

I. Dynasty 143

Chapter 143: A Failed Scheme

After the Qingming Festival, a continuous drizzle turned the streets and alleys of Qingzhou into muddy quagmires.

Having spent these days traveling outside, Xiao Ming was thoroughly fed up with trudging through ankle-deep mud. He thought to himself that if they could hold Cangzhou, he would definitely build several cement roads crisscrossing Qingzhou upon his return, while also revamping the city's drainage system.

After all, infrastructure was one of the essential projects for developing his fiefdom. Moreover, creating a superior living environment could attract merchants from across the Great Yu Empire to settle in Qingzhou.

By then, selling land—ah, the legendary land finance—would become a reality.

Rainy days were inevitably dull. With the Armaments Department having completed Luo Xin's plate armor, Xiao Ming summoned him over, intending to ask him a few things while he was at it.

"Your Highness, the plate armor is ready so soon?"

This set of armor was naturally meant to placate Luo Xin.

He had the Ironworks specially craft a commander's plate armor for Luo Xin. Unlike the standard-issue armor for soldiers, this set was not only more aesthetically pleasing but also thicker.

While Lu Fei was exceptionally strong, Luo Xin's strength was more than sufficient to wear this reinforced armor.

"Want to try it on?" Xiao Ming leaned back in his chair.

Of his four former troublemaker friends, two were dead, while the remaining two—Qin Mu and Wei Qing—were now too terrified to speak freely in his presence.

For a moment, Xiao Ming felt a pang of loneliness.

However, Luo Xin, having come from Chang'an, didn't share the same restraint around him as the others. After all, relations among officials in the Great Yu Empire were still quite relaxed.

More than ten days had passed since the Qingzhou Army incident. Though Luo Xin and Lu Fei's relationship wasn't as harmonious as before, tensions had eased somewhat.

Moreover, Xiao Ming's poem had somewhat altered Luo Xin's opinion of him, leading to occasional visits to the palace.

After all, Luo Xin was alone in Qingzhou, with no relatives or friends—Xiao Ming was at least an acquaintance.

During his time in the army, Luo Xin had greatly admired Lu Fei's plate armor, especially its quality. To his surprise, Qingzhou's craftsmanship in forging weapons seemed far superior even to that of Chang'an's Armaments Department.

Though he had never worn plate armor before, he had seen soldiers donning it in the military camp. Following their example, he suited up.

In an instant, a figure clad head-to-toe in steel stood before Xiao Ming.

"Not bad." Xiao Ming nodded approvingly. The armor was indeed worthy of being custom-made.

In truth, every soldier's plate armor was tailored to fit. Otherwise, there would be issues with sizing—one of the drawbacks of plate armor production.

"Thank you, Your Highness!" Luo Xin grinned as he examined the armor. This was the happiest he had been since arriving in Qingzhou.

Once suited up, Luo Xin turned to leave.

Xiao Ming immediately called out, "Where are you going?"

“To challenge Lu Fei to a rematch. Hmph! That newspaper even reached Chang’an. I, Luo Xin, have never been so humiliated. I must teach him a lesson.” Luo Xin grew angrier the more he thought about it.

Xiao Ming sighed helplessly. He hadn’t anticipated that a single poem would cause the newspaper to spread all the way to Chang’an. Over the next seven days, not only did he receive a letter from Consort Zhen, but he was also granted an edict exiling the disgraced General Niu Ben to Qingzhou.

Moreover, Fei Ji petitioned the court, resulting in the imperial government providing Qingzhou with two million shi of grain, five thousand bolts of silk, and two hundred thousand taels of silver.

This was a pleasant surprise. In ancient times, warfare severely disrupted production.

Not only were soldiers unable to produce food, but conscripted laborers transporting provisions also took away from agricultural output. The provisions from Xiao Wenxuan would slightly alleviate Qingzhou’s food crisis.

After all, Qingzhou was still grappling with food shortages. The lean season between harvests was the hardest to endure. Things would only improve after the next harvest.

“Another fight? Aren’t you afraid the newspaper will report it to Chang’an again? If you lose, you’ll still be humiliated. If you win, you’ll embarrass General Luo Quan.”

“How would winning be embarrassing?” Luo Xin’s voice was muffled inside the helmet.

Xiao Ming scoffed. “General Luo has always maintained strict military discipline. As a colonel, instead of setting an example for your soldiers, you’re instigating brawls. What kind of behavior is that?”

Luo Xin pondered this and realized there was some truth to it. Yet, the memory of being pummeled by Lu Fei’s wild punches still stoked his fury. He slammed the table in frustration. “I can’t do this, I can’t do that—Your Highness, you’re clearly playing favorites!”

“How am I playing favorites?” Xiao Ming feigned innocence. “In fact, I have something that will benefit you. I’ve just received an edict—His Majesty has exiled General Niu Ben to Qingzhou for hard labor. I’m entrusting this matter to you.”

“General Niu Ben?” Luo Xin couldn’t believe his ears.

This was a figure on par with his father, a master of military strategy—an area where even his father fell slightly short.

“Exactly, General Niu Ben. Since he’s being sent to Qingzhou, let him serve his labor in the Qingzhou Army.” Xiao Ming spoke casually.

Niu Ben had offended Xiao Wenxuan and was thus punished. By exiling him to Qingzhou, the emperor was clearly signaling Xiao Ming to find a way to utilize Niu Ben for the Qingzhou Army.

However, if Niu Ben dared to confront Xiao Wenxuan, how could Xiao Ming possibly subdue such a person easily?

That said, if he could truly win Niu Ben over, the Qingzhou Army would gain a commander of the highest caliber—a tremendous boon for its development.

After all, Lu Fei was a troublemaker—full of both strengths and flaws—while Luo Xin might not stay in Qingzhou permanently, making him a temporary asset.

Luo Xin immediately grasped the implications. Xiao Wenxuan was delivering a gift to Xiao Ming.

As a leading advocate for war, Niu Ben couldn't possibly stand idly by if Cangzhou fell.

“Understood, Your Highness. I will ensure General Niu is well taken care of,” Luo Xin said with a fist-and-palm salute.

Xiao Ming nodded, instructing Luo Xin on when to depart to fetch the general before dismissing him.

He appreciated Xiao Wenxuan's gesture, but what he truly desired was absolute dominance over the barbarians with cannons. In the future, Qingzhou would need commanders skilled in leading firearm-equipped troops.

Still, recognizing that the transition from cold weapons to firearms would take time, he let the matter rest.

No sooner had Luo Xin left than Zhan Xingchang entered.

“Your Highness, aside from the King of Yong, who agreed to provide one hundred thousand shi of grain, the other vassal kings all pleaded poverty, claiming their fiefdoms were too destitute to offer any assistance.”

As he spoke, Zhan Xingchan flushed with shame. He had been confident initially, but the shamelessness of these vassal kings exceeded his expectations.

“Of course they refused,” Xiao Ming said. “I merely wanted to gauge their attitudes. Now it’s clear they harbor ill intentions. Fine—let them keep their grain. At least I won’t owe them favors when the time comes for blades to cross.”

Putting on a profound front, Xiao Ming inwardly cursed the ancestors of the Kings of Zhao and the others eighteen generations back. These bastards hadn’t given him an ounce of face.