

Folly 681

Chapter 681: Starting with Mrs. Jin

Mrs. Lin carried a basin of hot water and slowly walked toward Mu Xiangxiang's room.

On the way, she didn't encounter a single person from the Old Mu Family, so the excuse she had prepared didn't come into play.

Mrs. Lin let out a sigh of relief, looked down at the chili water in the wooden basin, and grinned slyly.

"Xiangxiang, don't blame me; blame yourself for blocking the path of our second branch, blocking my daughter Qing's way!"

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Old Mu Family, inside Mu Xiangxiang's room.

Old Mrs. Mu was taking care of Mu Xiangxiang, along with Mrs. Jin, who had been tricked into being there by Mu Shuangshuang.

At this moment, the hot water Mrs. Lin was supposed to bring hadn't arrived yet, and Mu Xiangxiang's foul-smelling clothes hadn't been removed, so the entire room was engulfed in a sour stench, even worse than when Mu Shuangshuang was reeking.

But unlike before, the expression on Old Mrs. Mu's face showed no sign of disgust; instead, she looked worried, holding Mu Xiangxiang's skinny fingers with her calloused hands.

"Xiangxiang, don't worry, dear. Mother will surely save you, my good Xiangxiang..."

Mrs. Jin forced herself to withstand the stench, standing not far from Old Mrs. Mu, but gradually, the sour smell became more intense.

Mrs. Jin kept stepping back—

Soon she was at the doorway, leaning against the doorframe, breathing the air outside, finally feeling alive again.

Mrs. Jin didn't want to stay in Mu Xiangxiang's room for even a moment. If it weren't for that annoying girl making her come, and saying in front of the whole family how she, as the eldest sister-in-law, should behave, Mrs. Jin would still be enjoying herself in her own room.

Mrs. Jin glanced at Mu Shuangshuang, who was standing at the farthest corner of the courtyard, with a fierce look in her eyes.

Mu Shuangshuang was already observing the situation inside with Mu Xiangxiang and Old Mrs. Mu. When Mrs. Jin glared at her, Mu Shuangshuang noticed it immediately.

Mu Shuangshuang met Mrs. Jin's gaze, a bright smile curling at the corner of her mouth.

Mrs. Jin gritted her teeth in anger, feeling that Mu Shuangshuang was provoking her.

In her heart, Mrs. Jin made up her mind; she would certainly make that annoying girl pay.

Inside the room, suddenly, Old Mrs. Mu's voice erupted, cursing Mrs. Lin.

"Damn that second daughter-in-law, did she fall into the dung pit? Why isn't she here yet?"

As soon as she finished speaking, Mrs. Lin's voice rang out.

"Mother, I'm here, I'm here..." Mrs. Lin called out loudly.

Mrs. Lin stepped into Mu Xiangxiang's room with one foot, the pungent sour stench attacking her, making her tense up. Adding to it, Mrs. Jin was leaning against the doorframe nearby.

Mrs. Lin twisted her waist, forcefully bumping Mrs. Jin with her hip, directly knocking Mrs. Jin out of Mu Xiangxiang's room.

With a thud, Mrs. Jin landed on her knees at Mu Xiangxiang's doorway.

Mrs. Lin shouted at the top of her lungs, "Sister-in-law, what's wrong with you? Even if Xiangxiang's room smells bad, you shouldn't sneak out while Mother isn't watching!

All of us are worried about Xiangxiang, all eager to help take care of her."

Mrs. Lin's shout drew the entire Old Mu Family's attention to her.

Especially Mu Danian, who greedily eyed Mrs. Jin's body, his eyes nearly popping out.

Today, Mrs. Jin wore a beautiful dark blue wide-sleeved dress, gracefully flowing, looking particularly fairy-like. The only downside was the neckline was a bit too low. Standing was fine, but once she squatted or leaned forward, it was a problem.

Mrs. Jin felt a burning gaze on her and looked up to see Mu Danian staring at her neck.

Mrs. Jin looked down and, following Mu Danian's line of sight, saw her bright red dudou, realizing what Mu Danian was looking at, shaking with anger.

Before she could stand up and argue with Mu Danian, Old Mrs. Mu rushed over.

She grabbed Mrs. Jin by the hair, growling ferociously, "You still dare to despise Xiangxiang? Today, you'll wash Xiangxiang. If you don't clean her properly, I'll have my son divorce you!"

Mu Dade wasn't home at the moment; he had rented a carriage to the county early in the morning and wouldn't be back for ten days to half a month.

Mu Dandan and Mu Yingying were instructed by Mrs. Jin to absolutely not come out, so currently, no one could help Mrs. Jin.

Mrs. Jin's scalp was aching from being pulled, pleading incessantly.

"Mother... I don't despise Xiangxiang. Xiangxiang is my sister. How could I despise her? Mother, it hurts. Please let go..."

Mrs. Jin's cries were somewhat pitiful, and Mr. Mu couldn't bear it, so he spoke up.

"Xiangxiang's mother, let go. You're hurting the eldest daughter-in-law."

Old Mrs. Mu glared at Mr. Mu, dissatisfied, "Does she even know pain? Our Xiangxiang is lying unconscious on the kang. Does this so-called sister-in-law have any sympathy?"

"How do you know the eldest daughter-in-law doesn't care? Everyone's upset about Xiangxiang's accident. Let go before the eldest gets back and punishes you."

Mr. Mu was worried that Old Mrs. Mu might hurt Mrs. Jin, so he mentioned Mu Dade.

Who would have thought this would actually provoke Old Mrs. Mu?

"Hmph, how do you know she's upset? Are you the worm in her stomach? Besides, why do you care if I discipline the eldest daughter-in-law? When I hit or scold any other daughter-in-law, you never said a word. What, do you fancy this little vixen because she's good-looking?"

As soon as Old Mrs. Mu finished speaking, Mrs. Jin's face turned as red as if she had been slapped.

Mr. Mu was even more furious, stomping his feet in anger.

"You're sick! You damn old woman, to say something like that. I'm done arguing with you. Do what you want!"

Mr. Mu stepped aside, ignoring Old Mrs. Mu.

Only then did Old Mrs. Mu drag Mrs. Jin by the hair back into Mu Xiangxiang's room.

At Mu Xiangxiang's bedside, Old Mrs. Mu threw Mrs. Jin down, her face landing on the filthy and dirty Mu Xiangxiang.

The horrid smell overwhelmed her, and Mrs. Jin retched incessantly.

"Stop dawdling. Xiangxiang's waiting for treatment. Clean her up immediately. If there's still a speck of dirt on her, I'll skin you alive!"

Outside, listening to Old Mrs. Mu's curses, Mu Shuangshuang felt a sense of contemplation.

Old Mrs. Mu treating Mrs. Jin like this today probably means once Mu Dade's position is stabilized, this matter will be settled one day.

And Mrs. Lin, I don't know why, but she's not sucking up to Mrs. Jin anymore and has actually provoked her. She's underestimating Mrs. Jin excessively.

Mu Shuangshuang had always felt that Mrs. Jin wasn't an easy person to deal with.

This woman was terribly devious, the hardest to deal with in the entire Old Mu Family.

Right now, she should be remembering what Old Mrs. Mu and Mrs. Lin did, just waiting for the opportunity to come and repay them fiercely.

In the room, Mrs. Jin endured the nausea and wiped Mu Xiangxiang's body clean, including the filth in her hair, bit by bit.

After finishing everything, Mrs. Jin's originally beautiful dress now looked like wilted vegetables, dirty and wrinkled.

"Mother, Xiangxiang's body has been cleaned..."

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Chapter 682: Revenge Strikes Back

Old Mrs. Mu pushed Mrs. Jin aside with her crutch, climbed onto the bed herself, and felt a bit relieved as she saw Mu Xiangxiang's face regaining some color.

"Old man, Xiangxiang is cleaned up now, let Old Zhang come in."

Mrs. Jin was about to leave when Old Mrs. Mu stopped her.

"You can't go, later you have to make the medicine, as the eldest sister-in-law you must take care of this."

Mrs. Jin felt extremely irritated, and more importantly, she noticed her hand was burning and throbbing with a numbness that was particularly uncomfortable.

At first, Mrs. Jin thought she had touched something she shouldn't have and intended to wash her hands later, but the feeling grew stronger, and she started to panic.

"Mother, I want to wash my hands, my hands feel uncomfortable," said Mrs. Jin.

"Wash what? There's no feces on your hands. I'm telling you, don't think of slacking off, I'm keeping an eye on you." Old Mrs. Mu said, eyeing Mrs. Jin.

In the courtyard, Mu Dashan saw Zhang Huai Shu with his medicine box ready to diagnose Mu Xiangxiang and said,

"Uncle Zhang, please take care of Xiangxiang. If anything happens, call us."

