

The 80s 521

Chapter 521: Strategy on the First Day

The first day of the Lunar New Year usually involves not killing any living thing, nor visiting relatives, simply going door to door between neighbors to wish each other a happy new year.

Cheng Su was woken early by the crackling and popping sounds of firecrackers the kids' laughter could still be heard in the distance. She reached out beside her, but there was no one there, the bed was cold Taiguo had already gotten up and gone out.

She wrapped her blanket around her and sat up, hearing Mother Qi talking to someone outside. She yawned, got out of bed, and started to get dressed.

This being the first day of the new year, as a daughter-in-law, it wouldn't be good to wake up late; the mother-in-law might dislike it. It was the New Year after all; she ought to keep herself in good spirits and avoid trouble.

Once dressed and freshened up with light makeup, Cheng Su, following the custom of Xiashui Village, first respectfully offered tea to her in-laws and received a small red envelope. Then she set about preparing breakfast for the family.

Just as the breakfast was laid out on the table, Taiguo returned. It turned out he'd gone out for exercise, dressed in a thin, loose outfit, his forehead was covered in sweat. Cheng Su was then told by her mother-in-law to boil hot water for Taiguo to wash his face.

"How do you plan to visit relatives over the next few days?" Mother Qi asked them at the breakfast table.

"Today, we'll just stroll around the village. Yesterday, Jianming also asked me to join him for some drinks at Uncle's place. Tomorrow, the second day, is the day to visit the maternal home I plan to accompany Susu back to her parents' home to stay one night, and we'll return on the third day," Taiguo replied, taking a bite from a sub-stuffed bun.

"Stay overnight?" Mother Qi was taken aback, looking at Cheng Su "But your elder sister is coming back to her maternal home tomorrow, too. How can it work if you're not here?"

A daughter's return to her parental home and the daughter-in-law not being there to help with household chores just didn't seem right.

"Then we'll come back early on the third day," Cheng Su suggested.

Mother Qi still wanted to say something it was so close by, why stay overnight when you could just come for a meal and leave?

Father Qi pulled her aside and said, "Fine, you two head back early tomorrow. Pay your respects properly to the parents, and then you can come back on the third day."

"Thank you, Dad," Cheng Su said with a sweet smile.

Mother Qi looked displeased.

After the meal, Taiguo took Cheng Su out to visit neighbors. Mother Qi said to Father Qi "How could you just agree to that? Fenglian and Jisheng will be returning early tomorrow. Taiguo only has a few days off. A visit to the in-laws is enough, why do they need to stay overnight?"

"Traditionally, Fenglian and the rest usually stay overnight. If your daughter stays overnight at her parental home, then it's only fair that others do the same at theirs. Do you really want to say that only officials can set fires and commoners can't even light a lamp?" Father Qi retorted irritably, picking up his tobacco pipe and leaving "I'm going for a stroll."

Mother Qi was so frustrated that she felt tightness in her chest, but then she remembered her own plans and quickly stopped Qi Fengping, who was on her way out, hesitating to speak.

"Mom, what are you doing? I've made plans to go out. If you've got something to say, just say it," Qi Fengping called out.

Mother Qi looked at her, deflated, and waved her off "Never mind, just go."

The girl was still unmarried and clueless about affairs between men and women there was no need to corrupt her.

Qi Fengping, utterly confused, didn't bother with her and darted off.

"Mom, the stitching on my coat has come undone. Can you sew it up for me?" Qi Jianguo came out with a needle and thread.

Mother Qi started to protest "Ancestors above! It's the first day of the new year no sewing or cutting is allowed. I'll sew it for you tomorrow." And with that, she snatched the needle and thread from his hand.

Just as she was about to enter the house, holding the needle in her hand, Mother Qi paused, and a flash of inspiration struck her, making her eyes light up with an idea.

Chapter 522: The Guilty Conscience of a Thief

Cheng Su supported the drunken Qi Taiguo all the way home, and upon entering the room, she saw Mother Qi standing in front of their wardrobe, which puzzled her.

"Mom, what are you looking for?" Cheng Su asked, feeling a sudden weight on her hand as Qi Taiguo collapsed onto her shoulder. She quickly propped him up, "Hey, easy there."

Mother Qi was startled and her gaze shifted evasively, noticing that Taiguo was heavily intoxicated, she asked, "How did you manage to get so drunk?"

"A few friends came over to Second Uncle's home, and we ended up drinking together. Mom, please keep an eye on him for a moment. I'm going to get a hot towel to wipe him down," said Cheng Su.

"Oh, okay, you go ahead!" Mother Qi agreed surprisingly compliantly, "And make him an egg sugar water drink, add some honey. It's all in the kitchen, it'll help sober him up."

