

I. Dynasty 266

Chapter 266: Refugees

“Qingzhou Daily! Qingzhou Daily! Qingzhou Textile Workshop hiring female workers—one tael of silver a month!”

As the sun rose and the winter cold lingered, the streets and alleys of Qingzhou were already filled with the cries of newsboys. Since newspapers had gradually gained popularity in Qingzhou, even some scholars with spare money had developed a habit of reading them. With prices dropping lower and lower, buying a paper had become no big deal. Some families even bought newspapers for their school-aged children to read aloud at home.

“One tael of silver a month for working at the textile workshop? Did I hear that right?” an old man in a tattered cotton jacket muttered to himself.

Quickly, he rushed over to the newsboy and asked, “Kid, is what you said true?”

The newsboy, cheeks red from the cold, gave a clever glance and replied, “Buy a paper and I’ll tell you.”

“What? Just for asking a question?” The old man gripped his three copper coins tightly—his only money for rice.

With the newspaper business booming, the number of newsboys had increased too, and competition was fierce. No one wanted to waste words for free. Enduring the cold, the boy refused to elaborate, saying, “It’s printed in the paper. If I told you everything, how would I sell any? So, old man, do you want it or not? If not, I’m leaving.”

“Wait, wait! I’ll buy it. How much?” asked the old man.

“Three coins,” the boy replied.

“Three?” The old man’s rough, callused hand clenched the coins even harder.

“It’s not much—just enough for two ounces of rice, or a single bun,” the newsboy said brightly, then glanced at the man and asked, “Old man, judging by your accent, you’re not from around here, are you?”

The man’s expression turned guarded. Indeed, he was not from Qingzhou, but a refugee from Huazhou. His family’s land had been seized by local nobles, and when one of them tried to force his daughter to become a concubine, his son killed the man in a fit of rage. The local authorities had issued a warrant for their arrest.

With no other option, the old man fled with his family. He had heard that Qingzhou had no oppressive nobles, so they traveled over 400 li (about 200 kilometers) to get there. Now, with their savings depleted, he only had three copper coins left—and everyone was relying on that to buy food.

Clutching the coins, he hesitated for a moment before suddenly grabbing the newspaper from the boy’s hand and bolting.

The nine-year-old newsboy was stunned at first but quickly began to scream, “Thief! He stole my newspaper! Stop that old man!”

Clever and quick-witted, like most Qingzhou newsboys, he didn't let it go and took off in hot pursuit. Onlookers turned to see the commotion. Upon hearing the newsboy shout, many Qingzhou citizens joined the chase.

The old man ran desperately, gripping the newspaper tightly. His son had once been a houseboy for a wealthy family, so he could read. This paper might help them find work—especially with a job offering one tael a month. Where else could they find such an opportunity?

Just as he turned to look behind him, a horse suddenly appeared in front of him. He crashed head-on into it and fell with a cry.

The rider, dressed in a padded coat, looked annoyed—it was none other than Xiao Ming, who had been on his way to the Military Works Bureau to oversee the cannon shipment to Chang'an. He never expected someone to run straight into his horse.

Guards Zhao Long and Zhao Hu jumped down with their blades drawn.

The old man looked up and saw the gleaming sword, immediately collapsing in fear. It's over, he thought.

The newsboy arrived shortly after and, upon seeing Xiao Ming, immediately bowed, "This commoner greets Your Highness."

Xiao Ming frowned. Seeing a crowd chasing one old man over a newspaper seemed odd. "What's going on?" he asked.

“He stole my paper, Your Highness,” the newsboy said, his voice trembling slightly.

Xiao Ming laughed—this was the first time he’d heard of someone stealing a newspaper in Qingzhou. He turned to Zhao Long. “Have the local officials handle it.”

He was about to leave when the old man suddenly dropped to his knees and cried, “Please, kind sir, have mercy! I didn’t mean to steal. My family is starving. I heard the textile workshop is hiring, and I hoped my granddaughter could apply. I didn’t want to spend the rice money, so I... I’m sorry, sir!”

Hearing this, Xiao Ming pulled back on his reins. “But Qingzhou had a good harvest this year. Why is your family starving?”

Then, noticing the man’s accent, he asked, “You’re not from Qingzhou, are you? Where’s your household registration?”

The old man trembled, terrified. Zhao Long barked, “Answer honestly!”

The man stammered, “I... I’m from Huazhou.”

“Huazhou?” Xiao Ming frowned. That was near modern-day Zhengzhou. “Why are you here?”

Zhao Long suddenly remembered something. “Your Highness, I recall the local authorities recently received a warrant from Huazhou to arrest a family of five. They even sent wanted posters.”

The old man’s face turned ashen. “So even in Qingzhou, I can’t escape...”

Xiao Ming ignored Zhao Long and calmly asked, “Why are you wanted?”

With no more hope of escape, the old man told his story. When he finished, Zhao Long looked ashamed. “So that’s how it was. Then the arrest warrant is outrageous.”

Xiao Ming nodded. “Take him to Zhan Xingchang at the yamen. If his story checks out, release him. If he’s innocent, arrange proper shelter.”

Zhao Long saluted.

Turning back, Xiao Ming told the old man, “If what you said is true, then that arrest warrant is worthless here. Don’t worry.”

The old man beamed with joy. “Thank you, kind sir, thank you!”

The newsboy, now understanding the situation, looked sympathetic. "Old man, why didn't you say so earlier? I would've given you the paper for free. Don't worry, Qingzhou accepts refugees. If you live here for two years, you can get local household registration. With that, you'll be eligible for land."

The old man stared in disbelief. "Is... is that true?"