

## I. Dynasty 367

### Chapter 367: Youzhou City

On the walls of Shanhai Pass, everyone looked out toward the barbarian lands.

After Zhan Xingchang raised his concerns, Xiao Ming nodded. Niu Ben had a point, and so did Zhan Xingchang.

After thinking it over, he said, “The review of the slave soldiers will be handled by the military’s political officers. They’re best at this kind of work. Those who are fit to stay will stay. Those who aren’t will be dismissed. What I want is a loyal army, not just a large one.”

Niu Ben and Lu Fei nodded. They had only made a suggestion—it was up to Zhan Xingchang, Pang Yukun, and the others to handle the rest.

After all, letting such a large group of slave soldiers go unused would be a waste.

Once they finished inspecting Shanhai Pass and gave orders for reconstruction and forming the Youzhou Army, Xiao Ming turned to Lei Ming and said, “Lei Ming, you’re from Youzhou. The soldiers of the Guan Ning Iron Cavalry are also from Youzhou. You should help lead the formation of the Youzhou Army. If you do well, I’ll hand over full command of the Youzhou Army to you.”

Lei Ming had come with Xiao Ming on this trip.

During the journey, Xiao Ming told him the Guan Ning Iron Cavalry would now be stationed at Shanhai Pass. Now that Youzhou had been taken back, these men from Youzhou could finally return to their hometown.

Since being forced to flee to Cangzhou, Lei Ming had dreamed of reclaiming Youzhou and returning home on horseback, proud and strong.

Now, the opportunity was finally here. And he might even become the highest military commander of Youzhou. How could he not be thrilled?

Excited, he said, “Yes, Your Highness! I can tell if these slave soldiers are really from Youzhou just by asking a few questions. If anyone tries to sneak into the army with bad intentions, they’ll have to get past me first.”

The other generals burst into laughter. They had almost forgotten about the Guan Ning Iron Cavalry.

This was an elite cavalry made entirely of Youzhou people. With them as the core, forming a strong Youzhou Army would be no problem.

Seeing everyone laugh, Lei Ming scratched his head and said a little shyly, “Your Highness, maybe I was too eager. I’m not sure if I’m really the right person to lead the Youzhou Army...”

“Ignore them. A soldier who doesn’t want to be a general is not a good soldier. And a general who doesn’t aim high isn’t a good general,” Xiao Ming said, patting his shoulder.

Since giving Lei Ming command of the Guan Ning Iron Cavalry, the unit had tripled in size. That showed his capability.

And like Lei Ming said, this unit was one of the fiercest when it came to fighting barbarians.

After talking about the Youzhou Army, Xiao Ming turned to Niu Ben and said, “We’ve taken back Shanhai Pass, but there’s still one more problem.”

“Youzhou!” guessed Zhan Xingchang.

Xiao Ming nodded. “That’s right—Youzhou City. Now that the barbarians have abandoned it, we need to take over. Right now, it’s basically an empty city.”

Everyone nodded.

Niu Ben said, “Your Highness, the barbarian troops have left Youzhou City. It’s defenseless. I’ll lead 3,000 cavalry from the Guan Ning Iron Cavalry to go with you tomorrow. Since they’re all from Youzhou, they might be especially helpful.”

Xiao Ming agreed. After a long, busy day, he rested that night in the military town.

The next day, he and Niu Ben set off for Youzhou City. He left the construction team and Zhan Xingchang at Shanhai Pass. After visiting Youzhou, he planned to return to Qingzhou.

He had just put down the rebellion in Jizhou, defeated Beishan, and taken Shanhai Pass—all major events that would surely shock the capital.

Plus, he was about to marry Fei Yue'er, and a second trip to Chang'an was unavoidable.

Youzhou City lay southwest of Shanhai Pass. They arrived there on the second day of travel.

"This is the city where Prince Kang once lived. After ten harsh years, it still looks the same. Nothing has changed," Niu Ben said with emotion.

As they entered Youzhou's territory, the landscape shifted slightly. There were rivers, trees, paths, and some farmland.

It was the only place on the grasslands that still felt different.

Lei Ming rode close behind Xiao Ming, looking tense. He had left Youzhou when he was only thirteen. Now he was over thirty.

Looking at his old home made him sad. Memories of his childhood there flashed through his mind.

“Your Highness, the barbarians were truly cruel. Youzhou once had plenty of farmland. Now it’s all wasted and turned into grassland,” Lei Ming said angrily.

Even though the barbarians ruled Youzhou, they hadn’t given up their herding habits. They replaced farmland with grassland.

After ten years, the place had become almost like a prairie.

Xiao Ming smiled and said, “That’s why I’m counting on the Youzhou Army to give them a taste of their own medicine.”

“Don’t worry, Your Highness. I’ll make sure they pay back ten times over,” Lei Ming said firmly.

Niu Ben also smiled. The three of them chatted as they approached the gates of Youzhou City.

Outside the city gates, many commoners wandered around. When they saw the cavalry coming, they panicked and ran back inside.

“Your Highness, allow me to lead some men to scout the city,” Lei Ming said.

He took 500 cavalrymen and charged into Youzhou City.

Xiao Ming looked up at the city. On the gate tower, several dried-up corpses were hanging. The bodies were completely weathered—clearly there for a long time.

The characters for “Youzhou City” on the gate were also badly damaged, barely readable.

From the outside, the city looked like a lonely island in the grasslands.

On the way to Shanhai Pass, Xiao Ming had passed other cities like Shunzhou and Yunzhou.

But those places were just ruins now—broken walls, collapsed houses, no people, only wild rabbits and rats running around.

So Youzhou City was the only one of the former sixteen prefectures of Yan and Yun that still had people living in it.

“After the barbarians invaded, they massacred entire cities. Most people from the other cities were killed. The rest were driven here to Youzhou. Hopefully, there are still many people left here,” Niu Ben said as they waited.

“The cruelty of the barbarians is truly beyond words.”

He remembered that Prince Kang's lands once had over a million households. Now, at least half a million had been slaughtered.

That was over a million people. Xiao Ming felt a sharp pain thinking about it. Taking Shanhai Pass had given him nothing but empty land.

As the two of them spoke outside the city, Lei Ming soon returned. His saber was stained with blood.

"Your Highness, there are still some barbarian slave soldiers hiding in the city," he reported