

TANG JIU QING

BALLAD
of SWORD
& WINE 7
QIANG JIN JIU

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BALLAD of SWORD & WINE QIANG JIN JIU



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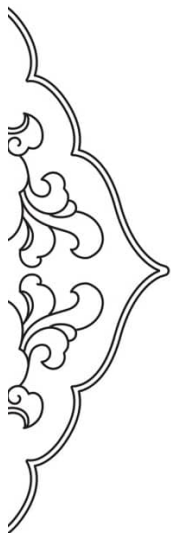


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Chapter 224: A Sharp Turn

THE SUN-SHOWER ACROSS the palace roofs ended as abruptly as it'd begun. Liang Cuishan's boots were speckled with mud as he strode into the Ministry of Revenue, the hem of his robe held high in his hand. All the officials knew the grain recount that awaited them and were at the ready. As the tapping of rain outside came to a stop, Liang Cuishan wiped a thin film of sweat off his face with a handkerchief. Without further ado, he announced, "Gentlemen, when you're ready."

Immediately, the room filled with the sound of abacus beads, as if the unexpected downpour had started again inside the office.

After assuring himself he still carried the Grand Secretariat's writ within his lapels, Liang Cuishan settled in a chair and buried his head in the mountains of account books from the eight cities. His mental arithmetic was outstanding, and he was well versed in taxes and levies, so he worked through the accounts quickly—but to be safe, he still kept an abacus, brush, and paper within reach.

The rain of abacus beads within the Ministry of Revenue's office drummed through the night, broken only by the footfalls of the errand runners coming in and out with strong tea to keep everyone awake.

Although her wing of the palace was far outside this din, the empress dowager could not sleep either.

Incense burned inside the hall where she sat, sending smoke spiraling upward. The empress dowager moved the prayer beads one by one with her thumb as she reclined on the settee. Liuxiang, her only company, gently pounded on her legs. The empress dowager, having already removed her eastern pearls, shut her eyes in repose, her face wan.

“Commander Han Cheng has already had a word with Fuman,” Liuxiang reassured her in a soft voice. “The heir apparent should be making her move any moment now.”

The empress dowager opened her eyes slightly. “The heir also spoke up during the discussion in Mingli Hall today. I can see Kong Boran has had a change of heart toward her; he truly thinks of her as his student now.”

“It’s all because of that Xue Yanqing.” Liuxiang kneaded with a practiced rhythm. “She was raised outside the palace. What does she know of governance?”

“She has no instinct for when to press forward and when to hold back, and no sense of either priority or propriety. If she wishes to interfere in affairs of state, she needs to know what she’s doing. Qi Zhuyin’s reluctance today about the betrothal must be because she thinks Xue Xiuzhuo can still find a way out of his predicament. They’re doing a recount of the eight cities’ grain as we speak.” The empress dowager held up her hand and studied the prayer beads wrapped around her fingers. “By all means, let them.”

Under the dimmed lanterns, the empress dowager appeared calm and unruffled, without so much as a tremble of panic.

In contrast, within the Ministry of Revenue, Liang Cuishan was growing increasingly alarmed. Surrounded by the clatter of abacus beads, he plucked at his own a few times to check his results, but they were the same as his mental calculations. There were no discrepancies in the Dancheng granary’s reserves as reported by the Ministry of Revenue. Based on this report of surplus grain, the granaries in the eight cities, far from vacant, were the most abundant in the Zhou empire.

How could that be?

Liang Cuishan pushed away the abacus and stood. He grabbed his handkerchief and wiped fresh sweat from his face.

Pan Lin sat in the chair within his cell, candlelight illuminating his pale face. He had been locked up for several days already, the rumpled hems of his robe evidence of the noble young master's wretched plight. Still, he pushed himself to stay awake, regarding Xue Xiuzhuo with tired eyes.

"You knew about the eight cities' granaries when you audited their field taxes at the start of the year." Xue Xiuzhuo was tired too. He covered his eyes with a damp handkerchief for a moment to gather himself. "The granaries of the eight cities have long been empty, right?"

