

Great Ming 111

Chapter 111: Would Rather Die Than Admit

Gao Yiye had just caught the words “Decree of the Deity” and was also arriving in front of Thirty-Two and the Clerk, panting heavily from her hurried sprint. She hunched over, hands braced on her knees, breathing hard.

The Clerk scrutinized her. Huh? Isn't this... the Li Family's master's wife, Madam Li? Why is she carrying such a large bow?

Gao Yiye hadn't put on the finest clothing in the village today, but she was no longer dressed in rough, low-grade sackcloth either. Li Daoxuan had provided cotton several times, and the village women had spun large quantities, making much cotton cloth. They produced numerous sets of cotton armor and also quite a few cotton clothes.

Gao Yiye was now wearing a set of well-fitted, blue cotton clothes, pure 100% cotton, certainly not mixed with synthetics. Although this attire seemed rather plain for the status of “Madam Li,” someone wouldn't mistake her for a lowly woman at first glance.

The Clerk stared stupidly at Gao Yiye. “Madam Li?”

Hearing “Madam Li,” Gao Yiye remembered the role she needed to play and was startled. She instantly shifted into a dignified mode. Her gasping stopped. Her hands left her knees. She straightened her back, forcing perfect, rigid propriety — a “fixed posture.” Only the line of sweat beads slowly tracing down her temple revealed the scene wasn't truly frozen.

The Clerk said, “The arrow just now...”

Gao Yiye interrupted sternly, “Not me! I didn't do it!”

She's carrying such a huge bow, the Clerk thought silently.

Gao Yiye raised her chin, adopting an aloof expression, pretending she couldn't interpret the Clerk's skeptical look.

About the archery? She would rather die than admit it.

Otherwise, people might think the Saint Lady of the Deity, Madam Li, was a mischievous little girl, embarrassing both the Deity and his incarnation, Lord Li.

The Clerk, possessing top-notch skill in reading people's expressions, noted her unshakable "would rather die than admit" demeanor and instantly shelved the topic, tossing it to the winds. He started again, "Ahem... Madam Li is dignified and elegant, accomplished in both letters and martial pursuits, truly Lord Li's blessing. Your arrival couldn't be more timely. I have come to the Li Family on orders from the County Lord, seeking to borrow some weapons to fight the bandits. May the lady..."

Gao Yiye dared not speak much, afraid to expose her lack of refinement.

She leaned close to Thirty-Two's ear and whispered, "The Deity's order: lend him five hundred longbows. They're already piled in the courtyard before the watchtower. You take him to get them."

Thirty-Two smiled. "Understood!"

Gao Yiye declared, "Then I shall take my leave."

With that, she completely ignored the Clerk, turned, and walked away with an air of supreme arrogance, not deigning to grant him the slightest regard.

The Clerk didn't dare feel angry, for the County Lord had told him; this lady came from a prominent family, acquainted with countless wealthy nobles. Why would she care about a mere clerk? She probably didn't even give much thought to the County Lord himself.

The Clerk cupped his hands respectfully, slightly inclining his upper body, paying homage as Madam Li departed.

Once Gao Yiye was far away, Thirty-Two finally smiled. "Madam just now said our Li Family can lend you five hundred longbows."

The Clerk was overjoyed. “Truly?”

Thirty-Two replied, “Follow me.”

He led the Clerk through several passages and courtyards. Ahead stood the watchtower. Arriving before it, they saw the courtyard piled high with a massive stack of longbows. Compared to the lightweight bows used by hunters, these were entirely different caliber. Just the arms were already half a zhang long!

The only slightly odd thing was the material of the bows seemed peculiar, and they were multicolored – rather frivolous hues.

Thirty-Two, long accustomed to the Deity’s divine artifacts, wasn’t surprised at all. The Deity often sent down rainbow-colored, garish divine items: multicolored walls, polychrome catapults, painted Giant Crossbow Vehicles, even the dwellings for the labor offenders were vibrant. You got used to it; it ceased to be strange.

But the Clerk opened his mouth in shock. “Huh? These bows... why painted up like this?”

Thirty-Two thought quickly. “Our Madam Li particularly enjoys archery. But she dislikes plain bows; they must be painted in bright colors to please her. Didn’t you see just now? The bow she carried was emerald green.”

The Clerk had an epiphany: Great families truly are great families! Toys for their wives are such a grand affair! Five hundred longbows, all painted like this just for the lady’s amusement? Such a waste!

“Very well,” the Clerk said, clasping his fists. “I shall arrange for porters to haul these away. The Li Family has aided us many times; the County Lord will not forget this kindness.”

Thirty-Two clasped his own fists earnestly. “Please, by all means, defend the county town. Ensure the bandits cannot breach its walls.”

The Clerk returned the gesture. “Naturally. We pledge to hold it with our lives.”

Thirty-Two added, "And ensure the City God Temple is protected."

A question mark slowly materialized over the Clerk's head. "?"

Realizing his slip, Thirty-Two quickly added, "The City God Temple of Chengcheng County was built during the Tang Dynasty, damaged repeatedly over time. I simply couldn't bear to see it ravaged by war again. That's why I implore you to guard it. It's a... a prized treasure."

The Clerk shook his head with a sigh. "Rebels, no matter how lawless, would hardly dare burn down a Taoist temple. Gods watch from just a few feet above; actions are seen by Heaven. Rest assured, Third Housekeeper Thirty-Two, the City God Temple will be fine."

...

Meanwhile, at Huanglong Mountain.

A squad of bandit troops skidded down the mountainside and paused atop a large boulder, gazing down at the Bai Family Fortress below.

The fortress sat quietly under the scorching sun.

One bandit surveyed it and chuckled. "Bit sturdier than your average country manor wall, but that's all. Low and thin ramparts. We'll smash through it in one strike."

Another bandit chimed in, "Look carefully. There are some huge objects on the fortress wall, covered in black cloth. Unidentifiable. And look, more behind the wall too."

"Can't figure out what they are. Bloody enormous."

The scout bandit laughed dismissively. “What could they be? Mere provincial gentry fortress! Even if those black covers hide a heap of rolling logs and stones, there aren’t enough hands inside to hurl them effectively at us.”

“That’s true! Probably just defensive gear – rolling logs, throw stones, that kind of thing.”

“Count the visible heads.”

“I already did. Less than ten sentinels visible in the open. By their attire, a few are Bai Family guards. Then there are soldiers wearing officials’ uniforms. Patrol Officer Cheng Xu of Chengcheng is likely garrisoned in the fortress.”

“Why worry about that coward Cheng Xu? He’ll run at the first skirmish along with his hundred-plus men. That leaves, at most, one or two hundred men of the Local Militia inside the fortress. Easy pickings.”

“Let’s go brief the boss!”

“Time to hit them hard!”

Chapter 112: Bu Zhan Ni Arrives

The sun had not yet fully risen, and the sky had just begun to show streaks of dawn when the sentinel at the corner tower of Bai Family Fortress sounded the bamboo alarm.

The hollow, echoing sound resonated in the air above the entire Bai Family Fortress.

Bai Yuan and Cheng Xu almost simultaneously rolled out of bed and sprang up.

They ran to the corner tower at the fastest speed.

Gazing toward Huanglong Mountain to the north, they immediately spotted a large group of bandits descending the slope.

They were not coming down along a single mountain path but dispersing across several paths.

They were like filthy water, surging wildly down the mountain along every stream when floodwaters erupt from the mountaintop.

“There are too many!” Bai Yuan couldn’t help but feel nervous.

“The bandit army is thousands strong? I can’t tell at all.”

“Fifteen hundred!” Cheng Xu, standing beside him, saw the number of the bandit troops with a single glance.

He snorted.

“It really is quite a lot.”

Bai Yuan said, “I heard that there were five or six thousand bandits stationed in Huanglong Mountain. Why did only fifteen hundred come?”

Cheng Xu said, “Although the bandit army was large, at least half were elderly and weak, women and children, and only three thousand could fight. Moreover, these three thousand troops belonged to two forces: Luochuan’s Bu Zhan Ni and Yichuan’s Zuo Guazi. These two groups of bandits might not be willing to act together, so only one of them has come today.”

Bai Yuan thought, Officials of the court indeed have more intelligence. I had never heard of these things, but Cheng Xu knew because he must have already received urgent military reports from Luochuan County and Yichuan County.

Cheng Xu snorted.

“Even if only fifteen hundred have come, it’s still troublesome. These two groups have been fighting in Luochuan County and Yichuan County for a long time and are much more formidable than the Supreme Bright King you dealt with before.”

This snort carried a hint of cowardice.

As he stared at the descending bandit army, he saw a person in gray clothes look up from afar and glance at him.

When that person raised their head, Cheng Xu saw clearly: it was his grandmother's face, and she grinned at him.

She opened her mouth and said something.

