

## I. Dynasty 50

### Chapter 50: The Workshop District

Qingzhou Eastern Military Camp.

This was the barracks where the Qingzhou Army was stationed. Compared to its peak strength of three thousand soldiers, the camp now housed only a little over three hundred troops.

Many barracks in the camp had been left vacant. In the past, these rooms were covered in cobwebs and thick with dust. But now, they had been cleaned out, and recruitment notices had been posted. Lately, a steady stream of people had been coming to enlist.

In just half a month, new recruits would begin training. This round of recruitment would fill the camp's barracks to capacity, restoring the Qingzhou Army to its former glory.

The veteran soldiers were especially excited, as if they had returned to the days before the barbarian invasion. The increase in troop numbers also meant greater chances for promotion.

However, before the new recruits even arrived, a group of raggedly dressed individuals had already moved into the camp. After inquiring, the soldiers learned that these were slaves purchased by Prince Qi from various regions.

In the past, the veteran soldiers had no favorable opinion of Prince Qi. But over the past two months, rumors of his transformation had spread throughout the city, gradually changing their perception of him.

“Your Highness, these slaves can’t stay in the camp indefinitely. The new recruits will be arriving soon, and I have no space to spare,” complained Lu Fei as soon as Xiao Ming arrived at the Qingzhou camp the next day.

“I never intended for them to stay here permanently. I’ll have them moved out before the recruits arrive,” Xiao Ming replied, tucking his hands into his sleeves. Although the snow had stopped, the weather had only gotten colder.

Despite the golden sunlight, Xiao Ming still shivered from the chill.

“If that’s the case... then I suppose it’s fine,” Lu Fei sighed in relief before asking, “But, Your Highness, why did you buy so many slaves? Surely the royal mansion doesn’t need that many servants?”

Xiao Ming furrowed his brows and didn’t answer the question. Instead, he asked, “Do you think the barbarians will attack Cangzhou this winter?”

“I can’t say for sure,” Lu Fei replied gravely. “Three years ago, Qingzhou was ravaged by an invasion. Over a hundred thousand able-bodied men were taken away, and we still haven’t recovered. Logically, the barbarians should realize there’s nothing left to plunder here.”

“But merchants from the grasslands report that a severe winter has killed off many of their cattle and sheep. The Hu Yantuo tribe, which lives north of Cangzhou, has suffered particularly heavy losses. I fear they might become desperate.”

Xiao Ming nodded. “If I remember correctly, the Hu Yantuo tribe can muster an army of at least thirty thousand, right?”

“That’s correct. The barbarians train their entire population as warriors—every man, aside from the elderly, women, and children, can fight.”

“This time, they’re desperate because their livestock have frozen to death, and they won’t have enough to eat next year. That means they’ll raid to stockpile food. If that’s the case, could we do business with them instead? Qingzhou cannot afford another invasion. If they attack Cangzhou with thirty thousand men, even if we win, it would be a costly victory—something I want to avoid,” Xiao Ming mused.

Lu Fei was straightforward, but not without intelligence. The new recruits were untrained, bandits were still causing trouble in the six prefectures, and engaging in a full-scale war with the barbarians would be disastrous.

“The merchants in Cangzhou usually buy livestock and furs from the barbarians in exchange for coal and iron ore. But this year, with so many cattle and sheep frozen to death, that trade is impossible—after all, who would buy dead livestock?” Lu Fei shook his head, thinking the plan was unfeasible.

“Is that so?”

Xiao Ming lowered his head in thought. He had accumulated a good amount of soda ash for making soap, but the price of oil remained high—a problem that had been troubling the Wang family.

Now that the barbarians had lost a large number of cattle and sheep, wasn’t this the perfect opportunity to purchase animal fat? And since Lu Fei mentioned the coal and iron trade, the Wang family would have to be involved.

The Great Yu Empire officially prohibited selling coal and iron ore to the barbarians, but smugglers were always around.

Xiao Ming naturally harbored no goodwill toward the barbarians. The growing might of the Grassland Empire was a significant threat to both himself and the Great Yu Empire. But for now, he was powerless to change that.

They simply could not win a war at this time. For the sake of stability and development, Xiao Ming had to swallow his pride and find another solution. This crisis could likely be resolved through the Wang family, as they had long-standing business dealings with the barbarians and private connections.

With his plan set, Xiao Ming chose not to discuss it with Lu Fei. The enmity between the barbarians and the Great Yu Empire was centuries old, and this kind of trade was anything but honorable.

His main reason for coming to the camp today was the matter of the slaves. Nine hundred and fifty of them—neither too many nor too few—but to Xiao Ming, they were crucial. They would be the workforce needed to establish several workshops.

The space in the Machinery Department was limited. It was already becoming too cramped for the growing number of artisans and equipment. Xiao Ming had long planned to build an industrial complex resembling a modern factory district.

He had already chosen the location—downstream of the Tuo River, south of the city. These slaves would be responsible for constructing the workshop buildings and would later be assigned to work in them.

For security reasons, Xiao Ming would enclose the workshop district within high walls, with the Qingzhou Army stationed there to ensure its safety.

By now, Lu Fei had gathered all the slaves. Xiao Ming swept his gaze over them—they stood scattered, dressed in rags, their hands and feet shackled, shivering in the cold wind.

Just as Liang Dahai had said, most of these slaves were young men and women—prime laborers by slave standards.

After verifying their quality, Xiao Ming turned to Chen Wenlong and instructed, “These slaves are now under your management. I’ve already given you the design for the brick kilns. With over nine hundred workers, you should have more than enough manpower. This winter, the Machinery Department will be overseen by Chen Qi. Your task is to use these slaves to produce red bricks and cement and to build the factory district. By spring, the Machinery Department’s equipment will be relocated there. Understood?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Chen Wenlong responded.

Xiao Ming nodded, then ordered Lu Fei to assist Chen Wenlong in escorting the slaves downstream to the Tuo River, where the kilns were also located.

For this new workshop district, Xiao Ming decided not to use traditional mud walls and wooden structures but to construct it with modern red bricks.

Brick-making was not an advanced craft. Xiao Ming gave Chen Wenlong a brief lesson on kiln operations, which were similar to pottery-making.

He didn't need these bricks to match modern standards—only to be strong enough for the buildings.

The second key material was cement. Chen Qi was already well-versed in its production. These tasks were labor-intensive but simple, and the slaves were more than sufficient for the job.

Xiao Ming did not bother speaking to the slaves about grand ideals like freedom, democracy, or human rights. In this era, such concepts were as meaningless as empty words.

These slaves had already accepted their fate and status. Instead of preaching ideals, it was better to improve their living conditions, boost their morale, and gradually make them feel a sense of belonging.