

Folly 541

Chapter 541: Picked Up a Bag of Silver for Free

Holding a heavy black cloth bag in her hands.

Mu Shuangshuang did not hurry to open it and count, but went to the backyard to see how many people were kept by the human trafficker.

She had no idea what to expect, but was shocked at what she saw.

In the narrow house in the backyard, almost ten women were kept, all bound like livestock.

Their bodies were bruised and swollen, indicating they had been bullied by the trafficker more than once or twice.

It was the first time these people saw strangers come, and they were all crying out.

Their eyes were filled with fear; they thought Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng were new buyers and feared being chosen.

Generally, those who got bought were either made the wife of a widower,

or a concubine to a man who was hideously ugly.

If not tortured to death by the first wife, they were beaten to death by the widower.

They would rather be beaten by the trafficker here, at least they wouldn't be beaten to death.

Given the scale of things, Mu Shuangshuang knew this was beyond what she and Lu Yuanfeng could handle.

This matter must be dealt with by the government.

"Don't be afraid, we are here to rescue you. Later, we will send those bad guys outside to the government. Tell us where your home is, we will send you back if we can, if not, I will take you to town to make a living, and you'll have to rely on yourselves in the future!"

Most of these people did not come by their own will, some were abducted by traffickers along the way.

Some were sold by their uncles at home.

Those truly sold by their parents were few and rare.

Everyone looked at Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng, hoping to be the first to have their ropes untied, the first to be let go.

Those who have never lost their freedom don't know how important freedom is.

They have endured so much suffering, no matter how difficult it is, they will continue to live.

Mu Shuangshuang stepped forward to help untie the ropes of each woman, then said to everyone, "Are there any children here?"

This was the first room Mu Shuangshuang entered, but there were only women inside, no children.

This wasn't like the trafficker's usual behavior!

Women and children are vulnerable groups, the easiest to be bullied and beaten.

As soon as everyone gained their freedom, they cried out as if they couldn't believe they were suddenly free, also afraid of being captured again.

So when Mu Shuangshuang spoke, no one responded immediately.

A few timid ones looked at the door, wanting to leave but afraid of the trafficker.

One of them, a girl who seemed to be about thirteen or fourteen, said, "Yes, in another room. The trafficker caught a particularly handsome young master yesterday."

That little girl was wearing a tattered garment full of patches, her face black and blue, swollen on one side.

She appeared to have been terribly abused.

Mu Shuangshuang couldn't understand, since the trafficker wanted to sell people, they should keep them well-maintained, why were each of them beaten into a pulp?

"Little girl, can you take me to find them?" Mu Shuangshuang lowered her voice, inexplicably feeling a bit close to this little girl.

Lu Yuanfeng beside her found it both amusing and exasperating.

Simply because Shuangshuang's way of addressing people was rather funny.

She herself was a child, yet she called others little girl.

Though this young girl had been beaten badly, she wasn't short, standing in front of Mu Shuangshuang, even taller than her.

The two followed the little girl to the farthest corner room.

A large lock was placed on the door, Lu Yuanfeng found a stick, wanting to break it open, but was stopped by Mu Shuangshuang.

"Leave this to me, Fengzi, you go elsewhere to see if there are more people, let them all go!"

Mu Shuangshuang took a small piece of wire out from her sleeve, and fiddled the lock a few times, and it opened.

The little girl beside was utterly amazed.

Mu Shuangshuang walked in and saw in the corner, a child about seven or eight years old curled into a ball, wearing luxurious clothing that clashed with the thatched hut.

As the door opened, Mu Shuangshuang clearly felt the child tremble.

Mu Shuangshuang rushed over, whispering, "Don't be afraid, I'm not a bad person. My brother and sister were caught here, so I'm here to find people."

The child raised his head and asked in a childish voice, "Is it Little Zhi?"

Actually, this child wasn't kept together with Little Zhi and Yuanbao, but all of yesterday, through the wall, he heard Yuanbao calling Little Zhi's name, telling Little Zhi not to be afraid.

Naturally, he remembered it.

Mu Shuangshuang nodded heavily.

"You know my sister?" Mu Shuangshuang asked.

The child shook his head, after a while, he gritted his teeth and said, "Take me back to the Xue Family in Qingshan Town, I... I can give you a lot of money!"

It turned out this child was the son of Xue Yi's elder brother, only just returned from the Capital with Old Mrs. Xue yesterday, who knew, he was abducted just after getting off the carriage.

The trafficker took away the only valuable longevity lock from him, seeing he was good-looking and well-dressed, they locked him up separately.

As they say, timing can be as good as fortune.

Mu Shuangshuang happened to know Old Mrs. Xue and had a good relationship with her.

"What is Xue Yi to you?" Mu Shuangshuang asked.

"You know my second uncle..." The child was surprised.

"Oh, it's your second uncle!" Mu Shuangshuang nodded understandably.

Now, Mu Shuangshuang felt even more compelled to help this child.

"Later, you come back with us, I'll make you delicious food, after lunch, I'll escort you to the town, I know your second uncle and your grandmother!"

Once Mu Shuangshuang finished speaking, the child let out a long sigh.

When Mu Shuangshuang mentioned the brother and sister, he no longer doubted her.

Gradually, more people were released, and Mu Shuangshuang led them out, surprisingly, one person was missing among those originally sprawled everywhere.

And it was the leader of the traffickers.

Mu Shuangshuang was stunned.

"Fengzi... someone is missing, what do we do?"

Lu Yuanfeng rushed out, searched around but found no trace of the person.

Mu Shuangshuang was filled with regret, wishing she had beaten that person one more time.

"Never mind, one is missing, the rest are still here, let's take these people to prison to face trial!"

"Okay!"

Lu Yuanfeng borrowed a fast horse from Wang Fugui's house to report to the government, while Mu Shuangshuang washed the little boy's face.

No one was allowed to leave temporarily, those women all shouted to leave.

"Wait until the government people arrive before you leave, you also wouldn't want the traffickers to go unpunished, besides I don't have Silver to send you all back, we can only let the government handle it!"

This finally quieted them down.

Having suffered so much, a while longer didn't matter.

"Are you hungry?" Mu Shuangshuang asked.

Of course, they were hungry, even the little boy was holding his stomach.

"Those who can cook, come with me, I'll make food for everyone."

These people hadn't had breakfast, and last night, while the traffickers celebrated, no food was given to them, they were already starving.

Fortunately, most of them had cooked at home before, and followed Mu Shuangshuang to the kitchen...

Chapter 542: New Partners

In the kitchen, the ingredients for cooking surprised Mu Shuangshuang.

On the beams, hung a few pounds of five-flavor pork, on the chopping board, there were two to three pounds of beef, and half a roasted chicken, but pitifully little green vegetables.

Probably because those men disliked eating vegetables.

Mu Shuangshuang glanced around casually and knew these ingredients were enough for the group to enjoy a good meal.

Mu Shuangshuang nodded, four women entered, one washed vegetables, another cut them, one kept the fire going, and the rest helped rinse rice to cook.

"You... can cook?" Mu Shuangshuang looked at the child from the Xue Family with curiosity.

But soon denied her own thought.

Such pampered kids wouldn't know how to cook.

It's just because she knew his family, staying by her side made him safer.

"Shall we go out and pick some wild vegetables?"

The traffickers' territory was close to the mountainside, there should be a lot of wild vegetables at the foot of the mountain.

The child from the Xue Family hesitated, and then nodded.

Mu Shuangshuang seemed to have a knack with kids, most children tended to warm up to her, except for those oddballs from the Old Mu Family.

This mountain, seldom visited by people, meant the mountain goods here hadn't been touched.

Mu Shuangshuang carried a little bamboo basket, chatting with the child from the Xue Family along the way.

Later on, Mu Shuangshuang simply asked, "What's your name? I can't keep calling you kid, kid."

"Xue Zheng!" Xue Zheng responded in a childish voice.

By now he had basically trusted Mu Shuangshuang.

Moreover, the things Mu Shuangshuang mentioned were all new to him.

Sometimes it was several mushrooms, sometimes a few wild vegetables.

Mu Shuangshuang squatted down to pick mushrooms, while Xue Zheng watched beside her, suddenly he saw a particularly beautiful mushroom, just as he was about to reach out and pick it like Mu Shuangshuang, she stopped his hand.

"Don't, it's a poisonous fly agaric, these mushrooms are toxic!" Seeing Xue Zheng's surprised look, Mu Shuangshuang added, "Nature is like this, the more enticing things are, the more poisonous they can be. Instead, these ordinary looking ones are edible."

