

I. Dynasty 165

Chapter 165: The Burning Fields

The lone moon hung high, its silver light blanketing the earth like morning frost.

In a small grove opposite the Qingzhou Army's official estate, dozens of shadowy figures shifted among the trees, black silhouettes in the night.

"Big Brother, what now? The estate is guarded day and night by the Qingzhou Army. There's no chance to make a move," whispered one of the men.

Through gaps in the trees, one could clearly see the glint of moonlight reflecting off the soldiers' silver armor.

"Yeah, the wheat's almost ready to harvest. If we don't act now, it'll be too late."

The man referred to as "Big Brother" was clad in black, the round silver moon reflected in his eyes. He spoke coldly, "Beishan Taiji will soon launch his attack on Cangzhou. The merchants from the steppe brought word—our mission is to disrupt the Qing Prince's supply lines. No matter what, tonight we burn those wheat fields."

"Finally! I've been waiting for this. When did this brat Xiao Ming start calling the shots in Qingzhou anyway? Since he's forced us into a corner, let's send him to hell first," one man spat.

“Exactly. The steppe merchants said Beishan Taiji promised—if we succeed tonight, once Qingzhou is taken, the six prefectures’ lands will be divided among us. We’ll each be little kings ourselves.”

That promise sent ripples of excitement through the group.

“We’ll give Beishan Taiji a proper gift,” the black-clad leader said with a sneer.

“What’s the plan, big brother?”

He paused, then said, “The Qingzhou Army is too alert. A head-on assault won’t work. You—take ten men and create a diversion from the east. Don’t engage them—just draw them away. The rest of us will use the opening to set the wheat fields on fire.”

“Brilliant plan, Brother. Let’s move.”

One of the men led a team across the stone bridge toward the estate.

When they got close, one of them pulled out a fire striker and blew on it. With a spark, flame ignited. He tossed it into the dry wheat.

The weather had been hot and dry for days—the moment the flame touched the field, the wheat went up like kindling.

“Fire! Saboteurs! Saboteurs!” a Qingzhou soldier roared as the blaze lit up the night.

Panic swept through the guards. Some grabbed water buckets to extinguish the flames, while others charged toward the fleeing arsonists.

The black-clad men didn’t fight back—they kept just out of reach, drawing soldiers further away.

Meanwhile, the rest of the saboteurs crossed Xiaoqing River under cover of the chaos, infiltrating the estate and setting fires in dozens of locations.

The Qingzhou soldiers were overwhelmed—put out one blaze and another sprang up behind them.

Then came the attack.

Grouped together, the black-clad men drew short blades and launched surprise strikes on the scattered soldiers.

Zzzzt!—the sickening sound of metal piercing armor. Zhu Sansi cried out as a blade stabbed into his back.

But his training kicked in. Instead of turning, he rolled away and drew his sword, blood soaking through his armor.

Thanks to his body armor, the blade hadn't gone deep.

He grit his teeth, locked eyes on his attacker, and shouted, "Assassins here!"

The saboteur was stunned—he had expected a clean kill. But Zhu's shout brought nearby soldiers running.

Realizing he had lost the advantage, the assassin turned to flee into the shadows.

But Zhu didn't give him the chance.

With a predator's leap, he struck back, his sword cutting down in an arc.

The attacker dodged, lacking Zhu's protection.

Zhu's swing had been a feint—midway through, he pivoted, slashing sideways.

The blade bit deep into the assassin's arm. Blood sprayed as the man screamed.

“Big Brother!” one of the saboteurs shouted, and the others rushed to shield him.

Zhu raised his sword, ready.

“Retreat!” the wounded leader ordered. Seeing more Qingzhou soldiers closing in, he chose escape.

The saboteurs melted back into the darkness.

The soldiers reached Zhu. “Zhu Sansi! Are you hurt?”

Clutching his back, Zhu grabbed a water bucket. “I’m fine. Put out the fire!”

As much as they wanted to hunt down the attackers, they knew—if the wheat burned, the Qingzhou Army’s food for the year would be gone.

Even knowing the assassins might strike again, the soldiers risked everything to fight the flames.

Meanwhile, a detachment had already ridden to the Qingzhou garrison for reinforcements.

But the flames were growing. Buckets weren't enough.

Across the river, the saboteurs watched the inferno with smug satisfaction.

"This is only one estate," the leader said coldly. "There are more. Let's see how long they can keep up."

The flames rose higher, painting the sky red. Sparks flew. The smoke thickened.

In the city, people looked up and gasped.

In the Qi Prince's residence, Xiao Ming was dragged out of bed by Luluo.

He rushed to the window and saw the northern sky glowing red—that was the estate.

Having grown up in the countryside, Xiao Ming knew exactly what this meant.

That kind of red sky only appeared during massive wheat fires.

But in these times, no one burned straw. Every household saved straw for cooking fires.

Which meant—someone had set the fields ablaze.

“Ready the horses!” Xiao Ming shouted.

“We already have them prepared,” Ziyuan replied calmly.

Xiao Ming vaulted onto his mount and led his guards galloping out of the city.

At the same time, the Qingzhou Army had already mobilized.

Nearby villagers also surged out of their homes—worried their own crops would be next.

“The Prince’s estate field is on fire!” someone shouted. “Get your buckets!”

From every direction, farmers picked up sickles, buckets, anything they could carry—and ran toward the flames.