

I. Dynasty 237

Chapter 237: Obstacles

The savory aroma of smoked pig's trotters wafted through the entire courtyard of the Prince's Manor.

Xiao Ming sat at the head seat, with Qian Dafu beside him. In front of each of them sat a low dining table—these were the standard dining tables used in the Great Yu Empire, where meals were traditionally enjoyed seated on the floor.

Seeing the abundance of dishes on the table, Qian Dafu's eyes lit up instantly. After all, he had endured a great deal of hardship over the past few months.

But before the two could even pick up their chopsticks, a servant hurried in to report: Niu Ben, Lu Fei, and others had arrived—Pang Yukun and Chen Wenlong were also with them.

"Your Highness? Did you summon them?" Qian Dafu asked, puzzled.

Xiao Ming responded helplessly, "What do you think? Clearly they heard about your return and found an excuse to come mooch a meal."

Unlike the other imperial princes who frequently held banquets, Xiao Ming rarely did. So Niu Ben, Lu Fei, and the others took every opportunity they could find to come by and freeload a meal.

It was starting to feel like they were taking advantage of a wealthy host.

“Haha, I see. Still, it’s lively this way. I’ve been away for three months, and I might be off again for another few. If too much time passes, I’m afraid we’ll grow distant,” Qian Dafu said.

Xiao Ming nodded to the servant, signaling him to let the guests in.

It wasn’t often so many people gathered together, so he figured it could serve as a small meeting as well. Besides, frequent meals and drinks together helped strengthen their bonds.

“Steward Qian, you’ve gotten even skinnier,” Pang Yukun said upon entering, bowing slightly to Qian Dafu.

Qian Dafu stood and greeted everyone one by one.

After exchanging pleasantries, Niu Ben and Lu Fei immediately turned their attention to the food, their eyes gleaming.

“Sit down, all of you. Seems you lot won’t rest until I’m eaten into poverty,” Xiao Ming sighed, instructing Ziyuan to bring a few more tables and have the kitchen prepare a few additional dishes.

“Your Highness, that’s not fair. I’ve been thinking about what you taught at Bo Wen Academy all day—my head still hurts! Don’t you think I deserve some kind of reward?” Luo Xin chuckled.

Niu Ben and Lu Fei were already aware that Luo Xin had attended Bo Wen Academy.

Upon hearing this, Lu Fei burst out laughing. “Your Highness, Luo Xin came back claiming the Earth is round—and that you said so! That nearly killed me!”

Niu Ben and the others laughed as well. Only Chen Qi remained composed, having already heard the explanation from Xiao Ming.

Lu Fei was still laughing when he noticed Xiao Ming glaring at him. He immediately fell silent, even swallowing a mouthful of saliva.

Xiao Ming felt utterly helpless. It seemed he had become the butt of everyone’s jokes. If word of this spread to Chang’an, he could only imagine how much ridicule he’d face.

He said, “It’s fine if you all joke among yourselves, but don’t go spreading this around. I don’t want to cause unnecessary trouble for myself.”

Everyone nodded. In their view, if this sort of talk got out, it would indeed damage Xiao Ming’s reputation.

Once seated, they dropped the topic and began asking Qian Dafu about his recent journey. Upon hearing that both saltpeter and lead ore had been discovered, Chen Qi exclaimed excitedly, “Your Highness, we can start producing lead bullets now, right?”

His words immediately drew Niu Ben and the others’ attention.

“Lead bullets? What are those?” Luo Xin asked.

Chen Qi explained, “Your Highness once said that lead bullets are toxic. Even if someone survives being shot, the poison will finish them off. Against the barbarians, these would scare them witless.”

Xiao Ming nodded. Because lead is relatively soft, it transfers all of its kinetic energy upon impact.

When striking the human body, lead bullets often deform or shatter severely, creating trumpet-shaped cavities in tissue. The wound area is hundreds of times greater than that caused by iron projectiles.

Additionally, lead bullets cause immense pressure on the circulatory system, leading to severe internal damage. Their lethality is hard to imagine.

But the suffering didn’t end there. If fragments of the bullet weren’t completely removed from the wound, the remaining lead could cause poisoning. Even if only a few fragments remained, infection was still likely, as the bullet often dragged in pieces of clothing or debris.

Even if Hua Tuo himself were alive, he wouldn’t be able to save someone like that. And the death? It would be slow and agonizing.

According to data, at a distance of 100 meters, a direct hit to the head with a lead bullet resulted in a 90% mortality rate. Hits to limbs resulted in a 20% death rate, with most survivors requiring amputation.

A shot near the heart almost always meant certain death. That's why, in modern times, lead bullets—due to their destructive and inhumane nature—are considered as horrific and threatening as biological weapons. They were banned by the European Union.

"Poisonous?" Luo Xin's face turned grim. "Your Highness, is that true?"

Xiao Ming nodded. Lead's toxicity was common knowledge in modern times. Now that they'd found a lead deposit, his goal was to manufacture lead cannonballs, making them the third type of ammunition following grapeshot.

These bullets would be reserved specifically for targeting barbarian commanders. Even if they weren't directly struck, a hit from a fragment would be almost certainly fatal.

These lead bullets would also be used as ammunition for Qingzhou's firearms—lead was far cheaper than steel balls, after all.

But most importantly, they were for fighting the barbarians. Xiao Ming had long set his sights on the fertile lands of Youzhou. If he could drive out the barbarians, not only could he block them at Shanhai Pass, but he'd also gain vast territory and population—that was the ultimate prize.

Niu Ben spoke up. "The barbarians will stop at nothing to destroy us. We can't afford to show mercy to our enemies. Steward Qian, you've truly made a great contribution."

“That’s right. In the Battle of Cangzhou, the number of enslaved soldiers killed was more than ten times that of the barbarians. And those men were all civilians from the old Youzhou lands,” Lu Fei added.

Pang Yukun had originally wanted to object to such a brutal weapon. After all, he had been raised on Confucian ideals of compassion. But seeing that Niu Ben and the other military officers were united in their stance, he said nothing.

Because maybe, just maybe, they were right.

“Enough of that for now. Tonight is a celebration for Qian Dafu. Come, let’s eat,” Xiao Ming said, noticing Pang Yukun’s conflicted expression.

Seeing Pang Yukun remain silent, Xiao Ming felt relieved.

During the day’s lesson, he had started to realize just how deeply Confucian feudal ideology had influenced him. He admitted that ideas like “father is father, son is son,” and “ruler is ruler, minister is minister,” had their benefits in governance.

But its rigid dogma was also a major obstacle to the advancement of civilization. The tech crystal archive recorded that during the Ming Dynasty, civilian astronomical research was outright banned—an outcome of Confucianism’s push for centralized control.