pot boiled again, just in time for Mu Shuangshuang to blanch the lamb for half a minute, then took it out and placed it in a bamboo sieve.

Liu Zian had never seen anyone cook before and didn't realize that cooking required such meticulous attention.

When Lu Yuanfeng entered the house, Liu Zian's gaze was still fixed on Mu Shuangshuang's back.

He only regained some composure upon entering the kitchen.

"Shuangshuang, let me help you chop the meat."

Lu Yuanfeng offered to help himself, and Mu Shuangshuang didn't refuse, she just said, "You can start by washing the meat, and also wash the prepared vegetables."

#### Chapter 395: Broaden Horizons

Lu Yuanfeng was drenched in sweat, but without taking a break, he dove straight into work.

Standing nearby, Liu Zian couldn't help but feel envious of Lu Yuanfeng. The moment Lu Yuanfeng walked in, he noticed the corners of Shuangshuang's mouth lifted slightly more, and the way they interacted seemed particularly harmonious. She could even casually have Lu Yuanfeng help out, yet he couldn't enjoy any of that.

Liu Zian felt a bit obsessed, constantly comparing himself to Lu Yuanfeng. He even wanted to become more familiar with Shuangshuang.

The sound of Lu Yuanfeng chopping meat on the cutting board echoed, each chop surprisingly rhythmic.

Mu Shuangshuang stood at the corner of the cutting board, slicing ingredients. Ginger was cut into slices, garlic into pieces — even these seemingly small tasks kept her busily engaged.

Their cooperation was so impeccable that Liu Zian felt like an outsider who couldn't blend in, which made him grow a bit anxious inside.

"Shuangshuang, you mentioned last time that your younger brother will start primary school next year. Would you like me to give him a few lessons?"

Liu Zian was currently teaching students about to start primary school, charging twenty coins per day including lunch. Today, he only taught a half-day class because his student's family had other matters.

Mu Shuangshuang paused in her chopping; Liu Zian's suggestion did seem like a good idea. Yuanbao and Xiao Han were soon to begin primary school, and if guided by Scholar Wang Liu Zian, attending classes might become less of a burden for them.

Lu Yuanfeng noticed Shuangshuang's hesitation. He knew that Shuangshuang was thinking of Xiao Han and Yuanbao, so he refrained from speaking.

But where would Liu Zian stay if he went to Shuangshuang's house?

Lu Yuanfeng glanced at Shuangshuang with uncertainty, just in time to catch her reassuring smile.

Just a single smile made Lu Yuanfeng feel that nothing else mattered.

Whatever Shuangshuang wished to do, he would support her!

"But don't you have classes to teach for others?" Mu Shuangshuang asked directly.

"I don't have classes in the afternoon and evening. I can arrange to adjust tomorrow's schedule. With a day and a half, I should be able to teach your brother the basic knowledge."

Liu Zian had already planned that if Shuangshuang agreed, he would do everything possible to help teach her brother.

"Liu Zian, I have more than one brother at home, is two okay?"

Mu Shuangshuang wasn't foolish. If Liu Zian went to the village, she'd at most pay two days of tuition and meals, but missing such a good opportunity would be a shame once the boy became successful in the future.

She wouldn't want any riches from anyone, but if something was beneficial for her brothers, she wouldn't mind doing it.

"No...no problem!" Liu Zian realized from Shuangshuang's words that she was in agreement.

He already planned on informing his parents through the villagers, to return home the following evening.

Thinking about spending two more days with Shuangshuang, any annoyance in his heart vanished, but before he could relish the thought, a splash of cold water doused him.

"Liu Zian, you'll stay at Fengzi's house today. As for teaching, that will also take place in his yard. He's set up a pergola there and I've tested it; it's not hot at all during the day. I'll bring you meals for the whole day. As for the tuition fee, how much do others charge?"

Liu Zian quickly waved his hand: "No charge, you helped me gather travel expenses last time, I haven't properly thanked you yet. Consider this one of my thanks.

Mu Shuangshuang wasn't going to argue with Liu Zian; she had her ways of getting him to accept the money.

But if he didn't speak up, and the payment was less, she couldn't care less!

Once she finished her current task, Mu Shuangshuang began pouring oil into the heated wok. When the oil was hot enough, she added Sichuan peppercorns to spice the wok, to be removed and set aside once done.

Next, she added ingredients like ginger, garlic, scallions, along with dried chilies and star anise to the wok to stir-fry for aroma.

As the fragrance gradually filled the air, even Little Niu, working in the front yard, followed the aroma inside.

This was likely the most enticing smell the kitchen in Little Niu's house had ever produced in years.

He stood at the door, peering into the kitchen, just as Shuangshuang began stir-frying the lamb in the wok.

Lamb naturally possesses a strong flavor, which under Shuangshuang's skillful hands, permeated the entire kitchen with its aroma.

Saliva began to flow instantly, and Lu Yuanfeng also felt a great sense of accomplishment. He thought of saving more money, so when Shuangshuang reached the right age, he could propose marriage.

