



TANG JIU QING

BALLAD
of SWORD
& WINE 5
QIANG JIN JIU

Table of Contents

[Color Gallery](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Chapter 147: Stepmother](#)

[Chapter 148: Victory and Defeat](#)

[Chapter 149: Third Lady Hua](#)

[Chapter 150: Treacherous Minister](#)

[Chapter 151: Round-Up](#)

[Chapter 152: Hassen](#)

[Chapter 153: Defeat](#)

[Chapter 154: A Man](#)

[Chapter 155: Negotiations](#)

[Chapter 156: Sister-in-Law](#)

[Chapter 157: Zhongxiong](#)

[Chapter 158: Broken Jade](#)

[Chapter 159: Nameless](#)

[Chapter 160: Hearsay](#)

[Chapter 161: Sunset Glow](#)

[Chapter 162: Trade Market](#)

[Chapter 163: Boat on a River](#)

[Chapter 164: Sunrise](#)

[Chapter 165: Frostfall](#)

[Chapter 166: Liu'er](#)

[Chapter 167: Guest](#)

[Chapter 168: Scorpion](#)

[Chapter 169: Dunzhou](#)

[Chapter 170: Monster](#)

[Chapter 171: Tattoo](#)

[Chapter 172: Heru](#)

[Chapter 173: Black and White](#)

[Chapter 174: Mad Dog](#)

[Chapter 175: Kitten](#)

[Chapter 176: Breaking Waves](#)

[Chapter 177: Torrential Rain](#)

[Chapter 178: Merchants](#)

[Chapter 179: Woman](#)

[Chapter 180: Shen Wei](#)

[Chapter 181: Ce'an](#)

[Chapter 182: Quail](#)

[Chapter 183: Inseparable as Fish and Water](#)

[Chapter 184: Discourse](#)

[Chapter 185: Hongyan](#)

[The Story Continues](#)

[Appendix: Characters & Institutions](#)

[Glossary](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Footnotes](#)

[Back Cover](#)

[Newsletter](#)

BALLAD
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TABLE OF CONTENTS



- 147** Stepmother
- 148** Victory and Defeat
- 149** Third Lady Hua
- 150** Treacherous Minister
- 151** Round-Up
- 152** Hassen
- 153** Defeat
- 154** A Man
- 155** Negotiations
- 156** Sister-in-Law
- 157** Zhongxiong
- 158** Broken Jade
- 159** Nameless
- 160** Hearsay
- 161** Sunset Glow
- 162** Trade Market
- 163** Boat on a River
- 164** Sunrise
- 165** Frostfall
- 166** Liu'er
- 167** Guest





- 168** Scorpion
- 169** Dunzhou
- 170** Monster
- 171** Tattoo
- 172** Heru
- 173** Black and White
- 174** Mad Dog
- 175** Kitten
- 176** Breaking Waves
- 177** Torrential Rain
- 178** Merchants
- 179** Woman
- 180** Shen Wei
- 181** Ce'an
- 182** Quail
- 183** Inseparable as Fish and Water
- 184** Discourse
- 185** Hongyan

APPENDIXES

- Character & Name Guide
- Glossary

Chapter 147: Stepmother

THE MORNING AFTER their company rescued Yao Wenyu, Shen Zechuan was up before dawn. He draped a white, wide-sleeved outer robe over his shoulders to guard against the chill as he stood at the desk looking over Yao Wenyu's prescription.

"His body was ravaged by the poison." Teapot in hand, Qiao Tianya poured a cup for Shen Zechuan. "It's astonishing he's still alive."

Shen Zechuan picked up the teacup. "Given Xue Xiuzhuo's usual methods, he would have aimed to kill." His brows drew together. "Is there no hope for his legs?"

"No." Qiao Tianya put the lid on the pot.

Shen Zechuan couldn't bring himself to drink the tea; he placed the untouched cup back on the table. "What about his health? Now that he's here, spare no expense; get him whatever medicine the physician prescribes. And assign a few meticulous attendants to care for him. We mustn't be poor hosts."

Seeing Qiao Tianya silent, Shen Zechuan understood: Yao Wenyu's health would never be recovered. While they had been conversing the previous night, Yao Wenyu had repeatedly coughed bloody spittle. Shen Zechuan paused before asking, "Is he awake? I'll pay him a visit."

When Shen Zechuan arrived, he saw the maidservants waiting in attendance under the eaves, as petrified as cicadas in winter. He lifted the bamboo blinds to enter, his expression placid. The lamps were unlit, and the dimness lent the interior an air of bleak gloom. It was quiet and still within.

Shen Zechuan caught only a vague glimpse of Yao Wenyu's lonely back through the screen.

