

## I. Dynasty 185

### Chapter 185: The Army's Anthem

Zhu Sansi and his companions were dragging the bodies of dead warhorses out from the pile at the city gate.

Aside from the 20,000 elite Qingzhou soldiers, over 30,000 auxiliary troops had supported the defense of Cangzhou. To Zhu and others, those soldiers had fought just as hard—and deserved to enjoy the victory too.

But there were too many people and not enough meat. Even after searching all of Cangzhou, the chickens, ducks, cattle, and geese brought in by Niu Ben were far from enough.

So, they began digging through the corpses, looking for usable horse meat.

Someone had heard that Captain Lu said horse meat tasted really good.

Since sunrise, when they received news that the barbarians had retreated, Cangzhou had been filled with an electric sense of celebration.

Zhu Sansi felt the same excitement. Crowds of civilians had entered the city, cheering alongside the soldiers.

They brought flatbread, eggs, and fruits for the soldiers—small gifts of gratitude.

During the siege, these civilians had been even more afraid for Cangzhou than the soldiers, because their homes were within the city.

“Zhu Sansi, here.”

A young soldier handed him a peach.

This soldier, Lü Zixing, was around Zhu’s age and served in the local garrison. During the battle, Zhu had saved him from being pushed off the wall by a barbarian.

Now, ever since the retreat, Lü Zixing had treated Zhu like a big brother. And once his family arrived safely, the first thing he did was offer Zhu some fruit.

“Young man, thank you for saving my son,” Lü’s father said. “We don’t have much, but please take these peaches as a token of thanks.”

Zhu looked at the father’s ragged clothes. It was clear this family lived in poverty.

He said, “No need for thanks. We’re all fighting for His Highness. Saving Zixing was just what I had to do. His Highness told us—always protect your comrade’s back. If I’m behind him, of course I’ll protect him.”

Lü Zixing, with his sharp, energetic face, said with admiration, “His Highness really said that? I wish I were part of the Qingzhou Army. Then I could see him more often.”

Zhu chuckled, "Sometimes he's kind of scary."

They both laughed.

Zixing still pushed the peach into Zhu's hand. "Just take it. These are wild mountain peaches. My dad came just to share them. The town folks really appreciate what you did. This year, the harvest won't be stolen by barbarians again."

Zhu took a bite, then slung a horse leg over his shoulder and started walking back toward the army camp.

"I was also worried about my family's harvest getting taken. So... how much land do you all farm?"

They chatted as they walked back toward the camp.

All around them, soldiers were carrying chunks of exploded horse meat back to camp.

From a distance, bonfires lit up the entire area, and the scent of roasting meat filled the air.

In the camp, Luo Xin and Lu Fei were bickering again.

Lu Fei was scolding Luo Xin for buying up local farm oxen. He was trying to get him to return them.

Xiao Ming and Niu Ben were watching the argument by a campfire, laughing silently.

They didn't step in. It was time to let the others enjoy themselves a little.

"This barbarian horse meat really is delicious!"

Niu Ben munched away, all while sneaking glances at the wine flask in front of Xiao Ming.

Xiao Ming had only brought one jar of Drunken Qingzhou wine. During the intense battle, it had stayed sealed.

Now that the war was over, he brought it out.

Last time at Prince Qi's residence, Niu Ben had gotten completely drunk off this wine and never forgot it. Now he was eyeing it hungrily—he sipped from his cup while longing for the flask.

When Xiao Ming poured himself another big cup, Niu Ben immediately did the same—then filled his cup again just in case he got shorted.

Luo Xin and Lu Fei, after their fight, noticed the drinking and quickly joined in.

Lu Fei reached for the wine flask.

“Smack!”

Niu Ben slapped his hand away.

“Your Highness, Commander—you’re hogging it!” Lu Fei complained.

“We’re not hogging anything!” Niu Ben snapped. “There’s only one jar. If it gets to your hands, there’ll be nothing left! Put your cup down—I’ll pour!”

“Letting the commander pour? Isn’t that out of order?” Lu Fei said with wide eyes.

Niu Ben wasn’t fooled. He poured Lu Fei only half a cup.

Lu Fei pouted and looked pitifully at Xiao Ming, silently begging for help.

Xiao Ming ignored him at first, drinking by himself—reluctant to share.

But Lu Fei's sad eyes were too much.

"Once we get back to Qingzhou," Xiao Ming said, "I'll send you ten full jars."

"Hehe, I was waiting for you to say that!" Lu Fei cheered.

Niu Ben stayed quiet. Xiao Ming had promised him twenty jars.

As night deepened, all the soldiers who had defended the city gathered—except for those on watch.

The camp was full of noise and joy as soldiers laughed loudly, releasing the pressure built up over the past ten days.

After a few drinks, Xiao Ming suddenly stood up.

The wine, the victory—it all made his heart surge with pride.

His territory had been defended.

He had made his mark.

“Commander, I think our army needs its own marching song,” he said.

“A marching song?” Niu Ben squinted. “What’s that, Your Highness?”

Lu Fei, half-sober, laughed. “Your Highness must be drunk!”

“I’m not drunk!” Xiao Ming said. “Every army needs a soul. A song can lift the spirit of the troops. Don’t believe me? I’ll sing one for you.”

In the Great Yu Empire, it wasn’t strange for nobles to sing or dance—especially at banquets in Chang’an.

It was much like the balls of Western nobles.

Lu Fei, always one for fun, jumped up. “Everyone quiet down! His Highness is going to sing!”

All the soldiers turned, surprised.

Feasting and drinking was one thing—but true celebration came from shared spirit.

Xiao Ming wasn't joking.

He wanted his soldiers to remember this battle—this indomitable will.

Then he began to sing a song from a future era, from a television drama called Drawing the Sword:

“If our homeland is invaded,

Hot-blooded men must rise.

Drink this cup of hometown wine,

A hero never returns alive.

The Yellow River roars, the Yangtze surges,

They gave me life, they gave me strength.

Let blood stain the brightest flower,

Let it bloom on my chest.

Red flags wave, war horns blare,

Blades drawn, thunder in the air.

When two paths meet, the brave will win,

March forward, march forward..."