

## I. Dynasty 154

### Chapter 154: The Cannon Arrives

“Wait,” said Xiao Ming, eyes fixed on the fortress ahead, issuing the command calmly.

Atop the walls of Wubao Fortress, a figure who appeared to be the leader stepped into view, observing the incoming reinforcements from the Qingzhou army.

Pointing toward the wall, Chen Fu said, “Your Highness, that’s Liu Chuang, the ringleader of this band. His father was involved in the Lotus Pond conspiracy against you. After their plan failed, I led the Cangzhou troops in a surprise attack on the Liu family’s fortress. We wiped out most of their retainers, but Liu Chuang managed to escape.”

The harsh sunlight made Xiao Ming squint. After the Lotus Pond barbarians were wiped out, he had ordered the news to be sealed and immediately launched an operation to capture the aristocrats involved in the rebellion. Many were caught before they even had time to react. Had the Liu family been more alert at the time, they might have held onto Wubao.

Lu Fei had reported that Chen Fu had used a trick to take the fortress—posing as a merchant buying grain, his men launched a surprise attack at the gates and captured it.

But now, barely a month later, the Liu family had used the exact same method to take it back.

“Let’s go with the usual plan,” Xiao Ming said. “Try to persuade them to surrender, buy time, and wait for them to let their guard down.”

These rebels were different from the retainers of noble houses like the Sun or Wang families. Back then, many were reluctant servants who could be talked into surrendering. But this group had resisted even after the barbarian war, which meant they were ready to fight to the death.

Worse, most of them were likely young nobles themselves, not oppressed servants. Persuasion would have no effect on them.

Chen Fu acknowledged the order and stepped forward to shout terms at the enemy atop the walls—offering the usual “surrender and live” line.

But before he could finish, an arrow shot down from the battlements, landing with a sharp thunk near his feet.

Niu Ben glanced up at the wall and remarked, “That’s a skilled archer. That’s more than 230 meters—most barbarian bows only shoot up to 180 meters. This one has serious strength.”

Then he turned to Lu Fei. “Fetch my bow.”

Luo Xin laughed, “Those fools dared show off their archery in front of the old general? Everyone knows your bowmanship is the pride of the Imperial Guards!”

“I haven’t practiced in five years,” Niu Ben said modestly. “Let’s just hope I don’t embarrass myself in front of His Highness.” But from the tone of his voice, everyone could hear his confidence.

Xiao Ming smiled. “General, your archery is legendary. Please, go ahead.”

Taking the bow from Lu Fei, Niu Ben's weapon was clearly much thicker and heavier than those used by the Qingzhou troops—it was obvious that it required immense strength to draw.

Without even dismounting, Niu Ben nocked an arrow, pulled the string back, and let it fly with a sharp whoosh.

A scream echoed from atop the wall—the same archer who had fired earlier tumbled from the battlements, an arrow embedded clean through his chest.

“Bravo!” Lu Fei and Luo Xin shouted at the same time.

Chen Fu stood stunned. He hadn't known who this new general was—after all, Niu Ben had only just arrived in Cangzhou and word hadn't spread yet.

The Qingzhou soldiers were equally astonished. Many of them had secretly resented Niu Ben's sudden appointment. In their eyes, Lu Fei had always been the rightful commander.

But now they understood—Prince Qi had not made this decision lightly.

Xiao Ming's lips curled into a faint smile. After hearing two days of bad news, this moment finally lifted his spirits. At least Niu Ben lived up to his reputation. He would be a formidable asset in the fight against barbarian cavalry.

The bandits atop the wall clearly panicked after witnessing Niu Ben's shot. A few of them peeked over the edge—then quickly ducked behind cover.

Generally, a bow's range was around 180 meters, with effective killing power within 120. Beyond that, only high-arching shots had any real force. The fact that Niu Ben could accurately kill someone at such distance was terrifying. Without decades of training, it was impossible.

It also proved his superhuman arm strength.

"How about that?" Luo Xin asked, smug. "In my opinion, bows are still better than crossbows. Your Highness, I never quite agreed with the plan to equip the Qingzhou army with so many crossbows instead of bows."

Niu Ben handed the bow back to Lu Fei and snorted, "What did your father even teach you? His Highness is absolutely right to favor crossbows. Training an archer takes three to five years—more if you want them to be accurate. A crossbowman only needs basic training to be battle-ready. Especially for defending fortresses, crossbows are far more useful. In close range, crossbow bolts are even more powerful and more accurate than arrows."

Luo Xin went quiet. Lu Fei chuckled on the side, enjoying the scolding.

He, too, had once doubted the policy—but over time, he came to understand. And with the barbarians advancing south, there was no time to train archers.

“You’re right, General,” Xiao Ming said. “That’s exactly what I was thinking. And in a few days, you’ll see something even more powerful than bows, crossbows, or catapults.”

Niu Ben raised an eyebrow. “You mean that’s what you’ve been working on at the machinery department all this time?”

“Exactly,” Xiao Ming grinned. “Better get off your horse soon—this thing packs a punch.”

The bandits in Wubao Fortress had no idea they were cornered. They never imagined the Qingzhou army would mobilize so many troops just for one fortress. Nor did they realize that stealing a shipment of cement had sealed their fate.

Three days later, a wagon escorted by cavalry rolled into the Qingzhou army’s forward camp outside Wubao.

In those three days, the Qingzhou army and the rebels had mostly traded insults and volleys of arrows. Niu Ben had picked off several enemy archers.

Siege ladders had also been prepared, but Xiao Ming didn’t want to waste soldiers in a drawn-out assault.

Yet Wubao couldn’t be left alone. Not only did it contain valuable cement, it also sat on a key supply route—posing a serious threat to Cangzhou’s logistics.

“Your Highness, the cannon has arrived,” said Chen Qi, accompanied by twelve craftsmen from the machinery department.

Looking at the carefully wrapped cannon on the wagon, Xiao Ming broke into a wide smile.

“General Niu,” he said, turning, “this is my secret weapon.”