Mu Shuangshuang pointed to the very ordinary mushroom.

Xue Zheng nodded, looking thoughtful.

"Alright, let's head back, I need to cook later!"

Upon returning indoors, the women had prepared the ingredients she needed, cleaning the wild vegetables and mushrooms, Mu Shuangshuang began to cook.

Xue Zheng stood just a foot away from Mu Shuangshuang, wherever she moved, he followed, seemingly afraid to stray far from her.

Mu Shuangshuang didn't notice.

Boiled fish fillets, braised pork, and spicy beef; Mu Shuangshuang made three big dishes, and used the meat slices to make a soup with vegetables and mushrooms.

Once the meal was ready, the group of women rushed over without decorum, Mu Shuangshuang anticipated this and had reserved a portion of food for herself and Xue Zheng, plus the little girl who had reacted first.

She's quite talkative, lively, the type with a sweet tongue calling Sister Shuangshuang, Sister Shuangshuang.

Nothing awkward at all.

After the meal, the group only rested for a moment when the government people arrived.

A team, all hurried over on fast horses, led by Lu Yuanfeng at the forefront.

From afar, he looked like the leader of the troupe.

Mu Shuangshuang found Lu Yuanfeng incredibly handsome, even a bit curious about how he looked when riding for battle.

After glancing a few more times, Mu Shuangshuang even noticed a carriage at the end of the team, a carriage clearly not from ordinary households, one she hadn't seen despite numerous trips to the town.

She thought, it must be the Xue Family arriving.

"Xue Zheng, your second uncle is here, you can go with him later!"

After a meal, Mu Shuangshuang and Xue Zheng's revolutionary friendship had deepened quite a bit, and along the way, she had made him laugh a couple of times.

Though wasn't sure if he was too reliant on Mu Shuangshuang.

As she spoke, Xue Zheng suddenly hugged Mu Shuangshuang's waist.

Mu Shuangshuang's body stiffened, this little rascal was not taking advantage of her, was he?

"Hey, Xue Zheng, what's up?" Mu Shuangshuang asked.

"I'm not going back, I want to stay with you..." Xue Zheng mumbled softly.

"No, you don't live here, you..." Mu Shuangshuang hesitated halfway through her words, sensing some dampness around her waist.

It seemed Xue Zheng was shedding tears, wasn't he just fine a moment ago?

Mu Shuangshuang wished the Xue Family would hurry up.

Yet, the Xue Family carriage ambled along, while the government people had arrived.

Lu Yuanfeng leapt off the horse, bringing a gust of wind, Mu Shuangshuang felt their position with Xue Zheng might be misunderstood, quickly explaining.

"This child is crying, Fengzi, could you help call the people in the carriage over?"

Just as she finished speaking, the hands around her waist tightened.

As if afraid she might run away.

Xue Yi stepped down from the carriage, witnessing this scene.

He didn't rush over, instead letting Xue Zheng hold Mu Shuangshuang for a while longer.

Not until Mu Shuangshuang was gritting her teeth did he come over.

"Xue Zheng, your second uncle has really arrived, see for yourself." Mu Shuangshuang placed her hand on Xue Zheng's back.

Xue Zheng suddenly found courage, resisting Mu Shuangshuang's words, refusing to let go.

"Xue Zheng, want to see even more beautiful mountains, pick more mushrooms, and go hunting?"

Mu Shuangshuang coaxed Xue Zheng softly.

"If you don't let go, I'll go on my own."

Only then did Xue Zheng release her.

Cannot deny Mu Shuangshuang's knack for coaxing kids.

Otherwise, Xue Zheng wouldn't be this obedient.

It's only now that Xue Yi approached.

"Ah Zheng, let's go home, your grandma misses you."

Xue Yi remained unfazed, appearing as if nothing happened.

Old Mrs. Xue wouldn't have been the same, yesterday she was anxious to the point of not eating or sleeping.

The Xue Family deployed all guards and servants, and still couldn't find anyone.

If it weren't for Lu Yuanfeng gathering people in the morning, it's likely Old Mrs. Xue would have been distraught.

Xue Yi owed Mu Shuangshuang gratitude, fortunately, he differed from others, knowing to amend mistakes, repaying kindness without reservation.

"Miss Shuangshuang, thank you and Yuan Feng for rescuing our Ah Zheng. I don't know how to properly thank you. I know you parted ways with Jiu Si Xuan, are you interested in partnering with me on business? The rapport between us would definitely be better than with Zheng Zhi!"

Xue Yi was confident, employing people without doubts, unlike Zheng Zhi, easily swayed.

Should doubts arise, he would question his judgment.

"I haven't thought it through yet; when I have, we can discuss further."

Mu Shuangshuang didn't commit outright, unsure about the collaboration just yet.

Chapter 543: Earth-Shattering Thunder

However, Xue Yi's attitude today really surprised Mu Shuangshuang.

When talking about cooperation, Xue Yi wasn't sharp-tongued either.

Xue Zheng didn't seem to like his second uncle very much. Since Xue Yi arrived, he stopped talking and stood on the side, looking down at the tips of his shoes.

The government officials entered the human trafficker's residence and tied up all the human traffickers with a hemp rope.

The lead arrest officer seemed to have a good relationship with Xue Yi. After controlling everyone, he even greeted Xue Yi.

Most of the women had followed the government officers away.

Today, the government officers would register them in the town, and then the town chief's people would escort these women home.

However, there were still two women left, along with the child who had been beaten up and had a bruised face.

These three claimed they were homeless. The two women were easier to settle as Xue Yi promised on the spot to find work for them, but the young girl was a bit difficult.

Because she was unwilling to follow Xue Yi.

Moreover, she was determined to follow Mu Shuangshuang.

"Sister Shuangshuang, please let me follow you. I can work and cook. I lost my parents very early, and no one takes care of me," the young girl kept pleading with Mu Shuangshuang. "I can be your maid and look after you."

Mu Shuangshuang looked helpless. Today, she seemed quite popular.

"Young girl, it's not that I won't let you follow me, but it's just that my family conditions are not that good right now. I also have siblings to take care of, and the work I do is not simple. I have to farm, dig the land, and even go hunting in the mountains, things that not just anyone can do."

"On the other hand, if you follow Xue Yi, whether you're working as a maid or learning something, he won't let you go hungry."

Mu Shuangshuang tried to persuade earnestly.

She didn't need a maid, nor did she need help.

She believed that the young girl would be better off following Xue Yi than her.

Seeing that Mu Shuangshuang was firm about not taking her, the little girl felt somewhat dispirited but ultimately had no choice but to follow Xue Yi.

Xue Yi had no intention of staying there long; once he confirmed who would be following him, he planned to return.

Old Mrs. Xue was at home alone, and Xue Yi was genuinely worried.

Xue Zheng threw himself into the carriage and never came out.

Before parting, Xue Yi said again, "Miss Shuangshuang, I have nothing else to say. For what happened today, I remember, and one day I will repay your kindness."

With Xue Yi's group leaving, it truly only left Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng.

After resting for so long, with beads of sweat still on his forehead, Mu Shuangshuang handed her cotton cloth handkerchief to Lu Yuanfeng.

"Wipe it off, you're all sweaty!"

Lu Yuanfeng held the handkerchief in his palm for a long time, reluctant to use it. Mu Shuangshuang straightforwardly said, "Let me help you wipe it!"

Before Lu Yuanfeng could react, Mu Shuangshuang had pulled him down, and the handkerchief in his hand was taken by Mu Shuangshuang.

Mu Shuangshuang's hand was very light, wiping gently as if teasing.

As soon as the sweat was wiped off, Lu Yuanfeng's face blushed, and he kept sweating.

"Haha!" Mu Shuangshuang couldn't help but laugh.

"You really are... Are you hungry? I'll make you some dumplings!"

When Mu Shuangshuang cooked, she was thoughtful; she prepared some dough and set aside a piece of meat, enough for Lu Yuanfeng to have lunch.

She knew that he rushed to town and certainly had no time to eat.

"Then I'll go water the horse first. Thank goodness for this journey, thanks to this horse." Lu Yuanfeng had a special attachment to the horse, perhaps remembering the days when he used to ride with tiger-like power.

Though he hadn't commanded a vast land, he had at least been on the battlefield and mounted a warhorse; he wasn't timid.

"Just right, by the time you're done, the dumplings will be ready to eat!"