Just after the Qixi Festival, Shuangshuang was already fourteen. Once she had her coming-of-age ceremony next year, Lu Yuanfeng planned to discuss this with Shuangshuang.

During the intermission while simmering the lamb, Mu Shuangshuang lit another stove in Little Niu's house and started stir-frying vegetables and minced meat.

"Shuangshuang, there's also a fish, should we prepare it?" Lu Yuanfeng suggested, his hand already reaching into the water vat for fish.

"Do it. Later, we can make spicy boiled fish slices. You four big guys can have a great feast today."

"Okay!"

Lu Yuanfeng agreed and began cleaning the fish. He was skilled in gutting fish, meticulously scrapping off the scales and slicing open the fish's belly to remove the innards and clean it thoroughly.

Taking advantage of the pause to wash the pot, Mu Shuangshuang secretly glanced at Lu Yuanfeng. Compared to Liu Zian, Lu Yuanfeng's stance while working was much more competent.

After expertly cleaning the fish, Lu Yuanfeng fetched some water and washed the fish until it was spotless.

Liu Zian realized the topic he had struggled to find had suddenly vanished again.

He could only pin his hopes on Lu Yuanfeng.

"Brother Lu, when you kill fish, aren't you afraid?"

A simple conversation starter, Lu Yuanfeng looked up at Liu Zian.

Seeing Liu Zian looking nervously at the now cleaned fish, he hesitantly responded.

"It's just a fish. I've killed animals in the mountains much larger than a fish. Plus, for a grown man to be afraid of these things, wouldn't that be laughable?"

Liu Zian instantly blushed and sheepishly retreated to stand alongside Little Niu.

"Are you all so idle? Sometimes watching isn't as productive as wiping the windows, tables, and chairs in the front yard, not to mention those metal items, they're all dusty. Use a dry cloth to wipe them!"

Mu Shuangshuang tirelessly advised, feeling she was about to turn into an old nag, speaking so much every day.

Lu Yuanfeng chuckled softly, seemingly because of Shuangshuang's words.

At this time, with Little Niu and Liu Zian gone from the kitchen, she asked naturally.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Nothing, I just found you quite amusing earlier. When you spoke, Little Niu didn't dare to resist and obediently went to work."

"Of course, do you even know who I am?" Mu Shuangshuang looked smug.

But she quickly thought of Liu Zian, and said to Lu Yuanfeng, "Fengzi, we shouldn't spoil our younger brothers and sisters too much. It's good to be nice to them, but we should still let them do some work and give them more exposure to society sometimes!"

## Chapter 396: Saving Money to Marry a Wife

"Alright, I'll also have Yuanbao lose some weight by eating less meat!" Lu Yuanfeng vowed earnestly.

Previously, he was reluctant to let Yuanbao work. Whatever Yuanbao wanted to eat, he would prepare. Now looking back, he realized he spoiled him too much.

Yuanbao is a man; he can't be pampered.

In the future, he still has to study, deal with people, so he must learn to restrain himself.

In the iron pot, the lamb was bubbling merrily. Mu Shuangshuang took the cleaned fish from Lu Yuanfeng and began slicing it into fillets.

She didn't know what kind of fish Little Niu bought, but it didn't have many bones, just right for making boiled fish slices.

She placed the thin fish slices in a large bowl, poured oil, pepper, and white wine over them to marinate together.

"Fengzi, help me switch to low heat, I'm going to fry the Sichuan pepper now."

As she spoke, Mu Shuangshuang began pouring oil into the hot pot. Before the oil got too hot, she started adding the Sichuan pepper.

The oil for Sichuan pepper shouldn't be too hot, just warm enough. Once the Sichuan pepper is fragrant, she could add the dried chilies.

This is the first seasoning for the boiled fish slices, so Mu Shuangshuang handled it carefully, not daring to be sloppy.

Lu Yuanfeng turned down the heat and found a towel for Mu Shuangshuang, asking with concern, "Are you tired? Shall I wipe your sweat?"

"Sure!" Mu Shuangshuang was unreserved, tilting her head and moving her face closer to Lu Yuanfeng.

Lu Yuanfeng looked at the palm-sized face in front of him, hardly daring to breathe for fear of startling Shuangshuang.

His movements in wiping sweat were gentle, as if afraid of wiping her the wrong way.

But Shuangshuang wasn't that fragile; she was indeed a tough girl, but being treated gently like this made her feel extremely comfortable.

Her heart was racing wildly. After Lu Yuanfeng wiped her sweat, Mu Shuangshuang returned to preparing the boiled fish slices.

She scooped up the dried chilies and Sichuan pepper, left some hot oil in the pot, and added fermented black beans and spices to sauté together. The dried chili paste, scallions, ginger, and garlic, even though they were just seasonings, already smelled amazing.

Lu Yuanfeng felt like his soul was almost being whisked away, whether it was by the mesmerizing person or the enchanting aroma of the seasonings.

In the hot pot, Mu Shuangshuang added a ladle of water. When the soup was ready, she added salt, pepper powder, and a bit of sugar. After adjusting the taste, she added the fish slices.

Soon, a pot of boiled fish slices was ready. Looking at the bright red fish slices in the pot, Mu Shuangshuang nodded with satisfaction.

