

I. Dynasty 157

Chapter 157: Capturing the Bandits

The sound of battle on the field drowned out everything else.

Golden sunlight glinted off polished armor, casting shimmering reflections like ripples across a lake.

Standing on high ground, Xiao Ming watched as five thousand regular troops charged forward in formation. The scale of it stirred his blood—he almost wanted to charge in himself.

But he knew that would only make things harder for Niu Ben, who'd then have to split his attention to protect him.

As the Qingzhou soldiers advanced on Wubao Fortress, the formation shifted under Lu Fei's booming voice. Months of training had made them well-practiced in maneuvering—even their charge was orderly and disciplined.

At the gate, the sword-and-shield troops formed a tight defensive wall to block the arrows raining down from the ramparts, while crossbowmen moved in behind them, retaliating with volley fire.

This three-stage firing system was inspired by musket formations—because crossbows, once fired, needed time to reload. The soldiers had to place them on the ground, brace with their feet, and draw with all their strength.

Because reloading was slow, the three-stage method allowed continuous fire. The first row fired, retreated; the second row fired; then the third—and so on.

Inside the gate, the rebels—mainly noble sons—had no real training.

After the first volley of arrows, they couldn't return fire. The waves of incoming bolts gave them no time to nock and shoot again.

In moments, their archers were either dead or too injured to fight.

The remaining bandits, realizing they couldn't hold the gate, retreated deeper into Wubao to fight among the buildings.

"These rats are smarter than I thought," Lu Fei spat.

"Don't underestimate them," Niu Ben warned. "They're harder to catch now that they're scattered. Break into squads—search and eliminate in units of one hundred."

He was right. The rebels had realized that a head-on clash with the Qingzhou Army would only end in disaster. So they were using the fortress layout to stall and fight on their own terms.

At Niu Ben's order, Lu Fei shouted, "Split formations!"

The Qingzhou troops quickly divided into small units of one hundred, each with a balanced mix of shieldbearers, crossbowmen, and spearmen—long-, mid-, and close-range tactics all accounted for.

Watching this seamless coordination, Xiao Ming nodded in satisfaction. This is close to modern urban combat tactics.

Once formations were reconfigured, the Qingzhou troops stormed into Wubao.

With five times the enemy's numbers, full body armor, and Niu Ben's leadership, it was only a matter of time.

It didn't take long. The gate fell, and Qingzhou flags were raised above it.

Xiao Ming began walking toward the fortress.

Wubao itself wasn't very large. Even with the rebels fleeing in all directions, there weren't many places for them to hide.

He could still hear occasional clashes and shouts from inside, though these were quickly fading—replaced by the disciplined footfalls of Qingzhou formations sweeping room to room.

A short time later, Niu Ben came over and reported, "Your Highness, the remaining rebels have been cleared. One group escaped into a tunnel. We haven't entered it yet."

“A tunnel? I thought they blew that up,” Xiao Ming asked with a frown.

“There’s a second one. I suspect they banked on using it to escape—likely why they were bold enough to retake Wubao. But from what we can tell, it’s blocked,” Niu Ben said with a hearty laugh.

The two of them made their way to the tunnel. The entrance was a narrow, dark hole—just wide enough for one person to squeeze through.

“Cowards! If you’ve got guts, come up and fight!” Lu Fei was standing there shouting down the hole.

A voice answered from within, “Hah! You gang up on us five to one—where’s the honor in that? If you’ve got guts, come down here!”

Luo Xin frowned. “This is tricky. The tunnel only allows one at a time—whoever goes down first would be picked off easily.”

In war, formation mattered. Every commander knew that. Fighting in a narrow space was dangerous.

“We can’t wait,” Niu Ben said grimly. “We don’t know where the tunnel leads, and they’re probably working to clear it. If they escape, they’ll cause more trouble later. I’ll go first. Follow me.”

But Xiao Ming held up a hand and smiled. “No need, General. It’s easy enough—I’ll have them crawl out on their own.”

“Your Highness, no offense, but that sounds a bit far-fetched,” Lu Fei chuckled. “Unless you’re going to fire a cannon down there.”

Xiao Ming was always on friendly terms with his officers, so they could joke openly.

He smirked. “How about a wager? If I make them come out willingly, you give me that tiger hide you hunted last winter.”

Lu Fei blinked, then laughed. “I knew you had your eye on that tiger skin. You can have the tiger bone too if you want.”

“Keep that for your wine,” Xiao Ming joked.

Then he turned to Luo Xin. “Fetch some firewood and straw.”

Luo Xin nodded and quickly sent soldiers to gather it—Wubao had plenty.

Niu Ben stroked his beard and chuckled. He already saw where this was going. That tiger skin was as good as lost.

Soon, bundles of firewood and straw were brought over.

Xiao Ming ordered the soldiers to pile it at the tunnel entrance. Then he told them to light it, but to pour water on the flames constantly so it didn't ignite fully—just enough to produce thick smoke.

His goal wasn't to burn the tunnel—he wanted prisoners. He still had questions about how they got the explosives that collapsed the other tunnel.

Soldiers used large fans to blow the smoke straight down the hole.

Before long, they heard coughing.

Lu Fei's face turned green. He realized he'd run his mouth again—and now his precious tiger hide was gone. Why can't I just shut up for once...

Xiao Ming had actually seen this tactic in a TV show—but back then, it was used by the enemy.

"Cough! Cough! Cough!"

The coughing inside intensified. Soon there were shouts and curses—men yelling for those ahead to move faster.

Then, finally, one man crawled out of the smoke, gasping.

Then another. And another.

One by one, they emerged—each one seized immediately by Qingzhou soldiers. In less than an hour, over a hundred rebels had been captured. The last one passed out the moment he reached the surface.

When no more came, Xiao Ming asked, “Where is Liu Chuang?”

Chen Fu pointed. “That one—covered in soot. That’s him.”

Xiao Ming walked over. The man had fair skin and a scholarly face, now filthy and bruised.

Standing before him, Xiao Ming said, “You’ve got some nerve—retaking Wubao and stealing my cement.”

Liu Chuang knew he was doomed. He glared and spat, “Hmph. Foolish king! Kill me or spare me, I don’t care. Just save your breath.”