Cheng Su felt somewhat puzzled, but didn't dwell on it. She turned and left, not noticing the relieved look on Mother Qi's face.

For the first time, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law worked seamlessly together to take care of Taiguo, both ending up sticky with sweat.

Looking outside at the sky, Cheng Su noted that it was evening. She decided to take a bath, thinking it would be too cold to bathe later at night. But when she opened her luggage, she felt that something was amiss.

The bag seemed quite disordered. They had just returned a couple of days before, and the luggage had hardly been touched, so why was it now in such a mess?

Thinking back to her mother-in-law being in the room earlier, Cheng Su furrowed her brows. Could it be that her mother-in-law had rummaged through their luggage?

She checked the contents of the bag. Nothing was missing, including some money—none was gone—it was just a bit more disordered, so she let it be.

But the possibility of her mother-in-law having gone through their bags made her uncomfortable. How could her mother-in-law not respect others' privacy, simply rummaging through their things!

After Taiguo sobered up, his hands were mischievously roving over Cheng Su's body.

Cheng Su joked, "When I came back today, Mom was in our room, not sure what she was looking for. My bag was all messed up."

Taiguo, with a dry mouth and bitter tongue, responded nonchalantly, "Perhaps she needed to take something?"

"What could she have needed from our luggage? It's just clothes and such," Cheng Su muttered.

Taiguo was taken aback, "What do you mean by that? Did you lose something? From the bag, I took out clothes to change into today."

Was he implying that his mother, by going through the luggage, did something sneaky?

Taiguo's brow furrowed, and he felt slightly displeased. Her words nearly accused his mother of being a thief.

"It's nothing, perhaps I'm overthinking it. Let's sleep, okay?" Cheng Su shrugged, not wanting to argue about it.

After all, there was no concrete evidence, and it wasn't a big deal. With the New Year upon them, there was no need to make a mountain out of a molehill.

Tick-tock, the light was switched off, and Taiguo's previously amorous intentions towards Cheng Su dissipated.

Mother Qi remained anxious until she saw the light go out in her son's room, and then she breathed a sigh of relief.

"What's been bothering you all evening?" Father Qi was curious.

"Bothered? That's nonsense," Mother Qi replied, a bit uncomfortably, as she lay down.

Father Qi looked at her skeptically, "Deny it all you want, but you have been peeking into Taiguo's room at least ten times tonight, looking as guilty as a thief."

Mother Qi's face darkened, "Go away, go away! Stop talking nonsense about thieves and guilt during the New Year, let's sleep!"

Father Qi watched her turn away, shook his head, and went to sleep. His wife had been getting increasingly enigmatic, making her all the more elusive.

Chapter 523: The Bending of the Inchworm

Under the same sky, there are countless stories to tell.

In the Beijing Ning Family's living room, a cultural evening show was playing on the television, while in Old Master Ning's study, Ning Gang was chatting with the old gentleman.

"The banditry on the roads of E County has caused quite a stir. Zhang Zhongming was sentenced to death. Dad, what do you think? I always feel that there's something not quite right about this." Ning Gang frowned as he spoke: "Zhang Zhongming is just a regimental commander. He alone, as a regimental commander, could not have controlled such a large gang. But from what I see, the Discipline Inspection Commission seems to have decided to stop investigating."

Old Master Ning, with a brush in hand, applied pressure with a steady wrist, the bold ink spreading on the pristine paper, said, "Since he is already a discarded piece, whether he can swallow it or not is irrelevant. What matters is that he has completed the image of the other military personnel, and this is a cause for general celebration. Employing the least impactful method to give the masses an explanation is exactly what the military needs right now."

"Dad, I understand that, but he..."

Without lifting his head, Old Master Ning interrupted him, "Son, when it comes to the image of national servicemen, Zhang Zhongming being pushed out was inevitable. If he dared to do it, he should dare to accept the consequences. One wrong step leads to another, and all these are consequences he must bear."

Ning Gang's brows furrowed lightly.

"As for whether the incident stops with him, that's not important. To govern and secure peace within the nation, firstly, you must put the common people's hearts at ease. Military personnel are meant to protect the country, but when they collude with such gangs, infringing on the interests of the people, if such a tumor is not decisively removed, how can the people be reassured? How can their trust be earned?" Old Master Ning continued, "And some investigations cannot go too deep, at least not openly. You must understand that pulling one thread affects the whole fabric. The state's utmost priority is internal stability; to resist external threats, we must first secure within."

But Ning Gang let out a cold laugh, "If that's the case, only pushing out a few sacrificial pieces while the root of the problem remains, then even if this gang is destroyed, there will still be a second and a third one to follow."