Mu Shuangshuang returned to the house, chopping the five-flavor pork into pieces and minced meat, and rolled the awakened dough into skins, forming dumplings with many fillings.

Since Lu Yuanfeng hadn't returned, Mu Shuangshuang didn't rush to cook the dumplings and instead inventoried the items at the human trafficker's place.

The rice vat was full of rice; these could be taken away.

A half vat of vegetable oil and about twenty pounds of flour; taking these things to Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng's house, they could eat for a while.

Anyway, taking from the wicked, the human traffickers weren't good people, so taking their things was considered a public service.

After inventorying the items, Lu Yuanfeng also returned, and Mu Shuangshuang started cooking the dumplings.

She put twenty dumplings into the boiling water, waiting for the water to boil again before adding more.

Mu Shuangshuang didn't like using precooked stuffing for dumplings, feeling that it didn't have a fresh taste, especially for meat stuffing, which might become tough when fried.

When the dumplings were done, Mu Shuangshuang set the table for Lu Yuanfeng. The human trafficker's place had no sauce made by her, so he had to make do with spicy sauce and vinegar. After a plate of dumplings, Lu Yuanfeng was finally full and satisfied.

"Shuangshuang, what do you think we should do with this place?"

Such a large house, Lu Yuanfeng didn't know how to deal with it.

"Leave the house here, and take everything else that can be taken, leaving nothing, not even pots and pans."

Mu Shuangshuang wanted to leave no trace wherever she went.

Lu Yuanfeng had no objections; after resting for a bit, he began sorting things.

Luckily, he found an abandoned cart in the storage room. The wheels were still good, and by knocking on the remaining planks, it might manage a trip, at most one trip.

Returning to Old Mu Family, it might be broken by then.

After finishing everything, Mu Shuangshuang suddenly mysteriously pulled Lu Yuanfeng into a room.

She took out that black cloth bag.

She shook it in front of Lu Yuanfeng.

"Fengzi, how much money do you think is in here?"

Lu Yuanfeng naturally shook his head, not knowing.

"I don't know either; let's count it!"

A bag of silver was poured out, nearly making Mu Shuangshuang faint with anger.

Inside, there was actually half of it filled with stones, meaning the seemingly heavy bag was only half useful.

Damn, this is too devious!

Mu Shuangshuang looked helpless.

Fortunately, after counting, there were more than fifty taels of silver, making Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng's trip worthwhile.

Fifty taels, plus the silver Mu Shuangshuang already had, might soon be enough to open a shop in town after saving a bit longer.

As Lu Yuanfeng suggested, the silver was still kept with Mu Shuangshuang.

The two of them drove their carriage towards the direction of Er Gui Village.

An hour later, with a cartload of stuff, they finally arrived at Er Gui Village.

The side gate of Mu Shuangshuang's house was a bit small, and such a large cartload couldn't fit through.

So Mu Shuangshuang had Lu Yuanfeng park the carriage outside.

Once the horse was tied up, Mu Shuangshuang took some sundries and headed into the house.

Yu Si Niang suddenly rushed out from Mu Dashan's house.

Her face unreadable, she stopped in front of Mu Shuangshuang.

"Shuangshuang, your uncle passed the exam..."

Chapter 544: Shouting in Front of the Villagers

Mu Shuangshuang's mouth formed an O-shape.

She almost couldn't hold the things in her hands steady.

She stared at Yu Si Niang, full of astonishment.

"Mom, my uncle really became a scholar? You're not joking with me?"

A person like her uncle actually passed the exam?

Back then, he disgustingly wanted to sell her to raise travel expenses, just like that disgusting Wang San.

And her aunt tricked her dad into signing that ridiculous contract.

Mu Shuangshuang felt as disgusted as if she'd eaten a fly.

"Why would Mom joke with you? After noon, your fourth uncle went to town to ask someone to read the letter your uncle sent, and just came back saying the letter stated your uncle became a scholar."

Yu Si Niang felt a bit uneasy too, back when Da De wanted the cold noodles recipe, the third branch didn't give it, and now the first branch has prospered; who knows what will happen next.

"Well, if he passed, he passed. They'll live their official's life, and we'll live our commoner's life. If Uncle becomes a scholar, he'll either go to the Capital to take the Imperial Examination or find a place to become a small official. Either way, my grandparents and uncles will surely follow him."

"When they all leave, we can focus on thriving without worrying about those oddballs coming to bother us every day!"

Mu Shuangshuang's words gave Yu Si Niang a sudden clarity.

She thought, "Anyway, it's already like this. If it's really as Shuangshuang says, it's good if the whole family goes with Uncle!"

"Then Mom will go prepare dinner. Today, I'll make meat patties for you, and add some sauerkraut soup. How does that sound?"

The meat patties are Yuanbao's request; last night, the two kids were indeed scared and still don't dare to go out.

"Mom, you decide. After Fengzi and I carry these things inside, we'll go check on Yuanbao and Little Zhi."

Following Mu Shuangshuang's words, Yu Si Niang looked back.

My goodness, a cart full of things, even a large jar.

"Shuangshuang, this is..."

"Mom, I'll tell you about these things later. Fengzi and I will move them into the house first."

Item by item, they transported the things into the house. As the pots and pans were put down, Mu Shuangshuang's kitchen instantly felt much fuller.

Luckily, the kitchen she built back then could hold a lot of things.

With a jar full of rice, Mu Shuangshuang felt happy just looking at it.

Mu Shuangshuang divided all the things into two portions and had Lu Yuanfeng take his portion back home.

Lu Yuanfeng refused to take the pots and pans, but Mu Shuangshuang insisted on giving him rice and oil until he finally accepted some.

After Lu Yuanfeng went home, Mu Shuangshuang entered the room to check on the two little kids.

Yuanbao and Little Zhi were frightened just hearing the door open, clinging to each other with eyes full of terror.

Mu Shuangshuang felt a surge of tenderness.

"Yuanbao, Little Zhi, come over quickly. It's Sister Shuangshuang!"

As soon as she spoke, the two little ones rushed over together, hugging Mu Shuangshuang tightly.

It was as if only Mu Shuangshuang could give them a sense of security.

"There, don't be afraid!"

"Yuanbao, you're a man. How can you be scared? Have you forgotten what you told Little Zhi? You've seen so many fierce beasts and hunted so much with your second brother."

"And Little Zhi, have you forgotten that Sister promised to always protect you? No matter when, Sister is here!"

Mu Shuangshuang's words greatly comforted the two little ones.

Yuanbao finally regained his courage, although Little Zhi still held onto Mu Shuangshuang, his emotions settled.

"You two little crybabies, tonight I'll make you delicious food that'll make your mouths water!" Mu Shuangshuang said with a big smile.

"Okay!" Little Zhi nodded heavily and withdrew from Mu Shuangshuang's arms.

She walked up to Yuanbao: "Brother Yuanbao, let's go play and invite Brother Xiao Han."

Yesterday's events scared Xiao Han too.

He spent one afternoon looking for them.

By the evening, he hadn't found Little Zhi and just stood at the village entrance alone.

It wasn't until Little Zhi and Yuanbao came back that night, resting only because Xiao Han stayed with them through the night, that the two kids dared to sleep.

"Alright, let's go play together!"

The three kids returned to normalcy.

Mu Shuangshuang organized her room a bit and peacefully waited at home for Lu Yuanfeng to come back.

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Old Mu Family

The news of Mu Dade becoming a scholar spread back, and everyone in the Old Mu Family acted as if they were injected with adrenaline, each one bursting with excitement.

Mr. Mu was dumbfounded, almost shedding tears of joy.

He painstakingly raised his son for over thirty years, and finally, his son vindicated him.

He asked Mu Dajiang, "Did your brother say in his letter when he's coming back? What is he doing now?"

"Brother's letter said he was participating in some official's Lu Ming Banquet in Qianzhou Prefecture, saying all the scholars from Qianzhou Region would attend, and he would also play around in Qianzhou Prefecture a bit, returning with the family before the formal notification arrives."

Mu Dajiang relayed every word the scholar in town said about the letter back to Mr. Mu.

Mr. Mu repeatedly exclaimed good, his joy couldn't be contained.

Mrs. Lin beside him wagged her hips in glee.

"This is great, Uncle Dog Egg became a scholar, our family is going to soar high on branches."

"Haha, when the time comes, we'll buy a big courtyard in town, large enough for five generations, and hire a hundred maids to serve us," Mu Dazhong laughed.

