

I. Dynasty 171

Chapter 171: The Barbarians Arrive

The scent of green grass and damp earth drifted in from the land north of Cangzhou City.

Outside the city, golden sunlight poured across the boundless prairie. A narrow trail led into the distance, and the occasional collapsed thatch hut by the roadside whispered of a past long gone.

“After the barbarians took Youzhou, they burned homes and forests, captured civilians. What was once a flourishing land turned into a wilderness of weeds within ten years, now reduced to grazing fields for the Huyan Tuo tribe,” Niu Ben said as he stood on the city wall, gazing across the vast prairie with a voice tinged with melancholy.

Ten years ago, he had stood on this very wall, watching barbarian cavalry sweep across the land. Flames had raged for months, painting the sky crimson like fresh blood.

Zhan Xingchang stood beside him. After working tirelessly for over two months, he had grown visibly thinner. But with tens of thousands of slaves laboring day and night, a majestic wall had risen from the earth.

“It’s a shame. Prince Yong guarded Youzhou and was once the most powerful among the princes. Yet even he couldn’t hold off the barbarians,” Zhan said.

Xiao Ming gazed at the fertile land beyond the walls. From Cangzhou to Youzhou, it was about four hundred li. Youzhou was where the Forbidden City stood in modern Ming Dynasty history.

The Ming, once known for 'The Son of Heaven guards the gates, and the monarch dies for the country,' had crumbled like dust after losing Shanhaiguan. Prince Yong's territory had been completely overrun by the barbarians.

If Niu Ben had not held firm in Cangzhou back then, and if the barbarians hadn't encountered resistance from the Ottoman Empire in the west, they would never have stopped their push south.

In that sense, the Ottomans had inadvertently delayed the downfall of the Great Yu.

"Don't boost the enemy's morale and dampen our own spirit," Xiao Ming said calmly. Right now, with Great Yu trembling at the mention of the barbarians, what they needed most was morale. Xiao Ming had no path of retreat left—if he didn't hold Cangzhou, death would be his only fate.

Zhan snapped out of his thoughts. He had fallen into the same fatalistic mindset as many scholars of Great Yu.

Niu Ben nodded. "There's nothing to fear about barbarians. They bleed just like we do. What we should worry about is our soldiers losing heart before the battle even begins."

Zhan looked embarrassed. "I've brought shame upon myself before Your Highness and the General."

Xiao Ming patted his shoulder. "Still, your point isn't entirely wrong. Tactically, we must respect the enemy. Strategically, we must view them with contempt."

“Hahaha... That’s a classic line, Your Highness. It should be written into our military doctrine,” Niu Ben exclaimed.

Zhan Xingchang, thoughtful, nodded slightly.

Xiao Ming smiled. “I didn’t come up with that. It was spoken by a great man. But it certainly applies to our situation with the barbarians.”

As the three of them conversed, they continued their inspection along the city wall. The section facing the prairie was five hundred meters long.

Xiao Ming had now gathered most of the territory’s forces in Cangzhou, totaling fifty thousand troops—just as planned.

Among them, only the Qingzhou Army had been equipped with the new-style plate armor and weapons. The rest of the newly raised forces had inferior equipment and served mainly as reserves.

After completing the inspection of the walls, Xiao Ming could see that Zhan Xingchang had fulfilled his vision.

On the ramparts, a watchtower stood every ten meters, and every fifty meters there was an extended bastion.

These bastions jutted out perpendicularly from the wall, giving soldiers more protected positions from which to defend.

Each bastion was equipped with repeating crossbows and catapults. Archers were already stationed and ready.

Outside the bastions, the walls were lined with logs, stones, iron caltrops, long spears, and other defensive tools. The long spears were meant to push back enemy siege ladders.

The rest were for hurling down on attackers.

Inside the walls, rope baskets had been installed leading into the city. Below each basket was more defensive material. Once the logs and stones on the walls ran out, reinforcements could be hoisted up by supporting troops.

At the base of the walls, every twenty meters stood large iron cauldrons filled with oil—intended for pouring onto climbing barbarian soldiers.

Outside the wall was a very different scene.

A trench three meters deep and three meters wide had been dug along the perimeter. Inside it were sharpened bamboo stakes sticking upward.

Barbarian soldiers in this era wore soft leather boots. The thin soles couldn't withstand such sharp traps.

Beyond the trench were dense half-height poles, each driven into solid foundations underground. Their purpose was to hinder large-scale charges and bunch the enemy together—making them perfect targets for the cannons.

"Your Highness, we've also placed traps outside the trench. They're hidden beneath sod and won't be easy to spot," Zhan said.

The entire defensive strategy had been developed by Zhan Xingchang—trenches, pillars, everything.

Niu Ben said, "This young man is quite the schemer. The barbarians are going to suffer this time."

Zhan laughed bitterly. "General, are you praising me or insulting me?"

"Of course I'm praising you!" Niu Ben roared with laughter. Like Pang Yukun, he appreciated talented people.

In his eyes, Zhan Xingchang far outshone most of the aristocratic youths.

Xiao Ming was also satisfied with Zhan's layout. Between the stone pillars, Zhan had tied vine ropes soaked in tung oil.

Once soaked, the vines became incredibly tough, and even blades took time to cut through them.

During that time, archers atop the walls would be free to rain down arrows.

“Good work,” Xiao Ming said approvingly.

Siege warfare was always difficult. Even with five times the numbers, attackers often failed.

And the more obstacles placed in their way, the heavier the losses for the attackers.

After touring the wall, Xiao Ming realized he hadn’t seen Lu Fei or Luo Xin. He asked, “Where are Lu Fei and Luo Xin?”

At this, Niu Ben gave a wry smile.

“Ever since receiving Your Highness’s telescope, those two haven’t rested. Every day they take soldiers out to scout. With the telescope, they can spot barbarian scouts long before being seen. They’ve become obsessed.”

Xiao Ming shook his head with a helpless smile. 'It's like the farsighted bullying the nearsighted. No wonder they can't stop.'

Just as they were speaking, a group of riders appeared in the distance. At the front were none other than Lu Fei and Luo Xin.

As they neared the city, the two quickly dismounted and climbed the walls.

Lu Fei, breathless, reported, "Your Highness, the Huyan Tuo tribe has picked up their pace. They'll likely reach the city by noon tomorrow."

"This time, the entire Huyan Tuo tribe is relocating to Cangzhou. It looks like they intend to set up camp here. I suspect their army is not far behind. They're bringing livestock to feed the main force."

Niu Ben asked, "What about their numbers?"

"Just the Huyan Tuo tribe alone has twenty thousand cavalry, and countless slaves," Luo Xin replied gravely.