

I. Dynasty 348

Chapter 348: Secret Weapon

A dry gust of wind swept over the Golden Guard's massive formation, carrying dust across the open battlefield outside Jizhou.

Though it was still the hot month of September, the air on this wide yellow plain was colder than winter.

Here, the Golden Guard—the most elite unit in Great Yu's imperial army—and the Blood Wolf Cavalry—one of the strongest barbarian forces—were about to clash.

At this moment, Luo Hong stared at the enemy cavalry 300 meters away. His grip on his sword was so tight his knuckles had turned white.

'Brothers go to war together. Fathers and sons fight side by side.'

Since childhood, Luo Hong had followed his father, Luo Quan, into countless battles. After more than 20 years, he could understand his father's thoughts with just a glance.

"Put the nation above self, sacrifice your life for honor."

—That was the family creed passed down from the Luo ancestors.

Luo Hong's gaze firmed as he looked over his soldiers. For the sake of Great Yu, the Golden Guard would not retreat, and neither would he.

"Woooo—"

The barbarian horns sounded, announcing their advance. Just as always on the steppe, mounted archers were the first to attack.

They urged their horses forward, galloping toward the Golden Guard. At a distance of 50 meters, the barbarian cavalry suddenly launched a volley of arrows.

"Shields up!"

Officers across the formation gave orders.

Immediately, the sword-and-shield troops raised their iron-clad wooden shields, each about one meter long. They held them above the archers and spearmen, covering them from the arrows.

Just in time—

"Ting! Ting! Ting!"

The dense rain of arrows struck, scraping metal, thudding into wood. Some shields were pierced, and cries of pain rang out—soldiers who weren't fully covered still got hit.

"Crossbows, fire!"

As soon as the barbarian archers finished their first volley, Great Yu's crossbowmen raised their weapons and shot back.

"Whoosh!"

A storm of bolts cut through the air, hitting the charging cavalry. Horses collapsed, men were flung off—chaos.

But the barbarian horse archers didn't stop. Instead, they began to circle the Golden Guard, using hit-and-run tactics, loosing arrows as they moved.

Luo Hong kept a close eye on the situation. This was typical barbarian strategy—

Harass and scatter the infantry before sending in the main force.

Mounted archers weren't the main strength of the barbarian army; they were used to disrupt tight infantry formations, which were otherwise hard to break.

Sure enough, the swarming cavalry flowed around the Golden Guard like water around stone.

"Hold the line!"

"Maintain formation!"

"Hold steady!"

Drums pounded. Flag signals rose. Officers barked orders as the formation took casualties. Luo Hong gritted his teeth.

They had to endure this.

His father had taken most of the cavalry to Fencheng—he couldn't waste the remaining 10,000.

On the other side, Chagatai watched the battle closely.

“The Golden Guard lives up to its reputation. Even under this pressure, they don’t break ranks,” he muttered.

Guduo spoke up, “They’re the personal forces of Luo Quan. Among the imperial troops, he’s the only general who can really fight.”

“Then we must make sure the Golden Guard never leaves Jizhou,” Chagatai said coldly.

“Qingzhou’s army is trapped in Fencheng. Their supply line is cut. Before we left, Taiji ordered us to cut the food line first, then surround the imperial army. Go now—take 20,000 light cavalry, circle behind them, and burn their supply wagons before they reach the camp.”

Guduo nodded, mounted up, and led his troops around to the rear.

Chagatai watched him leave, then turned back to the battle.

His goal wasn’t to defeat the Golden Guard head-on—only to stall them.

He wouldn’t send in the heavy cavalry yet. He’d just let the mounted archers wear down the enemy.

If the Golden Guard broke formation, that would be the time to strike.

But just as he was thinking this, a scout rushed over.

“Commander! We’ve spotted a large force of Great Yu cavalry heading toward Fencheng!”

Chagatai narrowed his eyes.

So...

These imperial soldiers were here to stall him.

Fencheng was the real battlefield.

Back in Yunzhou city, a wagon from Qingzhou slowly entered the city.

Inside sat Lin Wentao, who looked curiously around the modest city. After receiving Prince Qi’s orders, they had rushed here with their hot air balloons.

“Lin Wentao!”

A commanding voice called out. Lin turned to see Prince Qi walking toward him.

“Your Highness.” Lin quickly dismounted and bowed.

Xiao Ming looked anxious and skipped formalities:

“Have you mastered basic control of the balloons?”

“Yes, Your Highness. The ones flying around Qingzhou recently were all piloted by our students from the Physics Academy.”

They had known this trip might bring them into a real war.

Xiao Ming looked over at the arrived balloons and sighed in relief.

This time, he was using everything he had—whether it was ready or not. If they lost, all his efforts these past two years would be wasted. But if they won, they might gain control of Youzhou.

“Good. I have an important mission for you. Niu Ben is surrounded in Fencheng, and we’ve lost contact. I want you to fly over Jizhou, scout the enemy’s position, and deliver a message to Niu Ben.”

Lin Wentao looked at his two companions and said:

“Your Highness, this is Liang Yubin, and that’s He Cheng. They’ve been the main pilots. If anyone can do it, it’s them—they’ve been hoping for a chance to earn merit.”

Xiao Ming smiled.

“Good. If you complete this mission, I promise you both titles of nobility after the war.”

Liang Yubin and He Cheng were overjoyed. Every man in the territory dreamed of becoming one of the first nobles. They replied loudly:

“Your Highness, just give the order—we’ll get it done!”

Xiao Ming felt reassured.

He hoped that these hot air balloons, this secret weapon, might be enough to at least strike fear into the barbarians.