At that moment, the braised lamb was also done. As soon as the pot was opened, the aroma of lamb wafted through the air. Outside, the people who had been sent to work came back in, drawn by the delicious smell, staring at the two big dishes, their mouths watering.

"Shuangshuang, is it ready?" Little Niu asked, his face flushed.

"Not yet, go outside and wait a while longer. I'll call you when the food is ready."

Mu Shuangshuang shooed them out again and began working hard. After two sticks of incense time, lunch was finally ready. Uncle Da Niu had also come out from the boiler room. Three people, six pairs of eyes, watched Mu Shuangshuang. When she finally finished mixing the cold noodles, everyone heaved a sigh of relief.

"Shuang, your cooking skills are top-notch!"

Even before they started eating, Uncle Da Niu couldn't help but praise Mu Shuangshuang when he saw the table full of dishes.

"Haha, Uncle Da Niu, you've been praising me for so long that I'm getting embarrassed."

Though Mu Shuangshuang said she was embarrassed, there wasn't a hint of it on her face.

Everyone started sitting down to eat: boiled fish slices, braised lamb, cold noodles, some green vegetables, and a sour vegetable soup. These simple farmhouse dishes were enjoyed as if it were a holiday feast.

Mu Shuangshuang was quite aggressive with the spices, making everyone's mouths red from the heat, yet they still couldn't resist going for more.

"Brother Yuanfeng, you're really lucky, Shuangshuang cooks for you every day, right?"

Previously, Lu Yuanfeng had introduced Mu Shuangshuang to Uncle Da Niu as his future wife, so in Little Niu's heart, Shuangshuang was his sister-in-law.

Several people sat together, eating, drinking, chatting, and the atmosphere was warm and friendly. Even the usually quiet Liu Zian joined in.

Initially, Uncle Da Niu wasn't very responsive to Liu Zian because he was a sudden addition.

When Mu Shuangshuang mentioned that Liu Zian was a scholar, Uncle Da Niu, atypically, started talking to him.

"Zian, studying is a meticulous task, you should eat more lamb to nourish yourself."

Old Uncle Da Niu was quite simple-minded; Mu Shuangshuang hadn't even mentioned how much Liu Zian studied, yet he was already being favored.

"Thank you, Uncle. Studying isn't as hard as your work. You swing the hammer all day, that's really tough."

Liu Zian, who grew up in the village, truly admired these craftsmen who worked with real skills. He even planned that if he succeeded in the future, he would do his best to help them.

"Good child, with that thought, we're willing to keep our heads down and work hard. If I had money back in the day, I would have sent Little Niu to study too, but alas..."

All other occupations are inferior, only studying is esteemed. This was a true reflection of the ancient Da Ning Dynasty. In front of scholars, people naturally felt inferior.

"Dad, enough, let's eat. Don't waste Shuangshuang's good intentions." Little Niu knew that his father had regretted not sending him to study all these years, but he didn't think much of studying.

He could earn money with his hands now, and in the future, marry a wife, which wasn't bad at all.

"Alright, I know!"

Uncle Da Niu finally continued to eat, picking up a bite of noodles and putting it in his bowl. Seeing that the noodles were a bit cool, he said, "I'll go heat this up, cold noodles might not taste good."

"Uncle, these are cold noodles, meant to be eaten cold, please try them." Mu Shuangshuang quickly explained.

Only then did Uncle Da Niu take a bite. The cold noodles made by Mu Shuangshuang were more chewy than regular noodles, and because the seasoning was her own mix, they had a tangy, spicy taste, topped with minced meat, the flavor was incredible.

"This is indeed good stuff. Shuang, you really have skills!"

Everyone burst into laughter.

A meal full of joy and laughter was happily finished. After the meal, Mu Shuangshuang took a short break before starting to clean up the tableware.

All the dishes on the table were completely finished, not even the broth was left. This surprised Mu Shuangshuang, but she was happy because it at least proved her dishes were very appealing.

"Shuangshuang, let me do the dishes; you go rest!" Lu Yuanfeng volunteered enthusiastically.

Liu Zian wasn't one to be outdone either. "Shuangshuang, let me do it. Didn't you say I should get used to chores? From now on, whenever I have time, I'll learn."

Mu Shuangshuang couldn't be bothered with the two of them. Just moments ago, during the meal, they somehow got carried away, continuously serving her dishes, almost stuffing her to death.

Since arriving in the Da Ning Dynasty, Mu Shuangshuang dared not waste food. She couldn't bear to waste even a grain of rice, let alone a bowl of food.

Chapter 397: Feasting on Teeth

Neither of them was willing to yield, but Lu Yuanfeng was taller and stronger. He directly reached over Liu Zian and grabbed the bowl on the table.

Liu Zian wasn't about to show weakness either. He squeezed past Lu Yuanfeng and prepared to snatch the bowl.

By now, these bowls had transcended their actual worth in their minds.

The tension in the air didn't catch Mu Shuangshuang's attention until one of the bowls smashed onto the ground. She turned around to see the two still refusing to let go and rolled her eyes dramatically.

