

Folly 891

Chapter 891: Treat It with a Calm Mind

"Grandpa and Grandma didn't agree with what Aunt said," Huang Bitu remarked.

"Grandpa said that a guest is a guest, and he also mentioned that Ruan Xiao Jiao, after all, is the concubine of the County Magistrate. In the future, if someone from the Old Mu Family goes to the county, we might need her connections.

If we offend Ruan Xiao Jiao, it won't be easy for the Old Mu Family, and even Uncle might not be able to save face."

Mu Shuangshuang nodded. That indeed sounded like something Mr. Mu would say.

The old man cares a lot about face; he wouldn't do anything to tarnish the Old Mu Family's reputation, nor would he let the family do so.

But Old Mrs. Mu probably wouldn't allow it to happen, right?

Just as she thought this, she heard Huang Bitu say, "Grandma doesn't want Ruan Xiao Jiao to leave either, saying that her visit is just a meal, it won't cost the Old Mu Family much. At most, she would pay for it herself."

After hearing Huang Bitu's words, Mu Shuangshuang couldn't help but want to laugh. If someone else had said that, she might have believed it.

But hearing it from Old Mrs. Mu, claiming it wouldn't cost much, she simply didn't believe it.

If Old Mrs. Mu were that benevolent, the people of the Old Mu Family wouldn't have been treated so poorly.

"Shuangshuang, what do you think about this?" Huang Bitu asked, her face full of curiosity as she stared at Mu Shuangshuang.

Deep down, Huang Bita also didn't quite agree with Ruan Xiao Jiao coming to the house for New Year's.

Moreover, she always felt that Uncle and Ruan Xiao Jiao were a bit too close; the way Ruan Xiao Jiao looked at Uncle was very much like the way Da Lang looked at her.

Da Lang said that only when you like someone would you look at them that way.

Mu Shuangshuang furrowed her brows, feeling there was more to what Huang Bita was saying.

"Bita, if you have something to say, you can tell me. I won't tell anyone else."

In Mu Shuangshuang's heart, Huang Bita is a close friend, an inviolable confidant.

Huang Bita hesitated for a moment before speaking, "Shuangshuang, don't tell anyone about this, not even Third Uncle or Third Aunt.

I've seen Uncle and Ruan Xiao Jiao alone together several times, standing very close. Their relationship is not simple; it seems like Ruan Xiao Jiao... likes Uncle."

Saying this, Huang Bita still looked very cautious, as if she was afraid of being overheard.

Mu Shuangshuang pursed her lips and took Huang Bita's hand, "Bita, my uncle and Ruan Xiao Jiao grew up together. If it weren't for my Aunt, they would have been married.

But something happened afterward, Aunt became Uncle's wife, and Ruan Xiao Jiao married into the county as a concubine, and they haven't seen each other since.

When Ruan Xiao Jiao became a concubine, at first, no one knew she married the County Magistrate, and everyone bullied the Ruan Family, thinking they disgraced the village.

Later, it was Ruan Xiao Jiao's aunt who couldn't stand it, and announced in the village that Ruan Xiao Jiao's husband was the County Magistrate, so the villagers stopped bullying the Ruan Family."

"That's quite pitiful, falling for someone who marries another woman. As a woman, I know how painful it is not being with the one you love," Huang Bitu said.

"Back then, if it weren't for you, Shuangshuang, I would've accepted a few taels of silver for a dowry and married anyone."

Huang Bitu was older than average when she married, and when Matchmaker Sun came with a proposal, she said that marrying into a good family with someone of the same age was impossible.

She could only find someone who was a widower or had been a bachelor for half his life.

At the time, Huang Bitu had made up her mind to use the dowry to help her brothers get married.

As for finding someone she liked, she thought it was a luxury, something she didn't dare to hope for.

Fortunately, after some twists and turns, she ended up with Mu Dalang, who cherished her.

"Bitu, don't compare yourself to Ruan Xiao Jiao; you're much better than her. Whatever happened between her and Uncle was a long time ago, and they should have moved on.

Since she's married to the County Magistrate, she should treat him as her husband.

Not necessarily worship him, but at least give him the respect he deserves," said Mu Shuangshuang.

Essentially, Ruan Xiao Jiao is a victim, a pitiful woman.

But when she crossed the line and got involved with Mu Dade, she stopped being just a victim.

"Got it! Shuangshuang, I was just casually mentioning it, not really trying to find out anything," Huang Bitu said a bit embarrassedly.

"No worries, just treat it casually. Sometimes, even if you know something, it's better to pretend you don't," Mu Shuangshuang reminded Huang Bitu.

Finishing this conversation, the two girls chatted a bit more, and from the room, the laughter of two young women could often be heard.

In the kitchen, the two helping youths grinned foolishly.

The one tending the fire forgot to tend the fire, and the one plucking the feathers forgot to pluck them.

It wasn't until Mu Dashan noticed the situation and quietly coughed that the two buried their heads and got back to work.

After a while, the two young men spoke at the same time.

"Fengzi..."

"Da Lang..."

"You go first!" they said simultaneously once more.

Mu Dalang chuckled and continued, "I'll go first!"

Lu Yuanfeng nodded in agreement.

"It's fine if we let them chat for a while longer. It's been a while since I've seen Bita this happy," Mu Dalang said.

Lu Yuanfeng agreed.

The two exchanged a knowing smile, and this little matter became a mutual understanding.

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When Mu Shuangshuang and Huang Bita entered the kitchen, they each held a string of firecrackers, which Lu Yuanfeng had bought for the three kids in the family to play with.

They divided them into three portions; one was in Yuanbao's hand, and the other two with Little Zhi and Xiao Han.

Taking advantage of the kids going out to play, Mu Shuangshuang secretly took some out to set off with Huang Bita.

They entered the kitchen just to inform the two men.

Lu Yuanfeng quickly shook his head, "Shuangshuang, Bita, wait a bit. Let's go to the river to set them off in the afternoon, chat inside in the morning. The kitchen is fine with just us."

Mu Dalang also urged, "Yes, or you could help in the kitchen!"

Mu Shuangshuang looked at Huang Bita, who was full of helplessness but still entered the room and put down the firecrackers.

After a while, she entered the kitchen to help.

Seeing this, Mu Shuangshuang knew she couldn't play for the time being.

In the kitchen, there were suddenly two more capable hands.

Mu Shuangshuang and Huang Bitu were experienced in the kitchen, managing both chopping and fire-tending in an orderly manner.

As it neared noon, from afar in the village, people had already begun setting off firecrackers. Mu Dalang and Huang Bitu checked the time, considering it was almost time to head back to the Old Mu Family's place.

"Third Uncle, Third Aunt, Fengzi, Shuangshuang, Bitu and I are heading over now. We'll come back to hang out and have dumplings tonight!" Mu Dalang said.

Mu Shuangshuang watched Mu Dalang and Huang Bitu head to the Old Mu Family's house.

"Dad, Mom, I think we're just about ready to have our New Year's Eve dinner."

Chapter 892: Vexed

Mu Dalang and Huang Bitu returned to the Old Mu Family, and now the Old Mu Family also started arranging for the New Year's Eve dinner.

Old Mrs. Mu's mind was all on the newly released Mu Xiangxiang, constantly fussing over Mu Xiangxiang.

One moment, she asked Mu Xiangxiang if she was cold, and the next, she was getting food for her.

Since the meal hadn't started yet, Mu Xiangxiang could only eat some dried fruits and oranges to temporarily fill her stomach.

The oranges were taken by Old Mrs. Mu from Mrs. Jin's room.

Mrs. Jin had previously asked Old Mrs. Mu for a favor and gave her two oranges. Who knew that Old Mrs. Mu took a liking to them, and while Mrs. Jin was away, Old Mrs. Mu brazenly took an entire basket of oranges.

Not caring about Mu Yingying and Mu Dandan's green faces as they begged Old Mrs. Mu to leave some for them.

In the main room of the Old Mu Family, Old Mrs. Mu and Mu Xiangxiang sat at the northernmost position, below them stood Mrs. Lin and Mu Qingqing, as well as little Gou Dan playing with mud on the ground.

Since none of them were "outsiders," Mu Xiangxiang didn't need to pretend to be foolish. She could act however she wanted.

"Mom, I'm hungry, I want food!" Mu Xiangxiang, holding a peeled orange in one hand, mumbled to Old Mrs. Mu with her mouth still full.

Old Mrs. Mu treated Mu Xiangxiang like a treasure, so whatever Mu Xiangxiang said, she would naturally oblige.

But today is New Year, the New Year's Eve dinner for the Old Mu Family is held at the same time every year, and this year is no exception.