Hearing this, Mrs. Lin's face turned green. "A hundred maids, what do you mean? Are you thinking of finding someone younger?"

"What's it to you? If Brother becomes a scholar, shouldn't we have someone serve us? Or do you want to stay a bumpkin forever?"

Mu Dazhong defiantly retorted to Mrs. Lin.

Mrs. Lin was instantly deflated.

"Mom, I want Brother to properly teach that brat and Fengzi, I want to as well," Mu Xiangxiang chimed in.

Old Mrs. Mu's face lit up with a smile: "Good, good, good, we should thoroughly discipline that brat from the third branch, as for that poor boy? He'll be poor and lowly forever, not deserving of your status."

"Mom will find you someone better than him, better off than him, more attractive than him, who won't dare to be angry with you!"

Mu Xiangxiang wasn't really interested initially, but Old Mrs. Mu's conditions were undeniably tempting.

Anything better than Lu Yuanfeng meant she could show off in front of that brat.

Ideally, crush her underfoot.

"Then I don't want Lu Yuanfeng, Mom, hurry and bring someone better than him."

Seeing her daughter acting sensibly, Old Mrs. Mu's face beamed with joy.

"Why hasn't Fifth come out yet? Even if he's sick, such a big event can't be missed. Also for the third branch, at such a happy occasion, we should go talk it over with them. Everyone is part of Old Mu Family, this matter, let's all celebrate together," Mr. Mu said.

"Talk about what? Just watch me!"

Old Mrs. Mu straightened her back and walked out of the yard.

With hands on her hips, she shouted in the yard: "My son Da De became a scholar, my son Da De became a scholar..."

Chapter 545: We Are the Master and Mistress

Old Mrs. Mu shouted over ten times.

The voice was like a thunderclap.

From the head of the village to the end, everyone heard it.

Their first reaction was much the same as Mu Shuangshuang's.

All were astonished, but since folks were not related, they secretly cursed: It's just a scholar, what's there to brag about? Be careful, or you'll end up with empty hands.

But after cursing, everyone started picking out some unwanted items at home, ready to send something to the Old Mu Family.

At least before the Old Mu Family became prosperous, they could catch hold of their coattails.

Perhaps they could gain some benefits.

Once Old Mrs. Mu had finished shouting and returned to the main room, everyone inside looked at her with eyes full of admiration, especially Mrs. Lin.

"Mother, you're really something. Now the whole village knows that Uncle Dog Egg of ours passed the exam. Secretly, they must be envious of our Old Mu Family."

"That's right, our Old Mu Family isn't just any ordinary family. From now on, we must regard ourselves as gentry, not like some bumpkins who haven't seen the world."

At this moment, Old Mrs. Mu already felt like she was a city dweller.

Even her way of speaking began to lean towards that of urbanites.

Mrs. Lin secretly despised her, seeing the old lady as nothing but a madwoman.

But on the surface, she was all smiles.

"Mother, since our family are all city folks now, does that mean our Da Lang is too?"

Since Da Lang's worth has increased, why don't we ditch that Miss Huang? That girl spoke of Danyan, saying she was no good, probably just a tramp."

As soon as Mrs. Lin's words fell, three voices rang out simultaneously.

Old Mrs. Mu, Mr. Mu, and Mu Dalang.

Old Mrs. Mu and Mr. Mu had just gotten a taste of success, and right after finalizing an engagement, good news had arrived.

If the marriage came through, wouldn't a Champion Scholar follow?

Mr. Mu and Old Mrs. Mu were keen on marrying off Mu Dalang to Huang Bitu.

Mu Dalang naturally opposed because he liked Huang Bitu.

"Mother, this matter is settled. That Miss Huang is already my wife. If you call off the engagement, how will others view her? A person needs to have a conscience; if I don't marry Miss Huang, even if I succeed later, people will still point fingers at me."

"Exactly, second son's wife, you are too callous. Before when there was no news from our eldest, you went looking for them, and now that we have news, you want to send them away? That doesn't make sense." Mr. Mu said.

"Second family, don't cause trouble for me. If this falls through, the second branch won't get to enjoy good days either, and you can just live here for the rest of your lives!" Old Mrs. Mu spoke up, and Mrs. Lin deflated like an eggplant in frost, wilting instantly.

At first, she thought good days were ahead, no need to marry that poor girl from the Huang Family, but who would have thought, they still had to marry her.

"For this, I checked the dates—we'll marry Miss Huang into the family on the eighteenth of the twelfth lunar month."

Mu Dade's imperial exam was in February next year, so marrying Miss Huang before then might just bring luck to his next test.

In Mr. Mu's mind, his calculations rang clear and loud.

Mrs. Lin was infuriated.

As for Mu Dalang, a weight lifted off his heart.

"Daddy Gou Dan, say something. Is our Da Lang really going to marry that peasant woman?"

Mrs. Lin pinched Mu Dazhong.

By now, Mu Dazhong's mind had already drifted; he was imagining living well in town, marrying several concubines, one to massage his shoulders, another to rub his feet...

Suddenly, a sharp pain shot through his arm, Mrs. Lin was pinching his flesh.

"You wicked woman, what are you doing? Trying to murder your husband?"

"I murder your husband, who'll handle our son's matter? Father said the wedding's on the eighteenth of the twelfth lunar month."

Mu Dazhong was astonished upon hearing this.

"Father, I can't agree to this. Da Lang is the eldest grandson of the Old Mu Family. If he marries a mud-legged person, won't people think our family has a low threshold, and those ugly women and poor devils won't all try to squeeze into our family?"

"Xiangxiang hasn't married yet, nor have Qing, Xia, Dan from our eldest brother's family, and Ying, who are all of marriageable age."

Old Mrs. Mu thought about it and felt troubled.

She wasn't particularly interested in her granddaughters, but Xiangxiang was her dearest daughter. Now with Zhen in an uncertain situation, Xiangxiang was her only cherished companion.

"This is easy to solve. We'll announce that the Huang Family gave us one hundred taels of silver. Of course, the Huang Family can't produce that much money, but if our family stays silent, who will know?"

"Then, when suitors come knocking, they'll surely be sons from wealthy families, and our girls needn't worry."

Mr. Mu's few words were like moving mountains, leaving the second branch speechless.

Seeing one plan fail, Mu Dazhong came up with another.

"Father, I have no objection, but Da Lang is my nephew. Our Fifth hasn't married yet. If he goes ahead, Fifth might become a lifelong bachelor.

We can't be too excessive. After all, Fifth is part of our family too. Good days should be shared by everyone."

What Mu Dazhong said was indeed a consideration: generally, juniors should not marry before seniors.

For instance, a younger sister must not marry before her elder sister, or people will wonder if there's a problem, questioning why the younger got married while the elder remains single.

"Second son, stop talking nonsense. Since your father and I have decided, we've already considered Danyan."

"We've already sent Matchmaker Sun, and there will be a reply soon. From now on, no one but your father and I may speak of this matter!"

Old Mrs. Mu shot a glare at Mu Dazhong and said unceremoniously.

Mu Dazhong was so frustrated by these words that he nearly choked.

After finally anticipating good days ahead, his son still had to marry a peasant woman. So infuriating!

Thinking this over, he knew he had to seek out Fifth.

Thinking of Fifth, Mu Danian, Mu Dazhong found an excuse to leave the main room.

The main room was noisy, yet it didn't affect Mu Danian's room at all.

At the moment, in his room, Chen Hong was holding him as she wept uncontrollably.

"Danyan, my poor Danyan, how could those two old bastards beat you like this?" Chen Hong squeezed out a few crocodile tears.

She had just heard about Mu Dade passing his exams.

At this moment, Chen Hong was immensely relieved she had come to seek Mu Danian and not another lover.

Otherwise, she would have missed such a great opportunity.

Mu Danian's pants had been taken off, revealing his two pale buttocks, with their center bearing scars left by two pitchforks. Though scabbed over, they still looked terribly hideous.

Mu Danian yelled, "Those two old geezers from the Old Wang Family, I won't let them off for daring to lay hands on me, Mu Danian."

"Exactly, they even dared to sell me off. If it weren't for my cunning, having knocked down Wang San and escaped, you wouldn't be seeing me now."

Chen Hong omitted the part about Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng rescuing her.

The only thing was her own injuries; these few days, she mustn't let Mu Danian see them.

Luckily, it was his buttocks that were hurt—

Chapter 546: Preventing Her from Entering the Door

"Those two old farts, once I'm better, I'll make two holes in their asses too!" Mu Danian said angrily.