Zhang Huai Shu gave no guarantee and entered the house.

On the bed, Mu Xiangxiang was still unconscious.

After taking her pulse, Zhang Huai Shu asked Old Mrs. Mu, "What did this girl eat?"

"What's wrong with my daughter?" Old Mrs. Mu asked.

"You need to tell me what she ate before I can say," Zhang Huai Shu replied bluntly.

"You..."

Old Mrs. Mu didn't respond, causing the room to suddenly become tense.

In the courtyard, Mr. Mu was still sulking and refused to step foot inside Mu Xiangxiang's room.

But without him going inside, no one could control Old Mrs. Mu.

"Dad, why don't we go in and take a look, I'm afraid mom might quarrel with Uncle Zhang. If something really goes wrong this time, no one from the Old Mu Family will ever come to see us for illnesses again," Mu Dashan said to Mr. Mu.

When Old Mrs. Mu had chased Zhang Huai Shu out of the Old Mu Family before, the family went on Zhang Huai Shu's blacklist and he never treated their illnesses anymore.

People are inherently fragile, no one can go through life without getting sick.

The people of the Old Mu Family should never have offended Zhang Huai Shu.

Mr. Mu sighed and entered the room.

He spoke to Zhang Huai Shu, who hadn't yet treated Mu Xiangxiang: "Old Zhang, Xiangxiang... she's different from ordinary people; she eats the amount of food that three or four strong men would eat in one meal, sometimes even more.

After eating, she goes to the outhouse to gag and vomit everything up. This morning, she ate breakfast that belonged to the second brother's household and the fifth's as well, and somehow she vomited blood.

Then her mother had the fourth daughter-in-law give her chimney ashes to drink, and that's how she ended up like this."

Zhang Huai Shu sighed three times after hearing Mr. Mu's words.

"You people are messing around. This girl has been overeating for years, damaging her stomach, look at her, can you still see her face? Her head is too big for her body, she's basically a big-headed doll."

Zhang Huai Shu pointed at the unconscious Mu Xiangxiang on the bed and continued.

"The blood vomiting is due to over-gagging, injuring her throat, but how could you have given her chimney ashes to drink? These dirty things went into her throat, her stomach; it's going to be a big problem later."

Zhang Huai Shu, who has practiced medicine for decades, has seen stupidity, but never the kind displayed by the Old Mu Family. This isn't treating a person, it's risking their life.

Can chimney ashes be carelessly consumed?

"Stop talking nonsense, when we were young, chimney ashes were used for treatment, it's a good thing." Old Mrs. Mu hurriedly refuted, but Zhang Huai Shu sternly scolded her.

"Hmph, if your ashes were useful, why call me? I'm telling you, if you want me to treat her, stop trying to argue."

Zhang Huai Shu sternly asked Old Mrs. Mu.

Mr. Mu quickly stepped up to restrain Old Mrs. Mu.

"You better not say anything now, saving Xiangxiang is the priority."

Only then did Old Mrs. Mu fall silent.

After treating Mu Xiangxiang with acupuncture, Zhang Huai Shu told Mr. Mu: "Your girl, even if she survives this time, must not overeat again, her food intake must return to normal levels.

She must not gag again, if it happens again, I cannot guarantee I can save her. Also, because you made her drink the chimney ashes, she probably won't be able to speak for a while. How long it takes to recover depends on when the ashes are expelled from her body."

Mr. Mu nodded.

"I understand, thank you, Old Zhang. In the past, we were wrong to you, I will take good care of Xiangxiang."

"I don't have the medicine on hand, later have someone from the Old Mu Family follow me back to get it, it's a total of thirty doses, one dose a day. After finishing, I will come back to check."

"How much is the consultation fee?" Mr. Mu asked.

"The consultation fee is five copper coins, one acupuncture session is twenty copper coins, thirty doses of medicine, twenty copper coins per dose, it totals six hundred and twenty-five copper coins," Zhang Huai Shu replied.

When Old Mrs. Mu heard it cost that much silver, she was about to explode, but Mr. Mu forced her to sit down.

This time, Mr. Mu approached Mrs. Jin, who was scratching the back of her hand, and said, "Eldest daughter-in-law, if you have money, lend it for Xiangxiang's treatment first. When the eldest comes, I will explain to him."

Mrs. Jin was full of shock.

The old man never asked his daughter-in-law for money, he usually went through Old Mrs. Mu.

"Father, I don't have much on hand..." Mrs. Jin tried to say she was short on money, in fact, she didn't want to give it up.

"Hand it over, don't think I don't know how much money the big house has, in all these years my old lady hasn't taken a penny from your house, now we're just asking you to help Xiangxiang, isn't that reasonable?"

Mrs. Jin felt aggrieved, but her face remained calm and composed, neither humble nor arrogant.

"Mother, I'll go take some of the travel money set aside for Dade's exams, when he goes to the Capital, half a tael less should be okay, right?"

"Stop bringing up the eldest, now hurry up and get it."

Mrs. Jin quickly went to the room she shared with Mu Dade, and took out the consultation fee from her jewelry box.

At this moment, Mrs. Jin's face was contorted, her hand gripping the Copper Coin was bulging with veins.

"Mom..." Outside, Mu Dandan and Mu Yingying's voices rang out.

Mrs. Jin pulled herself together and opened the door.

The two daughters immediately came over and hugged Mrs. Jin.

"Mom, you've been wronged, we heard grandma scolding you," said Mu Dandan.

"Mom, let's leave the Old Mu Family quickly, it's terrible here," urged Mu Yingying.

Mrs. Jin just shook her head.

"No, I must watch the entire Old Mu Family fall from grace. Once your father's affairs are settled, I'll show them how formidable I, Jinyin'er, can be."

Mrs. Jin is now staying in the Old Mu Family just to see these people when they peak with joy.

She, Jinyin'er, who has been married into the Old Mu Family for so many years, has endured so much hardship and suffered so much.

How that old woman treated her, she must retaliate.

Chapter 683: Getting Serious

"But with Grandma treating you like this, Mom, you'll suffer."

Mu Dandan felt sorry for Mrs. Jin.

Moreover, Mu Dandan herself didn't want to stay with the Old Mu Family, there was nothing to eat, nothing to play with.

"Mom won't suffer greatly. If things really get out of hand, we'll just tear the facade apart, but with your father not around, I try to go along with the old lady to avoid extra trouble."

"Hey, Mom, why is your hand so red?" Mu Yingying pulled up Mrs. Jin's hand and asked in confusion.

Only then did Mrs. Jin remember her hand, burning with spicy pain.

"I don't know what it is, my hand feels terribly scalded," Mrs. Jin replied.

"Mom, you should see the doctor. It looks quite serious to me," Mu Dandan added.

Mrs. Jin nodded. She was going to see a doctor, but not Zhang Huai Shu. He's a quack and too lowly to treat her, a Scholar's wife.

"Dandan, Yingying, you two better not go out these days, don't let the old lady catch you, or she'll have you doing endless chores."

After speaking, Mrs. Jin took the money and went to Mu Xiangxiang's room.

Zhang Huai Shu was still waiting for Mrs. Jin's payment; she handed over six hundred twenty-five copper coins to Zhang Huai Shu and politely sent him out.

By the stove, Old Mrs. Mu kept her watch over Mu Xiangxiang, ignoring everything else.

Old Mrs. Mu's current appearance was actually quite poor. Her hair had mostly fallen out during her fight with Mrs. Lin, and there were red marks on her face from Mrs. Lin's scratches.

Her disheveled look made her resemble a madwoman.

But even more so was Mrs. Lin, with several strands of her black hair pulled out, and her clothes torn in the scuffle with Old Mrs. Mu.

The appearance was as bad as it could be.

But Mrs. Lin's eyes kept staring at Mu Xiangxiang on the stove.

If looks could kill, Mu Xiangxiang figured she'd be long dead by now.

"Dad, since Xiangxiang is fine now, let's go back. There's a lot to do at home," Mu Dashan said to Mr. Mu.

Mr. Mu sighed deeply, feeling a slight sense of gratitude towards his third son.

"Go ahead, and I apologize for today with Xiangxiang, and thank you for the trouble with the fourth."

But Mu Dashan shook his head and said to Mr. Mu, "Dad, it's nothing for me, but for the fourth, over the years, he has worked hard for this house. Even if there's no credit, there is hard work.

Mom shouldn't treat the fourth like this, shouldn't treat the fourth's wife like this. Dad, I know my request might be a bit much, but I still hope you can be kinder to the fourth family."

For this brother, Mu Dashan could only plead with Mr. Mu.

However, this time, the fourth branch had been heartbroken.

Mu Dajiang's forehead, that bloody hole.

Mrs. Liu's organs repositioned from being hit, and Mu Dajiang wondered if the fourth branch should also separate like the third branch.