"Xiangxiang, be good, it's not time for the New Year's Eve dinner yet. Eat some oranges first. If you feel it's not enough, I'll get you some other snacks?"

Old Mrs. Mu said affectionately to Mu Xiangxiang.

Beside them, Mrs. Lin and Mu Qingqing rolled their eyes to the point of nearly going blind.

The ground was littered with orange peels. Could the old lady be this blind, or was she purposely trying to agitate them?

All the oranges Old Mrs. Mu took back were given to Mu Xiangxiang alone. Anyone else who wanted one was stopped by Old Mrs. Mu's stern gaze.

Gou Dan looked at Mu Xiangxiang eating the oranges and nearly drooled a puddle.

He smacked his lips and bounced up to Mrs. Lin, saying, "Mom, I want to eat oranges, Gou Dan wants oranges."

Mrs. Lin had a troubled look on her face; it wasn't that she didn't want to, but she knew that even if she asked, the old lady wouldn't give any.

"Gou Dan, soon we'll have the New Year's Eve dinner. Don't eat anything else, save your stomach for dinner, there'll be meat to eat."

Since it's New Year, Mrs. Lin rarely coaxed her son Gou Dan, but Gou Dan wouldn't accept the compromise.

He shrugged his shoulders, shouting, "No, no, Gou Dan wants to eat, Gou Dan wants to eat!"

Mrs. Lin's face had changed, she coldly said, "You are not allowed to eat, go sit aside!"

Gou Dan was merely acting spoiled, but upon hearing Mrs. Lin's words, his arm movements became more exaggerated.

"Gou Dan wants to eat oranges, Gou Dan wants to eat..."

When Gou Dan said this, his eyes glared fiercely like an enraged little beast.

Mrs. Lin feared things would escalate, and flattering Old Mrs. Mu, she said, "Mom, Gou Dan is your own grandson. He wants to eat oranges, could Xiangxiang give him a few?"

Before Old Mrs. Mu could speak, Mu Xiangxiang interrupted, "Eat, eat, eat, that's all you know. Who is Gou Dan to dare to compete with me, Mu Xiangxiang?"

Upon hearing Mu Xiangxiang's croaky voice, Gou Dan cried out even louder.

Mu Xiangxiang picked up an orange and forcefully threw it at Gou Dan's face.

"You dead brat, yelling won't get you any!"

By rights, Mu Xiangxiang saying such harsh words should have earned a scolding, but the head of the Old Mu Family was Old Mrs. Mu.

If she were to rebuke Mu Xiangxiang, there must be something wrong.

Gou Dan was hit by the orange and started crying loudly.

On such a festive day, crying is considered unlucky. Mr. Mu, who was outside entertaining villagers, hurriedly rushed into the main room.

Seeing Gou Dan in tears, Mr. Mu angrily questioned, "What's going on here? Why are you all bickering, don't you know the New Year's Eve dinner is about to start? Aren't you aware it's New Year?"

Old Mrs. Mu quickly stood up.

Just when she was about to explain, Mrs. Lin said, "Dad, it's Gou Dan's fault. He wanted to eat his little aunt's oranges, but his little aunt threw an orange at his face. He shouldn't be crying."

Mrs. Lin spoke while pretending to raise her hand as if about to discipline Gou Dan.

Mr. Mu wasn't fooled; once Mrs. Lin spoke, he immediately knew who was at fault, who was causing trouble.

He directly said, "Xiangxiang's mom, take Xiangxiang to the big house and lock her up. When she's not out, the family is peaceful, no one stirs up trouble.

As soon as she's out, she's hitting people and causing havoc, and now there's orange peels everywhere. I've already told you, you can't give her so much to eat; are you trying to..." kill her!

He didn't say the latter part, feeling it would be unlucky.

"Old man, Xiangxiang knows she was wrong. Doesn't Gou Dan like oranges? I'll have Xiangxiang give him some.

Xiangxiang has just come out, and now you want to send her back in, what's the point of that?" Old Mrs. Mu said anxiously.

Mu Xiangxiang rolled her eyes. She wanted to speak, but her mom had said she couldn't make a sound in front of her dad.

"Hmm, you also understand it's not easy for her to get out. If there's any more trouble stirred up at the Old Mu Family, don't blame me for being impolite!" Mr. Mu said.

Just at that moment, Huang Bitu and Mu Dalang walked in, she said, "Grandfather, Fourth Aunt said we could start eating."

Only then did Mr. Mu's mood calm down.

The New Year's Eve dinner was laid out, but they couldn't eat right away; they had to first offer it to the ancestors of the Old Mu Family, which delayed them a bit.

Mu Dade and Ruan Xiao Jiao stood beside Mr. Mu and Old Mrs. Mu, while Mrs. Jin was squeezed into the corner.

Several times she tried to squeeze in, but was pushed away by Mrs. Lin.

When it was finally time to eat, Ruan Xiao Jiao quickly took the spot next to Mu Dade.

Mrs. Jin was so angry her teeth were itching, Mu Dandan also grumbled, "Aunt Xiao Jiao, did you sit in the wrong place?"

After speaking, Mu Dandan glanced at Mu Yingying, hoping Mu Yingying would join her in confronting Ruan Xiao Jiao.

But Mu Yingying ignored Mu Dandan's hint, deliberately lowering her head and stepping aside.

Mu Dandan thought: What's wrong with Yingying? Normally, as soon as Ruan Xiao Jiao is brought up, she'd get upset.

But now that she openly mentioned Ruan Xiao Jiao, Yingying seemed meek instead.

Mu Dandan didn't know Mu Yingying was being threatened; she kept blaming Mu Yingying internally.

Ruan Xiao Jiao looked innocently at Mu Dandan and slowly stood up.

"I'm sorry, I... I forgot this isn't the County Magistrate Mansion," Ruan Xiao Jiao said.

Ruan Xiao Jiao implied that at the County Magistrate's house, this is where her seat usually is.

In fact, considering her status, even though Ruan Xiao Jiao was just a concubine at the County Magistrate's house, sitting in the main position was completely acceptable.

Chapter 893: Festive Atmosphere in Full Swing!

Mu Dade squinted his eyes and glanced at Mu Dandan.

"Dandan, where Aunt Ruan sits is not for you to decide. Just focus on eating your meal properly."

Being reprimanded in front of the whole family, Mu Dandan's eyes quickly turned red.

She felt especially aggrieved.

Why should such a nobody of a woman come to her home for the New Year and sit beside her father?

Then what is her mother?

She tried not to think about it, but the more she thought, the more aggrieved she felt, even her nose tip turned red, and she was on the verge of tears.

Mu Dade continued, "Aunt Ruan is the County Magistrate's concubine. She's helped me a lot in the county. If I become an official in the future, I'll need her to speak favorably for me at the County Magistrate."

Whatever little thoughts you have, keep them to yourself. Our Old Mu Family is not the same as before. I, Mu Dade, have no connections or much money, and the future path won't be easy.

"If it weren't for Aunt Ruan's help, I wouldn't be sitting here eating properly now."

At the dining table, Mrs. Jin felt even more uncomfortable after hearing this.

Her husband took the imperial exam, she funded it, she found people, exerted every effort, but in the end, someone else outside contributed the most.

How could she swallow this?

Mr. Mu stepped in to mediate, "Alright, we are all family, let's enjoy a happy New Year's dinner together and celebrate the festival properly!"

Mu Dandan listened and murmured, "Who is family, Aunt Ruan is not part of our family."

Coincidentally, Mu Dade happened to hear this.

Mu Dade threw down his chopsticks: "Can't you keep your mouth shut even while eating? If you feel you can't stay in this family, go find someone to marry, and get it over with!"

Mu Dade rarely spoke harshly to his daughters.

This time, not only did he reprimand Mu Dandan, he chose to do so during a day meant for family reunion.

Mu Dandan immediately broke into tears.

"Crying, crying, always crying. Useless money-waster, are you letting people eat or not?" Old Mrs. Mu took over and cursed loudly.

Mu Dandan cried even harder.

Mrs. Jin was furious.

She said, "Mother, can't you be more mindful of what you say? Who said Dandan is a money-waster? This matter wasn't started by Dandan, why are you speaking against her?"

Mrs. Jin had endured enough of the old lady.

Earlier, she was made to empty and clean chamber pots at home for the old lady, tasks she had never done in her own family.

And Old Man Mu, he's called the head of the family for the sake of it, but in reality, he sways like a reed, favoring whichever side is better.

Can't even manage one wife, letting the daughters-in-law get bullied and treated as less than human.

"Are you trying to rebel, daughter-in-law? Why? Because I'm her grandmother and manage all kinds of affairs in this house.

