

#### Chapter 4 - Drunken Murder

The atmosphere in the ancestral hall grew tense. The village head's expression sank. "What, Li Erlang, you're not satisfied with my arrangements?" The ruffians began to rub their hands, eager for action, while the leader with patchy hair held a woodcutter.

The other elders either closed their eyes or tried to persuade him, "Xiao Er, don't act rashly." "You're no match for them." "Caretaker Liu is permitting you to keep helping out with work on his land. He'll pay you a little more. Won't you still be fed?"

Li Qingshan responded vaguely and left the ancestral hall somehow. As left, he was even tripped by the patchy-haired leader, almost falling over and leading to a roar of laughter from behind.

Along the way, he came across the witch. She smiled complacently. "A calamity, a calamity. It's still not too late to give offerings to the god right now."

Li Qingshan returned to his new house below Crouching Ox hill and lied down. He felt no happiness at all.

The sun set in the west, and the sky darkened. The crows of chickens and the barking of dogs gradually died down, and the village recovered its peace.

The black ox strolled in from outside. Li Qingshan sat up, and just when he was about to speak, the black ox said, "I saw it all, but I didn't help you."

"I didn't want you to help me. I don't care about that bit of land either. It's just that I..."

"Just can't let it go?"

"Yes."

"There are plenty of matters in the world where right and wrong are twisted and distorted. Let alone the indignation that you, a mere mortal, experiences, even immortals, buddhas, and great sages of tremendous power will have times when they feel wronged and insulted. How can your little bit of anger be compared to theirs?"

Li Qingshan's eyes widened. "But I don't want to just take it lying down." He suddenly thought of the knife again.

The black ox stared at him silently for quite a while before suddenly laughing aloud. "Good, good, good. As long as you can't accept it. When a real man goes about his matters, he is clear with his debts of gratitude and revenge. Even the debt of a single meal must be returned, while the grievance of a hostile glare must be resolved. I originally thought your resolve had been worn down through the years, but you actually still have some manliness. And only like that are you worthy of me teaching you."

Li Qingshan was dazed. "You were testing me?"

The black ox sniffed. "That's a test? I just wanted to ask you which path you wanted to take."

"Which path?" Li Qingshan was

“There is a myriad of paths in this world. There are paths where you swallow your anger and play safe, as well as paths where you stick by your weapon and die for a righteous cause. Humans have human paths, daemons have daemon paths, gods have god paths, and ghosts have ghost paths. Each path is glorious in its own way, and each path has its own trade-offs...”

As Li Qingshan listened to the ox go on about paths, he felt overwhelmed. Are you trying to sing that ‘path path path’ song<sup>1</sup> to me? Reaching there, he interrupted the black ox, “I seek my own path!”

The black ox was taken by surprise before being overcome with joy. “You actually understood. That’s right. Among the myriad paths, you must seek your own path.” He pulled out a large gourd from somewhere, and it flew into Li Qingshan’s hands by itself. “Since you don’t want to take things lying down, I will teach you the way to not take things lying down.”

Li Qingshan only felt his hand droop. There was some sort of liquid sloshing around inside. After opening the gourd, the smell of alcohol assaulted him.

Li Qingshan smiled wryly. After eating meat, was he supposed to drink? This sequence of events seemed perfectly reasonable, but was there anyone who cultivated just by relying on these two items? If people could become immortals by eating meat and drinking alcohol, all the wealthy people in the world would have become immortals already. Were immortals all just useless gluttons?

The black ox only said eight words, “Meat strengthens the body. Alcohol gives you courage.”

Li Qingshan made up his mind and tilted his head, gulping down all the alcohol. It was just unfiltered alcohol from the village. However, with the gourd of alcohol in his belly, he felt the world spin around him. He stared at the black ox in a daze. Did the ox want him to drink away his anger?

“Go kill someone, and I’ll teach you how to cultivate.” The black ox said flatly, acting like it had just mentioned something insignificant. With that, it crouched down.

Li Qingshan only felt a chill rise up from his back. He suddenly realised that before him was not a diligent old ox who had ploughed the land across all these years with him, but an actual ox monster. It would not be guiding him on a tranquil, peaceful path of immortals and buddhas, but a malicious, brutal path of daemons and demons.

Before it had even taught him any great abilities, it wanted him to eat meat, drink alcohol, and kill someone.

Was he really supposed to go kill someone? Faces flashed before him. He hated these people, to the point where he wanted to kill them, but he knew that he was not brave enough to do so. The black ox had seen through this, which was why it made him drink to gain courage.

Was this to demonstrate his loyalty or a formality for accepting him as a disciple?

Recalling what had happened today, a sense of tipsiness swelled up and anger flowed out. Li Qingshan raised his head and took in a deep breath. He lowered his head. “Kill whom?”

“That’s your problem. Let me just say this first. I won’t help you, nor will I save you. I am just an ordinary ox.”

The moon was bright that night, scattering a frosty light on the ground. Li Qingshan walked under the moonlight alone, only to find that the moon was dazzling. He would much rather it be shrouded by a dark cloud.

The village was quiet. Li Qingshan swayed about in the village as he felt at a loss.

Arriving before a run-down house, he heard a hubbub from inside. Li Qingshan recognised them clearly. They were the ruffians from the ancestral hall today. He quickly pressed against the wall and crouched down, eavesdropping on what they were saying.

“Today’s alcohol came far too easily. We just stood around in the ancestral hall and caretaker Liu rewarded us with so much.”

