

I. Dynasty 227

Chapter 227: The Raid

Outside Dengzhou City, Yang Chengye stood gazing at the vast coastline, his brow furrowed.

The endless sea and the salty ocean breeze were the challenges he had faced since becoming the Governor of Dengzhou.

With the Salt Transport Office headquartered in Dengzhou, his responsibilities were even heavier. Not only did he have to verify and report monthly salt production figures to Qingzhou, but he also had to deal with the relentless salt smugglers infiltrating the region.

Among the six prefectures, Dengzhou had the smallest population—only about 100,000 households. Most of these were scattered across counties outside the city, with Dengzhou itself housing just 50,000 households, totaling around 100,000 people.

Many of these residents made their living by fishing, as the sea stretched endlessly beyond Dengzhou's walls.

But in recent years, Japanese pirates had become increasingly active along the coast, killing many fishermen and forcing others to abandon their trade.

Yet, fishermen accustomed to life on the sea had little interest in farming. As a result, the land redistribution policy had been poorly implemented in Dengzhou—especially in a coastal village called Yutai.

Nestled by the sea, the village had no arable land nearby. The allocated farmland was too far away, so the villagers refused to relocate, continuing to risk fishing in nearby waters. Some even turned to smuggling salt—a capital offense in the Great Yu Empire.

The rise of smugglers meant fewer official salt sales, severely impacting the Salt Transport Office's revenue—something Yang Chengye could not allow.

A native of Dengzhou, Yang had originally served as Deputy Governor. But after the local aristocratic families were purged, he—a low-born official with no ties to the elites—was promoted to Governor.

Overnight, his fortunes had soared, and he was deeply grateful to the Prince of Qi. Determined to prove himself, he threw himself into his duties, leaving no room for negligence.

Thus, the salt smugglers had to be dealt with—for the Prince's trust.

But after six months of cat-and-mouse, he still hadn't captured the ringleader, a man named Yue Yun.

After three days of deliberation, Yang finally resolved to force the smugglers out.

"Governor, we truly don't know Yue Yun. Please, let us go!"

The village of Yutai was now surrounded by hundreds of Dengzhou soldiers. All three hundred villagers had been rounded up.

“Nonsense! The records clearly state Yue Yun is from Yutai. How can you claim ignorance?” Yang Chengye brandished a household register.

He continued coldly, “Word came from Qingzhou that His Highness will arrive in Dengzhou soon—likely within days. I’ve been lenient until now, but your continued defiance leaves me no choice. You will all be taken in for questioning!”

With a wave of his hand, the soldiers moved to detain the villagers.

Just then, a Dengzhou official galloped over urgently. “Governor Yang, His Highness has arrived!”

“What? So soon?” Yang’s frown deepened.

“Yes. His Highness and Chief Pang traveled by horse—naturally, they were faster. But with the smugglers still at large, how do we explain this?” The official looked uneasy.

Yang sighed. “What else can we do? Take the villagers in for questioning. I’ll report the truth as it is.”

With that, he turned his horse toward Dengzhou City.

Meanwhile, in the city's government office, Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun sat drinking tea. Lüluo stood beside Xiao Ming, her expression a mix of anticipation and unease.

"Governor Yang has some nerve—knowing Your Highness was coming, yet disappearing like this," Pang Yukun grumbled.

Xiao Ming chuckled. "No matter. Governance comes first. This year, Dengzhou's tax revenue jumped from last place to third among the six prefectures. Promoting Yang was clearly the right move."

"Your Highness, Yang is capable, but the improved revenue is also due to the Salt Transport Office. Without it, Dengzhou would still be at the bottom."

"True. But Dengzhou has immense potential. With the shipyard here, I plan to establish a naval base and a major port. In a few years, Dengzhou will thrive."

On their way, Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun had made stops to observe local conditions.

Overall, Dengzhou's people were poorer than those in other prefectures. The city itself was dilapidated—its walls crumbling, its streets sparsely populated, and its markets nearly deserted. The people's clothing was ragged.

"Governor Yang is fortunate indeed. With Your Highness's support, Dengzhou will surely rise to prominence," Pang Yukun said.

As they spoke, commotion erupted outside. Yang Chengye and his official hurried in.

“Your Highness, this official has failed you!” Yang dropped to his knees.

Xiao Ming was baffled. “Governor Yang, what’s the matter?”

Yang said guiltily, “Your Highness, I still haven’t captured the leader of the salt smugglers. I’ve disgraced you and Chief Pang.”

Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun exchanged glances. Pang Yukun said, “Governor Yang, we didn’t come here about the smugglers. There’s another matter.”

“Not the smugglers?”

Yang’s tension eased. He had assumed Xiao Ming’s visit was about the smuggling crisis, which was why he had resorted to rounding up Yutai’s villagers.

Xiao Ming nodded. “Exactly. We’re here to recruit skilled sailors for my fleet. As a local, your assistance would be invaluable.”

“Ah...” Yang looked stunned. “Your Highness, if we’re talking about the best swimmers, the people of Yutai are unmatched. But... I’ve just arrested the entire village for harboring smugglers. They’re being taken to prison now.”

“What?!” Pang Yukun’s face darkened. “Yang Chengye, how could you act so recklessly? Arresting an entire village without evidence—what will Dengzhou’s people think of the government? Of His Highness?!”