Don't think that since Da De became a scholar you became the scholar's wife. Let me tell you, even if you became the First-rank Imperial Decree Lady.

You still have to serve me, the old lady. Must empty the chamber pot when necessary."

The words from Old Mrs. Mu were almost overwhelmingly domineering.

Mrs. Jin, listening from the side, was so angry her whole body trembled, her hands beneath her sleeves clenched into fists.

Mu Dade listened on the side, showing a detached attitude.

Aunt Ruan listened, picking up the wine glass on the table, hiding her face as she chuckled.

As for Mrs. Lin, she listened with her heart filled with excitement, almost ready to set off firecrackers in celebration.

Even Mrs. Jin has her day, even Mrs. Jin gets scolded by the old lady sometimes, truly karma circles around, Heaven spares no one!

Mrs. Lin continued to enjoy the show.

"Mother, you are too much!" said Mrs. Jin.

"What if I am too much, you're my daughter-in-law, no matter how excessive I am, you have to endure it. A mother-in-law teaching a daughter-in-law, that's right and proper!" said Old Mrs. Mu.

Mrs. Lin promptly agreed, "Daughter-in-law of Da Lang, did you hear that? A mother-in-law teaching a daughter-in-law, right and proper. Don't come to Da Lang complaining about me, speaking ill of me in the future."

Huang Bitao was stunned, and instantly lowered her head.

Mu Dalang immediately defended, "Mother, let's just eat, why drag Bitao into this?"

Mr. Mu, watching this noisy scene, suddenly felt a deep sense of sadness and sorrow.

His Old Mu Family boasts many sons and grandsons, yet not a single quiet and harmonious environment exists.

In other families, love and respect between father and son, friendship between brothers.

In the Old Mu Family, there was nothing but quarreling.

Brother argues, daughters-in-law quarrel, daughters-in-law quarrel then mothers and daughters-in-law quarrel...

How can this be called a family?

He stood up and headed towards the dining hall's exit.

Before he reached the door, Mu Dazhong called him.

"Father, where are you going? The New Year's dinner isn't finished, you can't go out."

"Exactly Father, even if you're upset, at least finish the New Year's dinner!" Mu Danyan added.

The whole Da Ning Dynasty places great importance on celebrating the New Year.

Firecrackers are set off before the New Year's meal, and while eating, the main door is shut tightly. At this moment, those confined inside the home represent the family's wealth for the year to come.

If the door is opened prematurely, the wealth escapes.

Only after realizing this did Old Mrs. Mu remember the conversation she had with Mr. Mu the previous night, expressing his desire for a harmonious environment.

Old Mrs. Mu stood up, went forward, and took Mr. Mu's hand.

"Old man, why the rush? We haven't eaten yet, at the worst, I won't speak against them anymore. Let's eat, let's eat!" said Old Mrs. Mu.

Everyone accompanied Mr. Mu, offering well wishes.

Unfortunately, these were no longer what Mr. Mu yearned for.

A meal, apart from Mu Xiangxiang eating with all her might, consuming eight bowls of rice and three bowls of food, others felt disinterested.

Showed little appetite.

After finishing the meal, the main door was opened wide.

Mu Xiangxiang, holding onto her swollen belly, returned to her own room.

Mrs. Jin went back to the east wing, Mu Dade and Aunt Ruan went out for a stroll.

As for Mr. Mu, the anger and sadness bottled up within did not get released.

He walked for a while, finally stopping at the entrance of the third branch.

The third branch just started their New Year's meal, right at noon.

Lu Yuanfeng took some firecrackers, just about to set them off. Upon seeing Mr. Mu, he called to Mu Dashan inside.

Mu Dashan quickly came out.

When he emerged, Mu Dashan was full of brightness, his face beaming with wrinkles from smiling.

"Father, have you eaten? Why don't we celebrate the New Year together?"

This warmth was exactly what Mr. Mu wanted, with no hesitation, he nodded in agreement.

Mu Dashan led Mr. Mu towards the kitchen, explaining as they walked, "Father, we don't have a dining hall, usually we eat in the kitchen or my room, there are lots of people today, so we eat in the kitchen."

Mr. Mu remained silent, he kept observing the third branch.

Bright red couplets and high hanging red lanterns, although the house was simple and some roof tiles were cracked.

But the festive atmosphere here was thick.

"Father, today Shuangshuang and Si Niang are the cooks, you must try!"

As he spoke, Lu Yuanfeng let off the firecrackers, the cracking sound echoed...

Chapter 894: Unattainable Happiness

Mr. Mu stepped into the kitchen. In the center of the kitchen, a table was set with a spread of steaming hot dishes, which were not inferior to those of the Old Mu Family, perhaps even better.

Sitting at the table were the third branch family and the little grandson of the Old Lu Family.

Each of them wore a smile, in stark contrast to the atmosphere at their own home.

"Dad, have a seat here!"

Seeing Mr. Mu, Yu Si Niang wasn't the least bit surprised. She proactively arranged Mr. Mu's seat at the head of the table.

In doing so, it was clear who was regarded as the head of the family.

Even Shuang, who was usually lukewarm towards her, had a smile on her face.

From the moment he entered, no one asked why he was spending New Year's here.

It was, however, the three little kids who widened their eyes in delight and approached Mu Dashan:
"Uncle Dashan, Aunt Si, Yuanbao wishes you a Happy New Year!"

Mu Dashan cheerfully handed a red envelope to Yuanbao.

Then came Xiao Han and Little Zhi, both speaking with their cute, childish voices.

The little Xiao Han and Little Zhi had been looking much healthier since the family split.

Especially Little Zhi, with her bright, lively eyes, it was clear she would grow up to be a beauty.

"Heh heh, Happy New Year, Little Zhi, Xiao Han, come over here to greet your grandpa!" Mu Dashan chuckled.

The two little ones, along with Yuanbao, went over to wish Mr. Mu a Happy New Year.

Mr. Mu waved and said, "There's no need, I... I didn't bring any red envelopes!"

Mu Dashan shook his head, "Dad, we're family, what do we need red envelopes for? Mine are just for fun, not much in them."

Mr. Mu felt even more embarrassed.

Yu Si Niang stood up, took out some prepared red envelopes, and handed them to Mr. Mu: "Dad, these are from me, you give them to the kids!"

Mr. Mu was stunned for a moment, then understood Yu Si Niang's intention.

The red envelopes were never meant for him; they were to save his face because he felt embarrassed.

One wife openly argues in front of him, while another always considers his feelings.

At this moment, Mr. Mu particularly understood who cared more.

He accepted Yu Si Niang's red envelopes and handed them out to the three children. After receiving them, the kids happily chatted for a bit, then returned to their seats.

"Dad, since it's rare for you to be here today, let's have a drink with Yuanfeng, a gathering of three generations."

Mu Dashan poured a little wine into three bowls and proposed a toast to Mr. Mu and Lu Yuanfeng.

Lu Yuanfeng raised his bowl and said, "I toast Uncle Dashan and Grandpa Shuang!"

He then drank more than half a bowl, fitting for a man of the military.

"Then I'll drink too!" Mu Dashan said.

The atmosphere in the room was unusually warm.

Mr. Mu felt a series of doubts.

Everyone's attitude towards him today was so kind, he felt a bit out of place.

But in such a warm environment, he was reluctant to disrupt it.

"Let's eat!" Mu Shuangshuang reminded.

The children who weren't drinking picked up their chopsticks and happily started picking food.

The egg dumplings on the table were the most popular. Perhaps because of their enticing color, they were the first dish the kids went for.

Yu Si Niang, being a considerate woman, knew not to disturb the three men during the meal, but she tried to make sure the dish went to those who were drinking.

Suddenly, a large spoonful of meat appeared in her bowl, placed there by Mu Shuangshuang.

Ever since Mr. Mu arrived, the atmosphere, though unchanged, was not as relaxed as before.

Especially Yu Si Niang, who became a bit reserved.

Even towards herself, she wasn't as kind as before.

Mu Shuangshuang understood that it was a form of intimidation, an intimidation of status.

The old man was a senior, and Yu Si Niang unconsciously lowered her status.

Yu Si Niang looked at Mu Shuangshuang and heard her say, "Mom, you are the master of this house, don't worry about anyone else's feelings.

Learn to be more proactive, more generous, and you can take back the initiative at any time!"

Upon hearing Mu Shuangshuang's words, Yu Si Niang suddenly realized.

After adjusting her mood for a moment, she suddenly said to Mr. Mu at the table, "Dad, try this braised elbow, it's Shuangshuang's handiwork, very delicious, not greasy at all."

While Yu Si Niang was speaking, Mr. Mu noticed that her entire demeanor had changed.

