



TANG JIU QING

BALLAD
of SWORD
& WINE 4
QIANG JIN JIU

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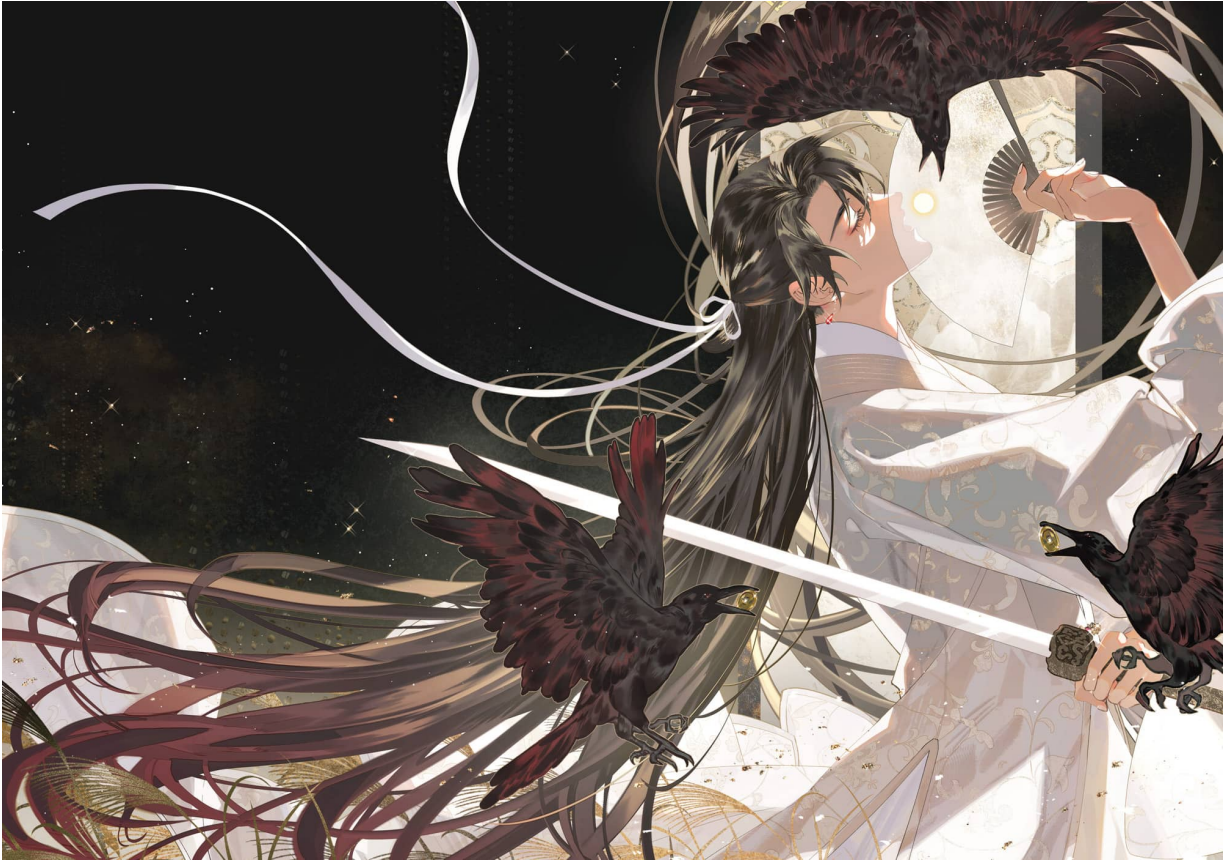
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BALLAD of SWORD & WINE QIANG JIN JIU



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Chapter 113: Reunion

IT WAS DAYLIGHT'S last hour. A few rays of evening sun lingered on the courtyard walls, diffused by the leaves of the pagoda trees. Ding Tao sat cross-legged on the veranda, keeping watch. He rolled some fruit around his silver plate, counting the pieces over and over again.

Shen Zechuan had just awoken. He had slept too long and too soundly, and felt almost more exhausted than when he'd lain down, his back sore and aching. He opened the door, blinking for a moment when he saw Ding Tao.

