

I. Dynasty 61

Chapter 61: Selection

“What is your name?”

Three hundred young and strong slaves stood facing him. At this moment, Xiao Ming asked a somewhat thin and frail-looking boy standing in the middle.

Though the boy was lean, he was the most spirited among them. He was about 1.7 meters tall, with large eyes that kept darting around, taking in his surroundings. He looked very clever.

“Reporting to my master, my name is Lu Tong,” the boy replied.

At this, Zhao Long barked, “The person before you is the Seventh Prince of the Great Yu Empire, His Highness the Prince of Qi. You should address him as ‘Your Highness.’”

The term “master” was how slaves addressed the barbarians on the grasslands. To Zhao Long, this was a sign of disrespect toward Xiao Ming.

Lu Tong’s face showed surprise. Having been bought from the grasslands, they had traveled by sea directly to this place and had no idea where they were. Now, he exclaimed with joy, “Your Highness, this lowly slave is from Cangzhou. Three years ago, when the barbarians breached Cangzhou City, I was captured by them.”

At the same time, most of the slaves began to stir. They spoke up one after another, "Is this Qingzhou? We've returned." "We're finally home." "This is wonderful."

Zhao Long's face turned red. The fall of Cangzhou City was a humiliation that the soldiers of Qingzhou could never forget. To think that these slaves before him were actually the people of the fiefdom who had been captured by the barbarians three years ago filled him with shame.

Xiao Ming also felt a flush of embarrassment. Although this was the fault of his predecessor, he now had to bear the responsibility.

Thinking quickly, he said, "After enduring countless hardships, I have finally brought my people back. Zhao Long, Zhao Hu, remove their shackles at once."

Lu Tong's eyes reddened, and tears streamed down his face. He fell to his knees, pressing his face to the ground, and clutching a handful of yellow soil, he wailed, "Father, Mother, I've returned. I've finally returned."

The other slaves also began to weep. The sight of returning home was already enough to stir emotions, let alone after three years of enslavement and suffering.

Chen Wenlong, who was usually silent and never disobeyed Xiao Ming's orders, also spoke with a look of shame, "Your Highness, these are all people of Qingzhou. I beg Your Highness to restore their household registrations and free them from their status as slaves."

"Of course," Xiao Ming said to Lu Tong. "Rise. Since you are people of Qingzhou and were once free, from this day forward, I restore your freedom. I will provide you with silver and household registrations. You may each return to your hometowns."

After he finished speaking, none of the slaves moved. They looked at each other, their faces filled with confusion.

Lu Tong stood up and said, "Your Highness, my parents were killed by barbarian soldiers while helping me escape the grasslands. Now, I have no home to return to. Most of them are like me. When the barbarians raided Cangzhou, they slaughtered countless people. Few of us can find all our family members."

Xiao Ming fell silent for a long moment. A poor and weak nation only brings suffering to its people. Countless examples in history had proven this.

Thinking of this, he bowed and said, "Although the fall of Cangzhou three years ago was due to the defending general abandoning the city, I also bear an inescapable responsibility. Here, I offer my apologies to all of you."

"Your Highness, this..." Lu Tong and the others were stunned and quickly knelt down. "How can we lowly slaves accept such a gesture from Your Highness?"

Zhao Long and Zhao Hu exchanged a glance, a strange look flashing in their eyes as they watched Xiao Ming.

Xiao Ming helped Lu Tong up and said, "The barbarians are strong and well-equipped, while Qingzhou is poor and weak. The fall of Cangzhou was the fault of the defending general, but the root cause is that our soldiers are not strong enough, and our horses are not sturdy enough. I have not forgotten the shame of three years ago. Now, I am working tirelessly to revitalize the fiefdom and ensure the safety of the people in the future. At this moment, I am in need of capable individuals. Since you have nowhere to go, would you be willing to follow me and work toward a greater cause?"

Lu Tong and the others, having no place to go and filled with the fervor of youth, were stirred by Xiao Ming's impassioned words. Lu Tong said, "If Your Highness does not reject me, I am willing to serve you faithfully."

Xiao Ming looked at the others. Some, like Lu Tong, were filled with enthusiasm, while others seemed hesitant and worried.

He realized that not everyone was like Lu Tong, who had lost both parents and had no one to rely on. He said, "Those who wish to stay with Lu Tong are welcome. If anyone wishes to return home, I will not force them to stay and will provide silver for their journey."

"Thank you, Your Highness," several voices rang out.

Xiao Ming then said to Chen Wenlong, "Go and ask the other slaves. If they are people of Qingzhou, restore their freedom. Provide them with travel expenses if needed. If they wish to stay and work in the workshops, pay them as craftsmen."

"Yes," Chen Wenlong nodded and headed into the workshop. At the same time, those who wanted to return home followed Chen Wenlong.

Out of the three hundred people, about a third left, leaving around two hundred behind. They all looked at Xiao Ming, waiting for his orders.

Now that they had no home to return to, and Xiao Ming, a prince, was willing to take them in, this was an incredible stroke of luck. It was far better than suffering on the grasslands, where they could be killed at any moment.

Looking at the remaining two hundred people, Xiao Ming said, "Since you have chosen to stay, from now on, you are my people. I selected you to teach you some special skills. Starting today, you will return to Qingzhou with me and live in the courtyard next to the Prince of Qi's residence. From tomorrow, I will begin instructing you in these skills."

"Yes, Your Highness," Lu Tong and the others bowed and replied.

Xiao Ming nodded and had Zhao Long and Zhao Hu take them back. He wasn't worried about whether they would be willing to become craftsmen.

Compared to their status as slaves, this was already a significant improvement. Moreover, as the status of craftsmen in Qingzhou rose in the future, he believed these young men would come to take pride in their new roles.

To cultivate a group of skilled technicians, Xiao Ming had invested heavily. He had specifically purchased the neighboring courtyard for secrecy and safety.

Once connected, this courtyard and the prince's residence would be linked by a small alley, separated only by a gate.

After Zhao Long and Zhao Hu escorted Lu Tong and the others to the courtyard, they immediately went to the military headquarters. Soon, twenty fully armed elite guards were added to the prince's residence.

Although these two hundred people were arranged by Xiao Ming, Zhao Long and Zhao Hu increased security for his safety. If these two hundred were to rebel, it would pose a significant threat to the prince's residence. This was just a precaution.

Xiao Ming did not object to this. He didn't believe that a few words from him would be enough to completely subdue these young men.

Their true character would have to be observed over time. After all, in his position, he couldn't afford to be too trusting. If they proved to be loyal and hardworking, that would be ideal.

But if they were to betray him or harm the interests of Qingzhou, he would not hesitate to act. As a member of the royal family, he always remembered that he could not afford to be overly merciful.

For such mercy would not only endanger himself but also the millions of people in his fiefdom.