

## I. Dynasty 182

### Chapter 182: Retreat?

“Your Highness, Qingzhou City has sent ten more cannons! And the messengers said they’ve also brought something called ‘grapeshot’!”

An auxiliary soldier shouted to Xiao Ming from the city walls.

“Grapeshot... finally here?” Xiao Ming felt a sudden urge to cry.

Producing grapeshot was an extremely tedious process. Despite the Machinery Department working tirelessly, the output had been minimal.

Though grapeshot were also solid projectiles, they were much smaller—each cannonball contained dozens, even hundreds, of tiny iron pellets. When fired, they spread like shotgun pellets, reducing range but vastly increasing the kill zone.

This was why producing a single grapeshot round was as labor-intensive as making dozens of regular solid shots, even though the material cost was similar.

Now that the grapeshot had arrived, it was the perfect weapon to repel the besieging forces. But just as Xiao Ming was about to rejoice, his expression suddenly changed as he looked beyond the walls.

“Set up all the newly arrived cannons on either side of the city gate—now!” he barked urgently.

The auxiliary soldier immediately rushed down the walls.

Xiao Ming then spotted Luo Xin amidst the chaos and shouted, “Take ten artillery crews and follow me down—quickly! There’s no time!”

Luo Xin, who had been lost in the frenzy of battle, snapped back to focus. A glance outside the walls made everything clear.

The two of them hurried down.

Below, over two thousand reserve troops stood ready. Xiao Ming ordered, “Form hollow square formations at the gate!”

The soldiers swiftly rearranged themselves into five interlocking hollow squares—two ranks of spearmen at the front, three rows of crossbowmen behind. These were the last of their arrows.

Meanwhile, the artillery crews positioned the cannons on either flank of the formations. They loaded the barrels with tightly bound cloth sacks—each filled with small iron pellets, collectively forming the grapeshot.

From the walls, Xiao Ming and Luo Xin had seen barbarian soldiers carrying over a dozen powder kegs toward the gate.

Originally, the area before the gate was the deepest part of the moat—sheer as a cliff, impossible to climb. But after days of relentless fighting, the trench had been filled nearly to the brim with corpses.

Now, the barbarians were using even more bodies to finish the job. Once the path was clear, they brought out the powder kegs—to blast open the gate.

And knowing the barbarians' tactics, cavalry would charge in the moment the gate fell.

That was why Xiao Ming had prepared this simplified hollow square formation—a tactic developed in the age of firearms to counter cavalry charges.

The square's open center allowed crossfire from all sides, preventing flanking maneuvers. Any cavalry that broke through would be met with volleys from multiple directions.

And now, with cannons added to the flanks, the formation's firepower was complete.

BOOM!

A thunderous explosion shattered the gate, sending wooden splinters flying. The massive doors collapsed inward.

Through the smoke, Xiao Ming saw barbarian cavalry—scimitars raised—charging straight for the breach. At the forefront were riders with blood-red wolf tattoos on their arms—Beishan Taiji's elite.

Five hundred meters. Three hundred. Two hundred—

The cavalry closed the distance in seconds. The moment the first riders crossed the threshold, Xiao Ming roared, “Fire!”

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Cannons roared in succession. The charging cavalry dissolved into clouds of blood and gore—riders and horses torn apart in an instant.

Those behind froze in horror, but momentum forced them forward.

Three cannons fired together, wiping out hundreds in a single salvo. The survivors rushed headlong into the hollow squares—only to be met with volleys of crossbow fire, dropping them mid-charge.

The few who reached the spearmen found their mounts skewered on steel-tipped pikes, horses screaming as they collapsed.

Wave after wave of cavalry surged in.

Three more cannons fired. Grapeshot erupted into deadly shrapnel, shredding another wave into crimson mist.

A third wave came—four cannons answered.

By the time the next group charged, the first cannons had already reloaded.

Corpses piled higher and higher—riders and horses forming a grisly barricade. Soon, the barbarians could no longer ride through; they dismounted, clambering over the mountain of dead to press forward.

The Qingzhou Army shifted formation again, tightening into a dense rectangular phalanx. Their disciplined ranks and impregnable armor turned them into an unstoppable steel tide, slowly pushing the barbarians back toward the gate.

Gradually, the corpses at the entrance piled so high that the breach was nearly sealed.

“The barbarians are retreating! They’re retreating!”

Someone on the walls shouted the words first. Then, like wildfire, cries of victory spread across Cangzhou.

“They’re retreating! They’re retreating!”

Luo Xin blinked, then joined the cheers—but soon, his shouts turned to sobs.

This battle had been too brutal. Every soldier had fought on the brink of exhaustion, many going days without sleep.

Xiao Ming stood as if in a dream, murmuring, “They... retreated?”

His gaze drifted to the river of blood flowing from the gate. Then, like a madman, he sprinted back up the walls.

From above, he saw it—the barbarian army, once an overwhelming tide, now in disarray, pulling back from the walls.

At the gate, thousands of riderless horses wandered aimlessly.

“Your Highness... they’ve retreated.”

Niu Ben, drenched in blood, stood beside him, his eyes red-rimmed.

This time, it was real. The barbarians were fleeing in genuine panic—their camp’s cavalry slowly withdrawing northward.

A full day of fighting—from dawn till dusk—and at last, the barbarians had broken.

“We can’t let our guard down. Beishan is cunning—this could still be a trick,” Xiao Ming said.

Niu Ben shook his head. “No, Your Highness. This is no ruse. I can swear to it—their losses are too severe. Even Beishan wouldn’t dare continue this gamble.”

“Even so, we remain vigilant tonight,” Xiao Ming insisted.

Niu Ben nodded. “As you command.”

As they descended, the sight at the gate made even the veteran general suck in a sharp breath. The mountain of corpses—what in heaven’s name had happened here?

Before he could ask, Xiao Ming issued another order: “Use the bodies to seal the gate.”

Silently, Niu Ben studied the prince. War had changed him.