She looked particularly confident, and even her introduction of a dish was very poised.

Mr. Mu couldn't describe the feeling, but it was somewhat overwhelming.

Ignoring his inner feelings, Mr. Mu picked up a piece of the elbow, finding it neither greasy nor overly tender.

"It's really good, Shuang's cooking..."

Mr. Mu mumbled indistinctly.

Mu Shuangshuang introduced the egg dumplings: "Grandpa, these egg dumplings are my mom's specialty. Try them, they're different from dumplings with wheat skin."

In Mr. Mu's eyes, the egg dumplings were also a novelty.

With a trial mindset, he found himself unable to stop after trying them.

All the dishes from the third branch were like those of a master chef.

Especially the dishes made by Shuang, made Mr. Mu want to eat until his tongue fell out.

In one meal, the three men drank two catties of wine, with Mr. Mu and Mu Dashan drinking the most.

Lu Yuanfeng was holding back, mainly because he was afraid of getting drunk, doing something foolish, and embarrassing Shuangshuang.

After several rounds of drinks, it was already afternoon.

Mu Dashan carried Mr. Mu out of the kitchen, while Yu Si Niang, Mu Shuangshuang, and Lu Yuanfeng tidied up inside.

The little kids, with their firecrackers, called on Da Long and headed to the little creek to the north of the village.

"Dad, you can rest in my room, it's alright."

Mr. Mu was too unsteady to walk.

Mu Dashan naturally wanted to help Mr. Mu rest at his house.

But the old man refused.

"Old third, your family is truly wonderful... I'm really envious, with such filial and sensible children! And Si, such a virtuous woman.

Unlike our Old Mu Family, where it's all arguing, arguing, arguing, even during the New Year's!"

The volume of Mr. Mu's voice was not low, even Mu Shuangshuang, washing dishes in the kitchen, heard it.

She instantly felt a pang of emotion.

No wonder! Ever since the third branch had that argument with the first branch, Mr. Mu had practically avoided the third branch.

Even when he saw people from the third branch, he was lukewarm.

How could he come over to join the New Year's celebration today?

It turns out he felt wronged by the Old Mu Family and came here for comfort.

Speaking of which, people in the Old Mu Family have so many little schemes, they can't even maintain a facade of harmony.

For Mr. Mu, who longed for peace in the Old Mu Family, it was nothing short of a blow, and a significant one at that.

Chapter 895:

Mu Shuangshuang was grateful that she hadn't chased Mr. Mu away for the sake of Mu Dashan and Yu Si Niang.

In this situation, it seemed more uncomfortable for him than being kicked out!

But no one else could be blamed; it was Mr. Mu himself who treated the third branch harshly for the sake of Mu Dade.

Now being treated like this by the Old Mu Family, he only had himself to blame, and it had nothing to do with the third branch.

"Dad, it's the New Year, please don't say anything more. Let me help you inside to rest!" Mu Dashan carefully assisted Mr. Mu toward his room.

"No, third son, help me go back, back..."

Mr. Mu's mention of going back naturally didn't mean to the third branch, but back to the Old Mu Family.

Mu Dashan paused, standing in place, unsure of what to do.

"Dad, Grandpa wants to go back to the Old Mu Family, you should take him back. He's had some drinks, resting in his own space will be more comfortable."

In the kitchen, Mu Shuangshuang called out to Mu Dashan outside.

With someone giving him advice, Mu Dashan quickly helped Mr. Mu in the direction of the Old Mu Family.

Worried about Mr. Mu's discomfort, Mu Dashan walked very slowly. The journey that usually took a short while became a long incense stick's time.

Initially intending to personally help Mr. Mu into the room, Mu Dashan was blocked in the courtyard by Old Mrs. Mu.

Before Mu Dashan could speak, Old Mrs. Mu rushed up, glaring at Mu Dashan like he was an enemy.

"Third son, what did you do? What happened to your father?"

Old Mrs. Mu started with blame, making Mu Dashan feel uncomfortable inside.

He said, "Mom, Happy New Year! Dad just had a bit to drink at the third branch and is a little drunk now, so I'll help him into the room to rest for a bit!"

"Hmph, stop being so insincere here, with me here, it's not your place to help your father. Get back to your doghouse in the third branch!"

Go to your vixen wife and that smelly girl daughter of yours. What's the point of being here?"

Old Mrs. Mu kept talking nonstop, like she'd swallowed a bullet.

Mr. Mu, hearing the disturbance, became somewhat sober.

He glanced at Old Mrs. Mu and said, "Say less, today's New Year!"

"You still remember it's New Year? After eating at home, you go around mooching off others. Do you think they're eager for you to go? They're probably cursing you behind your back!

And drinking this much drunkard's drink, wishing you'd drink yourself to death!" Old Mrs. Mu said angrily.

"Yeah, let me drink myself to death, drink myself to death, you get out of the Old Mu Family!" Mr. Mu too was infuriated and shouted at Old Mrs. Mu.

During the New Year, all taboos were broken.

You shouldn't mention death, lose your temper, or argue during the New Year...

One by one, these things were thoroughly broken by the Old Mu Family.

"You old fool, how dare you get fierce with me, I'm doing this for your good, don't you know? Without me, what would have happened to the Old Mu Family?" Old Mrs. Mu kept shouting.

Seeing this, Mr. Mu pushed Old Mrs. Mu away and staggered towards his room by himself, nearly falling several times.

Old Mrs. Mu followed behind him, calling and shouting, extremely annoying.

Mu Dashan shook his head helplessly and returned to the third branch.

The third branch was where his home truly was, a place worth carrying with his shoulders.

...

Mu Shuangshuang and Yu Si Niang tidied up the kitchen and rested for a while. When Huang Bitao and Mu Dalang came again, a group of them took firecrackers and left the courtyard.

Actually, the New Year atmosphere in the village was very dense.

There were big red lanterns, red couplets, and smiling villagers, all greeting each other more warmly than usual.

Huang Bitao and Mu Dalang walked at the front, followed by four children in the middle.

Yuanbao, Xiao Han, Little Zhi, and Da Long.

Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng walked at the back, and as they walked, their hands naturally intertwined.

Mu Shuangshuang's lips curled slightly, a few more shades of red appeared on her face.

By the creek, Huang Bitao and Mu Dalang went to the foot of a nearby mountain to talk, while Mu Shuangshuang and Lu Yuanfeng stayed by the creek with a few children to set off firecrackers.

Long strings of firecrackers were taken apart and thrown into the creek once lit.

After a while, there was a muffled sound on the water surface, though some sank with barely a splash.

Such a simple game kept the four children, including Xiao Han, quite entertained.

Laughter carried far, some villagers heard the firecracker sounds but no one dared to approach.

Because the northern side was the foot of Niuwei Mountain, where beasts could come down at any moment.

If they were taken by a beast, it would be a loss.

They played for two whole hours, and as dinnertime approached, Mu Shuangshuang called the children and went back to the Old Mu Family with Huang Bitao and Mu Dalang.

At night, they'd have dumplings, the dough needed preparing early, and this task fell to Mu Shuangshuang and Yu Si Niang.

Mu Dashan and Lu Yuanfeng went to the village well to fetch a full tank of water, because on New Year's Day, no one should fetch water from outside.

Also, no cutting of vegetables was allowed on New Year's Day, meaning that night's meals for the next day needed preparing in advance.

These were customs passed down for thousands of years from the Da Ning Dynasty.

Every year, the Old Mu Family adhered to these customs.

Now that the third branch had split off, it naturally followed the Da Ning customs.

One by one, the water barrels were emptied, and the water tank was finally filled.

After a trip to the vegetable garden, the next day's food was gathered.

Everyone eventually gathered at the third branch, the sound of chopping meat and vegetables crackled on, warming the heart.

During a break from washing vegetables, Mu Dashan said to Lu Yuanfeng, "Fengzi, tonight you shouldn't go back. Stay up with us to keep vigil."

In the past, the Old Mu Family stayed up all night, and this year the third branch would too.

Mu Dashan guessed that Lu Yuanfeng also planned to stay up, but the Old Lu Family wasn't as lively as the third branch, so why not sit together with the family?

"Uncle Dashan, wouldn't that be inappropriate?" Lu Yuanfeng was somewhat hesitant.

He didn't mind staying, but wouldn't it affect Shuangshuang's reputation?

"No problem, you're engaged to Shuangshuang. Living in my house, no one will gossip."

Besides, it's not like they'd be sharing a room!

But Mu Dashan kept that last thought to himself.

Lu Yuanfeng smiled and nodded.

Hearing that Lu Yuanfeng was staying, Mu Shuangshuang, who was making dumplings, quickly said, "Later, I'll teach you all to play cards, with money involved."

