

## **I. Dynasty 193**

### Chapter 193: The Soul of the Qingzhou Army

The fine drizzle continued to fall.

At this moment, Qingzhou City felt like a silent film—stifling, as if choking on unspoken rage.

It was a fury long suppressed in the hearts of the people.

In their eyes, Xiao Ming saw that anger—once buried deep, now rising to the surface.

Three years ago, they had endured the barbarian invasion. They suffered under the cruel exploitation of noble families who colluded with the enemy. The people had borne these pains silently. Now, that anger had erupted into hatred—for the barbarians, for the corrupt nobles.

And it was precisely because of this that the people, freed from their shackles, had firmly supported Xiao Ming in crushing the noble families and resisting the barbarians.

He also understood clearly: if he wanted to survive safely in this world, he could only rely on the people of his fiefdom.

To him, only a kingship built on the people's trust was truly stable. Otherwise, he would remain a puppet in the hands of the noble families.

After all, the noble clans of the Great Yu Empire had centuries of influence. Compared to them, Xiao Ming was a novice in political maneuvering—he stood no chance in their games.

But Xiao Ming wasn't a fool. Trying to compete in their arena would be idiocy. His advantage lay in his knowledge—technology far ahead of this era.

And that was the edge he planned to expand.

In the face of absolute power, all schemes were paper tigers.

The barrel of a gun would teach his enemies one truth: bullets are harder than words.

The military funeral for the fallen soldiers had been Xiao Ming's idea. So was the act of him, Niu Ben, and the others carrying the coffins.

To him, this funeral was not just respect for the dead—it was essential to forging the army's soul.

Dying wrapped in a horse's hide was tragic, but too desolate. This—this was what would bring peace to their hearts.

By noon, thousands of soldiers had been laid to rest. The Battle of Cangzhou had taken a heavy toll on the Qingzhou Army.

Had the barbarians not retreated, Xiao Ming couldn't say for certain whether Cangzhou would have held.

This defense had been a gamble—for him, and for the people of his fiefdom.

But luckily, they had won.

The victory bought them breathing room. From now on, any enemy attacking Cangzhou would pay an even bloodier price.

"Return to camp!"

As the funeral ended, Niu Ben's voice rang out. The Qingzhou Army turned in unison and slowly marched away from the graves.

Lu Fei's eyes were red. He hadn't cried on Cangzhou's walls. He hadn't wept upon returning to Qingzhou. But today, at this funeral, tears had fallen.

He looked at Xiao Ming and said, "Thank you, Your Highness. With such honor, our brothers on the road to the afterlife can rest in peace."

“They deserved this. Every soldier who dies for this country should be remembered.”

This funeral had surprised Pang Yukun—and even Niu Ben and the others.

In all of history, no ordinary soldier had ever received such rites. And for a prince to carry their coffins? If word spread, it would surely stir controversy.

But to the people, to the soldiers—their hearts were warmed. And for Xiao Ming, that was enough.

Luo Xin’s gaze was solemn. Over these months, Xiao Ming had given him too many surprises.

And this—this was the most shocking of all. He had to admit: in the eyes of nobles, commoners were expendable. So were soldiers.

In war, generals scrambled for credit. Who cared about the lives of foot soldiers? Beyond the Great Wall, countless nameless bones still lay unburied.

Yet Xiao Ming had not only brought every fallen soldier’s body back—he had given them a collective burial. To every soldier, this was glory.

Glancing back at the memorial standing tall among the graves, the four men left the cemetery.

Niu Ben spoke up: "Your Highness, news of Cangzhou's victory must have spread like wildfire in Chang'an by now. Soon, His Majesty will surely summon you to the capital for rewards."

"I think it's best if you don't go," Lu Fei shook his head. "With such achievements, the other princes will be green with envy. If they plot against you, we won't be able to protect you from so far away."

Luo Xin disagreed. "But if the imperial decree arrives, can you refuse? Not only would His Majesty be furious, but the other princes and ministers would seize the chance to accuse you—even claim you harbor treasonous thoughts. Those courtiers have twisted minds."

Niu Ben nodded. Luo Xin understood court politics far better than Lu Fei. "Luo Xin is right. You have to go. I'll guard Qingzhou in your absence. You two—" he pointed at Lu Fei and Luo Xin, "—will escort His Highness to the capital."

"Why us? You were the one who led the defense!" Lu Fei protested.

A bitter smile crossed Niu Ben's face. Xiao Ming noticed and said, "General, this trip is unavoidable. My mother also wrote, asking me to return. When I see His Majesty, I will plead for your exoneration."

"No need," Niu Ben refused. "This arrangement suits me fine. Life in Qingzhou is relaxed and free. If I'm cleared, those ministers will pressure His Majesty to recall me to the Imperial Guard. That would be troublesome."

Xiao Ming thought it over. Niu Ben knew the empire's political landscape far better than he did. He nodded in agreement.

Niu Ben added, "For your safety, take all one thousand Qingzhou cavalry with you to Chang'an. Better prepared than sorry."

Truthfully, Xiao Ming had no desire to return to Chang'an. To him, it was a cesspool of intrigue, its power struggles far too convoluted.

And there were few people there he missed.

But in her letter, Consort Zhen had mentioned something else: before the Battle of Cangzhou, Emperor Wenxuan had promised that if Xiao Ming held the city, he would propose marriage to the Fei family—securing Fei Yue'er, the youngest daughter of Fei Ji, as his bride.

In his past life, Xiao Ming had remained single. No one had ever arranged a marriage for him.

Now, his mother had found him a wife. The thought left him uneasy—after all, he'd never even seen this Fei Yue'er.

In the Great Yu Empire, brides and grooms typically met for the first time on their wedding night.

What if she turns out to be a shrew? My life would be over.

As for the Fei family's status, Xiao Ming had no strong feelings. He understood his mother's intentions—to ally him with a powerful clan.

But Xiao Ming had always believed in self-reliance. Depending on others would only lead to downfall.

So he didn't care about the Fei family's influence.

With a sigh, he resigned himself. He lived in this era now. Some things could be changed—but others required conformity.

Arranged marriages, dictated by parents and matchmakers, were hard to overturn. Even in his past world, many were forced into blind dates by their families.