Judging by the lip movement, it seemed like she was saying, "My dear great-grandson, come keep your grandmother company."

Cheng Xu quickly shook his head twice.

He focused his eyes and looked again.

Alright, the distance was too great to actually make out the person's appearance.

The scene he had seen earlier was entirely his hallucination.

"Seeing my grandmother is an ill omen for this battle," Cheng Xu thought, already planning to retreat.

He turned and whispered quietly to the deputy inspector, who had just gotten up and run to the fortress wall.

"Discreetly notify everyone to flee through the south gate as soon as I give the order. Understood?"

The deputy inspector nodded.

He said quietly, "Understood."

Bai Yuan gave a sidelong glance at the two patrol officers whispering to each other but pretended not to mind.

He turned to his trusted hired guards beside him.

"With the bandit troops descending the mountain, all the farmers around us will soon flock to Bai Family Fortress. Open the gates to let in those we recognize, and not a single stranger is allowed to enter."

As he anticipated, numerous villagers soon appeared.

Dragging children along, carrying the elderly and weak, with bags on their backs containing their last belongings, they surged towards Bai Family Fortress.

During the previous attack on Bai Family Fortress by the Supreme Bright King, Bai Family was unprepared, the surrounding commoners were unprepared, they were caught off guard, suffered heavy casualties, scattered in chaos, and Bai Family Fortress itself was plundered clean.

But this time was different.

Bai Yuan had prepared early and notified the surrounding villagers in advance to come to Bai Family Fortress for refuge at the first sign of trouble.

Therefore, the villagers had packed their belongings ahead of time, abandoned their homes as soon as they saw the bandit troops descending the mountain, and all came to Bai Family Fortress.

They were all neighbors, visible daily, making identification easy without worry about letting in spies.

Before long, the villagers had all taken shelter inside the fortress.

The elderly and weak retreated into the houses.

The able-bodied young men who could fight picked up the bamboo spears that had been piled in the warehouse beforehand and stood in positions assigned by Bai Yuan.

The robust women ran to the piles of rolling logs and stones, readying themselves.

Little Bai Family Fortress became tense like drawn bows and nocked arrows.

Seeing this, Cheng Xu couldn't help but say, "Huh."

He said to the deputy inspector, "That fellow Bai Yuan... why does he seem so experienced in warfare?"

The deputy inspector said quietly, "I heard he has fought three battles recently: one loss to the Supreme Bright King, one victory over the Supreme Bright King, and one where he eliminated Zheng Yanfu and Zhuang Guangdao... This guy must now be considered an experienced militia instructor."

Cheng Xu said, "That last battle doesn't count, as Gaojia Village's monsters helped out."

The deputy inspector said, "Hmm... That..."

Bai Yuan tallied the numbers: twenty hired guards, his trump card.

Seventy-seven men in Bai Family Fortress's militia, his main force.

One hundred and twenty miscellaneous able-bodied young men, an additional bonus.

And eighty robust women.

Bai Yuan knew this battle would be tough. With only so many people, relying on the not-so-high fortress wall to withstand three thousand bandit troops was a risky business indeed.

The key was Cheng Xu's attitude.

If Cheng Xu didn't flee, there was a chance to fight; if he ran, Bai Yuan would likely be unable to hold out and would have to abandon the fortress.

Therefore, the key to this battle was seizing the initiative early.

He could not let Cheng Xu sense any sign of defeat. As soon as Cheng Xu felt even a hint of losing, ordering the officials to flee would doom the battle.

"The bandit army is forming ranks to the north!"

The sentinel shouted.

Bai Yuan and Cheng Xu both looked northward.

The one thousand five hundred bandit troops arranged themselves into three clusters—or rather, huddles.

Their formations were slanted and disorderly, not worthy of being called ranks, just heaps.

The last heap of fierce bandits stood guard, hoisting a tattered flag with the character “泥” drawn on it.

Cheng Xu pointed at the fierce bandit under the flag.

The one guarding the rear is Luochuan's Bu Zhan Ni, so the two heaps in front must be his generals, Double-Winged Tiger and Purple Gold Dragon."

Bai Yuan snorted, feeling somewhat flustered.

He flicked open his folding fan, revealing the characters “Gentleman,” covering his slightly pale face.

Why do these bandits all have such ugly names? It’s too stupid, isn’t it?”

Cheng Xu said, “They use aliases to hide their true identities and avoid implicating their families. Rebellion is a crime punishable by execution along with their families.”

Bai Yuan said, “Bandits still want to protect their relatives? Ridiculous.”

Cheng Xu rolled his eyes.

Quit the sarcasm. Here they come.”

The moment this was said, the situation became tense.

The first to strike was Double-Winged Tiger.

Judging by his alias, he was a swift one.

With a shout and without any prelude, he directly led his five hundred subordinates charging toward Bai Family Fortress.

Cheng Xu immediately took half a step backward, ready to flee at any moment.

Bai Yuan, however, stepped forward.

He said loudly, "Catapult, giant crossbow vehicle, stand ready on my command!"

The Bai family hired guards and militia responded in unison.

Yes!"

Cheng Xu glanced left and right.

Damn, they have higher morale than my own men?

Chapter 113: Cheng Xu Finally Stops Being Hesitant

At Bai Yuan's command, the Bai family servants standing beside the catapults and Giant Crossbow Vehicles sprang into action. They grabbed the black cloth covering the siege equipment and yanked it off, fully revealing ten catapults and ten Giant Crossbow Vehicles.

The catapults were positioned behind the fortress wall, hidden from the bandit army's view. However, the Giant Crossbow Vehicles were mounted directly on the wall and corner towers, immediately catching the eyes of the bandits outside and startling them.

Double-Winged Tiger stared blankly. "Huh?"

In the next moment, Bai Yuan shouted loudly, "Catapults, fire!"

Two blacksmiths already standing by each catapult with heavy hammers simultaneously swung them downward. Thunk! The plastic catapults flung their massive arms upward, hurling two large stones over the fortress wall.

Double-Winged Tiger's bandits had only just begun their charge when two enormous stones soared through the air. One landed with a thunderous crash in the midst of the bandit formation, flattening two men instantly into paste. The other went off-target, slamming onto an empty patch of land two or three zhang away and rolling wildly, kicking up a vast plume of dust.

Double-Winged Tiger cursed, "Fuck!"

His subordinates screamed, "Ahhhh!"

In those two strikes alone, countless terrified bandits lost control of their bladders.

Double-Winged Tiger froze, momentarily unsure what command to give. He was no experienced commander; his entire strategy for battle had ever only been the two words "Charge forward!" The moment that command was issued, he'd leave everything to fate.

With the commander frozen, his troops naturally lost composure.

Just as Cheng Xu had predicted at the outset, the catapults targeted enemy morale. Once shaken, the bandit forces splintered. Some lost their nerve, halting their advance or even retreating, while the more reckless members still charged blindly forward.

Bai Yuan bellowed, "Giant Crossbow Vehicles, fire!"

The blacksmiths beside the Giant Crossbow Vehicles raised their heavy hammers. Thunk! Thunk! Two strikes hit the crossbows' mechanisms. The stretched elastic bands snapped taut with an eerie twang, launching plastic bolts into the air. The bamboo-shaped arrowheads attached to their tips looked absurdly comical.

These bolts flew with far greater accuracy than the catapult stones. A hoard of reckless bandits charging ahead suddenly faced two incoming projectiles. One struck a bandit squarely in the chest — thump! Piercing him without hesitation, the bolt lifted him a meter backward before he crashed to the ground, utterly lifeless.

The other bolt struck another bandit directly in the face — the impact was terrifying. A muffled thud sounded as the center of his face exploded into pulp. The huge arrowhead tore a chunk of the back of his skull, spraying red blood and white brain matter violently. Seeing this, bandits nearby screamed in fear.

This was far from the end. Blacksmiths from Bai Family Fortress had already moved to other positions, striking the mechanisms of two more catapults and Giant Crossbow Vehicles. The second volley — two more massive stones and two huge bolts — flew outward...

Meanwhile, beside the previously fired catapults and Giant Crossbow Vehicles, a group of strong women from the fortress swiftly appeared. They began loading new ammunition. Ten of them worked in unison, using ropes to pull down the giant arms of the catapults and placing fresh stones into their scoops. Elsewhere, several women hoisted giant crossbow bolts together, locking them onto the vehicles' rails. They pulled back intensely, stretching the elastic tensioners to their limits before engaging the mechanisms.

Cheng Xu glanced left and right, inwardly musing: Even these strong women are trained... This guy Bai Yuan has truly organized the fortress militia well. It's strange — why do these people follow his orders so willingly? How much has he promised these common folks to secure such unwavering obedience?

His own soldiers were never this reliable. Today, they'd slack off; tomorrow, they'd dawdle. They refused to train seriously. All he'd get when he scolded them were excuses: "Haven't eaten enough!" or "Haven't been paid enough!" — complaints that they were too famished to train.

