

I. Dynasty 332

Chapter 332: The Two Sides

“Commander, the Mongol general leading this 10,000-man force is named Kuha.”

“Reporting, sir! The enemy cavalry is now less than 100 li from Yunzhou!”

“Commander, along the way, the Mongol cavalry has been committing massacres and looting. The refugees from Jizhou are suffering tremendous losses.”

“...”

Inside the military command tent at Yunzhou, scouts from the Piaoqi Cavalry returned one after another, delivering urgent updates.

“Bam!” Lu Fei slammed the table with fury. “Commander, they’re retaliating. This is an eye-for-an-eye strategy—they’re using our own grassland raiding tactics against our territory now!”

Niu Ben’s expression darkened. He now understood why a single 10,000-strong detachment had broken away from the main Mongol army and advanced toward Yunzhou.

“Kuha... the name rings a bell,” Luo Xin muttered, frowning. “Didn’t Wang Xuan mention this man before?”

Niu Ben's eyes lit up with recognition. "Yes, that's right. Kuha is one of Chagatai's most vicious generals. Last time, when I led a cavalry raid deep into the grasslands, we attacked his tribe. We slaughtered every last man, woman, and child."

Wang Xuan had long been tasked with collecting intelligence on the Mongol tribes. Qingzhou's military command now possessed a complete dossier of their generals, courtesy of his work.

"If that's the case, we're in even greater danger," Lu Fei said, his brows furrowed. "Kuha is clearly out for revenge. He'll slaughter our civilians if given the chance."

The other commanders shared the same grim concern.

Niu Ben took a moment to think. "The Mongols must've been collecting intel on us as well. It's likely Kuha knows it was I who led the raid on his people. If he finds out I'm leading an infantry force into Jizhou... what do you think he'll do?"

"He'll definitely come for you," Lu Fei said gravely. "Kuha's known for his hot temper and impulsiveness. But Commander, this is extremely dangerous."

"Not necessarily," Niu Ben said, eyes gleaming. "Kuha doesn't know Qingzhou troops are now armed with flintlocks. His Highness told us: strike while they're still unfamiliar with firearms. A surprise ambush may just work."

Luo Xin nodded in agreement. "We've already exposed their movements. The element of surprise is gone for them—but not for us. We could lay an open-order square formation ambush right along their route."

Niu Ben pointed to a specific location on the map, about 30 li from Yunzhou. “Here. Our Piaoqi scouts already surveyed the area. The main road is wide, flanked by grasslands and dense woods. If Kuha wants to get deeper into Qingzhou, he’ll have to go through this pass.”

Unlike the open plains of the grasslands, Da Yu’s inner territories were shaped by agricultural civilization. Towns and cities were built around key roads and choke points.

Sure, cavalry could try to bypass cities, but the roads were still necessary for rapid movement—especially for supply-heavy raids like this one.

Taking unfamiliar backroads carried the serious risk of getting lost, especially for foreign troops. That’s why Niu Ben chose to ambush them on the official highway.

With the ambush site selected, Niu Ben gave his orders. Flintlock units, war wagons, and artillery teams were to move out immediately and begin setting up along the designated area.

Lu Fei and Luo Xin moved out at once, marshalling troops.

Based on Kuha’s distance—100 li away—and the average Mongol cavalry march speed, Niu Ben estimated they’d arrive by tomorrow.

Though horses were fast in short bursts, they lacked endurance. A long march would exhaust them unless rest periods were built in. Mongols typically solved this by bringing multiple horses per rider, but even so, full-speed marching would wear them out.

Niu Ben had thus made his worst-case assumption for arrival time.

That same night, Qingzhou's army quietly moved out of Yunzhou and began constructing fortified positions along the highway 30 li outside the city.

Meanwhile, Niu Ben kept dispatching scouts and raised his command banner high—deliberately baiting Kuha into attacking.

...

Fifty li away from Yunzhou, Kuha was leading his cavalry down the official road, steadily pressing forward.

Scouts returned with a string of reports.

This entire plan—to bypass Yunzhou and raid deeper into Qingzhou—had been set by Chagatai himself. Kuha had been chosen to spearhead the mission.

Since the loss of his tribe, hatred had consumed Kuha. Every day, the need for revenge grew stronger.

He no longer feared death—only the possibility of dying without vengeance.

“Commander, twenty li ahead, Qingzhou forces are entrenched and awaiting battle,” a scout reported.

Kuha frowned. “Why do they always seem to know exactly where we are?”

The scout fell silent. He had no answer. Not a single Qingzhou scout had been spotted by their own forces—yet the enemy always seemed to know their next move.

After a moment, Kuha grunted, “Ignore them. We’ll bypass Yunzhou and strike deeper into Qingzhou. We’ll plunder the towns near the capital.”

The rebellion in Jizhou had provided them with an opening, and last year’s brutal winter had wiped out much of the Golden Horde’s livestock. It was their first major food shortage in years.

To survive, many tribes had begun selling off their slaves or even killing them to preserve resources.

This southern campaign was all about looting grain.

But in Jizhou, all they'd found was famine and wasteland, filled with starving, desperate peasants. The region had been picked clean.

So now, under Chagatai's orders, Kuha had turned toward Qingzhou.

"But the highway is our only route," the scout pointed out.

"Idiot! Can't you capture a local peasant and force him to lead the way?" Kuha snarled.

"Yes, sir!" The scout galloped off.

Just then, another scout arrived. "Commander, our forward scouts report that the Qingzhou troops are mostly infantry and war wagons. Only a small cavalry unit is present. The command banner bears the name 'Niu Ben.'"

"Niu Ben?!" Kuha's eyes turned bloodshot.

He'd finally learned who had massacred his people. Niu Ben was the name burned into his nightmares.

"I'll kill him..." Kuha's breathing grew ragged, his knuckles white on the reins.

A subordinate commander tried to calm him. “Commander, it’s probably a trap. We can’t fall for the Great Yu people’s tricks.”

Kuha clenched his jaw and held back his rage. After several deep breaths, he forced himself to remain still, awaiting more intel.

An hour later, a scout returned. “Sir, all nearby villages outside Yunzhou are completely abandoned. The locals have all fled.”

That only infuriated Kuha more—yet another sign they had been expected.

Then came another report: “Commander, the Qingzhou army ahead numbers only around ten thousand. They’re positioned far from the city, exposed in open terrain.”

His fury faded slightly, replaced by calculating malice.

They had marched for days, and supply and feed for the horses were running low. If they wasted more time, both soldiers and animals would begin to starve.

Ten thousand soldiers, in open field, away from their fortifications?

This might be his best chance.

Kuha's voice rang cold: "Send scouts to search the flanks—check the woods for any hidden forces. Once we're clear..."

He drew his blade slowly.

"...the rest of you, prepare for battle."