"You both seem to love working so much. Lu Yuanfeng, you wash the dishes, and Liu Zian, clean up the mess on the floor!"

Mu Shuangshuang called their names directly, giving no one face, and Lu Yuanfeng and Liu Zian both blushed.

Then they realized how overly they had behaved.

"I'll buy a bowl to replace it later!" Lu Yuanfeng said.

"Me too!" Liu Zian replied.

"Fine, finish the work you have at hand first before talking about replacing bowls, I'll handle buying one myself!"

"Shuangshuang, I'll go with you." Lu Yuanfeng urged because every time they went to the market, it was always he who accompanied Shuangshuang, and he worried Shuangshuang might not manage it alone.

"Forget it, neither of you are coming with me until your mistakes are sorted!"

Taking some cash with her, Mu Shuangshuang walked out the door and headed straight into the marketplace. She picked out four earthenware bowls, negotiated the price, and was about to head back when she spotted a girl in a dark green dress with a beautifully tied bun with a hairband.

The girl was none other than Ah Ru from Ah Rubu's Mansion.

Ah Ru looked pleasantly surprised upon seeing Mu Shuangshuang and pointed with curiosity, "Shuangshuang, what are you doing here? Alone? Where's Fengzi?"

A barrage of questions rendered Mu Shuangshuang unsure of how to respond, so she gave a smile.

"He's being punished for breaking someone else's bowl at a friend's house. I made him wash it."

Saying so, Mu Shuangshuang shook the bowl in her hand and said to Ah Ru, "Here's the one I just bought to make amends. By the way, what are you here for?"

Mu Shuangshuang doubted Ah Ru was out shopping since this hour was typically when shop owners ate. Generally, during this time, only small stalls were busy, and big shops ought not have anyone attending.

"I'm checking out the patterns at all the shops. The shopkeepers are busy now; if you look longer, the clerks won't say anything." Ah Ru nodded.

"Are the patterns not enough at your place?" Mu Shuangshuang had drawn several for Ah Ru, one of which she'd already seen someone wearing, looking rather good indeed.

But for the remaining ones, not likely anyone had worn them yet!

"Yes, last time quite a few people from town asked about it. More of those were the ladies from clans or daughters of landlords wanting something unique, but your patterns aren't quite cost-effective for making individual pieces for them, so I'm thinking of finding patterns slightly different from the public ones."

Women love elegance and dread wearing the same outfit as someone else—Mu Shuangshuang knew this.

Moreover, for a town as little as theirs, going out and seeing another wearing the same clothing was rather embarrassing.

Regarding Ah Ru's intentions, if Mu Shuangshuang guessed correctly, she wanted to earn more silver to expand her shop.

If she were to release all those designs now, there might not be any good styles left in the future.

"Alright, I'll draw a few simpler designs for you. Though they might take some time, it'll leave the previous ones intact for now."

"Great, I've just sold a few outfits lately, you can take the silver with you when you go."

As they talked, the two girls got more into it, chatting and laughing on the way; by the time the designs were finished, nearly an hour had passed.

Mu Shuangshuang recalled the pile of ox bones she had bought and returned to the marketplace to purchase seaweed, weigh out two pounds of meat, and since there wasn't a divided pot, she would temporarily just use the small pot she bought at the smithy.

Heading back to Little Niu's house, Lu Yuanfeng and Liu Zian were already growing impatient; Lu Yuanfeng had gone looking for a while but hadn't found anyone, fearing Shuangshuang returned without him knowing, he sulked back gloomily.

Yet she wasn't there.

"Shuangshuang, where did you go?"

Lu Yuanfeng and Liu Zian exclaimed simultaneously.

"Nowhere really, I ran into Ah Ru on the way. I went to her shop and made two more designs, bought a couple of groceries to treat the folks at home. It's time we head back!"

Mu Shuangshuang thought it might be best to take the small path now; otherwise, the whole day would end without accomplishing anything.

"Shuangshuang, I have to find my fellow villager and inform him I won't be home," Liu Zian gathered the courage to say.

"Alright, let's split up. Fengzi's wheelbarrow is still parked somewhere else; I'll fetch it with him later, meet up at the village entrance."

"Okay!"

The three each busied themselves with their tasks and met back at the village entrance after about two sticks of incense's time.

Liu Zian appeared as a stranger in Er Gui Village for the first time. Concerned he might be nervous, Mu Shuangshuang assured him, "Liu Zian, my family members are quite easygoing, but my grandma's side, their mouths might be somewhat harsh. If you encounter them, just ignore them."

Mu Shuangshuang feared Liu Zian might think she was slandering the Old Mu Family, but such peculiar family members weren't worth slandering.

She felt if she didn't clarify now, and Liu Zian faced humiliation and left, it would all be for naught.

Liu Zian pondered her words for a good while before nodding with difficulty.

Harsh mouth, he couldn't understand, for his relatives treated him kindly, never speaking harshly to him. But everyone was poor, so it made no difference.

The only difference was that he was the sole scholarly one in Liu Family Village.

Mu Shuangshuang felt relieved seeing Liu Zian nod in agreement.

