

I. Dynasty 173

Chapter 173: Bloody Battle!

Screams echoed across the battlefield, one after another.

Niu Ben's lips trembled, but the bow in his hand struck like the scythe of death, cold and merciless.

With each life he took, a deeper weight of guilt pressed upon his heart. But he knew — behind him stood millions of people from the Great Yu. He could not afford mercy.

These conflicting emotions tore through him like brambles around his soul.

Xiao Ming's heart fared no better. Killing one to save ten thousand — in reason, it was right. But to carry it out with his own hands filled him with overwhelming guilt.

These were defenseless civilians, once tormented by the barbarians. And now, it was their own brothers-in-arms cutting them down.

But Xiao Ming understood: they had to bear this burden. Even if history would spit on their names for a thousand years, they had to endure it.

One by one, the slaves collapsed, and the laughter from the barbarian cavalry only grew louder. They were mocking Niu Ben for his futile efforts — another group of slaves was already being driven forward.

“General, let me out there!” Lu Fei suddenly ran over from his post, face flushed with rage.

“This isn’t right! Let us go fight! Otherwise, what are we cavalry good for?” one of the soldiers behind him shouted.

“Silence!” Niu Ben’s roar boomed like a great bell. “You only have a thousand men. And how many of you are better riders or archers than the barbarian cavalry? Do you want to die?”

“So we just stand here and watch our own people be slaughtered? They’re our citizens too!” Lu Fei’s eyes were bloodshot.

Luo Xin came forward and grabbed his arm. “Captain Lu, don’t be reckless. Don’t the lives of our soldiers matter too?”

“Don’t the lives of civilians matter? To you pampered nobles raised in Chang’an, are commoners nothing more than disposable filth?” Lu Fei threw off Luo Xin’s hand.

Niu Ben glared. “If you keep this up, don’t blame me for punishing you under military law.”

“I don’t care! Just let me charge out once. When I return, you can take my head if you want!” Lu Fei shouted.

“Lu Fei,” Xiao Ming’s voice rang out from behind, “I knew you’d be the one to cause trouble. You want to know why, despite all your merit, I never let you become governor of Qingzhou?”

He stepped forward, pointing directly at Lu Fei.

“If you were in charge of defending this city, the twenty thousand Qingzhou troops would already be lying dead beneath the barbarians’ arrows. You think you’re brave — but you’re just a reckless brute. You wouldn’t only throw away your own men, you’d also doom millions of civilians. Use your damn head!”

Lu Fei froze. Only then did he come to his senses.

“Damn those barbarians! When the time comes, I’ll rain hell on them!” he stomped and slammed his fist against the battlement before storming back to his post.

Niu Ben sighed. “That hothead. He won’t learn until he takes a real fall.”

By now, another group of slaves had reached the battlefield and were again marching toward the trench line.

“Loose arrows!”

Xiao Ming clenched his teeth as he gave the order. These traps were meant for barbarians — not for these people.

His heart bled.

‘My people...’

‘For Cangzhou’s sake, I’m sorry. Next year at Qingming, I’ll pour you each a cup of wine at your graves.’

Swish, swish...

Arrows poured down from the battlements. Driven forward by the barbarians, the slaves fell in pools of their own blood.

But the enemy kept forcing wave after wave of them forward. Their aim was not only to trigger the traps — they also sought to destroy the stone defenses.

From noon until dusk, the defenders remained on edge. Only when the sun dipped beneath the horizon did the barbarians finally stop sending slaves to dismantle the city’s defenses.

There was no moon that night. Darkness cloaked the world.

Campfires slowly rose in the barbarian camp, and the smell of roasting lamb wafted across the plain. After tonight, the real bloodbath would begin.

After resting in his command post for the night, Xiao Ming was awakened at dawn by the deafening cries of war.

He rushed up to the wall and saw thousands of slaves charging with ladders, spears, and clubs.

Behind them, the barbarian cavalry stood watching, like overseers monitoring a slave revolt.

The attack was focused on the city gate, and that was exactly where Xiao Ming stood.

Yesterday, the enemy had revealed most of the outer traps. Today, they were repeating their strategy, driving slave soldiers to storm the wall.

These slave soldiers were also people of Great Yu — now turned into tools of the enemy.

“Loose arrows!” Niu Ben bellowed.

The archers unleashed a deadly rain. Slaves carrying ladders fell one after another, yet more stepped up, pushing forward relentlessly.

There were three thousand of them in this wave, dense enough to shake the ground beneath their feet.

In Xiao Ming's eyes, the sight was more overwhelming than an entire school doing synchronized drills on a football field.

The Qingzhou Army had five thousand crossbowmen among its twenty-thousand troops — a decision Xiao Ming had made to ensure long-term defense. They now showed terrifying effectiveness. Within a hundred meters, the bolts tore through bodies like paper.

But the slaves seemed trained. Soon, a front line emerged with shields raised, slowing their pace but greatly reducing casualties.

Zhan Xingchang frowned. His sympathy for the slaves was fading fast — because they now charged like deadly enemies.

"Sixty meters!" Zhan suddenly shouted.

As he did, the front rank of slaves disappeared — swallowed by a pit. Screams erupted as they tumbled into the traps.

One after another, every pit at the sixty-meter line was triggered. Just like that, all of Zhan's traps were gone.

Yet the attackers didn't stop. To them, survival meant taking the city.

Faced with that choice, they pressed forward.

"Are you certain this Prince Qi has some kind of powerful weapon?"

Inside the barbarian camp, a shirtless warrior with a white cloak asked, eyeing a smirking trader in a blue collarless robe.

Liu Xuan replied, "No doubt about it. I didn't see it directly, but when Prince Qi attacked Liu's Black Fortress, many heard a massive explosion. And when I passed by later, there was a huge hole in the wall."

"Hmm. The Khan will arrive soon with the main force. Before that, we need to probe this weapon's strength. If it really exists, I'll speak well of you in front of the Khan."

Liu Xuan bowed obsequiously. "Many thanks, Banner Chief Gulte. If the Khagan captures Cangzhou and kills Prince Qi, that would also avenge my Liu clan."