Everyone looked at Mu Shuangshuang in surprise.

What are cards? And how do you play for money?

Nobody knew, only saw Mu Shuangshuang suddenly stand and say to Mu Dashan and Lu Yuanfeng, "Dad, Fengzi, you guys make the dumplings, I'll make the cards, and tonight we'll play Fight the Landlord!"

After speaking, Mu Shuangshuang dashed off to her room to take out the rice paper Liu Zian sold her last time and began crafting playing cards...

Chapter 896: Things I Don't Want to Remember

Mu Shuangshuang was very careful while making the cards.

The rice paper was very thin and could easily be torn. Even drawing patterns on it required great care.

Additionally, rice paper was prone to seepage and was so light that a slight glance could reveal what was written on the front from the back.

After finishing the first card, Mu Shuangshuang was particularly dissatisfied.

She thought for a moment and decided to find a tree so Lu Yuanfeng could cut uniform wooden pieces, then make wooden cards with them or go to town to buy paper as hard as a book to make the cards.

Otherwise, the game could begin with the cards being easily deciphered.

Unable to play Dou Dizhu, Mu Shuangshuang decided on the spot to visit Fu Xiaonan's house later to borrow a set of black and white chess pieces and teach everyone Go.

For village folks, entertainment options were almost described as meager. In previous years, the richest man in Er Gui Village, Old Wang, would pay for performances for everyone.

Now that significant issues had arisen in Old Wang's family, it was virtually impossible for him to afford shows for the villagers to enjoy and make merry.

Mu Shuangshuang regrettably reflected for a while and left her room empty-handed.

Mu Dashan and the others almost eagerly awaited Mu Shuangshuang to bring out something new.

Seeing Mu Shuangshuang empty-handed, she explained, "Everyone! I'm sorry, the rice paper is too thin, and anything written on it is easily visible. If made into cards, they will likely bore everyone before even being used."

Mu Shuangshuang's explanation instead piqued everyone's curiosity even more.

Especially Mu Dashan, who had never seen any rare curiosities in his life.

To finally hear about something interesting from his daughter but not be able to see it himself was like having a cat scratch his heart.

"Shuangshuang, since you said rice paper won't work, how about red paper? The kind we use for Spring Festival couplets?" Mu Dashan probed.

Curiosity led Mu Dashan to ponder some solutions of his own.

Mu Shuangshuang's eyes lit up, and she smiled while giving Mu Dashan a thumbs-up: "Dad, you've solved my problem. Red paper can indeed be used to make cards, but do we have enough red paper?"

A deck of fifty-four cards would likely consume quite a bit of red paper.

Mu Dashan, hearing Mu Shuangshuang's response, squinted his eyes with pride and said, "Of course we do! We have quite a bit left. Your mom and I were just talking about saving it for next year. If you can use it, go ahead, and we'll get more next year."

Yu Si Niang also added, "The red paper is on the top shelf of the cabinet in my room with you. Go take a look."

Mu Shuangshuang acknowledged and turned to go to Mu Dashan's room.

After spending about the time it takes for an incense stick to burn, she used scissors to cut the red paper evenly into card-sized pieces and then picked up Xiao Han's small brush to draw on the paper.

Fortunately, the family had some cinnabar, so there was no worry about the red parts.

Mu Shuangshuang spent quite a bit of time drawing the patterns.

In the kitchen, Mu Dashan and the others were not just waiting for Mu Shuangshuang's cards but also waiting for the dough to rise. Once the dumpling filling was marinated, everyone started making dumplings.

Even though Mu Dashan seldom entered the kitchen, he had wrapped dumplings together with Yu Si Niang before.

The dumplings he wrapped were small and plump, easily identifiable as the work of an old hand.

Lu Yuanfeng's craftsmanship was much worse.

The dumpling skins were always torn, either from too much filling that couldn't be closed or too little filling, turning them into wontons.

However you looked at it, they weren't satisfactory.

Moreover, Lu Yuanfeng's expression while wrapping dumplings was particularly serious, resembling someone going to battle.

Yu Si Niang was startled by his earnestness and, after some thought, said, "Fengzi, you should go inside and help Shuangshuang. Uncle Dashan and I can handle this!"

Lu Yuanfeng also had that intention.

Let him work in the fields, hunt on the mountain, or help at the tavern; he could do those tasks easily.

But the intricate tasks in the kitchen, he couldn't master.

Not only could he not master them, but even doing these tasks made him extremely nervous.

He didn't hesitate, said goodbye to Mu Dashan and Yu Si Niang, and went to Mu Shuangshuang's side.

Mu Dashan and Yu Si Niang continued their dumpling-making.

Once Lu Yuanfeng left, Mu Dashan exclaimed, "Was it three years ago when we last made dumplings with Si Niang?"

Yu Si Niang tilted her head in thought, then nodded.

"Yes, that was also the year of the imperial exams. Parents gave all the New Year's money to the eldest brother, hoping he would pass. Who would know, he still failed."

Old Mu Family's memories were mostly intertwined with Mu Dade.

"Indeed, back then, compared to the other branches, our third branch was the poorest. I remember parents sending each daughter-in-law to their own family to borrow some money to make it through the New Year.

The two sisters-in-law came back empty-handed from their families, but you managed to collect fifteen coins from the Old Yu Family.

The two sisters-in-law naturally were punished by Mother, though you weren't praised either.

Mother took those fifteen coins to buy a pound of meat, had you chop it finely, mix it with cabbage, and make cabbage pork dumplings."

When reminiscing, Mu Dashan's expression seemed somewhat odd.

It wasn't a longing expression but showed slight dissatisfaction.

Yu Si Niang smiled and said, "Yes, I still remember Mother saying that since I had been a helper at the town, I should prepare the New Year's Eve dumplings.

The pound of meat plus the cabbage meant nearly one and a half pounds of filling, and alone it couldn't be finished, still needing to knead the dough.

You sneaked into the kitchen to help me, and together we finally made the dumplings according to Mother's request."

Hearing this, Mu Dashan's heartache was evident.

Mu Dashan continued, "We were happily thinking after a long day's work, we could enjoy a bowl of hot dumplings.

By the time we cleaned the kitchen and refilled the water vat, upon reaching the dining hall, both pots of dumplings only had the water left.

Xiangxiang alone had eaten nearly half a pot, and most of the rest went into the bowls of the eldest brother, father, second brother, and Fifth.

We could only fill our bellies with the dumpling water to soothe the bitter feeling."

Mu Dashan's eyes were slightly red.

This was a real portrayal of the third branch three years ago.

After a day's work, personally making two pots of dumplings, all that came their way was the dumpling water...

The third branch was indeed past those hard times.

Yu Si Niang noticed her husband's low spirits and reached out to hold Mu Dashan's wrist.

"It's okay, it's all in the past, let's... make dumplings for ourselves this time, make two pots and eat them ourselves, giving none to anyone else!"

This was the first time Yu Si Niang had such a selfish thought.

This time, she wanted the dumplings they made to be eaten by their own third branch, along with Fengzi and Yuanbao, without sharing any with others.

Chapter 897: Stepping on Old Mrs. Mu's Back (Part 2)

"Nobody gets it!" Mu Dashan mumbled, then added, "Our family has what it has today all because of Shuangshuang's hard work."

Mu Dashan had never imagined that one day, the most rundown house of the third branch could have the whole family sitting together, eating meat.

Even less had he imagined that the third branch, which once had nothing, could one day have several acres of paddy fields in the village, several acres of dry fields outside the village, a fish pond, a tavern, a private school...

Half a year ago, even with tenfold the courage, Mu Dashan wouldn't have dared to dream of this.

But half a year ago, when their daughter took out the first earnings she made selling wild vegetables and mushrooms—sixteen coins—and said she wanted to transform this household, the third branch began to move towards a better future.

Just like now, under her tireless efforts, the third branch has what it has today.

"Shuangshuang is a good daughter, because of her our days are peaceful. Shuangshuang's father, from now on let's treat Fengzi and Yuanbao as our own sons. Whatever Shuangshuang, Xiao Han, and Little Zhi have, these two boys should also have."

Mu Dashan laughed heartily, "I've long considered Fengzi and Yuanbao as my sons."

Yu Si Niang also laughed, "Me too. Ever since that boy stood beside Shuangshuang, I felt he and our Shuangshuang were a pair.

Since Shuangshuang likes him, he is also our treasure. In my cabinet, I even have new shoes made for them."

Yu Si Niang was filled with pride, her face showing a bit of satisfaction.

Outside the kitchen, intending to grab a fire pot, Lu Yuanfeng heard every word.

