

I. Dynasty 228

Chapter 228: A Group Uprising

Pang Yukun's anger made the atmosphere in the Dengzhou government office tense.

Yang Chengye said, "I—I acted out of urgency, and I also have proof that these commoners were hiding salt smugglers."

Hearing this, Xiao Ming replied, "The law cannot punish everyone. If we handle this recklessly, it may cause civil unrest, and by then..."

Before he could finish, a constable suddenly ran in in a panic and shouted, "Governor! Bad news! A large crowd has gathered in front of Dengzhou Prison. They're trying to break in and demand the release of prisoners!"

"What?!" Yang Chengye was shocked. He looked at Xiao Ming—his warning had come true.

Pang Yukun pointed at Yang Chengye angrily and said, "You! You've caused a huge mess."

Frowning, Xiao Ming stood up and said, "Stop kneeling. Let's go see what's going on."

Having lived in this world for over a year, Xiao Ming had gained some understanding of the times. The people were generally obedient, but only if they had a way to survive and their interests weren't harmed.

If either of those conditions were broken, the government would quickly learn just how fierce the commoners could be. Although Xiao Ming had passed many new policies recently, due to poor local enforcement, there were still incidents where people gathered to protest.

When the group arrived at the prison, they saw over a thousand people gathered, some pushing and shoving the constables, seemingly ready to break in and rescue the prisoners.

Xiao Ming was accompanied by 500 cavalymen, who immediately charged forward on horseback.

When the people heard the thunder of hooves and saw the cavalry in silver armor, they instinctively backed up a few steps and quieted down. Their eyes turned to Xiao Ming and the others on horseback.

Yang Chengye was the first to dismount. He shouted to the crowd blocking the prison gate, "Who dares to incite such chaos at Dengzhou Prison? Who sent you? Are you trying to rebel?"

Yang Chengye was now certain—someone had secretly paid these villagers from Yutai Village to stir up trouble and pressure the government.

"You officials are arresting people without reason and leaving us no way to live. Is there no justice in this world?" a villager shouted from the crowd.

After that shout, the crowd fell into silence again. Most people kept looking at the intimidating cavalry.

Xiao Ming stepped forward and said, “I am Prince Xiao Ming of Qi. Who called you all here? If you’re truly brave, step forward! In the Battle of Cangzhou, many Dengzhou soldiers fought bravely and fearlessly. They didn’t hide like cowards!”

From their eyes, Xiao Ming could tell most of the people here were paid to come—they looked more afraid than angry.

If they were truly involved, why would they look so nervous?

“Prince of Qi? He’s the Prince of Qi?”

“That’s right. The soldiers of the Qingzhou Army wear that armor.”

“I didn’t expect the prince to be in Dengzhou...”

The crowd began to murmur. Then, a disturbance rippled through the people, and about ten young men stepped out.

The one leading them looked about twenty, with dark skin from years of exposure to the sea breeze.

“I’m Yue Yun. Your Highness, does this make me a brave man now?” Yue Yun said loudly.

Yang Chengye angrily shouted, “You bold criminal! How dare you call yourself a brave man before the prince? Arrest them all at once!”

Immediately, the ten or so young men behind Yue Yun drew their blades and stood protectively around him.

“Hold on!” Xiao Ming shouted. He walked up to Yue Yun and asked, “So, you’re one of Dengzhou’s salt smugglers?”

“Your Highness, there are many salt smugglers. I’m just one of them.”

“Why smuggle salt?”

“We can’t fish in the sea anymore, so smuggling salt is the only way to survive. Besides, sea salt is a natural resource. Everyone should be able to use it. Why can only the government sell it, and not us commoners?” Yue Yun answered firmly.

“If that’s the case, let me ask you—who paid for the food supplies, cannons, and ammunition used in the Battle of Cangzhou? How much silver did you, Yue Yun, contribute?” Xiao Ming smiled and said. “The Salt Transport Office contributes 10,000 taels of silver to the state treasury every month. If everyone thought like you, where would the army’s supplies come from? Who would defend against the barbarians? And don’t tell me you gave that salt away for free.”

Xiao Ming had used a bit of reverse psychology earlier and didn't expect Yue Yun to really come forward. That showed Yue Yun was passionate and maybe worth saving.

"This..." Yue Yun was momentarily speechless. After a pause, he angrily said, "You're right about the Battle of Cangzhou and protecting the six prefecture. But has Your Highness considered the people of Dengzhou? We've fished for generations, but now the pirates have taken everything from us. If we don't sell salt, how do we survive?"

"Nonsense! Didn't the government assign you farmland? Instead of farming, you blame His Highness!" Yang Chengye shouted, always frustrated by the salt smugglers and eager to punish them.

Yue Yun replied, "Our hands are made for rowing boats and casting nets, not for farming. How are we supposed to grow crops? And the farmland is so far from our village—how are we supposed to get there?"

Yang Chengye wanted to scold him more, but Xiao Ming stopped him.

"You say I don't care about the lives of Dengzhou's people? Fine. I'll give you a chance. Let's take back your fishing grounds. Are you willing?" Xiao Ming said.

"Take back the fishing grounds?" Yue Yun laughed bitterly. "Your Highness, you probably haven't seen these pirates. Their ships are bigger and better armed. Just the few of us—how can we drive them out?"

"What if I give you large ships, gather a thousand young men from Dengzhou fishing villages, and arm you all?" Xiao Ming asked.

Yue Yun looked at Xiao Ming with suspicion. “Is Your Highness serious?”

“I am!” Xiao Ming replied firmly.

“You’re not going to punish us?”

“If you’re willing to join my navy, I’ll pardon your crimes,” Xiao Ming said.

Laws must be flexible, and since Xiao Ming only mentioned the Cangzhou battle and Yue Yun dared to show himself, it showed he wasn’t a treacherous person.

He just wanted to save his fellow villagers—proof of loyalty and righteousness.

Right now, Xiao Ming needed people. As a prince, he needed to be open-minded and not stuck on petty details.

“From now on, our lives belong to Your Highness?”

Smuggling salt was a crime punishable by death, but Xiao Ming chose to show mercy.

Yue Yun had heard of the prince's noble character and, now seeing it for himself, felt completely loyal in his heart.