

I. Dynasty 230

Chapter 230: The Core Team

“How is that possible? My brother hated the pirates more than anyone! How could he join them? You’re lying!”

Lüluo shouted, her voice trembling.

Seeing her distress, Yue Yun softened his tone. He suddenly tore open his shirt, revealing a long scar stretching from his chest to his abdomen.

“Your brother gave me this wound—with a Japanese sword. Would I lie to you about that?”

“No...” Lüluo shook her head, tears streaming down her face.

The old woman sighed. “Haiqiu, after you were sold, your brother changed. None of us expected he’d end up joining the pirates. Now, the whole village curses his name.”

Lüluo’s grief deepened. With a sob, she turned and ran out.

Yue Yun stood to chase after her but hesitated and sat back down. After all, Lüluo was now the Prince’s personal maid.

Xiao Ming had hoped to reunite Lüluo with her family, but this outcome was far from what he’d expected. He sighed. “Yue Yun, visit the nearby fishing villages and recruit as many skilled young men as possible.”

“Yes, Your Highness!” Yue Yun stood eagerly, then helped his mother out of the government office.

Once they were gone, Yang Chengye spoke up. “Your Highness, was handling Yue Yun this way really appropriate? Won’t other salt smugglers grow bolder now?”

He had remained silent earlier but couldn’t hold back any longer.

“Salt smugglers should be judged by intent. Those who traffic for profit must be punished harshly, but for villagers like Yue Yun—forced into it to survive—we must show mercy. Besides, I need capable men now, and you said yourself Yue Yun has influence among the fishing communities.”

Pang Yukun nodded. “Exactly. And when challenged with duty to the kingdom, he stepped forward immediately. That proves he values justice over selfish gain.”

Yang Chengye frowned but finally relented.

Xiao Ming’s expression then turned cold. “Yang Chengye, do you admit your wrongdoing?”

“This official admits his fault!”

Yang knew Xiao Ming was condemning his rash arrest of an entire village to pressure Yue Yun—a move that could have sparked public outrage.

While some villagers had been bribed by Yue Yun, others genuinely resented the government's heavy-handedness.

"Since you admit it, your penalty is six months' suspended pay," Xiao Ming declared. "If not for the urgent need for talent, I would have dismissed you."

Yang Chengye accepted the punishment with a strained smile.

After reprimanding Yang, Xiao Ming continued, "Where is the Dengzhou shipyard? Take us there."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Lüluo was still weeping outside. Xiao Ming decided to let her grieve in private, instructing her to wait at the temporary residence.

The three men left Dengzhou, following the coastline east for twenty li before reaching the shipyard.

The sprawling facility occupied a wide bay, with over a thousand workers toiling on the beach.

“Your Highness, this site is only five li from Dengzhou’s military camp. In case of danger, reinforcements can arrive swiftly. Additionally, five hundred soldiers are stationed here to guard the shipyard,” Yang Chengye explained.

“How many troops does Dengzhou currently have?” Xiao Ming asked Pang Yukun.

“Recruitment began last year. We now have about three thousand—the fewest among the six prefectures. And equipment like armor and weapons is severely lacking,” Pang Yukun replied.

“That’s not enough. Dengzhou will become a strategic stronghold second only to Qingzhou. We need at least twenty thousand soldiers here,” Xiao Ming said.

Yang Chengye hesitated. “Your Highness, Dengzhou’s population is barely a hundred thousand. Three thousand troops already strain our resources. More conscription would cripple development.”

“Then recruit from other prefectures. The shipyard’s security cannot be compromised,” Xiao Ming insisted.

Pang Yukun nodded.

While pirates weren’t as dire a threat as the northern barbarians, they were still a major headache. Without sufficient troops, repelling a large-scale raid would be impossible.

After inspecting the shore, the three toured the shipyard. As Zhang Liang had reported, it was ready for production.

Returning to the residence, Xiao Ming found Lülao with red-rimmed eyes.

“Don’t grieve too much. Perhaps your brother had no choice,” he offered.

Lülao’s voice was icy. “Your Highness, no excuse justifies becoming a pirate. Our parents died by their hands—how could he serve their killers? If you ever capture him, let me execute him myself.”

Xiao Ming studied her. The timid girl seemed hardened by the ordeal. “Very well. If that day comes, he’s yours.”

Lülao forced a faint smile.

Xiao Ming sighed. Had he known this would happen, he wouldn’t have brought her.

After three days in Dengzhou, Yang Chengye and Yue Yun had scoured nearby villages, recruiting nine hundred men—every willing youth from the fishing communities.

How many would stay depended on their reaction to the galleons.

With the recruits in tow, Xiao Ming returned to Qingzhou.

At the shipyard, they saw the galleons resting on the riverbank.

“Your Highness, these will be our warships?” Yue Yun’s eyes shone. They were the largest vessels he’d ever seen.

“Correct. Three are ready, with more to be built in Dengzhou. Would you like to command this fleet?” Xiao Ming asked.

“Me?” Yue Yun’s excitement was palpable.

Xiao Ming nodded. A man bold enough to smuggle salt had the audacity he needed for long voyages.

“Yes!” Yue Yun’s gaze sparkled, already envisioning the glory of commanding such a mighty fleet.

After letting the recruits explore the ships, Xiao Ming addressed them. “Those who wish to stay, board the vessels. Those who don’t may leave with travel funds.”

A heavy silence followed. Then, one by one, two hundred men disembarked.

Yue Yun glared. “Cowards! Too scared to protect your own families? I spit on you!”

Xiao Ming stopped him. “Enough. Participation was always voluntary.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Yue Yun grumbled.

Seven hundred men remained—enough to crew the three galleons. More would surely join once these ships sailed to Dengzhou and began hunting pirates.

As Xiao Ming pondered, Pang Yukun called from below. “Your Highness, an envoy from Prince Zhao has arrived.”