"Yeah, yeah, let's finish off those two old geezers." Chen Hong nodded.

Then, leaning next to Mu Danian, she whimpered, "Danian, I've left those two old guys. You need to take care of me, or I'll starve to death."

As she spoke, Chen Hong gently pounded Mu Danian's chest with her hand.

With that pound, Mu Danian's mind wandered to that thing, and he hugged Chen Hong, moving his mouth closer.

An overwhelming garlic smell wafted over, almost making Chen Hong vomit.

These past few days, Mu Danian lay sprawled on the bed, poorly cared for by the family, with no one to help him.

Chen Hong blocked Mu Danian with her hand: "Your behind is in that state, focus on healing first. Once you're healed, you can do whatever you want!"

After saying this, she didn't forget to throw a flirty glance at Mu Danian, melting his heart.

"Little minx, always full of tricks. Don't worry, I'll talk to my parents myself. No one in this house dares kick you out!"

Outside, Mu Dazhong happened to be nearby and heard faint voices coming from Mu Danian's room.

And it sounded like a woman.

Mu Dazhong drooled instantly and leaned against the door to listen for sounds he hoped to hear.

Suddenly—

The door creaked open, and Mu Dazhong lost his balance, crashing into Mu Danian's room.

Chen Hong opened the door and saw a chubby figure appear. Frightened, she ran to Mu Danian's side.

Mu Danian took a closer look and saw it was his second brother. He comforted Chen Hong, "Chen Hong, don't be scared. He's my second brother; quickly call him brother!"

Chen Hong, hearing this, understood Mu Danian's intention to acknowledge her, and sweetly called him brother.

This call of brother almost made Mu Dazhong collapse.

Everyone in this area knew about Chen Hong's reputation.

But nobody could deny that Chen Hong looked pretty, especially her chest—

Though the skin on her face wasn't great, don't men just appreciate a good chest?

Mu Dazhong stared at the water balloons on Chen Hong's chest, unable to move his gaze for a while. Mu Danian noticed this and felt particularly proud.

"Fifth, how long has it been since you've found yourself a wife? Dad was still thinking about it earlier," Mu Dazhong consciously tried to instigate trouble between Mu Danian and Mr. Mu.

"What's he worried about?"

"Worried about finding you a wife, of course. Not lying, but I really don't want that girl from the Huang Family as my daughter-in-law, she's no good at all. But the parents' wishes are clear. What can I do about it? Do you have any good ideas?"

Mu Dazhong was playing the sympathy card in front of Mu Danian.

"What good ideas do I have? I've already found a wife. Da Lang can marry whoever he wants; I don't care anymore."

Mu Danian said casually, his eyes darting around quickly.

Now that his big brother has become a scholar, there's no need for him to join forces with the second household.

Anyway, his brother living a good life doesn't mean he'll bring the second household along.

"Fifth, do you really not care?" Mu Dazhong was shocked, unable to believe his plans could crumble so easily.

"Why should I care? If anyone should care, it should be you and my second sister-in-law. I already told my second sister-in-law last time that the girl from the Huang Family has nothing to do with me, as I'm going to marry Chen Hong."

After finishing, Mu Danian said to Mu Dazhong: "Second brother, if there's no problem, hurry back. I'm still not feeling well."

Mu Dazhong left angrily, not forgetting to take a few more glances at Chen Hong's chest before leaving.

Once Mu Dazhong left, Chen Hong asked about the matter.

Mu Danian explained the story to Chen Hong, and she angrily sat down on Mu Danian's couch, "Your parents really don't regard you at all, giving the girl they promised to you to your nephew!"

Chen Hong never was the easy-going type, and previously played humble only because she wasn't sure if Mu Danian would take her in.

She didn't necessarily have to stick with Mu Danian; there were plenty of men in the world. Who cares whom she follows?

But now she was sure Mu Danian needed her.

"Exactly, Honghong, this will be troublesome for you. Play however you want; make sure my parents see how formidable you are."

Back when Chen Hong was in Old Wang's family, she had the Wang Tiejiang couple wrapped around her finger. If she hadn't been sold out by them later, they wouldn't have been able to handle her even now.

Having Chen Hong around is meant to show his parents who's the boss.

"Rest assured, with me here, that niece-in-law won't get in the door of your family!" Chen Hong promised.

...

...

Mu Dazhong was frustrated and felt increasingly upset back home. Not only did Fifth refuse to help him, but he even dared to mock him.

Want to marry Chen Hong, do you? I'll make sure you can't.

Mu Dazhong pinched his own arm, pain causing his hair to stand, and quickly dashed into the main room, shouting to Old Mrs. Mu.

"Mom, it's bad, it's bad..."

Old Mrs. Mu spat a thick glob onto Mu Dazhong's face and cursed loudly, "What are you yelling about? Is a ghost chasing you or what?"

Mu Dazhong wiped the spit from his face and replied: "Mom, Fifth has gone mad; he wants to marry that widow Chen Hong from Tie Dao Village."

Afraid Old Mrs. Mu didn't know Chen Hong's reputation, Mu Dazhong added: "She's the one whom everyone shunned; last time, she was caught with our village's Sanwazi, and his wife almost beat her up!"

Chen Hong has a lot of bad history; any random tale could keep her busy.

"What did you say? Fifth wants to marry that floozy?"

Old Mrs. Mu was, of course, aware of Chen Hong.

Everybody knew she was the widow from Wang the blacksmith's house. People used to laugh, saying that fox would eventually leave Old Wang's house and bring trouble elsewhere.

At that time, they speculated whose family she'd bring trouble to next.

Now that it landed on Old Mrs. Mu's head, how could she not be furious?

"Exactly, Fifth even told that floozy to call me second brother, but I didn't agree. Our family has produced a scholar like Big Brother, who will eventually be an official. If word got out that Fifth married such a person, who would want to associate with our family?"

Old Mrs. Mu rolled up her sleeves, angrily stating: "Follow this old hag to meet that little demon; I need to see what kind of trick she can pull in front of me."

"Mom, are we just going like this? What about Dad?" Mu Dazhong finally noticed that Mr. Mu was absent from the main room.

"Why do you care about your dad? We're going to find that woman now and make her leave our home!"

Mu Dazhong suddenly felt a bit nervous.

This matter still required his dad to intervene.

Mr. Mu wasn't in the room because he was busy entertaining villagers who came by to watch the commotion in the courtyard.

The villagers, knowing Mu Dade had become a scholar, brought gifts to Mr. Mu's home.

"Old man, congratulations, congratulations! Dade has really made you proud this time!"

Chapter 547: Cut Off That Thing

"Mr. Mu, Da De is the only scholar in Er Gui Village, our sole academic achiever. Surely, the future holds great things for Old Mu Family!"

"If Old Mu Family rises to the heavens, don't forget us poor villagers. We all endured the famine together back in the day."

"Da De is truly amazing. He's different from us common folk now."

The villagers each offered flattering words to Mr. Mu.

The items in their hands occasionally dangled in front of Mr. Mu.

The aim was to seize the initiative.

To gain the Old Mu Family's approval in advance.

After all, to a farming family, a scholar is akin to a lord.

Mr. Mu's mouth was already stretched into a wide grin.

Recently, Old Mu Family had been under criticism but had never been praised like this before.

He suddenly felt like a long-suffering daughter-in-law who finally became a revered matriarch; for once, he'd straightened his back with pride.

Mr. Mu, excited, straightened his already bent spine, making it as straight as a rod.

"No matter how our eldest changes, he will always be from Er Gui Village. One must not forget one's roots. Even if he becomes Lord Qing Tian in the future, Da De will surely help everyone in the village."

With Mr. Mu's words, everyone finally breathed a sigh of relief.

They were anxious earlier.

Uncertain whether things would work out, they offered items their families didn't need, like the longest-kept eggs, fearing Mr. Mu couldn't call the shots.

However, Mr. Mu didn't keep a single gift from the villagers.

Not only did he refuse them, but he also told everyone not to send things anymore; Old Mu Family didn't need those gifts.

With his words, many indeed stopped sending gifts, as they had already received assurance.

With so many people hearing it, could Mr. Mu fake it?

Everyone took their gifts back as they were.

Luckily, Old Mrs. Mu was away giving Chen Hong a hard time; otherwise, all those things would have belonged to the Old Mu family.

At this moment, Old Mrs. Mu was marching towards Fifth (Mu Danian)'s room with a fierce determination.

