

I. Dynasty 258

Chapter 258: Retreat When the Enemy Advances

“Commander! Here, eat!”

Inside the Cangzhou military camp, long rows of tables were packed with food and drinks. A feast had been prepared to reward the soldiers returning from their mission into the steppe.

Everyone, especially Niu Ben and his men, was eating like ravenous wolves. After hiding in the mountains and starving for three days, they had no interest in manners—grabbing food with both hands and stuffing themselves, even choking occasionally.

Niu Ben was no exception. He clutched a chicken leg in one hand and a pork knuckle in the other, grease dripping from his mouth as he devoured the food.

“Old General, this campaign into the steppe was a great success. You and Lu Fei both deserve much credit. I toast to you,” Xiao Ming said, raising his cup.

Niu Ben lifted his drink and replied, “Your Highness is too kind. Defending against the steppe tribes is our duty.”

Lu Fei laughed, “That’s right! The nomads weren’t prepared at all. We roamed the grasslands like it was empty—we killed to our hearts’ content and feasted on meat every day!”

Xiao Ming chuckled and teased, “You never go hungry no matter where you are.”

During this campaign, Niu Ben and Lu Fei had driven nearly ten thousand quality horses back to Cangzhou.

Qingzhou’s cavalry breeding program had been weak for years, and this new influx of horses would greatly improve it. After a few years of breeding, Qingzhou would finally have its own supply of warhorses.

Although Xiao Ming was pushing Great Yu toward the gunpowder age, cavalry were still essential. After all, even in World War II, cavalry units were still used—so their value hadn’t faded yet.

Lu Fei grinned, “Heh, but I nearly didn’t live to eat this meal.”

“What happened?” Xiao Ming asked.

Before Lu Fei could answer, Lei Ming jumped in, “Lu Xiaowei saw a pretty nomad girl and hesitated for a moment. She almost took off his—uh—important parts with a blade!”

“You damn loudmouth!” Lu Fei smacked Lei Ming on the back of the head, making him grimace in pain.

“Serves you right!” Xiao Ming scolded. “The steppe tribes are brutal. They treat Great Yu’s people like livestock—even killing children for fun. You hesitate, but they’d gladly drink your blood and eat your flesh.”

Lu Fei nodded quickly, “Yes, Your Highness. I’ve learned my lesson. Next time, no mercy. Thankfully I was wearing my breastplate—otherwise my, uh, manhood would’ve been gone. Though my thigh nearly didn’t make it.”

For mobility, the cavalry had been equipped with lightweight plate armor—only about 20 jin (roughly 10 kg). While not as strong as heavy armor, it was still effective against slashing attacks.

And since their mission involved surprise raids, not open-field battles against mounted archers, this kind of full-body armor was especially useful in close combat.

What Lu Fei said may have sounded light-hearted, but it was a reminder of how dangerous the campaign had been. If even a common nomad woman was that deadly, then fighting trained warriors would have been far worse.

If they’d been surrounded, these 2,000 men might never have come back.

At this moment, Niu Ben put down his drink and asked, “Your Highness, what’s our next move? If the steppe tribes can’t find us, I’m sure they’ll send a new army eventually.”

Xiao Ming replied, “We pulled back this time to preserve our strength and wear them out. After searching for us so long, the nomads are tired—men and horses alike. Even if they want to attack again, they’ll need time to regroup.”

He continued, “Just forming an army takes ten days, maybe half a month. That buys us a month to keep building the new city wall. By then, it’ll be five meters high—not so easy to break through. And once

they come charging in, their rear will be left unguarded. That's when you go back through the tunnel and raid their supply lines."

"Brilliant!" Niu Ben nodded. "Strategy is best left to Your Highness and Zhan Xingchang—I'll handle the tactics. When the time comes, we'll make the steppe bleed again."

Xiao Ming and Zhan Xingchang shared a look, raised their cups, and said in unison, "Cheers!"

After rewarding the returning soldiers, construction on the new city wall resumed the next day. Niu Ben, Lu Fei, and their troops stayed in Cangzhou to rest and recover, preparing for the next campaign.

Meanwhile, Xiao Ming personally led the slave laborers, working day and night. After another month, the first layer of the city wall was completed as planned.

At the same time, far out on the steppe, Chagatai had completely lost his mind.

After half a month of searching with no results, he was on the verge of madness.

"Can anyone tell me where the hell those Da Yu cavalry went?!" Chagatai roared, kicking over the table inside his copper tent.

Guduo and Kuha stood silently nearby, pale and ashamed.

The entire Blood Wolf Tribe had been scouring the grasslands for signs of Great Yu's cavalry, but found nothing. At the same time, no other tribes had been attacked either.

"Qishou, I suspect... they've already returned to Cangzhou," Guduo said cautiously.

"Impossible!" Chagatai snapped. "Our riders moved fast—there's no way they all escaped."

Silence fell again. No one had an answer.

Then, one Qishou hesitated and said, "Some Great Yu merchants claimed this Prince of Qi practices dark magic. Could it be..."

"Bullshit!" Chagatai exploded. "Magic?! You expect me to explain this mess to Beishan Taiji using fairy tales?"

He paced back and forth angrily, shouting, "Beishan Taiji is already furious. He's ordered us to destroy Cangzhou's new city wall immediately. We can't waste more time on this! Summon the slave army!"

He glared at the Qishou before him—but no one moved.

Everyone was afraid to send troops. After witnessing what happened to Keqing and Kuha's tribes, no one wanted to be the next target.

"You want to see if my saber's still sharp?" Chagatai said coldly, narrowing his eyes.

Faced with his rage, the Qishou had no choice but to return to their camps and begin preparing troops.

Back in Cangzhou...

After sorting out the mares for breeding, the remaining 8,000 stallions were assigned to the military.

Over the next month, Niu Ben and Lu Fei expanded the Guan Ning Iron Cavalry once again.

Their victory had inspired over 2,000 young men from Youzhou to join.

With some downtime, Niu Ben and Lu Fei spent their days training these new recruits.

At the Cangzhou training ground, new riders galloped back and forth, practicing slashing attacks against straw targets.

When Xiao Ming arrived, Lu Fei beamed with pride. “Your Highness, what do you think of these recruits?”

“They’ve got the basics,” Xiao Ming nodded. “But they still lack real experience.”

He observed the green riders struggle with their movements. The drills focused on close-combat slashing—something that didn’t help much against mounted archers.

But if they could be trained as lance cavalry, maybe they’d finally have a proper answer to the nomads’ deadly hit-and-run tactics.