

I. Dynasty 257

Chapter 257: The Return

“Hurry up, move faster!”

In the Qinling Mountains, Lu Fei was barking orders as soldiers tried to pry open the rocks sealing the mountain tunnel. The entire 50-meter-long tunnel had been tightly blocked with cement and stones last year to prevent the nomads from sneaking through.

Now, reopening it was proving far more difficult and time-consuming than sealing it had been.

Outside the tunnel, a squad of 500 soldiers stood guard. But the tunnel was so narrow that only one person could work inside at a time—no one else could help.

“Damn it, if I’d known it would take this long to open, I wouldn’t have sealed it up so tight,” Lu Fei muttered with frustration.

Xiao Ming and Zhan Xingchang had also arrived at the scene. Judging by the current pace, it would take at least two days to fully reopen the tunnel.

“Keep working day and night—no breaks. We must open it as soon as possible,” Xiao Ming ordered, frowning.

The soldiers responded immediately. Each man took turns swinging the heavy hammer. When one got tired, another jumped in to continue.

Meanwhile, Niu Ben and his men had already entered the Qinling Mountains.

Following the directions written in the secret message Xiao Ming had given him, he led his troops deeper into the mountain. By nightfall, they finally heard faint knocking sounds echoing from a distance.

“His Highness must be opening the tunnel.”

Niu Ben’s face lit up. But with darkness all around, they couldn’t go search for the entrance. They didn’t dare light any torches either—nomad patrols were likely searching nearby.

They’d long since finished their dry rations and had no choice but to go hungry in the cold mountains.

Looking up at the cold stars in the night sky, Niu Ben’s face was full of worry. He could only pray the nomads hadn’t discovered the tunnel’s location.

Meanwhile, outside Shanhai Pass, the once-dominant Huyan Tuo tribe had now been driven to a poor stretch of grassland, far from their former stronghold in Youzhou.

After the crushing defeat at Cangzhou, the Huyan Tuo tribe had lost most of its fighting force. In the brutal world of the Golden Tent Khaganate, they were now seen as weak and of low status.

All of this was thanks to Beishan.

Late that night, Gultai stood staring southward, gazing longingly at the fertile lands that once belonged to his people. His heart ached.

“Father, I heard a Great Yu army entered the steppe. Seven or eight of the Blood Wolf Tribe’s smaller sub-tribes were completely wiped out,” said his son Batu, walking in with a smirk on his face.

“How do you know that?” Gultai’s eyes lit up. He couldn’t oppose Beishan directly, but he was more than happy to hear of his misfortune.

“A merchant caravan mentioned it. Qishou Chagatai is apparently furious. He’s sent out tons of riders to search the grasslands—but so far, no trace of the Great Yu cavalry,” Batu said. “Now, a lot of the other Qishou are afraid their own tribes will be next. They’ve all refused to send troops to attack Cangzhou.”

Gultai let out a hearty laugh—it was the best news he’d heard in a long time.

“Hmph! Chagatai humiliated me back in Shengdu. Serves him right!” he sneered.

Batu smiled too. It had been ages since he’d seen his father in such a good mood. “Still, this Prince of Qi has guts. Isn’t he worried that Chagatai will cut off his cavalry’s retreat? Cavalry are precious in Great Yu, after all.”

Gultai's eyes flickered. He frowned slightly. "Maybe this Prince of Qi really isn't afraid. Because... there's another way into Cangzhou."

"Another way?" Batu asked in shock.

Gultai nodded. "That's right. Years ago, the Wang family of Qingzhou told me there's a natural tunnel in the mountains near Cangzhou that leads into the city. I sent scouts to find it, but none returned. Later, the Wang clan started benefiting from the Prince of Qi and delayed sending guides. Eventually, that clan was wiped out by him. Now, I only know there's a tunnel, but I don't know where."

Batu frowned. "Then why didn't we look for it during the last battle at Cangzhou?"

"We did," Gultai replied. "But the mountains are vast—it's like finding a needle in a haystack. And the tunnel is supposedly so narrow that a single man can block it. Honestly, it's even harder to attack through the tunnel than through the city gates."

Batu nodded. But then a thought struck him. "Father, do you think the Great Yu cavalry used that tunnel to enter the grasslands this time? If that's true, Chagatai might never realize it. Should we tell him?"

"You fool!" Gultai's eyes glinted. "Beishan has always been ambitious. The Grand Taiji dislikes him. If not for the Grand Taiji pleading our case before the Khagan, we'd already be dead. Helping the Blood Wolf Tribe now is the same as helping Beishan. If we do that, we'll surely lose the Grand Taiji's favor—and our lives!"

Batu was stunned. He wiped the cold sweat from his forehead and said, "Father is right. I was foolish."

"This matter stays between us," Gultai said firmly. "No one else must know. Those Qingzhou cavalry might be a headache for Chagatai, but they won't bring him down. I'd bet anything this whole operation is just to buy time for their new city wall. Well, let's see how Chagatai handles this. I bet he's furious right now."

Batu smirked and nodded.

Just as Gultai guessed, Chagatai was indeed fuming.

He'd deployed nearly all his riders to search the grasslands, and even sent men to cut off the enemy's retreat. But they still hadn't found even a shadow of the Great Yu troops.

"Useless! You're all useless!" Chagatai roared. "Lock down the area twenty li around Cangzhou! Even if we can't find them, let them starve to death out here!"

"Yes, Qishou!"

The Qishou under his command quickly left to carry out his orders. None of them could imagine that Niu Ben and his men were quietly hiding in the Qinling Mountains.

With tens of thousands, it would be impossible to stay hidden. But a mere thousand men could easily vanish in the hills.

On the third morning, after two days of freezing in the woods, Niu Ben's unit finally located the tunnel.

Suddenly, with a rumble, a stone at the tunnel's entrance shifted. A familiar voice shouted, "Damn it, it's finally open!" It was Lu Fei, hammer in hand.

Looking up, he spotted Niu Ben among the trees. Overjoyed, he called out, "Commander! We finally found you!"

Xiao Ming also stepped out from the tunnel. The forest here was dense with pine trees, and five more mountains lay between this spot and Cangzhou City.

He smiled and said, "Old General, you've had a hard journey."

Niu Ben clasped his hands respectfully. "Your Highness, so you had this all planned. I thought we were doomed. It's a shame we had to abandon the spoils of war along the way."

"No matter," Xiao Ming said. "There will be more chances. The nomads still have bitter days ahead."

“Then let’s not waste time,” Niu Ben said.

He turned and led his troops into the tunnel, feeling for the first time like he’d cheated death.