

I. Dynasty 145

Chapter 145: The Disgraced General Niu Ben

A gentle breeze carried a drizzle, scattering lightly over the road.

On the official path to Qingzhou City, merchants and travelers hurried along. Though May was approaching, the lingering chill in the air seemed to thicken with the spring rain.

Among the mixed flow of merchants and commoners, a pair of bailiffs with hands resting on their waist knives stood out conspicuously. The pedestrians instinctively kept their distance.

Strangely, however, the two bailiffs seemed to treat the prisoner walking ahead of them with unusual respect—nothing like the impatience they typically showed toward other convicts.

“General Niu, Qingzhou City lies just ahead.”

Catching sight of the city walls in the distance, one bailiff spoke cautiously.

The prisoner wore a gray convict’s uniform, his hair streaked with gray and tangled, his long beard dotted with bits of straw. The thick calluses on his hands bore witness to years of hard labor.

“Mm. My thanks to you both.”

Niu Ben glanced at Qingzhou City. He had thought he would spend the rest of his life toiling in the mines, but half a month ago, Xiao Wenxuan had exiled him here instead.

When the news arrived, even the mine overseers' attitudes toward him had shifted.

Back in the mines, those overseers had never cared about his past military glories. To them, he was just another laborer doomed to die in servitude.

But now, they had suddenly become obsequious, even attentive on the journey. Clearly, they sensed this old general was about to make a comeback.

"Not at all, not at all! Escorting General Niu to Qingzhou is an honor for us." The bailiffs smiled ingratiatingly.

In the mines, they had treated Niu Ben harshly. Now that this famously hot-tempered general was returning to power, they were terrified of retaliation.

To their surprise, however, Niu Ben had remained calm throughout the journey, treating them with courtesy.

It seemed five years of hard labor had smoothed the edges of this old warrior.

"Is that General Niu ahead?"

A loud call rang out. A young man in plate armor strode toward Niu Ben.

Niu Ben's gaze first fell on the youth's armor before rising to his face. "And you are...?"

"General, I'm Luo Xin!"

Ever since Xiao Ming had tasked him with arranging Niu Ben's reception, Luo Xin had waited at the city gates daily. Three days later, he finally spotted the bailiffs escorting Niu Ben.

He had met Niu Ben in Chang'an, but five years had aged the once-vibrant general into a gaunt, weathered figure—hence his initial uncertainty.

"Luo Xin? Luo Quan's second son?"

"Exactly! Six years ago, I played at your estate." Luo Xin grinned.

Niu Ben reached out and gripped Luo Xin's shoulder. "Mm. Six years gone in a blink. You've grown into someone I barely recognize—though I can still see that old rogue Luo Quan in you."

Luo Xin chuckled. During their time as generals, Luo Quan and Niu Ben had always stood together.

Noticing the rain thickening, Luo Xin said, “Uncle Niu, this isn’t the place to talk. The Prince of Qi specifically ordered me to bring you to the palace as soon as you arrived.”

“The Prince of Qi?” Niu Ben’s mood soured. Since Xiao Wenxuan had exiled him to the mines, he had grown disillusioned—with the court, with the emperor, with everything. “What does a disgraced minister like me have to discuss with a prince? Just take me to my new labor site.”

Luo Xin was taken aback. “Uncle, why say such things? His Majesty sent you to Qingzhou to return you to service—to resist the barbarians!”

During the journey, the bailiffs had shared some Qingzhou gossip, but as lowly functionaries, they knew nothing of court affairs like the impending barbarian invasion.

Still, the eunuch who delivered the edict had been unusually deferential to Niu Ben, convincing them the general was being reinstated.

“Barbarians?” Niu Ben’s eyes sharpened.

Luo Xin hesitated, glancing at the bailiffs. “You two, go claim your reward at the Qingzhou magistrate’s office, then return on your own.”

“Yes, sir!” The bailiffs brightened and hurried into the city.

Only then did Luo Xin explain, “Uncle, His Majesty exiled you to Cangzhou for hard labor—but secretly, through Consort Zhen, he ordered the Prince of Qi to reinstate you. The barbarians will invade soon, and Cangzhou is in peril. Do you truly wish to watch the city you once bled to defend fall again?”

“Is this true?” Niu Ben seemed to awaken like a slumbering lion. “Your Majesty... after six years, have you finally understood?”

Equally stirred, Luo Xin said, “His Majesty tacitly approved my coming to Qingzhou. But the situation is too complex now. Come meet the prince—he’ll explain everything.”

Niu Ben’s disillusionment with Xiao Wenxuan stemmed from repeated concessions to the barbarians. Years ago, stationed at Cangzhou, he had been forced to watch helplessly as the Prince of Kang’s lands were ravaged, forbidden to deploy a single soldier.

That memory had haunted him ever since.

Now, at last, Xiao Wenxuan had come to his senses.

“Very well. Let’s go at once.”

At the Qi residence, they learned Xiao Ming had left for the Armaments Department early that morning and hadn’t yet returned. They settled in to wait.

Curious, Niu Ben asked, “Why would the prince visit the Armaments Department?”

In his experience, princes never set foot in such lowly places.

Luo Xin smiled. “That’s precisely what makes the Prince of Qi different. If I told you one thing, Uncle, you’d be even more shocked.”

“What?”

“In just a few months, the Prince of Qi has executed or exiled most of Qingzhou’s noble clans. The survivors have fled to the mountains as bandits. Strange, no?”

“Truly? I recall the Wang, Sun, Qin, and Wei families once dominated Qingzhou.”

“Now the Wang and Sun clans are extinct—their properties confiscated. The Qin and Wei families voluntarily disbanded their private armies and live purely as merchants.”

Niu Ben nodded slowly. “This Xiao Ming was the most wayward of all the princes in Chang’an. Who’d have thought he’d grow so bold?”

Luo Xin's initial impression of Xiao Ming had also been colored by his Chang'an reputation. But the longer he stayed in Qingzhou, the more he sensed something extraordinary about the man.

The city's thriving atmosphere alone proved Xiao Ming's popularity.

It was this, more than any poem, that had gradually softened Luo Xin's prejudice.

As they spoke, a hearty laugh approached. Xiao Ming, astride a fine horse and surrounded by guards, arrived at the palace.