

## I. Dynasty 29

### Chapter 29: The Distiller

“Enslavement?”

Zhang Liang looked up at this moment, his expression one of disbelief.

The crime of banditry alone was enough to warrant execution, let alone the fact that they had attacked an official convoy. He was momentarily stunned.

Zhang Kun, too, wore a strange expression.

At this moment, Xiao Ming glanced at Pang Yukun, who seemed somewhat satisfied, and pursed his lips. Originally, he had intended to release all of these men.

But Pang Yukun had strongly opposed the idea, arguing that winning over people’s hearts should not be rushed. If they were released without punishment, Zhang Liang might feel grateful to Xiao Ming, but he would also likely assume that Xiao Ming had spared him out of appreciation for his skills, which would diminish any sense of gratitude.

Instead, Pang Yukun suggested demoting them to slavery and later lifting their slave status based on their contributions. This way, they would take their work in the shipyard seriously.

It had to be said that people from different eras often thought differently. A “savior complex” could be detrimental in this era.

After some reflection, Xiao Ming realized Pang Yukun had a point.

At this moment, Qian Dafu slowly spoke up, “Zhang Liang, don’t be surprised. It was I who pleaded for your lives. Do you remember me?”

Zhang Liang studied him carefully and exclaimed, “Steward Qian!”

“Indeed, it’s me. When I first arrived in Qingzhou, I visited your shipyard to have my damaged merchant ship repaired. The convoy you attacked at Tuo Mountain was also mine,” Qian Dafu said.

Zhang Liang said remorsefully, “Steward Qian, I was blind. If I had recognized you, we would never have dared to do such a thing.”

“Enough, let’s not speak of this again. It was I who begged His Highness to spare your lives, seeing that you have some skill in shipbuilding. From now on, you must work hard to repay His Highness,” Qian Dafu continued.

Qian Dafu and Xiao Ming were playing a classic good cop, bad cop routine.

Zhang Liang, feeling as though he had just escaped the gates of hell, kowtowed and said, “Thank you, Your Highness. Thank you, Steward Qian.”

“Rise. From today onward, you will belong to the Machinery Department and be registered as slaves. Commander Lu, take them away,” Xiao Ming ordered.

In the Great Yu Empire, slavery was still a common practice. The empire’s laws explicitly stated: “Slaves are lowly, equivalent to livestock.”

This meant they were treated like animals, and the modern term “lowly person” originated from this concept.

The servants and attendants in the Prince of Qi’s residence were essentially Xiao Ming’s private property. He could buy, sell, or even kill them at will, as they had no human rights.

In the social hierarchy of scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants, slaves did not have a place, as they merely existed as dependents of these four classes.

In Chang’an, the capital, slaves made up as much as 20% of the population. The idle nobility relied entirely on these people for their daily needs.

The sources of slaves were diverse: prisoners of war, criminals sentenced to slavery, commoners who sold themselves into slavery, and children born to slaves.

These people were registered under a special slave category, and whether they could be freed depended entirely on their master’s will.

By registering Zhang Liang and his men as slaves, Xiao Ming held their fate in his hands, and he could dispose of them as he pleased.

Lu Fei led Zhang Liang and his men to the Machinery Department, while Pang Yukun said, "Congratulations, Your Highness, on acquiring another group of skilled craftsmen."

"This is all thanks to Chief Secretary Pang's advice," Xiao Ming replied, as the two exchanged mutual flattery.

Pang Yukun gave a stiff smile. "However, Your Highness, the funds allocated for the porridge distribution will only last for a month. I hope Your Highness can think of a solution. Many bandits have been surrendering recently, so it seems our efforts are bearing fruit."

Xiao Ming felt a headache coming on. Pang Yukun bowed slightly, implying that this matter was entirely up to Xiao Ming, and then left gracefully.

Qian Dafu glanced at Pang Yukun's retreating figure and said with a bitter smile, "Your Highness, Chief Secretary Pang has always been like this. He means no harm."

"You're always the peacemaker," Xiao Ming said helplessly. "Let's go to the Engineering Department. Whether we can secure the funds depends on what they can do."

This time, Xiao Ming went to the Engineering Department to have Chen Qi forge a very practical item—a distiller. This device could be used both for distilling alcohol and for extracting essential oils.

The principle of a distiller was quite simple: it consisted of several connected sealed containers. The first container was for distillation, the second for cooling, and the third for collection.

Once the distiller was made, distilling alcohol and extracting plant essential oils would be a breeze.

Most importantly, the distiller could be made from wood, ceramic, or metal.

At the Engineering Department, Chen Wenlong was assigning menial tasks to Zhang Liang and his men. Xiao Ming called Chen Qi over.

“Chen Qi, I need you to make this for me in the next couple of days,” Xiao Ming said, pulling Chen Qi aside and drawing a diagram of the distiller on a blackboard. He then explained the specific construction and materials needed.

After Xiao Ming’s explanation, Chen Qi quickly grasped the process of making the distiller. He said, “This is simple, Your Highness. How about we make a few large ceramic jars? They’re easy to shape.”

“Good idea. Use the ‘hollow-core’ method to make the connecting tubes between the jars,” Xiao Ming said.

The “hollow-core” method involved wrapping a soft rod in clay, firing it, and then removing the rod to create the condenser tubes needed for the distiller.

“Understood, Your Highness. I’ll have the craftsmen start on it right away,” Chen Qi said.

After giving instructions for the distiller, Xiao Ming returned to the prince’s residence and sent Ziyuan to purchase some rice wine and spices.

Ziyuan went to the East and West markets that day, but while she was able to buy rice wine in Qingzhou, she couldn’t find any spices.

Xiao Ming thought for a moment and decided to summon Qin Mu.

“Your Highness, spices won’t be a problem,” Qin Mu said, though his focus was clearly elsewhere. He asked, “I heard Your Highness has captured Zhang Liang and his son?”

Xiao Ming warmed his hands over the coal stove. The snow in Qingzhou had stopped a few days ago, but as it melted, the weather had grown even colder.

It didn’t surprise Xiao Ming that the Qin family had some history with Zhang Liang. He replied, “That’s correct. Do you have any thoughts on the matter?”

“Your Highness, it’s not that I have any thoughts, but Zhang Liang owes our Qin family a large debt. My father’s idea was to buy Zhang Liang and his son from Your Highness and have them build ships to repay the debt,” Qin Mu said tentatively.

Xiao Ming raised an eyebrow and said indifferently, "That won't do. I have my own plans for them, so don't entertain any ideas about this."

Qin Mu, having been rebuffed, said awkwardly, "In that case, I shall take my leave."

Xiao Ming glanced at Qin Mu and added a warning, "These spices are meant as a tribute to the Empress. Your Qin family must be careful. If anything goes wrong, even I won't be able to protect you."

Qin Mu, who had been annoyed by Xiao Ming's refusal regarding Zhang Liang, had initially thought of buying some low-quality spices to brush the matter off perfunctorily. But Xiao Ming's words sent a chill down his spine..

"Your Highness, don't worry. I wouldn't dare to pass off inferior goods. My family happens to have a batch of premium spices from the Western Regions, originally intended for sale in Chang'an. I'll deliver them to you tonight," Qin Mu said with a forced smile.

"That would be perfect," Xiao Ming replied with a meaningful smile.