

Tales of Herding Gods

- Chapter 1

Chapter 1: Don't Go Outside When It's Dark

'Don't go outside when it's dark.'

This phrase had been circulating through Disabled Elderly Village for years, but exactly when it started doing so was never figured out. In spite of that, the truth of this phrase was never in doubt.

In Disabled Elderly Village, Granny Si started getting anxious as she watches the setting sun slowly hide behind the mountains. As the sun set, the last of its rays disappeared, suddenly leaving the entire world in absolute silence. No sound could be heard. The only thing that could be seen was the darkness that slowly approached from the west, swallowing every mountain, river, and tree in its path before finally arriving at Disabled Elderly Village and engulfing it.

Four ancient stone statues had been erected at the four corners of Disabled Elderly Village. These statues were so old and mottled that even Granny Si didn't know who sculpted them or when they had been constructed there.

As darkness fell, the four statues emitted a faint glow in the darkness. Seeing the statues light up as usual, Granny Si and the rest of the elderly in the village let out sighs of relief.

The darkness outside began growing thicker and thicker, but with the light of the statues, Disabled Elderly Village was still considered safe.

Suddenly, Granny Si's ears twitched as she let out a cry of astonishment. "Everyone, listen! A child is crying outside!"

Beside her, Old Ma shook his head and replied, "Impossible. You must be hearing things... Eh, there really is a baby crying!"

Except for Deaf, the rest of the elderly looked at one another upon hearing the cries of a baby echo through the darkness from outside the village. How could a baby appear nearby when Disabled Elderly Village was located in such a remote area?

"I'll go take a look!"

Granny Si grew excited as she tiptoed then ran to the side of one of the statues in the village. Old Ma immediately hurried over as well. "Have you gone mad, Old Woman Si? Leaving the village when it's dark means death!"

"The things in the dark are afraid of the stone statue. I won't die so quickly if I carry this statue out of the village!"

Granny Si bent over as she attempted to carry the stone statue. However, since she was a hunchback, she was unable to carry it on her back.

Old Ma shook his head. "Let me do it. I'll help you carry the statue!"

Another elderly person to the side walked over with a limp and said, "Old Ma, you won't be able to carry that stone statue for long with just that remaining arm of yours. With both my arms intact, it'll be better to let me do it."

Old Ma just stared at him. "Can you still walk with your lame leg, Damned Cripple? I may only have one arm left, but there's more than enough strength in it!"

He stabilized his footing as he carried the impossibly heavy stone statue with his only arm. "Old Woman Si, let's go!"

"Stop calling me damned old woman*! Cripple, Mute, and the rest be extra vigilant. Since the village will be short one stone statue, be sure not to let the things in the darkness slip in!"

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As Old Ma and Granny Si walked out of Disabled Elderly Village, strange and unknown things floated through the darkness around them. However, as the stone statue shone with rays of light, all of them screeched strangely and retreated back into the darkness.

After following the baby's cries for a few hundred steps, Old Ma and Granny Si moved forward and arrived at a huge river bank. This was where the baby's cries were coming from. The faint glow from the stone statue did not reach far enough, so both of them had to intently listen to the direction that the sound came from, moving upstream. After dozens of steps, the cry could be heard nearby. At the same time, Old Ma's only arm had nearly reached its limit. Granny Si used her bright eyes and spotted a small fluorescent glow in the distance. The glow came from a basket which had stopped at the river bank. It was also where the cries had been coming from.

"It really was a child!"

Granny Si moved forward to pick the basket up, but she was startled upon realizing she couldn't. Under the basket was a pair of pale white hands had become bloated by the

river water. These hands were propping up the basket and the child inside of it, pushing them all the way to the river bed.

“Don’t worry. The child is safe now,” Granny gently said to the woman under the water.

As if the female corpse heard her words, her hands loosened their grasp. She disappeared into the darkness as she got swept away by the river.

Granny Si lifted the basket up, and inside of it was a baby swaddled in cloth. A jade pendant that gave off a fluorescent glow rested atop the clothing. Both the glow of the jade pendant and the glow of the stone stature were very similar, but the glow of the jade pendant was much weaker. It was this jade pendant that had protected the child in the basket from the encroachment of the things in the darkness.

Since the glow of the jade pendant was weak, it was only able to protect the child and not the woman.

“It’s a boy.”