Seeming to sense his presence, Yao Wenyu glanced over his shoulder. "Vice Commander, please come in."

Shen Zechuan lifted the hanging screen and ducked inside. Qiao Tianya waited in the outer chamber, leaning against the wall as he listened to the chirps of the caged birds hanging over the veranda.

"Cizhou will enter autumn soon, and the matter of trade with Huaizhou has been on Your Excellency's mind of late."

Despite his severe illness and paralyzed legs, Yao Wenyu was unwilling to appear sloppy before anyone and had dressed impeccably. Only the bruises on his hands remained conspicuous, no matter how he tried to hide them.

Shen Zechuan appeared not to notice. "The matter is indeed worrying. There are disadvantages to approaching them about the purchase of grain both too early and too late. I've been discussing it with Lord Zhou for days, but we've yet to reach a conclusion."

Yao Wenyu gave a slight nod. "There are two difficulties with regard to Huaizhou. The first is Jiang Qingshan, and the second is the checkpoint at Luoxia Pass. Without resolving both, it will be hard to establish a trade route between Cizhou, Chazhou, and Huaizhou. But if you ask me, neither of these pose too great a challenge."

Shen Zechuan listened with rapt attention.

Outside, the birds were chirping. Yao Wenyu looked at the new gauze screens on the window and coughed a few times. When he had caught his breath, he said, "When Xue Xiuzhuo held the post of Chief Supervising Secretary of the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue, he made the acquaintance of Jiang Qingshan. The two have worked together for many years; they not only made up for the deficit in Juexi's taxes but turned the thirteen cities of Juexi into Great Zhou's granary. Only when Jiang Qingshan is in personal

command in Juexi can he ensure the integrity of Juexi's governance and prevent another major incident like the case of Libei's tainted grain earlier this year. In other words, Jiang Qingshan must not leave Juexi. Xue Xiuzhuo will no doubt transfer him back to his original post so he can continue to serve as Provincial Administration Commissioner. The vice commander needn't worry he will be sent north to Huaizhou."

During his years as Chief Supervising Secretary of the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue, Xue Xiuzhuo had enacted many practical policies to help people in the outlying provinces. He was well-acquainted with the political situation in all the various regions—this was why, during the reign of Xiande, he was able to work with Hai Liangyi to audit Hua Siqian's accounts. Likewise, although Yao Wenyu had never served in government, he had wandered the land all year long. Having observed every province for himself, he too was aware of political concerns across the empire. Despite their differences in identity and status, both men were more intimately acquainted with the plight of commoners than officials like Kong Qiu and Cen Yu, who resided in Qudu year-round.

"Regarding Luoxia Pass." Yao Wenyu turned back to Shen Zechuan. "Libei has broken free of Qudu's control. The garrison at Luoxia Pass is the predecessor of the Libei Armored Cavalry, and the troops stationed there are all former subordinates of the Prince of Libei, Xiao Fangxu. They have long been at odds with Qudu despite their appearance of unity. As it stands, Zhongbo's revival will be nothing but advantageous to Libei. Luoxia Pass should be all too eager to lend a helping hand; I doubt they'll deliberately obstruct you."

Yao Wenyu paused to cough again. Shen Zechuan handed him a cup of tea, and Yao Wenyu thanked him before continuing. "If you want a deal with Huaizhou, it's yours. Mister Chengfeng and Lord Yu's presence will be enough. I believe the most crucial matter at hand is not the north, but Zhongbo itself. The eastern prefectures of Dunzhou and Duanzhou can be left for the moment, but Fanzhou must be secured with all haste."

Shen Zechuan and Yao Wenyu conversed until noon, when Fei Sheng came to deliver Yao Wenyu's medicine. As Shen Zechuan stepped out, he looked around at the maidservants lined up under the eaves. He turned to Qiao Tianya. "You haven't had much to do lately. Let Fei Sheng and Ding Tao stay with me, while you remain here and take care of Yuanzhuo."

Fei Sheng had initially thought this task would fall to him. Qiao Tianya was Shen Zechuan's indispensable, trusted subordinate, the leader of all his personal guards. He never expected Shen Zechuan to let go of him this easily for the sake of Yao Wenyu. But from another angle, this merely illustrated Yao Wenyu's importance. With Qiao Tianya keeping watch, no one would dare neglect Yao Wenyu's care.

As for Shen Zechuan himself, he had a second layer of consideration.