Her head held high, exuding the aura of a fighting cock, she marched up to Mu Danian's door, banging on it.

"Open up, open up, Fifth..."

Mu Danian knew well about his second brother; he couldn't stand seeing others doing well if he wasn't doing well himself.

So he had already briefed Chen Hong.

It was now up to Chen Hong and Old Mrs. Mu's first confrontation.

Mu Danian worried in his heart; among Old Mu Family's daughters-in-law, including his eldest sister-in-law, none dared provoke his mother. Could Chen Hong handle it alone?

He couldn't move himself, so he had to let Chen Hong take charge.

Chen Hong stepped forward to open the door, and Old Mrs. Mu's claw-like hand rushed in to scratch Chen Hong's face, wanting to ruin it.

"You brazen wench, shameless hussy! How dare you seduce my son? This old lady will rip that foxy skin off you today!"

Chen Hong was indeed no pushover.

She dodged Old Mrs. Mu's first wave of attack adeptly.

Then she lunged forward to engage in a fight with Old Mrs. Mu.

"You wicked old woman, I'm sleeping with your son, not you. Why meddle? Or do you, a woman past your prime, wish to serve your son alongside me?"

Chen Hong had fought against all the women in Tie Dao Village and was not intimidated before Old Mrs. Mu.

Unlike Mu Zhenzhen, who got divorced and had her jewelry and luggage snatched by village women,

when Chen Hong left, she not only took her own belongings but also whisked away belongings from those two old geezers from the Wang Family.

Chen Hong's words nearly made Old Mrs. Mu faint with rage, as her blood boiled.

By now, Old Mrs. Mu wanted to tear Chen Hong to shreds.

"You filthy-tongued woman, I'll tear your mouth apart!"

"Come at me, old hag. You speak so filthily at your age. If others don't dare insult you, I, Chen Hong, will thrash you."

The two women tangled into a chaotic fight.

Pulling hair!

Pinching arms, kicking below—every vicious trick of female combat was used.

Being younger and hitting harder, Chen Hong soon tore out a clump of Old Mrs. Mu's hair, with blood trickling from it, looking quite terrifying.

Truth be told, Mu Danian and Mu Dazhong, watching the scene, felt their blood boiling and were thrilled.

They'd watched for years, only seeing Old Mrs. Mu hitting others, never witnessing her getting hit.

This was perhaps a case of one villain being subdued by another!

Just as everyone thought Chen Hong had won, Old Mrs. Mu suddenly let out a furious roar: "Hussy, how dare you hit me? This old lady will fight you to the end..."

Old Mrs. Mu headbutted Chen Hong's stomach. Chen Hong was knocked to the ground, her back thumping heavily against the kang bed.

Old Mrs. Mu, fearless, rushed forward, delivering a series of heavy slaps across Chen Hong's face—

The slaps resounded clearly, mingled with Chen Hong's contorted curses and cries.

Clearly on the winning side, yet she got taken over by Old Mrs. Mu.

Chen Hong's fury erupted within.

Mu Dazhong and Mu Danian were stunned.

The plot twist was too fast; the once-dominant party suddenly lost all advantage, being firmly suppressed.

The old is wiser after all, seems fitting here.

Chen Hong was beaten close to fainting when Mu Danian came over. He reached to pull Old Mrs. Mu away, only to be pushed aside by her, plopping down on the ground, the tines of a rake poking two holes, starting to bleed again...

Mu Danian let out a miserable cry.

The sound was heard by Mr. Mu in the main room.

Even Mu Shuangshuang from the third branch heard it.

They hadn't eaten dinner yet; Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng stood in the yard watching the chaos.

Mr. Mu rushed inside to see Old Mrs. Mu still hitting someone.

He wasn't there when Mu Dazhong went to report, so he didn't know the person was Chen Hong.

Mr. Mu separated them, the two fierce fighters already looking disheveled and terrifying.

Old Mrs. Mu's hair looked like a bird's nest, awkwardly piled atop her head.

"What are you doing? Want everyone to see Old Mu Family bullying people? To make Old Mu Family a laughingstock?"

Mr. Mu's word "laughingstock" sounded extremely bitter.

He always cared for Old Mu Family's reputation, and now that Mu Dade passed the exam, he wanted to maintain the family's image even more.

But Old Mrs. Mu didn't understand; she only heard her husband scold her.

And it was over a hussy.

So naturally, she spoke without restraint.

"Don't give me these nonsensical hierarchies. You've been with this woman, right? Whether old or young, you all just care about that thing below. If I had known, I should've cut it back then, see what you'd use to pleasure women!"

The words made Mr. Mu's face turn green, choking as blood surged in his throat, unable to spit or swallow it.

"You shameless old hag, you're worthless! Your words stink more than dung, shameless!"

Mr. Mu cursed loudly.

Thinking to himself: In Old Mu Family, there's never a peaceful day, just a pile of messy affairs...

Chapter 548: Bite Me!

Mu Shuangshuang was watching the drama unfold, completely absorbed and not wanting to budge an inch!

She knew it would turn out this way.

If her uncle didn't pass the exam, at most everyone would be disappointed and continue preparing for next year.

But if he passed, that bunch of eccentrics would definitely lose their footing.

Looks like she wouldn't need to deal with it herself.

At this rate, the Old Mu Family was going to fall apart sooner or later!

"Fengzi, let's go have dinner. Starting tomorrow, let's get ready to dig the pond."

The pond in Tie Dao Village — Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng had fenced it — was supposed to be dug earlier, but the weather was too hot, and they got drenched in sweat before even starting.

Now the weather was just perfect.

Plus, after finishing this, they could get started on the autumn harvest. They had half of the grain from those few acres the Old Mu Family owned.

Thinking of how life was getting better and better, Mu Shuangshuang was in a great mood, almost humming a tune as she followed Lu Yuanfeng back.

Back in the kitchen, Yu Si Niang had already set the table, with a big meat patty in each person's bowl and a large sea bowl of sauerkraut soup.

But the atmosphere at the dining table was a bit tense, as Mu Dashan was shifting back and forth in his seat as if he had sores on his butt.

Mu Shuangshuang thought it must be because of Mu Dade's issue.

"Why are you fidgeting so much? If there's something wrong, can't we solve it together?" Yu Si Niang put the ladle into Mu Dashan's bowl and asked.

"Dad, are you thinking about Uncle passing the exam?" Mu Shuangshuang said.

With both his wife and daughter asking him, Mu Dashan couldn't hold it in.

"Si Niang, Shuangshuang, how about we move away? Your uncle seems polite on the surface, but when he comes back, he'll definitely settle old scores with us."

Mu Dashan and Mu Dade were brothers.

So he understood Mu Dade very well. In the past, he worked hard like a horse to support Shuangshuang's uncle and didn't think there was anything wrong with his attitude. But now, faced with the problem, Mu Dashan was a bit scared.

Hearing Mu Dashan's words, Mu Shuangshuang wasn't worried, instead, she felt particularly relieved.

She had just thought Mu Dashan wanted to go to the Old Mu Family to join the fun and congratulate the main family.

Turns out, he was afraid of the main family's revenge.

With this, Mu Shuangshuang felt much better.

Her spineless dad had grown a bit.

"Dad, don't worry. Even if my uncle passed, he can't cause us any trouble. After all, he'll be a government official in the future. We're barefoot, so we're not afraid of those wearing shoes, and we never intended to take advantage of him. He can't bully us!"

Mu Dashan nodded, agreeing with Mu Shuangshuang's words.

Mu Dashan relieved himself and finally returned to normal.

"I'm fine now, you guys hurry up and eat!"

After dinner, Mu Shuangshuang walked Yuanbao and Lu Yuanfeng back, and the two of them lamented the events of the past few days on the way.

Indeed, a lot had happened these past few days.

Little Zhi and Yuanbao were almost kidnapped, her uncle passed the exam, one thing after another, it felt like a dream. But unlike a dream, these things were all too real.

Wang the blacksmith's selling of Chen Hong didn't seem wrong to Mu Shuangshuang, but what shouldn't have happened was Wang the blacksmith buying someone else's child, especially a chubby son.

In this era, boys were worth more than girls. Parents generally wouldn't sell someone else's child willingly. If they bought from a human trafficker, it was stolen from someone else's family.

No trade, no harm!

For personal gain, breaking another family apart, Wang the blacksmith's fate was self-inflicted!

However, she still owed the Old Mu Family an apology!