After Mu Dashan and Mu Shuangshuang left, Mu Dajiang approached Mr. Mu.

"Dad, I want to discuss something with you," Mu Dajiang said.

Mr. Mu's eyelids suddenly twitched, and a bad feeling arose.

He looked at the fourth in front of him.

On his dark forehead, a stark white bandage stood out.

The face before him, though etched with deep lines from years of sun exposure, held a gaze full of sincerity.

"Fourth, today's incident was your mother's fault. On her behalf, I apologize to you and your wife. I promise that she won't raise her hand again."

Mu Dajiang shook his head.

"Dad, this isn't the first time. Xiaxia's mother is still lying at home, clutching her stomach. Watching Xiaxia's mother like this, I'm really upset.

The family has only fed the fourth branch, giving nothing else. I'd rather go to the town's wharf to haul goods. Though it's hard work, nobody will beat or scold me, and maybe in the future, I can save up money for Xiao Chu to attend school."

"Fourth, what are you saying?" Mr. Mu asked, bewildered.

"Dad, I want to separate the family... our fourth branch wants to separate. We won't take the house or the land; we'll sleep on the streets in town..."

Towards the end, the man's eyes reddened in front of Mr. Mu.

The incident today was really too much from Old Mrs. Mu.

Such a big bowl smashed down, and Xiaxia's mother, who did nothing wrong, worked harder than anyone, yet she's always the one beaten.

Mr. Mu felt distressed. His wife's nature was like this.

Expecting her to change was impossible.

But if she doesn't change, the fourth branch will surely lose heart.

"Fourth, I won't agree to the separation. First, as you said, without the family, you have nowhere to live, and secondly, even food would be an issue.

Xiaxia is at the age for marriage; if we split up, no one would dare come for a proposal."

Mr. Mu tirelessly tried to persuade Mu Dajiang, but Mu Dajiang was resolute.

"Dad, whether you agree or not, I've made up my mind. Tomorrow, I'll first send Xiaxia and Xiao Chu to her grandmother's house. When Xiaxia's mother recovers,

I'll go to town to find work. Once I save enough to rent a place in town, our fourth branch will move out."

Recalling the past, Mu Dajiang felt that even now, this decision was already too late.

If he had separated along with his third brother back then, it would be tough but happier for a family of four now.

As a man and a father, this time, Mu Dajiang was resolute.

"Fourth, you're too naive. Do you think everyone is like Shuang? Able to earn enough to survive?

Our Old Mu Family, being the way it is, isn't it because we're all together? Now you want to break apart, have you thought about the consequences?"

Mr. Mu still didn't believe that Mu Dajiang would really separate, thinking it was just a means for him to demand fairness.

Even though Mr. Mu protested against Mu Dajiang's decision, he didn't take it seriously in his heart.

It wasn't until the next day, when Mu Dajiang sent Mu Xiaxia and Mu Xiaochu to Lin Family Village, that Mr. Mu realized the fourth was serious.

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Mu Dajiang spent the entire day taking care of Mrs. Liu, never leaving her side.

As for the matters of the Old Mu Family, he no longer cared.

He was only waiting for Mrs. Liu to recover so that the fourth branch would then embark on the toughest path.

Though Mrs. Liu took her medicine, her abdomen still ached, unable even to get out of bed.

If not for Mu Dajiang's constant company, even going to the loo would be an issue.

"Daddy Xiaxia, do you think by doing this, Mom will come and beat or scold us?"

Mrs. Liu asked, intimidated from the constant abuse.

She had never been this afraid, not even when Old Mrs. Mu threatened to divorce her.

"No, Mom's looking after Xiangxiang now; she doesn't have the time to bother us, right? We just have to focus on recovering!"

Chapter 684: Torment to Death (Part 1)

In the past few days, several patients have appeared in the Old Mu Family.

Old Mrs. Mu took care of Mu Xiangxiang for an afternoon, and by midnight she started to have a fever and feel dizzy.

A few people from the Old Mu Family carried Old Mrs. Mu into the room, invited Zhang Huai Shu to diagnose her, and gave her medicine.

By morning, Old Mrs. Mu still hadn't woken up.

The task of caring for Mu Xiangxiang fell on Mrs. Lin.

Mrs. Lin, holding a bowl of cold porridge mixed with cold water and chili, entered Mu Xiangxiang's room. Just as she put the bowl on the table, Mu Xiangxiang woke up.

Upon waking, Mu Xiangxiang began to look around. She didn't see her father, didn't see her mother, only saw Mrs. Lin, who seemed up to no good.

Mu Xiangxiang began to throw a tantrum.

She shouted at the top of her lungs, but the sound produced was just a little cat-like meow.

"Oh, Xiangxiang is awake? Perfect, the porridge your second sister-in-law made for you is ready, let me feed you!"

Mrs. Lin took two steps forward, reaching the edge of Mu Xiangxiang's kang.

Mu Xiangxiang stared at Mrs. Lin in horror and pointed to her own throat.

She was asking Mrs. Lin what happened to her.

Mrs. Lin chuckled.

"Xiangxiang, your second sister-in-law really didn't want to tell you this, but after all, I'm your second sister-in-law. You are a grown girl, why must you eat like a pig, without restraint?"

Just like last time, you ate a whole plate of braised pork by yourself. If you really could digest it, it would be fine, but you ate it and then threw up. What a waste of food!"

Mrs. Lin spoke at length, not a single comforting word for Mu Xiangxiang, all filled with reproach towards her.

Mu Xiangxiang had always been the apple of Old Mrs. Mu's eye, cherished since childhood and never wronged. Being scolded like this, she was naturally upset.

Regardless of her illness, Mu Xiangxiang raised her hand, glared fiercely at Mrs. Lin, and acted as if she was going to hit her.

Mrs. Lin, realizing this, hurriedly retreated several steps, shouting at Mu Xiangxiang.

"Xiangxiang, people say an elder brother is like a father, an elder sister-in-law like a mother. I'm not your eldest sister-in-law, but I'm still your elder. Are you planning to hit me?"

Mrs. Lin spoke with arrogance, which stemmed entirely from Old Mrs. Mu being bedridden at the moment.

She managed all the affairs in the back courtyard by herself.

Moreover, as Mu Xiangxiang was mute, she couldn't complain to Old Mrs. Mu, so Mrs. Lin could treat Mu Xiangxiang however she wanted.

Mu Xiangxiang glared even harder.

She whimpered, but it had no impact.

"Xiangxiang, there's no point in shouting. Your voice is gone, and for the rest of your life, you'll never speak again. That marriage with the Qin Family must be off, the Young Madam Qin can't be a mute!"

As Mrs. Lin finished her words, Mu Xiangxiang whimpered a few times from her throat, her eyes rolled up, and she fainted directly.

Mrs. Lin, in a great mood, climbed onto the kang and placed her hand under Mu Xiangxiang's nose.

She found Mu Xiangxiang was still alive.

Mrs. Lin couldn't help but curse: "Damn thing, you still don't die this way."

After cursing, Mrs. Lin poured the entire bowl of cold porridge with chili on Mu Xiangxiang.

With a "crack," the bowl in her hand shattered, and Mrs. Lin shouted loudly.

"Dad, Mom, something bad has happened, Xiangxiang refuses to eat and has shattered the bowl..."

Lying on the kang, Old Mrs. Mu heard Mrs. Lin's pig-like howl, disregarded her own aching head, and struggled to get up to see.

She was stopped by Mr. Mu.

"Xiangxiang's mother, let Xiangxiang make a fuss by herself, she'll learn to behave after she's done. You're this sick now, recuperating is the priority."

Old Mrs. Mu refused, insisting on seeing Mu Xiangxiang.

"I have to go. Xiangxiang is still young and doesn't understand. That Mrs. Lin is evil-hearted, who knows how she'll bully my Xiangxiang. I, this old woman, must personally supervise that wicked wife, and if she dares to do anything bad, I... I'll... hit her with a hoe and kill her."

Old Mrs. Mu's voice was hoarse, like old tree bark scraping the ground.

"Old lady, what's the point in this, children and grandchildren have their own blessings. Besides, the second daughter-in-law wouldn't neglect Xiangxiang, you..."

Old Mrs. Mu stood up, with her disheveled hair, heading towards the Old Mu Family's side room.

What would normally take a few minutes, Old Mrs. Mu took the time of two cups of tea to walk, finally making it into Mu Xiangxiang's room.

She heard Mrs. Lin crying loudly.

"Sister Xiangxiang, what's the matter with you? Your voice will get better, we just need to be quiet for a few days, and it will be fine.

Your second sister-in-law knows you think there's not enough food, but because you're sick, your second sister-in-law can't harm you..."

Mrs. Lin was beside Mu Xiangxiang's kang, speaking lies with open eyes.

The purpose was merely to show the old couple she was trying her best.