Old Master Ning put down the final stroke, and said, "That's why this is a long and arduous war. Son, to truly eradicate the tumors, you can't act on impulse alone. You need to be steadier, steadier than your opponents. Plan one move, anticipate ten - deliberate and then act to break the whole situation."

Ning Gang paused for a moment and looked at the Old Master Ning putting down his brush; the characters, still emitting the scent of ink and not yet fully dry, clearly wrote the word 'steadiness,' commanding the large sheet of paper with forceful and weighty strokes.

"You are still young and have much to learn. This word, I give it to you," said Old Master Ning, patting his eldest son's shoulder.

"Thank you, Dad!"

Old Master Ning walked to a copper basin on the side to wash his hands and said, "I heard that Taiguo also took part in this operation and was brought in for questioning?"

Ning Gang replied, "Yes, I specifically chose soldiers for him to participate in this task. Little did I expect, he followed unreliable information and left the team during the operation. Although he managed to obtain the list from Zhao Wei that included Zhang Zhongming and the others, a soldier died, and two were seriously injured. This time, his merits and faults are equal."

Old Master Ning nodded.

"Young people can't stay calm after all; probably out of eagerness to achieve quick success and make a name for himself, that's what led to this incident. It's good, though; dampening his zeal a bit to see if he can become composed," Ning Gang added.

Old Master Ning said sharply, with his voice stern and eyes becoming piercing, "The inchworm contracts itself to stretch out further. I hope the young man understands this proverb, Ning Gang, this saying applies to you as well!"

Ning Gang stiffened up, "Yes!"

"Fourth brother, why are you standing at the door? Come on in!"

Outside the door, someone started talking. Old Master Ning and Ning Gang exchanged glances.

Chapter 524: Layers of Fog

He opened the door, and Ning Ge was leaning against the frame, yawning. Seeing Ning Gang come out, he waved his hand.

"Big brother, are you still going to the cultural evening? The performances are almost over."

Ning Gang glanced at his watch and said, "It's so late, Dad, you..."

"I won't go. You guys go ahead. It's the same shows every year, not that interesting." Old Master Ning waved his hand.

"Dad, if you don't go, I'm afraid we won't be able to get through the year without trouble. People will come to visit you every day, thinking something is wrong!" Ning Gang's wife, Xiu Xian, said with a smile.

"Exactly, Dad, take a walk with us. On the first day of the New Year, you can see your old comrades-in-arms," Ning Gang urged.

Old Master Ning hesitated for a moment, then said, "Well, alright then!"

"I'll go tell them to get the car ready!" Xiu Xian walked away joyfully.

"I'm not going. I drank too much during the day, I need to sleep!" Ning Ge yawned again and headed straight to his room.

Ning Gang wanted to call him back, but Old Master Ning said, "If he doesn't want to go, let him be."

Once the Old Master had spoken, Ning Gang could only let him be.

Inside his room, Ning Ge waited until he saw Ning Gang and the others leave. Then, he came out and slipped into Ning Gang's study.

Ning Ge had heard everything Ning Gang and the Old Master had said. As for the verdict on the highway robbers, he had his own sources to inform him of the outcome, which was exactly as he and Qi Taiguo had reported: Zhang Zhongming was the prime person in charge.

But Big brother's words were clearly dissatisfied and doubtful. Could it be that Big brother had nothing to do with these people after all?

Ning Ge felt somewhat relieved by this speculation.

He remembered the news he'd heard from Zhao Wei that night, that he had hidden a record of dealings with Zhang Zhongming with one of his lovers.

Zhao Wei was cautious, making preparations on all fronts. He carried a list with him, the same scroll that Qi Taiguo obtained, and hid another account book elsewhere.

And Ning Ge obtained this account book and various diaries from a woman named Daner. It contained detailed records of the bribes Zhao Wei regularly gave, increasing in amount each time. The return favors were continuous aid in getting people out, which made the highway robber gang fearless and ever-expanding. As long as the heat died down, they were out of trouble.

All this was minor compared to what caught Ning Ge's attention. A page from that book was torn out. When he asked Daner, she had no clue, only saying Zhao Wei seldom visited, and when he did it was only occasionally to take the book and make a record.

As to what he recorded, she had no idea. She was illiterate, hailing from the mountains, and couldn't recognize a single character.

Ning Ge was sure that the torn page must have contained some vital information, but why that particular page was torn out, he did not know.

Could someone have beaten him to the ledger and tampered with it?

Ning Ge furrowed his brow. Zhang Zhongming was pushed into his position single-handedly by Jiang Conghe, and after the incident, Jiang Conghe vehemently denounced Zhang Zhongming's violations of rules and discipline, asserting his own innocence.