They often infuriated him, but the complaint about unpaid wages was a real issue. Sometimes, he had to swallow his anger. As a commander, he understood: if you fail to pay your soldiers but try to drill them relentlessly, the inevitable outcome is mutiny.

Lost in these thoughts, Cheng Xu lifted his head just as the first volley of ten catapults and ten Giant Crossbow Vehicles had completed firing. Now was the "loading" phase. Out in the field, Double-Winged Tiger's chaotic, charging forces... withdrew.

Though his reckless bandits were foolish, after being fired upon by ten Giant Crossbow Vehicles, even the dullest woke up. A glance backward revealed that most had been terrified by the catapults — not only halting their charge, but actually retreating.

Now, even the reckless ones weren't reckless anymore. With startled cries, they began to flee. In minutes, every bandit had retreated to Double-Winged Tiger's side. They clustered around him, too fearful to advance further.

Thus ended the bandit army's first wave of attacks.

From Bu Zhan Ni's command post, two messengers ran and entered the formations of Double-Winged Tiger and Purple Gold Dragon. Shortly after, both commanders hurried toward Bu Zhan Ni's command post. The three bandit chiefs gathered, gesturing at Bai Family Fortress as if planning their next move.

Standing atop the corner tower, Bai Yuan snapped open his "Gentleman" fan with a swish. "Heh," he smirked. "The celestial weapon gifted by the Deity is truly formidable. In less than a blink, we demolished the bandits' first wave!"

Cheng Xu stepped up beside him. "These twenty siege weapons... they certainly inspire terror. Even an imperial army facing them would be bewildered, much less these bandits. Retreating out of fear makes sense. But they aren't fools. They will soon find a counter-tactic — charging in scattered formations."

Bai Yuan nodded. While devastating, siege weapons were notoriously inaccurate. The bandits would surely resort to dispersing their forces when attacking, eventually reaching the fortress wall.

"So they scatter? Let them," Bai Yuan declared. "Scattered troops are weak ones. There's no reason we can't hold them off."

Cheng Xu needed no such reminder — he was far more battle-savvy than Bai Yuan.

After weighing the options, Cheng Xu flashed a fierce grin. "Tell your servants to withdraw from the front line of the fortress wall. My soldiers will take their place. Damn it, I am a ninth-rank inspector of Great Ming, commanding imperial soldiers! I won't be mocked by a bunch of amateurs!"

Hearing his words, Bai Yuan brightened considerably: This timid commander has finally gained some backbone! At last, he isn't solely focused on escape. Excellent. With the imperial soldiers willing to fight earnestly, defending just became far easier!

With a wave of Chen Xu's hand, over one hundred imperial soldiers surged forward to the fortress wall. Bai Yuan's servants retreated to the second defensive tier, while the militia fell back to the third tier...

Just as the fortress completed its troop realignment, the bandit forces outside began stirring once more.

The three bandit chiefs had evidently finalized their plan. Double-Winged Tiger and Purple Gold Dragon returned to their own forces. Then, with a simultaneous bellow from both groups, their men rushed forward. Like ants escaping their flooded nest, they dispersed in every direction, positioning themselves over a zhang apart from one another.

“Charge!” screamed both Double-Winged Tiger and Purple Gold Dragon.

One thousand soldiers, under both commanders, surged toward Bai Family Fortress.

Chapter 114: Unable To Scale The Wall

The bandit army spread out their positions, charging toward Bai Family Fortress once more.

The catapults and Giant Crossbow Vehicles began firing simultaneously.

Rocks flew through the air, crashing down with a thunderous boom. But with the bandits dispersed, the damage wasn't severe. Only the truly unlucky wretches were hit directly by a stone and killed instantly.

The effectiveness of the Giant Crossbow Vehicles was also significantly reduced; their bolts easily passed through the gaps between the bandits.

The foolish bandits at the forefront roared with laughter, their morale soaring instantly. “Big Brother Bu Zhan Ni is truly amazing! A simple trick and the damn officials couldn't touch us!”

However, the front-runners hadn't even enjoyed their triumph for two seconds when a row of officials appeared atop the fortress wall. They nocked their arrows and loosed a volley towards the charging bandits.

The bows in the officials' hands were nothing like the hunting bows carried by the local gentry. These bows were called “Kaiyuan Bows.”

The highest grade Kaiyuan Bow had a draw weight of 120 jin, while the lowest grade still had 60 jin.

The archery skills of these bowmen also far surpassed those of the local gentry. In this single volley, at least five out of ten arrows struck their targets.

The foolish bandits in front, still laughing gleefully, suddenly felt a sharp pain in their chests. Looking down, they saw an arrow lodged in their burlap clothing, wobbling in their chests, its fletching still trembling...

An arrow shot from a 60-jin bow was no joke in terms of lethality.

The swiftest dozen foolish bandits dropped like flies, grabbing at the shafts embedded in their bodies as they writhed on the ground, howling in agony. "I'm hit... I'm hit... hurts like hell... damn... so painful..."

After the first flurry of arrows, the archers didn't hesitate. They nocked their second arrows and loosed another volley...

This highlighted the disadvantage of the bandits' spread-out formation. When the front rank fell, the rear ranks had to run forward a few extra steps to close the gap and become the new front line. This brief interval gave the archers enough time to draw and nock their bows again.

Immediately, another row of archers sent down another flurry of arrows, felling dozens more bandits.

They drew their bows once more. Another volley flew.

The bandit troops who had dodged the giant bolts and managed to reach the fortress wall now found it impossible to evade the archers' arrows. Soon, bodies littered the ground.

"Our archers! Return fire!" Purple Gold Dragon bellowed.

The bandits drew their hunting bows and sent a wave of arrows back towards the officials on the wall. However, the officials wore cloth armor. Though it might have been shoddily made and the metal plates rusty, rusty armor was still armor. The arrows shot from hunting bows were weak and feeble, utterly incapable of piercing the officials' armor plates. They all bounced off harmlessly and clattered to the ground.

“Pot lids! Raise the pot lids!” Double-Winged Tiger roared furiously.

Bandits carrying pot lids hurriedly raised them, shielding their chests.

The wooden pot lids proved quite effective at blocking arrows. With a chorus of muffled thud thud thud sounds, the shielded bandits finally reached the fortress wall.

The wall of Bai Family Fortress was no higher than that of an ordinary country manor – only about ten feet tall. Scaling it required only two bandits to form a human ladder. As bandits reached the wall base and prepared to act as stepping stones for their comrades, an official holding a large stone appeared atop the crenellations. He hurled the large stone straight down onto one of them.

The pot lid offered no defense against a large stone. With a loud crack, both man and lid were smashed to the ground. The official snorted derisively, chuckling “Heh,” before ducking his head back behind the wall.

After throwing the stone, the official turned his head and called back, “Stone! Bring it!”

A strong woman, stooped low, scurried over and handed him another large stone...

The official took the large stone, leaned out over the wall again, and heaved it down with full force. In the blink of an eye, another bandit soldier was crushed to the ground.

The bandit troops were being battered left and right, but they had finally reached the base of the fortress wall. Retreat was unthinkable now. They had to make a desperate push to get over the top, even if it meant death.

Soon, a human ladder formed. A fierce bandit, brandishing his saber, scrambled up and over the wall. But before he could find his footing, three officials, wielding three spears, thrust them simultaneously into his body...

The spears of the officials weren’t mere sharpened bamboo poles. They were tipped with iron spearheads. Each thrust tore a gaping, bloody hole, piercing from front to back.

The fierce bandit shrieked in agony and toppled backwards off the wall.

Intense combat broke out in multiple spots along the fortress wall...

Desperate bandits continuously scaled the walls, but the officials of that era were like divine warriors descending upon the bandit army, utterly impossible to withstand. The hundred-plus officials held the front lines, protected by their cloth armor. Bandits had to exhaust every method just to injure a single official, yet the officials could send three or four of them tumbling off the fortress with just a few moves.

Not to mention, large numbers of Bai family servants and militia were assisting. Bandits who managed to climb onto the fortress wall couldn't hold their ground for long.

Cheng Xu stood at the rear supervising the battle, not joining the fray himself. He only cursed a bit when particularly riled up, or directed the dozen or so reserve officials to plug holes in the defensive line.

Seeing someone now in command, Bai Yuan relaxed a little. He stretched out his hand to a trusted servant beside him and commanded loudly, "Bring my bow!"

The servant wiped sweat from his brow. "Is the lord going to shoot arrows again?"

Bai Yuan snorted. "This lord has been diligently practicing archery these past days. The art of 'shooting' from the Six Arts of Gentlemen has long since been restored within me! Hahaha! Watch this lord demonstrate what true 'gentleman archery' looks like!"

With that, he drew his bow, nocked an arrow, aimed at a bandit soldier who had just scrambled onto the wall, and swished—sent an arrow flying.