Pan Lin answered with silence.

"Chengzhi." Xue Xiuzhuo addressed Pan Lin by his courtesy name. "You let Yao Yuanzhuo go because you have a kind heart. You aren't cut from the same cloth as Wei Huaigu and his ilk; why do their work against your conscience? So many starved in Dancheng last year. If the court can't resurvey the land and return the fields to the commoners, many more will die again."

Pan Lin's throat bobbed. He tilted his head back and stared at the pitch-dark ceiling.

"Qi Zhuyin has repeatedly come to the capital to ask for military salaries; even now, the Qidong Garrison Troops can't move out. Meanwhile, the Twelve Tribes are knocking on the Bianjun Commandery's door." Xue Xiuzhuo's eyes were bloodshot after sleepless nights of torment. "Chengzhi, I need grain."

A moth had floated down onto the windowsill. In the silence, it took flight once more, diving across the night.

Wandering through the dark, it brushed past a speeding carriage that stopped at the steps of a manor. Hua Xiangyi leapt out as soon as Hongying lifted the curtain.

"Mistress—"

Lifting the hem of her skirt, Hua Xiangyi stepped over the threshold and broke into a run, the pearls on her hairpin swinging. Gasping for breath, she raced through the long walkways and labyrinthine courtyards of the manor, ignoring the startled shouts around her as she sped toward Qi Zhuyin's courtyard.

Qi Wei was speaking to the attendants in the courtyard when Hua Xiangyi swept in. Startled and thinking there was an assassin, he shouted, "Protect the marshal!"

Qi Zhuyin's guards drew their sabers, the glint of their blades a reflection of the luster of Hua Xiangyi's swaying pearls, so bright the cold frost of the moon seemed dim by comparison. The hairpin slipped free, spilling pearls over Qi Zhuyin the moment she opened the door. Hua Xiangyi hastily held back the sweep of loose hair at her temple.

A thin sheen of sweat covered Hua Xiangyi's brow. She took a moment to catch her breath. "The Dancheng granary is empty. No matter how much surplus grain the Ministry of Revenue reports"—Hua Xiangyi looked into Qi Zhuyin's eyes, still clutching her skirt—"it's a smokescreen."

Qi Zhuyin returned the fallen hairpin to Hua Xiangyi. She turned to Qi Wei, who took one look at her and raced out of the courtyard at full tilt to send a messenger to Liang Cuishan.

It was well past midnight. In a few hours, the imperial court officials would gather outside the palace gates to wait for the morning court session to begin. Time was of the essence.

Pan Lin had fallen silent after Xue Xiuzhuo's exhortation. He was a scholar, learned in the words of the sages; he couldn't bring himself to look directly into Xue Xiuzhuo's eyes. Gazing at the ceiling, he saw the timeworn traces of years of disrepair on the beams. Parts yet to be covered by new paint lay exposed, their surfaces bored through with fine insect holes—rotten to the core.

He felt a cool draft. He counted those tiny insect holes, slowly killing himself with the blunt blade of his conscience. He knew Xue Xiuzhuo's expression could well be an act, and yet he also knew Xue Xiuzhuo had spoken the truth. Over the days he'd spent in this cell, his silence had been more than simple evasion.

"Let me ask you." Pan Lin lowered his head from contemplating the ceiling, finally willing to meet Xue Xiuzhuo's eyes. "Why did you try to kill Yuanzhuo?"

Xue Xiuzhuo leaned back in his chair and returned Pan Lin's gaze.

"You want to prop up the Li Clan," Pan Lin continued, "and so did Secretariat Elder Hai. Together you supported the Tianchen Emperor and took Hua Siqian off the board." He lifted his shackled hands onto the table. "But then you killed the Tianchen Emperor so you could put forward the heir apparent. Xue Yanqing, you hide beneath the rolling waves. I can't begin to guess if you're a loyal sage or a treacherous sycophant."