Damn it, too fake, adding even more layers to the mystery!

Standing in front of a mahogany cabinet, he opened the glass door to look inside, which contained various files.

Suddenly, a file caught his attention; the date written on it made Ning Ge's heart pound.

Just as he was about to reach for it, a voice came from behind him.

"Fourth brother, what are you looking for?"

Ning Ge jerked, turned around, and standing at the doorway was Ning Gang, who had unexpectedly returned.

Chapter 525: The Eldest Brother's Suspicion

Having just faced the imposing figure of Big Brother, Ning Ge felt the uncertainty and scrutiny in his gaze and his mind worked feverishly.

He pursed his lips, his face somber, and asked with great seriousness, "Big Brother, I heard all the conversation you just had with the Old Man. Tell me, is there some arrangement your organization has with Qi Taiguo? Are you going to demote him?"

So that was the issue.

The suspicion in Ning Gang's eyes faded slightly as he said, "Why do you ask? What does this have to do with you?"

"Big Brother!" Ning Ge hurriedly stepped forward two paces and said, "I'm in partnership with Big Brother Qi and others in business, of course it's related. If they are doing well, so do I, but if they are not, it will also affect me. In the eyes of outsiders, we are from the same country, we share glory and loss together, don't we?"

Ning Gang walked to the mahogany cabinet and said, "Business is business, and matters are to be kept separate. Should we cover for Qi Taiguo if he has made a mistake?"

"So you're saying, he's really out of luck?" Ning Ge feigned fright.

Seeing this, Ning Gang's scrutiny completely dissipated as he said, "Since you overheard, didn't you get the full picture? It's said that his contributions and mistakes on this mission cancel each other out."

Ning Ge sighed in relief and carefully asked, "Big Brother, you're not lying to me, are you?"

"Why would I lie to you?" Ning Gang glared, then squinted his eyes, "You're quite something, aren't you? It hasn't been long, and you've already bared your heart to Qi Taiguo and company! Have they been feeding you some kind of magic potion?"

"Big Brother, listen to what you're saying. If a cat or dog stays too long with someone, they'll grow attached, let alone us - the bond between our families runs deep." Ning Ge rolled his eyes dramatically and said, "Wouldn't it be cold-hearted of me to remain indifferent if I heard something bad about him?"

Ning Gang's lips curved into a sly smile, "So you've come to my study to look for some favorable news?"

Ning Ge made a sheepish expression and said, "I just wanted to see how you all determine his situation up here."

Ning Gang snorted.

After thinking for a moment, Ning Ge said, "Big Brother, is what you and the Old Man talked about true? That Zhang Zhongming is merely a scapegoat, and there's a bigger Big Head who hasn't been caught yet? Big Brother, who do you think it is?"

"These things are none of your business. Don't ask too many questions, just focus on doing your business properly," Ning Gang reprimanded, frowning.

Ning Ge pouted and said, "What's wrong with asking? I'm not going to talk about it to others. Big Brother, tell me who you think it is, and I'll help you analyze whether they are loyal or traitorous."

"The military barracks today are not as simple as you think. They are intertwined with complex relations, many of which are tied to the older generation. These are all shadowy matters. From now on, do not speak of them, nor inquire about them, just honestly do your business," Ning Gang glanced at him dismissively and then took out from the cabinet the very file Ning Ge had been thinking about.

Inside Ning Ge's chest, urgency brewed, but he was powerless, watching as Ning Gang extracted some document from the file and placed it into a document bag.

Seeing Ning Ge still standing there, Ning Gang couldn't help but say, "What are you still standing around for? Didn't you say you were tired?"

Ning Ge watched him wrap the string around the document bag, losing all motivation, and said, "I'll be going then!"

As he turned to leave, he couldn't resist looking back and asking, "Big Brother, as a military man, what is your purpose in serving?"

"Of course, it is to serve the people and to devote myself endlessly to the country," he replied.

"Then you would never do anything to harm the country, would you?" Ning Ge asked further.

"Nonsense," Ning Gang glared fiercely, "Of course not."

Only then did Ning Ge leave with a smile, oblivious to the utter bafflement and scrutiny on Ning Gang's face.

Chapter 526: Mother's Reminder

On the second day of the Lunar New Year, when returning to her parental home, Cheng Su and Qi Taiguo finished breakfast and started preparing the gifts for visiting relatives. There were various tonics, candies, pastries, and they also brought Father Cheng two packs of good cigarettes and two bottles of fine liquor.