The journey continued with little conversation, Lu Yuanfeng remained mostly silent, clinging to a somber expression the entire way.

Fortunately, no one seemed bothered.

Arriving finally at Er Gui Village, it was dusk.

Mu Shuangshuang hurried home while Lu Yuanfeng helped carry items, heading directly to her house.

Upon entering Er Gui Village, Liu Zian seemed more confident, asking about Yuanbao and Xiao Han's situation—learning related, Mu Shuangshuang naturally gave detailed explanations.

The conversation finished just as they reached the side door of her house.

Previously, they'd discussed splitting off the third branch, so Liu Zian didn't dwell on those details.

Entering, he saw a clean courtyard flanked by two separate houses, with nothing in it except a door plank.

On the plank were spread out some dried gold and silver flowers, the fragrance permeating the courtyard giving an unusually comforting vibe.

Chapter 398: Red Eye is an Illness

"Dad, Mom, I'm back." Mu Shuangshuang called out into the house.

Liu Zian saw a woman of about thirty years old come out. She was very thin, but compared to Shuangshuang, she looked a bit better. Her face carried a hint of blush, and Liu Zian knew that she must be Shuangshuang's mother.

Yu Si Niang noticed the stranger and turned a questioning gaze towards Mu Shuangshuang.  
"Shuangshuang, this is..."

"Mom, this is Liu Zian, the teacher for Xiao Han and Yuanbao. He'll be staying at Fengzi's house today and tomorrow to give lessons to the kids."

As soon as she heard he was a scholar, Yu Si Niang got excited and hurriedly brought out a chair and made tea, leaving Liu Zian a bit flustered.

Liu Zian was popular wherever he went, especially since he was invited by Mu Shuangshuang to give lessons.

Xiao Han also came out from the house, holding the "Ritual" book in his hands. When he first saw Liu Zian, his gaze was unfamiliar, carrying a hint of skepticism.

Gradually, as Liu Zian spoke to him, Xiao Han loosened up.

Perhaps because Xiao Han liked books and knew Liu Zian could teach, he felt a bit of a student-teacher bond with Liu Zian, naturally admiring him.

"Shuangshuang, where did you find such a teacher? He seems quite good."

Yu Si Niang pulled Mu Shuangshuang into a room and asked curiously.

"Mom, do you remember when I argued with my uncle, saying that the number one scholar in the county would teach Xiao Han?"

"You mean, he is..." Yu Si Niang was so excited she almost fainted. She couldn't believe her daughter spoke the truth and indeed knew such a legendary person.

"Mom, don't get too excited, he's just an ordinary person. No need to fawn over him intentionally. I just think scholars are like that; whether they succeed or not depends on their strategies later on."

Getting into officialdom is easy; staying in the Capital or getting a decent job is hard.

The road Liu Zian has to travel is the toughest of all.

"You little girl, of course I know these things, don't worry, everything in good spirits." Yu Si Niang laughed.

Yet she couldn't help but feel a bit excited deep down. Fearing Liu Zian might go hungry, she hurried to the kitchen to see what to prepare for dinner. Mu Shuangshuang finished tidying up and made plans with Lu Yuanfeng to pick some vegetables in the garden. The piece of dry land from before, which Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng had cultivated, now yielded edible cabbage.

With the heavy rain a few days ago, Mu Shuangshuang felt there were plenty of good things in the mountains.

The two set out together, and Liu Zian watched from the yard, his gaze following Mu Shuangshuang's back for a long time.

Xiao Han calling him finally brought him back to reality.

"Teacher, what's wrong? We called you and you didn't respond?"

"It's nothing, let's continue."

Initially, Liu Zian didn't teach Xiao Han overly difficult things; they were mostly historical in nature—how the Grand Ancestor Emperor founded the Da Ning Dynasty, followed by how the Grand Ancestor slowly developed Da Ning into a strong country amidst attacks from several other nations.

As he spoke, Yuanbao was caught by Mu Shuangshuang to listen to the lesson.

Hearing something of interest, Yuanbao didn't even wash the mud off his hands, but sat down and listened attentively like a good student.

The Mu family's yard wasn't a private place — a stranger had arrived and surrounded by three little kids — it didn't take long before people came to inquire about the situation.

Yu Si Niang didn't think much and explained to everyone that Liu Zian was a scholar. Unexpectedly, this made everyone want to cram into Mu Shuangshuang's yard as if looking at a rare object.

Several people living near the Old Mu Family who also had children boldly approached Yu Si Niang to discuss something.

"Si Niang, you're being quite unfair, inviting a teacher! Why not let my son listen in too?"

"Ah?" Yu Si Niang was taken aback.

"What's the 'ah' for? We're all neighbors, better close neighbors than distant relatives. Since Shuangshuang invited him, shouldn't every child in Er Gui Village be allowed to listen?" Someone else chimed in.

"But, it's not for me to decide; the teacher said he would only teach Xiao Han and Yuanbao." Yu Si Niang replied, looking troubled.