He paused his knocking and slowly released his clenched fist.

A sense of being valued washed over him.

Just like back when he was falsely accused by Chen Hong on the street, everyone blamed him, but only Shuangshuang believed him and helped him out.

His heart warmed beyond words.

Lu Yuanfeng retreated and went back to Mu Shuangshuang's room.

Upon hearing the sound, Mu Shuangshuang looked up to see Lu Yuanfeng grinning foolishly, his hands empty.

"What's wrong? Isn't the fire in the stove ready yet?" Mu Shuangshuang asked.

Lu Yuanfeng shook his head, "No, I'll take care of it later."

Mu Shuangshuang guessed that her parents were in the kitchen showing affection, and Lu Yuanfeng might have been embarrassed to interrupt.

"No need to go, I'm almost done here!"

At night, hot dumplings filled their stomachs and chased away the cold.

The only thing that puzzled Mu Shuangshuang was Mu Dashan and Yu Si Niang—two people who usually didn't eat much—each eating two large bowls of dumplings that night.

Even when full, they didn't stop.

It made her regret cooking so many dumplings.

Mu Dashan, clutching his round belly, eagerly asked, "Shuangshuang, what are those playing cards?"

The kitchen was already tidied up by Yu Si Niang while the dining table was cleared. Mu Shuangshuang spread a piece of old cloth on the table and displayed the playing cards everyone had been eagerly awaiting.

"This is it!"

Mu Shuangshuang began introducing the playing cards, spending a long time explaining the rules and teaching how to recognize them. By the time everyone got the hang of it, it was midnight.

But in the long night, true entertainment had just begun.

*

Early the next morning, everyone got up to honor their ancestors.

The sound of firecrackers crackled continuously, it was Lu Yuanfeng setting them off for the third branch.

In the third branch, he didn't forget to bow to the old Lu family's ancestors, even though he had severed ties with them before. He never forgot this duty.

He never failed to burn incense for the ancestors.

During Qingming, he also climbed the hills for gravesite cleaning, everything a descendant should do, he missed nothing. In fact, he did extra.

The rules for the first day of the first lunar month were many, but the third branch continued to follow previous specifications, abiding by all customs, quietly waiting for the second day of the month.

However, Old Mu Family was bustling from the first day itself.

Mu Dade had plans to take the imperial examination this year. Wanting to go to the Capital and catch the examination, preparations had to start on the first day itself.

By the third day, he would leave through the main gate of Old Mu Family, in front of the whole village, heading to the Capital for the exam.

The time was pressing, leaving Old Mrs. Mu and Mr. Mu busy on their feet.

All necessary items couldn't be forgotten.

The Capital was over a thousand miles away from Er Gui Village, the round trip taking several months. Without preparing things ahead, how could they manage such a journey?

But in the family, the only one not sharing this view was Mrs. Jin.

Ruan Xiao Jiao spent the New Year at Old Mu Family, ate the New Year's Eve dinner, and even stayed for the vigil last night.

On this first day of the New Year, early in the morning for ancestor worship, Ruan Xiao Jiao was still around.

At this moment, Ruan Xiao Jiao practically became Old Mu Family's daughter-in-law, while she, Jinyin'er, felt like the trash everyone ignored despite being the one who helped place Mu Dade in his position.

All of this was orchestrated by Old Mrs. Mu.

The New Year's Eve dinner was approved by Old Mrs. Mu.

So was the vigil, and the morning's ancestor worship—Old Mrs. Mu called Ruan Xiao Jiao!

Mrs. Jin swore that this time she would seize the opportunity to make Old Mrs. Mu face consequences.

The tentative plan for going to the Capital had Mu Dade and Mrs. Jin on the list, with Mrs. Jin taking care of Mu Dade's living needs along the way, while Mu Dandan and Mu Yingying stayed home so as not to burden their brother during the exam.

Mrs. Jin understood Old Mrs. Mu's nature; if she wasn't there, Old Mrs. Mu would definitely bully her daughters. Mrs. Jin aimed to raise her daughters as elegant young ladies, not to let them become country bumpkins after falling prey to Old Mrs. Mu.

So early on the second day of the month, Mrs. Jin sent Mu Dandan and Mu Yingying back to her own family.

When Mu Dade returned, the daughters would be brought back.

Early on the second day of the month, Mrs. Jin dressed up and headed to the town, saying she'd find someone for fortune-telling, determined to ensure Mu Dade's success as Champion Scholar.

She was gone all day, returning at dusk with news.

She received information from Wang Banxian, the most accurate fortune-teller in town.

For Mu Dade to succeed as a scholar, he had to do as instructed.

"Sister-in-law, are you serious? In front of the whole village, have elder brother step on Mom's back to board the carriage?" Mrs. Lin listened to Mrs. Jin's story with her mouth agape.

Of course, there was a bit of schadenfreude mixed in.

Mrs. Jin recounted Wang Banxian's advice: for Mu Dade to claim victory this year and become a scholar.

He must step high, only by stepping high can he climb high, which means reaching the peak.

This height refers not to terrain but to individuals.

Which means the two parents.

Mr. Mu was the head of the house, the backbone of this family, but Mu Dade couldn't step on his back.

That left only Old Mrs. Mu.

Chapter 898: Burn Shuangshuang Alive

"Big sister-in-law, are you making things up?" Mrs. Lin, eager for chaos, deliberately spoke loudly.

Old Mrs. Mu, upon hearing Mrs. Lin's words, looked at Mrs. Jin, wishing she could skin Mrs. Jin alive.

That Mrs. Jin is too shameless, daring to say such things.

Let Da De step on her back, her old lady's back, is it that easy to step on?

Mrs. Jin sighed deeply, her face full of grievance as she said, "I knew, Mother would misunderstand me."

"When Wang Banxian first told me, I thought he was joking. But as he went through our family's matters one by one, I realized he was truly a prodigy."

"He said that Mr. Dan Dan was not supposed to pass the scholar examination, but was fortunate due to his nephew and niece-in-law, who brought luck to Da De."

Mrs. Jin was seriously lying.

The so-called Mu Dalang and Huang Bitu bringing fortune to Mu Dade was something she overheard one day while passing by the room of Mr. Mu and Old Mrs. Mu.

When Mr. Mu and Old Mrs. Mu arranged Mu Dalang to marry Huang Bitu, she felt something was off.

Especially with Lin Xiaozao causing such a ruckus, the old lady never wavered, insisting she liked Huang Bitu, which was unreasonable. Even when Lin Xiaozao hit Huang Bitu, the old lady never said anything good.

Besides, knowing the old lady's temperament, she would surely want her eldest grandson to marry someone wealthy, the wealthier the better.

How could she let Mu Dalang from the second branch marry a village woman from a family reportedly very poor?

Most importantly, it was said that the few taels of silver paid as betrothal gift were given without a blink.

This anomaly must have a reason.

Mrs. Jin was not stupid; she quickly connected the dots and understood that the old lady and Mr. Mu believed that the marriage of Huang Bitu and Mu Dalang would bring luck to Wang's Mansion, which was why Huang Bitu was allowed in.

Mrs. Jin knew how her own husband passed the Champion Scholar exam. She didn't believe in the nonsense about Huang Bitu and Mu Dalang bringing fortune to Wang's Mansion.

However, it was perfect for fooling the old lady.

Before Mrs. Jin could finish speaking, Old Mrs. Mu was already shocked.

She turned to Mr. Mu and said, "Old man, about that matter..."

The issue of Huang Bitu and Mu Dalang was never disclosed by Old Mrs. Mu to anyone.

In their eyes, only Matchmaker Sun knew, and they knew. Not even Huang Bitu and Mu Dalang were aware.

The silence was maintained to protect the main branch Mu Dade and also fearing that if Huang Bitu and Mu Dalang knew, they might use this matter to threaten Mu Dade.

After all, when faced with interests, who knows what excessive actions Huang Bitu, an outsider, might take?

"Old lady, this matter might be true!" Mr. Mu said.

The old couple was always deeply superstitious.

Back then, due to this matter, Huang Bita entered the family.

Now, given the same matter, they might have no choice but to do as Wang Banxian suggested.

Mrs. Lin, on the side, listened to Mrs. Jin's words, and with amazement exclaimed to Mr. Mu and Old Mrs. Mu, "Father, Mother, did you know all along that Da Lang married Huang Bita for the benefit of Big Brother?"

Old Mrs. Mu replied irritably, "What else did you think?"

"But Da Lang belongs to our second branch. If he brings luck..." It's also to our second branch, why should it benefit Wang's Mansion?

However, Old Mrs. Mu didn't give Mrs. Lin a chance to complete her sentence.