"See that, the second daughter-in-law isn't as bad to Xiangxiang as you claimed." Mr. Mu thought Old Mrs. Mu was making a fuss.

Old Mrs. Mu entered the room where Mrs. Lin was helping Mu Xiangxiang change clothes.

Even the broken bowls in the room had been cleaned up by Mrs. Lin. At a glance, it seemed like she was a virtuous daughter-in-law.

But Old Mrs. Mu wasn't convinced, she insisted on staying there, waiting for Mu Xiangxiang to wake up.

"Xiangxiang, mom is here to take care of you. I'll see who dares to play tricks."

Mrs. Lin turned ashen, cursing Old Mrs. Mu thousands of times in her heart.

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In the Third Branch of the Mu Family

Mu Shuangshuang was chopping pig feed in the yard, Yu Si Niang went to the village pond to do laundry, and Mu Dashan was tidying up the house.

Lu Yuanfeng went into the mountains to hunt, and four kids were playing in the yard.

These days of interaction, Xue Zheng was willing to play with Little Zhi Yuanbao, although most of the time he just watched Yuanbao and Little Zhi play.

From fighting roosters, cricket fighting, to games like eagle catching chicks, these small games were very common in the eyes of peasant children.

But, Xue Zheng had never seen them, so they attracted his attention every time.

After playing for a while, Xiao Han walked to the side, took out a book to read, and occasionally wrote and drew on the ground with a small stick in his hand.

Even though he didn't recognize most of the words, Xiao Han would still take the book every day to ask Mu Shuangshuang.

Now Xiao Han encountered another difficulty, his sister was chopping pig feed, and he couldn't disturb her. But if he didn't ask, he wouldn't know how the words were written.

"Ren, the Ren in benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faith!"

Suddenly, a gentle voice sounded.

Xiao Han looked up to see Liu Zian's face full of smiles.

"Mr. Liu, you're here~"

Mu Xiaohan shouted excitedly.

Upon hearing the voice, Mu Shuangshuang followed Xiao Han's gaze and saw Liu Zian standing with Xiao Han.

Xiao Han was full of excitement, especially happy with Liu Zian's arrival.

"Why... are you here?" Mu Shuangshuang put down the knife in her hand and stood up.

Liu Zian patted Xiao Han's head and then walked over to Mu Shuangshuang, saying, "Shuangshuang, I passed the examination!"

Mu Shuangshuang was stunned for a moment, and then burst into laughter.

"Congratulations, congratulations!"

Chapter 685: Proposal to Marry Shuangshuang

Liu Zian felt a sweet joy in his heart upon hearing Mu Shuangshuang's congratulations.

His cheeks were flushed, as if trying hard to express a certain thought.

"Thank you, Shuangshuang!"

"Xiao Han, shouldn't you serve your teacher a cup of hot tea? Little Zhi, help out by bringing over a stool." Mu Shuangshuang instructed her two younger siblings.

Mu Xiaohan rushed into the kitchen in a hurry.

Little Zhi was just about to do what Mu Shuangshuang had instructed when Xue Zheng surprisingly acted faster, went to Mu Shuangshuang's room, and brought a stool out.

After placing the stool in the courtyard, he stood beside Mu Shuangshuang, his eyes fixed on her, as if afraid she might run away.

"Xiao Zheng, you're really great. Thank you for bringing a stool for Brother Zi'an!" Mu Shuangshuang praised Xue Zheng.

Xue Zheng shyly smiled at Mu Shuangshuang, with a hint of blush appearing on his face.

Liu Zian looked puzzled at the unfamiliar child in front of him. He had spent a day and a half in Er Gui Village, clearly knowing the members of Shuangshuang's family.

"This is Xiao Zheng, a good friend of Yuanbao and Little Zhi. He lives in town but has been staying at my house for a while."

Liu Zian nodded in understanding and said,

"Shuangshuang, go ahead and sit down. I can stand for a while, no problem."

Liu Zian didn't sit but wanted to offer the stool to Mu Shuangshuang.

His first action upon entering was to scan the surroundings of the Third Branch courtyard of the Old Mu Family, looking for familiar faces.

He happened to see Shuangshuang squatting on the ground, holding a large kitchen knife in one hand, chopping pig feed.

A pile of pig feed lay beside Shuangshuang; she seemed to have been working for quite some time.

"How could that be right? You're the guest, and besides, I haven't finished my work." Mu Shuangshuang said as she picked up the knife and continued chopping pig feed.

From her proficiency in work, Mu Shuangshuang was no different from most daughters of peasant families.

But there was something about her that was different from other girls.

Liu Zian gazed longingly at the person he hadn't seen in a while, gripping a fifty-tael silver note in his palm so tightly it almost created moisture.

This was what he had prepared for Shuangshuang—

Liu Zian was the top scholar of this year's Qianzhou Prefecture examination, ranking first in the county and first in Qingshan Town.

Qianzhou Prefecture awarded Liu Zian fifty taels of silver as a reward for this exam, and they would cover all the costs for his trip to the Capital for the subsequent provincial examination.

Now, Liu Zian had finally achieved success, only waiting for next February's Imperial Examination and the following Palace Examination to see the results.

If successful, Liu Zian would probably enter officialdom.

He would then have a future to look forward to.

Once a man has a career, he must think about starting a family.

All Liu Zian wanted to do now was to express his feelings to Shuangshuang.

"Shuangshuang, you... are you doing well lately?"

Liu Zian was still a bit nervous, wanting to talk about something else first, to divert his attention.

"Not bad. Eating well, drinking well, I've even gained a bit of weight." Mu Shuangshuang smiled.

Just then, Yuanbao, who had been playing nearby, suddenly chimed in.

He said loudly, "Of course! My second brother always thinks of my Sister Shuangshuang first with any good things, even I, as a brother, don't get to eat them."

Liu Zian's expression momentarily stiffened.

He glanced around, not finding any sign of Lu Yuanfeng, feeling both relieved and a bit worried.

The feelings between Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng were something Liu Zian had to face.

The two often played together, though he wasn't sure of their true feelings for each other.

Liu Zian couldn't help but furrow his brows.

Mu Shuangshuang asked, "Liu Zian, your letter of appointment should have arrived already, right?"

"Yes, it should have come long ago, but Governor Zhuang kept me in Qianzhou for over a month, and I only returned from Qianzhou yesterday."

"Haha, so I'm the first one you visited, huh?" Mu Shuangshuang teased Liu Zian jokingly.

Speaking of which, Mu Shuangshuang was quite happy for Liu Zian for becoming a scholar.

After all, she still considered him an acquaintance, and even if her uncle really became an official sometime, she'd at least have a friend who could rival him.

Traditionally, commoners do not contend with officials. If her uncle did become an official, it could potentially be a troublesome matter for her and the Third Branch.

"Yes!"

The season was winter, and the weather was incredibly cold. Liu Zian wore a not-too-thick cotton jacket, his cheeks red from the cold, but still stood in the courtyard, accompanying Mu Shuangshuang.

After chopping two pots of pig feed, Mu Shuangshuang explained to Liu Zian and went to the kitchen, kindled a fire, and poured the pig feed mixed with some broken rice into a big iron pot all at once.

The pig feed needed to cook for about two cups of tea's time; Mu Shuangshuang just needed to add a few thicker logs of wood to the stove.

While moving firewood, she noticed there wasn't much left at home and thought she might have to find some time to collect more from the mountains.

In the courtyard, Liu Zian gradually found some courage.

He took a deep breath and walked toward the kitchen of the Third Branch.

"Mu Shuangshuang, do you have a moment? Could I talk with you?" Liu Zian asked.

Mu Shuangshuang smiled and nodded, "Come in, though the smell is a bit strong here, it's still better than outside."

"Shuangshuang, do you... do you like your life now?" asked Liu Zian through gritted teeth.

"I quite like it, why?"

Mu Shuangshuang thought it was a coincidence, as not just Liu Zian, but Lu Yuanfeng had asked her this question before too.

"Do you... do you want to go to the county town, or the Capital?"

Liu Zian thought he might end up developing in one of these places in the future, and if Shuangshuang was willing to join him...

"Of course, I'd like to. The county town and the Capital are big places, much more convenient than the village for doing things."

"Really?" Liu Zian's face lit up with excitement.

At this moment, he was filled with hope, feeling like this was the happiest moment of his life.

"Naturally! But I don't want to go now; I haven't saved enough money to head to the county town yet, and Xiaohan and Yuanbao's schooling issues are still unresolved."

The things Mu Shuangshuang spoke about were what she currently wanted to solve the most.

She already prepared the tuition fees for the two children, but there simply wasn't a suitable school available.

Either some teachers charged too high a fee, or some schools were just too far away, making a daily round trip difficult not only for the two children but even for herself.

