

## I. Dynasty 43

### Chapter 43: Cooperation

“Your Highness didn’t accuse you of human trafficking. Why are you so eager to clear your name? That must mean you’re guilty,” Lü Luo, who was serving by Xiao Ming’s side, suddenly interjected.

Xiao Ming glanced at the girl. It was rare for her to use her brain like this. Perhaps she had experienced something similar in her childhood, given that she was now a servant herself.

“Hmph, you can’t even fool one of my maids, yet you dare to deceive me? What punishment do you deserve?” Xiao Ming slammed the table in anger.

Liang Dahai was so frightened that he prostrated himself on the ground, kowtowing like a pestle. “Your Highness, spare me! Your Highness, spare me! This lowly one deserves death! I did indeed buy a slave of unclear origin yesterday, but I swear I didn’t abduct any commoners!”

In the Great Yu Empire, while the slave trade was legal, commoners—referred to as “good people”—were protected by law. Anyone caught abducting and selling commoners would be executed immediately. This was an ironclad rule.

Xiao Ming had only intended to scare Liang Dahai, but he hadn’t expected to stumble upon the truth. He said, “In that case, release that person immediately.”

“Yes, Your Highness. This lowly one will go release them right away,” Liang Dahai said, scrambling to his feet to flee.

“Wait!” Xiao Ming called out to stop him. His goal wasn’t to investigate a case. He said, “I’ll keep this matter on record. You can go release the person later. Today, I called you here for another matter.”

Liang Dahai was still terrified, staring blankly at Xiao Ming, waiting for him to continue.

Xiao Ming said, “I called you here to discuss a business partnership. I want to collaborate with you on the slave trade.”

“What?!” Liang Dahai couldn’t believe his ears.

“You heard me right. I called you here to discuss this matter. If you do well, you might even be granted a title in the future,” Xiao Ming said.

After the initial shock, Liang Dahai was overjoyed. In the Great Yu empire, merchants were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and slave traders were the lowest among merchants, often looked down upon. Now, not only was the Prince of Qi offering to collaborate with him, but he was also promising a future title.

Liang Dahai felt like he was dreaming.

“Your Highness, are you serious?” Liang Dahai asked again.

“I didn’t call you here for small talk,” Xiao Ming said. “This matter is simple. It stays between you and me. I will support you behind the scenes and provide you with silver. In return, you will supply me with slaves.”

Liang Dahai nodded. “Your Highness, that’s simple. As long as Your Highness needs them, I can provide slaves.”

“I don’t just want ordinary slaves. I’ll pay more for craftsmen—carpenters, blacksmiths, and the like,” Xiao Ming said.

“Such people are often from low-status households, and many are slaves. It shouldn’t be difficult,” Liang Dahai analyzed.

“Good. Since you’re well-versed in the slave trade, you must have many ways to acquire slaves. But in our partnership, you must never violate the law against abducting commoners. If you do, I won’t hesitate to draw my sword. Starting today, I will fully support you. You must do everything in your power to bring slaves to Qingzhou from everywhere,” Xiao Ming said.

Liang Dahai asked, “Your Highness, what about Kunlun slaves?”

Xiao Ming’s expression shifted slightly. The Kunlun slaves Liang Dahai referred to were the dark-skinned, short-statured natives of Southeast Asia. However, in recent years, some African slaves had also appeared in Chang’an, mostly brought through the Western Regions. These slaves were highly sought after by the nobility in Chang’an, seen as a symbol of status.

Now that Liang Dahai had brought up Kunlun slaves, it seemed he had already tapped into the overseas slave trade.

“Of course, as long as you can get your hands on them,” Xiao Ming said.

Liang Dahai replied, “Your Highness, this lowly one understands.”

After discussing the specifics with Liang Dahai for a while, Xiao Ming purchased twenty slaves from him to serve as servants in the prince’s residence. These were high-quality slaves, averaging ten taels of silver each—half the price of a plow ox.

After Liang Dahai left, Lü Luo seemed downcast, as if the dirty dealings between Xiao Ming and the slave trader had stirred up painful memories.

Lü Luo was never one to hide her feelings. Xiao Ming said, “Do you think it’s beneath me to associate with a slave trader? That it lacks virtue?”

“Your servant, your servant...” Lü Luo wanted to deny it, but a surge of emotion seemed ready to burst forth.

Xiao Ming laughed and said, “I know what you’re thinking. Although the slave trade is legal in the Great Yu Empire, it’s still not honorable. But have you considered that my fiefdom has only a million households? With such a small population, how many years would it take to revive the fiefdom?”

“But...” Lü Luo suddenly didn’t know what to say.

“Moreover, if I don’t buy these slaves, they’ll fall into someone else’s hands. How can you be sure they won’t have an easier life under me, or even gain their freedom?” Xiao Ming continued. “What I need is labor, not their status as slaves.”

Lü Luo clenched the hem of her clothes and nodded lightly. “Your servant was wrong. I thought Your Highness wanted to profit from the slave trade.”

Mentioning silver made Xiao Ming’s head ache. He had thought that four or five thousand taels of silver a day was a lot, but between buying plow oxen, slaves, materials, and building workshops, the funds were stretched thin.

“Ah, I set my heart on the moon, but the moon shines on the gutter,” Xiao Ming sighed bitterly, seemingly saddened by Lü Luo’s misunderstanding.

Lü Luo anxiously said, “Your Highness, it was my mistake.”

“Enough, I forgive you,” Xiao Ming said, taking Lü Luo’s small hand and earnestly rubbing it. “Let’s not talk about this anymore. Look at how cold your hands are. Come, let me warm them for you.”

Lü Luo’s face turned bright red.

Just then, a plump figure appeared at the entrance of the main hall. Xiao Ming was startled and quickly withdrew his hand.

“Ahem, Your Highness!” Qian Dafu coughed twice. “Besides the graphite, we’ve also brought back some limestone as you requested. Would you like to take a look?”

Not long after Li San left for Chang’an, Qian Dafu had returned with the graphite. The first batch of crucibles had already been put to use in the Machinery Department.

A small-scale steel production line had been established.

With steel production increasing, the Machinery Department’s need for steel to produce lathes was largely met. Currently, the department had produced two sets of lathes.

These lathes were to be installed in the hydraulic lathe workshop under construction. However, a new problem had arisen.

To operate these lathes, Xiao Ming needed to train a group of skilled lathe operators. But the Machinery Department was already short on craftsmen and couldn’t spare any more hands.

This was why Xiao Ming had turned to the slave trade. To monopolize the technology, it was essential to train a group of highly skilled slaves.