

## I. Dynasty 148

### Chapter 148: The Iron Mold is Completed

“Three bowls and I’ll be under the table?”

Niu Ben glanced sideways at Lu Fei, thinking to himself that this kid had witnessed his drinking capacity back in the day. How could he spout such nonsense now?

Lu Fei, oblivious to Niu Ben’s expression, said, “General, I’m not exaggerating. Try it if you don’t believe me!”

As the clear liquor filled the bowl, Niu Ben immediately sensed something different—a strong aroma rushed straight to his nose.

Having sampled fine wines across the Great Yu Empire, he now felt he was truly seeing something new.

“The secret recipe for this wine comes from His Highness,” Luo Xin chimed in. Having tasted Drunken Qingzhou himself, he could no longer stomach any other liquor.

But Drunken Qingzhou wasn’t cheap, and Luo Quan was notoriously stingy—preferring to mooch drinks at others’ homes rather than spend his own silver.

This was precisely why Luo Xin often visited Xiao Ming—mostly to freeload food and drinks.

Niu Ben gave Xiao Ming another look. This Prince of Qi was becoming more and more intriguing. After five years in the mines, all he had hoped for was to serve a wise ruler.

“Even so, three bowls to knock me out? You underestimate this old man,” Niu Ben said, licking his lips.

Five years without a drop had left him parched. He downed one bowl in a single gulp, then poured himself two more before anyone could stop him.

“Hahaha! Excellent wine!” Niu Ben roared with laughter. The liquor had a real kick. “Lu Fei, what do you say? Three bowls are nothing to me.”

Lu Fei smiled awkwardly, thinking to himself that the real test would come when the alcohol hit.

Xiao Ming shook his head helplessly. Every military man loved his drink. This banquet was meant to foster camaraderie among his officers, making it easier to manage the army.

But getting Niu Ben drunk was also part of his plan.

As the saying goes, in wine lies truth. A man’s drinking habits often revealed his character—this was a chance to gauge Niu Ben’s true nature.

Despite the general’s sterling reputation, Xiao Ming knew little of his actual temperament. Now was the perfect opportunity to find out.

“General, your capacity is impressive. Lu Fei, pour him another round. Let the general drink his fill today,” Xiao Ming said.

Luo Xin kept his head down, focused on the food. When he first arrived in Qingzhou, Lu Fei had gotten him drunk too—leading to a stream of drunken ramblings witnessed by Xiao Ming.

Niu Ben, like a thirsty man finding water, downed three more bowls. Soon, the alcohol took effect, leaving him swaying unsteadily.

Seizing the moment, Xiao Ming asked, “General, coming to Qingzhou must have been a great hardship for you.”

Rubbing his bleary eyes, Niu Ben felt his head grow heavy—but his inhibitions vanished like a breached dam. All his pent-up frustrations demanded release.

Slurring slightly, he said, “Y-Your Highness... this old official doesn’t mind Qingzhou. But those five years in the mines? That was hardship! All my loyalty, all my service—for the glory of the Great Yu Empire! And what did my earnest counsel earn me? Five years of hard labor! I... I...”

His voice cracked, and suddenly, he burst into loud, heart-wrenching sobs.

Lu Fei and Luo Xin exchanged moved glances. With corrupt officials dominating the court, loyal men like them had long suffered similar frustrations. Niu Ben’s words struck a deep chord.

From this outburst, Xiao Ming sensed Niu Ben's resentment toward Xiao Wenxuan and the imperial court.

"General, you've endured much," Xiao Ming said solemnly. "In Qingzhou, this prince will ensure your talents are never again overlooked."

Drunker now, Niu Ben declared thickly, "If a lord treats me as a man of worth, I shall repay him as such! If he treats me as a stranger, so shall I repay him! If he treats me as dirt, I shall repay him as an enemy! Today, Your Highness treats me as a man of worth—I shall repay you as one!"

"Well said! The general speaks true!"

Xiao Ming raised his cup and drained it. This was the kind of commander he needed.

The moment the words left his mouth, Niu Ben slumped onto the table, dead drunk.

Lu Fei and Luo Xin exchanged wry smiles. The feast was over. They helped Niu Ben up and escorted him back to the Qingzhou barracks.

Watching them leave, Xiao Ming reflected on Niu Ben's words. People often spoke of "returning good for evil," forgetting Confucius' actual teaching: Repay injustice with justice, and kindness with kindness.

This misinterpretation had poisoned generations, leading the Great Yu Empire to initially seek “civilizing” the barbarians through moral example—failing to grasp that those not of our kind will never share our hearts. The only language barbarians understood was force, not virtue.

As the trio departed, Ziyuan entered and said, “Your Highness, word from the Machinery Department—the iron molds are ready. Would you like to inspect them?”

“Really?” Xiao Ming’s face lit up.

That morning, he had been overseeing this very project when Niu Ben’s arrival forced him to return. At the time, Chen Qi and the artisans were casting the molds.

Ordering his horse prepared, Xiao Ming rode to the Machinery Department.

There, Chen Qi and a team of craftsmen were assembling the iron molds.

“Your Highness, we can begin casting the cannons now,” Chen Qi said excitedly when Xiao Ming arrived.

After a month’s effort, they had finally produced qualified molds. With this experience, creating the next set would be far easier.

“Let me see,” Xiao Ming said eagerly.

Since arriving in Qingzhou, economic development had been his top priority—not because he neglected the military, but because he understood that without funds, supplies, and popular support, raising an army was impossible.

Without a foundation in steel production and trained artisans, manufacturing cannons would remain a fantasy.

His heavy investments, even his extortion of skilled craftsmen, had all been for this day—the ability to produce these game-changing weapons.

Xiao Ming’s excitement spread to Chen Qi and the artisans. Their month of tireless work had not been in vain.

The clay molds had been broken away, revealing the black iron molds beneath. Like their clay counterparts, these were divided into seven segments. Once assembled, they would be ready for cannon production.

Strangely, the molds themselves weighed more than the eventual cannons—after all, they had to withstand repeated use.

“We’ll cast the first cannon tomorrow,” Xiao Ming declared, gazing at the molds.

Time was running short. Completing the molds was just the beginning—the artisans' skill would now face its true test.

Chen Qi smiled. "Your Highness, perhaps you could review the key points of cannon casting with us? We hope to succeed on the first attempt."

"No rushing this. Steady and sure," Xiao Ming said with a grin.

He then gathered the department's craftsmen, reiterating the cannon production process and critical details.

Under the influence of the knowledge crystal, vivid images of the process seemed to materialize in their minds, cementing each step in memory.