

Great Ming 1161

Chapter 1161 Retreat

Shizhu Pacification Commissioner Qin Liangyu was the first to make her position clear.

A formal proclamation was issued. Troops would be deployed to relieve Chengdu.

The news traveled fast.

Not long after, Kaixian Pacification Commissioner Ran Ke made the same announcement.

Then Zhong County.

Wanzhou.

Pengshui Miao.

Daozhen Gelao.

Youyang Tujia.

And Enshi.

At the mention of Enshi, more than one official blinked in confusion.

Was that not Hubei territory?

In later generations, yes. But in the present Ming administration, the Enshi region still fell under Kuizhou Prefecture of Sichuan. Jianshi County, parts of Badong, and the Shizhou Wei Military and Civilian Command were all governed within Sichuan's administrative sphere. Since Gao Family Village's policies extended through Kuizhou, they naturally extended to Enshi as well.

Thus, the Tujia and Miao Pacification Commissioners of Enshi also dispatched troops.

These minority forces had one obvious common feature.

They were poor.

Their equipment reflected it.

Where Han troops might carry mixed arms, layered armor, composite bows, and occasionally firearms, these mountain soldiers relied almost entirely on long spears. The shafts were oiled wooden poles, sturdy and flexible, tipped with simple but deadly steel heads.

Depending on the wood available in their home regions, the poles varied in color.

Those carved from pale timber became the White Pole Soldiers.

Those cut from darker hardwood were called Black Pole Soldiers.

Golden hued wood gave rise to Yellow Pole Soldiers.

Green tinged wood formed Green Pole Soldiers.

Brown barked shafts created Brown Pole Soldiers.

When these units assembled in Chongqing, the sight was astonishing.

A forest of spears.

A moving rainbow of timber and iron.

At the forefront stood Qin Liangyu, commanding the White Pole Soldiers with calm authority. Her armor gleamed faintly under the winter sun, but her gaze was fixed upward.

Above Cheng Xu's position fluttered the Heavenly Banner, a large, vividly colored standard bearing the symbol of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

She studied it for a long moment before speaking.

"Instructor He," she said, her tone measured, "did you foresee that today there would be White Poles, Black Poles, Yellow Poles, Green Poles, and Brown Poles all gathered together? Is that why this banner carries so many colors?"

Cheng Xu spread his hands, intending to laugh and deny it.

Then he froze.

A thought struck him with sudden force.

Could it be that Dao Xuan Tianzun had foreseen this gathering long ago? That the multicolored banner was not merely decorative, but symbolic? That it represented the unification of diverse local powers under one heavenly mandate?

The Heavenly Lord was said to know five hundred years into the past, five hundred years into the future, and five hundred years in between.

Cheng Xu felt his scalp tingle.

He bowed his head slightly toward the banner, awe blooming once more in his chest.

Not far away, the mass produced statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun was currently holding a Yellow Pole Soldier's spear, turning it from side to side with evident curiosity.

"So there are Yellow Pole Soldiers in addition to White Pole Soldiers," the divine figure murmured thoughtfully. "Interesting. Very interesting."

Meanwhile, Gao Family Village's five thousand regular troops had fully assembled within Sichuan. The three notoriously reckless generals arrived in succession, loud as ever, along with Zheng Gouzi. Supplies were distributed. Formations arranged. Orders relayed.

Then the combined force began its march toward Chengdu.

Behind the Heavenly Banner came disciplined infantry with firearms. Behind them marched the rainbow of pole soldiers. The earth seemed to vibrate under their synchronized advance.

While this colorful tide advanced eastward, the situation at Chengdu remained tense.

For several days, the siege had continued without decisive result.

Cannon fire echoed across the plains. Smoke drifted in thick layers before the city walls. The northern gate bore the worst of it, pitted with craters and blackened scars, yet no breach had opened.

Chengdu was no small frontier town. It was a grand ancient capital, its walls thick and formidable.

Before those towering defenses stood Li Zicheng, the Chuǎng Wang.

He sat astride his horse, gazing at the city in silence.

This fortress will not fall easily, he thought.

The imperial court possessed many cities like this. Xi'an. Luoyang. Nanjing. Each a stone mountain of defense. Without capturing cities of this scale, no territory could truly be claimed.

If strong cities could not be taken, then they would continue wandering.

But wandering forever was not strategy. It was survival.

"Chuǎng Wang Brother!"

A scout rushed forward.

"Er Zhi Hu has arrived."

Li Zicheng blinked.

Er Zhi Hu had been missing for days. When the rebel army marched near Chongqing, he had led ten thousand men into the mountains and vanished from sight.

Moments later, Er Zhi Hu strode into the central command tent. Cannon fire still boomed faintly outside.

"Brother," Er Zhi Hu said with a wry smile, "Sichuan is a labyrinth of mountains. I lost my way and nearly made the hills my permanent home. I wandered near Chongqing and planned to seize the city. I even arranged for a laborer inside to open the gates at night. But before the plan could unfold, a firearms unit appeared from the side."

Li Zicheng's expression tightened.

"Their firepower was overwhelming," Er Zhi Hu continued. "The Shu Kingdom garrison at Tieshan Ping was shredded by their chaotic volleys. They could not even swing a blade before being blown apart. I realized immediately that this army was beyond my strength. So I withdrew west and by fortune found you here."

