

I. Dynasty 183

Chapter 183: Unease

At the city gate, the mountain of corpses silently told the story of what had happened.

Streams of blood flowed together, and the thick smell of blood mixed with the stench of death filled every corner of Cangzhou City.

Even after the barbarian troops retreated, the defenders dared not relax. No one could be sure if the retreat was real or just another trap.

The city gate had been blasted open by barbarian explosives, and the damage was severe.

Zhan Xingchang immediately organized slaves to begin repairs. Meanwhile, other soldiers stacked the corpses of barbarian soldiers to block the gap in the gate.

“This one’s still alive!”

A voice would occasionally shout, followed by the final scream of a dying enemy.

After ten days and nights of brutal fighting, the Qingzhou Army had become calm and composed. When they saw barbarian soldiers, there was no fear—only the steady swing of their blades.

No prisoners.

That was Xiao Ming's order.

The barbarians had long used terror tactics—slaughtering cities, killing captives—to frighten the Great Yu Empire.

Now, Xiao Ming would repay them in kind. He would show them he was a wolf—one a hundred times more savage than any barbarian.

“Your Highness, these grape shot rounds are amazing. That one blast must have killed forty to fifty barbarian cavalry!” Luo Xin said, gently stroking the metal canister as if it were a precious treasure.

Xiao Ming, finally calming down after the bloodbath, nodded. “Grape shot is made to counter dense cavalry charges. We were lucky—the cavalry came charging through the city gate in tight formation, so the shot hit them at the perfect moment.”

Lu Fei was itching with excitement. “Your Highness, let me try firing one! I want to see this grape shot in action!”

But when he came down from the wall and saw the massive pile of bodies at the gate, even he was shocked.

The sight was overwhelming. No wonder the barbarians had retreated—who wouldn't be terrified by this?

“No way!” Luo Xin snapped, guarding the ammo like a mother hen. “We only have 300 grape shot rounds left. What if they come back? You can’t just fire one for fun.”

Lu Fei scowled. “Luo Xin, you looking for a beating? You think you own the artillery now? Don’t forget—you’re not even from around here. The artillery belongs to the Qingzhou Army and—ow!”

Before he could finish, Niu Ben smacked him across the backside with a whip. Lu Fei yelped and jumped.

When he saw Niu Ben’s dark expression, he realized—he’d just insulted another outsider. And Niu Ben was one too.

He laughed awkwardly. “Commander! I, uh, I’ll go check on the wall defenses!” And he ran off.

Luo Xin grinned smugly.

But Niu Ben said, “Don’t get too proud, Luo Xin. Lu Fei wasn’t entirely wrong. This artillery belongs to the Qingzhou Army. Once the war ends, you’re going back to Chang’an.”

Luo Xin’s smile faded. He looked at the silver-armored soldiers cleaning the battlefield. He touched the cannon before him, suddenly reluctant to leave it.

After all, he was technically an imperial guard commander, loyal to Xiao Wenxuan, not Prince Xiao Ming.

There was still a difference between a sovereign and a prince.

Xiao Ming noticed his expression and said softly, “Luo Xin, I won’t forget you.”

“Your Highness... Commander... I—” Luo Xin looked conflicted. Clearly, they were pushing him to make a choice.

Xiao Ming and Niu Ben exchanged a glance and laughed.

There was no denying Luo Xin had talent in commanding artillery. After this war, he had grown even more skilled in using cannons strategically.

Losing him would be a shame—but they couldn’t force him to stay.

The choice had to be his.

This battle had also changed Niu Ben’s outlook on fighting the barbarians.

“Your Highness,” Niu Ben said, “Now that we have artillery, Zhan Xingchang’s fortress-advance strategy actually sounds brilliant.”

“Thank you, General,” Zhan Xingchang said, approaching in armor, streaked with blood.

In a moment of crisis, even this scholarly civil officer had picked up a sword.

Niu Ben laughed and clapped him on the back. It was his way of showing respect.

In the Great Yu Empire, civil and military officers rarely got along. Niu Ben had always looked down on strategists like Zhan.

But after fighting side by side, his view had changed.

These scholars might be readers—but now, they were soldiers too.

“This plan won’t be completed overnight,” Xiao Ming said, “But it has to start now. If the barbarians truly retreat, begin building fortresses across the steppe using slave labor—layer by layer, push outward.”

Even with the retreat, Xiao Ming had no intention of chasing the barbarians into open field battles. Their cavalry was still too fast, and he had no way to counter it yet.

Plus, the Qingzhou Army had suffered heavy losses. It would take a long time to recover.

Just like Zhan Xingchang had said, their current strengths were cannons and walls.

Use your strengths to strike the enemy's weaknesses. That was the wisest move.

While the barbarians were gone, the commanders continued planning.

But no one knew if the retreat was real.

In war, it was common to fake a withdrawal to lure the enemy into a trap. So as night fell, the defenders of Cangzhou remained on full alert.

Only when dawn came and no barbarians appeared did the soldiers finally breathe a little easier.

"Your Highness, it looks like they really pulled back," Lu Fei reported, excited. "We counted the bodies—yesterday's attack cost them over 20,000 men. A lot of them were Beishan's elite Snow Wolf Guards. The barbarian Taiji are always fighting among themselves. Beishan probably didn't want to lose all his best troops here. He still doesn't know how many more it would take to actually break Cangzhou."

Lu Fei was clearly the happiest of them all.

Outside the city, many of the barbarian warhorses had refused to leave, still loyal to their fallen riders.

Lu Fei had rounded them up.

Three thousand warhorses. That was enough to form another thousand-man cavalry unit—bringing the Qingzhou Army's total cavalry to two thousand.

Niu Ben nodded slowly. "Your Highness, I think so too. I've already sent scouts to confirm."

Xiao Ming nodded in return.

Outside the city, soldiers were cleaning the battlefield. They piled up the bodies of slave and barbarian soldiers and burned them with firewood.

They collected fallen crossbow bolts and weapons from dead soldiers.

Other soldiers were busy retrieving cannonballs from the ground—precious resources that could still be reused.