Ding Tao squirmed awkwardly under Shen Zechuan's gaze. Hiding the fruit in his hand behind his back, he asked apprehensively, "Gongzi—dinner?"

Shen Zechuan stood quietly for a spell, one hand on the doorframe for support, before croaking, "What time is it?"

"It's just now evening." Ding Tao was surprisingly astute today; he quickly added, "Gongzi slept the entire day! Master left the city at the crack of dawn. Lord Zhou and Mister Chengfeng went together to see him off."

The corners of Shen Zechuan's eyes were still tinged red; he was fair-skinned to begin with, and catching the last rosy glow of the evening sun, he looked flushed, as if he'd had too much wine. As he lowered his lashes to slip on his shoes, Ding Tao gaped at his beauty.

"Still no word from Juexi?" Shen Zechuan descended the steps, but he was in no hurry to leave. He stood under the pagoda tree and looked up at the sky, slowly recovering from the residual effects of last night's exertion.

“No.” Ding Tao fell into step behind him. While Shen Zechuan was distracted, Ding Tao seized the opportunity to hastily stuff the uneaten half of his fruit into his mouth, gulping it down ravenously.

Shen Zechuan saw no sign of Meng; Xiao Chiye must have taken him along. He turned back, startling Ding Tao, who choked. After a moment, Shen Zechuan said, “No one will fight you for it. Take your time.”

Ding Tao was coughing so hard his eyes swam with tears. Waving a frantic hand, he tugged at the front of his clothes and said with difficulty, “G-Gongzi, *ack!* Are we going to see Lord Zhou? He and Mister Chengfeng already had dinner and are in the front hall discussing things now.”

Shen Zechuan nodded. “By all means.”

After taking his evening meal, Zhou Gui had convened in the study with Kong Ling and various other Cizhou officials. He rose at once upon hearing of Shen Zechuan’s arrival and dismissed the others.

“His Lordship informed us the vice commander was indisposed. We hadn’t intended to discuss any military matters until tomorrow. We weren’t expecting you’d be well enough to attend today,” Kong Ling said, hoping to alleviate any awkwardness as he showed Shen Zechuan to the seat of honor at the head of the room, facing the door. He returned to his place, angling his body to face Shen Zechuan and Zhou Gui, and continued, “Although we’re still in the hot sixth month, the trees in the residence are all tall with lush canopies; there’s not much direct sunlight, and it’s often brisk at night. Moving here after so many years in Qudu, the vice commander must be mindful of your health.”

Shen Zechuan took a sip of tea to moisten his throat. The hoarseness in his voice now a little less obvious, he said, “You’re right, of course. You mentioned we would discuss military matters tomorrow. Does that mean you’ve agreed on a plan for the garrison?”

“In the days since the vice commander signed a treaty of alliance with us, I’ve gathered my advisors alongside the various ranking officials of Cizhou and drafted a simple plan.” Hand on his knee, Zhou Gui watched as Kong Ling rose and passed a thin booklet to Shen Zechuan. “This is all tentative,” he continued. “We’ll still need the vice commander’s approval on the specifics. Take a look. If there’s anything amiss, let’s raise it for further discussion tonight.”

Although he had said they were waiting on Shen Zechuan’s approval, *raise it for further discussion* meant most of the plans within the booklet had been finalized. Thus was the predicament in which Shen Zechuan found himself: He had money, but no practical authority; Xiao Chiye’s deferential attitude toward Shen Zechuan was the only reason he had a seat at the table with these two. Zhou Gui could thank him and might even hold him in high esteem, but he would never hand over his authority to make policy in Cizhou—they had agreed on a treaty of alliance, not allegiance.

The room fell silent as Shen Zechuan read through the booklet. He had left Ding Tao outside teasing his sparrow; there were no servants nearby to disturb them. As Kong Ling sipped his tea, he was struck by a sense of unease. He maintained his composure and studied Shen Zechuan’s expression, but could read nothing on his face. He glanced at Zhou Gui, whose knit brows gradually betrayed his mounting anxiety. He couldn’t help but consider: Shen Zechuan might be young, but he was incredibly shrewd, and adept at keeping his thoughts to himself. After spending several days together, Kong Ling still couldn’t gauge how he felt about their arrangement, and therefore had no idea how to respond. Drafting this book had partly been an attempt to sound him out.

