

I. Dynasty 139

Chapter 139: Mediation

“They’re fighting?”

Everyone in the palace exchanged glances. Just two days ago, Lu Fei and Luo Xin had seemed like kindred spirits, as close as brothers who had shared the same pair of pants in childhood.

Xiao Ming had been relieved to leave Luo Xin in Lu Fei’s hands, planning to settle the gunpowder matter before hosting a banquet to deepen ties with Luo Xin.

Who would have thought they’d come to blows so quickly?

“That’s right, Your Highness. This morning, the soldiers egged them on, saying they wanted to see who was the better fighter between Colonel Lu and Colonel Luo. The two colonels seemed eager to test each other too, so they started sparring.”

“Isn’t it normal for soldiers to compete in the military?” Xiao Ming relaxed, thinking the soldier was overreacting.

“Your Highness, at first, it was fine. But then Colonel Luo lost and claimed Colonel Lu only won because of his superior armor, saying he lacked the dignity of a noble. And you know our Colonel Lu—he hates it when people bring up nobility or wealthy families. He immediately turned on Colonel Luo, saying Luo Xin only earned his military merits by riding on his father’s coattails and was all reputation without substance. Then they really started fighting.”

Hearing this, Xiao Ming was convinced.

No matter what, Luo Xin was a noble from Chang'an. Though he had disapproved of Xiao Ming's past behavior, he still carried some of the airs of a noble-born young master.

And this was precisely what the locally born officers of the Qingzhou army despised most.

At first, the two had bonded over their mutual renown, but once they spent time together, their differences became irreconcilable.

"Ah, they really know how to make trouble for me."

Xiao Ming sighed and headed to the Qingzhou army camp with Zhao Long and Zhao Hu.

He welcomed Luo Xin's arrival—it was, after all, General Luo Quan's goodwill. He couldn't afford to alienate the man.

Moreover, Luo Xin was originally from the imperial guard. His presence here likely had Emperor Xiao Wenxuan's tacit approval.

Xiao Ming's feelings toward his nominal father were complicated. From this perspective, the emperor's decision in court had truly been a last resort.

But if the two couldn't reconcile, he'd have to side with Lu Fei—he was, after all, Xiao Ming's trusted officer. Of course, it would be best if he could mediate their conflict and win Luo Xin over.

This was an opportunity to befriend General Luo Quan, a man of unparalleled prestige in the imperial guard.

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At the Qingzhou camp, Lu Fei and Luo Xin were locked in fierce combat, exchanging heavy blows. However, Luo Xin seemed to be faring worse.

After another exchange, Luo Xin staggered back three steps and spat, "And I thought you were a real man! Relying on your armor to gain an advantage—how shameless!"

After fighting Lu Fei for so long, Luo Xin realized the man was like an iron barrel. Every hit Luo Xin landed only hurt himself. Clenching his aching fists, he seethed with anger.

Lu Fei grinned. "Colonel Luo, that's where you're wrong. On the battlefield, are you going to fight the barbarians bare-assed? Ridiculous! Just this alone proves you've never faced true barbarian elites. Those bastards are far more shameless than me—they never fight head-on. They'll just shoot arrows at you, run when you chase them, and shoot again when you stop."

"Nonsense! I've spilled as much barbarian blood as you!" Luo Xin roared.

Lu Fei was about to retort when he noticed Xiao Ming approaching. He immediately shut his mouth and pretended nothing had happened.

“What’s going on, you two? Two days apart, and this is how you greet each other?” Xiao Ming said, eyeing Luo Xin’s bruised face.

Lu Fei removed his helmet, revealing a shameless grin, and played the victim. “Your Highness, Colonel Luo bullied me. He looks down on those of us from humble backgrounds.”

“Lies! All I said was that it’s dishonorable to duel me while wearing armor!” Luo Xin argued.

“You did say it!” Lu Fei bellowed.

Xiao Ming rubbed his temples. “Gentlemen, you’re a Qingzhou army colonel and an imperial guard colonel. Brawling like street thugs in front of the soldiers—aren’t you afraid they’ll laugh at you?”

Only then did the two realize their surroundings. Many soldiers were stifling giggles.

Lu Fei scowled. “What are you looking at? Get back to training! Anyone who makes a mistake in formation will answer to me!”

The soldiers immediately resumed drills.

Xiao Ming said, “This isn’t the place to talk. Come with me.”

Leading them to a small grove outside the camp, Xiao Ming addressed Luo Xin. “Second Brother, the Qingzhou army doesn’t care about lineage. That’s why Colonel Lu reacted so strongly. I hope you won’t take it to heart.”

Luo Xin was a proud man. He hadn’t wanted to come to Qingzhou in the first place, and now this conflict with Lu Fei left him even more displeased. “Your Highness needn’t explain. If the Qingzhou army doesn’t welcome me, I’ll return to Chang’an.”

“We can’t afford to serve a noble like you anyway,” Lu Fei muttered, looking skyward.

Xiao Ming glared at Lu Fei. “Enough. Everyone in Qingzhou knows you’re a troublemaker, Lu Fei. Second Brother may have been wrong, but you’re not blameless either. Keep this up, and forget about your custom plate armor.”

Lu Fei panicked. He could live without anything else—but not his armor. He’d grown attached to it, especially the custom-fitted set that even arrows struggled to pierce.

A troublemaker but also a scoundrel at heart, Lu Fei forced a smile. “Colonel Luo, my apologies. I was in the wrong. Next time, I’ll take off the armor, and we’ll spar properly.”

“Hmph! As if I’d spar with you again. Never!” Luo Xin turned to leave.

Lu Fei, who had only conceded for the sake of his armor, made no effort to stop him.

Xiao Ming called out, “Second Brother, think about why General Luo sent you to Qingzhou. If you can’t endure a little hardship, you might as well return to Chang’an and live a comfortable life as a colonel under your father’s wing. Let the Qingzhou officers look down on you as just another pampered noble—because they’d be right. While they shed blood against the barbarians, you chose to retreat.”

Luo Xin froze mid-step.

Why had he come to Qingzhou?

Wasn’t it for the dream of driving the barbarians out of the Central Plains?

“The moon of Qin, the passes of Han,

A thousand-mile march—none return again.

If only Dragon City’s general were still here,

No barbarian horse would cross the Yin Mountains.”

Xiao Ming recited the poem softly, his voice swelling with passion, stirring Luo Xin’s blood.

The poem’s solemn beauty seemed to linger in his heart. For centuries, the sons and daughters of Han had faced foreign invasions with iron will—and triumphed.

“What a line—‘If only Dragon City’s general were still here,

No barbarian horse would cross the Yin Mountains.’”

Luo Xin turned back. “Many say Your Highness is a man of extraordinary literary talent. Now I see it for myself.”