

I. Dynasty 146

Chapter 146: Official Appointment

“Your Highness!”

As Xiao Ming approached, Luo Xin saluted with clasped fists.

Dismounting, Xiao Ming motioned for Luo Xin to stand at ease while studying the elderly man beside him. “If I’m not mistaken, this must be General Niu Ben.”

Niu Ben sized up the Prince of Qi, noting traces of Xiao Wenxuan in his features. Bowing, he said, “This disgraced official, Niu Ben, pays his respects to Your Highness.”

“General Niu, there’s no need for such formality. This prince cannot accept such solemnity from a veteran like yourself.” Xiao Ming smiled. “General, let us continue our discussion inside the palace.”

The three entered the residence, where Xiao Ming had Lu Luo prepare tea.

In the main hall, Xiao Ming invited Luo Xin and Niu Ben to sit before bowing deeply to the latter. “General, you’ve suffered greatly. My father has long regretted failing to repel the barbarians at Shanhai Pass and asked me to convey his apologies.”

The years had tempered Niu Ben's once-unyielding pride. Rising, he said, "How could this disgraced official dare accept Your Highness's bow? That His Majesty still remembers an old relic like me is already more than I deserve."

"You humble yourself too much, General." Xiao Ming's smile widened. "Your military exploits are legendary, and this prince holds you in the highest esteem. I hope you can assist me in thwarting the barbarian invasion."

Niu Ben frowned. "At the city gates, Luo Xin seemed hesitant to speak. Now you mention this matter again—what exactly has happened?"

Exchanging a glance with Luo Xin, Xiao Ming recounted the court debate.

"Those traitorous, nation-wrecking scoundrels! Had I been there, I'd have skinned them alive!" Though five years of hardship had mellowed Niu Ben, the news still ignited his fury.

"General, calm yourself. What's done is done. We can only do our best and leave the rest to fate."

Zhan Xingchang had already departed for Cangzhou to repair its walls, taking nearly all of Qingzhou's cement production with him. Xiao Ming could only hope he would transform the city into an impregnable fortress.

"Ah, poor His Majesty—finally resolved to teach those barbarians a lesson, only to be betrayed by his own subjects. Those villains deserve death!" Niu Ben spat.

After a pause, he added, "But if we can repel this invasion, the barbarians will learn to fear the Great Yu Empire again. No more tributes or marriage alliances."

“Precisely. That’s why I hope for your assistance, General.” Xiao Ming seized the opportunity.

Niu Ben nodded solemnly. “Though a convicted criminal, if Your Highness will have me, I’ll brave fire and flood without hesitation.”

Xiao Ming felt a weight lift from his shoulders. He had feared Niu Ben might resent Xiao Wenxuan’s harsh punishment, but the general seemed far less volatile than rumored.

With this, he had truly gained a commander of the highest caliber.

Xiao Ming’s ambitions extended far beyond defending Cangzhou—a task well within Lu Fei’s capabilities. The vast lands beyond the city had once belonged to the Great Yu Empire. If reclaimed, they could expand his fiefdom significantly.

Most crucially, recapturing Shanhai Pass would permanently bar the barbarians from threatening the heartland.

“General! General!”

As the three sipped tea and discussed the barbarians, Lu Fei’s voice suddenly rang out.

The man himself burst in moments later, eyes alight at the sight of Niu Ben. “General, is it really you?”

Niu Ben looked equally surprised. “Lu Fei?”

“Yes, General! It’s me!” Lu Fei was practically vibrating with excitement.

Xiao Ming and Luo Xin exchanged puzzled glances. “General, you know Lu Fei?”

Lu Fei explained, “When the general was stationed at Cangzhou, I served as his personal guard. After he returned to Chang’an, us local soldiers stayed behind.”

“Ah, ancient history. But seeing you like this—clearly, His Highness trusts you deeply. Good, good. I knew I hadn’t misjudged you.” Niu Ben nodded approvingly.

“I’ve never forgotten your teachings, General,” Lu Fei said fervently.

Xiao Ming’s gaze swept over the three men. Previously, Qingzhou’s forces had only Lu Fei. Then Luo Xin arrived, and the two clashed incessantly.

Now with Niu Ben here—a man who clearly commanded their respect—the discord should cease.

Moreover, Niu Ben was renowned for his strict discipline. With him overseeing training, Xiao Ming could finally stop worrying about infighting undermining the army's readiness.

As a former grand general who had effortlessly commanded 100,000 troops, Niu Ben's expertise in military administration far surpassed Lu Fei's haphazard efforts.

Frustrated by Lu Fei's inability to establish proper systems—even basic budgeting—Xiao Ming had been forced to reclaim control of military funds, entrusting them to Pang Yukun instead.

But with Niu Ben's arrival, these structural issues would be resolved. Separating military and civil administration would prevent overlap and clarify chains of command.

Modern history had taught Xiao Ming the dangers of blending military and political power. An army's sole purpose was obedience—it could not be allowed independent thought.

Regardless of who commanded, the troops' loyalty must belong solely to him.

This was why he had established political officers in the army—to represent his authority and control its ideology, ensuring stability.

Thus, whether Lu Fei, Luo Xin, or Niu Ben led, they could only act on his orders. Should he ever need to replace them, the transition would be seamless, with no risk of mutiny.

Only such an army met his standards.

This system also eliminated concerns about Niu Ben, Lu Fei, or Luo Xin gaining undue influence. The military was his alone; the generals merely directed its operations.

Once Lu Fei had calmed somewhat, Xiao Ming said, “General, since Lu Fei once served under you, it seems you’re the only one who can manage this troublemaker. In that case, the position of Qingzhou Army Commander naturally falls to you.”

Beyond his title as feudal lord, Xiao Ming held the rank of Grand Commander of the Six Prefectures, controlling all regional forces. Even Lu Fei needed his seal to mobilize troops.

In the Great Yu Empire, the commander role was a military post subordinate only to the grand commander. And currently, the Qingzhou army was the strongest among the six prefectures.

After all, with limited resources, Xiao Ming could only focus on building one elite force.