

I. Dynasty 275

Chapter 275: Household Registry Audit

Outside the tower, the snow was falling harder.

Footprints and wagon tracks on the roads disappeared quickly beneath the thick, white layer.

A cold wind swept through, and Xiao Ming pulled his tiger-skin cloak tighter around himself.

This cloak had once been Lu Fei's family treasure, but after losing a bet, Lu Fei handed it over to Xiao Ming.

To be fair, Xiao Ming had given him some silver in return—enough to keep Lu Fei happy for a while.

After all, the man had been planning to sell it anyway.

"Your Highness, with snow like this, I fear the barbarians will have another rough year," Pang Yukun said, looking out at the snow-covered city of Qingzhou, concern written on his face.

Earlier, a comment from Lülao had reminded Xiao Ming of the Little Ice Age, and now with each winter growing colder, he was more certain of it.

“Wang Xuan sent word—just like last year, a lot of the barbarians’ cattle and sheep have frozen to death.”

“Last winter, when we needed animal fat for soap, I had the Wang family trade food for the dead livestock. But now that the Wang clan is gone... the barbarians are in trouble.”

“Absolutely,” said Lu Tong, who had once lived as a slave among the barbarians.

“Those frozen animals will last them through the winter, but once spring comes, they’ll be starving. I’ve seen it before—whenever their food runs out, they raid the Great Yu Empire.”

Lu Tong had been bought by Liang Dahai during one such winter—when livestock froze and tribes were desperate.

Thinking of this, Xiao Ming said,

“The Wang family may be gone, but trade with the steppe must continue. This is our chance to bring back more slaves. The fewer slave soldiers the barbarians have, the more laborers we’ll have in Qingzhou.”

Pang Yukun nodded.

“Your Highness, the population issue is serious. This latest household audit gave us a scare.”

Last year, Pang had given Xiao Ming an estimate based on old Qingzhou census data.

But after the New Year, Xiao Ming had ordered a full re-survey—and the real number was only about 600,000 households.

Pang's earlier numbers had been based on outdated records.

After Youzhou was lost and the barbarian invasions began, many civilians had been slaughtered or fled the region.

Only now did Xiao Ming understand why no one had objected when the emperor granted him the Qi fief.

On paper, it was supposed to be home to over one million households.

But clearly, the officials had known all along—the land was nearly empty.

When Pang first handed him the updated numbers, Xiao Ming had nearly lost it.

Six hundred thousand households meant between 1.2 and 2.5 million people total—nowhere near enough for a vibrant territory.

Now it all made sense: why Qingzhou—and all the other areas he visited—felt so desolate.

That's why Xiao Ming had launched his resettlement policy—actively inviting wandering refugees to settle in his domain.

Sure, some were unruly, but he couldn't afford to be picky.

Population loss on this scale was more dangerous than a barbarian army.

No labor force meant no industry.

And so, Xiao Ming didn't mind trading with the barbarians, so long as it helped him grow stronger.

Besides, the new Cangzhou city wall was nearly finished.

Once complete, it would become an impregnable fortress.

The only real risk was if the barbarians bypassed it and attacked Jizhou instead.

If Jizhou fell, his fiefdom's entire flank would be exposed—and no infantry could survive a cavalry onslaught.

Even if he had musket units by then, if they broke under pressure, it would lead to a total massacre and a rout.

But Jizhou was currently Prince Kang's territory—Xiao Ming had no authority there.

He could only hope Kang wouldn't turn out to be an incompetent ally.

"Send Liang Dahai and Li Kaiyuan back to the steppe. Trade grain for slaves."

The thought made Xiao Ming even more certain of his plan.

Food-for-slave trade would stabilize the barbarians for a few years, delaying any large-scale invasions. also weaken them long-term by continuously draining their supply of manpower.

Food gets eaten and disappears.

But once you lose slaves, you can't replace them quickly.

Pang nodded.

“I’ll have Li Kaiyuan and Liang Dahai prepare the caravans right away.”

As they stepped downstairs, they saw Lu Tong arriving with crates of fireworks.

“Your Highness, we’re still using bamboo tubes filled with gunpowder, copper, and iron powder. I tested them—they burst into beautiful colors!”

Lu Tong beamed. He’d never seen such pretty fireworks before.

Xiao Ming smiled and nodded.

Each bamboo tube had a small hole drilled into it with a fuse.

Once lit, it would shoot fire and colored sparks from the end.

Of course, these were not like modern aerial fireworks—they didn’t launch into the sky and explode overhead.

That would require knowledge of bursting shells and trajectory dynamics.

But still, these ground-based fireworks were more than enough for personal entertainment—especially in a world like Great Yu, where fun was hard to come by.

This New Year, he was going to enjoy himself properly.

Xiao Ming had the fireworks sent to the main hall.

Then Lu Tong and Pang Yukun took their leave.

During New Year, all but the essential officials got a seven-day break—part of Great Yu's civil service rules.

After they left, Ziyuan and Lüluo approached.

"Your Highness, what should we do with all the winter coats from the textile workshop? It's already New Year's, and we've got stacks of unsold coats. This might be our worst business loss yet."

"Don't worry," Xiao Ming grinned. "I've already taken care of it."

This time of year always put him in a relaxed mood—probably a leftover habit from his modern life.

“Taken care of? How?” Ziyuan asked, puzzled.

Xiao Ming gazed at the swirling snow and smiled:

“Let me have a bite of your lipstick, and I’ll tell you.”

Both girls instantly blushed.

In the Great Yu Empire, there was no word for “kiss.”

Instead, they used phrases like “taste your rouge”—a poetic way to say the same thing.