

I. Dynasty 260

Chapter 260: Standoff

Within Chagatai's pupils, there was only the endless firelight erupting from atop Cangzhou's walls and the trenches before them.

An entire hour had passed.

Wave after wave of slave soldiers had been driven forward, and wave after wave had vanished. In this moment, Chagatai suddenly felt that the seemingly close Cangzhou City was impossibly far away.

"Retreat! Retreat! All of you, fall back!"

Another wave of slave soldiers collapsed and fled. They could no longer bring themselves to charge again. The sight of mangled corpses had shattered the last shred of courage within them.

Kuha rode across the battlefield with his saber, cutting down slave soldiers as he went. Each swing of the blade claimed another life. But even so, he couldn't stop the retreating tide.

Guduo's gaze was grim. He had participated in the previous battle for Cangzhou as well. Compared to last time, there were now even more cannons atop the city walls, and many more trebuchets placed along the trenches.

Among the trebuchets, thirty more cannons had been added. These cannons had yet to fire, their dark barrels gaping like silent beasts, cold and terrifying.

Guduo understood well—these cannons carried far deadlier shells. The last time their cavalry breached the gates, it was these same cannons that turned them to dust.

On the Cangzhou walls, Xiao Ming silently watched the exchange. The explosions of black powder shells bloomed like deadly flowers on the grasslands—beautiful, but utterly lethal.

One wave of firepowder shells after another rained down, incinerating any slave soldiers who approached. The few who managed to reach the trenches were immediately cut down by the defenders stationed there.

“At this point, the barbarians have no choice but to fill the trenches with corpses,” Niu Ben muttered.

The five-hundred-meter-long trench circle was completely impassable for cavalry. Now the enemy had no option but to rely on waves of expendable slave soldiers.

Zhan Xingchang added, “We’re not aiming for victory this time. Just delay. All we need to do now is wait for good news from the grasslands.”

Xiao Ming nodded. He had clearly seen the chaos unfolding on the battlefield—slave soldiers breaking ranks, their morale shattered by overwhelming firepower. There was even unrest in the barbarian rear lines.

After all, these slave soldiers had never been truly loyal. They obeyed only out of fear. Now, between dying whole or dying in pieces, they had to make a choice.

As the three of them conversed, the barbarian assault suddenly ceased. Xiao Ming noticed disarray forming within their ranks.

He quickly lifted his telescope—there, within the enemy formations, he saw barbarian cavalry locked in combat with slave soldiers.

“Your Highness, the slave soldiers have rebelled!” Niu Ben exclaimed with delight.

Zhan Xingchang also picked up a telescope for a closer look. Sure enough, groups of raggedly dressed slave soldiers had turned on the barbarian riders. The carnage of cannons and firepowder bombs had finally pushed them past the brink of tolerance.

If death was certain either way, they would at least vent their fury on the barbarians first.

“What should we do?” Zhan Xingchang asked.

“Observe. Stay put,” Xiao Ming replied.

It was still too early to launch a counterattack. This chaos was limited—likely only a few bands of slave soldiers had turned. If they gave up their defensive position to go on the offensive now, the barbarians might seize the opening to strike.

As expected, the rebellion was quickly suppressed. But the barbarians didn't resume their assault. Instead, they seemed to be reorganizing their slave troops.

"Let them drag it out," Xiao Ming said calmly. "If anyone can afford to play the attrition game now, it's us."

Niu Ben nodded in agreement.

In the barbarian main camp...

Chagatai expression was dark.

Just earlier, a group of a thousand slave soldiers had refused to attack, then launched a surprise assault on their cavalry. Though quickly suppressed, the unprecedented incident forced him to face a hard truth.

In just three months, Cangzhou's defensive capabilities had grown again.

The army under the Qi Wang's banner had even dared to dig trenches and face them in open terrain—something no Great Yu army had ever done before.

And now, for the first time, Chagatai had to admit: he had never encountered a more difficult opponent.

Only now did he truly believe Beishan Tai Ji's words:

The future battlefield belongs to gunpowder.

"Cease the assault," Chagatai finally ordered. At last, he understood how Gultai must have felt during his humiliation.

The slave soldiers were a major part of their manpower. If they were depleted here, it would fall upon the tribal warriors to charge next.

"You're giving up the attack?" Kuha growled, his hatred burning brighter each day.

All he wanted now was to storm Cangzhou and avenge his wife's death.

Guduo replied, "Charging again would just throw more lives away."

"They're slaves. Their lives aren't lives. What does it matter if we use more of them?" Kuha snapped, his eyes red.

“Idiot,” Gудuo barked. “Our goal is to destroy the wall. If we lose too many troops doing it, it’s not worth it. Beishan Tai Ji won’t be pleased.”

Chagatai looked over at Gудuo. He agreed wholeheartedly.

After all, if he lost most of his troops just to tear down one wall, the Great Yu forces could rebuild it in a month. That would make all the sacrifice meaningless.

So, for now, he suspended the offensive, and prepared to send a messenger to Beishan, reporting the current situation. If Beishan still insisted on attacking, he would obey—but he was hesitant.

Though a man of Beishan’s faction, he had his own ambitions. If the Blood Wolf Tribe declined like the Huyan Tuo Tribe, Beishan would cast him aside just as quickly.

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With the barbarian attack halted, the cannons atop Cangzhou fell silent too. One li apart, both sides entered a tense standoff.

Night soon fell.

In the trenches, Great Yu soldiers remained vigilant. They hadn't forgotten the night raid from before. Now, they were even more focused—but this night passed quietly. The barbarians did not attack.

The following day, they still made no move.

But while the barbarians stood still, Lu Fei and Lei Ming did not.

With experience from last time, the two cavalry columns roamed the grasslands with ease.

The barbarian rear was exposed due to the main army's march on Cangzhou. Though this time, the tribes had deployed more scouts to guard against another Great Yu ambush.

So, rather than night raids, Lu Fei adopted a direct assault strategy—whenever they found a small tribe, the cavalry would charge in head-on.

Even if discovered by sentries, Lu Fei gave them no chance to send warnings back. His troops would follow them right to their camps. They might not wipe out every last man, but they slaughtered seven or eight out of every ten.

Their goal this time was no longer careful attrition—it was maximum chaos to force a barbarian retreat.

And in just two days, Lu Fei and Lei Ming's forces had already raided over ten tribes.

Panic swept through the Blood Wolf Tribe.

Rumors of the Great Yu army's return spread like wildfire, and tribe after tribe sent envoys to Cangzhou to beg for aid.

Worse yet, they noticed this time that the enemy cavalry was more numerous than before.