

I. Dynasty 133

Chapter 133: Fair Trade

By the lotus pond, the blood that once stained the ground had long been washed away by a heavy rain.

The serene scenery made it impossible to tell that a brutal battle had taken place here not long ago.

The King of Wei smiled as he watched Xiao Ming, waiting for his response.

“Third Uncle, if Cangzhou cannot be held, can your fiefdom truly withstand the onslaught? Or are you still counting on the Kings of Yan and Chu to come to your rescue?” Xiao Ming said coolly.

Now, he no longer needed to spare the King of Wei’s pride. The recent court debate had made it clear to him that the Great Yu Empire was overrun with treacherous ministers, its vassal kings harboring nothing but malice, while his father, the Emperor, clung to his lofty ambitions yet refused to relinquish his extravagant luxuries.

No one could help him—he would have to endure this alone.

The King of Wei looked awkward. “Nephew, you know full well my relationship with the Kings of Yan and Chu. If they don’t take this chance to kick me while I’m down, I’d consider myself lucky. This time, I believe only by joining forces can we overcome this crisis together. Don’t you agree?”

Xiao Ming thought this at least sounded reasonable. Before, the King of Wei's words had been nothing more than an attempt to use him as a pawn.

Preparing for the barbarian invasion had kept Xiao Ming busy to the point of exhaustion. He said, "Third Uncle, since you've come to Qingzhou, you must have a use for me. Let's speak plainly—you're here because you want my Qingzhou army to bear the brunt of defending Cangzhou while you conserve your forces, avoiding deployment unless absolutely necessary. After all, you still need to guard against the Kings of Yan and Chu, am I right?"

The King of Wei froze. He hadn't expected Xiao Ming to be so direct. With a bitter smile, he dropped his usual jovial demeanor. It seemed his nephew could no longer be judged by his past self.

"Since you've put it so bluntly, I won't mince words either. You must have seen through the schemes of those vassal kings, especially the King of Chu. He's likely waiting for the barbarians to sweep through the north, wiping out the other vassal kings for him. As for the Kings of Zhao and the others, they clearly have no desire to provoke the barbarians—hence the seemingly contradictory decisions in court. Behind it all, this is nothing more than a power struggle among the vassal kings." The King of Wei spoke slowly.

He paused, then continued, "The Emperor was forced into a corner this time. Over the years, the imperial family has poured money and grain into resisting the barbarians, only to enrich the likes of the Kings of Zhao, Liang, and Yong. Meanwhile, the southern vassal kings have grown fat off our efforts, growing stronger while the imperial family weakens. If the barbarians invade and destroy the two of us, the balance between the imperial family and the vassal kings will tip irreversibly. At that point, it would only be a matter of time before the throne changes hands."

Xiao Ming nodded. The King of Wei's words struck at the heart of the matter. Clearly, this was a sinister plot by the vassal kings to further weaken the imperial family, paving the way for their own ambitions.

After the first generation of vassal kings from the founding Emperor's era passed, any semblance of loyalty between the imperial family and the vassal kings had vanished.

Their ever-expanding ambitions, in this brutal age, would inevitably lead to endless turmoil.

“Third Uncle sees things clearly. But as it stands, Father has no other choice. Right now, he can only rely on us. If we hold firm, we can thwart their schemes,” Xiao Ming said.

The King of Wei had said all this to redirect Xiao Ming’s resentment toward the other vassal kings, drawing them closer in alliance.

He replied, “So you see, it’s not that I’m unwilling to help you—I must also guard against unforeseen threats.”

Xiao Ming smirked inwardly. Had he been the original Xiao Ming, he might have actually considered this so-called imperial kinship. But the truth was, he had no real ties to the King of Wei—or even Emperor Xiao Wenxuan.

In Chang’an, the only person he cared about was Consort Zhen, his mother in this life, who still treated him with maternal concern.

As for defending Cangzhou, he truly didn’t want the King of Wei’s men involved. The man was more than capable of stabbing him in the back.

He sighed. “Ah, I was too naïve. Third Uncle’s foresight is truly profound. In that case, I’ll lead the Qingzhou army to defend the city with all our might. If we’re overwhelmed, I hope you’ll reinforce us in time.”

The King of Wei was overjoyed but kept his expression neutral. Feigning emotion, he grasped Xiao Ming's hand. "Nephew, if we repel the barbarians, I'll personally commend your merits to the Emperor."

Xiao Ming smiled politely, then shifted the topic. "I must thank Third Uncle for this. While I can defend Cangzhou, you must have seen my memorial to Chang'an. I'll need your help with this matter."

The King of Wei's hand twitched. Last time, Xiao Ming had extorted a hefty sum from him—was he about to demand more now?

But since he needed Xiao Ming to hold off the barbarians, he couldn't refuse. Reluctantly, he said, "I do have some iron and coal. If you need them, I'll have them sent to Qingzhou."

"Then I must thank you again, Third Uncle. With enough iron and coal, Cangzhou might still stand a chance. Otherwise, even if I wish to defend it for you, I fear I won't have the strength," Xiao Ming sighed.

The King of Wei's lips twitched. He had planned to offer a token amount to placate Xiao Ming, but now he didn't dare.

Iron and coal were just a matter of silver, and the King of Wei was known as the wealthiest man in the empire—he could afford it. But if the barbarians breached his lands, his losses would be catastrophic.

Gritting his teeth, he said, "Don't worry, Nephew. Even if I have to buy it, I'll ensure you have enough iron and coal."

“Again, my deepest gratitude, Third Uncle. Now, let’s eat and drink.”

The banquet was ready. Xiao Ming raised his cup, inviting the King of Wei to join him.

As he drank, Xiao Ming glanced at the King of Wei—only to find the King glancing back at him. The two exchanged a smile: one a seasoned fox, the other a young one.

For this banquet, Xiao Ming had the palace kitchen prepare many dishes he had personally taught them. The King of Wei, a known gourmand, savored every bite, praising the flavors endlessly.

By the end of the feast, the King of Wei was thoroughly satisfied.

Having arrived in Qingzhou at noon, the King of Wei couldn’t possibly return today. Xiao Ming instructed Ziwan to arrange accommodations for him in the palace.

Unlike last time, after tasting such delicacies, the King of Wei was inclined to linger in Qingzhou for a few more days and didn’t refuse the arrangement.

With the King of Wei’s promise, the Qingzhou army’s shortage of ore would be temporarily alleviated. But for Xiao Ming, this was far from enough.

In this era, even in the King of Wei's fiefdom, the output of coal and iron was pitifully low. The entire Great Yu Empire's annual production likely couldn't meet Qingzhou's current demands.

After all, in the modern world, a single steel mill's yearly output could surpass the entire ancient world's combined production.