

I. Dynasty 330

Chapter 330: Prelude to War

Qingzhou Secret Intelligence Bureau.

As soon as news arrived from Yongzhou, Wang Xuan rushed to the Prince's Manor.

While Prince Qi had been busy reforming Qingzhou these past couple of months, the situation in Yongzhou had taken a dramatic turn for the worse. The number of people rallying under the so-called "Azure Dragon King" had grown rapidly, and Prince Yong's forces were losing ground fast.

But that wasn't the biggest concern.

Worse yet, the Mongol general Chagatai had led sixty thousand cavalry southward in two separate units, seemingly seizing the opportunity to strike. They were now acting as the vanguard of the nomadic invasion targeting Jizhou.

"What? Chagatai is already heading south?" Xiao Ming's expression turned grim upon hearing the news.

Wang Xuan nodded. "There's no doubt about it."

"Yong Wang, you damn fool!" Xiao Ming slammed the table. Plans always lagged behind changes—especially when you had a pig-headed ally who wrecked everything.

He'd sensed this might happen the moment the rebellion broke out in Yongzhou, but this was still far too soon.

And the letter he had sent earlier to warn Prince Yong? No reply. It had probably been tossed aside.

That man had always been stubborn and arrogant, refusing to listen to advice. Even with a crisis staring him in the face, he was still charging forward blindly.

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“What should we do now, Your Highness? Jizhou is only two hundred li from Yunzhou. Most of Yong Wang’s army is tied up dealing with the rebellion. That means Jizhou City is practically defenseless. If the Mongol cavalry takes it, the gate to our territory will be wide open!” Wang Xuan warned.

Xiao Ming thought for a moment. “We can’t let the Mongols bring the war to our land. Go call Niu Ben and the other generals here.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

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The reforms had kept Xiao Ming busy for nearly two months. It was now late July. He had originally planned to launch a northern campaign against the Mongols in October, but now that plan was shattered. He had lost three precious months of preparation.

So far, his army had only been equipped with ten thousand flintlocks. The Guanning Cavalry and Qingzhou cavalry combined numbered a little over ten thousand. And they had only 300 Hussite war wagons.

And that was after pouring nearly all available funds into military spending.

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Wang Xuan soon returned with Niu Ben and the other military commanders. On the way over, he had already explained the situation.

“Your Highness,” Niu Ben said firmly, “we must deploy the entire army to Yunzhou and be ready to support Jizhou at any time. If we allow Mongol cavalry into Qingzhou territory, the damage will be unimaginable.”

He paused and continued, “But there’s one good thing—right now Jizhou has no food. The people are starving. It’s essentially a scorched earth zone. Chagatai will need to secure Jizhou City before he can push toward Yunzhou.”

“This Yong Wang... how is he even managing his territory?” Lu Fei cursed.

Xiao Ming let out a long sigh. “It’s not the wolves that scare me. It’s the pigs on my own side.”

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As the group discussed next steps, Ziyuan suddenly burst into the room. “Your Highness, an urgent report from Chang’an has arrived—delivered at full gallop!”

Xiao Ming and Niu Ben exchanged a glance, then quickly stepped outside. A courier stood at the gate, holding a sealed letter.

Xiao Ming tore it open and read quickly. “The emperor is ordering me to send troops to help Prince Yong put down the rebellion and jointly resist the advancing Mongol cavalry.”

“What?! When we were defending Cangzhou, Prince Yong didn’t lift a finger! And now we’re supposed to help him?” Lu Fei shouted angrily. “His Majesty is playing favorites again!”

Niu Ben frowned. He too felt this was unfair. Back when the Mongols first invaded, Xiao Ming had been the weakest among the vassal princes, yet the entire burden had fallen on his shoulders.

But still—this wasn’t the time to argue.

Even if it felt like a slap in the face, they couldn’t just ignore the situation. If Jizhou fell, Qingzhou would be surrounded.

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“We’ll go to Jizhou regardless of the imperial edict,” Xiao Ming said calmly. “Now that it’s here, we just have a legitimate excuse. Besides, the Imperial Guards and Prince Wei’s army have already begun moving toward Jizhou.”

“They’ve already deployed?” Niu Ben and the others breathed a sigh of relief. At least this time, they wouldn’t be fighting alone.

In truth, Xiao Ming had long been hoping for a chance to move into Jizhou.

This chaos was a crisis—but also a massive opportunity.

Back during the Three Kingdoms era, Cao Cao had risen to power by absorbing the 300,000 refugees from Qingzhou. That massive population boost gave him his edge.

Pang Yukun had sent envoys to Jizhou to invite refugees into Qingzhou, but with poor results. People were afraid to travel far, especially to unfamiliar places.

Worse, disaster zones often gave rise to human traffickers and scammers. The refugees didn’t trust anyone easily.

But if Qingzhou's army marched into Jizhou? That was a different story. The people would trust soldiers more than strangers.

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Recently, Xiao Ming had been reading *The Prince*. It said a good ruler must have the strength of a lion and the cunning of a fox.

Now, with chaos at the borders, he had no choice but to play dirty.

If he was going to send his army to help, he'd better earn something in return. He wouldn't come back unless he brought back at least 340,000 refugees to repopulate his lands.

Having made his decision, Xiao Ming gave his orders.

Niu Ben was to lead 10,000 cavalry, 2,000 crossbowmen, 3,000 spearmen, 5,000 sword and shield infantry, 10,000 flintlock soldiers, 300 Hussite war wagons

The remaining troops would defend each province.

Meanwhile, Pang Yukun was ordered to open all civilian fortresses and strongholds. If the Mongols entered Qingzhou, the people were to retreat into the fortresses and minimize casualties.

As always, logistics were the hardest part of any campaign.

“Before the troops march, the grain must march first.”

Thankfully, last year Xiao Ming had ordered every province to stockpile military rations. The stores in Yunzhou should be enough to support this expedition.

Compared to before, logistics were smoother—at least for now.

But once they left Yunzhou, it would be tough again. Especially since Niu Ben was also bringing 30 cannons, which required carts and manpower to move.

Though the news had come quickly, war preparations couldn’t be rushed.

It took ten days to gather ammunition, weapons, and supplies.

Then Niu Ben led his twenty-thousand-strong force toward Yunzhou.

This time, Xiao Ming wouldn’t be joining the army himself. Everyone had a role to play now.

He would oversee the territory and manage the big picture.

The soldiers would fight the battles.

The officials would handle support.

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At the gates of the Qingzhou military camp, Xiao Ming watched the army depart with a quiet sense of worry.

The troops had only been using firearms for three to four months. Would they hold up in real battle?

To be cautious, he had made sure only a third of the force were musket troops.

But this was a step they had to take. Only on the battlefield could they truly grow and gain experience.

Of course, he'd given Niu Ben one crucial order—gather the refugees.