

## I. Dynasty 331

### Chapter 331: Jizhou Developments

July 25th. After six days of forced marching, Niu Ben led the 30,000-strong Qingzhou army into Yunzhou.

At the same time, he received grave news—Chagatai's sixty-thousand-strong Mongol cavalry was fast approaching Jizhou.

What was worse, a detachment of ten thousand riders had split from the main force and was circumventing Jizhou, heading directly toward Yunzhou.

Within the military command tent, Niu Ben unrolled the map Prince Qi had provided and began to analyze the situation. Surrounding him were generals Lu Fei, Luo Xin, Qi Guangyi, and Bai Mu, all intently studying the map.

"This is great," Lu Fei grinned. "Five thousand riders would be troublesome, but ten thousand? We'll show them what our flintlock troops can really do!"

Niu Ben, however, frowned. "An isolated cavalry unit pushing this far south... Something's not right. Lu Fei, send the Piaoqi Cavalry to scout and keep a close eye on their movements."

Lu Fei nodded firmly. The Piaoqi Cavalry was a specially reorganized unit from Qingzhou's mounted troops. They wore no armor, and even their horses were stripped down to the bare essentials for speed and maneuverability.

These soldiers were tasked not only with rapid raids but also intelligence gathering.

“Yes, sir!” Lu Fei gave a sharp salute and departed.

Niu Ben then turned to Qi Guangyi. “His Highness also ordered us to gather refugees while aiding Jizhou. Qi Guangyi, take five thousand armored cavalry into Jizhou. Guide the refugees into Yunzhou.”

Qi Guangyi nodded loudly. “Understood!”

Turning to the remaining officers, Niu Ben commanded, “Organize your flintlock units, war wagon crews, archers, and sword-and-shield infantry. Stay alert and ready for battle at all times. We cannot allow this cavalry to breach our borders.”

“Yes, sir!” the generals bellowed in unison.

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With the plan settled, Niu Ben exited the tent. Outside, the Governor of Yunzhou, Kong Yong’an, stood waiting.

“Governor Kong,” Niu Ben said with a polite bow, “I apologize for the inconvenience of stationing our army here.”

Kong Yong'an waved a hand. "No need to apologize, Lord Niu. We've been hoping for your arrival. Rumors have been spreading in the city. People say the Azure Dragon King plans to attack Yunzhou for food. The public is anxious. With your army here, we can finally breathe easy."

Niu Ben scoffed. "That Azure Dragon King dares target Yunzhou? Doesn't he know this is Prince Qi's domain?"

Kong Yong'an shook his head. "Jizhou is out of food. He's got thousands of mouths to feed and no way to sustain them. I'm afraid he's desperate."

Niu Ben sighed. "Just as His Highness predicted—internal unrest and foreign invasion. A true crisis on both fronts."

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Inside Jizhou City.

Prince Yong was pacing frantically.

His trusted guard, Chen Xinran, entered the hall.

"Have the Imperial Guards arrived yet? What about Prince Wei's forces? What about Prince Qi's troops?!" Prince Yong's eyes were bloodshot.

He was in a full-blown panic.

The civil unrest in his domain still wasn't under control, and now Mongol forces had surrounded the city. Chagatai's cavalry was ravaging the countryside, and Jizhou was encircled.

Every regional army that attempted to aid them had been slaughtered by the Mongol riders. In open terrain, they were no match.

"Your Highness," said Chen Xinran carefully, "There's still no sign of any reinforcements. The Mongol cavalry remains outside the city. Our troops are all on the walls, ready to defend."

Prince Yong's temper exploded. He swept the entire tea set off the table. "Those damn cowards! I'm about to DIE, and they still haven't come to save me! Worthless! All of them!"

Chen Xinran stood silent. He knew not to provoke the prince's infamous wrath.

Once a formidable warrior in his youth, Prince Yong had now grown bloated and idle after decades of luxury.

His military might had withered, but his temper and arrogance remained as dangerous as ever.

Last year's drought in Jizhou had started in July and had persisted into the present. Things might not have gotten this bad—had Prince Yong not ignored the crisis entirely.

When the Azure Dragon King rebelled, Prince Yong had failed to act. By the time he tried to suppress the uprising, the rebel had already established a massive following.

And to make things worse, he had embezzled much of the relief grain sent from the capital and other territories.

Even the 100,000 bushels of grain sent by Qingzhou had been largely sold off to profiteers.

Had that grain been used for disaster relief, perhaps the uprising wouldn't have spread so far.

When Prince Qi sent a letter urging him to act, Prince Yong glanced at it and threw it into the fire.

"Brat!" was all he said.

Chen Xinran sighed inwardly, a bitter sadness in his heart.

With internal rebellion and now foreign invasion, Jizhou seemed doomed. Even Prince Yong, blind as he was, now sensed the crisis—but it was too late. Their fate was no longer in their own hands.

“Your Highness,” Chen Xinran suddenly remembered something. “The Mongol cavalry outside the city seems to be missing a ten-thousand-man detachment. They’ve broken off and are heading toward Yunzhou.”

“Yunzhou? That’s perfect!” Prince Yong’s eyes lit up. “That means they’re not here for me—they must be targeting Prince Qi instead!”

He laughed manically and seized Chen Xinran’s shoulders. “Quick! Go to the city walls. Tell their commander this: Qingzhou had a massive harvest last year. Grain is plentiful. If they agree to raid Yunzhou instead, we’ll even provide supplies to help!”

“Your Highness... that would be collusion with the enemy!” Chen Xinran said, stunned.

“Collusion?” Prince Yong’s expression turned cold. “Better Qi dies than I do. I haven’t enjoyed enough of life yet. Besides, the empire is fragmented. Sooner or later, all vassals will declare themselves kings. When that day comes, Qi will be my rival.”

Chen Xinran was speechless.

Facing Prince Yong’s fierce gaze, he could only sigh and make his way to the city walls.

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Meanwhile, a hundred li from Yunzhou, the Piaoqi Cavalry had located the Mongol detachment heading their way.

On an open plain, the Mongol riders were already engaged in battle with a group of rebels wielding farm tools and scavenged weapons.

Although the rebels had the advantage in numbers, the Mongol cavalry was ferocious. They had formed a circular formation and were launching wave after wave of arrows into the crowd trapped in the center.

The rebel soldiers didn't even have a chance to reach the cavalry before being cut down by arrow fire.

The scouts squinted and spotted the rebel banner—it read “Azure Dragon King.”

So, this was one of the rebel bands... and they had unfortunately run straight into the Mongols.

The Qingzhou scouts didn't engage. They kept their distance and observed.

After about half an hour of intense fighting, the rebels broke ranks and fled. The Mongols pursued briefly, hacking down stragglers, then regrouped.

They didn't seem interested in further conflict with the rebels.

Instead, they resumed their march toward Yunzhou.

The Piaoqi Cavalry quickly turned back and galloped toward the city to report.

They had also spotted grain sacks tied to the Mongol horses, clear proof that this wasn't a random raid.

The Mongols were heading toward Yunzhou—with a plan.