Such an arrow, streaking across the sky, chasing the stars and the moon, piercing the firmament...

"Thud!"

It struck the vital center of an official's back.

Everyone: "..."

Clad in cloth armor, the rusty heart-protecting plate deflected the arrow. He wasn't injured, but he flew into a rage. Twisting around, he roared, "Who the hell is shooting their own men?!"

After roaring, he saw it was Lord Bai Yuan holding the bow.

He could only swallow his anger, offering an awkward smile instead. He turned back around and continued fighting the enemy.

Bai Yuan's old face flushed slightly. "Cross out 'shooting' from the Six Arts of Gentlemen. Cross it out."

He then turned to his servant. "Take note of this official. Prepare a substantial gift later. Apologize to him on my behalf. I hold the art of 'propriety' in the Six Arts in very high esteem."

Everyone: "..."

Cheng Xu interjected, "Stop fooling around. The bandit army is starting to retreat."

Bai Yuan looked up. Indeed, the bandit army was pulling back, their morale utterly broken.

No matter how Double-Winged Tiger and Purple Gold Dragon yelled and admonished, the bandit troops refused to throw their lives away anymore. They had no choice but to order a withdrawal.

Hordes of bandit soldiers retreated like an ebbing tide, carrying away every wounded comrade and corpse they could manage. Their earlier arrogance was matched only by their current wretchedness. In an instant, Bai Family Fortress plunged into quiet.

In the distance, the large flag bearing the character “Mud” wavered twice, then headed towards Huanglong Mountain. Double-Winged Tiger and Purple Gold Dragon’s forces also retreated, following the “Mud” flag.

The people inside Bai Family Fortress stood momentarily stunned. Then, cheering erupted as one: “We won! Bai Family Fortress is secured!”

“Bai Family Fortress is secured!”

Servants, militia, and villagers all cheered together, their voices shaking the land for miles.

Bai Yuan took out his folding fan. With a flick, it snapped open, revealing the characters “Gentleman” (君子) painted upon it. He laughed heartily, filled with pride. His gaze swept over the ten catapults and ten Giant Crossbow Vehicles, then moved towards the villagers who had risked their lives to help him repel the enemy. He thought to himself: It is all thanks to the Deity who gave me such formidable weapons and vast stores of grain to relieve the villagers. Only because the villagers within miles of Bai Family Fortress could eat their fill were they willing to fight the bandits so desperately. Truly, it is by the Deity’s blessing!

Chapter 115: New Weapon, Block Missile

“The Bai Family Fortress held.”

A fast horse rider galloped from the direction of Bai Family Fortress. When he arrived in front of Gaojia Village, it became clear that the man on horseback was a servant of the Bai family. He shouted at the top of his voice toward Gaojia Fortress: “The Bai Family Fortress held! Lord Bai and Inspector Cheng Xu joined forces to repel Bu Zhan Ni. The Bai Family Fortress is safe now.”

The villagers of Gaojia Village, upon hearing this, emerged from the fields, corners, rooftops, and various places, shouting in unison: “Great!”

“Lord Bai is a kind-hearted family; it’s good that he is all right.”

“If Bai Family Fortress is safe, then the bandits won’t enter our county, right?”

Then the servant dismounted at the fortress gate. Among the crowd of villagers, he walked briskly into the fortress. After paying respects to Thirty-Two, he went straight to the room of Madam Bai and Young Master Bai, who were lodging in Gaojia Village. He reported to the mistress and young master about the battle situation at Bai Family Fortress.

Li Daoxuan lay outside the box, eating tomato and egg covered rice, while listening to his vivid account of how Bai Family Fortress defended against the enemy.

Madam Bai, with a happy expression, said: "Since the bandit army is repelled, can we move back to Bai Family Fortress?"

"Madam, Young Master," said the servant. "This time, the invading bandit army was only Bu Zhan Ni's division. Yichuan's Zuo Guazi did not appear. If he also joins, the total bandit army could reach three thousand men. Then, Bai Family Fortress might not be held. Inspector Cheng Xu is unreliable and might flee at any time. So, Lord Bai asked me to tell you, madam, to lodge in Gaojia Village for a little longer."

Upon hearing this, Madam Bai sighed heavily: "Sigh, all right. You tell him to be careful, don't be stubborn. If the situation turns bad, just abandon Bai Family Fortress and flee."

The servant said: "This servant will obey."

The servant bade farewell to the young master and madam, went out the door, mounted his horse, and returned to Bai Family Fortress.

Li Daoxuan, after hearing the conversation, couldn't help but frown.

Not over yet!

There were five or six thousand bandits in Huanglong Mountain; they had only come out to fight this once.

Even Song Gongming attacked Zhu Family Village three times. The Huanglong Mountain bandits might not stop after just one attack on Bai Family Fortress?

No, he had to help his own little people.

Bai Yuan and his group of servants were also among Li Daoxuan's own little people; he couldn't not help.

But... how to help him better?

The plastic catapults and plastic giant crossbow vehicles had very limited combat effectiveness. Moreover, it was impossible to increase the number of catapults and giant crossbow vehicles any further. The space inside the fortress determined that catapults and giant crossbow vehicles could not be stacked infinitely.

Let Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu drive the sun chariot to ram?

No!

The sun chariot's off-road ability was not strong. If it entered ravines or field ridges, the chariot might get stuck and stop moving. Then Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu would lose their lives in vain.

They needed a more shockingly powerful weapon, one that could shatter the bandits' willpower instantly.

Preferably something that could fire a bunch of "projectile weapons" rapidly in a short time, from afar making the enemy cry for their parents.

Rapid fire!

Li Daoxuan's eyes suddenly brightened, eh?

He suddenly thought of something.

He quickly opened the online shopping site. Last time, he vaguely remembered seeing an interesting little toy. It seemed too big for the little people to use, so he didn't buy it. But now that Solar Vehicle No. 3 was ready for use, transporting heavy goods was no longer a problem. So, he could buy that thing.

Block missile launcher, full length 7 centimeters.

Placed in the late Ming era, it became a huge object 14 meters long, very massive. But it had an advantage: it was detachable and assembleable. It could be dismantled into pieces first. Then, using the large Solar Vehicle No. 3, the parts could be transported to Bai Family Fortress. After that, Bai Yuan could organize the militia to assemble it.

Good, he swiftly placed the order, saying to the shop owner: "Dear, I'll pay extra, expedite it with SF Express."

The magic of money was unparalleled in the world!

After a good half day, the block missile was acquired.

By then, Gaojia Village was near evening, with the sun setting in the west.

Madam Bai stood on the tall corner tower, gazing towards Bai Family Fortress, her heart filled with worry over it.

Young Master Bai stood beside her and said softly, "Mother, Father has always been honest, kind, and self-reflective as a gentleman throughout his life, and Heaven will surely take care of our Bai family. Please set your heart at ease."

Madam Bai sighed and said, "I hope so."

Just at that moment, Gao Yiye clambered up the nearby stairs and stood beside them, saying, "Young Master Bai, the Deity has a magical artifact to teach you to use. Learn it well, and tomorrow return home to teach your father."

Young Master Bai was surprised, “Me?”

He was only a half-grown boy around thirteen or fourteen, but children that age generally know a fair amount and learn quickly. Hearing that the Deity wanted to teach him, he felt curious, somewhat fearful, and a bit excited too.

But Madam Bai was startled, “Send my son back to Bai Family Fortress? That’s too dangerous!”

Gao Yiye smiled and said, “It’s just to go back and teach Mr. Bai how to use the magical artifact, then return to Gaojia Village right away.”

Only then did Madam Bai feel reassured.

Gao Yiye said, “Get ready to watch.”

Madam Bai and Young Master Bai hurriedly stood solemnly and widened their eyes.

They saw in the sky where the clouds parted, a large pile of weird, strange objects that resembled the colorful walls of old descending and scattering across the open ground before Gaojia Fortress.

Next, the dislodged pieces floated into the air as if seized by an invisible hand, clicked to assemble, and then clicked to assemble again. Very swiftly, they merged into a massive object over four zhang long.

Madam Bai and Young Master Bai were dumbfounded, “What... is this?”

Gao Yiye shouted loudly, “Li Da, the Deity wants you to strike the mechanisms behind that thing!”

Li Da appeared promptly, carrying a heavy hammer, and chuckled, “Releasing the magical artifact again? Wow, this artifact is huge!”

Gao Yiye shouted, “See those four mechanisms behind? Strike them continuously.”

Li Da laughed, "Alright!"

He swung the heavy hammer, "thud thud thud thud," striking the four mechanisms one after another. With each strike, the magical weapon launched two huge cylindrical shells; after four strikes, eight shells soared across the sky and thumped onto a distant hillside, knocking down several withered trees and raising clouds of dust.

Li Da exclaimed, "Oh dear, this thing is powerful!"