"I know a good school in town; it's where I studied. I can take Xiaohan and Yuanbao there."

"I've checked the school in town; it's too far away. We don't have a residence there, and without daily transport like a bull cart from the village, it'll be inconvenient for the kids."

Liu Zian could fully understand Mu Shuangshuang's concerns. Back then, if not for a man from the Liu Family Village working daily in town and giving Liu Zian a ride,

he might not have been able to study in town either.

"It would be great if a school could be established in the village." Mu Shuangshuang suddenly said.

Chapter 686: Jealousy

"It's a pity, it's simply impossible, the only school in the village was demolished years ago, and there's no teacher to set up a school," Mu Shuangshuang felt a bit lost.

As the elder sister, her biggest worry is naturally the future of her two younger brothers.

Xiao Han likes to study, while Yuanbao's attitude is unclear, but sending him to school would at least help him recognize some characters and meet some people.

Liu Zian pondered for a moment, then suddenly said, "Shuangshuang, I know someone who can be your teacher."

"What?" Mu Shuangshuang was incredulous.

"Liu Zian, you're not planning to teach yourself, are you? That's impossible. You have to set off for the Capital after the New Year; you can't afford any delays on the road."

Ancient transportation can't compare to modern times; to travel far, one either walks or takes a carriage. If anything happens, one has to leave two or three months early.

There's a main road in Qingshan Town leading to the Capital. By following it continuously, one can reach the Capital in two to three months, or in a month and a half if renting a carriage.

Liu Zian can at most spend a year at home before he has to go quickly to the Capital for exams; he doesn't have time to be a teacher in Er Gui Village.

More importantly, Liu Zian is now a scholar, with different status and position; it's impossible for him to stay in a small village to teach.

"Not me!" Liu Zian shook his head, blushing.

He said, "I have a classmate, he's also from a nearby village. He has taken the exam twice without passing. Before parting, I heard he planned to be a teacher in town, gather enough money for three years, and then try for the scholar exam in Qianzhou Prefecture."

"You mean he can at least be a teacher for three years?" Mu Shuangshuang felt delighted. If this is true, in three years she would definitely have her own house in town.

Sending Xiao Han and Yuanbao to study in town would also be convenient.

"That's right, but now I need to visit his home first to see if he has already found work in town yet."

"He probably hasn't, I went to several schools in town a few days ago and asked around; basically, no one is hiring teachers, and even if schools are looking, they prefer experienced scholars who are older."

Mu Shuangshuang was glad she had inquired in advance.

Liu Zian was also happy that he could finally help Shuangshuang.

"That way, your younger brother's schooling problem will be half solved."

"Yes, Liu Zian, thank you. If it weren't for your suggestion, I wouldn't know what to do. When you go to find that scholar, I'll go with you to see how much he'd charge to give lessons here."

Setting up a village school is not a simple matter; Mu Shuangshuang has to understand all aspects.

However, the easiest part is the Da Ning Dynasty's school system; there aren't so many cumbersome procedures.

Just build a hay house and set up some tables and chairs, and it can be sorted.

It shouldn't cost much.

"Shuangshuang is thinking it through, whereas I've been too anxious."

"Shuangshuang, about the matter I mentioned earlier..." Liu Zian was so nervous his heart almost jumped out.

He looked down, not daring to face Shuangshuang.

"I... Shuangshuang, if someone asks you to go to the county town with him, would you...?"

"Wait, Liu Zian, the fire in the stove is falling out." Mu Shuangshuang quickly went to the stove entrance, stuffing firewood deeper.

Her entire attention was focused on the stove, so she didn't hear Liu Zian's words at all.

Liu Zian had mustered all his courage to finally voice what was in his heart, yet Shuangshuang hadn't heard it.

"What did you just say, Liu Zian?" Mu Shuangshuang turned her head to ask Liu Zian.

Liu Zian opened his mouth, about to speak again, when Yuanbao's shrill voice came from outside.

"Wow, Second Brother, did you hit a spotted deer?"

Mu Shuangshuang's lips curved up slightly as she stood up, poured a cup of warm water in the kitchen, and took it outside.

In the courtyard, Lu Yuanfeng, covered in sweat, was standing there. The two exchanged looks and burst into laughter.

"I said you would catch a big game today," Mu Shuangshuang said.

"Yes, the weather is getting colder, and animals in the mountain are coming out. I saw several big ones today but unfortunately, my tools weren't complete, and the cold hasn't set in long enough, so the game are still agile and fast."

"Then I'll go with you tomorrow. I haven't been up the mountain in a while." Mu Shuangshuang said as she handed the water to Lu Yuanfeng.

Lu Yuanfeng looked at Mu Shuangshuang indulgently and chuckled foolishly, handing her a grasshopper he had crafted.

"You taught me this yesterday, I made it while waiting around today. It's ugly..."

"Not at all, I love it." Mu Shuangshuang took the item from Lu Yuanfeng and tucked it in her pocket like a treasure.

Her cheeks were blushing, as red as the sunset in March.

At the kitchen door, Liu Zian's heart felt as though someone had sliced it, causing intense pain.

He felt as though the grasshopper Mu Shuangshuang was holding was not just a grasshopper but her whole world.

And this world was given by Lu Yuanfeng, having nothing to do with him, Liu Zian.

"You haven't told me what you encountered today, was there any danger?" Mu Shuangshuang asked quietly.

Lu Yuanfeng quickly shook his head, but keen-eyed Shuangshuang noticed the red marks on his neck.

"What's this?" Mu Shuangshuang jumped, reaching out to check, but Lu Yuanfeng hid it with his clothes.

"I'm fine; just slipped," Lu Yuanfeng chuckled quietly.

Being cared for brings comfort to the heart.

Mu Shuangshuang looked more closely at Lu Yuanfeng, noticing that his knee's clothing was torn, and faint bloodstains could be seen.

Even the elbow was affected.

"You say nothing's wrong, but you're bleeding. Come inside to apply medicine." Mu Shuangshuang grabbed Lu Yuanfeng's hand and also instructed Yuanbao.

"Yuanbao, watch over these game, and take care of your teacher, Mr. Liu. If he's unhappy, I'll spank you!"

Although Mu Shuangshuang didn't forget to instruct Liu Zian, Liu Zian still felt sharp pain in his heart.

He found the hand holding Lu Yuanfeng's wrist glaringly noticeable.

Life seemed unbearably hard to him.

Lu Yuanfeng glanced toward the kitchen only when he heard Liu Zian's name.

He saw Liu Zian in a thin cotton coat, standing by the kitchen door; his face showing more weariness, and his eyes somewhat vacant.

Yet from his gaze, Lu Yuanfeng could still detect that he was looking at Shuangshuang holding his hand.

At that moment, Lu Yuanfeng suddenly felt lucky.

Seeking but not attaining is the most painful thing in the world.

Liu Zian likes Shuangshuang, but Shuangshuang likes him.

In fact, Shuangshuang's future life is all about him, not Liu Zian.

Chapter 687: You Smell It

Mu Shuangshuang led Lu Yuanfeng into the room, with a long bench placed in front of him.

She was rummaging through her medicine box inside the room.

This was made for her by Zhang Huai Shu, and all the medicines inside are for treating external injuries.

Mu Shuangshuang took out the golden sore medicine and said to Lu Yuanfeng, "Your sleeves, neck, and legs, all the places where you're injured, I need to treat them."

Lu Yuanfeng hurriedly shook his head, "Shuangshuang, I can do it myself; you... you... turn around."

With a red face, Lu Yuanfeng stammered as he spoke.

Mu Shuangshuang laughed heartily, "Why, afraid I'll take advantage of you? I'm just a little girl, not afraid, why should a big man like you be? Hurry up, stop dawdling!"

There's a pile of things outside waiting for us. There's also Liu Zian, I just talked to him about opening a school in the village, and there are a lot of things left to discuss."

Only then did Lu Yuanfeng roll up his sleeves; his elbow, the place where the skin was rubbed off, was already scabbed, but the surrounding skin looked slightly bruised.

Mu Shuangshuang felt pain just looking at it.

She tightened her grip on the golden sore medicine, then held Lu Yuanfeng's wrist and gently blew on it.

"Does it hurt?" Mu Shuangshuang asked.

"No, it doesn't hurt..." Lu Yuanfeng chuckled, answering.

Mu Shuangshuang glared at him, "Liar, in this state, it doesn't hurt!"

The golden sore medicine was sprinkled bit by bit on Lu Yuanfeng's wound, and he didn't make a sound.

But Mu Shuangshuang felt extremely distressed.

She frequently comforted Lu Yuanfeng, making him smile secretly there.

He rarely saw Shuangshuang like this, repeating the same thing many times.

But it was precisely because of this that Lu Yuanfeng realized how important he was in Shuangshuang's heart.

