

I. Dynasty 24

Chapter 24: Farmland

“By the way, the Engineering Department still has too few craftsmen. Now that we have enough silver, we should recruit more. Chen Qi, I’ll leave this task to you. Skilled craftsmen may be hard to find, but we can bring in apprentices. The most important thing is that they, like you, must have a passion for these technologies.”

Before leaving, Xiao Ming instructed Chen Qi. Although Chen Wenlong was a capable military officer, his thinking was somewhat rigid—far less open-minded than the younger Chen Qi.

While Chen Wenlong was competent in managing the department’s daily affairs, when it came to the technology Xiao Ming was introducing, the gap between him and Chen Qi was substantial.

Chen Qi nodded vigorously. Being recognized by the Prince of Qi was an immense honor for a mere craftsman with no official rank.

After seeing Xiao Ming off, Chen Qi stood at the entrance of the Engineering Department, grinning foolishly. He turned to his father and said, “Father, our prince is actually quite reasonable.”

“That’s now. If this were the past, you’d have gotten a beating for speaking out of turn,” Chen Wenlong said, kicking at Chen Qi’s rear.

Chen Qi dodged swiftly and laughed. “Father, I’m the chief craftsman now! You can’t call me a good-for-nothing anymore. Look at how much His Highness values our department—I think we have a bright future ahead!”

Chen Wenlong huffed, his beard bristling. Having had Chen Qi late in life, he had naturally spoiled him, allowing him to indulge in his fascination with strange contraptions. But he had never expected that his son would one day be so highly regarded—it was as if their ancestors were smiling upon them.

With this, when he eventually retired from his post as military officer, Chen Qi had a real chance of succeeding him.

“Since His Highness values you so much, you must not disappoint him. I’ve observed you over the past few days—you do seem to have a talent for this. Go on, then. I’ll leave the blast furnace project entirely in your hands. I will only handle procurement and finances for the office.”

“Don’t worry, Father,” Chen Qi said excitedly, realizing his father was giving him free rein.

The snow continued to fall in Qingzhou City. The fierce wind carried it like drifting dandelion seeds, quickly covering Xiao Ming in a layer of white.

Behind him, Zhao Long and Zhao Hu rode their horses closely, scanning their surroundings with vigilance.

The assassination attempt last time had left a lingering sense of unease over the entire city.

No one was more furious about it than Lu Fei. That an assassination could happen under his watch was a great humiliation. He had, therefore, ordered Zhao Long and Zhao Hu not to let any harm befall the Prince of Qi.

Xiao Ming could sense their tension.

This was a brutal era, where laws were trampled under the boots of the strong.

To live freely, one had to possess overwhelming strength.

Xiao Ming was not an overly ambitious person, but he understood that only by making his domain powerful would he truly be safe.

He had no desire to get entangled in the political struggles of the Great Yu Empire. He simply wanted to quietly build wealth, live a peaceful life, cultivate farmland, and develop industry—turning his territory into a land of prosperity.

Of course, if anyone dared to threaten this vision, he had no problem transforming from a passive sheep into a roaring lion, tearing his enemies apart.

The assassination attempt might have been orchestrated by his royal siblings or other ill-intentioned forces.

Yet Xiao Ming felt no anger—because anger without strength was meaningless. This was simply the price of being a prince.

Rather than wasting energy on futile investigations, he preferred to focus on development. Losing composure over such provocations would only be counterproductive.

“Zhao Long, Zhao Hu, do you remember where my farmland is located?”

Life in the royal residence was dull. Lü Luo and Ziyuan spent much of their free time embroidering, and Xiao Ming didn’t want to disturb them. Then, he suddenly remembered—he was a landlord. He owned a vast estate outside Qingzhou City.

Every prince in the Great Yu Empire was granted farmland, and as a feudal king, he was no exception. When he was enfeoffed in Qingzhou, he had been allocated a large piece of fertile land according to the standard for vassal princes.

Zhao Long, being a year older and more talkative than Zhao Hu, responded, “Your Highness, your farmland is the most fertile in Qingzhou. It lies on both sides of the Yang River to the north of the city. However, it remains entirely uncultivated—just a vast expanse of wilderness.”

Xiao Ming nodded. That was indeed the case.

After receiving this land, he hadn’t bothered with it, so it had remained untouched.

“Let’s go take a look,” Xiao Ming said.

“Your Highness, the roads are blocked by snow. It may not be safe to go outside the city now,” Zhao Hu cautioned. He was a man of few words, but his remarks were always to the point.

Xiao Ming, however, was too excited about the farmland to heed the warning.

If he remembered correctly, the standard farmland allocation for a vassal prince in the Dayu Kingdom was 100 qing.

The measurement of qing and mu was similar to modern standards, meaning he had about 10,000 mu of land—equivalent to an area five li (about 2.5 kilometers) in length and width. It was no small piece of land.

In the Great Yu Empire, land was divided into imperial estates, official lands, and civilian farmlands. His estate fell under the category of imperial farmland.

It was still early winter. If he could get the land cleared over the season, by spring, he could plant crops on his estate.

The more he thought about it, the more eager he became. Another idea had just struck him—one that could alleviate Qingzhou’s financial burdens. He turned to his guards and said, “Summon Commander Lu. Have him bring some soldiers with us. That should ensure our safety.”

Zhao Hu nodded. “That should be fine, though I worry about encountering bandits.”

“Hmm, you have a point. But this year, I ordered tax reductions and land reclamation efforts. Hopefully, that will lessen the chaos caused by bandits,” Xiao Ming said, furrowing his brow slightly.

Unlike modern times, in this era, turning to banditry wasn’t unusual.

Some people became outlaws because they couldn’t afford to eat, others because they had broken the law. And of course, there were those who were simply wicked.

Bandit gangs could easily take over a mountain and terrorize the region. Due to vast land areas, low population density, poor communication, and difficult terrain, government crackdowns were notoriously difficult.

Even in times of peace, bandits still roamed the countryside—let alone in turbulent times like these.

When they reached the northern part of the city and explained the situation, Lu Fei’s first reaction was to oppose the trip.

Unable to dissuade Xiao Ming, Lu Fei had no choice but to send out all the cavalry to escort him.

The Mi River was to the south, and the Yang River was to the north. A group of over thirty riders traveled more than ten li before finally reaching the Yang River, which was slightly smaller than the Mi River.

“Your Highness, this is your farmland. However, since you never paid much attention to it, it has remained abandoned,” Lu Fei said.

Xiao Ming gazed out over the snowy expanse on both sides of the Yang River. The only movement came from the rushing waters, where snowflakes melted instantly upon contact.

It seemed that he was the only one unaware of the details of his own estate. The land Lu Fei pointed out was indeed high-quality farmland.

“What a waste,” Xiao Ming murmured. Then, turning to Lu Fei, he asked, “Lu Fei, do you remember the military farming system from the previous dynasty?”