

I. Dynasty 229

Chapter 229: Traces of the Pirates

The gathered villagers gradually dispersed as the people of Yutai Village were released from the prison one by one.

Upon seeing Yue Yun, an elderly woman suddenly knelt before Yang Chengye and said, "Governor, selling smuggled salt has nothing to do with Yue Yun. It was me who forced him into it. The villagers are all old now—the young ones either joined the army or were killed at sea. Those of us left behind can't farm anymore. We only sold salt to survive."

"Mother, what are you doing? His Highness has already pardoned us," Yue Yun said, embarrassed.

"What?!" The old woman looked at the three men outside—two strangers and Yang Chengye, who wore a bitter smile.

Seeing her gaze, Yang sighed. "Yue Yun is right. This is His Highness, the Prince of Qi. If you want to thank anyone, thank him."

The old woman turned to Xiao Ming, trembling with emotion, and bowed deeply.

Xiao Ming quickly helped her up. "No need for such formalities. If your lives are difficult, that is my failure. I came to Dengzhou to deal with the pirate problem."

The old woman's eyes widened. "Your Highness... is this true?"

Xiao Ming nodded.

Pang Yukun interjected, "Your Highness, this isn't the place to talk. Let's return to the government office. Dengzhou's situation is no simpler than Cangzhou's."

Yang Chengye snapped back to attention. "Your Highness, Chief Pang is right. Pirates often lurk in Dengzhou. We should discuss this inside."

After dismissing the other villagers, Xiao Ming took Yue Yun and the old woman to the government office.

Once seated, Xiao Ming asked, "As locals, tell me about the situation along Dengzhou's coast."

"I'll explain," Yue Yun said eagerly. Not only had his crimes been pardoned, but he was also being recruited into the military. He was desperate to prove himself. "When my grandfather fished these waters, pirates weren't this rampant. But by my father's time, they infested the seas. Now, if we encounter them at sea, we're either killed or enslaved."

"Your Highness, the timeline matches. The Great Yu envoy's murder in Korea happened about twenty years ago," Pang Yukun noted.

Xiao Ming nodded. "What do these pirates look like? What kind of ships do they use?"

“They wear wooden sandals, tie their hair up, and shave their foreheads. Their clothes are nothing like ours,” Yue Yun said.

Xiao Ming sketched a kimono on paper. “Like this?”

“Yes! Exactly!” Yue Yun pointed. “As for their ships, we call them atakebune—floating houses.”

“Atakebune?”

Xiao Ming recognized the term from the Technology Crystal’s records. The description matched.

Yang Chengye added, “Your Highness, these pirates don’t just attack at sea—they raid coastal towns too. We’ve spotted them in Dengzhou several times, though in small numbers. The richer southern regions suffer far worse.”

“Only Dengzhou’s poverty has spared us,” Yue Yun muttered bitterly.

The three shared more about maritime conditions, and Xiao Ming asked about local fish species. Due to limited fishing methods, villagers only caught small coastal fish like pollock. Abalone was rare, as harvesting it required diving.

In modern times, this region was famous for abalone—a luxury due to transport difficulties. Fishing had once sustained the villagers, but pirate activity had made it too dangerous.

Xiao Ming faced many challenges. With the northern barbarians threatening, he couldn't focus solely on naval development. The galleons would serve dual purposes: overseas trade for crops like potatoes and coastal defense against pirates.

The saying “Ten years to build an army, a hundred for a navy” wasn't a joke. Even Yue Yun's fishermen rarely ventured far from shore—and neither did the pirates. Without landmarks, they'd be lost at sea forever.

Before long-range voyages, Xiao Ming would have to teach navigation—a complex science.

After grasping Dengzhou's situation, Xiao Ming told Yue Yun, “You know the fishing villages better than Governor Yang. Assist him in recruiting sailors.”

“Yes, Your Highness. But what if they refuse? Many are terrified of pirates,” Yue Yun said.

Xiao Ming smiled. “No matter. I won't force anyone. But bring them to Qingzhou first. If they still leave after seeing our warships, so be it.”

Yue Yun brightened. “That's fair!”

As they finalized recruitment plans, Xiao Ming remembered Lülao. He turned to her. “By the way, which village are you from?”

When he looked back, Lülao’s eyes were glistening with tears.

“Your Highness... I’m from Yutai Village.” She faced the old woman. “Auntie, do you remember me? I’m Meng Haiqiu.”

The old woman stared blankly. “What?”

Lülao stepped forward. “Auntie, I’m Meng Haiqiu—Meng Kuo’s daughter.”

Yue Yun’s jaw dropped. “You’re Haiqiu?”

Lülao nodded. “Brother Yun, it’s me.”

The old woman trembled. “Truly... Haiqiu?”

“Yes, Auntie. Brother Yun... where’s my brother?”

“Dead!” Yue Yun’s face darkened.

The old woman glared at him before turning back to Lülao, her voice breaking. “Haiqiu, your brother... he...”

She couldn’t finish.

Yue Yun spat, “Might as well be dead. He joined the pirates—now he’s one of their leaders. A traitor. Consider him gone.”