By the time Shen Zechuan shut the book, the sun was gone. He rubbed his fingertips on the side of the teacup without saying a word.

Kong Ling also kept silent. He was merely the advisor; it wouldn’t do to overstep his authority and bypass Zhou Gui during discussions of serious official affairs.

Zhou Gui asked Kong Ling to light the lamps, then turned to face Shen Zechuan head-on, deliberating over his next words. At last he said, “What

does the vice commander think?”

“Your Excellency has precisely recorded the price fluctuations of the daily necessities of firewood, rice, oil, and salt in Cizhou over the past few years in this ledger; there’ll be no problem estimating next year’s expenditure. I can see you’ve also calculated the military pay and provisions that will need to be allocated for the garrison troops. With so many aspects to take into consideration, Your Excellency must have worked tirelessly,” Shen Zechuan said with a smile.

Zhou Gui let out a light sigh of relief at those words; he didn’t know why he’d been so tightly wound to begin with. “This was not something I could prepare alone; I have Chengfeng and my fellow officials to thank for this. Then, shall we discuss the defense of the city walls?”

Shen Zechuan’s fingers stilled on the cup. “Not quite yet. I have some questions.”

“Please, go on,” Zhou Gui prompted him.

“Your Excellency has estimated Cizhou’s approximate expenditure for the next year. Other than the amount allocated for the new garrison troops, there is also a reparation of sixteen thousand dan¹ of grain owed to the twenty thousand heads of the Imperial Army, bringing the total sum for both armies to one hundred and ten thousand dan.” Shen Zechuan pondered. “This is a projection based on the yield from the bumper harvest in Cizhou last year and the grain consumption of Cizhou’s current populace. But I can see Your Excellency has left a remaining ten thousand dan of grains unallotted.”

“That’s right,” Zhou Gui answered.

Although Xiao Chiye said he didn’t require payment, it was impossible not to offer something. Sixteen thousand dan of grain would feed the twenty thousand soldiers of the Imperial Army for two and a half months at most, but it was more than the monthly amount they allocated to the twenty

thousand Cizhou garrison troops. Though Cizhou was unable to supply a year's worth of grain, they had truly done their utmost.

Worried Shen Zechuan found it too little, Zhou Gui said earnestly, "I'm showing Cizhou's accounts to the vice commander today in the hope that the vice commander and the marquis will understand our predicament. Due to instability across the empire, our grain from last year has been successively allocated to Libei and to the bandits of Mount Luo, which we could never have foreseen. In past years, Juexi's granaries were solely responsible for the supply of military provisions, but this responsibility is now split between the two prefectures of Cizhou and Huaizhou. I can't speak for Huaizhou, but Cizhou had to scrimp and save in order to meet that quota. It's not that I'm complaining to the vice commander, but the truth is we're gritting our teeth to feed His Lordship's twenty thousand soldiers even temporarily. At this rate, there'll be nothing left in the granaries in a couple months. Fortunately, we're nearing the autumn harvest. Counting the days, we should just about make it until then; that's the only reason we're not yet desperate. I would like to ask the vice commander to intercede with His Lordship on behalf of Cizhou regarding this sixteen thousand dan of grain. It's not that we want to go back on our words by providing it to him next year instead of now, but there's really too much else to consider."

Shen Zechuan did not immediately reply. The frown permanently etched between Zhou Gui's brows deepened. He got to his feet and paced a few steps across the floor before he continued. "Cizhou is a place where the livelihood of its people is at the mercy of the elements. No one can say for sure if the heavens will be benevolent next year. Considering the current state of our empire, I fear that once war comes upon us, the fertile farmlands Cizhou has so recently cultivated will be trampled under soldiers' boots. Should that time come, even the common folk of the city won't be able to fill their stomachs; there will be nothing to feed a garrison even if we establish one. We set aside the military grain not only for a rainy day, but also in preparation for the needs of the Libei Armored Cavalry. Vice Commander, it's not that we're unwilling to give a bigger share to the marquis, but the Libei Armored Cavalry is the first line of defense against the Hanma tribe. It's undeniable that they are strategically more important than the twenty thousand men of the Imperial Army.

