

## I. Dynasty 259

### Chapter 259: The Army Arrives

Inside the Cangzhou military camp, the soldiers trained with even more vigor when they saw Xiao Ming arrive.

Watching these honest and straightforward men, Xiao Ming turned to Lu Fei and said, “Looks like you’re going to be heading into the grasslands again soon.”

“Have the barbarian armies mobilized?” Lu Fei asked.

Xiao Ming nodded. “Yes. The scouts have just reported—Blood Wolf Tribe has assembled a large force and is advancing toward Cangzhou. Their objective is to destroy our new city wall. With such a grand mobilization, their rear will surely be vulnerable. It’s the perfect time to strike.”

“Heh, this subordinate has been waiting for a chance to head back into the grasslands and round up a few more warhorses. Your Highness, I’ll assemble the troops at once. And let’s bring the new recruits along too. Nothing trains a man like real battle. After this campaign, our cavalry will be much more experienced,” Lu Fei grinned.

“Are they up for it?” Xiao Ming glanced over at the recruits who had only been training for a month, a little worried.

“They’re good enough to ride. We’re mostly conducting night raids, not engaging in full-scale mounted battles. For this kind of operation, just being able to ride is enough,” Lu Fei explained.

After a month of training, these soldiers could manage basic riding. Riding itself wasn't overly difficult—the hard part was performing complex maneuvers on horseback.

In that regard, Great Yu's cavalry couldn't compare to the barbarians. The nomads had mastered the skill of shooting arrows while riding, even while fleeing, their bodies so in sync with the horses that it was as if they were glued to the saddle.

Great Yu's cavalry, on the other hand, frequently fell off their mounts during intense movement.

Still, what Lu Fei said wasn't wrong. Only real combat could sharpen the edge of a soldier's blade. In life-and-death situations, a man's potential could be pushed to its peak.

After considering that this operation wouldn't involve direct clashes and the new recruits would be accompanied by veterans, Xiao Ming nodded.

After all, in this era, conscripting a strong man often made him a soldier. There wasn't always time for perfect training.

After making arrangements with Lu Fei, Xiao Ming went to find Niu Ben. This time, Xiao Ming decided that Niu Ben would remain in Cangzhou to take overall command of the city's defenses.

Meanwhile, reinforcements from Qingzhou had also arrived, making Cangzhou's military force even stronger than during the last war.

There was no such thing as a “small” war. No detail could be overlooked, and Xiao Ming had to prepare for the worst.

“If this general is not leading the expedition, then the grassland strike force still needs two cavalry columns. Who will lead the other?” Niu Ben asked.

Lu Fei replied boldly, “This subordinate recommends Lei Ming. The lad is from Youzhou and knows the terrain well. I was only able to evade the barbarians last time thanks to his guidance.”

Niu Ben nodded. Lu Fei, though reckless, had always been fair and just. He wouldn’t recommend someone out of favoritism, so Lei Ming must have real skill.

Currently, the number of capable cavalry officers was still very limited. There were a few decent candidates in Niu Ben’s group, but they were all veterans—not from Youzhou. That didn’t align with Xiao Ming’s intention to build a regional cavalry corps in Guan Ning.

“I understand His Highness intends to develop the Guan Ning Iron Cavalry. That means we should start promoting officers from Youzhou within that unit. Very well, let Lei Ming take command,” Niu Ben said.

Xiao Ming nodded. He had spoken with Lei Ming before and found him sharp and perceptive. Since the long-term plan was to maintain pressure on the barbarians from the Youzhou region, they needed a local presence there.

In time, both Niu Ben and Lu Fei would need to return to Qingzhou to manage the broader military apparatus. Cangzhou would eventually be handed over to the Guan Ning Iron Cavalry.

Xiao Ming also had his own development strategy for the Guan Ning Cavalry:

Let them grow autonomously.

In the future, he would allow them to plunder freely across the grasslands. If they wanted to expand, they'd have to seize their own warhorses and train new recruits.

This would be a wild and untamed cavalry unit, but to prevent them from spiraling out of control, Xiao Ming would assign an official overseer (Changshi) to the unit. The behavior of the troops could be unrestrained, but their ideology could not. The army, no matter how wild, had to remain in his hands.

He had no intention of letting the Guan Ning Iron Cavalry turn into the historical one of the Ming Dynasty, which eventually became a double-edged sword.

With command roles assigned, Niu Ben instructed Lu Fei and Lei Ming to gather their men and prepare for deployment.

Meanwhile, Niu Ben, Xiao Ming, and Zhan Xingchang ascended the city walls to finalize defensive plans.

This time, the barbarian army's goal wasn't to breach the city but to destroy the new wall. Xiao Ming figured Beishan had no interest in wasting troops on an all-out assault on Cangzhou.

So the three of them agreed: they would launch a full-scale bombardment against the enemy, sparing no gunpowder or munitions.

Thanks to prior planning, Cangzhou had ample reserves of black powder. Unlike the previous siege, they weren't in danger of running out quickly.

That very night, Niu Ben and Lei Ming led their cavalry out through the mountain tunnel, vanishing into the grasslands under cover of darkness. According to scouts, the barbarian army would arrive at the walls of Cangzhou the next day.

At dawn, Xiao Ming and the others were already up. All construction workers had withdrawn from the outer wall. Qingzhou troops had taken up positions in the trenches, and the trebuchets of Cangzhou were locked and loaded.

A massive battle was about to begin.

"Your Highness, they're here." Around midday, Niu Ben pointed into the distance.

Through his telescope, Xiao Ming saw a vast black wave approaching—it was the Blood Wolf Army. The sky on the horizon had turned dark with their arrival, and leading the charge were thousands of slave soldiers.

These slaves wore tattered clothing and carried a mishmash of crude weapons.

As soon as the barbarian army appeared, tension gripped the battlefield. Every soldier was on edge, waiting for the sound of the horn that would signal the attack.

“Woooo—”

A low, deep horn sounded across the grassland.

The barbarians drove their slave troops forward, and from five hundred meters out, they began their assault on the defensive trench lines around Cangzhou.

On the city walls, Luo Xin held a red signal flag in hand, using flag commands to guide the artillery crews in loading and aiming.

“Fire!”

At Xiao Ming’s order, one hundred cannons roared as one. A wave of shells rained down on the advancing slaves.

“Aaargh—!”

A chorus of screams erupted across the field.

Even though the slave soldiers had spread out, the bouncing cannonballs still tore through their ranks, painting the air with blood.

Many of these slave soldiers had heard of Cangzhou's cannons, but this was their first time seeing them. Before they could react, those beside them had already fallen, their corpses grotesquely mutilated.

And when they looked ahead, they saw comrades who had reached the trench line suddenly blasted into the sky—arms, legs, and heads flying apart amid fiery explosions.

In their eyes, there was only carnage now.

And in their ears—only the deafening thunder of artillery.