

TANG JIU QING

BALLAD
of SWORD
& WINE 6
QIANG JIN JIU



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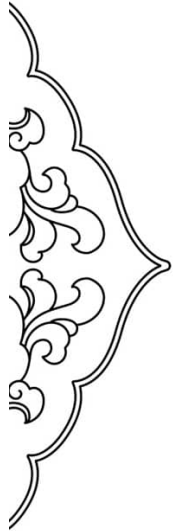


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Chapter 186:

Blizzard

THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN sky and the earth was erased as the blizzard roared across the battlegrounds and engulfed the eastern range of the Hongyan Mountains. The world was a boundless expanse of white snow as far as the eye could see.

Hassen had left the battlefield, but the snowstorm was blinding. Worried he'd lose his bearings in the snowfields overnight, he retreated to the abandoned relay station. The Scorpions Hassen was leading all possessed features similar to the people of Great Zhou. As soon as they returned, they had shed the Libei cavalry armor they'd worn as a disguise and were now sitting around drinking tea.

"Zhou..." One of the Scorpions wiped the token attached to his stolen armor and squinted at the text in the glow of the fire. "This one was surnamed Zhou, huh?"

"Mine's Fu." Another man raised a token. "It's a man from the Libei homeland."

“Wolves all hail from the Libei homeland.” Ulihan, a bearded man with a scar over one cheek, looked around at the younger men joking with each other, then at Hassen, who’d been silent throughout. “You slew the king of wolves tonight. Hassen, from now on, you are the king of the northern battlefields.”

The northern battlefields had always belonged to the king of wolves. Xiao Fangxu occupied the highest peak of the Hongyan Mountains with his valor and military prowess. For the last twenty years, the mere mention of this man had struck fear into the hearts of the Twelve Tribes of Biansha. Everyone here was acutely familiar with the legends surrounding him. Yet tonight, they had returned victorious, and the man they had slain was no ordinary mortal, but the war god of Libei.

Hassen sipped his tea and smiled shyly at Ulihan.

He had always possessed an understated intelligence, but after tonight, no one would dare belittle him. Ulihan could already see how fast Biansha would raze Libei in the coming years. Their commanders understood the present Libei all too well: Xiao Jiming had yet to recover from his injuries, and Xiao Chiye was but a fledgling. Libei had a dearth of commanding generals and was facing a bitterly cold winter. Hassen had been waiting for this moment a very long time.

“But you don’t look happy,” Ulihan observed.

“Not quite what I expected.” Hassen cradled the bowl in his hands and recalled his war trophy. “I grew up listening to legends of him. My father always said he was invincible.”

“The esuhuri will be proud of you.” Ulihan thought for a moment. “What you have severed tonight is also the head of the Libei Armored Cavalry.”

Hassen drank his tea and didn’t answer. But Ulihan was right. It wasn’t just Xiao Fangxu’s, but an army’s head Hassen had removed this night. All along, the iron wall standing in the north had seemed indestructible. Yet when Hassen stood before it at last, he’d found there was a fatal chink in the Libei Armored Cavalry’s armor.

This army was far too centralized. Although their faith was rooted in the land they stood on, they were overly reliant on their commander. They were still too new; every single soldier had his eyes locked on Xiao Fangxu. As long as Xiao Fangxu was there, the troops thought, the Libei Armored Cavalry would ride triumphant out of every battle.

Amur understood this, and so did Hassen. Since the start of the reign of Tianchen, the Libei Armored Cavalry had begun to lose the initiative. Xiao Jiming’s temporary defeat was the first sign of their collapse. As soon as Xiao Fangxu stepped back onto the field, Hassen was certain the Libei Armored Cavalry’s leadership was also the key to taking them down. Hassen had been transferred north specifically to familiarize himself with Xiao Fangxu. He had

followed Amur in his battles all over the land since he was eight years old, and the name spoken most in the commander's tent had always been Xiao Fangxu's. At a time when Xiao Fangxu still knew nothing of him, he had already learned everything there was to know about the king wolf.

Hassen didn't want to win just one battle. He wanted to topple Libei on every front. As to who would be grief-stricken over this, it was not his to consider—just as Libei had never considered Biansha's suffering. Hassen wanted to crush his opponent to blood and dust. He wanted to pierce his opponent's heart so thoroughly they would never recover from the setback. The time for Biansha to turn the tables was now. The two parties had been at odds too long, sharpening their fangs and accumulating debts of blood. Compassion for their enemy was tantamount to suicide.

As the fire burned down to embers, the Scorpions scattered, looking for a corner in which to rest. Leaving Ulihan the night watch, Hassen leaned against an old cabinet and closed his eyes.

The frigid wind howled over the eaves, sending the wind chimes hanging at the relay station's entrance clanking violently. All color had drained from the world, leaving only black and white as the night and snow tore into each other. Snowflakes like tattered wads of cotton piled up into snow dunes, and the footprints the men had left in the snow were soon swallowed up.

A Scorpion standing outside the relay station to piss was grabbed by the throat before he could untie his pants. A muffled *crack* followed, and the

Scorpion's body was lowered slowly to the ground.

Ulihan had an acute sense of hearing. Immediately, his hand went to his iron hammer. He stared menacingly at the doorway and whispered, "The wolf has come."

The Scorpion closest to the entrance shifted silently to peek through the crack between the doors. The moment he bent over, a long blade plunged through the gap and straight through his head.

No one in the relay station made a sound. Hassen watched calmly as that blade withdrew, splashing the door with crimson. The stench of blood filled the air. The door flew open, and a gust of wind extinguished the fire and plunged the house into darkness. A figure bearing a striking resemblance to Xiao Fangxu loomed in the doorway. Ulihan broke out in a cold sweat.

For a suspended moment, all was silent. Then the Scorpions burst into action. Nearly half their number had perished during their ambush on Xiao Fangxu, and those that remained were exhausted. Now again they felt the fear of being run through by the king of wolves. The Scorpions prayed this wolf pup didn't have the same arm strength as his father.

Yet every man who rushed forward was nailed to the floor.