The Cheng family in Myrica Rubra Village wasn't alone; they had other uncles and such as well. According to custom, in the first year of a daughter's marriage, when she goes back to her parental home for the New Year, she must bring gifts for those uncles.

So, Cheng Su had purchased quite a lot in advance, and this time returning, she was laden with both big and small packages.

Mother Qi looked on with disapproval. That was all money, after all.

"Dad, Mom, we're off then. We'll come back tomorrow. If big sister and the others come, please send them our regards!" Cheng Su said with a smile.

"Go ahead," Father Qi waved them off with a chuckle.

Qi Taiguo was loaded with bags on his back and in his hands as he and Cheng Su headed out the door.

"This trip back to the parental home is quite the exaggeration," Mother Qi muttered with a curled lip.

"All right, it's the same when visiting relatives; everyone's carrying big and small parcels. Besides, she's a new bride. Go boil some water. Didn't we say we'd slaughter a chicken? Fenglian and the others should be back soon!" Father Qi said. "I'll go catch the chicken!"

After hearing this, Mother Qi said no more and hurried off to boil water.

Huangtian Village and Myrica Rubra Village were actually not far apart, just neighboring villages. A leisurely fifteen-minute walk brought them to the Cheng household, where Father Cheng and the family had been eagerly waiting.

"Dad, Mom, Happy New Year. We're back!" Cheng Su greeted as she approached.

"Father-in-law, mother-in-law," Qi Taiguo also called out respectfully.

"It's good you're back. Come in and have a seat," Father Cheng greeted them with his usual warmth.

Once inside the main hall, Cheng Zhi ran out from some corner to greet Cheng Su and Qi Taiguo and offer his New Year's wishes, adding his outstretched hand.

Cheng Su reluctantly stuffed two red envelopes into his hand, to which Cheng Zhi thanked them with a big grin and upon opening them, he said, "Dad, Mom, my sister may well be a big businesswoman, but she's a bit stingy, isn't she? Just two Great Unity RMBs in the red packet."

"Are red packets about the amount? It's the thought that counts. If you don't want it, give it back," Cheng Su pretended to grab them.

Cheng Zhi dodged her and said, "Once the goods are sold, there are no returns. You should know that by now. Who ever hears of taking back money that's been given away?" as he pocketed the red envelope.

Mother Cheng poured some tea and, seeing this, said, "You don't need to hide it. Hand it over; it needs to go towards your tuition fees."

Cheng Zhi protested, "Mom, what era do you think we live in? I'm a high school student. Since when do I hand over my red envelopes for you to keep?"

Mother Cheng shot him a glance and warmly invited Qi Taiguo, "Son-in-law, have some tea, eat some fruit." She pushed over a plate of fruit and a stack of fried meatballs and other festive foods for the New Year.

Qi Taiguo thanked them with a smile and offered Father Cheng some cigarettes, which made Cheng Zhi sitting beside them envious.

After chatting for a while, Qi Taiguo stayed to talk with Father Cheng, and Cheng Su headed over to the pile of gifts she had brought, to sort out the ones that needed to be given away.

She first took out all the gifts for her own parents, then turned to ask Mother Cheng how many sets they needed to prepare for the uncles and brothers.

After a brief discussion, they decided on six sets, meaning she'd have to lug gifts to visit six different households.

Luckily, they only needed to do this for every family in the current year. After this year, it would just be her own uncles who would receive gifts.

Once the gifts were organized, Cheng Su, eager for a quick resolution, called for Qi Taiguo, ready to set out visiting relatives.

But Mother Cheng stopped her at the door and said, "The word about your business in Qing City has somehow gotten out. Earlier, your aunts wanted me to talk with you, to see if you could arrange jobs for them at your place. Be alert and handle it as you see fit!"

Upon hearing this, Cheng Su felt a shiver down her spine, hoping the New Year wasn't going to bring such misfortune.

Chapter 527: It Turns Out that the Mother-in-law Dug a Big Pit

Cheng Su was indeed that unlucky, and luckily her mother had given her a heads-up before she had come, otherwise she would have been completely caught off guard.

This aunt, what should she be called? Cheng Su thought for a moment. Ah, her father's eldest brother's wife, so that would make her Great Aunt.

"I heard you're running a big business now. Look at your sister, she's grown up. You know, girls don't need to study that much. Besides, our family is poor; we can't afford her education. It's better for her to start working. Susu, do you think you could arrange some sort of job for her?" the Great Aunt said, pointing to a girl next to her.

Cheng Su looked over, and the girl, who was only fifteen or sixteen years old, kept staring at Qi Taiguo with wide eyes, practically sprouting little hearts.

Cheng Su coughed, and when the girl looked her way, her face turned red and she cast her eyes down.

