

I. Dynasty 363

Chapter 363: A Strategic Fortress

Across the vast grasslands, Niu Ben led the Qingzhou and Cangzhou armies as they joined forces on the plains. Then, they marched straight toward Shanhai Pass.

It had been more than half a month since they set out from Jizhou, and along the way, they'd received news that the rebel forces in Jizhou had been suppressed.

"General, look!"

While on the move, Lu Fei suddenly pointed at the mountains ahead. Nestled between the towering peaks stood a grand fortress—it was Shanhai Pass.

That was the northern gate of the Great Yu Empire.

"Shanhai Pass..."

Niu Ben's eyes gleamed. For years, this fortress—known as the strongest pass in the land—had been in barbarian hands, serving as their main route southward.

If they could capture Shanhai Pass and station troops inside the fortress, it would turn into a launch point to threaten the barbarians' territory. The balance of power would flip.

All the commanders looked at Shanhai Pass in the distance, visibly excited.

“Full advance! Take Shanhai Pass!” Niu Ben shouted, and the Qingzhou soldiers immediately quickened their pace.

Since entering the grasslands, they hadn’t seen any barbarian soldiers—only abandoned tents.

Clearly, the barbarians had retreated with the main army.

If Beishan was truly dead, the entire Blood Wolf Tribe would face harsh punishment. With how bloodthirsty and cruel the barbarians were, they might even massacre the entire tribe in his name.

That panic explained why the tribe was fleeing so desperately. Niu Ben’s army needed to strike now—before the Golden Horde had time to reinforce Shanhai Pass.

By noon, the Qingzhou and Cangzhou troops arrived just outside the pass.

This former military stronghold was still held by the barbarians. As they saw the barbarian guards on the fortress wall, Niu Ben ordered the troops to set up camp on the spot.

Luo Xin began directing the artillery crews, pushing 150 cannons into position at the front lines.

In the past, the wall facing the barbarians was the front of the fortress, while the side facing Great Yu was the rear military town.

Now, both the town and fortress wall were under barbarian control. To take Shanhai Pass, they only needed to capture the town.

“Liang Yubin, He Cheng!”

These two had performed well in the Jizhou campaign, so Niu Ben brought them along for the Shanhai Pass attack. They also brought a hot air balloon.

“Here!” the two replied, running up.

Since the interior of the fortress couldn’t be seen from outside, Niu Ben had them use the balloon to scout the area.

Following the order, the two quickly prepared to launch with the help of Qingzhou soldiers.

“Heh heh, Commander, can we go up too?” Lu Fei grinned shamelessly.

Luo Xin and the other officers looked on eagerly.

They had all seen how impressive Luo Quan looked riding a hot air balloon in Jizhou. Now, riding one had become a kind of honor.

Niu Ben straightened his expression.

“This is a battlefield, not a game. If you want to fly so badly, I’ll ask His Highness to let you have a go when we return. But for now, stay sharp.”

Then, as soon as he finished lecturing them, he jogged over to the balloon basket himself with a happy grin.

All the officers rolled their eyes in contempt.

Once Niu Ben was aboard, the soldiers holding the ropes slowly released them, and the balloon began to rise. From above, the entire military town inside Shanhai Pass was visible.

Using a telescope, Niu Ben carefully observed everything.

The town was a mess. Slaves and barbarian troops were running everywhere, gathering on the fortress walls.

Some of the barbarians pointed at the hot air balloon, clearly agitated.

Niu Ben sneered. 'Just this balloon alone is enough to scare them senseless.'

But then he frowned. Inside that not-so-large town, there were around 130,000 defenders—mostly slave soldiers, with some barbarian troops mixed in.

After getting a clear view, he had the balloon brought down and returned to the ground.

"Commander, how's it looking?" Lu Fei asked.

"There are about 130,000 troops inside. Looks like Chagatai guessed we might try to attack and left a strong force behind," Niu Ben replied.

"One hundred thirty thousand?!" Lu Fei was clearly troubled.

The barbarians were usually the ones doing the attacking. Now that it was their turn, everyone knew siege warfare wouldn't be easy.

Niu Ben nodded.

“It’s too late to attack tonight. Same as always—set up the war wagons outside to guard against enemy cavalry. Set up camp, cook, and we attack at dawn.”

The officers all nodded.

Then Niu Ben gathered them to discuss siege tactics. Attacking a city defended by over 100,000 troops with only 40,000 of their own was nearly impossible.

“General, how about fighting fire with fire? Last year, during the Cangzhou battle, the barbarians tried to blow up our walls. What if we plant explosives on their wall and blow it up? Once there’s a breach, our musket formation will make short work of them.”

Niu Ben nodded. “That’s a solid plan.”

Luo Xin added,

“This time, the Cangzhou army brought a new type of cannonball—it’s called a lime bomb. His Highness said it’s great for dealing with wall defenders. We should try it tomorrow.”

“What’s the point of all that?” Lu Fei shouted. “Let’s just blast them with all 150 cannons and send those mongrels straight to the afterlife!”

The others glanced at him but said nothing.

Niu Ben shook his head.

“Leave guards on duty. The rest of you eat and rest. We attack tomorrow.”

Lu Fei scratched his head awkwardly and followed the others out.

The next morning, after breakfast, the camp’s bugle sounded for assembly.

The hot air balloon lifted again, with Niu Ben on board, overseeing the battlefield.

As the attackers, the Qingzhou army’s 40,000 troops arranged themselves outside the city.

The walls were packed with barbarians, many of them armed with bows.

To be fair, Lu Fei had been right the night before. After thinking all night, Niu Ben decided to rely on the cannons—that was Qingzhou’s real advantage.

The 150 cannons were lined up side by side behind the city gate, spaced two meters apart across more than 300 meters—completely covering the front of Shanhai Pass.

Under the cannons were crates of cannonballs and gunpowder bags, fully stocked.

The Cangzhou army even brought catapults and barrels of gunpowder, which could bombard the walls from 200 meters away.

The barbarians weren't so lucky. They had lost all their cannons in the Jizhou campaign.

Confident that they wouldn't lose Shanhai Pass, they hadn't brought any long-range weapons either.

Looking at the dense groups of defenders on the wall, Niu Ben gave his order.

“Fire the cannons and smash them hard!”

Upon receiving the command, Luo Xin grinned viciously and shouted,

“Fire!”

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

In an instant, 150 cannons roared, spewing smoke and flames. The cannonballs smashed into the battlements, sending chunks of stone flying.

The main city gate of Shanhai Pass, under the fierce bombardment, was quickly turned into a shredded mess.