Outside Lu Yuanfeng's courtyard, Mu Shuangshuang didn't want to go inside.

It was still early, and Mu Shuangshuang didn't ask Lu Yuanfeng to walk her back; she just told him to go rest early.

The entire day had tired both of them out!

As she watched Lu Yuanfeng enter the house, from the Old Lu Family's side, Xia Guagua's figure appeared before Mu Shuangshuang.

In just that short time, Xia Guagua had changed to the point where Mu Shuangshuang barely recognized her.

Her hair was a mess, she was pale, and her chin was so thin you could see the bones, even skinnier than when she first arrived!

She stared at Mu Shuangshuang with empty and hateful eyes.

Spitefully, she said, "Are you feeling proud that you can marry Brother Yuanfeng, while I have to marry trash like Wang Fugui?"

Mu Shuangshuang nodded cooperatively, "Indeed, I'm very proud. Who told you to harm others? The state you're in now is what you deserve, you brought it on yourself!"

"You..." Xia Guagua's eyes flashed with malice.

"What about me? Losers should have the look of a loser. No matter how cocky you are, don't you still have to suffer the consequences?" Mu Shuangshuang intentionally displayed a pleased expression.

Xia Guagua's mouth twisted in anger.

Moreover, Mu Shuangshuang put her hands on her hips and challenged, "It's useless to be angry. If you've got the nerve, come and bite me, come and bite me..."

Mu Shuangshuang's actions were infuriating, and Xia Guagua got so mad she fainted and fell to the ground.

Seeing this, Gu Jiulian prepared to shout out loud.

But Mu Shuangshuang beat her to it.

"Hey everyone, look! A pregnant woman fainted! The Old Lu Family is abusing a pregnant woman..."

Mu Shuangshuang's shout completely cut off Xia Guagua's escape route.

Not yet married and already carrying a love child.

No one would dare set her up in a match again.

Gu Jiulian had never encountered someone like Mu Shuangshuang who could act so ruthlessly. Back then, her late husband's awful family couldn't bring her down, yet now she was defeated by a teenage girl. How could Gu Jiulian endure this?

"You damn girl, I'm gonna skin you today!"

Gu Jiulian lunged forward, her hand swinging with a whoosh in the air.

But before she could touch Mu Shuangshuang, her wrist was grabbed by someone,

a chilling aura surrounded this person, capable of freezing anyone into shards with ease.

"You...you..." Gu Jiulian looked in fear at Lu Yuanfeng, who was clutching her wrist.

Since Lu Yuanfeng severed ties with the Old Lu Family, Gu Jiulian hadn't bothered him for a long time.

Ultimately, she was scared!

Back then, Old Sir Lu and Old Lady Lu would intervene, but now, they had no say.

"Did you take my words as nothing?" Lu Yuanfeng's face was cold, emanating a bone-chilling air, his eyes full of anger.

"Fengzi, it wasn't me. It was that damn girl bullying Guagua. Didn't you see your sister fainted, and you're still helping her?"

Gu Jiulian hurriedly explained, only making things worse!

"I don't want a sister with such malicious intent, and you, don't you dare set foot near my house ever again!"

Finished speaking, Lu Yuanfeng let go of his hand, and Gu Jiulian fell to the ground.

Lying there, Gu Jiulian cursed and said very nasty things, but Lu Yuanfeng didn't pay her any attention and took Mu Shuangshuang's hand, leading her towards the direction of the Old Mu Family.

Chapter 549: He Likes It This Way

On the way back to the Old Mu Family's house, Lu Yuanfeng didn't say a word.

Not sure if he was angry.

Mu Shuangshuang hung her head. Actually, even if Lu Yuanfeng hadn't helped her earlier, she could have handled Gu Jiulian herself.

That woman, she had long wanted to punch.

But seeing his sulky face, Mu Shuangshuang still took the initiative to ask.

"Fengzi, are you angry?"

Mu Shuangshuang lowered her head and asked cautiously.

Lu Yuanfeng wasn't angry, just upset that this happened right under his nose.

"I'm fine. From now on, don't pay attention to them. Gu Jiulian and Xia Guagua are not easy to deal with."

Lu Yuanfeng knew well that Gu Jiulian liked to take small advantages and shirk responsibility.

Xia Guagua, at such a young age, was already malicious.

Lu Yuanfeng didn't want Shuangshuang to suffer.

Even though he knew Shuangshuang wouldn't suffer.

It's just human nature; when it's someone you care about, even if someone touches a finger of theirs, you want to take that person's life.

So precious, like fearing it will melt if held too tightly or that it will break if held too loosely—

"Mm-hmm, I promise, as long as they don't provoke me, I won't go up against them..." Mu Shuangshuang raised her hand and swore to Lu Yuanfeng.

"..."

Lu Yuanfeng felt exhausted; saying it made no difference at all.

Forget it, in the worst-case scenario, he would just keep a closer eye on things.

With this reassurance, Lu Yuanfeng felt relieved.

After sending Mu Shuangshuang home, Lu Yuanfeng began his return journey.

It was the season for eating tangerines, and Lu Yuanfeng knew which families in the village had them. He spent some coins to buy a few tangerines, planning to bring them to Shuangshuang the next morning for her to try.

Early the next morning, Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng met up, with Lu Yuanfeng carrying a hoe and a rake, and a basket of tangerines in hand.

Yuanbao followed behind him, happily.

"Second Brother, when are you marrying Sister Shuangshuang? I can't wait to have Sister Shuangshuang living in our house."

It had been a while since Yuanbao had chatted with Lu Yuanfeng, and now that the opportunity arose, he started his long chatter.

"Why should a kid like you worry about these things?" Lu Yuanfeng asked.

"Why shouldn't I? Second Brother, you are my real brother! It's other people's matters I don't care about," Yuanbao pouted, looking smug.

Lu Yuanfeng himself wanted to marry Shuangshuang soon.

But for now, he had nothing to offer, and Shuangshuang was still young. Besides, he had promised they'd wait until she was at least sixteen.

"Second Brother..." Yuanbao whined.

"Second Brother..."

Lu Yuanfeng still didn't answer!

Now Yuanbao was anxious, he shouted, "Second Brother, if you don't marry Sister Shuangshuang soon, you might lose me, your adorable little brother!"

"Lose you?" Lu Yuanfeng frowned, not understanding what Yuanbao meant.

"Yes, I will run away from home. Anyway, no one makes me delicious meals or wakes me up, so I might as well run away from home."

Yuanbao's words gave Lu Yuanfeng a headache, as he didn't know how to respond to his little brother.

After a while, he muttered, "I'll do it as soon as possible."

When they arrived at the third branch's yard, Lu Yuanfeng placed the tools under the big tree in the yard and carried the bamboo basket into the kitchen.

In the kitchen, it was Yu Si Niang cooking, not Mu Shuangshuang.

"Aunt Si, these tangerines are for you, to have a taste," Lu Yuanfeng said, placing the bamboo basket on the kitchen table.

Yu Si Niang looked thrilled.

"Fengzi, sit down. Shuangshuang is still sleeping. I don't know what's happened to her lately, ever since she stopped delivering things to the town, she's been especially fond of sleeping in the morning," Yu Si Niang said with a dotting tone beneath her feigned scolding.

Lu Yuanfeng was happy too. If Shuangshuang could sleep more, it was a good thing for him.

Only by sleeping more could she gain weight and grow stronger.

"Aunt Si, let Shuangshuang sleep a little longer. I'll go chop some firewood for you."

The weather was getting colder, and everyone needed to prepare firewood for warmth.

When winter came, families would gather around a fire in the kitchen, roasting sweet potatoes and fish, chatting together—these were the commonest entertainment activities for rural families.

Yu Si Niang, worried about Lu Yuanfeng, said, "Fengzi, you should rest too. I can chop the wood."

"It's fine, I'm a man, I'm strong. Aunt Si, you should also take care of yourself, or else Shuangshuang will worry."

After saying that, Lu Yuanfeng went to work.

In the yard, the sound of chopping firewood resounded after a short while.

Looking at the basket of green tangerines on the table, Yu Si Niang was deeply moved.

This son-in-law was closer to her than her own son; Shuangshuang had chosen well.

In the future, life with Fengzi was bound to be good.

Mu Shuangshuang was half-asleep when she heard the sound of chopping firewood in the yard. She got up to look and saw it was Lu Yuanfeng.