This girl, she seemed to be called Cheng Dahua!

Cheng Su smiled and said, "I'm not running any big business, just a small restaurant, and we have enough staff right now, not hiring more."

The Great Aunt became anxious as soon as she heard this, "But that can't be all, I heard you also have a factory? Factories always need people, right?"

Cheng Su felt a wave of annoyance, asking, "Great Aunt, where did you hear that from?"

"Where else could it be from? Of course, it's your mother-in-law who said it. Not to mention our Myrica Rubra Village, but the whole Huangtian Village probably knows by now. Your mother-in-law was boasting about how her daughter-in-law in the city is doing big business and it wouldn't be a problem to arrange a job!" the Great Aunt said. "Susu, I'm not talking about others, but Dahua is also a sister from your side of the family, you should be able to arrange something, right?"

Cheng Su scoffed quietly and casually glanced over at Qi Taiguo.

Who else could it be but the mother-in-law who had dug her a huge pit to fall into!

Qi Taiguo was drinking tea, listening to the Great Aunt's remarks and feeling the killing intent in Cheng Su's gaze. He felt very uneasy, pretended not to hear, but couldn't help resenting his mother inside.

They say you shouldn't show off wealth, and his mother usually knew that best of all. Why had she started broadcasting it now!

"Great Aunt, it's not that I can't arrange it, but we really do have enough people for now and don't need any more workers," Cheng Su certainly didn't dare hire the girl whose eyes kept darting towards her brother-in-law.

She glanced at the time on her watch, stood up, and said, "Great Aunt, you see, I still need to visit my second and third aunts to give my New Year's greetings. I'm going to head over there first!"

The Great Aunt's expression turned sour.

She had watched Cheng Su grow up and this was the first time she has asked her for something, but Cheng Su wasn't playing along. Cheng Su's high and mighty attitude left her feeling stifled and annoyed.

"Go ahead, I understand that my home's too humble," the Great Aunt said with a biting edge.

Implying that her home couldn't accommodate such a grand presence.

Cheng Su also looked somewhat displeased. Who had she provoked? Here she was, paying a New Year's visit out of filial piety, and not only didn't she receive a good word, but she was also met with disdain and revulsion.

She was sure that as soon as she stepped out the door, the Great Aunt would spread around how unfriendly she was.

Cheng Su and Qi Taiguo walked out of the Great Aunt's house. They accepted all the New Year's money given to them, but upon leaving, not a single person saw them out, all because Cheng Su refused the job arrangement.

"Susu..." Qi Taiguo tried to smile apologetically.

Cheng Su glared at him and said, "Your mom really knows how to create problems for me. Arranging a job is 'no trouble at all.' I didn't even know she could talk that big!"

Having said this, she stormed off with angry strides.

Qi Taiguo, feeling guilty, braced himself and followed.

Chapter 528: Uncle Praises

One by one, we visited several other houses to give our New Year's greetings, and without exception, all these aunts and older female cousins hinted or outright asked Cheng Su to arrange jobs for their kids.

Cheng Su was so frustrated she nearly wanted to scream. She forced a smile as she turned down invitations to stay for dinner and entered the last house with a trembling heart.

This was the home of Third Uncle Cheng Shuqiang, her father's blood brother.

Third Uncle wasn't very old, just in his forties, over a decade younger than her father. In Cheng Su's memory, this uncle was somewhat rebellious when he was young, but he seemed to mellow down after getting married.

Third Uncle had two sons, both boys, named Cheng Hai and Cheng Shan. Both were in junior high.

Cheng Su sat down as Third Aunt, brimming with warmth, played host. She looked at the woman in her forties, her smile as gentle and shallow as when Cheng Su had first seen her after her wedding, kind and tender in nature.

Third Aunt had the two boys give their New Year's greetings to Cheng Su and Qi Taiguo. Cheng Su handed over two red envelopes, which they both accepted with smiles and thanks.

The two cousins, younger than her own brother Cheng Zhi, seemed much more well-behaved and sensible.

"In June, when we harvested the corn, it was so sweet. I remember you loved sweet corn as a kid. We saved a whole bunch for you, but you left in such a hurry last time that we didn't get to bring you any!" Third Aunt pushed the tray of candies meant for the guests towards Cheng Su and her group.

"It's fine, there's always time for corn. If not this year, then there's always next year," Cheng Su replied with a smile.

"That's true. Today, you have to eat with us. It's the New Year, and as the 'niece,' visiting your maternal family, you should stay for a meal," Third Aunt said with a laugh: "Hubby, you chat with them. I'll go kill the chicken."

"Mhm!"