“Half the reason Cizhou was willing to sign a treaty of alliance with my lords is that I was thoroughly heartbroken and disillusioned by the moldy grain sent to the front lines by the Wei Clan and their collaborators in the military provisions case. The fact that His Lordship the marquis is the second young master of the Xiao Clan has also dispelled many of my misgivings. This is a favor to my lords, but particularly to Heir Xiao. Although you’ve promised us the continued use of the Northeast Provisions Trail, I can’t depend on this. Juexi is the granary of the empire, after all; there is no doubt the various clans will fight to claim this supply route. The vice commander wants it—the empress dowager even more so.

“Everything I’ve said to the vice commander this evening is sincere; these words come from the bottom of my heart.” Zhou Gui paused, slowly bowing to Shen Zechuan as he continued, “It’s not easy to make a living when the world is in turmoil. As the prefect of Cizhou, the prefecture’s safety must be my first priority. His Lordship and the vice commander have helped Cizhou out of a tight spot, and for that, I won’t hesitate to go through fire and flood for you both. If Cizhou has another bumper harvest this year, we can add more to this sixteen thousand dan of grain for the Imperial Army’s allocation next year. But Cizhou simply can’t supply the Imperial Army the same way we’re supplying the Libei Armored Cavalry. I’ll be frank with you: If Biansha attacks again this autumn, or if Libei is hard-pressed for provisions come spring, then Cizhou will allocate the grain to the Libei Armored Cavalry before we allocate it to the Imperial Army.”

The candlelight in the study was dim. Zhou Gui lived frugally, dressing in simple clothes and eating simple fare. Other than on an occasion like the welcome feast he’d thrown for Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye, his family dined on common dishes. During the years in which the region was beset by natural disasters, they had boiled and eaten tree bark, just like anyone else. At the moment, Cizhou seemed prosperous in comparison to the rest in Zhongbo, but in truth, it was still a shambles compared to the empire’s other regions. Setting aside a portion of the city’s grain for these new arrivals was something they had done under a great deal of pressure. The first time Xiao Chiye left the city to face Lei Changming, Zhou Gui had brought up requesting the aid of the Libei Armored Cavalry. It hadn’t been a spur-of-the-moment suggestion, but a notion deeply ingrained in his mind.

The fall of Zhongbo had come up in their conversations countless times—both implied and stated outright—but outsiders would never understand how it had felt to live through it. Zhou Gui had developed a nervous disorder after the defeat. If he heard so much as a whistle at night, he would toss and turn for hours in a constant state of anxiety.

The losses along the Chashi River had been more than devastating. Massacre, *massacre*—this word echoed from Duanzhou all the way to Qudu. It had been on everyone's lips in those terrible days. To Qudu, the bloodbath had been merely a smudge of ink on a report from the front lines, but for Zhongbo, the loss of their homes and families had been all too real.

It was only thanks to the Libei Armored Cavalry that Cizhou managed a narrow escape. In the eyes of Zhou Gui—of everyone in Cizhou—the Libei Armored Cavalry was of far greater importance than the Imperial Army. Xiao Jiming had descended from the heavens with his godly troops, swooping to their rescue, and that Iron Horse on River Ice became their talisman against the certain death of the northern and eastern frontiers of the Zhou empire at the hands of the Biansha Horsemen. Lei Jingzhe had wanted to take Cizhou, but he hadn't intended to settle there long; he would have robbed Cizhou's granaries and immediately left to seek reward in Qudu. The ever-present possibility that Xiao Jiming would deploy his troops southward was the fear nipping at his heels.

Xiao Jiming was said to have taken badly ill from the tainted grain, but no one had seen him with their own eyes. Those who counted on him didn't dare to believe it, and those who feared him didn't dare to bet on it. The old senior officials under Hai Liangyi were all wary of Xiao Fangxu, but their juniors in the ranks were more wary of Xiao Jiming.

Silence reigned in the study. The candle flame flickered.