He needed an answer. Here was Xue Xiuzhuo's opportunity to justify those unbecoming deeds that violated the principles of the virtuous gentleman. He only needed to give Pan Lin a valid reason, and he would score a complete victory.

But Xue Xiuzhuo refused. "I tried to kill Yao Yuanzhuo because he deserved to die."

After this long night, he no longer looked as prim and proper as usual. He had gone so far as to loosen his tightly fastened official's robe as he sat opposite Pan Lin. "The noble clans think they still rule this court, but the truth is, they'd already lost control of the ship by the last years of Yongyi. Look at your father—if the noble clans were still as powerful as they imagine themselves to be, would he have needed to sit on the fence between the noble clans and the officials of humble origins? The fall of Zhongbo showed me one thing."

Xue Xiuzhuo extended a finger and pointed toward the ground. "Even as the noble clans infiltrate every institution in this country, they are being infiltrated. Hua Siqian thought he could outplay Amur in the east, but in the

end, he was no more than a jackal Amur leashed while eyeing our land. And the most ludicrous part? Right up until his death, Hua Siqian still thought he was the one holding the chain.

“My teacher Secretariat Elder Hai and I watched the Prince of Libei rise to power. The Libei Armored Cavalry became a valiant army in the northeast, but they did not place themselves at the throne’s disposal. Their commanders’ surnames are Xiao. No matter how loyal Xiao Fangxu and Xiao Jiming claimed they were to the throne, the Libei Armored Cavalry would never accept a commanding general from Qudu. They call themselves a pack of wolves, an iron wall. They’re not wrong—they are indeed an impenetrable fortress—but while they block out the Biansha Horsemen, they also block Qudu.

“Had the empress dowager not inserted herself into the court, the Guangcheng Emperor would have surely disbanded the Libei Armored Cavalry in the later years of his reign. The last time they were truly an army subordinate to the Li Clan was when they were still called the Luoxia Cavalry. Don’t tell me Xiao Fangxu didn’t understand this. Yet he was unwilling to hand over his military power. He believed in himself. And perhaps he did nothing wrong—but ultimately, he couldn’t prevent his armored cavalry from growing less flexible by the day.

“Many denounced Qudu’s paranoia. But who could guarantee that such a large and powerful force would always have a clear-headed commander at its helm? Even Xiao Fangxu himself knew it was impossible. What we needed were not verbal promises or personal trust, but real checks and balances on power. Xiao Fangxu understood long ago that he would have to hand over a son to Qudu. My teacher looked for an appropriate opportunity for him to do so, in consideration of Libei’s dignity and friendship with Qudu. But before he could act, Hua Siqian, in trying to make up for the state treasury deficit, handed the six prefectures of Zhongbo to Amur on a silver platter. As a result, the catalyst for Xiao Chiye’s entry into the capital became a festering wound between Qudu and Libei.

“Do you understand now? Scorpions from the desert are lurking in these murky waters. Amur used them to spread rot through the empire, yet the noble clans feigned ignorance. Teacher and I bent over backward to prop Li Jianheng up on the throne in the hope that he could clean up the imperial court. But he was a useless fool.

“As for Yao Yuanzhuo, his reputation had grown to terrifying proportions—but he would never put it to use for Qudu. If I didn’t kill him, he would inevitably be used by others. All of you aided Yao Yuanzhuo out of some so-called sense of righteousness. Go see for yourself the surge of reputable scholars flocking to Zhongbo now, where he is giving counsel to Shen Zechuan.”

Xue Xiuzhuo was quiet for a long time before he continued expressionlessly, “I am neither a loyal sage nor a treacherous sycophant.”

What, then, was he?

He didn’t know either.

