

I. Dynasty 346

Chapter 346: The Meat Grinder Begins

Wisps of cooking smoke rose outside Yunzhou City.

The more than one hundred thousand civilians who had surrendered were split into separate groups by the Yunzhou army to prevent any chance of them gathering and causing trouble again.

At the same time, hundreds of large cauldrons had been set up across the fields outside the city, each simmering with rice porridge. The gentle aroma of cooked rice made many of the disaster victims swallow hungrily.

Qi Guangyi rode on horseback, constantly patrolling. The people were now lining up in front of the cauldrons, waiting for their share. The rumor that Yunzhou was truly taking in and feeding refugees had finally become reality.

And that steaming porridge calmed them.

'If there's food to eat, who would still want to fight just to survive?'

But it was still dangerous to have so many people gathered together. Orders had already been given to relocate these civilians to different provinces within Prince Qi's domain, in small groups.

Even so, they would not be forced to move. Their consent would be sought.

“Everyone, as you’ve already heard from those inside the city, His Highness is a man of great virtue. He promises that anyone willing to settle in Qingzhou, Cangzhou, or other provinces will receive their own land to farm. You’ll be able to live in peace and security. After tonight’s meal, if you wish to go with us, gather at the North Gate. You’ll be registered and sent to your new homes.”

Qi Guangyi paused and added:

“Of course, if you prefer not to go, we won’t force you. Each person will be given three catties of rice, and you’re free to go wherever you wish.”

The crowd listened intently to his speech.

As soon as he finished, quiet whispers spread through the refugees.

Qi Guangyi carefully watched them. According to their own accounts, many had only recently been forced to follow the Azure Dragon King. Some were even dragged into his army by neighbors or friends.

Many had originally planned to escape to Yunzhou, but were caught up by the rebel army on the way—and never expected the Azure Dragon King would actually attack the city.

These people had been ordinary civilians. Most never wanted to fight; all they wanted was a safe place to live.

“Sir, are you telling the truth? We really get land if we go?” one brave man asked.

Qi Guangyi nodded. “Absolutely true. Some refugees in the city have already received land. You can go ask them. The people stirring the porridge ahead were once refugees just like you.”

The man didn’t hesitate—he walked straight to the front to ask. After a brief conversation, he returned.

Everyone eagerly surrounded him. “Is it true? Is it real?”

“It’s real! He got twenty mu of land. The Yunzhou authorities even gave him grain to survive the season. They said he only needs to repay it after the first harvest—and he won’t have to pay taxes for three years.”

“Such good fortune exists?!” The others were stunned. It felt like a dream.

Qi Guangyi smiled and went on to explain the policy at other locations.

A bowl of hot porridge, paired with a generous policy, slowly melted the people’s defenses. Under the strict discipline of the Yunzhou and Qingzhou troops—none of whom dared bully the civilians—the refugees gradually began to trust again.

They began to long for a new life. That night, many families sat together, seriously discussing whether to relocate.

The next morning, the North Gate was packed with people eager to move to the six provinces.

Xiao Ming and Zhan Xingchang looked at the scene with deep satisfaction. With the right policies, people would always be drawn in. After all, when faced with the choice between hell and paradise, the decision wasn't hard.

Some still didn't want to leave their homelands. As promised, Xiao Ming gave them enough food for the road so they could seek refuge with relatives elsewhere.

This gesture earned Xiao Ming great respect among the refugees. In a time when many officials made empty promises, he was one of the few who delivered.

His compassion quickly spread across the land through the mouths of those fleeing in all directions.

To Xiao Ming's surprise, some of the civilians who had fled during the previous battle came back on their own, willing to accept resettlement from the Yunzhou government.

In just over ten days, Yunzhou had resettled 200,000 people—and that number was still growing.

"Your Highness, we've finally handled the refugee crisis," Zhan Xingchang said. "It's just a shame that so many people died. That Azure Dragon King... despicable. With the barbarians invading, instead of serving the nation, he chose to grab land and grain for himself."

Xiao Ming nodded solemnly. “His greed knows no limits. But clearly, he’s no ordinary man. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have been able to take several provinces so easily.”

“You’re right, Your Highness,” Zhan Xingchang agreed. “We were lucky this time—our surprise use of cannons and flintlocks broke the enemy’s spirit. If we’d only had regular weapons, this would’ve been a brutal fight.”

Just as they were speaking, the sound of shouting came from outside. Moments later, two guards—Zhao Long and Zhao Hu—helped a bloodied scout into the room.

Xiao Ming and Zhan Xingchang immediately turned pale.

Seeing Xiao Ming, the scout gasped, “Your Highness... the barbarian reinforcements have arrived. Governor Niu’s Qingzhou army is trapped in Fencheng by 80,000 enemy troops. The Shanzi Camp escorting the grain collapsed without a fight. On their retreat, the food supply was stolen by the Azure Dragon King.”

The scout collapsed as soon as he finished.

“Bang!” Xiao Ming slammed the table with his hand, chest heaving in rage.

“Azure Dragon King! You shameless bandit! Do you have no sense of duty to our people?!”

Zhan Xingchang's face was red with fury. First the Azure Dragon King had attacked Yunzhou, and now he was stealing supplies from the army fighting the barbarians?

"This man is no righteous leader. He's just a criminal rebel!"

"And that Shanzi Camp is useless!" Zhan Xingchang fumed, stomping in frustration.

When Niu Ben departed for Jizhou, part of the Shanzi Camp had escorted food supplies for the Qingzhou army.

After reaching Fencheng, Niu Ben had ordered them to wait for the imperial army and look for a way to break through the enemy siege.

Since he expected a long campaign, he had ordered the Shanzi Camp to make repeated trips to stockpile a month's worth of food—just in case they got surrounded.

Now that the supplies were stolen, the Qingzhou army didn't have enough rations.

How could Xiao Ming not be worried?

“Fencheng is even weaker than Yunzhou,” Zhan Xingchang reminded him calmly. “Its walls are just mud bricks. The top priority must be to break the siege around Fencheng.”

Xiao Ming sighed. He hadn’t expected the war to become so difficult. Now that the barbarian reinforcements had arrived, Jizhou might soon become a giant meat grinder.

He turned to Zhan Xingchang and said:

“Send orders: Qi Guangyi will lead 5,000 cavalry and 3,000 flintlock gunners to Fencheng at once. If we lose this battle, the royal family will have no foothold in the North.”