Madam Bai and Young Master Bai also watched in stunned silence.

Gao Yiye asked, "Young Master Bai, the Deity asks if you've learned it?"

Young Master Bai said, "Eh? Eh? I've learned it: to strike those four mechanisms behind with the heavy hammer, right? I'll fetch a heavy hammer now and hit it for the Deity to observe."

"Poof!" Gao Yiye burst out laughing, "Hahaha, the Deity isn't telling you to imitate Blacksmith Li—he wants you to learn how to assemble the fragments of the magical weapon."

Young Master Bai said, "Eh? The assembly method? Oops, I forgot to notice it."

Everyone fell silent.

Chapter 116: I Remembered It All

Young Master Bai had been watching the invisible hand assemble the block missile in mid-air earlier, foolishly grinning away without committing any of the steps to memory. Now that he was being questioned, his face instantly flushed a liverish purple.

He was unbearably mortified.

Beside him, Madam Bai seethed with rage and gave her son a hard pinch on the ear.

“The Deity is teaching you how to use a magical weapon, yet instead of learning the important parts, you focused on how Blacksmith Li struck the mechanism? How could I give birth to such a foolish son!”

Young Master Bai covered his face, not daring to retort, obediently enduring the scolding.

Madam Bai: “Hurry up and apologize to the Deity!”

Gao Yiye: “No need. The Deity says not to apologize. He will demonstrate it for you again. This time, you must watch carefully.”

Young Master Bai immediately snapped to attention, his eyes wide open, fixed intently on that strange magical weapon. It went click, click, click, piece by piece disassembling, falling apart, and soon became a pile of scattered components again.

Gao Yiye: “Alright, the Deity will begin assembling now.”

The blocks flew up once more, merging together in mid-air. The crisp sounds of assembling blocks filled the air. Before long, the block missile was reassembled.

Li Daoxuan even reached his hand down the slope to retrieve the eight shells and reloaded them into the missile launch tubes.

Gao Yiye: “Did you get it clearly this time?”

Young Master Bai looked up, face radiant with excitement: “Reporting to the Deity, I have remembered it all.”

“Quite quick to learn,” Gao Yiye said. “The Deity praises you for being clever.”

Young Master Bai himself had little reaction, but Madam Bai beside him was overjoyed: “The Deity praised my son as clever! Hahahaha! My son was praised by the Deity! Hahahaha!”

Later, whenever Madam Bai boasted to other women in her chats, she would tell everyone, “My son was praised by the Deity, who said he is clever.” This claim she boasted about her entire life.

While Madam Bai was laughing uproariously with delight, Gao Yiye said to Young Master Bai: “Tomorrow morning, the Deity will send Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu, bringing three sets of magical missiles and a large quantity of shells to Bai Family Fortress. You will go with them and teach your father how to assemble the magical missiles.”

Despite his young age, Young Master Bai had good manners. He made a deep bow toward the sky: “I humbly obey the Decree of the Deity! Heh, the ‘Rites’ part of the Six Arts, I learned it from my father—”

Pinch! Madam Bai gave him another hard pinch on the ear: “Don’t learn that from your father.”

...

Early in the morning, Cheng Xu rose very early.

He was writing a memorial to the throne. Though a military officer, he could read and write, though his literary skill wasn’t on par with civil officials. He could manage plain talk and commonplace language, chronicling events straightforwardly enough to recount what had happened clearly.

“I, leading a hundred soldiers, defended Bai Family Fortress against the bandit army, overseeing the porters in felling trees to build weapons such as catapults and giant crossbow vehicles, training the local gentry. After several days, the bandits indeed arrived, covering the heavens and earth, their numbers exceeding six thousand. Yet I harbored not a shred of fear. First, I used catapults and giant crossbow vehicles to crush the bandits’ morale, then led troops out to mask and attack, shattering the villains in a single blow. The scoundrels fled, casting aside helmets and armor, retreating into Huanglong Mountain. I pursued the bandit army for over thirty li, slaughtering bandits without number. The villains were terror-stricken, never daring to invade our Chengcheng again...”

He wrote animatedly, filled with self-satisfaction.

Having achieved such a great feat, promotion and wealth were within reach. Hahahaha!

Just as he was overjoyed, the deputy inspector pushed the door open and entered, speaking in a low voice: "General, we received news brought down by hunters from the mountains."

Cheng Xu: "Oh? Report!"

Deputy inspector: "The hunters reported that after Bu Zhan Ni retreated to Huanglong Mountain, he reunited once more with Yichuan's Zuo Guazi. The two armies are now marching jointly towards Bai Family Fortress."

Cheng Xu: "Damn it!"

The brush in his hand clattered to the table. He fumed: "Why?! Those scoundrels suffered a heavy defeat in our Chengcheng County! They should dare not come again! They should head northeast into Yichuan County, or west to Luochuan County! Why must they come to Chengcheng County? As long as they didn't come here, it wouldn't be my problem!"

The deputy inspector lowered his voice: "They say there's a formidable commander stationed in Yichuan County... Hong Chengchou, Shaanxi Grain Transport Supervisor. Zuo Guazi was beaten so badly by him that he dares not face him or go to Yichuan County. As for Luochuan County, they say there's also a formidable patrol officer... Bu Zhan Ni was actually driven into Huanglong Mountain by that man... So... so..."

Cheng Xu grimaced: "So they're squeezing the soft persimmon, right? I, Cheng Xu, look easy to deal with, do I?"

The deputy inspector broke out in a cold sweat.

Cheng Xu raged: "Where about me looks like a soft persimmon?! Exactly where?!"

Deputy inspector: "Leader, don't be angry now. Think about how to deal with these two villains first. They've joined forces, their fighting strength amounts to fully three thousand. With this small Bai Family Fortress, we ultimately cannot defeat them. We'd better slip away."

Panic churned in Cheng Xu's heart: "I planned to slip away anytime anyway; I wasn't bound to hold this Bai Family Fortress. But if those villains refuse utterly to go to Luochuan or Yichuan Counties, they'll surely march straight into Chengcheng County after breaking through Bai Family Fortress, eventually throwing the entire county into ruin. As Patrol Officer of Chengcheng, where could I flee? Escape today, be caught tomorrow. Even if by luck I escape a while longer, in the end the Emperor will hold me accountable, it'll still be the crime of dereliction of duty. The Donglin Party Magistrate will impeach me again, and this head of mine... won't be kept."

Cheng Xu snapped his head up and suddenly saw the deputy inspector's face transform into his grandmother's, who grinned at him: "Good great-grandson, come keep your great-grandmother company."

"Ah!" he screamed, turning around to see another great-grandmother standing behind him: "Good great-grandson, your great-grandmother is so lonely..."

Cheng Xu: "Aaaaaaaagh!"

Thud! He face-planted onto his desk, sweating profusely. "I'm dead... This time I'm really dead."

Just then, outside came the loud shout of the Bai Family Fortress sentinel: "Lord! Lord! Gao Chuwu has come again! He's brought us more stuff!"

Cheng Xu: "Huh? Gao Chuwu? That guy who brought us the strange catapults and giant crossbow vehicle? He's back?"

His spirits lifted, rushing with pride. He shot out of the room in an arrow-like burst.

Indeed, that enormous strange vehicle stood parked at the gate of Bai Family Fortress once more. This time too, the vehicle was piled high with goods. It was the same bizarre material that wasn't metal, nor iron, nor stone, nor wood. However, this time it wasn't clear what it was – it resembled a jumble of chaotic equipment, useless squares.

A young master in white clothes sprang down from the vehicle, looking about thirteen or fourteen, exceedingly young, without a trace of facial hair. It was precisely Young Master Bai. He tilted his head back and shouted loudly to Bai Yuan: "Father! I'm back!"

Bai Yuan took a single glance and panicked: "Eh? Why have you come back? This place is dangerous! Get back to Gaojia Village at once!"

Chapter 117: Are You Playing With Me?

Young Master Bai revealed a confident smile: "Father, I received orders from the Deity to deliver magical missiles. Since they require immortal arts for assembly, the Deity sent me to explain the method, fearing you might not know."

Bai Yuan: "Huh? Magical missiles? What is that?"

Cheng Xu darted to Bai Yuan's side, following up eagerly: "What new weapon is this missile?"

Young Master Bai declared proudly: "Father, please dispatch hired guards immediately. They must unload the magical missile fragments from the cart. I'll instruct them on assembling it right now."

Hearing these came from the Deity, Bai Yuan hesitated not at all. With a wave of his hand, he gave the order. Large groups of hired guards scurried out, dragging and pulling a heap of bizarre fragments from the cart down.

Bai Yuan did recognize these fragments. Weren't they pieces of Gaojia Village's colorful wall? They had just been painted gray this time. What use could they serve? Was the Deity intending for us to build a new wall?

Pondered possible uses. Building a taller wall could, indeed, be somewhat useful.

