

I. Dynasty 159

Chapter 159: Searching for Saltpeter in the Latrines

“Squire Liu, how do you find the power of this cannon?”

Xiao Ming’s voice pierced through the gunpowder smoke, reaching Liu Chuang’s ears and filling him with despair.

Could the Prince of Qi, armed with such a deadly weapon, ever be defeated? The thought flashed through his mind but was quickly shattered.

At the city gate, Liu Wei’s desperate pleas for mercy could be heard—his brush with death had driven him nearly mad.

“I suspect Liu Wei will be much more willing to reveal the source of the gunpowder now. But if you still wish for a dignified death, I can grant you that opportunity.”

Xiao Ming’s tone was calm, as if victory was already assured.

Liu Chuang let out a low, bitter laugh. He had lost. The moment the cannon fired, terror had consumed him.

“The gunpowder recipe was passed down by my ancestors,” Liu Chuang admitted weakly. “I only ask that Your Highness grant me an intact corpse.”

Superstition ran deep in the Great Yu Empire. The people believed in reincarnation, and many were convinced that only a whole body could be reborn. Thus, “dying without a complete corpse” was considered a vicious curse.

The half-meter crater in the wall made it clear to Liu Chuang that if the cannon struck him, he wouldn’t just lose an arm or a leg—his entire body would be reduced to pulp.

“What I asked was where the saltpeter came from,” Xiao Ming pressed. This was his real concern.

Whether the Prince of Shu was involved or not, the immediate problem was the shortage of gunpowder materials—which would leave him defenseless against the barbarians.

“Heh. If Your Highness wants it, just dig it out of the latrines,” Liu Chuang laughed mockingly.

Xiao Ming frowned, disappointed. He had hoped Liu Chuang knew the location of a saltpeter mine, but instead, the answer was far cruder.

He waved his hand dismissively at Niu Ben. “Kill them all. But leave their bodies intact.”

Niu Ben nodded and signaled to Lu Fei and Luo Xin.

Understanding the order, the two drew their blades. A flash of steel later, Liu Chuang collapsed into a pool of blood.

The surrounding soldiers watched coldly. Men like these—nobles who oppressed the weak—deserved death a thousand times over.

With the cannon tested and the manor secured, it was time to return to the city.

Now, Xiao Ming had to find a solution for the saltpeter shortage. Locating a mine immediately was impossible, but Liu Chuang's words had given him an idea—no matter how unpleasant.

After instructing Chen Fu to personally escort the cement to Cangzhou, Xiao Ming turned to Niu Ben.

"Old General, though the six prefectures' nobility have been purged, remnants still stir up trouble. I trust you to suppress them and prevent further chaos."

"Leave it to me, Your Highness. A soldier trains for a thousand days to be used in one battle—this is my duty." Niu Ben clasped his fists in salute.

Xiao Ming nodded. Originally, this task would have fallen to Xian Xingchang, but the barbarian invasion had disrupted his plans. Now, Xian Xingchang was focused on repairing Cangzhou's defenses.

The troops returned to the city. Over ten days had been spent suppressing Liu Chuang's rebellion, but at least the cannon test had been a success. The Machinery Department could now focus on mass-producing them.

As for Xiao Ming, the saltpeter problem remained. The cannons were just one part—he also needed vast quantities of loose gunpowder for grenades.

He had held onto a sliver of hope that Liu Chuang knew of a saltpeter deposit, but that hope was now dashed.

Still, there was a silver lining. Liu Chuang had proven one thing: extracting saltpeter from soil was possible—and that soil could be found beneath latrines, albeit in small quantities.

But even a drop counted in a drought.

Upon returning to his palace, Xiao Ming immediately summoned Lu Tong.

"Saltpeter... in latrines?" Lu Tong blinked in disbelief.

To Xiao Ming, the science was clear. The Tech Library contained multiple methods for extracting saltpeter from soil, and the principles were straightforward.

In rural areas, the soil near pigsties and latrines was rich in organic matter. As this matter decayed, nitrifying bacteria converted it into nitric acid, which then reacted with minerals like calcium and magnesium to form potassium nitrate—saltpeter.

The white, powdery deposits on the walls of such places often contained high concentrations of saltpeter, sometimes as much as 75%.

After explaining the process to Lu Tong, the man slowly nodded in understanding.

“It’s a troublesome method, but for now, it’s the only way to overcome this hurdle,” Xiao Ming said.

If saltpeter mines were available, no one would be digging through latrines. But desperate times called for desperate measures.

Beyond scraping saltpeter directly from walls, Xiao Ming also instructed Lu Tong to dig up old soil from beneath latrines and boil it with plant ash to extract saltpeter crystals.

“Your Highness, that’s doable. Now that you mention it, I remember seeing that white stuff in my own latrine. But the amount is so small—how many latrines would we need to gather enough?”

Xiao Ming already had a plan. He would mobilize the common people.

After sending Lu Tong to prepare the necessary tools, Xiao Ming summoned Fan Zheng and personally drafted a notice for the newspaper.

The notice called on the people to collect saltpeter from latrines and deliver it to local government offices. For every jin (500g) provided, they would be paid one wen.

The next day, the announcement spread like wildfire. Reporters fanned out across villages, reading the notice to illiterate farmers.

“The white stuff in latrines can be sold for money?”

In Zhu Family Village, Zhu Wuliu stared in amazement at the man who had just read the newspaper aloud.

His older brother, Zhu Sansi, had already joined the Qingzhou Army, leaving only the eldest brother Zhu Yier, younger sister Zhu Xiaomei, and himself at home.

With the harvest approaching, the family was hopeful, though they were still poor by most standards. Still, life was better than before.

After Zhu Sansi enlisted, the local government had delivered a shi (about 60kg) of grain and a bolt of cloth to the family—a gesture that left the entire village envious.

No one had expected soldiers' families to receive such benefits. In the past, conscription had meant forced service with no compensation.

Because of this, many hesitant villagers had since enlisted, eager for the prestige and rewards that came with it.

Aside from his second brother, Zhu Wuliu's eldest brother now worked at the docks, loading and unloading cargo for merchant ships.

Over the past six months, the number of ships arriving in Qingzhou's port had surged, creating a high demand for laborers—and driving up wages.

Zhu Family Village was close to the docks, and during the farming off-season, most men worked there.

Compared to his brothers, Zhu Wuliu had stayed home to tend the fields. But now, he saw an opportunity to earn some silver himself.

His heart stirred with excitement.