Cheng Su wanted to refuse; the 'enthusiasm' from the previous houses had all come with ulterior motives, which genuinely scared her a little.

But Third Uncle and his family were direct relatives from the same branch, all acknowledging the same man as their grandfather. If they really made a request, she wouldn't even know how to refuse properly!

Qi Taiguo tugged lightly at her sleeve and blinked, prompting Cheng Su to swallow her words of refusal. After all, Third Aunt had not seemed cunning during her return visits.

Well, she thought, let's cross that bridge when we get to it.

Outside the door, Third Aunt instructed the two cousins to heat water, with one helping her by holding the chicken wings to wipe the chicken's neck. Listening to this, Cheng Su felt reassured.

Glancing around the room, while it lacked impressive furniture, everything was tidy, a testament to the lady of the house's diligence.

Third Uncle had a quick temper, but his wife was gentle and soft-spoken, a harmonious and suitable match.

And looking at the two cousins, obediently following orders, unlike Cheng Zhi, who would probably vanish in a puff of smoke at a single command, it was clear that Third Uncle's household had done a good job with upbringing.

As Cheng Su was considering this, Qi Taiguo had already started sharing a cigarette with Third Uncle, chatting back and forth.

"...Times have changed. In the past, our granddad's generation talked about toppling capitalism, but nowadays, I see quite a few villagers venturing out to do business. Small business owners are in demand and can make money; it's good," Third Uncle reminisced, puffing on his cigarette.

Cheng Su felt intrigued and asked, "Third Uncle, have you also gone into business for yourself?"

"Not at all, I just think that now is a rare opportunity. If one fights hard, it's not impossible to make a fortune. I heard from your dad that you're also in business?" Cheng Shuqiang smiled and said, "In our family, your dad is the silent type, and although your sister-in-law is bold, she can't quite manage a business. Out of us all, it's you, a young woman, who started a business first. You truly are the most like our great great grandmother!"

Chapter 529: The Spitting Image of Great Grandmother

Cheng Su listened to her third uncle's words, but she had never heard them before, so she asked, "This Great Great Grandmother, what kind of person was she? You seem to hold her in high regard."

Her third uncle just laughed, "In fact, I don't have much of an impression of her either. Your dad probably remembers a bit. I'm just repeating what your grandfather told me."

Cheng Su was very curious, "Then, third uncle, you can also tell me about her."

"Your Great Grandmother was also born into a distinguished family. Although she was from a merchant background, she was a true lady of high birth. She was very familiar with the abacus since she was young, and as the eldest daughter, she was also very capable. I've heard that even before she got married, she often helped her father manage the family business and take care of her younger siblings!" Her third uncle spoke slowly, "After she married your Great Grandfather, she founded the Jade Palace, specializing in jewelry and jade. That's how our Cheng family got its start."

"Your Great Grandfather died early, and the Cheng family could only rely on her, a woman, to hold everything together, managing the business, and caring for the children, all without relying on others. The business grew, life improved, and your grandfather received a good education, even learning to speak English! But later, the times turned bad, capitalists were criticized, revisionists and the common people shouted every day to overthrow capitalism, and our Cheng family was one of the first to bear the brunt, falling into decline. And your Great Grandmother, strong-willed all her life, ended up dying in desolation and sorrow, alas..."

Her third uncle blew a ring of smoke, sighing.

"Are there any photos left?" Qi Taiguo asked.

"Photos?" Her third uncle thought for a moment, then said, "I think there are. I'll go look for them."

He went into the room, and Cheng Su cast a glance at Qi Taiguo, asking, "Why have you suddenly become interested in my Great Grandmother?"

Qi Taiguo said with a smile, "Didn't your third uncle say that you resemble her the most? I just wanted to see!"

Cheng Su huffed, "Don't flatter me. I've got scores to settle with you when we get back."

Qi Taiguo was about to speak when her third uncle came back with a yellowed photo album, saying, "Those years were very chaotic, with constant upheaval. We moved several times, and not many photos were left. There's only one or two."

Cheng Su took it and flipped it open to the first page, where there stood a woman in a qipao with her hair in a bun, holding a tobacco pipe, her lips slightly upturned, her gaze proud, and her face somewhat familiar.

"Look, you do resemble your Great Grandmother quite a bit!" Qi Taiguo exclaimed first.

Cheng Su was also surprised. The person in the photo was only in her thirties, and she did resemble Cheng Su—at least a seventy percent likeness.

Cheng Su felt a surge of excitement.

Turning to another photo, it was Great Grandmother holding a child, her gaze soft and her expression even more tender. That child was probably her grandfather.