Yao Wenyu was a proud man. Although his legs were broken, he was still a distinguished young master of Qudu, and refused to present a sorry sight to others. He hadn't called any of these maids to serve him this morning because he was unwilling to let them see him in his injured state. Fei Sheng was unsuited to care for him; his penchant for ingratiating himself with his superiors would be counter-productive here and make things awkward for all involved. In contrast, Qiao Tianya and Yao Wenyu shared a similar background. There were many things about Yao Wenyu only Qiao Tianya could truly understand.

Qiao Tianya murmured his acknowledgment and stayed.

Regardless of Yao Wenyu's pronouncements, any deal with Huaizhou would have to be discussed in detail with Zhou Gui. Shen Zechuan spent the next few days in the prefect's study. Given his acclaimed reputation, Zhou Gui's advisors all hoped to catch a glimpse of the famous Yao Wenyu. But Shen Zechuan declined all their visitation cards—the man had yet to recover from his injuries.

When Xiao Chiye received the letter informing him of Yao Wenyu's condition, he immediately turned to call for Wu Ziyu. When the young

general arrived, Xiao Chiye instructed him to send a military craftsman to Cizhou to design a custom four-wheeled vehicle for the scholar.

Wu Ziyu had been with Xiao Chiye for a month. His troops had gradually bonded with the Imperial Army over their misfit status and now got along better with them than anyone else. Since the soldiers of the other camps all looked down on them, they didn't waste their breath sucking up to the fighting battalions. Each time the supply squad delivered provisions, the receiving camp would check them. Once everything was confirmed in good order, they retraced their steps to their station at Border Camp, where they stayed put to avoid conflicts with the other camps.

"What kind of four-wheeled vehicle?" Wu Ziyu, still bare-chested from his ablutions, trailed behind Xiao Chiye. "For military sieges, transporting supplies, or...?"

Tantai Hu socked Wu Ziyu on the shoulder and scolded with a laugh, "Did he ask for you or a craftsman? Master has given his orders; just do it!"

"I've got to at least get the details clear so I can prepare materials before they head out," Wu Ziyu retorted.

The military craftsmen of Libei were renowned for their skill. Their workmanship was known to be excellent, and all the materials they used came straight from the Hongyan Mountains; they wouldn't care to source anything in Zhongbo.

"For moving about." Xiao Chiye had just dismounted and was filthy from head to toe. They'd been on the road for six days returning from the front lines; everyone was exhausted.

Wu Ziyu turned back to relay the command, while Chen Yang followed Xiao Chiye into the tent with the rest of his personal guards. The tables and chairs that had originally occupied the tent had been removed, replaced with a newly constructed sand table. Gu Jin was waiting when they arrived.

"Gu Jin." Xiao Chiye shrugged off his outer robe and tossed it to Chen Yang. He propped both elbows on the edge of the sand table, eyes already on

the lay of the land. “Report.”

Gu Jin pulled off his helmet, his face drenched in sweat. He pointed to Tudalung Banner. “When we brought the provisions up this time, I made a special trip around Tudalung Banner with our cavalry. It’s just as you suspected—Huhelu was redeployed to the southeast to make way for someone else. The commander stationed up north now is a man named Hassen. According to Wu Ziyu’s information, Hassen is Amur’s son, from the Hanma tribe. At the start of spring this year, the Biansha Horsemen attacked Third Sand Camp. Hassen led Amur’s vanguard against Zhao Hui in battle. The Three Great Battalions of Liuyang lost eight hundred men in that fight.”

Chen Yang pulled over a folding chair, and Xiao Chiye sat. “Those are heavy casualties.”

“Remarkably heavy.” Gu Jin pushed aside a strand of damp hair and continued. “This man is cunning and ruthless, but not reckless. When the heir was badly injured and Amur had him surrounded on all sides, Zhao Hui rushed over to provide reinforcement, only to end up trapped by Hassen on the plains. The entire squad was thrown into chaos.”

“That man is educated.” Wu Ziyu, slipping on his coat as he entered the tent, spoke up from the back. “In terms we would use, Hassen is Amur’s lawful son. While Amur has over ten sons, he only remembers a few of them. Of those, Hassen’s mother is the most distinguished; she’s known as the flower of the Hanma tribe. Amur’s control over the Hanma is in large part due to her influence. The status of the son depends on the status of his mother, and Hassen is the son who, by virtue of his mother’s status, was raised at Amur’s side and personally taught by the man himself. In the future, he will inherit Amur’s title of Great Hero. I’ve only heard this and never seen it myself, but apparently, he’s well-versed in the art of war; even Huhelu was afraid of him.”

“Why didn’t you say so earlier?” Tantai Hu stroked the scar on his face. “If I’d known of his prowess, I would’ve stayed in Tudalung Banner and not returned.”