On an early September morning, wearing only thin clothing, the wind felt cold. Seeing Lu Yuanfeng in a thin shirt sweating in the yard made her feel the distinct difference between men and women. She resigned herself to adding an extra layer before coming out again to find a pile of firewood had already accumulated in the yard.

Lu Yuanfeng, with a serious expression, was diligently working.

She smiled at Lu Yuanfeng, "Why are you up so early? I thought you'd come later today."

"I'm used to it; I can't sleep in. Do you want to sleep a bit more?" Lu Yuanfeng asked concernedly.

"No need, once I'm awake, I can't get back to sleep. Is my mom cooking in the kitchen?"

Mu Shuangshuang noticed the smoke rising from their kitchen, a scene of tranquility.

"Yes, I brought some tangerines over earlier. They're sweet; you should try them later!"

Speaking of tangerines, Mu Shuangshuang's eyes lit up. She ran to the kitchen unceremoniously, quickly washed up, grabbed two large, nice-looking green tangerines, peeled them, and popped a piece into her mouth, instantly feeling sweetness spread through her heart!

Mu Shuangshuang handed a segment of tangerine to Lu Yuanfeng.

"Thank you for your hard work lately, have a taste~"

Finishing her sentence, she handed the tangerine to Lu Yuanfeng's mouth, the sweet tangerine spreading over his taste buds.

Lu Yuanfeng lowered his head to gaze at the smiling girl before him.

She stared at him intently with her pitch-black, bright eyes.

Her previously thin face had filled out nicely.

With all this time to recover, Mu Shuangshuang's complexion had finally turned into a healthy shade of white, with a touch of pink, very endearing.

The intensity in Lu Yuanfeng's gaze made Mu Shuangshuang's face go red. She handed the rest of the tangerine segments to him.

In the tranquility of the morning, happiness welled up from such a simple act.

Just after finishing, Yu Si Niang called them to set the table. Glancing at each other, they both quickly lowered their heads.

"Make sure to eat more; digging a pond is hard work," Mu Shuangshuang said.

Lu Yuanfeng nodded slightly, his mouth curving into a broad smile.

If only life could always be this way...

Chapter 550: Apologizing at the Door

Just after breakfast, Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng were getting ready to head to Tie Dao Village to dig up the pond's silt. Before they walked out of the courtyard, they heard strangers outside asking for directions to their house.

Mu Shuangshuang set down the water jug in her hand and took a quick look outside, seeing Wang Tiejiang and his wife walking towards her house.

Upon seeing Mu Shuangshuang, Wang Tiejiang and Mrs. Zhou froze, taking a moment to compose themselves before asking.

"Is this the third branch of the Old Mu Family?" Mrs. Zhou's face showed some timidity, even though she was already sure this was the place, she was still anxious and uneasy.

This time, they came to offer an apology and also to check on the two children.

"I am the daughter of the third branch. What do you need?" Mu Shuangshuang's tone was neutral and ordinary, yet carried a hint of estrangement.

Anyone would have a bad attitude upon seeing the people who had purchased their younger siblings, so Mu Shuangshuang's reaction could be considered quite polite.

Mrs. Zhou, receiving confirmation from Mu Shuangshuang, excitedly handed over the bamboo basket she had brought.

"Here are fifty eggs, take them! Little girl, is there an adult at your house? I need to speak with them?"

In Mrs. Zhou's eyes, Mu Shuangshuang was just a ten-year-old little girl, unable to make any significant decisions.

"You can tell me what you need, my parents are quite busy!"

Mu Shuangshuang didn't accept the basket of eggs, as she couldn't take a gift without merit, and she wasn't unaware of their intentions.

Mrs. Zhou glanced worriedly at Wang Tiejiang, and seeing that he had no objections, she spoke up: "We came to apologize. Previously, we were blinded by greed and bought your younger brother and sister. My husband and I know we were wrong, and now, the only thing we can do is offer you compensation and ask for your forgiveness."

Life in Tie Dao Village wasn't easy for the Wang Tiejiang couple either. The village head from Er Gui Village had personally visited to inquire about this matter, and after Chen Hong openly revealed to the whole village that they had sold her, they were isolated by the entire community.

Everyone protected their children when they first saw them.

No one wanted to live in the same village with human traffickers.

If it weren't for the village head remembering that the Old Wang Family had lost their son and were honest and straightforward, they would have been expelled from the village long ago.

"Forgiveness is too great a word. After all, your actions not only hurt me; can the children who were frightened forgive you?"

After speaking, Mu Shuangshuang continued: "Your biggest problem wasn't buying my younger siblings but talking to traffickers about purchasing children. I understand your grief from losing a son, but in this matter, while you were pleased, for others, it was pain and disaster."

Both Wang Tiejiang and Mrs. Zhou flushed red.

This issue was indeed their oversight; they knew these two children might have been stolen or kidnapped by traffickers, yet they just wanted someone to accompany them.

Even if the child came from unjust means...

"We already realize the mistake we made. We came this time because we want to see the two children again and apologize in person. Is this acceptable?" Wang Tiejiang pleaded.

"I won't let you see the children. Little Zhi and Yuanbao cried for a long time that night, and the next day they were terrified. If they saw you, they would surely remember that day."

It's not that Mu Shuangshuang was heartless; originally, people without any intersection shouldn't complicate things unnecessarily.

Wang the blacksmith's family probably wanted to establish a good relationship with her family, visiting the children occasionally.

But how can such a beautiful thing exist in the world? A wrongdoing cannot be fixed with a simple apology.

A mistake is a mistake. What you should bear, you must bear yourself.

"Little girl, just consider us begging you. We're getting on in years..."

"Old Master Wang, Mrs. Wang, Yuanbao is my brother. He's always been a cheerful child and has never cried even through hardship. But on that day, he cried very badly. I knew then that the incident was a knot in his heart."

"Although Shuangshuang and I aren't children from a wealthy family, we can still provide food for our younger siblings."

"Some things have already happened, and if Shuangshuang and I don't want our siblings to think about them again, if we ever meet, we will explain to Yuanbao and Little Zhi that it was a misunderstanding."

Lu Yuanfeng's intention was to let the Old Wang Family not insist and let things happen naturally.

"Actually...our lives as husband and wife aren't good, not just because of exclusion by villagers, but more so because Yuanbao's good-nature reminds us of our deceased son Little Jiang. Our son was just as good-natured and called us mother and father..."

Recalling their son, Mrs. Zhou wept bitterly.

While other families had children in abundance, they feared children would suffer, so they only had one.

And at middle age, they found themselves without even their only son.

"Old woman, forget it, let's not search anymore. As long as Yuanbao and Little Zhi are happy, that's enough," Wang Tiejiang tugged at Mrs. Zhou's clothes and comforted her.

Wang Tiejiang now looked ten years older, with more white hair on his head, and even his back was stooped considerably.

Mrs. Zhou's hand shook as she held the bamboo basket, but she eventually nodded.

The two elderly supported each other, walking towards the door.

Their lean silhouettes and staggering steps paused with each stride.

In fact, neither of them were too old to walk, but they just felt too tired.

Not knowing what the courage to live on really is.

Gradually, as the Wang family got ready to leave Mu Shuangshuang's sight, Mu Shuangshuang called out: "Wait a moment..."

Mu Shuangshuang's decision to let the Wang family see Little Zhi and Yuanbao was made temporarily.

For someone with one foot already in the coffin, perhaps this was their only wish.

Moreover, life is filled with bitterness, and they had already tasted one; it shouldn't be compounded with more harshness.

However, Mu Shuangshuang did say they could look, but not approach, at least not to frighten the two children.

After sending off the Old Wang family couple, a lot of time had already been delayed.

Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng carried their hoes and proceeded with water on their journey again.

At the village entrance, they ran into Mu Dalang. Upon hearing that Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng were going to dig up a pond, Mu Dalang promptly rolled up his sleeves and joined them in their work.

Mu Shuangshuang couldn't help but tease Mu Dalang.

"Cousin, my uncle has become a scholar, and grandma and grandpa are probably eager to arrange your marriage, aren't they? Tell me, when is it happening?"

Mu Dalang blushed and slowly recounted the events.

"It's set for the eighteenth of the twelfth lunar month, but my parents still disagree. They argued with grandma and grandpa, who forcefully set the date and have already sent matchmakers to notify the people in Huang Family Village."

"This is indeed a good day, right before my uncle's Imperial Examination."

The Imperial Examination is an incredibly important part of the civil service exams, passing this stage allows one to take part in the Palace Examination and meet the Holy Emperor.