

I. Dynasty 256

Chapter 256: The Hidden Plan

The afternoon sun cast a golden light across the dry grasslands. The foundation work on the new wall was finally nearing completion.

As the concrete was poured into the beams, a group of craftsmen followed Prince Xiao Ming's instructions. They used metal rods to repeatedly stab into the freshly poured concrete and pull them out again.

In modern construction, this is done with a vibrating rod to shake the concrete and remove air pockets. Since they didn't have that equipment here, this was their best manual method.

"Xu Changgui, we'll start backfilling in three days. When you do, make sure to water the soil thoroughly so it compacts well," Xiao Ming instructed a middle-aged craftsman nearby.

Xu Changgui had once been a slave bought by Liang Dahai. He was later assigned to the construction team. In his former life, he was a bricklayer, so when Xiao Ming gave technical orders, he picked things up quickly.

Since Xiao Ming planned to create a permanent construction corps for Qingzhou, he made sure to mentor people with potential. Xu Changgui was one of them, and over the past few days, Xiao Ming had personally taught him the finer points of wall-building.

“Yes, Your Highness.” Xu Changgui answered carefully, always keeping a humble tone. As a slave, he knew his place. Just being noticed by the Prince was already more fortune than he had ever dreamed of.

He’d been studying hard, believing that if he proved himself, perhaps one day he could shed the label of “slave.”

Just then, a cheer rose from the distance. Xiao Ming turned his head to see a group of cavalry approaching, all clad in silver armor.

“Your Highness, looks like Niu Ben and Lu Fei are back. Seems like the nomads have started chasing them,” said Zhan Xingchang.

Xiao Ming nodded. “That’s called when the enemy advances, we retreat. If the nomads waste all this energy hunting us only to find no one, it’ll drive them mad.”

Zhan Xingchang chuckled. “They’ll be pulling their hair out.”

As the riders drew closer, their faces came into view—it was Lu Fei’s unit. They were also driving along several thousand captured horses.

“Your Highness, we’re back,” Lu Fei reported, covered in dust and grass. The journey had clearly been rough.

Xiao Ming patted him on the shoulder. “Not bad. I was starting to worry you’d stay out there too long.”

"I wouldn't dare. Either the nomads would kill me, or Your Highness would take my head," Lu Fei joked, then asked, "Has Commander Niu returned yet?"

"Not yet," Xiao Ming replied, his expression turning serious.

Lu Fei's smile faded. "That's bad. On our way back, we spotted a unit of five thousand nomadic riders heading toward Cangzhou. They were clearly trying to cut off our retreat. We barely made it back."

Just as he spoke, Luo Xin shouted from the city wall, "Your Highness! Cavalry approaching!"

The three of them rushed up the wall. Xiao Ming took the telescope and saw a group of nomadic cavalry loitering far outside the city—clearly observing but not attacking.

"They're here to cut off Niu Ben," Zhan Xingchang said, narrowing his eyes.

"What do we do now? Not even a general like him can fight through five thousand with only a thousand men," Lu Fei said anxiously.

Xiao Ming, however, already had a backup plan. He just hadn't wanted to use it unless he had no other choice. "No choice. Open the mountain tunnel."

"The tunnel! How could I forget?" Lu Fei brightened.

Last autumn, the nomads had used a cave ten li west of Cangzhou to sneak into the city. That invasion had ended in failure, and afterwards, Lu Fei had been ordered to seal the tunnel and post guards there.

In the last battle, the nomads didn't use that route again—clearly, only that first raiding party had known of it.

"Mountain tunnel?" Zhan Xingchang asked, confused.

Lu Fei explained, "There's a narrow cave ten li west of the city. Only one man and horse can pass at a time. I sealed it last year."

"No time to waste. Go open it now and wait for Commander Niu. If the nomads haven't found it yet, we'll use it again in future raids. But if they do, we'll collapse it. Either way, the harassment plan can end now—the foundation is done, and finishing the wall will be much simpler."

"Yes, sir!" Lu Fei turned and rushed out with a team.

"So that's why you've been so calm," Zhan Xingchang said with admiration. "You already had a plan."

Xiao Ming nodded. "That tunnel was our final backup. Before they left, I gave both Lu Fei and Niu Ben a sealed note—only to be opened if they were in danger. Lu Fei never had to use his, so he didn't know."

“Let’s just hope Commander Niu opens his now,” Zhan Xingchang murmured.

Meanwhile, Niu Ben’s unit had just reached the foot of the Qinling Mountains outside Cangzhou. He still remembered when Emperor Xiao Wenxuan himself had named those peaks during a royal tour of the empire.

“Commander, nomad riders spotted outside the city,” a scout reported.

“So they’re not completely stupid,” Niu Ben muttered, signaling his troops to halt.

“What now?” a junior officer asked.

Niu Ben squinted. In his time exiled to the mines, he’d made peace with life and death. He’d known going into the steppe was dangerous—but he had gone willingly. All he wanted was to help push the nomads back one day, maybe even ride to Tianshan.

“Hah! Are you all afraid to die?” Niu Ben suddenly laughed loudly.

“Never!” the troops roared.

Niu Ben lifted his telescope. Against five thousand cavalry, their thousand-strong force couldn't possibly break through.

He might not care if he lived or died, but his men were elite—seasoned officers, veterans, and captains. Over the past ten days, he'd been teaching them how to survive on the steppe: how to hide, find water, change formations, and evade pursuit.

Losing them all here would be a tragedy.

Then he remembered the note Prince Xiao Ming had given him.

He hesitated, then opened the sealed envelope.

Reading the contents, Niu Ben couldn't help but chuckle and shake his head.

"Into the Qinling Mountains. His Highness already left us a way out," he said, rallying his men and pointing toward the mountains ahead.