"Luck to whom?" Old Mrs. Mu snorted coldly and continued, "Even if the second branch thrives, it's still just a farming nest, peasants! Do you really expect Da Lang to go to school and become a scholar?"

"Mother, you can't say it like that. Da Lang may be too old to study, but Gou Dan can. Gou Dan has reached school age, if you send him to the town school, he could become a Champion Scholar."

Mrs. Lin spoke while pulling her son Gou Dan closer to Old Mrs. Mu.

Old Mrs. Mu rolled her eyes disdainfully.

"Forget it. It's not about whether Gou Dan can pass or not. Even if he can, I won't be alive to enjoy any benefits?"

And stop talking about Wang's Mansion should not receive luck; you talk as if you don't want to benefit from Big Brother. Without Big Brother, you Lin Xiaozao would be a destined peasant forever!"

This infuriated Mrs. Lin beyond words.

Her heart, liver, spleen, kidneys, and lungs were boiling with anger. That old lady spoke with her usual viciousness.

Mrs. Lin glanced at her husband, who was watching the drama, hoping he would support her, at least speak to the old lady.

Unexpectedly, Mu Dazhong directly ignored her, acting obsequiously, "Da Lang bringing luck to Big Brother is Da Lang's good fortune.

But the good life Big Brother is enjoying is thanks to our Da Lang; when Big Brother becomes a high official, do not forget our second branch."

This obsequious conduct naturally disgusted Mrs. Jin.

Smart Mu Danian also sided with them.

He said, "Big sister-in-law, I've always followed Big Brother and Second Brother; you can't forget me in the future, I'm not yet married."

The crowd talked about the matter of Mu Dalang and Huang Bitu for a while.

Then they returned to the main topic.

Mrs. Jin continued, "Da De passing the scholar exam, thanks to the fortune from Da Lang and Bitu, there should be no issue in becoming Champion Scholar.

But unfortunately, there's a fierce star in the West blocking some of the luck. Without resolution, it might hinder becoming Champion Scholar."

Mrs. Jin's words carried deep meanings, and she was very strategic.

The fierce star in the West referred to the third branch's troublesome Mu Shuangshuang.

Meaning, her presence was the obstacle preventing Mu Dade from becoming Champion Scholar.

Even if they stepped on Old Mrs. Mu's spine and her husband didn't become Champion Scholar, eventually, this burden would be carried by the third branch's troublesome girl.

From the start, Mrs. Jin distanced herself.

If her husband became Champion Scholar, she would become the Champion Scholar's Wife.

If not, she would still live in luxury.

"Goodness, I knew that troublesome girl was no good! Turns out she's a fierce star!" Old Mrs. Mu said, gritting her teeth.

Mrs. Lin also criticized the third branch: "I said, that troublesome girl was slapped twice before, didn't dare make a fuss, and suddenly became smart.

Turns out it's the fierce star causing trouble. Mother, I think we should find a witch to burn that troublesome girl, then Big Brother can become Champion Scholar."

Becoming Champion Scholar would change Old Mu Family's fate.

From then on, Old Mu Family could rise to prominence.

Even their farts would smell sweeter than others'.

Such temptation made everybody's heart move.

All of them were eager, waiting for Mr. Mu and Old Mrs. Mu to give orders to burn the troublesome girl.

However, Mrs. Jin's intention was not to take Mu Shuangshuang's life, merely to embarrass the old lady, also making her life easier without the troublesome Mu Shuangshuang.

She wasn't in the Old Mu Family to make the old lady's life comfortable.

She quickly intervened, "Wang Banxian said, the fierce star has grown up, can't be killed, but stepping high can change Da De's fortune, allowing him to become a high official!"

Chapter 899: Mu Danian Makes Plans for Himself (Part 1)

A few words from Mrs. Jin, and the people of the Old Mu Family were dumbfounded.

Previously, they thought Mrs. Jin was messing with Old Mrs. Mu, but now they felt that Mrs. Jin was really doing it for her son's benefit.

Old Mrs. Mu said, "As long as it's good for Da De, this old woman of mine dares to do anything.

My eldest daughter-in-law, I'll leave this matter to you. Arrange it well and don't let that damn girl affect my son."

Mrs. Jin squinted her eyes and nodded repeatedly.

On the surface, Mrs. Jin appeared to be respectful toward Old Mrs. Mu, but in her heart, she was mocking Old Mrs. Mu to death.

In front of the entire village, if her son rode a horse using his mother's back, she wanted to see how the old lady could save face.

What Mrs. Jin thought of, Mr. Mu also thought of.

He said, "I still think this isn't appropriate. After all, your mother is an elder. If the villagers see Da De stepping on her back, your mother will lose face, not to mention..."

Da De might also be criticized by others. How can a son step on his mother's back? He's not a three-year-old baby."

Old Mrs. Mu was afraid Mr. Mu wouldn't agree and would hinder Mu Dade's fortune, so she quickly said, "Old man, I'm willing to do this myself, so what's it to others?"

Besides, if Da De becomes a Champion Scholar, our whole family will go to the Capital, and these mud-legged villagers won't even be able to see us."

Mrs. Lin, standing by, fully agreed with Old Mrs. Mu's point of view.

As long as Mu Dade could become a Champion Scholar, she could endure being gossiped about, even if beaten with a stick.

"Dad, in my opinion, the matter you're worried about is actually quite simple." A glint of cunning appeared in Mu Danian's eyes.

As he spoke, he twitched his thick, worm-like eyebrows.

Upon hearing Mu Danian had an idea, everyone in the main room focused their attention on him.

Impatient, Mu Dazhong urged, "Fifth, we're all family. If you know something, just say it. Why hide it?"

Mu Danian finally spoke, but not before giving Mrs. Jin a meaningful look.

It seemed as if he could see through her little tricks.

Mrs. Jin felt a chill all over.

Among the entire Old Mu Family, Mrs. Jin always felt that the hardest to deal with was not the old lady but this Mu Danian.

Back when she often visited the main residence, Mu Danian dared to look at her lecherously.

Mrs. Jin wasn't some naive girl. If she didn't understand what that look meant, she wouldn't dare claim she was the eldest daughter-in-law of the Old Mu Family, having had two daughters.

"Actually, it's simple. Our goal is for big brother to step on mother's back, not for everyone to see him doing it.

Tomorrow, we can just cover mother's head with a burlap sack and tell the villagers she went back to her maiden home. Even if they guess, without evidence, they can't say anything.

This way, we keep the Old Mu Family's face, and big brother's fortune keeps rising. Becoming a Champion Scholar will happen this year."

Mu Danian's words had the people of the Old Mu Family all fired up with enthusiasm.

Mrs. Jin was a bit unhappy. Her original intention was for the old lady to lose face in the whole village. Now, no one would know the old lady got stepped on by her own son?

Mrs. Jin's distraction fell into Old Mrs. Mu's eyes and became a cardinal sin.

Old Mrs. Mu looked sharply at Mrs. Jin and said, "Eldest daughter-in-law, you aren't disagreeing with this, are you? Do you want everyone in the village to see my face?"

"No no no, mom, that's not what I meant." Mrs. Jin quickly waved her hand and then explained, "I just think the idea Fifth offered is good. It's a win-win solution."

Old Mrs. Mu snorted coldly, waving her arm in front of Mrs. Jin's eyes, "I don't care what you say. In short, this time, Da De is in your hands, and if you don't make him a Champion Scholar, don't come back! Our Old Mu Family doesn't need a daughter-in-law who only eats but does nothing."

In terms of infuriating speech, Old Mrs. Mu dared to claim second place; no one in the Old Mu Family dared to claim first.

This little old lady wasn't physically robust, but her actions and words were far more aggressive than those of strong old women.

Mrs. Jin was shaking all over with anger, her teeth chattering, and her body trembling uncontrollably.

With sharp eyes, Mu Danian saw Mrs. Jin in this state and quickly reached out to support her, taking the opportunity to feel her up.

"Oh dear, big sister-in-law, you're not having another attack like last time, are you?"

Back when Mrs. Jin quarreled with Mu Dashan and was hit back by the honest Mu Dashan, he even said she was just a scholar's wife, not a Champion Scholar's Wife.

As a result, Mrs. Jin was so angry she foamed at the mouth and rolled on the ground like she had a fit.

After that, Mrs. Jin spent quite a bit of silver to nurse herself, but there were always problems.

Her head would hurt out of nowhere, and if she got too angry, she would convulse just like now.

After seeing many doctors, they all said it was emotional instability.

Mrs. Jin didn't pay it much mind, but this time, after Old Mrs. Mu angered her, Mrs. Jin felt she should go to a better doctor.

The Capital was a good choice!

