

I. Dynasty 149

Chapter 149: News of the Barbarians

After several days of gloomy rain, the skies suddenly cleared.

The heavens stretched high and blue like sapphire, dotted with soft white clouds drifting gently. The beauty of it all felt like a cleansing of the soul.

Yesterday, after his hands-on demonstration at the Machinery Department, the workshop was finally ready to begin producing cannons in earnest. But with the barbarian invasion looming ever closer, time was running out.

That morning, Li San and Wang Xuan arrived at Prince Qi's residence together, bringing back the intelligence they had gathered on the grasslands.

"Your Highness, we received word that the barbarians and the Ottoman Empire appear to have reached some sort of truce," Li San reported. "Three months ago, the barbarians returned to Shengdu with the slaves and craftsmen they had captured from the Ottomans."

"So the western campaign is over?" Xiao Ming asked.

"It appears so," Wang Xuan said grimly.

For Xiao Ming, this was terrible news. After unifying the steppe tribes, the barbarians had become the most powerful empire in the north. With Great Yu growing weaker and focused on defense, the barbarians had no threat behind them and turned westward.

After crushing several small kingdoms in the west, they clashed with the powerful Ottoman Empire. After three long years of war, both sides realized the other was too massive to defeat—and finally withdrew.

That meant one thing: the barbarians would now turn back east, and the full pressure would land on Great Yu.

Xiao Ming remembered how, in real-world history, the Mongol Empire had also stopped their western conquests before turning south to easily destroy the Southern Song.

“Any other bad news?” Xiao Ming asked with a bitter smile. “What do we know about their population, army, or weapons?”

Wang Xuan answered, “There is one more thing. During their western campaign, the barbarians acquired a powerful siege weapon from the Ottomans. It’s called the Huihui Giant Cannon. According to reports, it can hurl a 300-pound stone over 500 meters.”

“Huihui cannon?” Xiao Ming asked. “You’re sure it throws stones?”

“Yes. Merchants on the grasslands described it as a massive trebuchet, not a true cannon,” Wang Xuan confirmed.

Xiao Ming let out a small sigh of relief. As long as the barbarians hadn't acquired gunpowder-based artillery, it was still manageable. But even without cannons, if their siege weapons could really launch 300-pound stones, Cangzhou City could be in serious danger.

He remembered that in actual Mongol history, similar stone-throwing machines had been used—and they had come from the western regions.

Li San added, "If they bring these to attack Cangzhou City, I'm afraid our walls won't hold."

Still, Xiao Ming considered this a lesser threat. The range of these 500-meter stone throwers was much shorter than real cannons, and his own cannons could destroy them before they got into position. As long as he maintained artillery superiority, there was no need to panic.

"That's manageable. Any other intelligence?" he asked.

Li San replied quickly, "We can't determine the exact population of the barbarians, but it's estimated they have at least two million households."

"That many?!" Xiao Ming was stunned.

"Some of them have settled in the Changbai Mountain region and started farming. Their population has grown," said Li San.

Now Xiao Ming truly understood the scale of the threat.

These barbarians were no longer purely nomadic—they had become a semi-pastoral, semi-agricultural society. That made them even more dangerous to Great Yu, because it meant their logistics and supply lines were now stable, enabling long-term military expansion.

And Wang Xuan's next comment made things worse.

"That's just their civilian population," he said. "The ratio of regular soldiers to slave soldiers is now one to five."

"Merchants say that before each campaign, the barbarians send waves of slave troops ahead. Once the enemy is exhausted from fighting them, the real barbarian cavalry charges in to finish the job."

Li San added, "Recently, we found out that barbarian riders have been capturing civilians north of Cangzhou City. These were all once citizens of Great Yu. It looks like they're preparing to use the same tactics against us as they used against the western kingdoms."

Then he clenched his fists and said, "Your Highness, what should we do if the barbarians push our own people to the front lines as human shields?"

"The barbarians are shameless and inhumane!" Wang Xuan growled.

Such tactics weren't new—history was filled with examples of invaders using civilians or collaborators to soften targets. The Manchus and Mongols had been especially notorious for this. That's how small populations had conquered massive kingdoms.

And now the barbarians outnumbered Great Yu ten to one.

"What will we do?" Xiao Ming said coldly. "If Cangzhou falls, then I'll be the next Prince Kang."

Li San and Wang Xuan exchanged glances—they understood the weight behind those words.

The two continued reporting on the barbarians' military structure. Their soldiers used composite bows made from animal sinew, giving them long range. Their cavalry was trained in feigned retreat tactics, where they would turn and shoot while riding away.

That very strategy had defeated many western forces.

But the army of Great Yu was well aware of this and would never take the risk of chasing the barbarians onto open grassland. Doing so was a death sentence.

Aside from their 180-meter effective bow range, the most dangerous thing about the barbarian army was their discipline—even more so than their weapons. A fearless, well-organized army was the real nightmare.

Xiao Ming could already picture it: barbarian soldiers climbing over mountains of their own dead under cannon fire.

Li San concluded, “Also, merchants say that the barbarian army has been training constantly, and they’ve grown extremely suspicious of all Great Yu travelers. Several merchants were even captured.”

Xiao Ming nodded. The barbarians’ recent actions were clearly signs of an upcoming invasion.

He said, “Keep a close eye on everything they do—especially troop movements. Report to me immediately with any updates.”

Li San and Wang Xuan nodded and left.

Xiao Ming stood up and headed straight for the Machinery Department. Thankfully, he had ordered full-scale cannon production. Without that, he wouldn’t be able to counter even a single Huihui stone thrower with its 300-pound payload.

Such force hitting the walls would be nearly as destructive as a cannon blast.

His current artillery only fired solid cannonballs—he still lacked the technology and capability to produce explosive shells.

As these grim thoughts clouded his mind, he quickened his pace, a deep sense of danger weighing heavily on his shoulders.