

I. Dynasty 131

Chapter 131: The Big Fish Eats the Small Fish

"I've said everything that needed to be said. Given Father's temperament, he will surely adopt my plan."

The Third Prince gently fanned himself with a paper fan, exuding confidence.

Li Zhong, upon hearing this, revealed a sly smile. "Your Highness, this is a plan that kills two birds with one stone. The most important target is King Wei. When the barbarians invade, neither King Wei nor Prince Qi will be able to stop them. Once Qi and Wei fall, the barbarians, driven by their greed, will inevitably continue to seize the remaining lands in the north. The territories north of the Yangtze River will be lost."

"Therefore, if we can take this opportunity to weaken King Wei, the fertile lands south of the Yangtze will belong to your uncle, King Chu. When the time comes, all we need to do is wait for the right moment. If the barbarians reach the gates of Chang'an, the Emperor will have only two options: perish with the city or flee to Lin'an and establish a new capital. At that point, he will have no choice but to rely on your uncle. How could the throne escape you then? And if, by misfortune, the Emperor perishes, Your Highness can ascend to the throne with your uncle's support."

"My uncle has already mentioned this in his letter. I never expected his vision to be so far-reaching. I only hope the barbarians don't just raid and retreat this time," the Third Prince said with a cold smile.

Li Zhong chuckled. "They certainly won't. According to my sources, the barbarians have already ceased hostilities with the Ottoman Empire. This time, they won't retreat easily. The fate of the north is sealed. The barbarians are poor at naval warfare, so the natural barrier of the Yangtze River will ensure our safety. Your Highness should not hesitate any longer and must make preparations early."

The Third Prince sighed softly. "Very well. Once I ascend the throne in Lin'an, I will work diligently to gradually reclaim the lost northern territories."

"Your Highness is wise," Li Zhong said with a smile.

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The next day, during the morning court session.

After a night of contemplation, Xiao Wenxuan addressed the civil and military officials: "The matter of the barbarians' southern invasion requires careful consideration. After all, the Great Yu Empire and the barbarians are currently at peace, and we should not make rash assumptions. Prince Qi and King Wei, as feudal lords, are responsible for defending their territories. If the barbarians invade, they must resist with all their might to show the barbarians the strength of the Great Yu Empire. If the two princes cannot hold them off, we will negotiate peace and increase the tribute to appease the barbarians. Meanwhile, the other princes must also strengthen their defenses. If the barbarians remain unreasonable, we will fight them to the death!"

"Your Majesty is wise!" Cui Hao and other ministers exclaimed with joy.

Luo Quan clenched his fists, ready to speak again, but a fellow military official beside him shook his head subtly. From Xiao Wenxuan's expression, it was clear that he had already compromised.

The Crown Prince and other princes remained silent, each harboring their own plans. Prince Zhao had instructed the Crown Prince to side with the peace faction, and though he did not speak, many of the peace-seeking ministers were his allies.

In Prince Zhao's view, Xiao Wenxuan was aging, and in a few years, the Crown Prince would ascend the throne. Therefore, it was crucial to stabilize the barbarians and preserve the northern territories until he could secure his rule.

The Fourth Prince, backed by Prince Liang, shared the same sentiment. If the barbarians invaded, it would be the northern princes who suffered, while the southern princes could use the opportunity to grow stronger.

Thus, the northern princes were not foolish. If the barbarians truly invaded, their priority would be negotiation, with resistance as a secondary measure.

"However, Prince Qi has explicitly stated in his letter that his fiefdom lacks high-quality iron and coal. I believe we should not make things difficult for him. He should be allowed to purchase coal and iron within the Great Yu Empire."

Xiao Wenxuan spoke with a tone of resignation. This was the only way he could help Xiao Ming.

The ministers raised no further objections. If the barbarians truly invaded, they could simply watch from the sidelines, letting Prince Qi and King Wei bear the brunt of the attack. If they failed, peace could be negotiated.

This would show the barbarians that the Great Yu Empire was not an easy target. At that point, increasing the tribute and ceding Prince Qi and King Wei's territories could secure peace.

If the barbarians refused to negotiate, then the imperial guards could be mobilized for a decisive battle.

After announcing this decision, Xiao Wenxuan seemed utterly exhausted and ordered the eunuch to dismiss the court.

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Three days later, Qingzhou.

“A bunch of cowards!” In the Prince Qi’s mansion, Xiao Ming angrily threw the imperial edict from Chang’an to the ground.

Pang Yukun was horrified and immediately picked it up. “Your Highness, if the eunuch sees this, he will surely report your disrespect to His Majesty.”

“What is there to fear? The barbarians are invading, and the Great Yu Empire is on the brink of disaster. And what are they doing? Each one is only thinking of their own interests. It’s utterly absurd, laughable, and a disgrace to the entire world!” Xiao Ming fumed.

Along with the edict, a secret letter from Consort Zhen had arrived, detailing everything that had happened in the court.

“At least General Luo is a true man,” Lu Fei said.

“General Luo may be righteous, but even he cannot stand against the traitors in the court!” Xiao Ming retorted.

Zhan Xingchang pondered for a moment and said, “Your Highness, the edict orders us to defend Cangzhou alone, with King Wei providing support. This plan is likely the poisonous scheme devised by the Third Prince.”

“Mother mentioned that Father was furious in the palace that day, so it must be true. My Third Brother is probably already dreaming of the north falling and him ascending the throne in Lin’an.”

“Exactly. This plan is primarily aimed at weakening King Wei. We are merely collateral damage,” Zhan Xingchang explained. “From the perspective of the other ministers and princes, it’s clear that Prince Zhao, Prince Liang, and Prince Yong have no intention of getting involved in the defense of Cangzhou. As long as their own fiefdoms remain safe, that’s all that matters to them.”

Pang Yukun nodded. “Xingchang is right. It seems the fate of Prince Kang has now fallen upon us.”

Xiao Ming nodded as well. Back when the barbarians attacked Shanhaiguan, the court in Chang’an had acted no differently. Sacrificing one fiefdom in exchange for ten years of peace. Unfortunately, Prince Kang, a wise and noble ruler, chose to take his own life in his mansion rather than surrender.

“I will not let Prince Kang’s tragedy repeat itself in Qingzhou. At least there’s one piece of good news: Father has agreed to let us purchase high-quality iron and coal from other provinces,” Xiao Ming said.

He had never expected help from others, and the recent court confrontation between Xiao Wenxuan and the various princes only confirmed this.

Zhan Xingchang said, “Your Highness, now is the time to demand money, grain, iron, and coal from King Wei. Otherwise, defending Cangzhou will be extremely difficult.”

“Hahaha, you’re absolutely right...” Xiao Ming suddenly burst into laughter. Zhan Xingchang was indeed cunning.

At this moment, King Wei must be furious. He probably never expected that his smooth-sailing reign would be betrayed by the other princes.

As the first line of defense against the barbarians, King Wei would undoubtedly hope that Xiao Ming could hold Cangzhou. Therefore, asking for some support wouldn’t be unreasonable.

Pang Yukun forced a bitter smile. “Your Highness, the entire court is plotting against you. How can you still laugh? Even if we secure the money and grain, resisting the barbarians will likely cost us dearly.”