

I. Dynasty 25

Chapter 25: The Production Corps

"I remember, Your Highness," Lu Fei said with a salute. He knew that Xiao Ming would not bring this up without reason, so he asked, "Your Highness, do you intend to reinstate the military farming system?"

"Exactly. At the founding of the Great Yu Empire, the government implemented the military farming system, where soldiers doubled as farmers. But as time passed, commoners lost their land, and the system gradually became obsolete, replaced by the current mercenary system," Xiao Ming said, brushing the snow off his shoulders. "Now that the six prefectures are in ruins, everything should be planned with agriculture in mind. I intend to temporarily reinstate the military farming system. Soldiers will farm during the busy seasons and train during the off-seasons. This will not only ease the financial burden but also accelerate the economic recovery of the six prefectures. What do you think?"

Lu Fei pondered for a moment before replying, "Your Highness, restoring the military farming system is not impossible. You are the ruler of the six prefectures, and your word is law for us soldiers. However, most of the current recruits are landless commoners. If we reinstate the military farming system, they still won't have land to farm."

Xiao Ming had already anticipated this issue. He replied, "I've thought of that. This version of the system will be different from the past."

"Please enlighten me, Your Highness."

Xiao Ming continued, "Those who own land can return home to farm, while landless soldiers can cultivate government-owned land. The harvest from these lands will be entirely used for military supplies. What do you think?"

Lu Fei couldn't help but laugh. So, after all this, Xiao Ming's plan was to have the Qingzhou army farm his land. Straightforward as always, he said, "Hmph, I thought Your Highness was truly concerned about the people. Turns out, it's just about your own estate."

Xiao Ming wasn't offended. From an outsider's perspective, it did seem like he was acting out of self-interest.

He laughed heartily. "If that's how you see it, Lu Fei, you're gravely mistaken. I won't take a single grain from these lands. All the harvest will go to the state treasury. As you said, the land already belongs to me—I don't need to quibble over small gains. In my view, if the people prosper, my territory prospers. If the people are strong, my territory is strong. If you don't believe me, I can write a formal decree and hand it over to Chancellor Pang. How about that?"

Lu Fei was taken aback. The royal family and noble clans of the Great Yu Empire were all known for hoarding wealth. Yet Xiao Ming was willing to relinquish his estate's profits to the government. This was unprecedented.

"Your Highness, do you truly mean this?" Lu Fei asked again.

"I do. A gentleman's word is as swift as a horse's gallop," Xiao Ming said, meeting Lu Fei's gaze head-on. He knew that dealing with this stubborn officer required directness. "My only concern is whether the soldiers will believe me. That's why I need you to oversee this."

After a long pause, Lu Fei nodded and said, "I will trust Your Highness once more. If you keep your word, I will devote my life to serving you, for you are a wise and just ruler. But if you go back on your promise, I will have no choice but to take my soldiers and seek another path."

“I’d rather not have a gang of bandits led by you roaming my land,” Xiao Ming said lightly. Lu Fei commanded great respect in the army. If he truly turned outlaw, many soldiers would follow him.

“In that case, leave convincing the soldiers to me,” Lu Fei said firmly.

The snowfall grew heavier, obscuring the road ahead. Now that Xiao Ming had confirmed the location of his estate and secured Lu Fei’s support for the military farming plan, he had taken a crucial step forward.

The mercenary system had made the army a major financial burden.

With limited funds, he could barely sustain 5,000 troops in a territory meant to support a much larger force. The soldiers were ill-equipped and poorly supplied—little more than a band of brigands.

Given these dire conditions, the only way to change things was to implement the military farming system, reducing the army’s drain on the treasury.

This model was essentially a form of military settlement, a system that had appeared throughout history whenever resources were scarce.

On the way back, Xiao Ming continued explaining the logic behind the production-based military corps to Lu Fei. He planned to divide the army into two groups: a Production Corps and a Construction Corps.

The Production Corps would focus on military farming and border defense.

The Construction Corps would handle mining, road building, and dam construction.

Lu Fei, being a straightforward man, only had a basic understanding of the old military farming system. But after listening to Xiao Ming's detailed explanation, he suddenly saw the bigger picture.

"Your Highness, I was wrong to doubt you. This is a brilliant strategy! If that's the case, we can immediately begin recruiting, expanding our forces from 5,000 to the full 50,000 soldiers our territory should support," Lu Fei said.

Xiao Ming nodded. "We can, but we shouldn't expand too quickly. Right now, we don't have enough food to sustain such numbers. Let's start by recruiting 5,000 more. Once the government farmlands yield their first harvest, we can expand further."

"I overlooked that," Lu Fei admitted, smacking his forehead. Then he grinned. "But, Your Highness, you promised that each soldier who completes their service will receive ten mu of farmland, which they can pass down for generations. The recruitment office is going to be swamped with eager applicants!"

"Hahaha!" Xiao Ming laughed. This policy was both a military incentive and an economic measure, designed to encourage enlistment. "Well, that's your problem now, Lu Tiger. You handle it."

Lu Fei froze for a moment, then chuckled. "Lu Tiger" was his nickname in the army. Hearing Xiao Ming call him that made him feel a newfound camaraderie with his lord.

Over the past month, Xiao Ming had come to understand that being a vassal prince was no easy task. He had to balance rewards and punishments, manage both governance and military affairs, maintain authority, and earn his subordinates' trust.

Now, he could say he was truly working at full capacity.

Braving the heavy snow, the group of thirty riders headed back toward Qingzhou City.

Halfway there, a vague silhouette appeared in the distance—another group of riders galloping toward them.

“Who goes there? Halt!” Lu Fei suddenly shouted. The assassination attempt last time had made him highly vigilant.

The snowfall obscured their faces, making it impossible to tell if they were friend or foe.

In an instant, the thirty riders surrounding Xiao Ming formed a protective ring, bows drawn, ready to shoot at a moment's notice.

But the approaching riders paid no heed to Lu Fei's warning, continuing their charge. As they drew closer, Lu Fei raised his hand, preparing to give the order to fire.

Just then, a voice from the approaching group cried out, “Steward Qian, hold on!”

“Wait! It’s Qian Dafu!” Xiao Ming immediately ordered the soldiers to lower their bows.

Sure enough, as the group neared, it became clear that these were Qian Dafu and his men, who had been out searching for mineral deposits.

But Qian Dafu was slumped over his horse, an arrow lodged in his back.