

I. Dynasty 176

Chapter 176: Barbarian Army

Last night, Xiao Ming fell asleep as soon as he finished eating. All night, his dreams were filled with images of the bloody battle at Cangzhou City—the terrified eyes of slave soldiers, splattering blood, and the crimson mist rising from exploding fire jars.

Just half a year ago, he had been a shut-in researcher comfortably working in a lab. Now, he had to face the brutal reality of ancient warfare just to survive.

This was a hundred—no, a thousand—times more terrifying than witnessing a street fight. The sheer psychological pressure of seeing a dark mass of roaring enemies charging at you was overwhelming.

But he had to endure it. He had to get used to it. Because this might very well be his life from now on.

On the city walls, the supplies consumed yesterday had been replenished. The rookie soldiers, who had never experienced war before, seemed to have matured overnight. Yesterday's victory taught them that as long as they stood united, the barbarians weren't so fearsome.

"Your Highness, I doubt the barbarians will attack again in the next couple of days," Niu Ben said, peering through a monocular telescope at the enemy camp.

Xiao Ming was also observing. Campfires still burned in the barbarian encampment, where slaves scurried about, forced to rebuild siege ladders and other equipment. Meanwhile, the barbarians roasted cattle and sheep over the fires, the rich aroma making many soldiers swallow their saliva.

“Don’t drool. Once we win, I’ll make sure you all eat meat too!” Xiao Ming said to the soldiers.

The men burst into laughter.

Niu Ben grinned. “His Highness is right. All these years, the barbarians have been stealing from us. After we win, we’ll raid their cattle and sheep—let you eat until you’re sick of it!”

“Better yet, I’ll lead the cavalry out and bring back barbarian wives for you!” Lu Fei chimed in crudely, having appeared out of nowhere.

The laughter grew even louder.

In the military, flowery words meant nothing. These soldiers were mostly illiterate—practical promises worked best. Xiao Ming pointed beyond the walls. “Do you see that land out there? Is it fertile?”

“Fertile!” the soldiers shouted in unison.

“Good. From now on, for every barbarian you kill, I promise you ten mu of land outside Cangzhou. The more you kill, the more land you get. And when we retake Shanhai Pass one day, every one of you will become a damned landowner!”

“Your Highness, do you mean it?” a soldier suddenly asked.

“My word is iron. Captain Lu and Commander Niu are both witnesses,” Xiao Ming replied.

The soldier’s face flushed with excitement. “Your Highness, I’m originally from Youzhou. I fled to Cangzhou as a refugee. If we reach Shanhai Pass, can I pick land in my hometown?”

“Of course.”

The soldier nodded firmly. “Your Highness, many of us in the Qingzhou Army are from Youzhou. For your promise, we’ll fight to the death.”

Xiao Ming and Niu Ben exchanged satisfied glances.

In warfare, a soldier’s motivation was crucial to victory. Most soldiers had little desire for distant campaigns. The reason the Qingzhou Army fought so fiercely for Cangzhou was simple—behind these walls were their homes and families.

But if they were to push north and retake Shanhai Pass, that motivation would wane—except for those who had once called Youzhou home.

This gave Xiao Ming an idea. “Commander Niu, I want to establish a special cavalry unit—the Guan Ning Iron Cavalry.”

“Guan Ning Iron Cavalry?” Niu Ben’s expression turned thoughtful. “If I’m not mistaken, ‘Guan’ refers to Shanhai Pass, and ‘Ning’ is Ningyuan. Your Highness’s vision is far-reaching.”

Xiao Ming nodded. In his past life’s history, the Guan Ning Iron Cavalry had been one of the most elite forces of the late Ming Dynasty. Their strategy had been simple: Let Liao people guard Liao lands, let Liao lands feed Liao people. By recruiting the toughest natives of Liaodong, they forged a cavalry that even the Manchus feared.

Xiao Ming’s plan was the same—to form a cavalry from the remnants of the Yong Prince’s forces and displaced Youzhou refugees. Such men would fight desperately to reclaim their homeland.

“Exactly.” He explained his thoughts to Niu Ben.

Niu Ben nodded approvingly. “Your Highness is farsighted. But the Great Yu lacks warhorses. Where will we get enough mounts?”

“If we don’t have horses, we’ll take them from the barbarians,” Xiao Ming said, eyeing the herds in the enemy camp.

Niu Ben shook his head skeptically. With their current defensive stance, launching raids for horses seemed impossible.

As Niu Ben predicted, the Huyantuo tribe didn’t attack for the next three days.

Then, on the third evening, a massive army appeared north of the Huyantuo camp.

Through his telescope, Xiao Ming saw banners emblazoned with a wolf's head—the royal standard only the Great Khan was entitled to carry.

At the same time, the Machinery Department delivered four more cannons to Cangzhou, along with five hundred fire jars and a supply of granulated gunpowder.

That night, Xiao Ming ordered all cannons mounted on the artillery platforms.

The barbarian host stretched beyond the horizon. There was no telling how many troops had arrived, but the sheer number of slave soldiers alone was daunting.

As the battle loomed, the atmosphere in the city grew tense. Every face was grim.

Can we hold?

That question weighed on every mind. Soon, they would have their answer...

Barbarian Command Tent

Gultai and Liu Xuan entered the royal tent together, where a towering man sat like an iron pagoda.

Gultai's expression darkened. "Taiji Beishan, has the Great Khan not come?"

The man—Beishan, the same envoy who had visited Chang'an—smirked. "Why would my father bother with a minor outpost like Cangzhou?"

"Then why does Taiji bear the royal standard? Isn't that disrespectful to the Great Khan?" Gultai's voice was hoarse.

Beishan stood. "By my father's order. The banner is just to intimidate these Great Yu dogs. Or do you question the Khan's command, Banner Chief Gultai?"

"I would never defy the Khan's word," Gultai said stiffly.

Beishan sneered. Gultai had always favored his elder brother, the heir apparent, while looking down on him—the second son destined for some remote territory.