"Si Niang, come on! It's just listening to a lecture, not eating from your third branch, don't be stingy." The first woman spoke domineeringly, leaving no room for Yu Si Niang to refute, and quickly addressed the villagers: "Quickly, bring your kids here, Si Niang allowed us to listen in too!"

"No, Sister-in-law Chen, you..." Yu Si Niang stamped her foot in frustration.

It was the first time she had seen someone so domineering, despite her saying nothing.

Ignoring Yu Si Niang, Mrs. Chen busily directed the villagers, moving chairs and tables from Shuangshuang's house, even setting aside the boards drying gold and silver flowers to pull out the benches inside.

Suddenly, Liu Zian felt the yard was full of people, all looking at him like he was some rarity.

"Zian, the village kids want to listen to you. Can you teach them? If not, then I'll..."

Yu Si Niang reluctantly bore the pressure as things had reached this level.

She was typically accommodating, and villagers would often ask for her help.

This time, although she was unwilling, she didn't want to offend these villagers.

The third branch had just separated, and in the village they held no real status—if they angered the villagers, no one would want to associate with them.

"It's fine, Aunt, you handle your own affairs, I can manage here."

But Liu Zian soon realized he was wrong.

Initially, he told Xiao Han, Yuanbao, and Little Zhi some stories about court's big men.

The three listened intently, yet the newcomers were unruly, reacting contrarily to everything he said.

At the moment, he was talking about Xing Ningtian, the deceased War God of Da Ning Dynasty, a prince with a different surname, and the children were joking about it.

"I don't believe one person could lift a large tripod." A boy of about twelve or thirteen commented.

"Yet that's the truth." Liu Zian explained patiently.

These came from historical records, they couldn't be wrong.

"Then why did he die? I think it's all fake." The boy stubbornly insisted.

No matter how Liu Zian explained, he wouldn't listen.

Liu Zian felt helpless, and Yuanbao, unable to tolerate it, intervened.

"Why do you talk so much nonsense? If you want to listen, listen; if not, get lost! Can't even hear a story in peace."

Yuanbao was king among the kids, and his words finally made Liu Zian's teaching process more comfortable.

However, soon after, hearing that Shuangshuang had invited a teacher, the Old Mu Family members couldn't wait to rush over.

"Third sister-in-law, I heard Shuang invited some teacher, let me have a look!" Mu Xiangxiang took the lead, but in truth, she was searching for Lu Yuanfeng's figure in the crowd.

Strange, I saw Lu Yuanfeng with that little girl earlier, why can't I see him now?

Chapter 399: Fengzi Kissed Shuangshuang

Yu Si Niang knew that today's matter was far from over.

Yet, she was completely powerless against them.

Yu Si Niang's brashness was reserved only for her sisters-in-law; she certainly wouldn't engage in any fighting or conflict with others.

Plus, now that Mrs. Lin was pregnant, even if Yu Si Niang wanted to be rude to her, she wouldn't dare.

"Third Sister-in-law, what's the point of standing there without saying anything? Everybody's here, isn't it?"

Mu Xiangxiang shouted loudly, even though Liu Zian was right in front of her.

Those unaware of the truth tried to explain the situation kindly.

"Mu Family's Little Aunt, take a proper look, this isn't the same gentleman?"

Mu Xiangxiang glanced at Liu Zian, indeed finding his face unfamiliar.

He wore clothes washed to the point of fading; although old, they were spotlessly clean. Despite this, he looked skinny and frail, lacking any muscle and strength. He couldn't compare to Lu Yuanfeng, so Mu Xiangxiang didn't even want to look at him.

However, she still refused to leave; she was waiting for Lu Yuanfeng to come back.

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...

In the mountains, Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng headed towards a shady slope where wild vegetables and mushrooms were often found.

After walking for nearly the time of a stick of incense, they finally found a spot rich in mushrooms.

In the mountains, mushrooms must be collected carefully; only familiar types should be picked, and brightly colored mushrooms must never be touched.

Mu Shuangshuang gathered mushrooms while observing Lu Yuanfeng from a distance. He was also cautiously avoiding the brightly colored mushrooms, and didn't even touch the good ones growing near toxic ones.

Mu Shuangshuang felt great, so she focused on collecting mushrooms and digging wild vegetables!

The sun was setting at that moment, so its light was dimmer than usual. But, filtering through the forest leaves, it gently illuminated faces.

Lu Yuanfeng's gaze occasionally fell upon Shuangshuang. In the distance, the slender girl was squatting, seriously digging up wild vegetables, completely undistracted by the outside world.

Her dedicated demeanor undeniably attracted Lu Yuanfeng.

"Fengzi, do you think we should keep picking mushrooms?" Mu Shuangshuang turned and shook the basket in her hand, meeting Lu Yuanfeng's intense gaze.

Mu Shuangshuang's face instantly turned red; after all, from her past life until now, she had never been in a relationship, let alone holding a man's hand. During school, courses like grappling and combat involved both genders, but none ever gave her the current sensation.

"Shuangshuang, give me the basket, I'll hold it for you!" Lu Yuanfeng moved closer, his gaze still bold.

At that moment, Mu Shuangshuang squatted while Lu Yuanfeng stood; from her angle, he was very tall, with a strong, straight back.

