

Great Ming 1111

Chapter 1111 Reinforcements

With everything laid out so plainly, Wu Shen discovered that arguing any further would only make him look childish, so he simply clasped his hands with the solemn dignity of a man conceding defeat and said, "I only hope the situation in Sichuan can be resolved sooner rather than later."

San Shier let out a long, theatrical sigh, the kind of sigh that suggested he carried the fate of mountains and rivers on his shoulders. "Sichuan is no easy undertaking. The terrain twists like a coiled dragon, transport routes vanish into mist, and small factions sprout like bamboo shoots after rain. If we rush, we stumble. If we charge, we scatter them into the hills. We must advance step by step. It is called gradual progress."

Wu Shen blinked and tilted his head. "That is not an idiom."

San Shier paused, frowning as if rummaging through a mental dictionary that had clearly been poorly compiled. "Is it not? Then perhaps this is called misplaced attribution."

Wu Shen could not help laughing. "Get out. Just go now before you invent another proverb and embarrass us both."

Thus what ought to have been a touching farewell, something worthy of a poem about Peach Blossom Pool being a thousand feet deep yet still not matching Wang Lun's parting affection, somehow degenerated into Wu Shen physically shoving San Shier out the door while scolding him like a brother who had overstayed his welcome.

San Shier straightened his robe outside, dusted his sleeves with exaggerated dignity, and thought to himself that in this world even loyalty required correct timing, otherwise it merely became devotion cast into the wrong direction.

And so he set off toward Sichuan.

By now the railway line from Taiyuan in Shanxi to Gao Family Village was fully operational, iron rails gleaming beneath the sun like two drawn blades stretching across the land. San Shier boarded the train

and felt once again that peculiar sensation of modern power rumbling beneath his feet, steam hissing, pistons pumping, human ingenuity roaring louder than any warhorse.

The train sped forward and soon arrived at Pingyang Prefecture.

The moment it came to a smooth halt, a neatly arranged column of militia soldiers began boarding in disciplined rows. Their boots struck the wooden floorboards in steady rhythm, and the carriage that had been filled with merchants and chatter instantly acquired the stern atmosphere of a moving barracks.

Wang Er stepped into the carriage last and sat down opposite San Shier with the composure of a man who had already weighed life and death and found both acceptable.

San Shier raised an eyebrow. "You are leading troops to suppress bandits?"

Wang Er nodded. "We have returned from serving the emperor in the capital and rested for several days. That is sufficient. I volunteered for the pacification campaign. Bai Mao now holds an official court post and cannot wander as he pleases. Serving the emperor in the capital was reasonable. Roaming the countryside for battle would not be. So he remains in Pingyang. I will lead the militia."

This time Wang Er brought five hundred soldiers, and this train was only the first. Over the next several days additional trains would depart, until two thousand five hundred men formed a complete Shanxi Independent Regiment rolling southward along iron rails instead of muddy roads.

San Shier asked, "Sichuan or Henan?"

"Henan," Wang Er replied without hesitation.

On their earlier route toward Sichuan, the Gao Family Village logistics team had passed through Wuchang and witnessed the devastation left by Zhang Xianzhong's forces. Li Daoxuan had personally intervened there and frightened a Prince of Chu to death, an event that rippled outward like a stone thrown into still water. Afterward, priorities shifted. Henan needed reinforcement.

Gao Family Village had already committed heavily to that province. Bai Yuan commanded a strong main regiment defending Luoyang, backed by several thousand veteran troops and more than ten thousand newly recruited Henan soldiers. Generals Cao Wenzhao and Gao Jie, though not officially of Gao Family Village, were assisting as well.

Yet even with such numbers, they could not fully stabilize the region. The rebels gathered and dispersed with frustrating agility, appearing in one county at dawn and vanishing into fields and hills by dusk. They refused decisive engagement and preferred to exhaust government forces through constant movement.

More reinforcements were necessary.

Wang Er intended to support operations near Wuchang and would escort San Shier for part of the journey.

The train thundered onward, cutting through Shanxi before returning briefly to Gao Family Village itself. It halted only a short while before an enormous quantity of goods began loading onto the cars.

San Shier and Wang Er watched as logistics soldiers carried crates, sacks, and bundles with disciplined efficiency. Then the sky above shimmered faintly.

A colossal golden hand descended from the heavens with unhurried grace, its movements gentle despite its scale. It picked up prepared cargo as if plucking sesame seeds from a table, lowering them carefully beside the train where soldiers could quickly load them aboard.

Wang Er's expression softened. "When it comes to developing technology or waging war, Dao Xuan Tianzun rarely intervenes directly. Yet when it concerns relief for the common people, he never hesitates to help."

San Shier nodded. "On one hand he wishes us to solve problems ourselves so that we do not grow dependent on divine strength. On the other, he cannot bear to see refugees suffer. He desires to save as many as possible. It is called boundless compassion."

Fully loaded with five hundred soldiers and mountains of supplies, the train departed again, heading toward Xi'an. There they transferred onto the West Han Railway, whose whistle echoed sharply as it sped toward Hanzhong.

San Shier gazed out the window at mountains rolling past and said thoughtfully, "Zhu Cunji may appear frivolous, yet the two railway lines he selected are crucial. The West Yan line allows rapid deployment to the northern frontier. The West Han line ensures swift supply into Sichuan. This outcome feels almost like fortunate coincidence."

Wang Er considered this and replied, "Perhaps not coincidence. A man raised within the imperial clan receives knowledge others do not. Even without deliberate strategy, his instincts may still guide him to the most critical routes."

Their discussion faded as the train arrived in Hanzhong.

On the platform stood Prince Rui, Zhu Changhao, once again planted before the ticket booth with the determination of a merchant guarding his accounts. "How many tickets have been sold today?" he demanded.

The station staff, long accustomed to a prince who monitored ticket revenue like a shopkeeper, answered dutifully, "Seventy eight taels of silver today."

"Only seventy eight?" Zhu Changhao frowned. "Yesterday at this hour it was eighty two. Business has declined."

The staff member forced a polite smile, silently wondering when a prince had begun measuring dignity in daily revenue fluctuations.

At that moment the train pulled in with a piercing whistle. Steam billowed as it came to a halt.

Zhu Changhao sprang up the locomotive steps with startling agility and addressed the driver before he could disembark. "How many tickets did Xi'an sell today?"

"Two hundred ninety taels," the driver replied calmly.

Zhu Changhao's face lit up. "Over two hundred? Excellent, excellent."

Then realization dawned.

The last time Xi'an reported such figures, it had been due to bulk cargo tickets. High revenue again likely meant the arrival of those immense relief shipments bound for Sichuan.

He turned and looked down the length of the train.

Uniformed logistics soldiers were already unloading goods in relentless succession. Basket after basket, crate after crate, poured onto the platform and were swiftly transferred to waiting wagons bound for the docks.

His gaze settled upon Zhuge Wangchan, who directed subordinates with crisp gestures and a commander's composure.

Soldiers possessed keen instincts. Zhuge Wangchan sensed scrutiny and lifted his head.

Their eyes met.

The air between them seemed to tighten, as though invisible sparks flickered across an unseen wire.

Zhu Changhao raised his voice defensively. "What do you want? I am not collecting your taxes today, so why are you staring? Do not come closer. I warn you."

He stepped backward while speaking and promptly collided with something solid.

Turning around, he found himself facing a broad chest clad in sturdy cloth armor. He slowly lifted his gaze.

A full beard framed a stern face. The man stood tall and unmoving, built like an iron tower planted firmly into the platform.

For a brief moment, Prince Rui felt as though he had backed into a city wall that had grown a pair of eyes and was now looking down at him with measured patience.

Chapter 1112 This is Shaanxi, After All

The man Prince Rui had collided with was none other than Wang Er of Baishui.

For years he had worn a thick beard to obscure his features, and with his towering frame and the heavy aura of a man who had once shaken the realm as a rebel leader, he looked less like a traveler and more like a moving fortress. When Prince Rui recognized the sort of presence standing before him, his earlier arrogance shrank noticeably, as though someone had quietly taken a blade to it.

He stumbled backward several steps.

