

I. Dynasty 125

Chapter 125: Dilemma

The possibility of a barbarian invasion in the autumn.

Apart from Pang Yukun, military generals like Lu Fei soon received the news.

“Your Highness, as long as the equipment and weapons can keep up, defending Cangzhou City won’t be a problem. But so far, even the equipment for the Qingzhou camp hasn’t been settled. Can you hurry Chen Wenlong along?” Lu Fei shot a sideways glance at Chen Wenlong, who stood with his eyes fixed straight ahead, his teeth clenched in frustration.

Chen Wenlong had a calm temperament, while Lu Fei was hot-headed. Naturally, the two didn’t get along. Chen Wenlong replied, “Commander Lu, producing plate armor isn’t easy. Producing a thousand sets in a month is already quite an achievement.”

“But Your Highness said we could produce a hundred sets a day. Are you trying to deceive me?” Lu Fei, his chest wrapped in bandages, glared and questioned.

Now it was Xiao Ming’s turn to blush. When the hydraulic hammer was first implemented in the steel workshop, he had confidently claimed they could produce a hundred sets of plate armor a day.

Later, reality had slapped him in the face. It wasn’t that he had misjudged the production capacity.

The problem was the insufficient supply of iron ore. Now he understood that while smelting iron and steel was relatively easy, mining was a different story.

After the shallow layers of ore were exhausted, the mines had to be dug deeper. Then, whenever it rained, the mines would flood, turning into ponds.

Once the rain stopped, the first task was to drain the water from the mines before mining could resume.

At the same time, the deepening of the mines increased the difficulty of transporting the ore. The three iron mines under Qian Dafu's management were producing less and less ore.

The same problem was occurring with the coal mines.

In the past, Qingzhou had never engaged in large-scale steel production, so the shortages of coal and iron ore during the rainy season hadn't been noticeable.

But now, the steel workshop was not only producing weapons and armor but also bearings for ox-powered waterwheels and farming tools for civilian use.

Chen Wenlong glanced at Xiao Ming and said to Lu Fei, "Your Highness is clearly worried, so you can see I'm not deceiving you."

"Your Highness, what's going on? If this continues, we'll only have eight or nine thousand soldiers ready in six months. These soldiers, trained for only half a year, are no match for the barbarians, who are born riders and archers. Without the advantage of superior armor and weapons, we'll suffer heavy losses."

Xiao Ming rubbed his forehead and leaned back in his chair. “Do you think I don’t want to equip the entire new army with plate armor? The reality is what it is, and I’m helpless.”

With plate armor production already lagging and now the need to produce cannons, Xiao Ming was truly overwhelmed.

Now he understood why ancient states struggled to maintain a standing army of even a hundred thousand soldiers. Feeding, clothing, and equipping an army was expensive, and maintaining weapons like plate armor added to the cost.

Cavalry was an even greater expense. Each cavalryman needed four horses and a dedicated auxiliary soldier to tend to the equipment and horses.

These auxiliary soldiers were similar to the squires of Western knights, responsible for maintaining the cavalry’s gear and horses.

And the warhorses were no small expense either, requiring high-quality fodder, which cost a fortune.

The workshop district was a major source of income but also a major expense. The slaves in the workshops needed food, clothing, and other necessities, not to mention the costs of Qian Dafu’s mines.

In short, while he had earned a lot recently, he had also spent a great deal, with most of the silver going into production. Even agricultural investments like oxen and farming tools had consumed a significant portion.

Lu Fei fell silent.

Chen Wenlong comforted him, "Commander Lu, don't worry. If we have enough materials, military needs will naturally take priority."

"That's right. You focus on training the troops. I'll handle the armor and weapons," Xiao Ming said.

Lu Fei had no choice but to relent.

After sending Lu Fei away, Xiao Ming said to Chen Wenlong, "With Qingzhou's mineral supply insufficient, it seems we'll have to purchase from outside."

"That's possible, but Your Highness must be wary of slander in the court," Chen Wenlong warned.

Xiao Ming frowned. Although he was a feudal lord, he wasn't free to act as he pleased. He was still subject to the court's restrictions.

Iron ore was strictly controlled in the Great Yu Empire. Generally, other feudal lords rarely purchased iron ore from outside, relying instead on internal supplies.

Because large-scale purchases of iron ore could only mean one thing: the feudal lord was mass-producing weapons and armor.

This was a sensitive issue. With no major conflicts in the Great Yu Empire, if a feudal lord couldn't meet his needs with local ore and had to purchase from outside, what were his intentions?

"I understand. I may have to report this to the court. In the meantime, balance production as best you can and prioritize the needs of the Qingzhou army," Xiao Ming sighed.

With his power still growing, he couldn't afford to act recklessly. Otherwise, he might lose his life, and all his hard work over the past months would be for nothing.

"Yes, Your Highness," Chen Wenlong nodded.

Qian Dafu had been silent in the main hall. After Chen Wenlong left, he asked, "Your Highness, how should we deal with the water in the mines?"

"I'll have the Machinery Department prepare a few more ox-powered waterwheels for you. Since mining is temporarily halted, focus your efforts on prospecting, especially for wolframite, followed by tin and lead ores," Xiao Ming said.

The reason for seeking the latter two ores was to prepare for the possibility of cast iron cannons failing, in which case they would have to resort to bronze cannons. Cast iron cannons had a high risk of exploding.

Pure copper cannons were simply too expensive. Copper coins were still in use throughout the Great Yu Empire.

Qian Dafu nodded.

After giving instructions to the three regarding the barbarian threat, Xiao Ming personally wrote a report about the barbarians and sent it to the courier station for swift delivery to Chang'an.

Meanwhile, he went to the Machinery Department to discuss cannon production with Chen Qi.

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Chang'an.

In the imperial palace, the willows were sprouting new leaves, and peach blossoms were in full bloom, creating a vibrant scene. Empress Zhao was strolling through the rear garden with a group of concubines.

Consort Zhen walked beside Empress Zhao. Over the past six months, the concubines had noticed that Empress Zhao and Consort Zhen were growing closer.

Some of the more astute concubines had already discerned the underlying implications and dared not show any disrespect to Consort Zhen.

A few days ago, Prince Zhao had arrived in the capital to meet the Emperor. Xiao Wenxuan personally went out of the city to welcome him, showing the importance he placed on Prince Zhao. Back in the day, without Prince Zhao's assistance, Xiao Wenxuan would never have secured the throne. It was no surprise that Prince Zhao's daughter had become the current Empress Zhao.

Now, with the position of Crown Prince in flux, Prince Zhao's arrival in the capital spoke volumes. However, the Crown Prince's recent assertiveness in court suggested he was feeling confident.

As for Consort Zhen, she seemed to be gaining more of the Emperor's favor lately. But the palace was a place where news traveled fast.

The actions of Prince Qi, Xiao Ming, against the local nobility in Qingzhou had already caused a stir in the palace.