Shen Zechuan felt his back and waist aching. Traces of Xiao Chiye's bites still marked his collarbone, concealed beneath his clothes. Strangely enough, at such a serious moment, he suddenly remembered Xiao Chiye's sweat-soaked face, his strong arms, and his gasping kisses along Shen Zechuan's neck.

In all his considerations of Xiao Chiye, he'd never once considered him lesser than Xiao Jiming.

Shen Zechuan did not stay silent long; though his mind wandered, it was only for a moment. "I understand. Next year, Ce'an and I will return to you the exact amount of the grain lent to us when we arrived here."

The color drained from Zhou Gui's face. He rushed to explain, "Vice Commander, that's not what we—"

"The issue I wanted to bring to Your Excellency's attention is not that the amount of grain you've allocated to the Imperial Army is too little, but that it's too much." Shen Zechuan motioned for Zhou Gui to sit, then continued his explanation. "The fact that Cizhou is willing to allocate such a significant amount of grain to the Imperial Army is proof of your sincerity. But as we mentioned earlier, the Imperial Army will only be relying on grain from Cizhou temporarily. In the future, the Imperial Army will supply its own military provisions and will not need to draw from Cizhou's granary."

Zhou Gui was aware of his own shortcomings and didn't dare reply directly. He looked to Kong Ling. "Chengfeng oversaw the drafting of this booklet, so there are some matters he understands better than I. Chengfeng, please explain to the vice commander."

Kong Ling got to his feet, keeping one hand on the back of the chair for support. Instead of explaining, he asked a question: "The vice commander is certain the Imperial Army will not lack for grain in the future. You also said the Northeast Provisions Trail will still be used as usual. In truth, we can think of no solution that would allow for this. Would the vice commander be so kind as to explain? Otherwise, we must insist the Imperial Army accept this grain."

Shen Zechuan gently brushed the lid over the tea in his cup. "Before that, I wish to ask both of you—do you expect Cizhou to merely live off the land from now on?"

"Cizhou is limited by its geography," Kong Ling replied. "If we don't live off the land, how can we survive?"

“What I see is the exact opposite.” Shen Zechuan set down the teacup. “It’s true that Cizhou’s position wasn’t originally ideal. You have Libei to the north and Chazhou to the south. You’re obstructed by Dunzhou and Duanzhou to the east and restricted by Dancheng to the west. Cizhou didn’t dare, nor was it able to, move as it pleased. But that was when Cizhou was subordinate to Qudu. Now that you’ve established a connection with Libei, Dancheng can no longer rely on Qudu’s power and influence to force you to do its bidding. Meanwhile, Dunzhou is overrun with the bandits, and the honest folk who remain there will soon flee, leaving the place a hollow husk. When this happens, three of the walls enclosing Cizhou will have collapsed. The remaining, Chazhou, is not an obstacle, but an opportunity.”

Zhou Gui fidgeted in his seat, wanting to stand up again. Kneading away at his robe until the fabric under his palms was wrinkled, he began cautiously, “You mean...”

“Chazhou lies along a waterway that leads right to Hezhou. After the fall of Zhongbo, traveling merchants from Hezhou took advantage of the opportunity to peddle foodstuffs at exorbitant prices in Zhongbo, making quick and huge profits from bandits of all kinds. It would be a true shame if this route was only used to make someone *else* rich.”

“But bandits run rampant in Chazhou too,” Kong Ling pointed out, “and they have connections with the Yan Clan of Hezhou. They won’t let us do business along that route for nothing.” He grew more anxious as he spoke. “Besides, what have we to trade? Compared to Hezhou, Cizhou is a remote hinterland.”

“Grain,” Shen Zechuan said.

The moment he said it, Zhou Gui lurched to his feet. “Absolutely not! If we did that, how would we be any better than those conscienceless thieves who conspired with the officials and merchants in Juexi to resell imperial grain for private profit?”

“Your Excellency, please hear me out.” Shen Zechuan’s gaze was steady, his manner so calm Zhou Gui couldn’t help but sit back down. “The reason there are thieves in Juexi and Hezhou reselling grain at exorbitant