His guards reacted instantly, forming a protective ring around him while eyeing Wang Er with deep suspicion. The captain of the guard even let his hand rest openly on the hilt of his saber, as if hoping the gesture alone might discourage catastrophe.

Wang Er merely snorted, the sound low and dismissive, and turned away as though the entire royal entourage were nothing more than background noise at a marketplace.

Only after he left did the guard captain release a long breath. "That man is dangerous. If a real clash had occurred, we would not have been able to stop him. Your Highness might truly have been in peril."

Prince Rui stared in disbelief. "How dare he. I am a prince."

The captain lowered his voice. "He carries the scent of blood. One glance was enough to tell he fears no law. If you angered him, he would not stop to consider titles."

Prince Rui felt the chill of that statement settle into his bones. "Are you saying that in Hanzhong there are now people who would strike a prince openly. People who would kill a prince without hesitation. Has the realm fallen so far that royal law is merely decoration."

The captain wisely chose silence.

At that moment a peculiar laugh drifted over from nearby. "Justice has always existed. As for royal law, Your Highness, reflect carefully. Has royal law ever truly existed in the way you imagine."

Prince Rui turned sharply and saw a plump middle aged man in scholar's robes, his eyes bright with the sort of amusement that suggested he enjoyed poking hornets' nests from a safe distance.

"And who are you," Prince Rui demanded.

"My surname is San, my given name is Shier," the man replied with an easy smile. "I serve as a strategist."

Prince Rui blinked. "A strategist."

Ordinarily he would not deign to converse with such a figure, yet this strategist showed neither fear nor deference. It was as if stepping off a train had become a ritual for ignoring princes.

"What did you mean by that remark," Prince Rui pressed. "Are you mocking the Great Ming Code."

San Shier chuckled softly. "If all under Heaven obeyed the Great Ming Code, then royal law would indeed shine brightly. Yet how many truly abide by it. Has Your Highness always followed it. Have the great ministers. If not, then perhaps the law exists more in text than in practice. My questions, however, may be like asking directions from the blind."

With that he turned and walked away.

Prince Rui's face flushed red. "Impudent."

He considered ordering his guards to seize the man, yet then he saw San Shier fall into step beside Wang Er. The memory of the iron tower's silent snort cooled his impulse immediately. The guards, recalling their captain's earlier assessment, remained frozen in polite paralysis.

Prince Rui fumed. "No one treats me as a prince anymore."

The guard captain spoke carefully. "Since the uprisings at the end of the Tianqi era, the realm has grown chaotic. It is prudent to exercise caution."

"Caution," Prince Rui scoffed. "This is Hanzhong. My domain."

As if Heaven wished to contradict him at once, alarm bells began clanging from within the city walls, their harsh metallic cries slicing through the air.

Everyone at the station turned toward Hanzhong City. The station lay outside the walls, an inconvenient fact suddenly magnified.

A eunuch burst from the city gate and ran toward Prince Rui, shouting breathlessly. "Your Highness, return at once. Bandits are attacking."

Prince Rui froze. "Again."

In earlier years a rebel named Wang Daliang had stirred trouble here, and the memory of that terror had not faded. Now the word bandits struck him like a physical blow. He bolted toward the city gate, robes flapping inelegantly.

The common people followed in a panic, surging toward the narrowing entrance as the gates began to close.

The logistics soldiers from Gao Family Village did not move. Instead they formed tight ranks around the towering piles of supplies, their discipline standing in sharp contrast to the fleeing civilians. The five

hundred militia from Shanxi, newly arrived with Wang Er and San Shier, spread out instinctively and secured the perimeter.

San Shier turned to Zhuge Wangchan. "Why are there bandits here as well. This is Shaanxi."

His tone carried none of his usual playful cadence.

Zhuge Wangchan frowned. "That is precisely what troubles me."

Before them the city gates halted halfway, leaving space for civilians to squeeze through. The Prefect of Hanzhong and Regional Commander Zhao Guangyuan had chosen not to abandon the populace outside.

The tide of people poured inward.

Prince Rui was swept along, yet halfway to safety he suddenly stopped and looked back at the enormous train resting on the tracks beyond the wall.

A strangled cry escaped him. "My train. They will steal my train. It cost eighty thousand taels. I hold forty percent of the shares. Thirty two thousand taels."

The guards stared at him in disbelief.

"My thirty two thousand taels," he wailed. "It earns hundreds of taels daily. My capital has not yet returned."

The guard captain exchanged a weary glance with his men, and together they dragged the lamenting prince inside the city.

On the wall above, a military official shouted toward the Gao Family Village contingent. "Why are you still outside. Enter the city immediately. The gates are closing."

Wang Er called back, his voice steady. "Where have the bandits come from."

"From the mountain forests of Sichuan," the official answered. "A detachment has crossed over and is moving toward Hanzhong."

Wang Er and San Shier exchanged a long look.

So that was the answer.

Bandits driven from Sichuan had spilled across the border like floodwater seeking a new channel. Shaanxi was not immune simply because it was Shaanxi.

San Shier folded his hands behind his back and spoke quietly. "If they have come from Sichuan, then our journey has shortened itself."

Wang Er's eyes hardened. "Five hundred men are present. Supplies are here. If they wish to test the border, they may test it against us."

Behind them the steam engine released a low hiss, as if the iron beast itself were awaiting orders.

The gates of Hanzhong creaked inward another fraction.

Outside the walls, beneath the open sky of Shaanxi, soldiers from Gao Family Village stood their ground and prepared to welcome the so called bandits who had crossed one province too far.

Chapter 1113 My Money!

Wang Er lifted his hand toward the city wall and called out in a voice that carried clearly over the clamor, "Close the gates. We will not be entering."

The military official atop the wall stared at him as though he had just misheard something profoundly unreasonable. He had offered them refuge, fulfilled his responsibility, and now these outsiders calmly refused the safety of stone walls and iron gates. After a brief, helpless pause, he waved his arm and shouted, "Close the gates."

The winch creaked. Iron chains groaned. The heavy gates of Hanzhong began to swing shut with slow inevitability.

From above, Prince Rui leaned over the parapet, his voice breaking into a near hysterical wail. "My train! My silver! I have not even recovered my capital yet. Where is General Zhao. Where is the Prefect. Where is the militia. Why is no one defending my train."

The official replied with strained patience, "General Zhao is holding the South Gate. The Prefect has gone to the West Gate. The gentry militia are stationed at the East Gate."

Prince Rui's face went pale. "Then the North Gate has no one."

"Your Highness's personal guards are stationed there," the official answered.

Prince Rui fell abruptly silent.

The awkwardness of that silence was sharp enough to cut cloth. His personal guards looked impressive in formation, but even he knew they were ornamental blades in gilded scabbards. Asking them to repel seasoned bandits outside the walls was like asking accountants to wrestle tigers.

He dared not step outside himself.

Yet while he lamented loudly, he noticed that the fierce group on the platform had not retreated. They remained in place, forming ranks around the great iron train.

Prince Rui's eyes brightened as though he had discovered buried treasure. "You there. You look capable. I will hire you to guard my train. One thousand taels. No, fifteen hundred."

For a man known for counting copper coins twice before spending them, this was an astonishing display of generosity.

Wang Er glanced up at him and snorted. "Keep your silver. We will guard the train regardless."

Prince Rui blinked rapidly, his thoughts unable to keep pace with events. "You will. Without payment."

Wang Er had already turned away. "Prepare for battle. Logistics team, you are under my command until further notice."

Zhuge Wangchan saluted crisply. "Understood."

Wang Er scanned the station grounds and nearly laughed in disbelief. Hanzhong North Station was little more than an afterthought, a patch of earth with rails laid across it. The ticket booth was a sagging straw hut. Beyond the iron beast and its tracks, nothing suggested foresight or defense.

He cupped his hands and shouted up at the wall, "You miserly prince. You would not even build a proper station."

Since there was no structure worth defending, the train itself would serve as fortress.

Orders flowed swiftly from Wang Er's mouth. Platoons were assigned to specific carriages. Others hauled supply baskets and stacked them into makeshift barricades along the platform. Men moved with disciplined urgency, retrieving flintlock rifles from cargo crates and taking their positions.