"It's quite similar, isn't it? Not only the facial features but actually now, your temperament is also similar to hers. Your Great Grandmother, she was so strong-willed. As a girl, it didn't show much, but after marrying Taiguo, it's as if you became a completely different person—strong-willed, smart," her third uncle said with a smile.

Cheng Su smiled awkwardly, too embarrassed to say that she had indeed become another person entirely!

"Third uncle, are you also considering going into business?" Cheng Su asked as she closed the photo album.

Her third uncle hesitated for a while, then said, "I'm already in my forties. Even if I do something, I don't know what it could be, and I don't have the capital for it."

Cheng Su pursed her lips, gave it some thought, and then said, "Third uncle, I think the real estate market will definitely develop greatly in the future. Why don't you go into building materials and construction projects?"

She recommended Zhang Jisheng to do this because he was skilled at carpentry and would be able to learn and do it.

And the same went for her third uncle. Even if he didn't have the skill, if he was willing to learn, he might well succeed at it in the future.

Chapter 530: It's All the Mother-in-law Looking for Trouble

After lunch at Third Uncle's home and chatting for a while, Cheng Su and Qi Taiguo finally left and headed back to her parents' house.

"Aren't you really annoyed with relatives asking you to arrange jobs? Why did you then volunteer to suggest that Third Uncle take on the renovation work?" Qi Taiguo didn't understand and said, "Also, didn't you say you would ask your brother-in-law to do it?"

Cheng Su stopped in her tracks and said, "Asking your brother-in-law is one thing; besides, we don't even know if he wants to do it. Your brother-in-law is your brother-in-law, and Third Uncle is Third Uncle; of course, I could let him do it!"

Qi Taiguo clicked his tongue, "Look at you, I didn't mean that at all, I didn't say he couldn't go!"

Cheng Su scoffed coldly, "Don't even start. I'm still annoyed about it. You see what your mother has dragged me into. Just wait and see, someone will surely say that I'm heartless."

"That's right, so why did you only allow your Third Uncle..." Qi Taiguo found it strange that she refused everyone else but voluntarily suggested Third Uncle go.

"Look and see, other than my Third Uncle's family, what have the other families done? Have Third Uncle and Third Aunt ever brought up asking me to arrange this? Do you not see what kind of person Third Aunt is?" said Cheng Su.

Qi Taiguo fell silent.

In Cheng Su's Third Uncle's family, not a single one was a pain.

Therefore, Cheng Su was willing to help, and besides, this was her own blood-related Third Uncle. If she could help her husband's Elder Sister, why couldn't she help her own Third Uncle from her maternal family?

If the Qi family had anything to say, she had plenty of justifications ready at hand.

Helping people also depended on who the other person was; Cheng Su wasn't about to make herself uncomfortable.

Take, for example, Big Flower from the maternal side of the family hall: A young girl, always staring at her cousin's man, does she have no shame at all?

Or take Second Aunt's son Dongzi: Claims he only manages things, pah! Who does he think he is, daring to overstep with her!

Of course, Qi Taiguo wasn't about to say Third Uncle couldn't go. He said, "But if you arrange it just for Third Uncle, aren't you afraid others will talk even more?"

Cheng Su sneered, "Who am I afraid of? What do I owe them? They say to arrange it, and I arrange it? What benefit do I have? As for their talk, let them talk. Will I lose a piece of flesh?"

"You're not afraid, so why blame Mom?" Qi Taiguo muttered.

Cheng Su gave him a cold look, "That's a separate matter. As they say, less trouble is better than more. If it weren't for her big mouth, would people be gossiping about me? This is creating issues out of nothing!"

"Alright, alright, everything's my fault!"

"It's not your fault, it's your mother's. Hey, I just don't get it, she clings to every cent as if afraid thieves are eyeing it, so why so eager to show off this time? Isn't this just announcing, 'I have money, the Qi family has money?'" Cheng Su was also puzzled by Mother Qi's actions.

But whatever she did, it was never quite right, obviously just creating trouble for her.

Qi Taiguo tried to please her, "You're capable, maybe Mom was just so happy and proud that she blurted it out. Old folks, you know, if they have something good or something to boast about, naturally they want others to envy them, right? Even me, I want to tell others how capable and virtuous my wife is!"

"Just listen to you, earlier you complained that I only focused on work and couldn't even cook a meal for you to eat!" Cheng Su brought up old grievances.

Qi Taiguo immediately said, "That was my nonsense in the past, my wife, let's turn over a new leaf, shall we? With the New Year coming up, shall we have a good celebration?"

Hearing his soft tone, Cheng Su sighed. She felt a fire burning inside her, but she couldn't vent it all on Qi Taiguo. What annoyed her the most was her mother-in-law creating problems for no reason at all.