



TANG JIU QING

BALLAD
of SWORD
& WINE 1
QIANG JIN JIU

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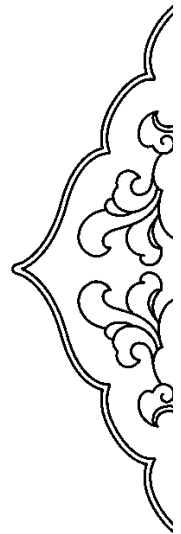
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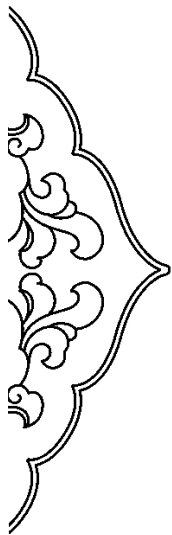


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- Character & Name Guide
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Chapter 1: Frigid Wind

“**S**HEN WEI, the Prince of Jianxing, suffered a crushing defeat at Chashi River in the northeast. The prefecture of Dunzhou’s front line fell into enemy hands, and thirty thousand soldiers were buried alive in the Chashi Sinkhole. You were among them—so how is it that you’re the only one left alive?”

Shen Zechuan’s eyes were glazed and unfocused. He didn’t answer.

The interrogator slammed his hands on the table and leaned in, a vicious glint in his eyes. “Shen Wei had long been in secret communication with the Twelve Tribes of Biansha. He intended to hand the six prefectures of Zhongbo to our enemies on a silver platter. Together with your Biansha allies, you planned to breach the defenses of Qudu from within and without. This is why the Biansha Horsemen spared your life, is it not?”

Shen Zechuan’s dry, chapped lips parted as he struggled to understand the interrogator’s words. The jut of his throat bobbed as he answered with difficulty, “N-no.”

“Shen Wei immolated himself to escape judgment. The Embroidered Uniform Guard has already presented correspondence proving his secret liaisons with the Biansha tribes to the emperor. And yet, boy, you still deny it. Your stubbornness borders on stupidity!” the interrogator snapped.

Shen Zechuan’s head felt heavy, his mind dazed. He had no idea how long it’d been since he’d last slept. He felt as though he was hanging from a single thread thousands of feet in the air. If he negligently let go for so much as an instant, he would plummet to the ground and be smashed to pieces.

The interrogator opened Shen Zechuan’s written statement and gave it a cursory glance. “You said last night you were able to climb out of the Chashi Sinkhole alive because your elder brother protected you—is that so?”

The scene swam hazily before Shen Zechuan’s eyes. The sinkhole was so deep, countless soldiers packed together within. But even as the pile of corpses grew higher and higher beneath their feet, still they could not reach the edge. No matter how they struggled, they couldn’t climb out. The Biansha Horsemen surrounded the sinkhole, and the whistle of arrows mingled with the frigid night wind. The blood rose up to his calves as the anguished wails and final gasps of the dying crowded close to his ears.

Shen Zechuan’s breaths came fast and shallow, and he shivered in his seat. He clutched at his hair despite himself, unable to prevent

a strangled sob from escaping his throat. “You’re lying.”

The interrogator held up the statement and flicked it with a finger. “Your brother is Shen Zhouji, the eldest lawful son of the Prince of Jianxing. This brother of yours abandoned thirty thousand soldiers before the Chashi Sinkhole and attempted to stealthily flee with his own private guards. The Biansha Horsemen lassoed him with a rope and dragged him to death on the public road along the Chashi River. He was dead by the time the Twelve Tribes of Biansha slaughtered those soldiers in the sinkhole. It’s impossible for him to have saved you.”

Shen Zechuan’s mind was awlirl. The interrogator’s voice sounded so far away; all he could hear were the unending wails.

Which way out? Where are the reinforcements?

The dead crowded against the dead. Putrid, decaying flesh pressed down on his hands. Mu-ge¹ shielded him from above, sprawled over the bloodied corpses. Shen Zechuan listened to Mu-ge’s ragged breaths, and the cries that escaped his throat were those of despair.

“Your brother is invincible.” Ji Mu struggled to squeeze out a smile, but tears were streaming down his face and his voice hitched as he continued, “I’m an impregnable fortress! Hang on just a bit longer; it’ll be fine. Reinforcements will arrive soon. When they

come, we'll go home and get our parents, and I need to find your sister-in-law..."

"Come clean with it!" the interrogator barked, banging on the table.

Shen Zechuan began to struggle as if to break free of invisible shackles, but the Embroidered Uniform Guard swarmed over and pinned him to the table.

"Since you arrived in our Imperial Prison, I've taken your youth into account and haven't meted out severe punishment. But it seems you don't know what's good for you—don't blame us if we're ruthless. Men, carry out his punishment!"

Shen Zechuan's arms were bound with rope; they dragged him to an open space in the chamber. Someone set down a bench with a clatter and tied his legs to it. The burly man beside him lifted his broad wooden staff, hefted it briefly in his hands, and swung it down.

"I'll ask you one more time." The interrogator brushed at the foam on his tea with the lid of his cup and took a few unhurried sips. "Did Shen Wei collude with our enemies and commit treason?"

Shen Zechuan gritted his teeth and refused to yield. He shouted between strikes of the heavy staff, "N-no!"

The interrogator set his cup aside. “The Shen Clan wouldn’t be in this position today if you’d shown such fortitude on the battlefield. Continue!”