Within moments, five hundred militia had transformed an open platform into a layered defensive formation, firing angles overlapping, reserves positioned behind cover, ammunition distributed with methodical care.

Prince Rui stared down in open astonishment. "They all have flintlocks. Even the Shenji Battalion lacks such lavish equipment."

The city's military official was equally stunned. Equipment was one matter. Organization was another. These men moved as if each already knew his place in the design of battle.

Soon, from the South Gate, came loud cries. The rebels had arrived. Their voices rolled around the city walls, taunting and probing, yet no clash of steel followed. They were testing, not committing.

Shouts rose from the East and West as well. Still no full assault.

After a time, a detachment that had circled half the city reached the North Gate. Finding it closed and defended from above, they shifted their attention outward.

Their eyes landed on the iron colossus resting on the tracks.

"What is this monstrous cart."

"So much iron."

"If we tear it apart and sell the metal, we will feast for years."

With greedy enthusiasm, they charged toward the station.

Prince Rui shrieked from the wall, "No. Not my money."

The first volley answered him.

Flintlock rifles extended from carriage windows. A coordinated blast tore through the front ranks of the charging rebels. Men fell in rows before their shouts could finish forming.

Before the smoke had even cleared, barrels rose from behind the bamboo basket barricades. A second volley followed, then a third, staggered in rhythm so that fire never fully ceased.

The station erupted into disciplined thunder. Gunfire rolled across the open ground in relentless cadence.

The rebels who had advanced with such confidence now stumbled backward in chaos. Those who survived the initial shock dragged wounded companions away, their earlier bravado replaced with wild confusion.

From the wall, soldiers and officials watched in disbelief. The prince's personal guards gaped. The local commander narrowed his eyes, studying the formation below with grudging admiration.

The common people, packed behind the battlements, burst into cheers.

"That is how you fight."

"They drove them off without a single step back."

The rebel detachment, battered and shaken, fled toward the South Gate.

There, General Zhao Guangyuan had been observing. He saw the disorder in their retreat, the collapse of morale caused by unseen thunder from the North.

A seasoned commander recognized opportunity the way a hawk recognizes movement in grass.

The South Gate swung open. Zhao Guangyuan led his troops in a fierce charge, cutting into the disordered rebels with decisive force. The bandit formation shattered completely and fled toward the southern hills in desperate flight.

Silence gradually replaced the chaos.

Then the North Gate creaked open.

Prince Rui was the first through, running with surprising speed for a man so devoted to comfort. He rushed to the locomotive and threw his arms around its rounded front, pressing his cheek against cold iron as though embracing a long lost relative.

"My thirty two thousand taels," he murmured fervently. "It is fortunate you are unharmed. Truly fortunate."

Behind him, soldiers from Gao Family Village stood calmly among drifting smoke, their rifles still warm, their formation intact.

For them it had been a brief engagement.

For Prince Rui, it had been a near financial apocalypse.

Chapter 1114 Re-planning

The bandit army retreated in disorder, like a tide that had surged forward with confidence only to be smashed against hidden reefs.

Zhao Guangyuan pursued them fiercely for several li, his cavalry pressing hard while infantry followed with grim determination. Yet once the rebels reached the tangled foothills and slipped into the folds of the southern mountains, the advantage evaporated. Forest paths twisted unpredictably, and ambush could lurk behind any ridge.

Reluctantly, Zhao Guangyuan ordered the gong sounded.

The pursuit ended.

Upon returning to Hanzhong City, he did not rest, nor did he remove his armor. Instead he headed straight for the North Gate. During the fighting he had been stationed at the South Gate, relying only on the echoing thunder of muskets to tell him that something extraordinary was unfolding. He had witnessed the rebels collapse and flee southward, presenting him with the opportunity he had seized, but he had not seen with his own eyes what force had broken them so thoroughly.

Now he intended to see.

When he arrived at the North Gate, he found the Prefect already there, along with several local gentry whose curiosity had overcome their fear. All of them were staring beyond the wall.

Outside, the Gao Family Village militia were conducting the aftermath of battle with astonishing order.

Dead bandits were being gathered respectfully into a single area for burial. Wounded enemies were treated with swift applications of medicine before being laid aside under guard. Those who had surrendered without injury knelt with hands on their heads, trembling but unharmed.

The field did not resemble the chaotic aftermath of war. It resembled a carefully managed construction site.

The gentry exchanged uneasy glances. Normally, after battle, soldiers would scatter across the ground like crows, stripping armor, pocketing coins, arguing over spoils. Here, not a single militiaman stooped to loot.

Zhao Guangyuan felt something twist in his chest. Envy, perhaps. If only his own troops possessed such discipline.

He approached Wang Er and offered a formal salute. "These are your soldiers."

"Yes," Wang Er replied simply.

"Remarkable," Zhao Guangyuan said. "May I ask which general you serve under?"

"We are a militia."

Zhao Guangyuan blinked. "You call this a militia."

"What else should we be called," Wang Er said evenly. "Bandits."

The general flushed. "That is not my meaning. It is only that your discipline is beyond anything I have seen."

"Then do not compare," Wang Er answered. "Imperial troops often behave no differently from bandits when discipline fails. It is no wonder you find this strange."

Zhao Guangyuan's jaw tightened. "My men are not like that."

"I have no interest in arguing reputations," Wang Er replied. "There is a more pressing matter."

Zhao Guangyuan followed his gaze toward the southern mountains. "The bandits."

"They have crossed into Shaanxi," Wang Er said. "Every one of them must be cleared out. Shaanxi has achieved relative peace through effort and blood. We cannot allow that peace to be devoured."

Zhao Guangyuan sighed and looked at the endless ridges. "You speak boldly. But those mountains are vast. How do you intend to root them out."

Wang Er gave him a sideways glance. "We will handle it. You need only avoid obstructing us."

Zhao Guangyuan bristled. "You presume much."

Wang Er turned away from him as though the matter were settled and addressed San Shier instead. "It seems I cannot proceed to reinforce Wuchang."

San Shier nodded slowly. "Shaanxi stands at the gateway. If Hanzhong falls into chaos, the Guanzhong Plain will feel the tremors. We must establish a defensive line here and block the bandits from advancing further. This is what one might call repelling trouble before it ripens."

"I will remain," Wang Er said. "You continue into Sichuan."

San Shier stroked his beard thoughtfully. "My logistics team will accompany me. We will not be undefended."

They exchanged a formal salute and parted.

San Shier soon boarded a vessel on the Han River, the logistics soldiers loading supplies with the same measured efficiency as before. The boat pushed off, gliding downstream toward Sichuan.

Wang Er remained behind.

He summoned a trusted subordinate. "Take the next train back to the village. Report everything to the Saintess and Steward Tan. Inform them that Hanzhong requires reinforcement."

The subordinate saluted and departed.

Only then did Wang Er turn to the Prefect. "My militia will likely need to station near Hanzhong for some time. We require no provisions from you. We will build our own encampment near the train station. All we ask is that you refrain from interfering."

The Prefect and Zhao Guangyuan exchanged long looks.

Allowing a mysterious militia, well armed and impeccably organized, to remain outside the city walls indefinitely was no small matter. If conflict arose, neither the Prefect's yamen runners nor Zhao Guangyuan's garrison would stand a chance.

The Prefect opened his mouth to offer a polite refusal.

At that very moment, Prince Rui burst forward with surprising enthusiasm.

"Excellent. Truly excellent. If you remain, my train will finally be safe. I have worried day and night that bandits might dismantle it for scrap. If you garrison at the station, I shall be eternally grateful."

The Prefect stared at him in disbelief.

Zhao Guangyuan's expression became one of complete resignation.

Prince Rui continued eagerly, "Please guard the train station at night. The great train must not be touched."

"I already intended to station there," Wang Er replied. "It is convenient for transport. Reinforcements will arrive by rail."

Prince Rui beamed. "Wonderful. I entrust the station to you. And please ensure that nothing else is stolen."

Wang Er frowned. "There is nothing else of value there. Even the ticket booth is a straw hut."

"That hut cost silver," Prince Rui protested indignantly. "At least two taels."

Silence fell upon the gathering.