He reached out his callused hand and placed it open in front of Mu Shuangshuang, who suddenly placed her hand on his.

In excitement, Lu Yuanfeng pulled Mu Shuangshuang into his arms, roughness blinded her momentarily. She fell directly into Lu Yuanfeng's embrace, her head resting on his chest, hearing the thumping heartbeat.

Mu Shuangshuang lifted her head, wanting to withdraw from Lu Yuanfeng's arms, but his face was already close, and then their lips lightly touched, with a sensation between ice and fire.

For their first kiss, both froze like fools, eyes wide open, staring at each other, not even knowing how to hold each other.

They were incredibly close, inhaling each other's scents, familiar yet filled with wild allure.

"Uh..." Mu Shuangshuang softly murmured, initially thinking Lu Yuanfeng would let go, but his actions became even more passionate.

When they finally separated, Lu Yuanfeng's face turned red like a monkey's behind, continuously apologizing.

"I'm sorry... Shuangshuang, I didn't mean to, I don't know why I just did it, I..."

Lu Yuanfeng anxiously paced in place, yet Mu Shuangshuang showed no signs of disdain or fear.

Perhaps if today's event involved someone else, Mu Shuangshuang would see it as harassment or intentional, but because it was Lu Yuanfeng, she wouldn't think so.

Moreover, their current relationship was like "boyfriend-girlfriend" in modern terms, as long as it wasn't too outrageous, kissing seemed fine.

"Silly boy, I don't blame you, but next time, don't be so rough; my waist got pinched sore, and my lips are chapped!"

Mu Shuangshuang spoke, tilting her head for Lu Yuanfeng to see her chapped lips.

This guy must be part dog; no one kisses by biting, truly a silly boy!

Lu Yuanfeng's face reddened further; with an apologetic look, he said, "Sorry, Shuangshuang I..."

"Just be more careful next time, but... Fengzi, I think even though we like each other now, I haven't reached maturity yet..."

Mu Shuangshuang paused, fixing her gaze on Lu Yuanfeng because she knew he understood!

Lu Yuanfeng nodded heavily, "Yeah, when you mature next year, I'll go to your family to propose, Shuangshuang I know you don't want to marry so early. I won't force you; next year we'll get engaged, inviting matchmakers and village leaders to witness is enough."

Lu Yuanfeng often chatted with Shuangshuang, knowing she was different and didn't want to marry at fifteen nor become a wife and mother before experiencing the world.

Lu Yuanfeng understood and was willing to wait.

But ultimately, he was insecure; Shuangshuang was so great, if the engagement wasn't set, others would surely compete with him.

Mu Shuangshuang understood; she was protective, not liking anyone to harm those she cared about.

But she had a habit: once adapted to someone or something, it had to stay with her.

In this life, she had already decided on one person and didn't want to adapt to anyone new. Yet she still had many dreams and tasks that needed her personal attention.

"Thank you, Fengzi!" After speaking, Mu Shuangshuang playfully blinked, continuing, "Next time I'll kiss you instead!"

Lu Yuanfeng's eyes widened instantly; he seemed unable to believe what he heard, yet Shuangshuang's earnest look indicated she wasn't joking.

Just as Lu Yuanfeng wanted to say more, Mu Shuangshuang interrupted him directly.

"Fengzi, when my mother finishes stewing the beef bones later, we can use these wild vegetables, mushrooms, and the sweet potato flour brought by my uncle for a big stew, okay?"

#### Chapter 400: Auntie Stinks

With a look of normalcy and a tone to match, the fire in Lu Yuanfeng's heart finally subsided, and he nodded vigorously.

"Good!"

Mu Shuangshuang weighed the basket in her hand, thought about the ingredients already at home, and the two discussed before heading down the mountain. At the foot of the mountain, Mu Shuangshuang dug up some roots of fish mint to add a bit into the beef bone soup later.

The two chatted and laughed all the way home.

As soon as they entered the courtyard, Mu Shuangshuang noticed that there were more people than usual, and the place where Liu Zian used to teach was now crowded with people.

It was so noisy, you couldn't even hear what Liu Zian was saying. Those people, each holding a bowl from her house, kept sneaking glances into the kitchen to see what's cooking, which really irked Mu Shuangshuang.

"What are you doing here?" Mu Shuangshuang asked.

"Listening to the lecture, can't you see this kid's teaching the village kids?"

That Mrs. Chen, who had called everyone over, rudely chimed in.

She made Mu Shuangshuang feel like she was the outsider, and that Mrs. Chen was the owner.

And she directly called Liu Zian "this kid," not even addressing him as teacher.

"Liu Zian, Xiao Han, Yuanbao, Little Zhi, you can have dinner now, wash up and get ready to eat."

Liu Zian stood up, nodded to Mu Shuangshuang through the crowd.

"Hey, Shuang girl, you haven't even cooked yet. I see Si Niang hasn't prepared anything either. Are you trying to kick us out?" Mrs. Chen shouted loudly.

As soon as she finished speaking, everyone turned their inspecting gazes on Mu Shuangshuang, as if she'd done something wrong.