While pondering all kinds of possibilities, he heard Young Master Bai directing nearby hired guards to carry the fragments into the central courtyard of Bai Family Fortress. This fairly spacious yard, measuring several zhang in both length and width, usually served for martial training.

Young Master Bai gestured, deciding the place could accommodate the magical missiles, and began commanding: “You men—move that fragment on the left. You men—take the one on the right. Good, lift them up... Fit this protrusion here into that socket... Yes, exactly... Move toward the center now... Bring them together... Stronger ones, push vigorously from both sides...”

Dozens of hired guards hauled two building blocks, crashing them together forcefully.

Snap!

A crisp sound echoed as the two mythical fragments locked together into a larger piece.

Bai Yuan: “???”

Cheng Xu: “???”

Young Master Bai continued: “You men—fetch that fragment over there... Align it with this socket... Aim precisely... Good, both sides push simultaneously... Slam it inward...”

Snap!

Another crisp sound announced the next integration.

Bai Yuan: “???”

Cheng Xu couldn't hold back: “What the hell is this?”

Bai Yuan glanced over: “Though I don't understand it, I feel profoundly bewildered.”

Cheng Xu snapped: “Are you both mad? What nonsense are you playing at, especially now?”

Young Master Bai ordered: “You guys over there—yes, you! Lift that fragment... Mount it over here... Correct... Move further left... Align the socket... Apply force...”

Snap!

Another fragment clicked into place.

Young Master Bai glanced up and suddenly rubbed his sweaty forehead: “Slightly wrong. Quick, pry it off! Reinstall it.”

Bai Yuan: “!!!”

Cheng Xu exploded: “Damn it! Playing with me? Starting over? And here I was, all hopeful about that delivery from Gao Chuwu, while you two fiddle about!”

Young Master Bai bowed deeply to Cheng Xu: “General, please bear with me. I merely misspoke slightly. Correction shall happen immediately.”

Cheng Xu scowled: “Don’t think refined speech makes your nonsense sound wise.”

Young Master Bai turned, resuming command: “Bring that piece over... Here... Align it... Jam it home...”

Snap!

A series of dizzyingly strange operations.

Everyone present was utterly baffled, but as long as Bai Yuan did not order a halt, the servants and militiamen of Bai Family Fortress had no choice but to continue indulging Young Master Bai in his antics.

After fussing about for a good while, the servants were panting and exhausted, finally completing the task.

Young Master Bai stood before the peculiar device spanning over four zhang in length, first executed a formal bow, then spoke: "Father, uncles, generals... the magical missiles have been successfully assembled. Now, this junior will demonstrate their power to all."

The crowd remained clueless, still unable to grasp what kind of devilish thing this was.

Young Master Bai gestured to the servants and commanded: "All of you together, go push the axle of the magical missiles. Turn it further over... lift it higher..."

The block missile raised its head, its barrel tilted toward the sky.

Young Master Bai pointed at a strong servant: "You over there, take a hammer and strike the four mechanisms at the rear. See them? Those four protruding circular mechanisms—hit them down one by one."

The servant could only reach the lower two mechanisms; the upper two were truly out of reach. He had to set up a square table, climb onto it, lift the hammer, to barely manage.

"Strike!"

At Young Master Bai's order, the servant swung the heavy hammer—thump, thump, thump—knocking down all four mechanisms in rapid succession.

A succession of eight dull thuds echoed out, and eight giant plastic shells, each longer than two men, shot one after another from the barrel of the magical missiles...

Once launched, they soared incredibly far, flying over Bai Family Fortress's castle, skimming past a patch of parched farmland, clearing a dried-up riverbed, and finally crashing with deafening booms onto the slopes of distant Huanglong Mountain.

The sheer range was so astonishing that everyone present nearly had their jaws drop.

It turned out, while the block missile toy in Li Daoxuan's world had a range of 5 meters, after arriving in the late Ming dynasty, its range became 1000 meters.

That meant it could fire upon enemies two li away.

It was far beyond the range of even the longest-distance catapults (about 300 meters) and Giant Crossbow Vehicles (about 100 meters), exceeding them by a huge margin.

The entire Bai Family Fortress was utterly dumbstruck.

But the most bewildered person in the whole scene was Cheng Xu, who, as the most knowledgeable about weapons of war, grasped exactly what the range of this magical missiles implied.

Cheng Xu thrust his hands skyward and let out a long, hearty laugh: "Hahaha, Heaven helps me, Heaven helps me. With such a weapon, those puny bandit army are not worth mentioning. Hahaha, grandmother, your great-grandson must delay visiting you again, hahaha, your great-grandson has once again clawed back from the brink of death."

He snapped his head down: "Young Master Bai, how many of these magical missiles are there in total?"

Young Master Bai held up three fingers.

Cheng Xu beamed with delight: "Quick, quickly assemble the remaining two as well."

Young Master Bai said: "But at home... there aren't any courtyards this spacious. The magical missiles each require at least four zhang in length and width."

Bai Yuan sprung out immediately: "Back Garden—tear down all the rockeries. We can place another one there."

Then, he pondered further: “That yard before the book pavilion, if we dismantle the gazebo and corridor, we can fit one there too.”

Young Master Bai said: “Father, on the wall of the gazebo before the book pavilion, there’s your calligraphy—your greatest masterpiece from your entire life.”

Bai Yuan snorted: “For the sake of Bai Family Fortress, what does sacrificing a few works of calligraphy matter? Among the Six Arts of Gentlemen, just set aside the ‘shu’ art for now—scratch it off entirely for all I care.”

Chapter 118: Fear Stemmed from Insufficient Firepower

Everyone in the Bai Family Fortress was mobilized. Even Cheng Xu’s one hundred-plus officials joined in, dismantling the rockery garden in the rear courtyard and demolishing the pavilion and corridor in front of the study.

The Bai Family Fortress thus gained two more spacious courtyards to station the magical missiles.

Under Young Master Bai’s direction, a large crowd carried bulky building blocks, thoroughly enjoying themselves while constructing.

Such a grand spectacle of over a hundred people playing with blocks was unfortunately unseen by Li Daoxuan, or he would have been delighted for days.

Finally, three magical missiles were assembled.

Young Master Bai, having fulfilled his task, was sent back to Gaojia Village by Bai Yuan. A half-grown child was not permitted to remain on the battlefield.

Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu transported hundreds more plastic shells. Each shell was as long as two men stacked upon each other. Made of hard plastic rather than stone, these “giant shells” were large but not heavy. A few villagers easily lifted them and loaded them into the missile launchers’ barrels.

Bai Yuan personally directed a large group of villagers and sturdy women to practice loading actions. Each magical missile could fire eight shells consecutively. Each shell required a team to handle, necessitating eight teams per missile. For three missiles, twenty-four teams were needed.

Over a hundred villagers were required for this feat of loading ammunition!

They practiced diligently and quickly to minimize the loading time of the magical missiles, ensuring greater confidence when confronting the bandit army.

Thus, one hundred people ceaselessly rotated around the missile launch stands, repeatedly drilling the loading motions.

Cheng Xu watched from the side, a familiar odd feeling rising again: This was during a severe drought! These villagers continuously hauling large, heavy shells in circles must be starving quickly. How were they so willingly obedient?

As he pondered these thoughts, the Bai family steward emerged with a group of servants carrying large baskets. Each basket overflowed with fine steamed buns made from fine white flour. The buns were visibly well-made, plump, white, and substantial.

The steward shouted loudly, "By Lord Bai's order, eat these buns and resume practice..."

The villagers swarmed forward with a roar. Each grabbed two buns, taking huge bites that left massive crescent shapes. Cheeks bulged as they chewed, their words becoming muffled: "Mmm... fragrant... delicious..."

"Mmm... working for Lord Bai is good... plenty to eat..."

Cheng Xu witnessed this and froze inwardly: Damned if he dared feed the villagers until full! Even his soldiers didn't eat this well.

He turned instinctively towards his troops—venerable regular soldiers of the Imperial Ming army—all now drooling over the villagers' buns.

Cheng Xu could only let out a long sigh.

He understood well. Life for military households was tough. Since the Wanli era, the court rarely paid full wages, dragging payments month after month, year after year. Many military households had fled; numerous soldiers had even joined the bandit ranks, becoming fierce warriors among them.

To placate the soldiers who had followed him for years, Cheng Xu had even dipped into his own pocket several times—a painful expense.

Thump!

A large basket laden with steamed buns was placed before Cheng Xu. The Bai steward smiled, “General Cheng, share these among your Military Gentlemen.”

Cheng Xu’s spirits rose, pride washing over him. He was here to exploit the wealthy, after all. He waved at his men: “Eat! Don’t stand on ceremony with Lord Bai. His ancestor was once a magistrate and produced two county magistrates. He’s rich; we won’t eat him out of house and home.”