For a moment even Wang Er seemed uncertain how to respond to such unwavering devotion to accounting.

Behind him, a younger militiaman who had received some schooling cleared his throat and remarked with deliberate innocence, "If the heir of the Prince of Qin, the major shareholder of the West Han Railway, were to see the Hanzhong station reduced to this state, he might have words to say."

Prince Rui waved a dismissive hand. "He cannot leave Xi'an. He will never see it."

Far away, in Wan Shou Zhai, Zhu Cunji suddenly sneezed and rubbed his nose thoughtfully. "I suspect someone is speaking ill of me."

Beside him, Zhu Yujian remained focused on trade matters. "Pay attention. The Tujia people here weave brocade similar to that in Kaixian. It can be transported along the railway and sold as a commodity."

Zhu Cunji waved vaguely toward the scenery. "Handle such matters yourself. I am here to appreciate the view. Those stone pillars are quite impressive."

Back in Hanzhong, Wang Er watched as smoke from the earlier battle thinned in the afternoon light. The mountains to the south stood silent, concealing enemies who would surely return.

Plans had shifted.

The route to Wuchang would wait.

For now, Shaanxi would become the line that must not break.

Chapter 1115 Applying for Battle

The five hundred militia under Wang Er set up camp at Hanzhong North Train Station.

The station itself was barely worthy of the name. It consisted of little more than a straw shed that sold tickets. Wind passed through it freely, and if rain wanted to come in for tea, no one would dare stop it. Fortunately, the militia had brought their own tents and provisions. Within a short time, hundreds of tents rose not far from the tracks. A simple wooden palisade enclosed the camp, making one thing perfectly clear. Military zone. Keep out.

After a brief period of disorder, the station resumed operations. The townspeople returned in droves, crowding around the straw shed to buy tickets for Xi'an.

Prince Rui, Zhu Changhao, wandered about the station with restless steps. Even with Wang Er's men guarding the area, he still felt uneasy. What if the rebels rushed in and seized his precious train? What if all his investment vanished overnight? The thought made his chest tighten. Because of that fear, he had not allowed the train to depart earlier.

While he was pacing, a sudden commotion erupted from the ticket shed. He turned and saw a line so long it nearly curved back on itself like a dragon basking in panic.

"What is happening?" Prince Rui hurried over.

The clerk behind the counter saw him coming and understood immediately. Without stopping his hands from collecting silver and passing out tickets, he reported, "Your Highness, tickets for the next train are selling faster than hot cakes. We have already collected one hundred and fifty taels of silver. Judging by the line, we should reach two hundred and fifty taels once they are sold out."

Prince Rui's eyes nearly shone like polished copper. "Forty percent is mine. That means one hundred taels of silver. From a single trip. Astonishing. Ha ha ha. I am becoming wealthy!"

His joy burst out like fireworks. Then, just as quickly, suspicion crept in.

Why were tickets suddenly so popular?

As he pondered, he overheard a woman in line whispering to her husband.

"Will we truly be safe if we flee to Xi'an?"

Her husband whispered back, "Xi'an is a major city. Its walls are far stronger than Hanzhong's. If we reach Xi'an, we will be absolutely safe. The rebels would not dare approach it."

Only then did the woman release a long breath. "That is wonderful."

Prince Rui finally understood.

The rebel attack had terrified Hanzhong. The people were not traveling for pleasure. They were fleeing for their lives.

In that instant, his emotions became tangled beyond sorting.

If rebels came, train tickets would sell like this every day. Silver would flow in like a mountain spring. But if rebels came, they might also seize the train. And what good was silver if one's head was rolling on the ground somewhere in the Micang Mountains?

Should he hope for their arrival, or pray for their absence?

After thinking carefully, he concluded that it was better they did not come. After all, the sensation of one's heart trying to punch its way out of the chest was a cost too.

More and more townspeople flooded the station. Tickets for the next train sold out. Then the train after that. Then even the one after that. Each departure was packed with anxious faces and bundled belongings.

At first, Prince Rui danced with joy. After a short while, he suddenly froze.

"Oh no," he muttered to himself. "The common folk may flee when danger approaches. I cannot. I must remain in Hanzhong. This is dreadful. Utterly dreadful."

The train rumbled toward Xi'an, carrying wave after wave of refugees.

The moment they arrived, news of rebels outside Hanzhong spread across the entire Xi'an Prefecture like sparks in dry grass.

That evening, in Xi'an's market square, before the Celestial Mirror, a massive crowd gathered.

On the screen appeared the composed and dignified face of Gao Yiye.

"Breaking news," he announced. "A rebel army has appeared outside Hanzhong. Though repelled by local militia, they have not withdrawn far. They have retreated into the Micang Mountains south of the city. It is unclear when they may attack again, or whether they may bypass Hanzhong and head directly toward the Guanzhong Plain."

The people of Xi'an had already heard rumors. Now, hearing it confirmed by Gaojia News, they understood it was true. The square erupted in noise.

Gao Yiye continued, "All citizens are advised to remain cautious and avoid traveling near Hanzhong in the coming days."

The crowd muttered, "Who would dare go there? People from Hanzhong are fleeing here in droves."

Gao Yiye went on. "Governor Sun Chuanting of Shaanxi has begun mobilizing troops to address this threat. However, our main militia forces are currently stretched thin. They are securing the northern frontier while also fighting rebels in Henan and Sichuan. The number of troops that can be deployed remains uncertain."

At that moment, a coal miner from the Xi'an Bamei No. 1 Coal Mine suddenly roared, "If the main force is busy, then it is time for the reserve militia to step forward. The Bamei No. 1 Coal Mine Militia requests to join the battle!"

His roar ignited the crowd.

A worker beside him leapt up. "The Xigang No. 2 Steel Mill Militia requests to join the battle!"

"The Chang'an Automobile Factory Militia requests to join the battle!"

The entire square erupted into a thunderous clamor.

Then a powerful voice cut through the noise.

"Silence."

Governor Sun Chuanting himself stepped forward from the crowd.

"What use is shouting at the Celestial Mirror? This is a recorded broadcast. The Saintess cannot hear you."

The crowd fell silent at once.

Sun Chuanting continued, "Tomorrow, each factory militia unit will submit a written report to the governor's office listing your troop numbers and equipment. I will coordinate your deployment and determine how you shall fight."

A resounding cheer rose into the night.

Back at Hanzhong North Station, the trains continued their relentless shuttling. They carried Hanzhong residents north to Xi'an. At the same time, they carried the Gao Family Village Militia south to Hanzhong.

Before long, all two thousand five hundred of Wang Er's men had arrived. A vast encampment spread outside the station like a small military city.

Prince Rui was naturally delighted. With so many troops present, no rebel would dare seize his treasured train.

But the Prefect of Hanzhong and the Regional Commander Zhao Guangyuan could not help feeling uneasy.

Wang Er held no formal military rank. Yet he commanded a force of considerable strength. In strict terms, such a situation bordered on dangerous territory.

However, he had come from Xi'an. Governor Sun Chuanting himself had not objected. If the governor was unconcerned, how could a mere prefect and a regional commander dare raise questions?

Thus, they held their tongues.

That evening, the Prefect and Zhao Guangyuan went together to the North Train Station, bringing Prince Rui with them. The three entered the camp and sat before Wang Er.

Wang Er saw the three arrive in unison and immediately understood. Something important was coming.

"Gentlemen," he asked calmly, "what brings you here?"

Zhao Guangyuan cupped his fists respectfully. "The rebels we repelled are hiding in the Micang Mountains. They keep us in constant anxiety. The common people cannot live in peace. In the surrounding villages, the fields lie empty. No farmer dares to till the land. If this continues, next year we will face another great famine."

Prince Rui quickly added, "Indeed, indeed. A great famine is most undesirable. During the great famine of the seventh year of Tianqi, I spent seven thousand taels of silver on disaster relief just to calm the starving masses around Hanzhong. I truly do not wish to spend that much silver again."

His tone was grave.

His heart, however, was calculating.

Chapter 1116 Mass Mobilization

Wang Er rolled his eyes at Prince Rui.

This time, however, there was a little less contempt in that eye roll.