He’d received Mister Changzong’s guidance in his early years of schooling and thought he would become a gentleman of virtue. In years past, he had held Qi Huilian in high esteem, and even had several meaningful exchanges with the grand mentor when he was in Xue Xiuzhuo’s hands. He had thought Qi Huilian would understand his aspirations, but ultimately the man had rejected him. He had also respected Hai Liangyi and willingly put himself at his beck and call. To this day, he still called Hai Liangyi his teacher. But Hai Liangyi had staunchly believed Li Jianheng could become a benevolent emperor under his guidance, while Xue Xiuzhuo could wait no longer. He needed a sovereign who could split the chaos and create a new world. If no such candidate was available, Xue Xiuzhuo could only press on and make one, by any means necessary.

He needed neither sympathy nor a willing ear; he was prepared to pay an exponential price for all he’d done. He had only one life, and he was gambling with it now, in the twilight of the Zhou empire. Whether or not the dawn that came after the long night was the one he sought, he would fight for it with all he had.

This was Great Zhou’s last chance, as well as his own.

Pan Lin buried his face in his hands. After a long time, he spoke. “I was aware of Wei Huaigu’s forged accounts when I served as the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Revenue. I knew there were discrepancies in the Dancheng

field taxes.” He looked up, revealing eyes surrounded by fine lines. “But my surname is Pan, and there’s only so much...”

He trailed off and rubbed his face hard a few times.

Hurried footsteps echoed outside the cell. Pan Lin and Xue Xiuzhuo sat in silence as the noise pressed in toward them. In the last moment before the door opened, Pan Lin said wearily, “Empty. The eight cities are all empty.”

Xue Xiuzhuo shot to his feet. Before the clerk behind him could open his mouth, Xue Xiuzhuo wiped the fatigue from his face and fastened his collar, then nodded once to Pan Lin. “Thanks.”

Figures moved outside the cell. Just as Xue Xiuzhuo stepped through the door, Pan Lin said, “In repressing your own desires so completely, you’ve pushed yourself far beyond what any common man could endure. You said it yourself: Great Zhou needs checks and balances. But what can the heir apparent possibly use to hold *you* in check?”

Xue Xiuzhuo looked sidelong at him and didn’t answer.

As he watched Xue Xiuzhuo leave, Pan Lin seemed to understand something. The door to the cell creaked closed, leaving him sitting alone. A weak bar of morning light filtered through the small window beside him, but it didn’t land on Pan Lin.

He had done his best.

Pan Xiangjie rummaged through chests and cupboards searching for his account books. Those moldy old records that had accumulated at the bottom of his drawers were now lethal weapons that could effect his downfall. He had heard the news as soon as he woke; he needed to burn everything before Xue Xiuzhuo arrived.

The reign of Yongyi. The reign of Xiande. The reign of Tianchen.

Finally, Pan Xiangjie found the chest where he had bundled all these accounts neatly. Kneeling, he yanked the cord apart with his bare hands, then threw all the books into the copper basin.

There were too many of them for him to burn on his own.

Pan Xiangjie's panic was giving him heartburn. He had never imagined the breach would be his own son. He had been driven into a dead end—but he wouldn't go down without a fight.

"The reign of Yongyi..." Pan Xiangjie traced a finger down the entries in the accounts as he read them one by one. "The Hua Clan... The Han Clan..."

Everyone was there.

Pan Xiangjie nearly danced with joy. As long as everyone was implicated, his Pan Clan would not perish.

The rapid pounding of military boots erupted from the courtyard. Pan Xiangjie clutched the account book and rose, one hand on the chest for support. Unsteadily, he made his way to the door.

He came face to face with Han Cheng.

Faking composure, Pan Xiangjie swiftly covered the book with his sleeves. "Things have not yet come to a head and already the empress dowager can't contain herself? Abandoning the pawn to protect the rook is not a wise strategy. Xue Xiuzhuo and the noble clans will not suffer one another to live. Even if you cast the Pan Clan aside today, the others will not escape unscathed."

Pan Xiangjie had spent his life feigning ignorance, cowering behind Hua Siqian and Wei Huaigu, falling to his knees in the imperial court at every turn to beg for mercy. Yet now here he stood, speaking with lucidity and eloquence.