

I. Dynasty 147

Chapter 147: Xiao Ming's Hidden Thoughts

"Your Highness, this..." Niu Ben hesitated, unsure of what to say.

Xiao Ming chuckled, "Well, right now the only position I can offer the old general is the role of commander. After all, the title of Grand Commander already belongs to me."

"Your Highness, I dare not accept so casually," Niu Ben said respectfully. "I'm a man who carries the stain of punishment. If I suddenly take on the role of commander in the army, I fear the other officers might not accept it."

Indeed, Lu Fei had earned great merit in battle, yet he remained only a captain. Luo Xin was in the same position. That was why Niu Ben hesitated—after all, he'd been absent from Great Yu for five years. Most soldiers wouldn't even recognize him.

"No need to worry, General," Xiao Ming said. "If I placed you under Lu Fei or Luo Xin, they'd feel more uncomfortable than anyone."

Hearing this, both Lu Fei and Luo Xin laughed aloud.

Lu Fei added, "That's right! We would be honored if the general became our commander. With you leading us, we'll beat the barbarians into the ground!"

Luo Xin chimed in, “No need for modesty, General. The commander’s position has been vacant this whole time. It seems His Highness left it open just for you.”

Xiao Ming gave an awkward smile. Truthfully, the position had been kept empty on purpose—to keep Lu Fei motivated and obedient. But now that Niu Ben had arrived, Xiao Ming no longer feared discipline problems. Niu Ben was well-known for his impartiality—he didn’t care if a soldier was from a noble family or not. If someone broke military law, they would be punished.

And Lu Fei clearly respected Niu Ben. Under his command, Lu Fei would likely behave himself—saving Xiao Ming a lot of headaches.

“...If that’s the case, I shall accept,” Niu Ben said after a moment’s pause.

With this, Niu Ben officially became the commander of Qingzhou’s forces. Emperor Xiao Wenxuan had sent him here precisely with that in mind, indirectly instructing him to remain in Qingzhou. After all, the emperor had once sworn in court never to appoint Niu Ben again. Bringing him back to the capital would be an embarrassment.

So sending Niu Ben to Qingzhou as a form of “hard labor” was the perfect cover. How Xiao Ming chose to use him was technically not the emperor’s concern.

And if the court ministers ever brought it up, the emperor could just play dumb.

Considering all of that, Xiao Ming had no hesitation giving Niu Ben the position of commander. From now on, this old general would be his man.

Although he'd been granted a title, Niu Ben still seemed troubled.

"Worried about your family?" Xiao Ming asked with a knowing smile.

"You knew?" Niu Ben was surprised.

His entire family was still in Chang'an, and after years of exile, he had no idea how they were doing. Now that he was rising again in Qingzhou, he wanted to bring them here—he couldn't leave them behind to suffer.

As a feudal prince, Xiao Ming had to think about these things. He'd been studying all sorts of knowledge from the Technology Crystal, and he understood that the best way to win someone's loyalty was to anticipate their needs.

"Of course," Xiao Ming said. "That's human nature. Don't worry—I've already sent people to Chang'an to bring your family to Qingzhou. And I've also prepared a residence for you in Qingzhou City."

Niu Ben was deeply moved. "Thank you, Your Highness. I swear I will repay your kindness, even if it costs me my life."

"No need for that," Xiao Ming smiled. "Just keep these two in line," he said, glancing at Lu Fei and Luo Xin.

Both men turned pale.

“Your Highness! I didn’t do anything wrong! You can’t punish me like this!” Lu Fei cried.

“Yes! It was just a friendly duel between comrades!” Luo Xin added quickly.

Xiao Ming didn’t reply, just smiled knowingly.

Niu Ben quickly understood what Xiao Ming meant. “Lu Fei, Luo Xin—you know how I run my troops. When His Highness wasn’t involved in military matters, maybe you could get away with things. But under me, that won’t work.”

Lu Fei, the troublemaker, immediately grinned sheepishly and said, “General, we wouldn’t dare.”

Luo Xin was less amused. At first, he’d been happy to see Niu Ben arrive—but now that he realized he’d be under Niu Ben’s strict command, he felt a chill run down his spine. So much for easy days ahead.

Xiao Ming, however, was pleased. He needed someone who could take full control of the military, since he had far too many responsibilities. A strong commander was essential.

Now that the matter of the army was settled, Xiao Ming felt at ease. He smiled and said, “It’s getting late. I’ve had the kitchen prepare a meal. Let’s have lunch here.”

Lu Fei and Luo Xin were thrilled. Everyone in Qingzhou knew that Prince Qi's residence had the best food anywhere.

Niu Ben, tired from his journey, was also a bit hungry. Seeing the joy on the others' faces, he became curious and nodded in agreement.

Xiao Ming summoned Ziyuan to prepare the food and asked Luluo to bring wine.

In Great Yu, it was custom for royalty and officials to eat at separate tables—but the dishes served to each person were identical in portion and presentation.

Now that Xiao Ming was financially stable, his residence had been fully organized by Ziyuan. The staff had grown to over a hundred, with more than ten new handmaidens. The kitchen was now comparable to those of other royal palaces.

Recently, Ziyuan had even suggested hiring dancers and musicians, saying it was embarrassing for a prince's estate to have no entertainers.

With a pure heart (or so he claimed), Xiao Ming hadn't objected.

After all, ancient life lacked entertainment—and a little dance in the evening could be nice. Ziyuan and Luluo had been trained in the palace. They were skilled in music and dance, and could even choreograph routines. The thought of it tempted him.

Well, I'm still a man, he thought. A little beauty and rhythm could certainly brighten up a day at work.

Still, he had standards. He wouldn't let his estate become a chaotic mess like the great clans of the capital. He also had another motive.

The common folk needed entertainment too. He understood that idleness leads to trouble. Give people something to enjoy, and they'd stay out of mischief.

His Technology Crystal didn't just contain science—it included art, music, and literature. He believed that art was a way to enlighten the people.

He wanted to create a different atmosphere in Qingzhou—something like a renaissance. And such a movement needed a birthplace. Naturally, it had to start with his own residence.

Of course, he couldn't deny it: beyond the noble ideals, he just wanted to see Ziyuan and Luluo dance.

As he was lost in thought, the banquet was already set.

Lu Fei lifted a jar of Drunken Qingzhou Wine and poured generously for Niu Ben. "General, you have to try this white wine from Qingzhou! Just three cups and you'll be on the floor!"