

I. Dynasty 379

Chapter 379: Military Expansion

Inside the Governor's Office, the atmosphere was growing even more lively.

Everyone's face was glowing with joy. Those who had received noble titles exchanged happy glances, while those still waiting were filled with hope.

Xiao Ming's eyes swept over the crowd.

To him, titles were just names. But to these officers—many of whom were born as commoners—they meant the world. Titles represented honor, and silver and farmland represented wealth.

By granting them such generous rewards, Xiao Ming ensured these commanders would live comfortably and become harder to bribe or turn against him.

And for Xiao Ming, the cost was minimal. The six prefectures had plenty of land and not enough people. Giving out farmland actually helped boost agriculture.

After finishing the military rewards, Xiao Ming turned to Pang Yukun.

"Secretary Pang, you've been with me the longest. You're like my own Xiao He. You've handled all the logistics and government work personally. Today, I'm giving you the title of Regional Earl."

"Your Highness... this..." Pang Yukun was shocked.

He had never included himself when they discussed reward plans. He didn't expect Xiao Ming had kept him in mind.

Honestly, he had admired the others receiving titles, but for the sake of fairness, he had never let himself be jealous.

Now, suddenly being honored this way stirred deep emotions in him.

"You don't need to refuse. I owe you this. And your contributions to Qingzhou are no less than any general's," Xiao Ming said.

Hearing this, Niu Ben and the other generals nodded in agreement. They respected Pang Yukun deeply. He was honest and hardworking. It was only right that he finally received something to improve his own life.

"Thank you, Your Highness," Pang Yukun said, voice choked with emotion.

He thought back on his journey in Qingzhou, and tears almost came to his eyes. He truly believed a bright future awaited them all.

Xiao Ming gave Pang Yukun a firm pat on the shoulder, then looked toward Zhan Xingchang.

“Zhan Xingchang, you’re getting the title of County Earl. I hope you don’t find it too low?”

“Your Highness, even Officer Lu Fei is a County Earl. I’m deeply grateful just to be included,” Zhan Xingchang replied with a smile.

He knew he was still new and inexperienced. A higher rank might have stirred resentment.

Everyone accepted that Niu Ben and Pang Yukun were King Qi’s right-hand men—there was no jealousy there.

Xiao Ming nodded, then handed out more rewards to officials like Chen Wenlong.

Finally, he turned to Li Kaiyuan and two merchants.

Yes, even merchants were on the rewards list. His goal was to attract wealthy businessmen from across the Great Yu Empire to settle in Qingzhou and move their industries there.

Xiao Ming already had his own industrial system, but the empire still relied heavily on traditional industries—textiles, dyeing, papermaking, cooking oil, and more.

There was no need to start these from scratch. All he had to do was lure existing businesses to relocate.

Upgrading their technology would come later.

“Li Kaiyuan, you are granted the title of County Earl,” Xiao Ming said with a cheerful smile.

Li Kaiyuan had looked very anxious the whole time. Merchants had always been looked down upon. Deep down, he feared he wouldn’t receive anything.

But as soon as Xiao Ming announced his title, Li Kaiyuan’s whole body relaxed. He stood up, lips trembling, nearly in tears.

“Thank you, Your Highness. I’ll never forget your kindness.”

Xiao Ming laughed heartily. He had promised to treat Li Kaiyuan equally when giving him control of the merchant guild. This was just fulfilling that promise.

Then, he looked at the two most unusual attendees at the meeting: Ding Wu and Dai Zixing.

He had thought carefully before inviting them.

Both were merchants from other regions who had recently registered as Qingzhou citizens. They had contributed a lot of silver to the northern campaign.

Especially Ding Wu—according to Li San’s investigation, he was the son of Ding Wanquan.

By awarding these two titles, Xiao Ming knew he would inspire other merchants to follow their lead.

“Ding Wu, County Baron. Dai Zixing, County Baron,” he announced.

The two of them had felt awkward the whole meeting. Surrounded by officials and generals of King Qi, they had felt like nobodies.

Still, they had a little hope in their hearts. After all, who didn’t dream of noble status?

“Thank you, Your Highness,” they both said, standing up and bowing. “We will do our best to serve Qingzhou and make greater contributions.”

Xiao Ming nodded. “You two were chosen because I see you as examples among merchants. In the future, Qingzhou’s business world will rely heavily on you.”

The two nodded eagerly, their faces flushed with excitement.

Xiao Ming glanced at the reward register once more. With the title ceremony complete, he told the students and merchants they could leave.

Next came the discussion of government affairs.

“Now that the rewards are done, let’s talk about the granted lands. Minister Feng has arrived in Qingzhou, and I’ll be heading to Chang’an soon. While I’m gone, you all need to keep an eye on the land arrangements.”

Pang Yukun nodded. “Your Highness, the wedding is the main event in Chang’an. If you can produce an heir soon, the six prefectures will be even more secure.”

Xiao Ming rolled his eyes. Pang Yukun always thought like a government official. Talking about children before the wedding was just like court ministers pushing the emperor to have a son.

If he suddenly died one day, these people wouldn’t be left without a leader.

Annoying as it was, Xiao Ming understood. This was just how things worked in a feudal empire. These people were literally betting their lives on following him.

Still, he wasn’t buying into Pang Yukun’s words. Instead, he said,

“Secretary Pang, while I’m in Chang’an, take care of the refugee situation in Youzhou. Work with the army on recruitment. Some of these refugees are young and don’t want to farm—joining the army may be their best path.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Pang Yukun said, nodding.

Xiao Ming continued, “Also, by the time I return, the potatoes should be ready for harvest. Make sure the slave plantations are properly managed.”

Pang Yukun nodded again.

Then Xiao Ming turned to Niu Ben.

“Governor Niu, you need to take the lead on building the Youzhou army. We now control Youzhou, so we must increase our number of troops. Our current forces are stretched too thin. Expansion must begin now.”

“Understood,” Niu Ben replied.

“And one more thing,” Xiao Ming added. “Firearms have now been officially added to our forces. From today forward, focus on building a proper firearm army.”