The soldiers cheered, swarming forward. Dusky hands grabbed at the snow-white buns, leaving grimy handprints.

But it mattered little. Blackened by their own hands, they devoured the buns ravenously. They were so delicious that soldiers licked their fingers clean afterward, whitening their previously sooty hands substantially.

Dawn of the next day had just broken when the sentinel shouted, “Bandits! The bandits are descending the mountain!”

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The sound of bamboo clappers reverberated over the Bai Family Fortress.

Bai Yuan and Cheng Xu were the first to appear on the watchtower. Together, they gazed north towards Huanglong Mountain. Masses of bandit troops were slowly descending the slope.

This time, the bandit force was significantly larger than before.

Cheng Xu assessed with one glance: “Three thousand! At least three thousand! Bu Zhan Ni from Luochuan and Yichuan’s Zuo Guazi are coming together this time.”

The last report of these two joining forces had terrified him. Seeing their approach firsthand now, however, fear vanished. Perhaps “all fear stemmed from firepower deficiency.” With sufficient firepower now, what concern was left? His grandmother lay completely forgotten beyond the clouds.

Pointing towards the hillside, he measured roughly and chuckled, “Almost. They’ve entered the missiles’ range.”

Bai Yuan sounded surprised, “Have they?”

Cheng Xu retorted, “Mr. Bai! Estimating distance by sight is a skill you still need to learn properly from us soldiers.”

Bai Yuan flicked open his folding fan with a snap, revealing the characters “Gentleman.” “This skill falls outside the Six Arts of Gentlemen. I hardly deem learning it necessary.”

Cheng Xu: “...”

Goddamn, I want to hit him. But now was not the time.

Cheng Xu turned towards the villagers already at their posts and bellowed: “Prepare to launch the missiles!”

Hearing the command—regardless of who gave it—the villagers sprang into action. Such was the nature of an untrained rabble: whoever shouted loudest commanded.

Bai Yuan didn't mind Cheng Xu usurping his command of the villagers. He stood with hands clasped behind his back on the rampart, his gaze fixed far on the bandits slowly descending the slope.

The bandit army was descending...

Bu Zhan Ni, meanwhile, was cursing: "Damn Bai Family Fortress! A paltry few hundred people made me take a big fall! That useless patrol inspector Cheng Xu actually grew a spine! Just relying on those damn catapults and giant crossbow vehicles!"

Zuo Guazi asked, "How can such a tiny fortress have so many Siege Weapons?"

Bu Zhan Ni snapped, "How should I know? I'd like to ask that too!"

Zuo Guazi turned and spoke softly: "Old Lu, advise us how we should attack?"

A fierce bandit, clad in the Ming army's distinctive cloth armor, bearing a Kaiyuan Bow and a sword, stepped out from behind Zuo Guazi. Clearly, this man had once been an official. Everyone knew his surname was Lu, that he was a border army veteran who had fought numerous battles against northern nomads, but his full name remained unknown—rebels used aliases to protect their families.

Old Lu chuckled darkly, "They expect us to attack from the north. Their catapults and chariots are aimed that way. Once down the mountain, let's split the main force. Both flanks will circle the Bai Family Fortress. Brother Bu Zhan Ni and Brother Zuo Guazi should each command a column attacking from east and west. Their Siege Weapons turn slowly. They won't manage both flanks."

Bu Zhan Ni and Zuo Guazi beamed. "Brilliant plan! An ex-soldier truly understands warfare."

Just as they finished speaking, their troops cried out: "Eh? What's flying over here?"

...

Year Seven of Tianqi (1627), August. Hu Tingyan, Provincial Governor of Shaanxi, submitted a memorial:

“Lin-Gong frontier provisions are short by five or six years, exceeding two hundred thousand taels; Jinglu border fortress short by two or three years; Guzhen’s central funds owed from Year Forty-Seven of Wanli to Year Six of Tianqi total over one hundred and fifty-nine thousand taels silver.

“The armies first pawned robes and sold arrows; now they sell children and divorce wives. They once begged on streets; now desert the ranks. Complaints once murmured in sand are now shouted openly.”

Chapter 119: Something’s Flying Over?

“What is that?”

The bandit troops turned their heads to look. They saw two strange objects flying up from within Bai Family Fortress, streaking across the sky, heading straight toward their direction.

No one thought they were cannonballs!

Not even Old Lu, who had served in the border army and possessed ample combat experience, believed they were cannonballs.

Everyone simply gaped stupidly as those two strange objects flew on and on... gliding over the fortress wall of Bai Family Fortress, sweeping past the dry, cracked farmland, soaring across the rolling expanse of yellow sandy earth, until they finally landed on the slopes of Huanglong Mountain...

“THUD! THUD!”

The two massive objects landed, striking the mountainside at least thirty meters away from the bandit troops, bringing down two large trees in the process.

Since they didn’t land on them, they weren’t afraid!

True to his name, Double-Winged Tiger moved quickly. With a swish, he dashed toward the spot where the gigantic objects had landed, laughing as he ran. “I’ll go see what those flying things are.”

Bu Zhan Ni actually called out a warning, "They might be some kind of giant birds. Be careful, don't get pecked."

Double-Winged Tiger burst into laughter, "I'm a tiger, would I fear birds? That Bai Yuan of Bai Family Fortress, he's like a bird. I'll definitely have him for dinner."

"Hahaha!" A group of bandits roared with laughter.

Meanwhile, inside Bai Family Fortress, Cheng Xu was gesturing toward the spot where the projectiles had landed. He spread his thumb and index finger on both hands, forming a square frame with them. Peering through it at the slopes where the projectiles had struck, he then twisted around and yelled into the courtyard, "Turn the missile a little to the left! Lower its head a tiny bit... Yes... yes, yes, yes... just that much... hehehe, perfectly..."

"Are they aligned now?" Cheng Xu cackled. "No test shots this time! Fire all eight! Fire all eight missiles at once!"

"Orders received!" A villager wielding a big hammer swung it forcefully. BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! Four consecutive strikes activated four mechanisms.

Eight missiles flew out in rapid succession.

On the other side, Double-Winged Tiger had just reached the spot where the two strange objects had landed. He saw two massive, bizarre things lying on the mountainside, each taller than two men put together. Reaching out to touch them, he found the material was weird—neither metal nor iron.

He couldn't figure out what they were at all.

He turned his head and bellowed, "Big Brother! It's not a giant bird! It's some weird thing. They might be chunks of meteorite!"

Bu Zhan Ni: "Meteorite? Landing right in front of us? That's an auspicious sign!"

Throughout history, wasn't the appearance of a monarch's celestial sign often accompanied by falling meteorites?

He had barely formed the thought when his men cried out again, "Here they come again..."

Bu Zhan Ni turned to look. From the direction of Bai Family Fortress, another eight strange objects were streaking arrogantly across the sky, flying straight toward their position.

Old Lu suddenly screamed, "GET DOWN NOW...!"

Only Old Lu, after decades on the battlefield, could discern from the flight path and speed of those eight flying horrors that they were coming down right on top of them.

And only then did it finally dawn on him that these monstrous things might be some kind of cannonballs. It's just that he had never seen cannonballs so huge before. Plus, there had been no explosive roar of cannon fire earlier, which had confused him initially.

Old Lu had just thrown himself face-down onto the ground when the eight monstrosities landed. The first smashed directly onto the mountain path where a large group of bandit troops were queued in a single-file line, descending the mountain. It crashed right into the middle of their line with a THUMP that flung several men sprawling through the air.

Then the second...

The third...

"BOOM! THWHUMP! THUMPTHUMP!"

Eight projectiles struck the mountainside in succession, wreaking havoc on the massed bandits, toppling men and sending others flying.

Cheng Xu was ecstatic. “Hahaha! The angle was perfect! Don’t just stand there looking at the other two missile launchers! Fire them too! Quick, quick, quick! Launch them!”

The villagers standing next to the other two block missiles also swung their huge hammers, knocking down all the mechanisms in succession.

Sixteen missiles soared into the air together.

This time, Cheng Xu didn’t even bother to see if they hit; he shouted loudly, “Loading, load immediately, hurry, hurry, hurry.”

The twenty-four groups of villagers, who were already prepared, lifted huge shells and ran to the missile launch racks in turns, stuffing them into the barrel...

One villager tripped, fell with a thud, and his whole group stumbled down together. As the shells were about to crash onto them, some officials nearby dashed over instantly, catching the shells, thus preventing them from injuring their own men.

“Hurry, hurry, hurry!”

Inside Bai Family Fortress, there was a scene of fervent activity.

Meanwhile, the bandit army on the hillside was in a miserable state.

Three thousand men were walking down several mountain paths on the hillside. The spacing between people wasn’t much, with many even squeezed into the paths. Suddenly, giant shells fell from the sky, crashing down continuously. Who wouldn’t be scared out of their wits by this?

