

Rise 154

Chapter 154: Seeing the Cooking Smoke Again

"You've lost so much weight."

It was around three or four in the afternoon when Zhu Ping'an returned to the courtyard. His mother, Chen, inspected him thoroughly several more times and came to a heart-wrenching conclusion.

"I think Zhi'er has gotten chubbier." Mr. Zhu, carrying the luggage, glanced at Chen's teary, distressed expression and tried to console her with a casual comment.

Mr. Zhu's intention was to comfort Chen, but it backfired spectacularly. His remark infuriated Chen, who shot him a glare. "Of course you don't feel heartache—it's not your flesh and blood!"

"Mother, I didn't suffer even a bit outside," Zhu Ping'an reassured Chen. Noticing the wild delicacies like dried wood ear mushrooms and mountain fungus laid out in the courtyard, he grinned sheepishly and changed the subject. "Mother, you're the best. These were dried for me, weren't they?"

"Sharp-eyed as always." Chen beamed with joy.

Not long after they settled in, Zhu Ping'an's eldest brother, Zhu Pingchuan, returned, carrying a large slab of meat with a somewhat constipated expression.

"Why'd you buy so much meat? It'll spoil in this weather," Chen scolded upon seeing the large portion.

"Mother, it's not that I wanted to buy so much. Uncle Zhao insisted on giving it to me for free, saying it's a huge honor for his family that a scholar—ahem, that will be Zhi Di—eats their family's first piece of meat after coming home. When I tried to pay, he chased me halfway across the village and stuffed the money back into my waistband," Zhu Pingchuan explained, helplessly.

"We can't just take it for free. Go and give them money again." Zhu grabbed the meat, took some money from his pocket, and handed it to Zhu Pingchuan, instructing him to return and pay Uncle Zhao.

"This Zhao Laosan is too much, making it sound like my son's some kind of tyrant," Chen muttered with a mix of annoyance and pride.

Zhu Pingchuan left but returned shortly, now carrying two large bones and a kidney tied with straw rope.

"I tried so hard to leave the money there, but Uncle Zhao insisted on giving these for Zhi Di to replenish his strength. He wouldn't take the money unless I accepted them. So, I had no choice but to bring them back," Zhu Pingchuan said, waving the bones and kidney, his face full of exasperation.

"Just leave it be, then," Mr. Zhu said, rubbing his hands.

"Big bones are good for making soup," Chen said, taking the bones and kidney from Zhu Pingchuan and heading toward the kitchen.

Barely a moment later, Chen came out of the kitchen with a knife in hand and marched straight to the chicken coop.

The sound of an old hen clucking in distress soon followed.

When Zhu Ping'an saw the black-and-yellow old hen in his mother's hands, he froze in surprise. The last time he was home, his mother had proudly boasted that this hen laid more eggs daily than the neighbors' hens. Why was she suddenly about to slaughter it?

"Mother, Mother, don't kill the chicken! Doesn't this one lay lots of eggs?" Zhu Ping'an rushed over to stop her. Eggs were still considered quite precious at home, even though their circumstances had improved.

Moreover, Chen had always been deeply attached to the hens she raised. She cared for them diligently, feeding them grass seeds, wild vegetables, bran, and cabbage leaves. Not only were they well-fed, but they were also treated well. Before winter, Chen would always have Mr. Zhu tidy up the chicken coop. Zhu Ping'an remembered that during New Year's, when a chicken had to be slaughtered, Chen would always struggle with the decision. She'd gather all the hens, deliberate over each one, and hesitate endlessly—this one was too precious, and that one too beloved. Only when there was no other choice would she reluctantly pick an older hen with declining egg production.

So, at this moment, Zhu Ping'an was shocked when his mother, Chen, picked out the oldest hen that laid the most eggs. He couldn't help but speak out to stop her.

"The hens that lay more eggs are the ones that should be eaten. We still have plenty of hens laying eggs at home. Zhu Shouyi, come here," his mother said, picking up the most productive egg-laying hen from the past and holding a knife, testing its sharpness. After a few swipes, feeling unsure, she called for Zhu Ping'an's father.

"Little chicken, little chicken, don't make a fuss, you're a dish of the world, gone early this year, back early next year."

Zhu Ping'an's father didn't try to persuade her, walking over to take the hen and knife. He scraped the knife a couple of times against the stone by the well, muttered a couple of times the old family's chicken-slaughtering chant, and then with a clean and decisive stroke, the hen was done.

While Zhu Ping'an's father was sharpening the knife, Chen hid in the kitchen. She only came out after the hen was fully processed, happily picking some dried mushrooms and mountain fungi, and carrying the cleaned hen back to the stove to make soup.

This also proved the saying that a gentleman stays away from the kitchen.

The dinner was unusually lavish, with large portions. After it was ready, Chen, under her husband's eager gaze, reluctantly allowed Zhu Ping'an to ladle out a large bowl of chicken meat and a big chunk of boiled meat, sending it to the old house.

Zhu Ping'an, holding a large bowl, the fragrance rising from it, walked toward the old house.

As the cooking smoke rose, dusk covered the land.

At this time, the villagers were probably also preparing their dinners, with wisps of smoke drifting from the houses, like rising clouds. The ongoing cycle of life, with homes lit up by fires, and smoke leisurely rising, formed the most harmonious scene of life in Xiahe Village.

"Big Aunt, my mother is stewing chicken at home, come to eat meat at our house," Zhu Ping'an greeted when he ran into the neighbor, Zhao Da Niang, who was close to his mother.

Zhao Da Niang saw Zhu Ping'an from afar. Since he had been away for over half a year and the boy had grown quickly, she thought he looked a little like the second child from Chen's family who had passed the imperial examination, but wasn't sure. She was preparing to approach for a better look, when unexpectedly, Zhu Ping'an had already greeted her from afar.

This made Zhao Da Niang very happy. Not everyone gets greeted by the scholar personally and invited to eat meat at their home. She felt light as if floating.

"Young Master Zhu has returned!" Zhao Da Niang smiled happily.

"Young Master Zhu?"

Zhu Ping'an almost tripped upon hearing this title.

"Aunt, please don't say that, I'm not worthy of it. If you call me that, it will shorten my life. Just call me Xiao Zhi as usual," Zhu Ping'an said with a bitter smile.

"How can that be? Last time, when people from the county came, they all called you Zhu Laoye," Zhao Da Niang shook her head.

"That was them, Aunt. You've known me since I was little, just call me Xiao Zhi," Zhu Ping'an smiled brightly.

"Such a child. Then I'll be bold and call you Ping'an Lang," Zhao Da Niang said, feeling even lighter as she smiled more happily.

"Alas," Zhu Ping'an grinned foolishly.

"Where is Ping'an Lang going?" Zhao Da Niang asked curiously when she saw him holding a large bowl of meat.

"My mother is stewing chicken at home, and she asked me to deliver it to the old house. Aunt, come to eat meat at our house. Mother has mentioned you many times," Zhu Ping'an explained, then smiled and urged Zhao Da Niang to join them.

"Ping'an Lang is so filial. Your whole family is, except for your grandfather, who's rather biased," Zhao Da Niang said, somewhat indignantly on behalf of the Zhu family.

"It's all in the past," Zhu Ping'an smiled foolishly. "I'll deliver it while it's still hot, so it doesn't interfere with meal time. Aunt, you really should come."

"Then go ahead and deliver it. I won't go, dinner is already made at home. Tell your mother I'll visit her another day for a chat," Zhao Da Niang politely declined, waving for Zhu Ping'an to hurry and deliver the food.