Once the medicine was applied to his wrist, next was the knee. It was somewhat inconvenient on the knee, either Lu Yuanfeng had to take off his pants, or directly tear that part of the knee.

Lu Yuanfeng didn't have many clothes to begin with; ripping one would leave him with one less piece.

So all Mu Shuangshuang could do was turn around.

"Fengzi, next time, let's go to the mountains together. At least I can help you; you know the mountains well, and I'm smart. Together, we can overcome any difficulty."

Mu Shuangshuang was reasonable, and Lu Yuanfeng applied the medicine while chatting with her.

"By the way, Fengzi, Liu Zian passed the exam; he was the top scorer in Qianzhou Prefecture. Among our friends, we actually have such a big man."

Lu Yuanfeng, upon hearing that Liu Zian passed the exam, almost spilled the golden sore medicine on the floor.

"But he's interesting; suddenly he came here, and I don't know whether he's grateful for our help or something else." Mu Shuangshuang continued.

Up till now, Mu Shuangshuang hadn't noticed Liu Zian's interest in her.

Because she never thought such a thing would happen to her.

"Fengzi, why aren't you talking? Are you listening?"

Facing away from Lu Yuanfeng, Mu Shuangshuang didn't know what he was thinking at the moment.

"I'm listening! He's impressive, Shuangshuang, what do you think of Liu Zian?"

"Not bad, it's just sometimes hard to tell what he's thinking."

Mu Shuangshuang hadn't seriously studied Liu Zian, like today. If Mu Shuangshuang hadn't brought up the school, he wouldn't have thought to help solve this issue.

So she really didn't understand why he came.

Mu Shuangshuang's evaluation of Liu Zian was indifferent.

Lu Yuanfeng sighed with relief and finally focused on applying the medicine.

By the time Mu Shuangshuang turned around again, Lu Yuanfeng had already applied the medicine on his neck.

"Alright, let's go out!" Lu Yuanfeng carefully put away the golden sore medicine and hurriedly spoke up.

Outside the yard, Liu Zian occasionally glanced inside the house, and just when he was about to burst with anticipation, they finally came out.

Liu Zian quickly stepped forward to greet them.

"Fengzi, are you feeling better?"

"Nothing serious, just a small injury, Shuangshuang has already treated it for me. I heard from Shuangshuang that you passed the exam, congratulations!" Lu Yuanfeng sincerely remarked.

Looking at Lu Yuanfeng's demeanor, Liu Zian suddenly felt a bit suffocated.

"Yeah, my mom also said I'm quite impressive, finally rising from the status of a peasant to a scholar; maybe I can even become an official one day."

Liu Zian's words were actually somewhat aggressive.

To outsiders, it might seem like he was boasting.

In reality, he was indeed showing off; he simply wanted Lu Yuanfeng to back down...

Mu Shuangshuang furrowed her brows. "Liu Zian, being an official and farming are just different roles, that's all. Being an official doesn't make anyone superior, nor does farming make anyone inferior, as long as one can support oneself, it's deserving of respect."

"Shuangshuang, that's not what I meant..." Only then did Liu Zian realize that when he said those words, Shuangshuang was present.

And she was quite sensitive.

"I'm not implying what you're saying either!" Mu Shuangshuang retorted with no good mood.

She wasn't a fool; Liu Zian's tone was so obvious, wasn't it a blatant insult to her and Lu Yuanfeng?

So what if he becomes an official?

If an official is like her uncle, aren't they just the same as loathsome bloodsuckers, like a parasitic bandage?

"Shuangshuang..." Liu Zian tried to explain, but Mu Shuangshuang had already walked away.

Talking about status is something Mu Shuangshuang dislikes the most.

No matter who it is.

"Fengzi, let's skin this sika deer and sell it to the villagers, the deer hide can be tanned to make warm deer leather shoes."

Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng chatted naturally; at this moment, Liu Zian seemed redundant.

He regretted extremely, feeling he shouldn't have said those things just to belittle Lu Yuanfeng!

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Old Mu Family

Mu Xiangxiang woke up again; it was already midday. Mrs. Lin didn't eat, personally scooped up lean meat porridge, and went to Mu Xiangxiang's room to deliver food.

To say she was delivering food, it was actually tormenting Mu Xiangxiang.

Her daughter wanted to marry into the Qin Family; she had to slowly torment Mu Xiangxiang to death.

After all, this freeloading thing eats without leaving anything and can't do anything.

Keeping her was just wasting food.

Bringing the porridge into Mu Xiangxiang's room, the scent of meat immediately attracted Mu Xiangxiang, who was still lying down.

She used the strength of her arm to turn herself, and upon turning, she saw Mrs. Lin standing at the door, looking at her with a sinister expression.

"... Wuwuwu..." Go, get out, leave!

Mu Xiangxiang screamed, but could only make wuwu sounds.

"Xiangxiang, don't get agitated, second sister-in-law brought you your lunch; you didn't eat your breakfast because you said it was too little.

You can't possibly skip lunch, right?"

Mu Xiangxiang's eyes glared fiercely at Mrs. Lin, as if she was going to devour her.

Mrs. Lin laughed covering her mouth.

"Look at how good this porridge is, with meat in it, take a sniff..."

Chapter 688: Torturing Mu Xiangxiang to Death

Mrs. Lin spoke while using a spoon to scoop the lean meat porridge, waving it in front of Mu Xiangxiang.

The meat in the white porridge stimulated Mu Xiangxiang, causing her to twist her body as she reached out her hand, wanting to grab the porridge.

But having just vomited and not eaten breakfast, she had zero strength.

Her hands and feet were weak, yet the hunger inside her propelled her towards Mrs. Lin.

"Oh dear, don't rush, it's just a bowl of porridge, it's not like your second sister-in-law won't give it to you. Let me taste it first!"

Mrs. Lin said as she scooped a spoonful of porridge and put it into her own mouth.

The white rice porridge was filled with small pieces of meat.

It was evident how much Old Mrs. Mu had invested for Mu Xiangxiang.

The pot of lean meat porridge was made by Mrs. Lin, as Old Mrs. Mu instructed her to put in a couple of ounces for Mu Xiangxiang alone.

In the past, when eating meat, everyone could at least gnaw on a fatty piece, but now it all belonged to Mu Xiangxiang.

Mrs. Lin was unhappy about this.

She drank Mu Xiangxiang's porridge while cursing Old Mrs. Mu.

The damned old woman only had a soft spot for her own daughter and eldest son while treating everyone else like oxen.

She likes to stew porridge for her daughter, doesn't she?

Mrs. Lin would help eat it up bit by bit, starving this stinky girl.

Mrs. Lin now had two plans: starve Mu Xiangxiang to death or torture her to death.

Once Mu Xiangxiang died, her own daughter would be settled, and the old woman would likely go mad. She could then easily push out the eldest daughter-in-law and become the head of the household.

Then, she could eat whatever she wanted!

Mu Xiangxiang stared intently at the person eating her lean meat porridge, her eyes filled with accusation.

And hatred!

A few moments later, the bowl of porridge was almost finished.

Mu Xiangxiang hadn't had a single bite, and she started slapping the bed covers, her cries growing more intense.

"Spit!" Mrs. Lin mimicked Old Mrs. Mu's manner, spitting phlegm into the remaining meat porridge, then handed the bowl to Mu Xiangxiang.

"Eat it, your second sister-in-law added extra ingredients for you, guaranteeing you'll want more!"

Mu Xiangxiang had never seen such a scene and dry heaved for quite some time.

But at the moment, her stomach was painfully hungry.

The fury inside her body surged, and not knowing where the strength came from, she knocked the bowl out of Mrs. Lin's hand, spilling the remaining meat porridge all over the floor.

"You shameless thing, I, Mrs. Lin, take care of you wholeheartedly, and you dare smash things, completely disregarding me."

Mrs. Lin rushed forward, pressing Mu Xiangxiang down with both hands, and drew out a silver needle from her sleeve.

"Stab stab stab~" several times in succession, Mrs. Lin stabbed the needle into Mu Xiangxiang's flesh just like she did with Mu Shuangshuang before, causing Mu Xiangxiang to scream in pain.

Yet, that voice was as small as ever.

Mrs. Lin burst into laughter, grabbing Mu Xiangxiang's head and said to her, "Let me tell you, you'll be mute for life. Don't even think about speaking to the old woman, and don't even think about accusing me, or I'll take your damn life!"

At this point, Mrs. Lin's mind was already completely distorted, filled with images of how Old Mrs. Mu used to bully her.

She just wanted Mu Xiangxiang to taste her power.

Ignoring the shattered bowl on the ground, Mrs. Lin left Mu Xiangxiang's room.

As soon as she stepped out, she put on a pitiful expression and even slapped her own face.

"Mother, something's wrong, Xiangxiang smashed the bowl again, she seemed to think one bowl of porridge isn't enough..."