The mountain paths were immediately thrown into disarray. Some hid in the woods on both sides of the road, some dived into dry grass piles, some crouched behind large stones, some ran forward, and some ran backward. In the shoving and collisions on the paths, some people lost their balance, fell, and rolled downward.

Next, more people fell, and large groups slid and rolled together.

The paths were thrown into disarray, and huge shells fell soon after, flinging mud into the air. Some were hit directly by shells and died on the spot; others were knocked over when shells bounced up. While not immediately fatal, they were severely injured.

Tumbling down the hillside and knocking over their comrades caused a stampede. In an instant, the whole hillside was filled with cries and wails, chaotic beyond description.

Old Lu roared, "Don't panic, hold the formation, don't panic! Hide behind large stones in an orderly manner."

But no matter how much he shouted, it was useless. These people were not elite border army troops; they didn't possess the skill to remain calm under pressure. They were just a bunch of peasants who had recently picked up knives. A very few had participated in militia training, but most only knew how to bully the weak when they outnumbered them.

"They're coming again, again, lots of shells flying over here!"

"Ah, ah, ah, there are so many more!"

Seeing another volley of shells flying up from Bai Family Fortress, the bandit army screamed in fear, and many wet their pants.

"Boom! Boom!"

Another wave of shells fell continuously. This time, it was twenty-four again, scattering dust and sand all over the hillside.

"What kind of cursed place is this, why are there such devilish things?"

"Woo woo, mother, I want to go home."

“I’ll never come to Bai Family Fortress again.”

With just one glance, Old Lu understood that morale had collapsed and they could no longer fight.

He rolled on the ground, tumbling over to Bu Zhan Ni and Zuo Guazi, and said quickly, “Brothers, retreat. We can’t fight; morale has collapsed. If we force everyone to charge downhill to Bai Family Fortress in this situation, Cheng Xu could easily crush us, defeating three thousand with just a hundred.”

Bu Zhan Ni and Zuo Guazi were now hiding behind a large stone, their hearts pounding in fear, afraid that a huge shell might land on their heads. Hearing Old Lu’s words, they didn’t hesitate and immediately ordered, “Withdraw, back to the mountains, all withdraw.”

Chapter 120: Let’s Buy You Books

“The bandit army has been driven away!”

“They’ve fled!”

“Hahaha!”

The sentinel laughed excitedly: “They retreated, scrambling back up the mountain. Hahaha! As insolent as their advance was, so wretched their retreat.”

Cheers erupted from inside Bai Family Fortress.

Especially the twenty-four groups of villagers who had been loading the cannonballs burst into uproarious laughter.

Unquestionably, they were the ones who had contributed the most in this battle. Others hadn’t even had a chance to act, so who could compete with their merit?

Likewise overjoyed, Cheng Xu roared with laughter and pointed at the dust-clouded slope: “Little ones, keep a sharp watch on that hillside. Once the bandits have withdrawn, send a few swift-footed men to check. Once we’re certain they won’t return, organize the porters to gather those cannonballs.”

He only needed to issue the command for such minor tasks, leaving deputy inspectors and archer squad leaders to oversee the execution.

As for Cheng Xu himself—of course, he would draft a memorial to report his achievements.

Back in his room, he picked up paper and pen, writing proudly: “Bandit chiefs Bu Zhan Ni and Zuo Guazi rallied ten thousand bandits to assault Bai Family Fortress once more. Though I commanded but a hundred men, I pledged to live or die with Chengcheng. How could they defy official authority? I organized local militia gentry to fell trees and craft missiles to repel the bandits...”

His pen froze at this point.

He’d heard the term “missile” from Young Master Bai—a word utterly unfamiliar before. If he included it in the memorial to the imperial court, would the emperor even understand?

The emperor would surely ask: “What is a ‘missile’?”

Then both civil and military officials would stand dumbfounded. The emperor’s curiosity would peak, likely summoning with an edict: “Deliver this ‘missile’ contraption to the capital. We wish to examine it.”

Should it reach that stage, complications would spiral.

The origin of the missiles would require thorough explanation. With no room for evasion, the connection to “Ghost Village” would inevitably come to light. Cheng Xu’s claim of “heroically repelling the bandits” would vanish, stolen by whatever ghosts resided in that village.

Cheng Xu quickly held the draft memorial over a flame, reducing it to ash. Taking up his brush anew, he repeated the opening, but upon reaching the felling of trees, he shifted words: “I personally led the charge into enemy ranks. Alone, I slew several fierce bandits, my might shaking Huanglong Mountain. Intimidated by my valor, the ten thousand bandits dared not confront me, fleeing in disarray. Untiring, I pursued them thirty miles under nightfall. Only the fear of ambush compelled me to halt the pursuit.”

Upon reviewing his words, he chuckled deeply, thoroughly satisfied.

With such magnificent deeds, those despicable civil officials couldn't undermine him now!

Hahaha!

...

“Bai Family Fortress has triumphed again!”

A galloping horse dashed into Gaojia Village. While still distant, its rider—a Bai family servant—shouted exuberantly: “Praise the Deity’s bestowed magical missiles! Bai Family Fortress is victorious!”

Villagers of Gaojia Village erupted into joyous laughter once more.

A cheerful atmosphere filled the air above the village.

Climbing the watchtower together, Madam Bai and Young Master Bai knelt and kowtowed toward the sky.

The servant thundered up the gate tower to report battle details to them. Thirty-Two and Gao Yiye also gathered to listen.

Li Daoxuan, outside the box, today savored a 29-yuan portion of Leshan Spicy Chicken Skewers. Munching on chicken offal skewers, he also kept an ear tuned to events within.

When the servant described the power of the magical missiles, he gestured theatrically, exaggerating wildly, elevating their might to celestial heights: “A single cannonball blasted over fifty bandits to death!” or “One projectile flattened an entire mountain!” Li Daoxuan outside the box nearly spat out his skewers laughing.

Utter nonsense! Merely a plastic toy cannon blasting down a mountain? No matter how scaled down Huanglong Mountain was, it couldn't be overturned by a mere plastic cannonball.

In reality, forget Huanglong Mountain—even a small stone in the real world couldn't be damaged. Against solid fortifications in the future, these plastic missiles would offer little use.

After the hyperbolic recounting, the servant kowtowed deeply toward the sky: "Our master declares this rout has utterly crushed the bandits' spirits. They no longer dare threaten Bai Family Fortress. Handling brief arrangements, he will journey here to thank the Deity in person."

Li Daoxuan cared little for gratitude. Bai Yuan passing through the village, however, delighted him immensely. That entertaining man was pure distraction, like watching a husky clown around—unending amusement.

Feeling rather smug himself after the servant's narrative, Young Master Bai exclaimed: "Haha! Since the magical missiles drove off those bandits, my contributions in this battle are significant, right? Accomplishment deserves reward! Mother, that talking bird I mentioned last time—will you get it for me now?"

Whap! Madam Bai delivered a hard pinch to his ear. "Fivolities cloud ambition! How utterly disgraceful! Now is the moment for diligent study! Think not that a minor service entitles you to such wasteful trinkets!"

Young Master Bai clutched his sore spot, speechless.

Madam Bai added coolly: "Very well. As reward, Mother shall acquire for you a new collection: Comprehensive Interpretation of the Tai Ji, Western Inscriptions, Correcting Childish Ignorance, Family Rituals, and Canonical Interpretation of Imperial Governance. How does that sound?"

Thump! Young Master Bai collapsed to the floor, unresponsive.

Hearing the book titles, Li Daoxuan had no clue what they signified. Judging from Young Master Bai's reaction, they weren't treasures—more akin to gifting a child the most dreadful textbooks. He sighed internally. Poor lad.

The commotion however reignited his awareness: Recent focus solely on warfare, his constant worry about casualties amongst his figurines, had made him neglect a crucial matter—education.

Without proper study, embracing new knowledge and ideas, dismantling old systems and forging new ideals remained impossible.

Consider peasant uprising rebels like Wang Er, Bu Zhan Ni, Zuo Guazi, Li Zicheng, or Zhang Xianzhong during the Ming dynasty's decline. Lacking guiding ideology, their armed resistance against the landlord class wasn't genuine "revolution"—it was power seizure. Once triumphant, altering the dynasty's name might feign renewal, yet they inevitably replicated obsolete governance.

They simply annihilated existing landlords, then promoted peasants to become new landlords exploiting later peasants... fundamentally changing nothing.

Breaking this cycle demanded new philosophies.

Li Daoxuan sighed deeply, shifting his focus from battlefields to the village's study well.

A cluster of children stood before Scholar Wang reciting The Hundred Family Surnames: "Zhao, Qian, Sun, Li, Zhou, Wu, Zheng, Wang..."

Must it start with these children? How many years would it require?

He pondered this when a shabbily dressed, impoverished-looking young man approached Scholar Wang. "Mr. Wang, I heard you sought me?"