

I. Dynasty 152

Chapter 152: The Problem of Saltpeter

“Prince of Shu?”

Xiao Ming murmured the name softly.

Memories of this prince from his predecessor’s life surfaced—among all the imperial brothers, the Fifth Prince, the Prince of Shu, had the worst relationship with him.

Both unruly and headstrong, the two had clashed repeatedly in Chang’an.

Xiao Ming and the Prince of Shu had fought more than once over petty rivalries, earning them frequent reprimands from Emperor Wenxuan.

Now that the Fifth Prince had taken his fief in Shu, Xiao Ming hadn’t thought much about him in a long time.

In Xiao Ming’s memories, Shu was a remote, mountainous region—though historically known as the “Land of Abundance”, never lacking in grain.

The only downside was the frequent raids from the Nanman tribes in the south and the Tibetans in the west.

Still, overall, the Prince of Shu's situation was slightly better than his own—though not by much.

And given Shu's rugged terrain, isolated deep inland, the Fifth Prince likely found his circumstances even more frustrating.

"Exactly, Your Highness. Think about it—Qingzhou was buying saltpeter in bulk, and merchants from Shu were thrilled to profit from it. But suddenly, they can't obtain any. Who else but the Prince of Shu could enforce such a blockade?" Lu Tong complained. "If this is truly his doing, then he's deliberately sabotaging you! With the barbarians pressing south, time is critical, yet he's throwing obstacles in your path. He clearly wants to see you fail!"

If it were anyone else, Xiao Ming might have hesitated—but with the Prince of Shu, he fully believed the man was capable of such pettiness.

"The road to Shu is harder than climbing to the heavens."

Precisely because of this, Shu was easily defended but hard to attack. Currently, the southern and northern princes had very different agendas.

The Prince of Shu, as a southern prince, could live comfortably even if the north fell—he only needed to hold Shu.

Moreover, the Fifth Prince knew he had no chance at the throne of the Great Yu Empire—but if chaos erupted, everything would change.

After a moment of contemplation, Xiao Ming said, “Whether it’s the Prince of Shu’s doing remains unclear. How much gunpowder can we still produce with the remaining materials?”

“At most, five hundred pounds.”

Xiao Ming’s frustration spiked. Five hundred pounds of gunpowder wouldn’t even be enough to scratch the barbarians.

The current cannons fired solid shot—their power was comparable to a direct-fire catapult, just with longer range. The damage wasn’t overwhelming; unless a shot hit directly, it wouldn’t kill, unlike explosive shells that relied on shrapnel and shockwaves.

Even with ample gunpowder, the battle would be tough. If they ran out, Cangzhou City would likely devolve into close-quarters combat.

“I’ll handle the materials. Just focus on production.” Xiao Ming’s expression darkened.

Earlier, issues with iron and coal had been debated at court, but the other princes hadn’t deliberately obstructed him.

Though some mines had been flooded, local supplies were still barely sufficient. And Prince Wei, eager to use Xiao Ming as a shield, had been cooperative.

Thus, coal and iron hadn't been major problems.

But now, the saltpeter shortage was a death sentence.

Though the Great Yu Empire already used gunpowder, demand wasn't yet high enough for large-scale production. The saltpeter came from Shu, but since it was for the Imperial Machinery Department, the Prince of Shu wouldn't dare interfere.

Leaving the industrial district, Xiao Ming returned to his palace. For now, he could only send a letter to Chang'an, asking Emperor Wenxuan to resolve the issue.

At the same time, he planned to request saltpeter and gunpowder from Prince Wei—though he doubted he'd get much, since Wei also undervalued firearms.

After drafting the letter, he sent Ziyuan to the courier station, ordering it to be delivered to Chang'an at top speed.

This wasn't the modern world, where a phone call could solve everything. Here, the fastest communication between cities was through courier stations—yet even an 800-li journey would take at least nine days for a round trip.

And if further complications arose, more back-and-forth messages would be needed.

The thought made Xiao Ming seethe. His greatest fear was that the Prince of Shu was indeed behind this—if so, the man could simply drag things out, leaving Xiao Ming helpless.

By the time Cangzhou's battle ended and saltpeter finally arrived, it would be useless. If Cangzhou fell, there'd be no need to send saltpeter at all—instead, Emperor Wenxuan would have to rely on the Prince of Shu.

"Prince of Shu, if this is your doing, I'll skin you alive one day." Xiao Ming gritted his teeth in frustration—yet there was little he could do.

Shu was thousands of miles from Qingzhou—utterly beyond his reach.

While seeking help from Chang'an, Xiao Ming refused to sit idle. He sent another letter to Prince Wei and summoned Qian Dafu back immediately.

By dusk the next day, Qian Dafu finally arrived at the palace.

"Your Highness, what's so urgent?"

Exhaustion from rough travels clung to him—his search for mines had taken its toll, leaving him gaunt and weary.

“Stop searching for other minerals. From now on, focus entirely on finding saltpeter and sulfur. Everything else can wait.”

Industrial upgrades could be delayed, but the barbarian threat was imminent.

Moreover, if he used cannons to repel the barbarians, the Great Yu Empire would inevitably prioritize gunpowder—and saltpeter would become a strategic weapon used against him, much like oil in the modern world.

A resource-poor nation was vulnerable; if cut off, its economy would collapse.

“Your Highness, what’s happened?” Qian Dafu asked, confused.

Xiao Ming explained the saltpeter crisis, and Qian Dafu’s expression turned grave.

“Saltpeter is a matter of life and death for me. I’ll assign you another 5,000 laborers—even if we have to dig through every inch of land, we must find it.” His voice was steel.

Qian Dafu understood the severity. Bowing deeply, he said, “This old servant will recall all mining teams immediately and devote everything to the search.”

With that, he turned to leave—only to run into Pang Yukun at the gates.

“Steward Qian, you look troubled. What’s wrong?” Pang Yukun, ever observant, couldn’t help but ask.

“Sigh, the saltpeter supply is cut off. His Highness is furious—be careful when you see him.”

Pang Yukun frowned. “Misfortune never comes alone. I fear His Highness will be even angrier soon.”

Qian Dafu had no time to inquire further. With a quick salute, he mounted his horse and galloped away.

Watching him leave, Pang Yukun sighed, hesitated for a moment, then stepped into the palace.