Even when she was on someone else's territory, Mrs. Lin shouted loudly, ensuring that the neighbors heard about Mu Xiangxiang's behavior.

These days, whenever she had free time, Mrs. Lin went outside to slander Mu Xiangxiang.

Say that the stained pants Mu Xiangxiang wore were washed by Xiao Chu, the fourth family's daughter.

In Er Gui Village, the families were already closely knit, and whatever one household knew, the entire village would find out in a short time.

Now, the whole village knew Mu Xiangxiang was lazy.

With the news of Mu Xiangxiang's gluttony circulating indirectly from Mrs. Lin.

This time, even if the Qin Family broke off the engagement with Mu Xiangxiang, no one in the village would want her.

But keeping Mu Xiangxiang forever reliant at home wasn't possible. What Mrs. Lin wanted most was for Mu Xiangxiang to die.

To save on rations and to deeply hurt Old Mrs. Mu.

Returning to the dining hall of the Old Mu Family, the whole family hadn't eaten and were waiting for Mrs. Lin.

Mrs. Lin was inwardly pleased, pretending to be surprised and asked, "Father and Mother, why haven't you eaten yet? Didn't I say I went to bring food to Xiangxiang and wouldn't be back for a while, why wait for me?"

Old Mrs. Mu weakly glared at Mrs. Lin.

"Stop flattering yourself, what were you shouting about earlier outside? What's wrong with Xiangxiang? Hurry up and speak, or you won't get lunch!"

Mrs. Lin quickly put on a heavy expression.

"Earlier, I went to Xiangxiang's room, she just woke up. I helped her finish a bowl of porridge, but she wanted more after finishing. I told her to wait as her stomach isn't well, she can't eat too much.

Who knew, Xiangxiang smashed the bowl and even slapped me." Mrs. Lin showed her face to everyone, who indeed saw the red mark.

"You're talking nonsense, accusing Xiangxiang of such rubbish; she's so ill, where would she have the strength to hit you? Clearly, you're guilty. Did you perhaps do something wrong against me, the old woman?"

Old Mrs. Mu suddenly asked.

Mrs. Lin was taken aback, trying to remain calm.

"Mother, I have the same question. Xiangxiang always wants to eat more at mealtimes and is surprisingly strong. I can't help it, why don't you go see for yourself?"

Mrs. Lin spoke with a troubled look.

At this point, Mrs. Lin actually wished for Old Mrs. Mu to see her daughter's miserable situation, hopefully get angry, and then pass away!

"Enough, you, Xiangxiang's mother, Xiangxiang is already in this condition, the fourth daughter-in-law is also bedridden, and if you continue to be so aggressive, no one will care for Xiangxiang.

Your current situation doesn't allow you to be so stubborn."

Old Mrs. Mu, still ill and exhausted, listened to Mr. Mu's words without protesting for once.

"Alright, take me back; I need to rest for a while, I'm too tired!"

Mrs. Lin escaped a predicament, feeling elated, especially since Old Mrs. Mu wasn't at the table, which made her even happier.

She picked herself a portion of all-white rice, not touching the sweet potatoes at all.

The rest of the people followed suit, imitating her.

When Mr. Mu returned, the table was a mess, the only edible thing being the small amount of leftover wild vegetables in the pot, not even half a sweet potato was left for Mr. Mu.

Mr. Mu wasn't like Old Mrs. Mu, who would scold or act violently.

Mr. Mu, except for bearing a bit of hardship himself by finishing off the wild vegetables nobody usually ate, had no viable solution.

"Dad, I'm full, you and Mom take care of yourselves!"

Mu Dajiang finished lunch and greeted Mr. Mu before leaving.

And he headed in the direction of the third branch.

He needed to ask Shuangshuang if there was any way for the fourth branch to make money!

Chapter 689: Offering Strategies and Suggestions

When Mu Dajiang arrived at the Third Branch of the Old Mu Family, the third branch was also having lunch.

Due to Liu Zian's arrival and Lu Yuanfeng's big catch, it called for a better meal at noon.

A plate of stir-fried venison was placed on the table, being the most eye-catching dish of the day.

The other dishes included a big sea bowl of mustard tofu soup, a scallion omelet, and just a couple of vegetable sides.

Households in the countryside didn't have a wide variety in each meal, but every dish was served in generous amounts.

Sometimes a single dish couldn't fit into just one sea bowl.

"Anzi, you worked hard for the exam! Eat whatever you like, treat this like your own home, don't be shy."

The simple and honest Mu Dashan warmly greeted Liu Zian, his face brimming with an unstoppable smile.

"Thank you, Uncle Dashan. It's not difficult for me compared to the hard work you and Aunt Si put in to manage the entire third branch. It's truly not easy!"

Upon receiving praise, the man's face blushed as if slightly intoxicated.

Beside him, Yu Si Niang couldn't help but tease, "Alright, Anzi is not a child anymore, no need for you, a grown man, to remind him to eat. People who don't know might think our family is quite fierce."

"That's true, that's true. Anzi, help yourself, don't mind us," Mu Dashan quickly added to Liu Zian.

Liu Zian took a few bites of his rice, his gaze falling on Mu Shuangshuang sitting beside Lu Yuanfeng.

At the dining table, Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng occasionally exchanged few words, looking so joyful that everyone in the third branch was already accustomed to the format of their interaction.

It was relaxed, just like a family.

Only Liu Zian, who hadn't seen Shuangshuang for a long time, found it intrusive.

He felt bitterness in his heart, no matter how delicious the food was, it all tasted bland.

"Fengzi, you've worked hard today, this is for you!" Mu Shuangshuang picked up her chopsticks and placed a big piece of venison into Lu Yuanfeng's bowl.

Lu Yuanfeng chuckled, holding his bowl closely, giving Liu Zian the impression of protecting it from being taken away by others.

Liu Zian felt increasingly uncomfortable, struggling to hold his chopsticks steady.

He desperately wanted to say he was full but couldn't bear to lose the chance of being so close to Shuangshuang, feeling torn inside.

Just at this moment, Mu Dajiang entered.

Looking at the table full of dishes and the sudden addition of Liu Zian, Mu Dajiang hesitated for a moment, then took a few steps back.

"Third brother, I didn't know you hadn't had lunch yet, I'll come over after you've eaten."

Seeing Mu Dajiang about to leave just after arriving, Mu Dashan quickly put down his chopsticks and rushed to stop Mu Dajiang.

"Old Four, what are you doing? You're here already, why not sit and have a meal together?"

Mu Shuangshuang also stood up, addressing Mu Dajiang, "Fourth Uncle, where are Aunt Si and Xiaxia, and Xiao Chu? I can call them over to eat."

Generally, the fourth branch didn't drop by casually, fearing repercussions from Old Mrs. Mu, who wouldn't give the fourth branch favorable treatment.

However, whenever the fourth branch came over, the third branch was exceptionally hospitable, just like now, as Mu Dashan hurriedly pulled his brother toward the dining table.

"No need, I sent Xiaxia and Xiao Chu to their grandma's house. Now, it's just your Aunt Si at home; she... she's still recovering and can't go out," Mu Dajiang stopped Mu Shuangshuang from going to call them.

"Did Aunt Si eat? I have some lean meat porridge simmering in the stove, I could bring it over for her."

"Your Aunt Si has eaten, Shuangshuang, don't busy yourself, sit down and eat!"

Mu Dajiang spoke in a way that seemed weak and drained.

After hearing Mu Dajiang's words, Mu Shuangshuang looked up seriously at Mu Dajiang.

This man, clearly, hadn't been living well these past few days.

His chin was stubbly, unshaven for days, and his clothes were buttoned incorrectly, with deeply sunken eye sockets.

He clearly looked sleep-deprived.

What on earth had he gone through?

How did he become like this in such a short time?

"Old Four, after Xiaxia's mother took Uncle Zhang's medicine, she should feel better, right? If she still doesn't feel well, have Uncle Zhang check her, his medical skills are superb."

Evidently, Mu Dashan hadn't noticed anything amiss with his brother and pulled Mu Dajiang to sit down, even asking Si Niang to serve him a meal.

During this, all the topics discussed were about the fourth branch.

"Thank you, third brother!" Mu Dajiang said.

Smelling the aroma of the food, Mu Dajiang glanced at the dishes on the table. A big bowl overflowing with venison, emitting a strong meat aroma, made Mu Dajiang, who had only had a few bites of sweet potato earlier, hungry again.

"Old Four, eat quickly. I know there's nothing good to eat at mom's place," Mu Dashan urged Mu Dajiang to eat.

Casually standing up, Mu Dashan even placed a piece of meat in Mu Dajiang's bowl.

"Third brother, I... I've spoken to our dad, our fourth branch wants to move out. From now on, our fourth branch probably won't stay with the Old Mu Family," Mu Dajiang suddenly said.