“Shen Wei didn’t collude with the enemy...” Shen Zechuan rasped, his head hanging and his voice hoarse. He was crumbling, bit by bit.

“We suffered a crushing defeat at the Battle of Chashi River all because Shen Wei recklessly met the enemy head-on. After that loss, he had a chance to turn the tide at the Dunzhou front line—yet despite his great advantage in strength over the enemy troops, he withdrew his forces. Because of this, the three cities of Duanzhou Prefecture fell into enemy hands. Ten of thousands of common citizens lost their lives on the edge of Biansha scimitars.”

The interrogator heaved a lengthy sigh and continued with rueful disdain, “All six prefectures of Zhongbo were bathed in blood. Shen Wei took his troops and retreated south once again. But the battle he fought in Dengzhou Prefecture was the most suspect of all. The Chijun Commandery Garrison from Qidong had already crossed Tianfei Watchtower to provide assistance—yet he abandoned this pincer attack. Instead, he mobilized thousands of cavalry to escort his own family to the city of Dancheng. The entire front line at Dengzhou Prefecture collapsed without these troops. Was this not intentional sabotage? If it weren’t for the Libei Armored Cavalry racing three days and nights to cross the Glacial River, the Biansha Horsemen would even now be at the gates of Qudu!”

Shen Zechuan was drenched in cold sweat, his consciousness fading. The interrogator flung the statement at him in contempt, and it slapped against the back of his head.

“Rather a dog than a man of Zhongbo, eh? Shen Wei is a sinner before Great Zhou. Do you yet deny it? You have no choice but to accept your guilt!”

Shen Zechuan was in agony, half of his body numb. He lay collapsed on the bench, the paper fluttering before his eyes. The ink strokes on it were clear, every character like the humiliating lash of a whip on his face, announcing to the world:

Shen Wei betrayed his country. He's less than a dog.

They had left the six prefectures of Zhongbo piled high with bodies. To date, the corpses at the bottom of the Chashi Sinkhole remained uncollected. Everyone in the cities of Dunzhou who might have collected them had been massacred.

Shen Wei had burned himself to his death, it was true—but this debt of blood must be borne by a living person. Shen Wei had a harem of wives and concubines who bore him a bounty of sons, but every one of them had perished when the Biansha Horsemen entered Dunzhou. Only because Shen Zechuan was of low birth, raised far from the family, had he managed to escape with his life.

They dragged Shen Zechuan back to his cell, his heels leaving twin trails of blood in their wake. He faced the wall and gazed at the small, narrow window. Outside, the frigid wind howled, and the snow came pelting down. The night, black as pitch, stretched without end.

In his head was primal chaos. Amid the cries of the wind, his mind wandered back to the sinkhole.

Ji Mu was dying. His breathing had grown labored. Blood dripped down his armor onto the back of Shen Zechuan's neck, where it quickly turned cold. The wails around him had quieted, leaving only the groans of unendurable pain and the bellows of the biting wind.

Shen Zechuan lay nose-to-nose with a dead man whose features were no longer recognizable. His legs were pinned under the weight of human bodies; a shield dug painfully into his ribs. All he could smell as he gasped for air was the thick stench of blood. He gritted his teeth, tears streaming down his face, but he couldn't afford to cry aloud. In despair, he stared down at the face trampled beyond recognition, yet could not tell if this was a soldier he knew.

"Ge," Shen Zechuan sobbed softly, "I...I'm scared..."

Ji Mu's throat bobbed. He gently patted Shen Zechuan's head. "It's all right... We'll be okay."

Shen Zechuan heard the singing of the soldiers at death's door. The gale tore apart the sound of their songs and sent tattered pieces fluttering away into the frigid night.

“Battle in the city south... Death within the city north...

Graveless, left exposed to rot... May the crows feed.”²

“Ge,” Shen Zechuan whispered beneath him. “I’ll carry you on my back... Ge.”

Ji Mu’s body was like a bent and broken shield. He smiled and said in a hoarse voice, “I can walk on my own.”

“Were you struck by an arrow?”

“No.” Ji Mu’s tears had dried up. He said breezily, “Those Biansha baldies have no aim.”

Shen Zechuan’s fingers were soaked in flesh and blood. He wiped his face with some difficulty. “Shiniang³ made dumplings. Once we get home, we can eat as many as we like.”

Ji Mu sighed. “I’m a slow eater. Don’t...snatch.”

Shen Zechuan gave a firm nod beneath him.

The snow gradually blanketed Ji Mu's body. He seemed very tired, so quiet was his voice, and he hadn't even the strength to move his fingers. The song was sung achingly slow, and when it reached the line, "*the valiant rider died in the fray,*" Ji Mu closed his eyes.

"I...I'll give Ge my money too, to get married..." said Shen Zechuan.

"Ge."

"Ge."

Ji Mu remained silent. As if he were weary of listening to Shen Zechuan speak and couldn't help but drift off.

Shen Zechuan trembled all over. He didn't remember when the Biansha Horsemen left or how he had clawed his way out. When he finally pushed himself up and pulled himself out, it was to dead silence amid the heavy snow. The stacked corpses cushioning his knees had the look of discarded burlap sacks.

Shen Zechuan turned to glance down and choked with sobs.

Ji Mu's back had been pierced with such a dense cluster of arrows that his body was like a curled hedgehog. All his blood had trickled down onto Shen Zechuan's back, but Shen Zechuan hadn't realized it. The thunder of horses' hooves came swiftly toward him like the looming storm.