In fact, Liu Zian was invited by her, and she had the right not to let him teach those people.

Moreover, if she wasn't mistaken, those people didn't cherish Liu Zian's teaching opportunity at all, fiddling with their fingers, chatting, completely disregarding him.

Lucky that Liu Zian has a good temper, if it were her, she would've stopped teaching long ago.

"Aunt Chen, what are you talking about? How can anyone other than our family know if our meals are ready or not!"

Besides, Liu Zian just traveled a long way and didn't even have lunch. My mother prepared an early dinner to treat him, as she should.

And after lecturing for so long without even having half a cup of tea, he's probably thirsty too. Even if not eating, he should rest, don't you think?"

What Mu Shuangshuang said made sense, and even if people felt uncomfortable inside, they couldn't argue against it.

Mrs. Chen's eyes rolled, and suddenly she asked, "Shuang girl, how many days is this teacher going to teach, so the village can listen again tomorrow?"

"Exactly, Shuang girl, my son doesn't recognize any big characters. If you let this teacher teach my son how to write, you'll be a benefactor to the Feng family!"

"My son too. I don't need him to teach anything else, just as long as he can write the three-character classics."

Mu Shuangshuang listened to the rude requests, and her mouth almost went askew. Do they really think free stuff can be taken as they please!

Mu Shuangshuang picked up a bright smile again, "Sure, but I invited Liu Zian here for one-on-two tutoring, which costs fifty wen a day. You can invite him separately later, and if there are more people I'll ask Liu Zian if it can be cheaper."

Upon hearing it costs money, everyone's face instantly fell.

Mrs. Chen shouted loudly, "Oh my! What a thing, fifty wen a day! Why not just rob us!"

"But Aunt Chen, should he pass the imperial exams in the future, it can't compare to just fifty wen. As the saying goes, all trades are inferior, only reading is superior. You must know, if a scholar emerges from a family, passing the exams means the whole family awaits ascendancy!"

Using ancient logic to deal with ancient people, no problem at all!

Mrs. Chen's face turned beet red. Only then did she realize that the person she had looked down upon for so long might indeed pass the exams in the future.

Mrs. Chen left in disgrace, and those who heard about the amount of Silver also left.

The courtyard instantly quieted down, and Xiao Han, feeling proud of his sister, was about to speak when Mu Xiangxiang, who had been watching the scene, approached.

"Fengzi, you're back, tired? Shuangshuang, that nasty girl, she's not a good person to make you work. Come, come to my house, I'll have my mother make you something delicious!"

Mu Xiangxiang said as she tried to take Lu Yuanfeng's hand, but he dodged her.

He was puzzled, he hadn't even spoken to Mu Family's Little Aunt, so why was she acting so cordial towards him?

Mu Shuangshuang was also baffled, her Little Aunt hadn't been here for a while, why did she come out of nowhere to throw herself into Fengzi's arms, could it be she likes Fengzi?

"Fengzi, why avoid me? I'm not a wild beast, won't bite you, will I?" Mu Xiangxiang looked confused, trying again to approach Lu Yuanfeng.

Her breasts were much larger than Mu Shuangshuang's, and she deliberately pushed them against Lu Yuanfeng's arm as she spoke.

Lu Yuanfeng stepped back several paces in fright, his first reaction was to see if Shuangshuang was angry.

Seeing Shuangshuang still had the same expression, Lu Yuanfeng's heart finally calmed down, but when facing Mu Xiangxiang, he immediately became solemn.

"Mu Family's Little Aunt, please behave appropriately. A young lady like you shouldn't just throw yourself at men like this, it looks bad."

Hearing this, Mu Xiangxiang got angry and questioned, "That nasty girl forced you, right? Did she tell you not to talk to me, not to get close to me?"

She was desperately throwing this accusation in front of Mu Shuangshuang.

Mu Shuangshuang almost cursed internally, was this Mu Xiangxiang brainless, daring to disregard her face like this!

"Little Aunt, if you're talking bad about someone, don't do it in front of them, okay? Could you take those words to the latrine and talk to the dung beetles there?"

Mu Shuangshuang rushed up to separate Lu Yuanfeng and Mu Xiangxiang, shouting loudly at Mu Xiangxiang.

"What did you say? You want me to talk to dung beetles? Are you crazy, you nasty girl."

"Little Aunt, if I were you, I'd first check if I smell good before calling others nasty. It's not nice to smear others."

Mu Shuangshuang stared at Mu Xiangxiang, speaking with an implied meaning.

The reason she said this was because she noticed a stinkbug resting on Mu Xiangxiang's hair.

Farm folks had a lot of stinkbugs, but they don't smell unless squashed.

Mu Shuangshuang's hand reached into the basket, grabbing a tender green leaf, waiting for the moment when Mu Xiangxiang strutted proudly in front of her.

In a swift motion, when she slapped the stinkbug on Mu Xiangxiang's head, a pungent smell wafted off Mu Xiangxiang's head.

"Oh my, Little Aunt, why do you smell so bad!" Mu Shuangshuang exclaimed!