

## I. Dynasty 134

### Chapter 134: Schemes Within Schemes

“Your Highness, next should be the King of Yong, right?”

After the banquet ended, the King of Wei, surrounded by his guards, retired to the palace. At this moment, Zhan Xingchang suddenly spoke to Xiao Ming.

Xiao Ming nodded. This time, being forced to play the fool and defend Cangzhou, he certainly wouldn’t do it without sufficient benefits.

From south to north, east to west, he intended to extort them all. Even if he couldn’t get anything, he would at least send letters. At a time like this, expecting him to spend silver to buy coal and iron was nothing short of treachery.

He could easily use this as grounds to complain to Xiao Wenxuan.

“Right, the King of Yong, the King of Zhao, the King of Yan—none of them should be spared. Send letters to all of them. Whoever refuses to contribute, we’ll submit memorials to Chang’an,” Xiao Ming said.

His memorial had mentioned using silver to purchase supplies, but the premise was that the other vassal kings would send troops in support. Now, with him standing alone, if they weren’t willing to pay for his efforts, who would willingly play the fool?

Zhan Xingchang smirked mischievously. “Your Highness, leave this matter to me. I’ll make sure these vassal kings cough up something.”

Xiao Ming had full confidence in this cunning advisor. “Go ahead. If you succeed, this prince will reward you handsomely.”

Acknowledging the order, Zhan Xingchang and Pang Yukun headed to the Governor’s Office.

Xiao Ming then made his way to Qingzhou City. With the King of Wei here, he would undoubtedly try to gather intelligence about the city. Xiao Ming needed Li San to stay vigilant, especially regarding the artillery molds being crafted in the Armaments Department.

Before submitting his memorial to Chang’an, he had already summoned Chen Qi to study the issue of artillery molds day and night.

Given the current situation, bronze cannons were out of the question—he couldn’t afford them. Even if he gathered all the copper in his fiefdom, he could only produce a few at most.

Bronze cannons weren’t much better. Qingzhou lacked significant reserves of copper, lead, or tin. After much deliberation, he could only opt for cast-iron cannons.

Although cast-iron cannons were less durable than bronze or copper ones and more prone to sudden explosions, given the short timeframe, this was the only way to produce more artillery.

Thanks to blast furnace iron smelting and crucible steelmaking, Qingzhou’s steel output had increased dramatically.

Moreover, the knowledge repository contained ready-made information on cast-iron cannons. He didn't need to go through the trial-and-error phase of early cannon development but could directly apply mature casting techniques to produce them.

Even so, some technical challenges remained insurmountable. The success rate for cast-iron cannons was estimated at only 30-40%. In other words, for every ten cannons produced, only three or four would be usable, as many barrels would crack during cooling due to thermal expansion and contraction.

The internal mold water-cooling technique required to ensure barrel integrity was beyond Qingzhou's current capabilities. They would need steam engines before even considering it.

As Xiao Ming had anticipated, the King of Wei was not one to sit idly by in Qingzhou. His men were busy gathering information about recent "interesting events" in the city.

Naturally, most of what they learned revolved around the noble families, followed by novelties like newspapers and glass.

"Newspapers? How intriguing."

Newspapers were plentiful in the Qi Palace, and the King of Wei easily obtained a copy from Xiao Ming to peruse.

Xiao Ming stayed close to the King of Wei, doing his best to keep this restless uncle in check.

Rather than letting him snoop around, it was better to show him what could be revealed.

“Third Uncle, if you like it, you could try something similar in your fiefdom,” Xiao Ming said, subtly leading the King of Wei into a trap.

The reason he could publish newspapers was due to movable-type printing and advanced papermaking techniques.

“That won’t be necessary. Though it’s similar to the notices at the city gates.”

The King of Wei was no fool. The identical script in the newspapers clearly wasn’t handwritten by scholars. Xiao Ming undoubtedly had a special method, but the King of Wei wasn’t particularly interested. To him, letting commoners know so much was pointless.

After glancing at the newspaper, the King of Wei picked up a piece of glass. “Nephew, the barbarian invasion must have hit your business hard, no?”

With war looming, merchants usually fled from danger, especially since most were connected to various vassal kings.

Yet, far from declining, Qingzhou’s commerce seemed more bustling than ever. Merchants worried about the war speculated that if Qingzhou fell, its goods would become rare treasures, driving prices sky-high.

“Indeed, it has. My Qingzhou Chamber of Commerce has actually been earning more silver lately. We’ve received plenty of goods in lieu of payment—grain, copper, iron, cloth, and the like. That’s precisely why I dare defend Cangzhou.”

The King of Wei seethed inwardly. He didn’t know what evil spirit had possessed this kid, but lately, everything seemed to go his way.

Meanwhile, despite his earlier maneuvering, the King of Wei found himself plagued by misfortune.

“This glass is quite remarkable. I’d like to buy some on my return. How much do you have left?” The King of Wei changed the subject.

Once glass production scaled up and artisans honed their skills, output increased rapidly. Qingzhou now had a substantial stockpile.

“Third Uncle, you can have as much as you want,” Xiao Ming replied.

The King of Wei nodded, enamored with the glass. He planned to use it lavishly to decorate his palace upon returning.

However, he had also heard that glass wasn’t cheap—a single bottle cost at least twenty or thirty taels of silver.

In truth, another reason Xiao Ming stayed close to the King of Wei was to ensure he quickly sent someone back to his fiefdom to arrange the delivery of coal and iron.

Having seen Qingzhou's novelties, the King of Wei was somewhat satisfied. Yet he knew Qingzhou's real secrets lay in the Armaments Department, a place no outsider had ever entered.

"Very well. I'll have someone prepare silver to exchange for glass and gather iron and coal to send to Qingzhou," the King of Wei said slowly.

Summoning a guard, he whispered a few instructions, and the man departed.

Then, the King of Wei turned to Xiao Ming. "Nephew, if the barbarians breach Cangzhou, your prosperous Qingzhou will be lost. Soap, glass, fine wine—all will become extinct. The Great Yu Empire's vibrant world will be destroyed. By then, no matter how much you have, there'll be nowhere to sell it."

"Third Uncle speaks wisely," Xiao Ming said lazily.

This was precisely why he had to defend Cangzhou at all costs. The Great Yu Empire couldn't afford chaos—not yet. If order collapsed, where would he sell his goods? Without silver, how could he develop his fiefdom?

At the very least, he and the King of Wei shared a common goal this time: to temporarily maintain the empire's fragile balance for their own ends.

As they spoke, Ziyuan called from outside the door, “Your Highness!”

“What is it?” Xiao Ming asked.

“There’s a man named Luo Xin at the gate requesting an audience. He claims to be the son of General Luo Quan.”

Pfft! The King of Wei spat out his tea.