

I. Dynasty 123

Chapter 123: Defense Strategy

“Your Highness, are you saying you plan to face the barbarians alone?”

Qián Dàfù looked incredulous.

Xiao Ming nodded. “That’s right. This time, I will protect my fiefdom myself. In these times, no one can be relied upon. I can only depend on myself.”

The Wáng family’s schemes, Princess Pingyang’s calculations, and King Wei’s secret plots—each incident reminded Xiao Ming that he was surrounded by wolves. There was no one he could truly trust.

The only person he could rely on was himself.

“Your Highness, this is no trivial matter. Even with the full strength of the Great Yu Empire, we have been ceding territory and paying reparations for years. How can Your Highness expect the six prefectures to stand against the barbarians?” Qián Dàfù continued to persuade.

From the moment he could remember, the name “barbarians” had been synonymous with terror. As a child, the maids in his household would often scare him by saying, “The barbarians will come and take you away.”

This showed how deeply ingrained the fear of the barbarians was in the hearts of the Great Yu Empire's people.

Qián Dàfù's reaction was within Xiao Ming's expectations. The events of three years ago had left an indelible mark of terror on Qián Dàfù.

At that time, when Cāngzhōu fell, the barbarian cavalry surged into the heart of the six prefectures, burning, killing, and looting without restraint. On their way to Cháng'ān, they could see corpses lying in pools of blood.

Many of the bodies were missing their heads, as the barbarians used heads to tally military achievements. To boost their records, many barbarians slaughtered civilians indiscriminately.

This memory was vivid in Xiao Ming's mind, showing how deeply the incident had affected his predecessor.

It was also because of this invasion that the six prefectures suffered greatly, and even after three years, they had not fully recovered.

"All I need to do is defend Cāngzhōu and prevent the barbarians from setting foot in my fiefdom."

At this stage, this was the extent of what Xiao Ming could do. Launching a counterattack into the grasslands was virtually impossible, as Qingzhou's overall strength was insufficient to support an offensive against a grassland empire whose power rivaled that of the Great Yu Empire.

After all, the population base was limited, the army was limited, food supplies were limited, and silver reserves were limited.

“But can we hold them off?” Qián Dàfù grew anxious. “Your Highness, as long as we preserve our strength, there will always be opportunities in the future.”

“Qián Dàfù!” Xiao Ming’s patience wore thin. “This is my fiefdom. Without it, I am nothing. If I return to Cháng’ān, forget about my father—do you think the other princes will let me live out my life in peace?”

“This...” Qián Dàfù fell silent. Xiao Ming was right. Since the founding of the Great Yu Empire, each emperor had sired numerous sons, but only a handful had survived to the end.

Take Emperor Xiāo Wénxuān’s line, for example. Of his sons, only King Wei and King Kang remained alive. The other ten princes had all turned to dust.

This pattern had repeated with each generation of princes, and now it was Xiao Ming’s turn.

“This old servant understands,” Qián Dàfù’s expression suddenly became resolute. “Consort Zhēn once instructed me to protect Your Highness at all costs. If Your Highness stays in Cāngzhōu to resist the barbarians, this old servant will stand by your side.”

“Good. That’s the kind of loyalty I expect from my people,” Xiao Ming said.

This wasn’t blind courage or overconfidence on his part. Over the past few months, he had come to realize one thing: he had no way out.

If he wanted to survive, he had to carefully manage his fiefdom. And now that the barbarians were eyeing his territory, he couldn't let that happen.

The suddenness of this matter left Xiao Ming with no desire to stay in the mansion. Instead, he headed to the Governor's Office.

At that moment, Pang Yukun was discussing something with a young official.

Seeing Xiao Ming arrive, Pang Yukun said, "Your Highness, weren't you discussing medical techniques with Medical Officer Sun? Why are you here?"

"The barbarians plan to attack Cāngzhōu this autumn and winter."

Before Xiao Ming could speak, Qián Dàfù, who had followed him, blurted out.

The young official standing beside Pang Yukun smiled lightly and asked, "If the barbarians plan to attack Cāngzhōu, it must be a highly secretive matter. How did Your Highness come to know of it?"

Pang Yukun seemed to share the same thought, but then he remembered something and said to Xiao Ming, "Your Highness, this is Zhan Xingchang, the one I mentioned to you."

Xiao Ming took a closer look at Zhan Xingchang and said, "So you're Zhan Xingchang? Chief Secretary Pang said you are resourceful and decisive. Why don't you tell me how we should respond?"

"To achieve victory, one must know both the enemy and oneself. First, how did Your Highness come by this information?" Zhan Xingchang asked calmly, without a hint of subservience.

Exchanging a glance with Qián Dàfù, Xiao Ming explained how Hóngyún had come to him and revealed the Wáng family's plans.

Pang Yukun frowned and said, "Your Highness, the words of a courtesan may not be reliable. Isn't Your Highness being a bit hasty?"

"It's better to believe it and be prepared than to dismiss it and regret it later. Chief Secretary Pang, have you forgotten about the barbarian cavalry last year? Those riders likely didn't end up outside Qingzhou by accident. It seems they took a wrong turn while searching for someone," Xiao Ming said.

Zhan Xingchang said, "In that case, we should send people disguised as merchants to the grasslands to gather intelligence and closely monitor the barbarians' movements."

"That's the first step. But if this is confirmed, what then?" Xiao Ming asked again.

"Your Highness should know better than I do. We must defend Cāngzhōu at all costs to protect the six prefectures."

“What if I want to reclaim the lost northern territories?” Xiao Ming asked.

“Of course, we should also build fortresses and implement a scorched-earth policy. This is what is known as the ‘advance and fortify’ strategy,” Zhan Xingchang replied, his expression unchanged.

Pang Yukun stroked his beard with satisfaction and said, “Xingchang, please elaborate on this ‘advance and fortify’ strategy.”

Zhan Xingchang continued, “The most critical aspect of attacking the grasslands is the supply line. However, facing the powerful barbarian cavalry, the supply line is extremely vulnerable. Therefore, we should build a fortress every day’s journey apart. This will ensure that supplies can be transported to the fortresses.”

“Secondly, the grassland cavalry is not skilled in siege warfare, while defending cities is our strength. With the fortresses close together, they can quickly support each other. If the barbarians bypass the front-line fortresses and attack Cāngzhōu, we can dispatch troops from the fortresses to cut off their supply lines, ensuring an invincible position.”

Xiao Ming nodded. This Zhan Xingchang truly had some skills. The best way to deal with nomadic tribes was the fortress advancement tactic, combined with a scorched-earth policy to deprive the barbarian cavalry of supplies.

However, this strategy also required the Qingzhou Army to have sufficient field combat capabilities to ensure the fortresses could advance.

“Let’s set aside the ‘advance and fortify’ strategy for now. We don’t have the capability to launch such an offensive yet. Let’s focus on how to defend the city,” Xiao Ming said.

Zhan Xingchang replied, “We need strong city walls and fire tubes.”

Xiao Ming’s eyes narrowed slightly. Fire tubes, an early form of cannon, were already in use in the Great Yu Empire. However, they fired stone projectiles and had limited range, so they were not taken seriously.

Yet Zhan Xingchang proposed using fire tubes for defense, a remarkably forward-thinking idea for this era. These fire tubes were the predecessors of cannons.

With the capabilities of Xiao Ming’s steel workshop, crafting precise firearms was impossible, but crude cannons like fire tubes were within reach.