

## I. Dynasty 153

### Chapter 153: Misfortunes Never Come Alone

“What! The cement was stolen?”

“Exactly, Your Highness. I just received the report.” Pang Yukun said.

Xian Xingchang was responsible for repairing Cangzhou City’s defenses, but logistics and transportation fell under Pang Yukun’s jurisdiction. Naturally, he was the first to know when something went wrong.

Xiao Ming’s anger over the saltpeter crisis had barely subsided when this new outrage ignited his fury again. “You’re coming with me to the Qingzhou military camp immediately. Those remnants of the noble clans—I won’t rest until they’re torn limb from limb!”

Pang Yukun paled. He had never seen such violent rage from Xiao Ming before.

But it wasn’t unwarranted. The local aristocratic clans had been either exterminated or absorbed by Xiao Ming’s reforms. However, after centuries of entrenchment, eradicating them completely was no easy task.

In Qingzhou, the presence of the Qingzhou Army had allowed for swift and thorough suppression. But other prefectures, with weaker militaries, gave the clans time to react. Many had rallied their private armies and rebelled, throwing their regions into chaos.

Thankfully, with popular support and the disciplined New Army, the uprisings were quickly quelled.

Yet some remnants had fled deep into the mountains and marshes, emerging occasionally to cause trouble.

“Your Highness, there’s no need for haste. The bandits have already been cornered in a fortified manor by the Cangzhou Army. However, this particular stronghold once belonged to the Liu Clan of Cangzhou—it’s the most defensible of all the manors across the six prefectures. The Cangzhou Army has launched several assaults but were repelled each time, with dozens of casualties.”

“No need for haste? The cement is critical to Cangzhou’s repairs! Any delay could spell disaster!” Xiao Ming seethed. Now he truly understood the saying: Misfortunes never come alone.

Pang Yukun fell silent and followed Xiao Ming to the Qingzhou military camp.

At that moment, Niu Ben was standing atop the training platform, overseeing soldiers drilling in formation. Lu Fei and Luo Xin were each correcting maneuvers among the troops.

When Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun arrived, Niu Ben immediately halted the exercises.

“Your Highness.” Niu Ben descended from the platform.

The other day, he had drunk himself into a stupor and woke up the next morning filled with regret, fearing he had behaved improperly in front of Xiao Ming.

Xiao Ming, however, was too agitated for pleasantries. His greatest fear was that the bandits would destroy the cement. There was no time to waste.

“General, I’m afraid I must ask for your assistance. A group of bandits has seized a fortified manor and stolen supplies meant for Cangzhou.”

Niu Ben was momentarily surprised, but having seen everything in his long career, he quickly regained his composure.

“In that case, this old general will lead the Qingzhou Army to suppress them at once.” He then asked, “How many bandits are there?”

“According to reports, roughly a thousand.” Pang Yukun replied.

Niu Ben frowned. “Military strategy states that attackers should outnumber defenders five to one. We’ll need five thousand men.”

He ordered Lu Fei and Luo Xin to muster the troops.

As the initial fury subsided, Xiao Ming grew calmer. Every soldier was precious now. These clan remnants, knowing capture meant death, would fight desperately. The Qingzhou Army would suffer heavy casualties.

Then an idea struck him—he had been searching for a place to test the cannon. This was the perfect opportunity.

“General, go ahead and besiege the manor. But wait for my arrival before launching the assault.”

Niu Ben clasped his fists. “As you command, Your Highness.”

While Xiao Ming and Niu Ben spoke, Lu Fei and Luo Xin remained silent. It seemed Niu Ben had them well disciplined.

On the way back from the camp, Xiao Ming suddenly thought of something. “If the Liu Clan’s manor is so impregnable, how did the bandits get in?”

“The manor originally belonged to the Lius. The rebels among them must have known its layout. No one expected a hidden tunnel inside. Survivors said the bandits initially planned to loot the manor’s grain and funds, but when they saw the cement convoy, they mistook it for valuables and attacked.”

“Afterward, when the Cangzhou Army arrived, they tried storming the tunnel—only to find the bandits had blown it up.”

“Blown it up?” Xiao Ming’s eyes sharpened. “You mean with explosives?”

“Yes, Your Highness. The bandits used gunpowder to collapse the tunnel.”

Pang Yukun’s words hung in the air as both men realized the implication simultaneously.

“How do these rebels have gunpowder?”

Gunpowder wasn’t a secret in the Great Yu Empire, but it wasn’t something just anyone could produce. The materials alone were a hurdle—as Xiao Ming was painfully aware.

Now, these clan remnants had gunpowder. The implications were troubling.

“No matter. We’ll deal with them first and ask questions later.” Xiao Ming steadied himself.

Returning to Qingzhou City, Xiao Ming headed to the Machinery Department. He ordered carts prepared to transport the cannon to the Liu Clan’s manor.

He also instructed Chen Qi to polish cannonballs overnight and sent men to retrieve gunpowder from Lu Tong.

The next day, a wagon pulled by four horses departed Qingzhou City, carrying a large object wrapped tightly in hemp cloth.

Escorting it were the Qingzhou Army's elite cavalry.

The distance between Qingzhou and Cangzhou was over four hundred li, with the Liu Clan's manor roughly two hundred li from Qingzhou.

The cannon weighed around a ton. Even with four horses, the journey would take five or six days.

Xiao Ming's stated purpose was to suppress the bandits, but his real goal was to test the cannon's power.

Though he had seen countless schematics and records, witnessing its actual performance was another matter.

Naturally, Chen Qi and his team would accompany the cannon.

Xiao Ming, Niu Ben, and the others set out ahead. Three days later, they arrived at the Liu Clan's manor, now surrounded by the Cangzhou Army.

"Colonel Chen Fu of the Cangzhou Army pays his respects to Your Highness."

The officer in charge of the siege was a Qingzhou Army veteran later assigned to Cangzhou.

“Report.” Xiao Ming said.

“Your Highness, the bandits remain holed up inside. The manor has ample food and water—enough to last months. This won’t be easy.”

Chen Fu had already attempted assaults, each ending in failure.

Xiao Ming studied the manor. Unlike the Wang Clan’s earthen fortifications, the Liu Clan’s stronghold was built entirely of stone, with walls over ten meters high.

More critically, it commanded the official road between Qingzhou and Cangzhou. After its capture, it had become a waystation between the two prefectures.

That the Lius had dared to build it on a major highway spoke volumes about their former arrogance.