

## **I. Dynasty 366**

### Chapter 366: Slave Soldiers

The northern winds howled across the vast grasslands, and the once endless green now showed a touch of yellow.

Autumn had arrived, and winter was not far away.

Riding his horse across the broad plains, Xiao Ming looked at the lands once occupied by the barbarians and felt many emotions in his heart.

It had taken nearly three years, but he finally drove the northern threats beyond the Shanhai Pass. From now on, the grasslands beyond Cangzhou would become his land for horse-breeding and farming.

After putting down the rebellion in Jizhou, he returned to Qingzhou. Just five or six days later, he received news of the fall of Shanhai Pass.

Filled with excitement, he didn't rest but rushed overnight to see the once most formidable pass of the Great Yu Empire.

"Your Highness, look, Governor Niu Ben is coming," said Zhan Xingchang, pointing ahead.

Xiao Ming looked over and indeed saw Niu Ben and the other generals approaching. After retaking Shanhai Pass, Xiao Ming had decided to strengthen this most important stronghold, turning it into a true fortress.

So he brought the construction team from the building of Cangzhou City to Shanhai Pass and placed Zhan Xingchang in charge of it.

At the same time, their fortress advancement strategy would continue. They would build forts along the line of Shanhai Pass, step by step shrinking the barbarians' living space.

The battle in Jizhou had made Xiao Ming realize the ferocity of the Golden Horde. He had no choice but to take this enemy seriously.

The fearless charges of the barbarian soldiers had left many of his generals unsettled.

Especially since this time, Beishan had nearly destroyed Jizhou with just his Huyan Tuo Tribe. If it weren't for Beishan being accidentally injured by a cannon shell, even if they had won, it would have been a bitter and costly victory.

If that had happened, he would have missed the opportunity to take Shanhai Pass and change the tide of the war.

"Your Highness," Niu Ben and the others soon arrived, all beaming with joy, clearly still immersed in the thrill of retaking Shanhai Pass.

"No need for formalities. You are all great heroes now—it's I who should salute you," Xiao Ming said with a smile.

The weather was clear and the wide view lifted everyone's spirits. With this great victory, Xiao Ming felt particularly cheerful.

Hearing his words, the smiles on everyone's faces grew even wider.

Niu Ben said, "Your Highness, up ahead is Shanhai Pass, but the main gate was blasted open during the attack and is badly damaged."

"That's why I brought the construction team. With them, Shanhai Pass will be rebuilt in just a few months, even stronger than Cangzhou City," Xiao Ming replied.

Luo Xin glanced at the long convoy of artillery and was shocked. "Your Highness, you brought quite a few cannons this time."

"Not that many—just two hundred cannons. The construction team will build two star forts right up against the pass. These cannons are for those forts. I want to make Shanhai Pass a barrier the barbarians can never cross."

Xiao Ming was filled with ambition. Now that Shanhai Pass was in his hands, his territory was truly secure. From now on, he could focus on peaceful development without fear.

But he also understood that though the barbarians had suffered a heavy defeat, they still had great strength.

That's why he personally brought the construction team to rebuild Shanhai Pass. Since he had taken it back, he could never allow it to be lost again.

They entered Shanhai Pass through the shattered wall. Led by Niu Ben, Xiao Ming and Zhan Xingchang began to inspect the area.

The outer wall of Shanhai Pass stood tall, and behind it was a full military town.

Now, due to the war, the military town was severely damaged.

"This military town is a bit small. Since it's already ruined, let's just rebuild it. Expand each side of the walls to five li long," Xiao Ming said after thinking for a moment, looking at Zhan Xingchang.

"You're right, Your Highness. Judging from the Jizhou battle, the barbarians are still very capable of cutting off supply lines. We should build more granaries in the expanded town—just like the government offices in other prefectures, the military town should store at least three years' worth of supplies," Zhan Xingchang replied.

He understood Xiao Ming's thoughts well.

"Three years!" Lu Fei laughed. "That's a good idea. If we're ever surrounded again, we won't have to worry about food. In Jizhou, we almost ran out."

Xiao Ming and Zhan Xingchang laughed together. A city with three years of food would be a nightmare for any enemy.

After discussing the food, they moved on to talk about the armory, ammunition depots, and other essential facilities in the military town.

After agreeing on everything, Niu Ben said seriously, “Your Highness, now that we’ve taken Shanhai Pass, what about the garrison troops?”

Xiao Ming understood what he meant. The Qingzhou Army couldn’t stay here forever. The situation inside the Great Yu Empire was still unstable, and Qingzhou’s elite army had to guard its core territory.

“The pressure along the Cangzhou line is much lighter now. Let Cangzhou’s troops take over for the time being. But that’s not a long-term plan—each regional army has its own duties,” Xiao Ming said, frowning slightly.

Niu Ben, Lu Fei, and Luo Xin exchanged glances. Then Niu Ben said, “Your Highness, I have a suggestion—though I’m not sure if I should say it.”

“Go ahead,” Xiao Ming said, patting the wall of Shanhai Pass.

“In the battle for the pass, around 35,000 slave soldiers surrendered. Many more were captured on the Jizhou battlefield. These slave soldiers are all strong young men—excellent military material. Why not choose the best among them to form a new Youzhou Army to guard Shanhai Pass?”

Niu Ben and Lu Fei had both fought in the old Youzhou battles and were deeply attached to the region.

Lu Fei added, “Your Highness, just like the Guan Ning Iron Cavalry, the people who hate the barbarians the most are from Youzhou. These slave soldiers only submitted to the barbarians because of cruel oppression. Now that they’re free, all they feel toward the barbarians is hatred. If we pick the elite and train a strong army, it will become the barbarians’ worst nightmare.”

“Youzhou City...” Xiao Ming suddenly remembered.

These slave soldiers had been taken from Youzhou City, which the barbarians had turned into a “sheep pen.”

These slaves were born on Youzhou land and had suffered under barbarian rule since childhood. Xiao Ming still clearly remembered the tragic stories Lei Ming had told him.

He had rushed to Shanhai Pass and hadn’t visited Youzhou City yet. After more than a decade of barbarian rule, he wasn’t sure how the people there would see him.

“What do the slave soldiers think?” Xiao Ming asked.

“Your Highness, many of them came to us asking to join the Qingzhou Army to fight the barbarians. That’s why we’re suggesting this,” Niu Ben said.

Zhan Xingchang spoke up, “Your Highness, I believe we should proceed cautiously. These slave soldiers come from unknown backgrounds. They must go through strict vetting. We must confirm they are truly Youzhou natives and truly hate the barbarians. Otherwise, if someone with evil intentions sneaks into the army, Shanhai Pass could be in danger.”