

## I. Dynasty 60

### Chapter 60: The Carrot for Liang Dahai

“Your Highness, this time I’ve brought you three thousand slaves, hehe.”

Before Xiao Ming had even gone to seek out Liang Dahai to ask if he had any new slaves, the man had already taken the initiative to find him. Only a few days had passed since the ox-powered waterwheel was completed, yet Liang Dahai had already returned from the grasslands, eager to report his haul.

“Three thousand? How could there be so many this time?” Qin Le’s voice carried disbelief.

Liang Dahai chuckled smugly. “Your Highness, we must thank the heavens for their gift. This year’s harsh snowstorm killed off many of the barbarians’ cattle and sheep. Even with trade routes open to Dayu, the tribes couldn’t afford to keep so many slaves. Rather than letting them starve, they preferred to sell them to me in exchange for food.” He paused, then added with a hint of pride, “I traveled through several tribes to gather these three thousand slaves. Those barbarians were quite cunning, though — they sold them at high prices. But knowing Your Highness urgently needed slaves, I bought them all.”

Xiao Ming nodded in satisfaction. This time, Liang Dahai had done well. At this point, Xiao Ming no longer concerned himself with the fact that the barbarians were Dayu’s long-standing enemies. The development of his fief came first — everything else was secondary.

Over the years, the barbarians frequently raided the borders, abducting countless Dayu citizens. Many captives died during the journey to the grasslands, while those who survived lived as slaves in unbearable misery. Less than one in ten ever returned alive. Rumors often spoke of the barbarians treating Dayu captives like prey, releasing them into the wild only to hunt them down for sport — a game to pass the time.

“You’ve done well. A higher price doesn’t matter. These people are Dayu citizens. That they were captured is already a humiliation for Dayu. No matter how they are brought back — through silver or through force — it is always a good deed. Name your price. I’ll take them all.”

Liang Dahai’s eyes flickered with surprise. He had heard rumors of Xiao Ming’s recent wealth — the merchant guild, the auctions, and the influx of foreign merchants were all proof. But knowing the prince had money was one thing — actually getting a share of it was another.

Hesitating for a moment, Liang Dahai bowed deeply and said, “Your Highness, being allowed to do business under your name is already a great honor... But I have one small request. Would Your Highness permit me to join the Qingzhou Merchant Guild?”

Xiao Ming’s lips curled into a faint smile. The Qingzhou Merchant Guild had become a legend among traders. Through word of mouth, its reputation had spread like wildfire, with merchants whispering promises as if they were slogans from a pyramid scheme: “Join the Qingzhou Merchant Guild, and you’ll make a fortune.”

“I would have spoken to you about this had you not been away,” Xiao Ming said casually. “Since you’re already working with me on the slave trade, you’re naturally one of my people. Joining the merchant guild is a given.”

His voice lowered slightly. “However... I’ve also established my own trading company. If you’re willing, you can report to Li Kaiyuan. From now on, you’ll be one of my men. And if your contributions are sufficient...” He paused, eyes narrowing. “...I might grant you an official position in the future.”

Liang Dahai’s entire body trembled. The four words “official position” rang in his ears like heavenly music.

In Dayu, as in most dynasties, society was rigidly stratified. Commoners had little hope of rising in status. Even those who passed the imperial examinations had to face the Kanhé interview — a brutal screening process where officials evaluated not only a candidate's knowledge but also their family background, appearance, and reputation. Those without powerful backers were quietly eliminated. Only the top three scorers bypassed this process and gained entry into the imperial court.

For a merchant like Liang Dahai to become an official was nothing short of a phoenix rising from the ashes.

"Your Highness's great kindness, Liang Dahai will never forget!" Overcome with emotion, Liang Dahai fell to his knees with a loud thud.

Xiao Ming watched him quietly. In his mind, an official position was nothing more than a carrot on a stick — something to dangle in front of those who could be useful. But in this era, such a promise was more precious than gold.

"Don't celebrate too early," Xiao Ming warned. "What I give, I can just as easily take away. Everything will depend on your own merit."

Liang Dahai bowed low. "I understand! If Your Highness ever needs me, I will walk through fire and water without hesitation!"

Xiao Ming smirked faintly. "We'll see about that."

After dismissing Liang Dahai, Xiao Ming made his way to the workshop district, where the new slaves were being housed. With the influx of laborers, Chen Wenlong had built a slave housing compound

within the workshop zone. Tall walls surrounded the area — both to prevent escapes and to keep outsiders from prying.

When Xiao Ming arrived, he found the slaves huddled together — far different from the previous batch. The new arrivals were little more than walking corpses. Years of torment had drained every shred of life from their eyes.

Only the young and strong still carried a flicker of light.

Xiao Ming ordered the guards to separate the elderly and children, leaving behind those between thirteen and thirty years old — the age group most capable of learning. Out of three thousand, only three hundred fit the criteria.

The rest had either died or been killed by the barbarians long ago.

With these three hundred, Xiao Ming would lay the foundation for his industrial empire.

The next morning, he stood before them by the Xiaoqing River. His voice was calm — neither harsh nor overly kind.

“You were once Dayu citizens. The barbarians stole you from your homes... but now, I have bought your freedom.”

A ripple of shock passed through the crowd. None of them expected to hear these words.

“I will not force you to stay. Those who wish to leave may go.”

The slaves looked at one another uncertainly, but no one moved.

“But if you choose to stay, you will not be slaves. I will teach you skills. Those who work hard will earn food, clothing, silver... and one day, freedom.”

The faint flicker of hope in their eyes burned brighter.

“I will not give you chains...” Xiao Ming’s voice echoed across the riverbank. “...I will give you a future.”

Not a single person left.

From that day on, they were no longer slaves — they were the first apprentices of Qingzhou’s industrial revolution.

The gears of history had begun to turn.

In the coming years, these forgotten men would become craftsmen, engineers, and foremen — the backbone of Xiao Ming's factories.

While others scrambled for power, Xiao Ming quietly laid the foundation of a new era.

One day, these three hundred men would build machines that would shake the entire Great Yu Empire.

One day, their hands would forge the weapons that would break the shackles of the noble clans.

One day, they would look back on this moment...

And realize that hope had been reborn by the banks of the Xiaoqing River.