

I. Dynasty 160

Chapter 160: A Nationwide Movement

Warm spring winds stirred the air, rippling through the golden waves of wheat in the fields.

In Zhu Family Village, nestled beside those fields, the scene was lively and chaotic. Every household was digging through their latrines—all looking for one thing: niter.

Zhu Wuliu was the fastest. He already held a handful of white powder in his palm. He had searched every inch of his family's outhouse and now carefully wrapped up the powder before rushing off to Qingzhou City.

"Zhu Wuliu, go check it out first! If it's true they'll pay for it, we'll follow!"

"Yeah, you run fast—we'll wait for your word."

"..."

Many villagers were digging. Some were still skeptical. After all the suffering they'd endured over the years, they still didn't fully trust the local government.

Even though the land reform policies and production teams had brought them benefits, the long-standing distrust of officials wasn't easy to erase.

Some feared they were just being tricked into handing over what little they had.

But Zhu Wuliu's older brother, Zhu Sansi, was a soldier in the army. That made him trust the Qingzhou administration more than most. He believed in the current Prince Qi.

Clutching the niter tightly, Zhu Wuliu arrived at the city and headed straight for the government office.

At the entrance, he saw a boy around his age waiting nervously. Zhu hesitated for a moment, then asked, "Are you really buying niter here?"

The boy was one of Lu Tong's assistants. To make sure the collected substance was truly niter, Lu Tong had dispatched personnel to every county seat to handle purchasing.

"Yes, we are!" the boy replied, delighted—Zhu Wuliu was the first person to show up.

Zhu let out a sigh of relief and handed over his packet. "This is all I could find."

The boy weighed it on a small scale and said, "Five taels in total. Since you're one of the first hundred people, His Highness said we'll pay twenty wen per jin to encourage early participants. That's ten wen—here you go."

Zhu Wuliu beamed as the ten copper coins clinked into his hand.

The boy added, “Hey, there’s also a way to make even more niter. Want to learn?”

“Of course!” Zhu replied eagerly. The weight of those ten coins convinced him: the government could be trusted.

The boy taught him the folk method of refining niter—digging up old outhouse soil, mixing it with wood ash, and boiling it to extract niter crystals.

Zhu Wuliu memorized the steps and ran straight back to his village.

When he returned, a crowd of villagers surrounded him.

“Well? What happened?” they asked.

Zhu held up the coins and said, “Didn’t I tell you? His Highness doesn’t lie to the people. The officials are paying twenty wen per jin for the first hundred people.”

The moment he said it, the villagers took off running—each grabbing whatever scrap of niter they had and sprinting for Qingzhou like a pack of chased dogs.

Zhu laughed to himself, rolling the coins between his fingers, already imagining what he could buy with the first money he'd ever earned.

As word spread that niter really could be sold for cash, it traveled fast—one village to the next. More and more peasants joined the hunt for niter, and soon the whole countryside was at work.

After half a month of shortages, the chemistry lab in Qingzhou's industrial district finally received its first shipment of niter. Sure, the sacks reeked of urine, but it was better than nothing.

"You're brilliant, Your Highness," Lu Tong said excitedly, even though the smell of the niter sack nearly made him faint. "That Prince Shu thought he could control you by cutting off our supply. Now he's got nowhere to sell his stash."

Xiao Ming chuckled bitterly. "If I had a reliable source, I wouldn't be digging it out of latrines."

He knew this wasn't a long-term solution—niter took time to form, and homemade soil-niter couldn't replace actual mines. But for now, it solved an urgent problem—and humiliated Prince Shu.

Once every citizen in Great Yu learned how to produce their own niter, Shu's monopoly would collapse.

"With a steady supply," Xiao Ming said, "we need to ramp up gunpowder production."

As for Prince Shu, Xiao Ming had already sent a letter to Chang'an but hadn't yet received a reply. He wasn't sure how Emperor Xiao Wenxuan would handle it.

But for now, he had weathered the crisis.

With gunpowder secured, Xiao Ming turned his thoughts to a new priority—launching explosive powder jars.

He had specific ideas: on a battlefield, no single weapon is enough. The cannon was great for destroying siege engines and long-range threats. But the powder jar was for close-range defense, specifically to kill barbarians trying to climb ladders up the wall.

Made of ceramic and packed with gunpowder, a single explosion could send shockwaves strong enough to scatter enemies and horses alike. While the cannon dealt linear damage, the powder jar dealt area-of-effect damage.

To compensate for the jars' fragility, Xiao Ming planned to wrap them in layers of thick straw—tightly bound to prevent shattering mid-flight.

All he had to do was mount small catapults on the wall, and he could cover the gaps between the cannon's long-range and the soldiers' throwing range. Wherever the enemy stood, fire would follow.

While envisioning this brutal—but effective—defense system, Xiao Ming made his way to the machinery department. Chen Qi was busy—but this task still had to fall to him.

At the same time, in Chang'an...

A group of unwelcome guests had arrived in the capital.

They were envoys from the Golden Horde, and their presence shattered the city's peaceful atmosphere. From high-ranking ministers to common citizens, everyone was speculating about their true purpose.

Their arrival would determine whether Great Yu and the Golden Horde would be at peace—or war.

"Honored envoys," said Zhao Xing, a senior official from the Ministry of Rites. "Please rest in the guest house for now. His Majesty will receive you tomorrow."

All foreign diplomatic affairs in Great Yu were handled by the Ministry of Rites, and Zhao Xing had been assigned to host them.

"Tomorrow?!" one of the barbarian guards growled. "We want to see your emperor today! If we miss our chance, you'll pay with your worthless head!"

The lead envoy and his two guards were tall and powerfully built. Their hair hung long behind them, with tight braids on either side. Golden earrings glinted coldly in the sun, and their faces were dark and grim.

The one who shouted wore leather armor and a felt hat—he was clearly a warrior, not a diplomat.

Zhao Xing flinched. He, like most officials, feared the barbarians deeply.

His legs trembled as he tried to calm them. “Honored envoy, I’m merely delivering His Majesty’s orders... There’s nothing I can do. Please, allow me to arrange a fine meal and wine in the meantime—would that be acceptable?”