Returning to Disabled Elderly Village, all the villagers that gathered were old, weak, sick, and disabled. Granny Si peeled away the swaddling cloth to take a look at the baby, and the remnants of her withered, scattered teeth broke out into a grin. “There is finally a healthy person in our Disabled Elderly Village!”

Cripple, who only had one leg remaining, surprisingly asked, “Are you planning on raising him, Old Woman Si? We can’t even take care of ourselves! I think we should give him away...”

Granny Si erupted in anger. “I, an old woman, retrieved this child with my own strength. Why must I give him away?”

The group of villagers became submissive and did not dare to oppose her. Carried on a stretcher, the village chief came over. He was slightly worse than the rest of the elderly; at least the others had limbs, even if they were lesser than those of a normal human. He, on the other hand, had no limbs at all. However, everyone was very respectful of him. Even the fiend-like Granny Si did not dare to be impudent.

“Since we’re going to raise him, should we give him a name?” she asked.

Village Chief replied, “Old woman, do you see anything else in the basket?”

Granny Si went through the basket and shook her head. “There isn’t anything in here other than this jade pendant. The word “Qin” is on the pendant. The jade does not have any impurities, and it also has a strange power. It definitely isn’t an ordinary object... could it be from a rich family?”

“Should he be called Qin, or should his surname be Qin?”

Village Chief gave the question some thought before saying, “Let his surname be Qin, and let his name be Mu. Qin Mu. Once he grows up, let him be a herder. That should be enough for him to survive at least.”

“Qin Mu.” Granny Si looked at the swaddled baby who wasn’t afraid of her and was unexpectedly giggling without a care.

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The sound of a flute echoed across the river bank. A herder boy sat on a cow, playing a melodious tune on his flute. The herder boy looked to be eleven to twelve years of age, and he had delicate features, such as his red lips and white teeth. With his shirt half-open, a jade pendant dangled in front of his chest.

This young boy was indeed the baby that Granny Si had picked up from the river bank eleven years ago. The elderly in the village had painstakingly raised the boy over the years. Granny Si had found a cow so that, when Qin Mu was still a baby, he could have milk every day and live through the period in which babies would die young. However, no one knew where she got it from.

Even though the villagers of Disabled Elderly Village were all fiendish, all of them were very nice to Qin Mu. Granny Si was a tailor, and during most days, Qin Mu would learn how to tailor from Granny Si, how to gather and refine herbs from the Apothecary, how to use leg skills from Grandpa Cripple, how to use echolocation from Grandpa Blind, and how to properly breathe and exhale from the limbless village chief. As a result, each day went by quickly.

The cow had been his wet nurse since he was a baby, Granny Si had planned to sell her away, but Qin Mu was reluctant. Therefore, the job of herding cows was left to him.

Qin Mu frequently herded cows by the river bank, content with the green mountains and bluish-white clouds.

“Qin Mu! Qin Mu, save me!”

Suddenly, the cow Qin Mu was sitting on started to speak, greatly shocking him before he jumped down from its back. He could only see the cow’s eyes welling up with tears, and in a human tongue, it said, “Qin Mu, you have consumed my milk since you were a baby. I can partially be considered your mother, so you need to save me!”

Qin Mu blinked, then asked, “How do I save you?”

The cow said, “There’s a sickle at your waist. Cut away my skin and you can save me from being trapped.”

Qin Mu hesitated.

“Have you forgotten the grace in which I nurtured you?” the cow asked.

Qin Mu raised his sickle and carefully cut the cow's skin. It was strange, but when the cowskin had been peeled away, not a single drop of blood flowed out. In addition to that, the inside of the cowskin was unexpectedly empty—no flesh or bone could be seen.

Halfway through peeling the skin from the cow, a woman who appeared to be twenty to thirty years old rolled out, both legs still wrapped in those of the cow. Her skin and the cow's skin were connected, but her upper body had already been separated from the cow's skin.

With her disheveled hair, the woman grabbed the sickle from the hands of the flabbergasted Qin Mu and cut the cowskin from her legs in two to three moves. Her courage turned into evil as she looked at Qin Mu and pointed the sickle at him, laughing coldly. “Vile little creature! I was turned into a cow because of you, and for eleven years, I could only eat grass and even had to feed you milk! I had just given birth to my poor child before that witch plotted against me and turned me into a cow just to feed you milk! Now I'm finally free! I'm going to kill you, then I'll slaughter every evil being in this village!”