"Ah?" Mu Dashan was stunned.

Not only him, everyone present, except Liu Zian and Xue Zheng, were surprised, staring at Mu Dajiang, waiting for his explanation.

"Old Four, what's going on, tell your third brother quickly," Mu Dashan was anxious.

"Recently, many things have happened in the fourth branch. When mom smacked a bowl on my head, when she jabbed Xiaxia's mother with her elbow, I thought if I didn't do something, the fourth branch might really be done for.

Third brother... this time, your brother wants nothing else, just wants to move out."

The so-called splendor was worthless compared to life.

Mu Dajiang's wish wasn't grand, he simply wanted his family to be safe together.

"Old Four, I completely understand your feelings..." Mu Dashan said, his voice trembling likewise.

They also moved out back then because they truly couldn't carry on any longer.

Everyone targeted his daughter Shuangshuang, even his own eldest brother wanted to sell her to pay for his examination expenses.

His eldest sister-in-law even tricked him into signing a contract to sell his daughter.

Mu Dashan never cared about the things given by his brother, without his daughter, what use was wealth and fortune for him and Si Niang?

"Fourth Uncle, there's something Shuangshuang doesn't know if it's appropriate to say?" Mu Shuangshuang asked.

"Shuangshuang, say it! Fourth Uncle came this time to ask what way there might be to avoid our fourth branch being controlled by your grandma, I've already talked to your grandpa, we don't want the land or the house, just the family together is enough."

This time, Mu Dajiang was determined.

"Fourth Uncle, Shuangshuang has actually long thought of a livelihood method for you. Do you remember the thing Shuangshuang has for making rice puffs?"

"I remember, you're the only one in the village with it, ever since you bought that iron lump for making rice puffs from that old man, no one in the village has turned to him for rice puffs."

Currently, it's winter, the perfect season for everyone to eat rice puffs.

"Indeed! Shuangshuang can rent that iron lump to you. As for the rent, Shuangshuang won't ask much. In the first year, you just need to occasionally give some rice puffs to a few kids!"

Chapter 690: The House Was Almost Blown Up

Mu Shuangshuang's so-called rent is practically nothing.

Giving the little ones some rice snacks is really nothing for Uncle Mu Dajiang.

"But I don't know how to make rice snacks, I'm afraid I can't earn any money."

Mu Dajiang expressed his concern.

"Shuangshuang will teach you. You can start whenever you want."

"Really?" Mu Dajiang was full of excitement, not knowing how to express his gratitude to Mu Shuangshuang.

"Of course, but Uncle, you should hurry up and eat. It's a big deal."

Mu Dajiang glanced at the dishes they hardly touched, looking apologetic.

"You guys eat quickly, I won't say anything, hehe!"

After lunch, Lu Yuanfeng helped Mu Shuangshuang bring out the iron chunk.

With the rice and sugar ready, Mu Shuangshuang demonstrated on the spot. When she put the machine on the fire, Liu Zian rushed over.

"Shuangshuang, this looks really dangerous. You don't demonstrate; why don't you teach me? I'll do it!"

Lu Yuanfeng frowned at the eager Liu Zian.

"Let me do it. Zian is a guest; it's not good to burn the guest." Lu Yuanfeng said.

"I'll do it!" Liu Zian reached out, stopping Lu Yuanfeng.

"Enough, neither of you is as skilled as I am. If you teach my uncle, and he makes a mess, how can he make money?"

Mu Shuangshuang pushed both of them aside.

Took control.

Now, neither of them got their way.

"Uncle, making rice snacks needs some skill..." Mu Shuangshuang demonstrated while teaching Mu Dajiang how to do it.

Mu Dajiang nodded from time to time, as if he understood everything.

So, Mu Shuangshuang was reassured enough to let him try. The first batch she handled was sweet and delicious.

When the second batch was handed over to Mu Dajiang, he almost blew up Shuangshuang's house.

With a loud "bang," a piece of iron flew off the rice snack machine, and a big dent was made in the third branch's walls.

Faintly, smoke could still be seen...

Mu Shuangshuang stood there dumbfounded.

Lu Yuanfeng and Liu Zian were also there, breaking out in a cold sweat out of fear.

"Shuangshuang... I... I don't know what happened, I..." Mu Dajiang was almost dying of anxiety, nearly having flipped his third brother's house over.

"Uncle, don't be rash. Learning a craft takes time, and you're bound to be unfamiliar the first time!"

Mu Shuangshuang was already somewhat regretting it. She had heard her father say before that her uncle was always the slowest to catch up when learning anything.

Including work, although Uncle leaves early and comes back late, the work he does is still less than the average person.

He is what they call a slow bird that still doesn't fly faster than the normal birds.

Mu Shuangshuang had learned to make rice snacks just by watching once. The old man didn't even demonstrate in such detail.

Mu Dajiang stood in place, hesitating for a long time, suddenly turned to Mu Shuangshuang and said, "Shuangshuang, I decided to try again. Help me set the stuff back up!"

"..."

Mu Shuangshuang swallowed nervously. "Uncle, you still want to try now?"

The shadow of the previous event hadn't faded, and Mu Shuangshuang looked at her somewhat aged house.

Calculating in her mind how many more times it could withstand her uncle's damage.

Starting over, Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng hid far away, no one dared to come close.

Fifteen minutes later, with another bang, nothing flew out this time, but the rice snacks turned into charcoal. Looking at that pile of black stuff, Mu Shuangshuang's mouth twitched slightly, and she didn't recover for a while.

"Shuangshuang, I want to try once more. I think I've got it this time!" Mu Dajiang was full of confidence.

Unexpectedly, this time, even Mu Dashan, who had been hiding at home, came out.

"Fourth Brother, you've already tried so many times today, why not take a break, and maybe we... practice in a better place tomorrow."

When Mu Dashan was in the house, he was startled by the noise. Knowing it was his brother's doing, he quickly pulled Yu Si Niang inside, not letting her near the door at all.

"That's fine then, Shuangshuang, Uncle will come find you tomorrow! Thank you for today, Uncle will repay you once we're better off."

The honest man sincerely remembered his niece's kindness.

Mu Shuangshuang nodded, not forgetting to remind Mu Dajiang.

"Uncle, don't clash with Grandma, and don't keep saying you don't want anything. If Grandpa is willing to give, just take it. The third branch has suffered all these years; they deserve those things."

Mu Dajiang hesitated, then finally said to Mu Shuangshuang after a long pause, "Shuangshuang's right, Uncle remembers!"

Just as Mu Dajiang was about to leave, Mrs. Lin sneaked up like a thief at the courtyard entrance.

She eyed the discarded rice snack clump, her eyes shifting, then suddenly said, "Old Four, why are you still here? Xiangxiang's been calling for rice snacks for a long time. She's sick, as her brother, you should make something for her to eat, shouldn't you?"

The fact that Mu Xiangxiang would be mute for a while was known to everyone.

Not just Mu Dajiang, even Mu Dashan had forgotten old grudges, sending Mu Xiangxiang half a sack of red dates, some dried wood ear mushrooms, and two pounds of lean meat.

Though they might not all be beneficial to Mu Xiangxiang's health, the sentiment was what mattered.

"This..." Mu Dajiang hesitated.

He had just promised his third brother to leave, how could he go back again?

Mu Shuangshuang noticed Mrs. Lin talking to Mu Dajiang, then glanced at the way she looked at the rice snack machine, suddenly having an idea to prank Mrs. Lin.

"Uncle, didn't you just say you learned how to make rice snacks? Second Aunt must also want to try some, why don't you make some for her?"

Mu Shuangshuang called out to Mrs. Lin, whilst winking at Lu Yuanfeng to take care of the charred rice snacks.

Lu Yuanfeng responded quickly, cleaning up the rice snacks before Mrs. Lin could approach.

"Shuangshuang, I just promised my third brother I'd stop, now..." Mu Dajiang looked troubled.

"It's fine, Uncle, you can confidently show off in front of Second Aunt, let her also enjoy some special service, how about that?"

Mu Shuangshuang said as she pulled Mu Dajiang towards the third branch courtyard.

Mrs. Lin's mood was upbeat, the curve of her mouth higher than usual.

"Second Aunt, I heard you're taking care of my little aunt, how is she doing?" Mu Shuangshuang asked.

Mrs. Lin smiled even more brightly.

"Xiangxiang is doing well, eating with appetite and sleeping well." Mrs. Lin said loudly, fearful that no one else knew.

"My little aunt knows she can't speak temporarily, so she's not causing trouble?" Mu Shuangshuang asked.

"Not at all, your little aunt listens to me. Whatever I tell her, she listens!"

"Really?" Mu Shuangshuang didn't quite believe it.

"Of course, your little aunt..."