

I. Dynasty 321

Chapter 321: Exchange of Interests

The atmosphere in the chamber had become noticeably tense.

After a long pause, Cao Zhengyang finally said,

“Your Highness, our Cao family will fully support you. But this matter is significant, and I must return to consult my father.”

This time, it was Xiao Ming’s turn to be surprised.

He hadn’t expected Cao Zhengyang to agree so readily.

What he had just proposed was merely a rudimentary version of the East India Company—a company driven by capital to plunder resources across the globe.

His earlier words had simply packaged the war against the barbarians as a grand banquet for merchants—a vision that turned military conquest into lucrative opportunity.

To his surprise, Cao Zhengyang became increasingly excited.

He said candidly,

“It seems my father was right to send me. Your Highness once claimed in court that all your inventions originated from a Western missionary. I now believe that you weren’t lying.

To be honest, our Cao family has recently begun trading with the Dutch.”

Xiao Ming’s teacup trembled slightly in his hand.

His expression turned serious.

“You said... Dutch?”

“Yes, the Dutch,” Cao confirmed.

“Your Highness sent Yue Yun on an overseas mission, did you not? Wasn’t it to establish trade routes with Western nations?”

Xiao Ming narrowed his eyes.

“Indeed. That was the purpose.

Then... the Prince of Chu also knows about the Dutch?"

Cao acted surprised, though not convincingly.

"He does. The Prince of Chu has been secretly dealing with the Dutch for some time. Initially, the Dutch mistook him for the emperor himself. But once they learned the truth, the prince offered them most-favored-nation treatment, and agreed to trade exclusively with them. Only then did they relent."

Xiao Ming nodded slowly.

If Cao knew this much about the West, then there was no longer any need for Xiao Ming to hide his own Western connections, especially the fact that he had learned from a Western missionary.

Clearly, the Cao family had already peered beyond the horizon.

Now the conversation had gone far beyond a simple business negotiation.

Xiao Ming's expression darkened as he said,

"The Prince of Chu is bold beyond measure! To have hidden this from the court for so many years—he deserves to be punished!"

Cao smiled faintly,

“Your Highness, every prince has his secrets. Surely, you are no exception.”

His eyes sparkled.

“Of course, as merchants, we care only for profit. That is why we support Your Highness’s northern campaign against the barbarians. We’ve seen how Western merchant companies grew wealthy by following the footsteps of war.”

Xiao Ming didn’t deny it. Since they knew this much, there was no need to hold back.

He shifted the conversation.

“Since the Cao family wishes to do business in my territory, I do have another request.”

He hadn’t expected this brief meeting to escalate so quickly. If what Cao said was true, then while the Western powers were already carving up the world, Xiao Ming hadn’t even yet unified his own northern frontier.

“Please speak, Your Highness.”

“Your family’s grain warehouses are spread throughout Great Yu. But in my territory, we are facing a food shortage. I would like to purchase grain from the Cao family.”

“How much do you need, Your Highness?”

“Six million shi of grain.”

Xiao Ming didn’t hesitate.

Last year, he had extorted several million shi of grain from Prince Wei, and had also traded for more through business exchanges. That stockpile had been enough to sustain the army.

But if he were to distribute it among the common people, it would only last one year.

He had calculated that his entire domain required six million shi per year to function.

He wanted to buy enough for one full year.

He’d figure out the rest later.

Cao Zhengyang's expression changed.

Six million shi—that was no small sum.

“Your Highness must be joking. We are not Prince Wei. Though our Cao family is called the richest in the world, our wealth is nothing compared to a prince. I think... we can provide up to 500,000 shi at most.”

Then, after a moment's thought, Cao added,

“However, the Dutch and Prince Chu have recently developed tensions. Prince Chu is eager to build a naval fleet and urgently needs artillery. Perhaps Your Highness could trade cannons to him. Our Cao family would be happy to act as intermediary in the deal.”

Xiao Ming stared at him.

This sudden and heavy investment in him from the Cao family was entirely unexpected.

And now, they were even offering to mediate with Prince Chu?

He became suspicious.

Was the Cao family in some kind of crisis? A life-or-death situation, even?

Otherwise, why would they take such a risk in reaching out to him?

Could it really be—as he suspected—that Prince Chu was preparing to slaughter the “fat pig” that was the Cao family, to fill his own coffers?

If so, then the Cao family must have already suffered losses.

Even if they survived, they’d no longer be considered the richest house.

But even a declining camel is still bigger than a horse, and having them join his camp meant a huge boost in resources.

Also, by leveraging this incident, Xiao Ming could report Prince Chu’s dealings with the Dutch, accusing him of betraying the throne.

Thinking this through, Xiao Ming nodded,

“Then I’ll be counting on you.”

“Your Highness is too kind. It is the honor of the Cao family to serve you,” Cao Zhengyang said with a relieved smile.

The gamble had paid off.

This visit to Prince Qi had been a high-risk move by the Cao family. But as they saw it—to go forward was death, to retreat was also death. This was a desperate bid for survival.

Having concluded the meeting, Xiao Ming turned to Li Kaiyuan and said,

“Kaiyuan, make sure they’re well taken care of. We mustn’t be rude.”

Li Kaiyuan nodded. As someone of noble standing, it was only fitting for him to handle the hospitality.

With the two guests gone, Xiao Ming fell deep into thought.

This visit from the Cao family had caught him off guard.

Though he had always believed they would eventually come to him, he hadn’t expected it to happen under these conditions.

Thinking back to the moment when Cao Zhengyang had “acted surprised” upon revealing Prince Chu’s secret dealings with the Dutch, Xiao Ming grew even more convinced:

The Cao family and Prince Chu had indeed fallen out.

And their timing?

It all boiled down to the fact that Yue Yun’s fleet had given them a card to play in the negotiation.

Xiao Ming chuckled coldly. He needed capital, yes. But he also didn’t trust it. Capital could help him conquer lands, but it could also destroy him if mishandled.

Therefore, Xiao Ming had always treated commerce with caution. first exploiting its strengths and also guarding against its cutthroat nature

Still, if the Cao family really backed his expedition against the barbarians, that would prove they understood long-term strategy.

And that made them worth watching.

Deep in thought, Xiao Ming headed back to the palace.

Halfway there, he ran into Pang Yukun.

“Your Highness, I was just heading to see you,” Pang said, visibly anxious.

“What is it?”

“I just received two urgent letters from a friend in Jizhou. One of them states that unrest has already broken out in Prince Yong’s territory. He’s dispatching troops to suppress the riots and has ordered a news blackout. This... is not a good sign.”

Xiao Ming’s brows furrowed.

His worst fears were slowly coming true.