

I. Dynasty 166

Chapter 166: The Loss

The pitch-black night was dyed crimson by raging flames, the acrid stench of smoke thick in the air.

In front of the official granary, the pungent scent of scorched wheat stabbed at Xiao Ming's heart like a blade.

This was months of rations for the Qingzhou Army... months of rations.

"Your Highness!"

A loud shout rang out, accompanied by urgent hoofbeats. Niu Ben and Lu Fei arrived with the Qingzhou troops.

"Those damn bastards! Who did this?!" Lu Fei roared furiously, charging into the fields and stomping on the burning stalks.

Niu Ben's face was like stone. Seeing Xiao Ming so stricken, he said, "Your Highness, now's not the time for sorrow. We must stop the fire from spreading. If not, all the wheat will be gone—and the blaze will reach the villagers' crops too."

Xiao Ming had only just arrived. Shaking off the haze of rage, he said, "Tell all soldiers to stop using water. Everyone start cutting the wheat along the burning edge. We'll make a firebreak."

Niu Ben didn't stop to ask what a firebreak was. "All men, start cutting wheat!" he commanded.

Xiao Ming noticed many villagers had been roused by the commotion. Approaching them, he said, "Everyone, I ask for your help to bring this fire under control."

"Your Highness, this is our duty," one man said.

Immediately, the villagers rushed into the fields, bending over and expertly swinging their sickles.

Another shouted, "I'm heading back to the village to bring more people!"

This detachment of Qingzhou cavalry was only a thousand strong. Infantry reinforcements hadn't arrived yet. If they waited any longer, more crops would be lost. Fortunately, nearby villages weren't far.

Niu Ben said, "Get on the horse. I'll take you."

To save the granary wheat, Xiao Ming didn't stand idle. Grabbing a sickle, he too entered the fields.

Soon, the sound of running footsteps rang out. Villagers from nearby had arrived and plunged into the fire line.

With so many seasoned farmers joining, the blaze—spanning several hundred meters—was quickly surrounded. Half an hour later, the Qingzhou infantry arrived and also joined the effort.

By dawn, the flames had finally been extinguished, halted by the firebreaks.

Blue-gray smoke drifted under the dim morning sun. Xiao Ming's clothes reeked of scorched straw.

"Your Highness, five hundred mu of fields are gone," Lu Fei said, face blackened with soot, his voice hoarse. The other soldiers and villagers looked much the same.

The fire was out, and they all let out a heavy breath.

"Five hundred mu," Xiao Ming echoed quietly. Fifteen hundred shi of grain.

But the real issue wasn't the lost wheat—it was the traitors who dared such madness. With enemy forces preparing to invade, someone still had the audacity to sabotage the rear supply lines?

To him, it was treason. Betrayal. Treachery. A crime punishable by death.

"Where are the soldiers who guarded the granary last night?" Xiao Ming asked coldly.

Lu Fei stiffened. He felt a deadly aura emanating from Xiao Ming—so unlike his usual approachable self.

“If blame must be laid, then punish me, Your Highness. It was my negligence that allowed these rebels to burn the fields,” Lu Fei knelt on one knee.

“This wasn’t the captain’s fault! We were ambushed!” shouted several soldiers, dropping to their knees as well.

“Get up!” Xiao Ming said. “I’m not here to assign blame. I just want to know exactly what happened.”

The granary was massive. Soldiers had to patrol in scattered shifts. If someone deliberately planned this, it would be impossible to guard against it fully.

“We were drilling last night when a group of black-clad figures snuck in and set the fire. We gave chase immediately, but didn’t expect another group to be lying in wait. They set more fires while we were distracted. They even tried to kill us—Zhu Sansi was stabbed in the back, though he said he wounded one of them too.”

Xiao Ming noticed one kneeling soldier with a blood-soaked back.

He sighed inwardly. How could he blame a wounded man who still spent the night fighting fire?

'This was my fault. I was too careless before a war.'

"You're Zhu Sansi, right? You're injured—why haven't you gone to the physician? Don't you care about your life?" Xiao Ming asked.

"Captain Lu said the wheat is the Qingzhou Army's life," Zhu Sansi replied with a blank but firm face.

Xiao Ming froze. With men like this, how could the Qingzhou Army not become the empire's finest force?

"He says nonsense like that all the time. Go to the physician. The wheat's burned—we'll survive. But I don't want to lose a good soldier," Xiao Ming said.

Zhu Sansi's eyes grew moist. The prince's concern stirred something deep in his chest.

Lu Fei gave a sheepish grin. "What are you standing around for? Get to the doctor!"

Zhu Sansi nodded, helped by a few comrades as he walked away.

Pang Yukun had arrived during the night too. "Your Highness, Zhu Sansi said he wounded one of them. We should search the area immediately for anyone with an injured arm. If we don't catch them, this will happen again."

Xiao Ming nodded. "General Niu, we can't wait any longer. Have the troops start harvesting the wheat today. Even if we have to dry it later, it's better than losing it."

Just then, a man dressed as a villager stepped forward. "Your Highness, if you're harvesting, let us help. After everything you've done for us, it's time we returned the favor."

"Yes, we can't let the army's food burn."

"Our own crops can wait a few days."

"..."

Voices rose one after another.

Xiao Ming was deeply moved. 'This is what General Niu meant—if you treat people like family, they'll treat you the same.' He bowed deeply.

"Thank you, everyone. Truly."

Pang Yukun smiled faintly. 'Those who win the people win the world. These policies haven't been in vain.'

Niu Ben looked meaningfully at Xiao Ming, then turned to the troops. "What are you standing around for? The villagers are harvesting. Are we going to let them beat us?"

"Yes, sir!" came the thunderous reply. The soldiers charged into the fields.

Xiao Ming watched it all with a heart full of resolve. 'For these brave soldiers and kind-hearted people, even if I'm broken to pieces, I will defend Cangzhou. I'll never let the barbarians set foot on our land again. Never again shall our people suffer under foreign rule.'

Quietly, he and Pang Yukun returned to the city. Xiao Ming ordered all nearby prefectures to search for any man with a wound on his arm. Any useful tip would be rewarded with a thousand taels.

At the same time, he summoned Li San to the Prince Qi's manor.