Qin Mu was dumbfounded and had no idea what the lady from the cowskin was talking about.

Just as the lady was about to slice him to death, she suddenly felt a chill from the center of her back. She looked down and saw the blade of a knife jutting out from her chest.

“Mu'er, your Grandpa Apothecary wants you to go home for your medicines.” The corpse of the lady collapsed to the floor. Behind her, pleasantly smiling at Qin Mu and holding a knife that dripped blood, was Grandpa Cripple from the village.

“Grandpa Cripple...” Qin Mu body went limp as he looked at the cowskin and the lady's corpse in a daze.

“Go on back now.” Cripple patted him on the shoulder and chuckled.

As Qin Mu stumbled back to the village, he turned back to look and saw Cripple throwing the lady's corpse into the river.

The impact of this scene was so great to him that he didn't even realize when he'd returned to the village.

“Qin Mu! Damned brat, what did I tell you? Don't go outside when it's dark!”

As night fell, the stone statues at the four corners of Disabled Elderly Village automatically began to light up again. Granny Si stopped Qin Mu, who was planning to sneak out of the village to check on the cowskin and dragged him back.

“Granny, why can’t we go out when the sky goes dark?” Qin Mu asked, raising his head.

“When the sky goes dark, some scary things will move around in the darkness. Going outside means certain death,” Granny Si solemnly said. “The stone statues in the village protect us, and the things in the darkness dare not enter the village.”

“Do the other villages have stone statues like this too?” Qin Mu asked out of curiosity.

Granny Si nodded her head. However, she kept looking outside of the village with a worried expression, mumbling to herself, “Cripple should be back soon... I really shouldn’t have let Cripple go out. He only has one leg remaining...”

“Granny, something weird happened today...”

Qin Mu hesitated for a moment before telling Granny Si about the woman that emerged from the cow’s stomach. Granny Si nonchalantly replied, “Are you talking about that woman? Cripple told me about that. He settled it properly. When you were weaned at four years old, I wanted to sell the cow away, but you didn’t want me to. In the end, I let you care for it. You see what happened? I said you would definitely develop feelings for the cow if you drank its milk until you were four years old.”

Qin Mu blushed. Four years of age was definitely too late to wean a child off of milk, but that wasn’t the important thing here, right?

“Granny, Grandpa Cripple killed that lady...”

“It was a good kill.” Granny Si laughed. “She made a bargain. She would have died eleven years ago. If it weren’t for our need to nurse you, could she have lived up to today?”

Qin Mu didn’t know what she was talking about.

Granny Si glanced at him and said, “That woman was the wife of the lord of Border Dragon City which is located thousands of miles away. Border Dragon City Lord is lecherous, and that woman got jealous easily. The Border Dragon City Lord loves to go out womanizing and kidnapping maidens from respectable families. Every single time the Border Dragon City Lord defiled the purity of a maiden, his wife would send her men to beat that maiden to death. I originally snuck into Border Dragon City planning to assassinate her, but when I saw that she had just given birth to a child that was only three months old and saw that she had the milk you needed, I turned her into a cow. I didn’t think that this woman would actually manage to break free from the seal, speak, and nearly harm you.”

Utterly amazed, Qin Mu cried out, “Granny, how do you turn a human into a cow?”

Granny Si chuckled, revealing her withered teeth. “You want to learn? I’ll teach you... Oh, Cripple is back!”

Qin Mu look over and saw Cripple limping back, gripping a crutch with one hand and carrying a beast over his back with another. Darkness came flooding toward the village like raging tide, causing Granny Si worriedly shout, “Move faster, Damned Cripple! Faster!”

“What’s the rush?”

Cripple continued walking toward the village at a steady pace, and at the exact moment he entered the village, the thick darkness flooded over the entire village. The beast on his back, a fierce multi-colored tiger, was still alive. The darkness brushed against its tail, and it suddenly howled in pain. Qin Mu rushed behind it to take a look and saw that the only thing left of the tiger’s tail was bone. All of the tail’s skin, fur, and flesh had disappeared as if something had chewed everything off.

Qin Mu gazed into the darkness outside the village, curiosity piqued, unable to see anything in the pitch black.

“What is it that exists within the darkness?” he thought.

*司老太婆 (Old Woman Si) is a pun for 死老太婆 (Damned Old Woman)