The seventh year of Tianqi. That was the very year Wang Er of Baishui County had risen in rebellion and killed the magistrate.

Shaanxi had been scorched by drought. The land cracked. The wells ran dry. The people survived on wild roots and stubbornness.

He still remembered why he had rebelled.

Magistrate Zhang Yaocai of Chengcheng County had collected taxes like a butcher weighing meat. Starving villagers were treated worse than stray dogs. Wang Er had once sneaked into Gao Family Village

to steal water, desperate enough to risk death. Instead of punishment, Dao Xuan Tianzun had bestowed upon him a small mountain of flour.

He had carried that flour home with tears in his eyes.

Then he learned that the seed grain of his fellow villagers had been stolen.

That was the moment fury swallowed him whole.

Now, standing in Hanzhong, recalling those days, Wang Er could not help but sigh.

He had never imagined that this so called dead money grubber Prince Rui had once taken out seven thousand taels of silver for disaster relief. That number was not small. Not even slightly.

In Wang Er's heart, the prince's figure grew a little taller.

He could not help asking in disbelief, "Someone as fond of money as you would actually spend it?"

Prince Rui scoffed. "Look at you. This prince exhausts his brain earning money precisely so I can be generous when spending it. Struggle fiercely when earning, spend boldly when it is time to spend."

Wang Er was speechless.

Prince Rui continued proudly, "Those who do not strive to earn, who lazily cling to their tiny lot, who refuse to think hard about making even a single copper coin, and then act stingy when spending, unwilling to part with a penny for anything. Such pitiful creatures, this prince disdains to be."

At that exact moment, Li Daoxuan, who was co sensing through the embroidery on Wang Er's chest, felt an invisible arrow strike his heart.

Prince Rui, you little rascal. Those words were aimed directly at me, were they not.

I will beat you.

Before anyone could notice the silent divine grievance, Zhao Guangyuan, Regional Commander of Hanzhong, spoke up.

"This general has discussed the matter with the Prefect and His Highness Prince Rui. The bandits hiding in the Micang Mountains cannot be ignored. We have decided to dispatch troops to search the mountains and eradicate them completely."

Only then did Wang Er understand why the three had come together.

"You want my militia to cooperate with yours and conduct a joint mountain search?"

"Indeed," Zhao Guangyuan replied. "The Micang Mountains are vast. The forests are dense, the ravines intricate. Our combined forces are insufficient. We ask for your assistance."

Wang Er let out a cold snort. "You need not ask. I would search the mountains anyway."

The three men were overjoyed. Without Wang Er's support, their own troops were too few to dare venture deep into the mountains.

Then Wang Er added calmly, "I alone will search the mountains. There is no need for you to participate. You would only get in the way."

Silence.

The air stiffened.

Zhao Guangyuan frowned. "The Micang Mountains are not small. You have only two thousand five hundred men. How will you search everything? We must coordinate properly, divide the area, form encirclements..."

"No need," Wang Er cut him off. "Your few men would not help much. I have my own methods of gathering manpower."

Zhao Guangyuan's face reddened. "Hey!"

The Prefect hurried to smooth things over. "Instructor, please, General Zhao's soldiers are quite capable..."

Wang Er's tone remained firm. "I have sufficient manpower. I do not require your small numbers."

That was the final straw.

Zhao Guangyuan exploded. "There is a limit to how much one can look down on others."

He was a dignified Regional Commander. The son of the renowned general Zhao Shuaijiao. To be dismissed like this by a mere militia instructor was unbearable. He nearly overturned the table in fury.

At that very moment, a sharp whistle split the air.

Woo!

A train rumbled into view, chugging toward the station.

The militia camp stood close to the tracks. As the train rolled past, hands shot out of every window, waving enthusiastically toward the tents.

"We are here! Militia, we are here!"

"Reinforcements have arrived!"

"We came to help!"

Voices burst from every carriage window.

The train was packed with over a thousand people. All reserve militiamen.

The moment it stopped, they leaped off in waves.

Their discipline was clearly looser than that of the regular militia. They did not form neat ranks. Instead, they surged toward the camp gate in a noisy mass, offering somewhat crooked salutes.

Then came the loud declarations.

"Bamei No. 1 Factory militia reporting for duty!"

"Xigang No. 2 Factory militia reporting!"

"Xigang No. 3 Factory militia, under Governor Sun Chuanting's command, here to support the front!"

Zhao Guangyuan, still burning with anger, turned and saw more than a thousand fresh troops arriving.

His mouth fell open.

He hurried outside the camp and demanded, "Who sent you?"

"Shaanxi Governor Sun Chuanting!"

Zhao Guangyuan protested, "If you were sent by the Governor, then you should report to me, the Regional Commander of Hanzhong."

The militiamen answered plainly, "We were ordered to report to Instructor Wang and follow his command."

Zhao Guangyuan sputtered, "Why? I am a Regional Commander, descendant of a famous general, trained in military strategy. Why are these men not assigned to me, but to a militia instructor?"

No one paid attention to him.

Some continued shouting introductions. One even yelled back toward the train, "Hurry back to Xi'an. Many more are waiting!"

Another militiaman ran to Wang Er and reported, "Instructor Wang, the Chang'an Automobile Factory militia has arrived as well. They did not come by train. They came in vehicles produced by their own factory."

Wang Er's eyes lit up. "Excellent. After transporting the troops, those vehicles can be used for logistics."

Zhao Guangyuan muttered in confusion, "Vehicles?"

Half a day later, he understood.

On the cement highway to the northwest, a massive convoy appeared.

Solar powered buses and steam automobiles.

They were smaller than trains, each carrying only a dozen or a few dozen men. But there were hundreds of them.

They rolled forward in waves, each unloading more militiamen. Another thousand joined the ranks almost instantly.

And this was only the beginning.

The train made a second trip.

The automobiles began their second run.

Troop numbers swelled continuously.

More and more. Without end.

Temporary encampments spread outward from Wang Er's original camp, expanding several li in circumference.

The Prefect of Hanzhong, Zhao Guangyuan, and Prince Rui stood watching in stunned silence.

This was the first time they had witnessed a mobilization of this scale.

The first time they had seen troops transported in such overwhelming numbers.

Only then did they understand.

This battle was no longer something they could intervene in.

With their pitiful forces, they would not even qualify to assist this vast militia army.

Chapter 1117 Mountain Search

Two days later.

Wang Er stood before an army that seemed to stretch to the horizon.

Tens of thousands.

When he spoke, his voice rolled across the ranks like thunder over dry land.

"Do you know why we have mobilized so many militia this time?"

Tens of thousands answered in perfect unison.

"We know. This is Shaanxi."

Wang Er nodded slowly.

"That is right. This is Shaanxi. This is where the rebellion first ignited. The people here have already suffered enough. We will not allow them to suffer a second time."

The response shook the earth.

"We will not. We will not."

Wang Er raised his arm and pointed south.

"This is also the most important liberated zone under Dao Xuan Tianzun. Our core rear stronghold. We absolutely forbid any rebel from stepping into Shaanxi."

The army roared.

"Forbidden. Forbidden."

Wang Er smiled.

"Good. Since morale is high, we move now."

And so the massive force began to advance, flowing toward the southern mountains like a steel river.

On the walls of Hanzhong Prefecture, Zhao Guangyuan, the Prefect, and Prince Rui stood watching the departure.

All three wore expressions that were difficult to describe.

When Wang Er had first arrived with five hundred men, they had felt nothing.

When two thousand five hundred gathered, they had begun to feel uneasy.

Now, watching endless ranks of militia stretching beyond sight, they should have been terrified.

Strangely, they were not.

Instead, something else stirred in their hearts.

Excitement.

If Sun Chuanting could mobilize such strength at will, what bandit in this world could ever break through Shaanxi's defenses?

Deep within the Micang Mountains.

Fengdongyan.

A colossal cave carved into the mountain's belly. When the wind swept through the peaks, it spiraled inside the cavern, howling through the stone like ghosts wailing in the dark. Thus the name. Wind Cave Rock.

Hidden inside were more than ten thousand rebels.

Their leader was Mi Chuang Jiang.

