

I. Dynasty 164

Chapter 164: The Barbarians' Trick

The scent of wheat mingled with the earthy aroma of soil, wafting on the breeze. In the nearby river, gentle ripples shimmered under the sun.

It was a peaceful and idyllic scene—standing there amid the fields, one could almost forget the looming threat of war. If not for the barbarians, this would've been a picture-perfect moment of rustic tranquility.

After chatting a bit more about the upcoming harvest, Xiao Ming finally shared with Niu Ben, Lu Fei, and Luo Xin the news of the barbarian envoys' arrival in Chang'an.

"Just over two months?" Niu Ben frowned slightly.

Xiao Ming noticed his expression and asked, "What is it, General?"

Niu Ben replied solemnly, "Your Highness, the barbarian totem is the steppe wolf. They fight like wolves—cunning and treacherous. We must not trust their claim of 'three months before their attack.'"

"Exactly," Lu Fei agreed. "From our experience fighting the barbarians, it's clear they'll use any means necessary to win. They lie, deceive, and strike when least expected."

Pang Yukun exchanged a glance with Xiao Ming. They hadn't dealt with the barbarians enough to understand their tactics, but now their expressions turned grave.

"Please, elaborate," Xiao Ming asked seriously.

Niu Ben nodded. "If they say they'll attack in three months, it's likely to lull us into a false sense of security. Their real plan is to strike early and catch us unprepared. From this point forward, Your Highness should dispatch scouts into the steppe to monitor their movements and prepare for a sudden strike on Cangzhou."

"They'll almost certainly send small tribes first," Lu Fei added. "A probing attack to test our defenses before committing their main force."

Luo Xin opened his mouth to speak, but with both of them covering the essentials, he simply nodded and said nothing.

Xiao Ming nodded slowly. This information changes everything.

If the barbarians did launch a probing attack, he had to make sure not to reveal the cannons too early. The element of surprise must be preserved until the main army arrived.

"Very well," Xiao Ming said. "General Niu, I ask that you personally oversee Cangzhou's defense. Leave only enough soldiers behind to harvest the wheat."

Niu Ben gave a crisp nod. "Rest assured, Your Highness. With me in Cangzhou, the city will stand like a mountain."

With the matter settled, Niu Ben and the others departed immediately. They needed to lead the Qingzhou Army back to Cangzhou City without delay.

Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun remained. Their job was to ensure Cangzhou's supply lines stayed open.

By midday, they had inspected all the government-run fields. Pang Yukun returned straight to the Command Office, already planning how to coordinate grain and supply deliveries.

Qingzhou was now in a state of full military readiness.

That afternoon, Xiao Ming visited the machinery department. He instructed Chen Qi to hand over the newly finished ten cannons to Pang Yukun for immediate transport to Cangzhou. One additional cannon would remain behind for training purposes.

Plans rarely keep up with change.

"Your Highness, will ten be enough?" Chen Qi asked, watching as slaves carefully lifted the cannons onto carts.

"It won't be," Xiao Ming replied grimly. "But we don't have a choice. Let's just hope the barbarians arrive late." He paused. "By the way, how's production going on the powder bombs I asked for?"

At the mention of that, Chen Qi looked rather puzzled.

“Your Highness... I understand the rusted nails inside. But... why are we packing animal dung into them?”

“You wouldn’t understand even if I explained,” Xiao Ming said. “Just follow instructions. Divert some laborers immediately to start mass-filling those powder bombs. We’ll make up in numbers what we lack in firepower.”

Chen Qi scratched his head but nodded. The whole business with the powder bombs still baffled him.

“And the catapults?” Xiao Ming asked.

“We’ve already built thirty,” Chen Qi replied. “I had Zhang Liang call in extra carpenters. Since it’s just a basic design, production is fast.”

He pointed toward a courtyard nearby. “They’re assembling more right now.”

The catapults Xiao Ming had requested were small and portable—range under 200 meters—easy to mount atop walls.

Nobody knows when the barbarians will strike, he thought. We must prioritize speed. Sacrifice complexity for quantity.

In the adjacent yard, hundreds of carpenters were hammering away.

The design was a simple torsion catapult, modeled after a bow. A bent bamboo arm was tied with hemp rope on each side, forming a spoon-like scoop at the center.

To fire, soldiers would pull back the scoop and release—just like drawing a bowstring.

It required three soldiers to operate, but was quick and easy to make.

Xiao Ming had found this design in the technology crystal—the simplest, fastest solution to deal with the urgent threat.

“Have Zhang Liang send more carpenters,” Xiao Ming said. “Cangzhou needs at least fifty of these. We’ll need them there within the next few days.”

The urgency in his voice wasn’t lost on Chen Qi.

“Your Highness... are the barbarians already on the move?” he asked.

“Most likely,” Xiao Ming answered. “We must be ready.”

Chen Qi nodded. "Then I'll push production even harder. Also—the fourth iron mold is almost done. By the end of next month, we can produce another sixteen cannons."

Xiao Ming let out a long breath. "That brings us to twenty-six total. Let's hope... it'll be enough."

If Niu Ben's hunch was correct, they wouldn't even get the full three months.

It was like a boxer counting "one, two, three" before a match—except the punch came on "two."

But such is the art of war. If the barbarians fought fair, the Great Yu Empire wouldn't be in this sorry state to begin with.

Chen Qi scratched his head. "That's the best we can do for now."

Then he remembered something. "Ah, Your Highness—the glass lenses you requested from the glassworks are finished. I have them here."

"Excellent," Xiao Ming said. "Give them to me right away. Niu Ben leaves for Cangzhou tomorrow—he'll need this for reconnaissance."

Chen Qi left and returned with a small wooden box.

Inside were three pairs of circular lenses—thick in the center, thin at the edges. One set was a convex lens—a magnifier. The others were concave lenses.

Xiao Ming's plan was simple: assemble a monocular telescope.

It wasn't just a matter of slapping two magnifiers together. Without a prism, the resulting image would appear inverted.

So instead, he combined a convex lens with a concave lens, producing a simple refractor that gave an upright image.

The trade-off? Narrower field of view. Lower magnification.

But for now, that was more than enough.

A single monocular scope, he thought, is worth a hundred scouts.