

I. Dynasty 224

Chapter 224: Running Out of Money Again

A cup of strong tea sat beside him, its faint aroma filling the air.

Setting aside military reforms for now, Xiao Ming continued, "The Huyantuo tribe has withdrawn from the grasslands, replaced by the Blood Wolf Tribe. I assume you're all aware of this?"

"Our scouts on the plains have already brought back reports. Last time, we won by sheer luck. But now that Beishan has taken control of Youzhou, things have become much more complicated," Niu Ben said with a frown.

Zhan Xingchang added, "Exactly. The Blood Wolf Tribe has intensified surveillance on Cangzhou. Enemy scouts frequently appear outside the city, making it impossible for us to send craftsmen to build fortresses on the plains. After Your Highness left for Chang'an, I attempted it once. The moment our craftsmen transported materials onto the grasslands, barbarian cavalry arrived, forcing us to retreat back into the city."

"Beishan is indeed not an easy opponent. Right now, he's like a wolf watching its prey, eyeing Cangzhou for any weakness. The moment we slip up, they'll strike," Xiao Ming said, his expression grim.

After a moment of thought, he continued, "But we can't abandon the fortress strategy. If we can't expand onto the plains yet, we must at least turn Cangzhou's defenses into an impenetrable stronghold. After the meeting, I'll teach you a new construction method."

“Yes, Your Highness,” Zhan Xingchang replied.

Xiao Ming then turned to Chen Qi. “How is the military workshop progressing?”

Chen Qi said, “Your Highness, all equipment from the Machinery Department has been moved to the military workshop. Cannons are now being produced steadily. This month, we’ve supplied Cangzhou with twenty more cannons. However, material shortages are becoming a problem again.”

Chen Wenlong chimed in, “Your Highness, Steward Qian’s mines alone can’t keep up with the demand. Right now, the daily iron ore output is barely enough for one cannon—sometimes not even that.”

This was a problem Xiao Ming couldn’t easily solve. Mining wasn’t as simple as throwing more people at it.

Once surface-level iron ore was exhausted, miners had to dig deeper underground, where space was limited. There was only so much manpower that could be crammed into narrow tunnels.

As a result, mining had become more difficult, and production had plateaued.

Adding to the issue, transporting the mined ore took even more time, severely hampering cannon production.

“Don’t worry about that. More materials will arrive soon,” Xiao Ming assured them.

Chen Qi and Chen Wenlong exchanged glances. “Really?”

“Absolutely. The Emperor wants to purchase cannons from us—eight thousand taels per cannon. Part of the payment will be in iron and coal. Other feudal lords will likely follow suit. This means iron and coal from across the Great Yu Empire will flow into Qingzhou,” Lu Fei declared loudly.

“Purchase? Your Highness, these cannons are our lifeline against the barbarians. We barely have enough for ourselves—how can we sell them?” Niu Ben protested immediately.

The idea of parting with cannons was more painful than cutting off his own flesh—they were the backbone of Qingzhou’s military.

“General, as Chen Wenlong just said, our local mines can’t meet demand. If we don’t solve the material shortage, production will remain crippled. Besides, we can’t refuse the Emperor’s orders, and the profits are too good to ignore. Each cannon costs us two to three thousand taels to make, but we’re selling them for eight thousand. For every cannon we provide the court, we can produce two or three more for ourselves. It’s a guaranteed profit,” Xiao Ming explained.

Niu Ben froze for a moment before breaking into a smile. “Your Highness, I must be getting senile.”

The others chuckled good-naturedly.

“But this means the military workshop will be stretched thin. Your Highness, we’ll need more slaves assigned to us—otherwise, we won’t have enough manpower,” Chen Qi said.

“That won’t be a problem. However, we must differentiate between the cannons we sell and the ones we use. At the very least, ensure the sold cannons have inferior range and power compared to ours. That way, even if they fall into enemy hands, we can still overpower them,” Xiao Ming warned.

Niu Ben and the others nodded in agreement. They had been about to raise the same concern, but Xiao Ming had already thought of everything.

Once military matters were settled, Pang Yukun spoke up. “Your Highness, this year’s harvest across the six prefectures has been bountiful. Many commoners have sold their surplus grain to the government. Our granaries now hold over five hundred thousand dan of grain. Combined with military reserves, our storage facilities are overflowing. With the next harvest approaching, should we continue purchasing grain?”

Five hundred thousand dan of grain could feed five hundred thousand people for three months—more than enough for the army, but far from sufficient by modern standards. Emergency reserves should cover at least three years of consumption.

In times of war, production would be disrupted. During the Battle of Cangzhou, for instance, while only fifty thousand soldiers and support troops were mobilized, two to three hundred thousand civilians were drafted to transport supplies and prepare siege materials.

With so many laborers pulled from their farms, this year’s autumn harvest would undoubtedly shrink.

This was why Xiao Ming had said Qingzhou was still recovering.

“Buy as much as the people are willing to sell. At the very least, ensure the army has three years’ worth of grain. As for storage, order each prefecture to build new granaries. Use brick-and-mortar construction with cement flooring, and choose elevated sites to prevent moisture damage. Set quotas—each prefecture must meet its grain procurement target,” Xiao Ming said firmly. Food security was no joke.

Farming depended on the weather. Droughts, floods, or locust plagues could wipe out an entire year’s harvest. Stockpiling during abundant years was the only way to safeguard against disasters.

Pang Yukun nodded, jotting down Xiao Ming’s instructions. Then he added, “Your Highness, the treasury now holds only two million taels of silver. Here’s the ledger—would you like to review it?”

The saddest thing in life was being alive but broke.

Pang Yukun’s words made Xiao Ming’s stomach twist. All profits from the merchant guilds flowed into the treasury for government allocation, so the ledger told the full story.

Just providing plow oxen and farming tools to the people had cost over a million taels. Each set of plate armor for the military cost at least twenty taels—forty thousand taels for the Qingzhou Army alone. The Battle of Cangzhou had consumed hundreds of thousands more in cannons, ammunition, and shells.

Add to that the expenses for feeding slaves, paying officials’ salaries, and purchasing timber for shipbuilding...

As Xiao Ming scanned the ledger’s dense numbers, his head began to throb.