His original name had been Mi Jiang. After the previous Chuang Jiang died and the title was elevated to Chuang Wang, the old position became vacant. Mi Jiang promptly promoted himself and became the second generation Chuang Jiang.

Passing on the flame, as they liked to call it.

To distinguish himself from his predecessor, he kept his surname, becoming Mi Chuang Jiang.

He was a veteran bandit from the Yan'an region. He had risen early in the Chongzhen era, fought north and south alongside Wang Jiayin, and survived countless battles. He was no greenhorn.

Not long ago, he had followed the new Chuang Wang into Sichuan and caused chaos for a time.

Then he got lost.

The mountains of Shu were treacherous. Easy to enter. Hard to leave.

After wandering in circles for days, Mi Chuang Jiang made a bold decision.

"Forget everything. Head north."

No matter how steep the cliffs. No matter how winding the paths. Follow the sun. Walk north. If a mountain blocks the way, climb it. If a river blocks the way, swim it. As long as we go straight north, we cannot get lost.

Shockingly, the method worked.

After a string of fortunate accidents, he emerged from the Shu mountains, crossed the Micang range, and stepped into Hanzhong territory.

When he saw Hanzhong City in the distance, he laughed wildly.

"I am back. Back in Shaanxi. Brothers, we are home. Seize Hanzhong."

And then he was beaten so thoroughly he nearly forgot his own name.

At Hanzhong North Train Station, Wang Er's flintlock riflemen had given him a lesson in modern warfare. Zhao Guangyuan had then chased him like a hunting dog until he fled back into the Micang Mountains.

Now he crouched inside Fengdongyan, deeply uneasy.

A subordinate approached. "Boss, what do we do?"

Mi Chuang Jiang stroked his chin.

"Let me think carefully. Perhaps we bypass Hanzhong and enter the Guanzhong Plain. Plenty of grain there. Enough to feed us well."

At that moment, a scout burst in, clothes torn, face pale.

"Boss. Disaster. The Hanzhong army is advancing into the Micang Mountains. They are clearly preparing a mountain search."

Mi Chuang Jiang scoffed.

"A mountain search? I have roamed for ten years since the start of Chongzhen. I have never seen the government conduct a proper mountain search."

"It is true," the scout insisted. "They are coming."

Mi Chuang Jiang laughed loudly.

"The Micang Mountains are vast. Dense forests. Endless ravines. Do they think a few thousand soldiers can stroll in and search the place? Scatter a few thousand men in here and they will vanish without a trace."

The scout swallowed.

"It is not a few thousand. It is tens of thousands. I cannot even count. As far as the eye can see, there are only people."

Mi Chuang Jiang froze.

"Tens of thousands? Since when can the government conjure such numbers overnight?"

"I do not know," the scout said weakly. "There are too many."

Mi Chuang Jiang rushed with him to the northern slope. From the summit, he looked down.

At the foot of the mountain, an enormous army had already assembled.

Dense.

Countless.

Nothing but heads.

For a moment, he could not speak.

"In the past," he muttered, "we always outnumbered the government. Now they outnumber us several times over. How are we supposed to fight this?"

His subordinates trembled.

"What do we do?"

Mi Chuang Jiang forced himself to stand tall.

"Do not panic. There is nothing to fear. The Micang Mountains are treacherous. There are hiding places everywhere. If we had not marched straight north, we ourselves would still be lost. Once they enter, they will lose direction. They will not know north from south. We have the terrain."

He had barely finished speaking when something rose slowly from the formation below.

A massive spherical object.

Beneath it hung a gondola.

Inside the gondola were men. A brazier burned bright, heating the air.

It looked like a giant reconnaissance hot air balloon.

Higher and higher it rose.

Soon it reached the level of the northern slope.

Mi Chuang Jiang stared at the figures in the gondola.

They stared back.

Hundreds of meters apart, eyes locked.

Then one of the men in the gondola lifted a megaphone.

"Bandit leader. I see you. You are surrounded. Lay down your weapons and surrender immediately. If you surrender, your sentence may be reduced and your years of Labor Reform shortened. If you resist, do not blame us when swords and spears show no mercy."

Mi Chuang Jiang exploded.

"Damn it. Loose arrows. Shoot him down."

His men answered helplessly.

"It is too far. We cannot reach it."

The balloon rose even higher, floating above the slope.

Inside the gondola, a scout from Gao Family Village pulled out paper and brush. He sketched a rough topographical map that looked like a child's drawing. Then he drew a red circle around the exact location where Mi Chuang Jiang stood.

He rolled the paper, placed it into a bamboo tube, tied it to a rope, and lowered it to the ground below.

Moments later, the Gao Family Village Militia began their ascent into the mountains.

The hunt had begun.

Chapter 1118 Defenses Must Be Strengthened

Mi Chuang Jiang stood on a high ridge, watching the so called government troops pour into the Micang Mountains.

A chill crept into his bones.

The army did not advance as one clumsy mass. The moment they entered the mountains, they split into more than a dozen separate columns. Each column numbered over two thousand men. They moved like a giant comb, sweeping every slope, gully, ravine, and forest.

This was not a symbolic search.

This was a purge.

One subordinate wailed, "This is bad. This is truly bad."

Another shouted, "Boss, we cannot just wait here to be surrounded. Let us roll rocks down the slopes and crush them."

"Yes, and set up archers for ambush."

Mi Chuang Jiang snapped, "Good. Do it at once."

Only then did the rebels scramble to establish defensive positions. Unfortunately, these were not prepared fortifications. They were hasty arrangements built on fear.

One group seized an excellent rockfall position on a slope.

There was just one problem.

They had no rocks ready.

So they scattered to search for suitable boulders nearby.

Their frantic movement made them beautifully visible.

Up in the sky, the observer in the reconnaissance hot air balloon saw everything.

Information was relayed to the ground units.

Thus, the Gao Family Village militia advancing along that route were suddenly stopped by a runner who came sprinting toward them.

"Stop. There is an ambush ahead. Another twenty meters and rocks will come crashing down."

The militia halted immediately and looked up the slope.

An officer lifted his binoculars.

"There. That patch of stone. Rebel squad. Small pile of rocks. Waiting for us."

"Damn them."

"Our flintlocks cannot reach."

"Bring up the small grenade mortars."

The artillery team hurried forward, setting down a compact cannon no thicker than a man's arm. They adjusted angle and elevation with practiced calm.

Boom.

The mountain answered with echoing thunder.

Steel factory militiamen watching from the side leaned in with interest.

"So that is how a small grenade mortar works."

"Fascinating."

After several explosions, the rebel rockfall position was shattered. The bandits either died or fled.

Only then did the column continue its advance.

Each of the more than dozen detachments had about two hundred regular militia at the front. The civilian militia followed behind. Their combat ability was weaker, their equipment simpler, their experience nonexistent. What they possessed in abundance was enthusiasm.

They were ideal for consolidating captured ground.

"Second squad. Occupy Shiziping Heights. Deploy a new hot air balloon immediately."

A balloon rose.

"Eighth squad. Ascend Bandengya Pass. Launch balloon."

Another balloon climbed into the sky.

One high ground after another fell into Gao Family Village hands. From each elevation, a new eye in the sky expanded the search radius.

It was terrifyingly efficient.

Soon, a vast portion of the northern Micang Mountains was under control.

Mi Chuang Jiang and his men could only retreat.

South.

Then further south.

For days, the mountain became a battlefield of pursuit and escape. Skirmishes erupted in forest clearings and narrow ravines. Each time, rebel casualties mounted. Bodies were abandoned. Retreat followed.

Mi Chuang Jiang's hiding space shrank.

Compressed.

Compressed again.

And again.

Until one day, he suddenly realized there was nowhere left to run.

Behind him rose a sheer cliff that could not be climbed. To his left yawned a gorge that promised certain drowning. To his right, a jagged precipice waited to claim any careless footstep.

He had no balloon to guide him.

Running blindly in the Micang Mountains had finally delivered him to a dead end.

His throat tightened.

Before him stood tens of thousands of Gao Family Village militia and civilian militia.

A forest of weapons aimed at him.

Bolt action rifles. Breech loading guns. Rifled muskets. Smoothbores. Even bows and crossbows in the hands of enthusiastic workers.