"I'm fine!" Mrs. Jin withdrew her hand from Mu Danian's grasp.

"Dad, mom, Dade and I are leaving tomorrow. I'll go back and pack the extra things. Oh, right, Wang Banxian also said tomorrow we need a good omen, and we must prepare a hundred taels of silver as a travel gift."

"What, a hundred taels?" Mr. Mu drew a sharp breath.

Not to mention a hundred taels, even ten taels of silver, the Old Mu Family might not be able to come up with.

The second house's Mu Dazhong and Mrs. Lin hastily spoke, "Big sister-in-law, last time when big brother took the scholar exam, he asked for fifty taels, and later made dad gather some silver. Why is it that this time going to the Capital requires so much?"

Mrs. Jin rolled her eyes inwardly.

The thing she disliked most about the second house was that they always wanted something for nothing, wanting the best without giving anything.

"Xiao Zao, you yourself mentioned it's the Capital. This trip, Dade and I will go for half a year, for exams and living expenses, so we need a lot of money.

Never mind after we reach the Capital, we'll need to prepare so much more silver to gather information."

Mrs. Jin detailed it, giving the people of the Old Mu Family the feeling that even a hundred taels were too little.

"Eldest wife, we understand the difficulties you're talking about, but our Old Mu Family... truly can't come up with this money."

The eldest daughter said when she left that she wouldn't give even a penny for travel expenses to the Capital.

This relative of the Old Mu Family, if unnecessary, shouldn't be maintained.

The Old Cao family isn't getting involved in this mess.

"Big sister-in-law, I'm not one to talk, but a hundred taels of silver, how many acres of land would need to be sold to gather it? You're asking for too much!" Mrs. Lin grumbled discontentedly.

Chapter 900: Borrowing Usury

This sister-in-law, Mrs. Lin has always been envious and jealous.

None of the daughters-in-law who married into the Old Mu Family had a good time under the old lady's watchful eyes.

They could only use what the men in the family left behind for food and clothing.

If they slightly displeased the old lady, they would get a severe beating.

But because the eldest sister-in-law's family had some status and wasn't just farmers, she never had to cook a meal for the family from the day she entered the house.

She could arrange her own food and clothing.

"Xiaozao, I just told you, you really don't remember things with your head. If you don't bring enough money, how will Dade eat and stay warm on the road?"

"What if we run into a high official in the Capital and need connections? If we have no money, would they bother with us?"

"People always say, 'Only with effort comes reward'. If you don't put in the effort, where will the reward come from?"

Mrs. Jin's words were every inch a gem, leaving Mrs. Lin speechless.

"Dad, what should we do? I followed Wang Banxian's advice, and heading to the Capital, a hundred taels still feels a bit shabby..."

Mr. Mu grabbed his pipe, taking five swift puffs.

A hundred taels of silver, even if the Old Mu Family sold their fields, land, sons, and daughters, they couldn't gather it all.

"Dad, why not ask the third brother? Doesn't his family have a tavern?" Mrs. Lin whispered as a reminder.

At this, everyone felt a spark of hope.

The tavern in town must be worth a hundred taels of silver.

But how could that troublesome girl give it up?

So, this plan wouldn't work.

Seeing Mr. Mu hesitate, Mrs. Jin said again, "How about this, Dad, Dade is my husband, and in my family, he's a good son-in-law, practically half a son.

If you provide this travel expense, my parents should contribute too. I'll go back and have them prepare fifty taels, then our Old Mu Family would only need to come up with fifty taels. How about that?"

This generous gesture from Mrs. Jin put her in the right no matter where the conversation went.

And she would be praised by everyone.

But even fifty taels were beyond the reach of the Old Mu Family.

This time, Mrs. Jin fell silent, waiting for Mr. Mu's answer.

After a long pause, Mr. Mu let out a long sigh and said, "Let's go to Gao Village and borrow from Gao Tiezhu. We'll borrow a hundred taels, and when Dade becomes the Champion Scholar, we'll return it with interest."

As soon as Mr. Mu finished speaking, not only did Old Mrs. Mu's face change, but even the young Mu Dazhong and Mu Danian's faces changed.

Everyone around Niuwei Mountain knew what Gao Tiezhu was up to.

To put it nicely, he lent money to help people through tough times, but his interest was heavier than the court's oppressive taxes and miscellaneous fees.

They heard that the last time, he even forced a widow in their village to death.

Just for borrowing eight hundred wen from him.

Borrowing eight hundred became eighty taels when repaying.

It increased a hundredfold.

"Dad, have you lost your mind? Borrowing fifty taels from Gao Tiezhu, just the interest would cost our Old Mu Family everything," Mu Dazhong yelled.

"What else can we do?" Mr. Mu asked angrily. "Do we really have to sell the fields and land?"

Mr. Mu wasn't foolish; the current situation was that by the time the eldest became Champion Scholar, it would be around the New Year.

During this long time, the Old Mu Family with a dozen or twenty people couldn't go without eating.

The fields couldn't be sold!

But the eldest's imperial exam couldn't be delayed, so what to do?

Borrowing was the only option.

"Selling the fields and land is better than being pushed to death by Gao Tiezhu. Dad, you know what kind of person Gao Tiezhu is," Mrs. Lin complained.

In her heart, Mrs. Lin was already wavering.

She, Lin Xiaozao, married into the Old Mu Family but hadn't enjoyed life yet. If they wanted her to risk her life, she wouldn't have it.

If it came to it... well, then she wouldn't enjoy the good fortune from the eldest's family anymore.

The land from Old Mu Family would be divided in half between their second house.

As expected with couples, Mu Dazhong thought the same way.

Enjoyment was important, but life was more important.

Besides, it was still uncertain whether the eldest would pass the exam.

Even a cooked duck could fly away.

Moreover, his elder brother was like that, a duck with even its feathers still on.

"Alright, it's the New Year, so keep your mouth clean. I spit, spit, spit, the eldest will definitely become the Champion Scholar, and our Old Mu Family will definitely all go to the Capital to enjoy good fortune."

First, Old Mrs. Mu scolded Mu Dazhong thoroughly, then she fantasized a bit about her own future.

Happiness was so close, she had to seize it.

"Eldest daughter-in-law, borrowing money might not be resolved quickly today. Go tell Dade not to go to the Capital tomorrow.

Three days later is a good day. We'll have the whole village send the eldest off, nice and lively, sending him to take the exam!"

Old Mrs. Mu was truly worried and had her hands full with this son taking the imperial exam.

She spoke more logically than ever.

As for the postponement, Mrs. Jin didn't mind, they could just call for a fast horse and rest less on the road for two days.

And they could still get fifty more taels of silver, why not?

But she still needed to put on a show.

"Dad, Mom, put aside the borrowing for now, I'll go ask Dade. If he's willing to eat poorly on the way, we won't be put in a difficult position.

Before she finished her sentence, Old Mrs. Mu scolded her.

"What nonsense are you spouting? My son is a top scholar; how can he eat what even pigs wouldn't? If you want to eat that yourself, don't drag my son with you."

The other Lin sisters, hearing Old Mrs. Mu's words, pouted their lips high.

In their hearts, they cursed Old Mrs. Mu: What pigs wouldn't eat, hasn't she been eating it herself?

"Alright, since everyone is fine, let's disperse. Do what you need to. Second one, since you already know about Da Lang and Bi Taowang Laoda, there's no need to hide it from them anymore.

Let them know, let them be happy too, and when your elder brother goes to the Capital, let them stand by, soak in the good fortune, understand?"

Mu Dazhong naturally agreed wholeheartedly.

Once everyone dispersed, he went to find Mu Dalang and told him everything about the family meeting.

After Mu Dazhong finished speaking, he went to lie down and sleep on the kang.

Mu Dalang secretly went to the third branch and told them all the news discussed by the Old Mu Family.

Mu Dashan was so shocked he jumped straight from his chair.

"You said your grandpa is going to borrow money from Gao Tiezhu?" Mu Dashan exclaimed.

"Yes, and wants to borrow fifty taels, even my grandma agreed," Mu Dalang said.

Beside him, Mu Shuangshuang, seeing how agitated Mu Dashan was, couldn't help but ask, "Dad, what exactly is going on? Who is this Gao Tiezhu?"

Mu Dashan let out a long sigh before explaining who Gao Tiezhu was.

After hearing everything, Mu Shuangshuang's mouth opened wide.

She gasped and blurted out, "Isn't this borrowing money to solve a problem just usury?"

"What lending?" Mu Dashan asked.

"Just like you said, Gao Tiezhu lends money to others, charges high interest, interest getting compounded. The longer it takes, the more to repay.

If you can't repay, this loan can ruin a person's family and life."