“You’d just be serving your head up on a platter.” Wu Ziyu came to a stop beside the sand table. After a moment of hesitation, he added, “His fighting style is actually pretty similar to our supreme commander’s.”

“Then he’s also ill-suited to be stationed on garrison duty.” Xiao Chiye set his thumb ring straight. “I bet he likes to provoke others into attacking, right?”

The various generals didn’t respond, silently musing that the second young master was rather self-aware.

Gu Jin coughed lightly. “Hassen wasn’t commanding the fight against Libei before this year. Until then, he’d mainly been stationed in the southeast, where he gave Qidong hell. Hassen was the one who injured Qi Shiyu and almost took his head off.”

It was him!

Tantai Hu gasped. “Then I’ve heard of this man too. Marshal Qi herself fought him back then. When Qi Shiyu was trapped on the east side of Biansha’s camps and couldn’t break through, his sons didn’t dare deploy troops for a rescue mission. Marshal Qi went to the Chijun, Bianjun, and Cejun Commanderies one after another to request reinforcements. Cejun vehemently refused; it was the Lu Clan of Bianjun who stepped forward to solicit assistance from Suotian Pass. The grand marshal gathered these three forces into an army strong enough to venture into enemy territory and rescued her father.”

That battle had propelled Qi Zhuyin to fame. She had taken advantage of the direction of the wind and burned ten li of the linked Biansha camps’ provisions; it was this that earned her the epithet Windstorm through the Scorching Plains. But the battle had not been an easy one. In truth, the legend that followed omitted part of the story—Hassen had hunted Qi Zhuyin for thousands of li after she had rescued Qi Shiyu; the return path of the Qidong garrison troops had been paved with blood.

Xiao Chiye’s eyes brightened slightly. “I see. In that case, I know him too.”

This man was Lu Guangbai's archenemy.

"Three days ago, Zhao Hui led the Liuyang Camps up north to Tudalung Banner to take over Guo Weili's post and face Hassen." Xiao Chiye turned his thumb ring. "Right now, we no longer have any reinforcements backing us. Libei has only two major camps left in the southeast: Guo Weili's Third Sand Camp, and ours. Even if it traveled at a snail's pace, the news that we beat back Huhelu should have reached Amur's ears by now. This is an opportunity. If he hasn't altered his original plan, the Biansha Horsemen will launch an assault on Third Sand Camp before the middle of the eighth month at the latest. We need to kick Guo Weili in the ass as hard as we can to keep him awake."

"Uh, hang on," Wu Ziyu interjected, "Guo Weili won't fall asleep. He gets overly excited—*that's* his problem. He's apt to get ahead of himself and is easily provoked. If Hassen tricks him and leads him away from the camp to slaughter him, then what are we, a bunch of soldiers who move supplies around, supposed to do?"

Xiao Chiye, Gu Jin, and Tantai Hu turned their heads to him as one and said: "Fight."

Wu Ziyu wiped spittle off his face. "We don't have the authority to move without orders. And not to put a damper on everyone's fighting spirit, but it was partially blind luck we won the battle at Third Sand Camp. Huhelu was another Guo Weili; he took our supreme commander's bait and was defeated with the element of surprise. But now the Biansha soldiers know our strength; Amur won't repeat his mistake. Their next attack will be an all-out assault—the kind they've been launching on the front lines. They'll be fighting a genuine siege war, and we'll no longer have the advantage."

Xiao Chiye got right to the point: "That's why, when you kick Guo Weili in the ass, you have to tighten the collar around his neck at the same time. If he dies, it has to be because he was strangled to death."

No one was willing to deal with Guo Weili. They had nearly come to blows during the handover of Third Sand Camp. Chen Yang and Tantai Hu still held a grudge over the incident with Gu Jin, and Guo Weili didn't give a

damn about Xiao Chiye. But the fact was, it was dangerous to leave things like this. If the generals were not of one mind, accomplishing anything would be an uphill battle. Even if Xiao Chiye was a superhuman warrior, the strength of one man was meaningless in the face of thousands of soldiers and horses. What was more, their enemies weren't fools; the old vulture in command was smart as a whip.

Tilting his head back, Xiao Chiye stared at the roof of the tent. *So damn annoying.*

Chen Yang, who had been quiet all this while, flipped open his notebook and said solemnly, "And now for a message Gongzi sent from Cizhou. He said—"

Xiao Chiye's eyes darted over. "I'll read it myself."

"—that the marriage alliance between Hua and Qi will take place in three days." Chen Yang paused, then continued, reading Shen Lanzhou's words without inflection: "It's a joyous event for Marshal Qi to have gained a stepmother. What gift shall we send her?"

Xiao Chiye's smile was thin. "Send her our congratulations."