Every barrel pointed at Mi Chuang Jiang.

He swallowed.

Then he dropped his weapon.

With a desperate kick, he sent it sliding away.

He raised both hands high.

"Do not fire. I surrender. Do not fire."

In Hanzhong Prefecture, Zhao Guangyuan was patrolling the city when he saw a massive formation approaching the South Gate.

Wang Er had returned.

Behind him marched Mi Chuang Jiang and more than ten thousand disarmed followers.

Zhao Guangyuan's face lit up.

"Success. The mountain search succeeded."

He ordered the gates opened and went out to greet them.

The Prefect and Prince Rui soon arrived as well.

"All rebel forces in the Micang Mountains have been captured," Wang Er announced. "Hanzhong may temporarily lift its alert status."

"Excellent," Prince Rui cried out immediately. "Finally, no one will attempt to steal my steam train."

The others exchanged glances in silence.

Some worried about strategy.

The Prefect worried about people.

He looked at the more than ten thousand captives and spoke softly, "What will be done with them? Their resettlement is no small matter."

"There is no need for the Prefect to trouble himself," Wang Er replied calmly, once again invoking Sun Chuanting as a convenient shield. "We will escort them to Xi'an and hand them over for disposition."

In truth, Sun Chuanting would likely not bother personally. Most of them would probably be sent directly to Tianzhu Mountain or Huanglong Mountain labor reform camps.

Years of labor awaited them.

Wang Er was preparing to depart for Xi'an when the embroidered image of Dao Xuan Tianzun on his chest spoke in a voice only he could hear.

"Wang Er, there is a better way to handle these captives."

Wang Er immediately bowed slightly. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, your subordinate awaits your guidance."

Li Daoxuan said, "We have subdued this rebel force, but bandit groups still stir in Sichuan. Others may cross the Micang Mountains again and invade Hanzhong."

Wang Er frowned. "That is true. What should be done?"

"Strengthen the defenses of the Micang Mountains," Li Daoxuan replied. "Establish outposts and beacon towers at key locations. If bandits are sighted, light the beacons at once. The signal will reach Hanzhong immediately. From there, Xi'an can be notified without delay."

Wang Er understood at once.

Shaanxi was the core heartland of Dao Xuan Tianzun's liberated territory.

It could not be left vulnerable.

Bandits must never again cross the mountains unnoticed.

The defense line against Sichuan had to become iron.

Chapter 1119 Grand Construction

Wang Er turned to the militia.

"Fellow militia members," he announced, "you come from all walks of life, each with your own skills. Fighting isn't your primary talent; you're far better at getting work done."

The militia chuckled in agreement.

"That's right, that's right."

Wang Er continued,

"Now, Tianzun has a crucial task for all of you. We need to initiate a rapid construction effort in the Micang Mountains, establishing multiple mountaintop outposts, signal towers, and all the accompanying transportation and logistical systems..."

Upon hearing it was Tianzun's command, everyone's enthusiasm surged.

"Understood!" they declared.

"Excellent," Wang Er affirmed. "You understand this aspect better than I do. I ask that you begin planning immediately. If there's anyone here with expertise in this field, step forward now to propose a plan."

No sooner had he finished speaking than a middle-aged militiaman stepped forward from the ranks, carrying a hand crossbow and looking decidedly less like a fighter. As he walked, he unslung the

crossbow and tossed it aside. Then he removed what appeared to be a helmet from his back and placed it on his head—

Only then did the others realize it was not a helmet at all, but a Blue Hat.

The surrounding militiamen gasped in astonishment.

"Good heavens, a Blue Hat! A senior technician! What are you doing serving as a militiaman?"

The Blue Hat chuckled.

"Defending our home and nation knows no status."

He approached Wang Er, snapped a salute, and declared,

"Designer from the Gao Family Village Architectural Institute, reporting for duty."

Wang Er produced a stack of papers—a concise topographical map of the Micang Mountains sketched by observers from a reconnaissance hot air balloon.

"Here's the map," he said. "Have a look."

The architectural designer took the map, studied it for a moment, then pulled out a pen and swiftly drew several circles.

"Here, here, and here... we can build outposts in these locations, each designed with living space for fifty soldiers, and signal towers erected on their roofs..."

He then drew several lines.

"These will be roads. We need to construct these routes to connect each outpost, allowing our vehicles to deliver supplies and deploy troops as quickly as possible."

Wang Er exclaimed,

"We're truly fortunate to have you! You've produced a plan so swiftly."

He raised the plan high.

"Workers, do you see this?"

"We see it!" the workers shouted back.

"Brothers from all trades, let's roll up our sleeves and get to work!" Wang Er rallied. "Before the second wave of bandits arrives, we must establish a defensive line that blocks their entry into Shaanxi—a line even more formidable than the Great Wall itself."

The crowd roared,

"Hoo-rah!"

Wang Er's gaze swept toward Mi Chuang Jiang.

Startled by Wang Er's imposing stare, Mi Chuang Jiang flinched.

"What do you want? Don't kill me!"

"You've seen the map in my hand, haven't you?" Wang Er asked.

Mi Chuang Jiang stammered,

"I've seen it, uh... but I don't understand it."

Wang Er pointed to the lines on the map.

"These are roads. They need people to build them."

Mi Chuang Jiang instantly grasped the meaning and quickly offered,

"My men will build! All my men will build the roads!"

Wang Er nodded.

"Work diligently on the roads, put in good labor, and you can soon become decent people again."

With the economic construction phase now in full swing, Wang Er immediately felt like an idiot; he understood nothing about it.

Just then, the Blue Hat stepped to the forefront, waving a hand.

"Cement Factory Militia! Immediately scout for a suitable site here and prepare to build a temporary cement factory to supply cement for the Micang Mountain outposts!"

A group of militiamen eagerly stepped forward.

"We're from the cement factory!"

"Are the brothers from the furniture factory here?"

"We are!" a group of carpenters shouted, stepping out.

"You, quickly cut some timber and construct a few wooden outposts for temporary use..."

"Yes, sir!"

"Militiamen from the pig farm, textile factory, and mess hall, you are responsible for everyone's meals."

"Alright!"

Tens of thousands of militiamen sprang into action, each expert in their own field. Every individual took charge of the work they knew best, and the workers from Gao Family Village were exceptionally skilled at large-scale, organized production.

In this regard, they had already far surpassed everyone else of this era.

The Prefect of Hanzhong had initially thought he could lend a hand with such internal affairs, but to his surprise, these militiamen didn't need his assistance at all. They quickly divided themselves into work groups and plunged into their various tasks.

The Prefect of Hanzhong simply stared, bewildered.

He suddenly realized he wasn't even as competent as the man wearing the Blue Hat.

The great, whistling trains, which had just been transporting soldiers, now suddenly switched to hauling production materials. All sorts of manufacturing and construction tools were brought in by the trains and distributed to every worker.

The workers laid down their weapons, picked up their tools, removed their helmets, and donned Yellow Hats, even breaking into song:

"Oh, the liberated zones!"

"Oh, the great production!"

"The army and people mobilized together, oh!..."

The Micang Mountains suddenly buzzed with more activity than Hanzhong Prefecture itself—

Meanwhile...

A fleet of ships slowly entered Japan's Nagasaki Port.

The great pirate Mang Er—ah, no, the great merchant Zheng Zhihu—dressed in merchant attire, a smile on his face, disembarked and strode onto the docks of Nagasaki Port.

At this time, Japan had already begun tightening its maritime policies. In another year, they would enter a period of national seclusion that would last for over a century, until Western "black ships" forced them open and initiated the Meiji Restoration.

Of course, even during its seclusion, Nagasaki Port would remain open.

Consequently, Japanese merchants flocked to Nagasaki, eager to embrace this last free trading port.

Zheng Zhihu was quite a renowned figure here. The moment he stepped off the ship, a local merchant approached, speaking in Chinese.

"Brother Mang Er, what brings you to Nagasaki?"

Zheng Zhihu laughed heartily.

"I've brought a batch of excellent goods."

"Excellent goods?" The local merchant's face immediately flushed with excitement. "What kind are they? Bring them out so we can all get rich!"