Li Qingshan immediately recognised the voice. Patch-haired Liu was a renowned ruffian in the village. He would loaf around and be up to no good everyday. He had a vicious and twisted personality, often carrying a woodcutter around with him. The villagers were all rather afraid of him. Even when they found him stealing things, they were afraid to do anything to him. The other scoundrels followed him as their leader.

“This is all thanks to your might, big brother. Didn’t you see that kid’s face? He even turned pale from fright.” A roar of laughter rang out from inside.

Li Qingshan had no idea how he looked back then, but he was definitely bright red now. The tipsiness mixed with his anger and rushed to his head.

“It’s just a pity that the coward didn’t try to pick a fight. I haven’t used my arms and legs in a long time. Originally, I planned on using him for some practise. That kid never takes me seriously.”

Having experienced two lives, Li Qingshan was not as afraid of him as the ordinary villagers were. He had never thought that it would lead to hostility.

“Big brother, if you want to beat him up, it can’t be any easier. That idiot built his house outside the village. We can throw something over his head and give him a bashing. How simple is that? We might as well lead his ox away and sell it on the market. We’ll be able to get some money for drinking too.”

The other scoundrels all played along and agreed.

Li Qingshan let out a breath of alcohol and grasped the knife in his bosom.

Patch-haired Liu had been filled up with alcohol. He came outside to take outside, but he did not return inside afterwards. Instead, he made his way south of the village along a path.

Li Qingshan found this to be strange. He immediately followed along and saw him arrive before the house of the renowned widow Liu of the village, calling out for her to open the door. Only then did he understand what he wanted to do.

The door remained firmly shut, and not a single lamp had been lit up either. She was clearly afraid of him. There were a few cottages nearby, but everyone actually ignored him.

Under the influence of alcohol, patch-haired Liu let loose a great string of profanity and kicked the door viciously a few times. His swearing led to a series of dog barks around the village before he finally turned around and left.

The widow inside eased up a little and silently peeked outside through the door slit. As expected, patch-haired Liu had left, causing her to finally relax. Suddenly, there was a flash right before her, and she saw a figure following patch-haired Liu closely. It was dark, so she was unable to make out the figure's appearance or attire. She only thought he was one of patch-haired Liu's followers, but she could feel that something was rather off.

Li Qingshan followed patch-haired Liu to a remote area. Making up his mind, he yelled out and suddenly lunged forward.

Patch-haired Liu turned around in surprise, but all he saw was a dull knife stab towards him. He immediately became half-sober. He wanted to escape or fight back, but his arms and legs were powerless. Normally, he only used a blade to scare some villagers and would get involved in some scuffles. When did he truly experience an actual battle for his life? The assailant was just a teenager, but when his killing intent and determination flooded over, he was like a wild beast from the mountains.

Without any obstruction, the knife plunged into his body. Even Li Qingshan himself had never expected patch-haired Liu who swaggered around daily to be so useless. Looking at patch-haired Liu's terrified, begging expression, he seemed to become even more drunk. His eyes shone with a dim redness as his head seemed to stop working. Only his hands continued to move constantly.

The sheen of the knife and the colour of blood danced about in the darkness.

By the time that Li Qingshan had calmed down, patch-haired Liu had already collapsed in a pool of his own blood. He could not be more dead than that. The heavy smell of blood under this moonlit night was slightly chilling.

Li Qingshan forcefully composed himself and left in a hurry. He ran all the way to the stream below the Crouching Ox hill in one breath before stopping. He looked at himself in the reflection of the water and could not help but leap in fright. "Is this still me?"

The water reflected a bloodied teenager, his mouth tightly shut and his eyes wide open with an undispersed sense of murderousness. It was extremely terrifying.

Li Qingshan cupped the cool stream water and washed all the blood off himself before returning to the cottage. He did not pay any attention to the black ox beside him. Instead, he directly collapsed on his bed.

Only now did his hands begin to shake; they were suddenly covered in cold sweat, drenching his clothes. He had completely sobered up now.

The black ox asked with a smile. "Aren't you going to run away?" It was as if it were not the reason why Li Qingshan had gone and killed someone.

Li Qingshan replied, "I need to run away after killing someone like that?" He had not chosen patch-haired Liu on impulse. He was utterly wretched in the village. No one would stand forward for him. If no one reported the matter, there would be no investigation. As long as he did not leave behind any

evidence that was far too obvious, nothing definite would probably come up over the death of such a person.

The approval in the black ox's eyes deepened. Finding a common person who killed once angered was very easy, but finding someone who knew who to kill, who not to kill, and how to remain safe while killing was not. Moreover, even if his current composure were all fake, it would only demonstrate his willpower.

Li Qingshan could not hide his trembling hands from the black ox, but in its eyes, there was no shame in this. There were plenty of people who were so fierce and cruel that murder was nothing in their eyes, but to be able to suppress this nervousness and fear until now was truly impressive.

Quite a while later, the black ox asked, "How do you feel?"

"Utterly terrified and utterly exhilarated!" Li Qingshan was speaking from the bottom of his heart. After the fear passed by, there was actually a sense of indescribable delight. Most of his pent-up anger had vanished. Thinking back to when he read 'Water Margin', it was the same feeling from the chapters of Lin Chong Shelters from the Snowstorm in the Mountain God Temple and General Zhang's Blood Spatters the Duck and Drake Bower<sup>2</sup>.

The black ox chuckled. "Get some sleep. There's a lot to do tomorrow!"

Li Qingshan's heart skipped a beat. He was overjoyed. "You mean..."

1. The song might be referring to this.