With a flourish, Zheng Zhihu pulled out a bottle of seafood soy sauce, then with another swift motion, a bottle of 53-proof Dao Xuan Tianzun Special-Blend Liquor. Another flourish produced a piece of Xilankapu brocade, followed by Chengcheng embroidery, Want Want Snow Crackers, Kiss Star Jellies, and Dove Chocolates...

Each item he produced was stranger and more outlandish than the last.

Yet, to the seafaring merchants, these utterly absurd items, while certainly peculiar, were far from unacceptable.

Merchants of the Age of Exploration would accept almost any bizarre, never-before-seen commodity. As long as it tasted good, looked attractive, or proved useful, there was no merchandise they wouldn't take.

The local merchant examined the curious goods, then sampled a few. His expression instantly shifted.

"Eh? Eh? Brother Mang Er, these goods you've brought this time... they're magnificent!"

Zheng Zhihu chuckled.

"Hehehe, let's be clear, they won't be cheap."

"Price is no issue," the merchant declared. "The more you charge me, the more I can charge the daimyō and samurai! Hahahaha!"

Chapter 1120 Raising Taxes

With a ruthless heart, Zheng Zhihu set an exorbitant price, averaging five times higher than his acquisition cost at Shanghai Port. The most expensive item on his list was Dove Chocolate.

This particular commodity was already costly to begin with. Li Daoxuan only occasionally bestowed it when he was in a good mood, and lately, Li Daoxuan had been on a diet, so he had not bought chocolate to eat in a long time. If he did not buy it, he naturally would not grant it to the little people in the diorama.

The chocolate currently existing in Gao Family Village mostly came from the Village Chief's stash.

Merchants transported it from Gao Family Village to the Heyang Qichuan Ferry, then transferred it to Xiaolangdi, and from there it traveled by river-sea vessels to Shanghai Port.

This layering of transfers caused its price to continuously escalate.

By the time it reached Zheng Zhihu's hands, it was already sky-high.

Zheng Zhihu then transported it across the ocean to Nagasaki Port, where he marked it up another tenfold.

Its price had become utterly incomprehensible to ordinary people.

Then the local merchant, after acquiring the goods from Zheng Zhihu, added another twenty percent to the price.

With the price soaring to such heights, the packaging naturally had to match.

The local merchant found a beautiful, exquisitely crafted ceramic box, so fine that the box alone could fetch several taels of silver in Japan.

In the very center of the box, a tiny piece of chocolate was carefully placed.

The asking price was two hundred fifty taels of silver, or simply "two-fifty" for short. It was purchased by a samurai eager for promotion, hoping to present it to his superior, and was then delivered to the residence of Nabeshima Katsushige, the Nagasaki Magistrate.

Nabeshima Katsushige was the son of Nabeshima Naoshige, a renowned general from Japan's Warring States period. He was a daimyo with a domain of 357,000 koku. After the Battle of Sekigahara, he was appointed Nagasaki Magistrate and had been stationed at Nagasaki Port ever since.

A page, holding the porcelain box with both hands, presented it before Nabeshima Katsushige.

"My Lord, this is a Tang good sent to you by your subordinates."

"Tang good" was the general term used by the Japanese at the time for items introduced from the Great Ming Dynasty.

"Tang goods?" Nabeshima Katsushige was long accustomed to Tang goods. Due to his position at Nagasaki Port, he constantly received goods from all over the world delivered by sea merchants, especially those from the Great Ming Dynasty. Silk, ceramics, tea sets, he had grown tired of seeing them all.

Nabeshima Katsushige shook his head. "Do they have nothing new to send me? Tang goods are the least scarce thing we have here. It is the peculiar items from the Western lands that are harder to come by."

The page whispered, "This item, however, seems quite rare. It is called 'Dove Silky Milk Chocolate,' a name never heard before."

"Oh?" Nabeshima Katsushige's interest was piqued. "Bring it closer for me to see."

The page stepped forward.

Nabeshima Katsushige now saw it clearly. Within the delicate porcelain box lay a small, dark, unremarkable square.

"Is this thing meant to be eaten?"

The page nodded. "Yes, my Lord."

Nabeshima Katsushige asked, "So unsightly. How can it be delicious?"

The page replied, "I do not know, and I dared not taste it myself. According to the samurai who delivered it, this tiny piece costs two hundred fifty taels of silver. It is far too expensive. I would not dare try it."

Two hundred fifty taels?

The price startled Nabeshima Katsushige. How small was that piece? And yet it cost two hundred fifty taels?

The number left him stunned.

His curiosity to try something new was ignited.

He reached out, picked up the small piece of chocolate, and tossed it into his mouth.

For some reason, a strange voice echoed in his mind, shouting, "Two-Fifty!"

Then the exquisite taste of silky milk chocolate spread through his mouth.

Nabeshima Katsushige's face revealed an expression of ecstasy. "Ah! Truly delicious, utterly delightful. It truly lives up to its price of two hundred fifty taels of silver. Tang goods always manage to surprise me."

He could not even bring himself to chew it. Instead, he let the chocolate slowly melt in his mouth, savoring it until it had completely vanished. Only then did he reach into the box, hoping for a second piece.

It was gone.

At two-fifty, there had been only that one tiny piece.

Nabeshima Katsushige exclaimed, "Such a wonderful thing, and there is only one small piece? How could one small piece be enough? Quickly, find the samurai who brought this and ask him where he bought it. Go at once!"

The page hurried off and soon returned with a report.

"It was obtained from Tsuchiya Santarō, a small merchant from the Rakuichi-Rakuza markets. Tsuchiya Santarō obtained it from the Zheng clan, sea merchants from the Great Ming Dynasty."

Nabeshima Katsushige declared, "Good. Now that you know, go and buy more."

The page darted off like a bird. Not long after, he returned, excitedly carrying a large stack of porcelain boxes filled with chocolate for Nabeshima Katsushige. That pile of boxes alone cost the Nabeshima family several thousand taels of silver.

And besides that stack of chocolate boxes, he brought back even more peculiar items.

"My Lord," the page announced, "there were many more Tang goods this time, and quite a few rare items. I have bought them all for you."

The page produced the exotic goods one by one.

"Look, this is called Want Want Snow Cracker. It is cheaper than chocolate, but also very tasty. And this is Xizhilang Jelly, quite fascinating. This is a Warm and Sleepy wool sweater. It is said to be top-tier even in the Great Ming Dynasty, and all the high-ranking officials and nobles there adore it."

Soon after, Nabeshima Katsushige found himself wearing a Warm and Sleepy wool sweater, a fragrant silk fan crafted by the Tujia people of Kaixian tucked into his waist, his feet resting on a thick rug embroidered in the Chengcheng style, a Want Want Snow Cracker in his left hand, and a clump of Xizhilang Jelly in his right.

Surely, this was a life fit for an immortal?

However...

Not long after, the Nabeshima family's Treasurer, the official in charge of finances, came calling.

"My Lord, please stop buying. Please, these Tang goods are too expensive. Our Nabeshima family's silver cannot sustain such spending. We are already experiencing expenditures exceeding our income."

Nabeshima Katsushige responded, "I have been spending rather quickly lately, but if we simply raise taxes a bit, will not those farmers make up the money for me? Go. Raise the taxes. Raise them now."

The Treasurer gasped in alarm. "We cannot raise them further. The farmers are already on the verge of rebellion."

Nabeshima Katsushige scoffed. "Afraid they will rebel? Kill anyone who dares to rebel."

The Treasurer silently cursed his misfortune, but a daimyo's command was absolute. As a loyal samurai, even if his lord was mistaken, he had to obey. Such was the spirit of Bushido.

While the Treasurer grumbled internally, Nabeshima Katsushige placed a Lay's Original Potato Chip into his hand.

"Here. You must try a Tang good as well. This is truly a rare delicacy."

The Treasurer put the chip into his mouth and crunched.

"Crunch. Delicious. So, so delicious."

He could not stop himself. Happiness became a constant crunching sound.

The Treasurer could not help but ask the page in a trembling voice, "How much did that small piece I just ate cost?"

The page replied, "Fifty taels."

The Treasurer hissed, then gritted his teeth.

"It seems... my family will also have to raise taxes."