Li Zicheng exhaled slowly.

"That firearms unit has entered Sichuan," he muttered. "Damn them. They pursue us everywhere."

"You recognize them?" Er Zhi Hu asked.

"They fought us in Shaanxi," Li Zicheng replied. "Then in Shanxi. Yunyang. Henan. Wherever we go, they appear. They are not the Shenji Camp. They have nothing to do with the court's regular forces. They are enemies of the Jin merchants who secretly support us. But I am not a fool. I will not die for the merchants' interests."

Er Zhi Hu's face grew serious.

"Then we retreat?"

Li Zicheng nodded.

"We retreat."

"But we cannot retreat forever," Er Zhi Hu pressed. "One day we must face them."

There was truth in that.

Li Zicheng fell into deep thought.

On open plains, disciplined firearms troops held advantage. Range. Formation. Coordination.

Bandit armies excelled in mobility and ferocity, not line warfare.

"Into the mountains," Li Zicheng decided at last. "We withdraw north into the vast ranges between Sichuan and Shaanxi. In forests and narrow passes, firearms lose their range advantage. There we force close combat. There we may stand a chance."

No sooner had he spoken than another scout burst into the tent.

"Chuǎng Wang Brother! Imperial reinforcements have arrived. They carry a multicolored banner."

Li Zicheng's eyes sharpened.

"Them again."

He raised his hand decisively.

"Cease the assault on Chengdu. Withdraw north immediately. Use the forests. Wear them down."

The cannons fell silent.

Rebel formations began to pull back in disciplined retreat, disappearing gradually toward the northern roads and rising terrain.

On Chengdu's walls, General Ma Xianglin watched the enemy lines recede.

At last, he allowed himself a long breath.

Behind him, the provincial governor and the imperial censor slowly emerged from cover, their complexions still pale but recovering.

"Open the gates," orders were given. "Welcome the reinforcements."

When Gao Family Village's forces entered Chengdu, the sight stunned many officials.

Not only had the disciplined firearms troops arrived, but behind them marched the minority chieftains of eastern Sichuan in full strength.

Aside from Qin Liangyu, these leaders had historically remained within their own domains, rarely intervening in outside conflicts. They guarded their mountains. They kept their distance.

Yet now they stood united beneath one banner.

The provincial governor stared at the assembled commanders, bewildered.

"How," he murmured softly, "were they persuaded to come?"

Chapter 1162 The Old Cured Pork from Home

Wang Weizhang, Governor of Sichuan, stood on the Chengdu city wall and looked at the formation before him.

Row upon row of colorful spearmen.

Bright tassels.

Embroidered banners.

Mountain warriors standing tall like they were posing for a festival parade instead of reinforcing a warzone.

His mood was... complicated.

Very complicated.

He lifted his sleeves, cupped his hands formally toward Ran Ke, and spoke with the politeness of a man who had swallowed vinegar.

"General Ran."

Ran Ke returned the gesture, relaxed, almost amused.

Wang Weizhang continued, his voice smooth but edged with acid.

"The last time this humble official requested assistance, General Ran refused without hesitation. Yet today, when Chengdu faces danger, you arrive so generously to lend aid. It seems... General Ran still keeps a minor governor like me somewhere in his heart."

The words were polite.

The meaning was not.

Even a passing mule could hear the accusation beneath it.

You respect him, not me.

You value others, not me.

Ran Ke laughed softly. Not loudly. Not angrily. Just the laugh of a mountain man who did not care about court etiquette.

"Governor," he said plainly, "when you implemented policies, all the benefits went to the Han households. My Tujia people of Kaixian received nothing. Not a single advantage. Now that cannons are firing and blades are drawn, suddenly you remember this general?"

He tilted his head.

"Where is the justice in that?"

Wang Weizhang opened his mouth.

Then closed it.

Because there was no safe reply.

Ran Ke continued, unhurried.

"I did not come to Chengdu to help you. I came to deal with the bandits quickly so they do not roam freely and disturb the prosperity of my own people. That is all."

That is all.

The governor felt as if someone had shoved cured chili directly into his throat.

He flicked his sleeve sharply.

"Hmph," he cursed silently. "Mountain savage."

He turned away from Ran Ke and looked toward the Pacification Commissioner of Pengshui, leader of the local Miao forces.

Perhaps this one would show some decorum.

Perhaps this one would behave like a proper subordinate.

He had barely opened his mouth when the Miao leader snorted and turned his head aside as if examining distant clouds.

Wang Weizhang closed his mouth again.

The silence was suffocating.

Fortunately, the Enshi Pacification Commissioner stepped forward.

Now this man had grown up in the Enshi Grand Canyon, a place so beautiful and untouched by chaos that it might as well have been a hidden paradise blessed by Dao Xuan Tianzun Himself. People raised in such scenery often developed calm temperaments and faint smiles that suggested they were watching the world as if it were theater.

He waved lightly.

"Greetings, Governor."

Wang Weizhang almost teared up from gratitude.

Finally. Someone civil.

"General, you truly place the court's interests above all," the governor said warmly.

The Enshi Commissioner reached behind his back.

Instead of presenting a memorial or military document, he produced a fragrant slab of cured pork.

He pressed it into Wang Weizhang's hands.

"Come, come. Taste this."

The governor blinked.

"This is the first batch from our Enshi pig farm and pork processing workshop. Authentic Enshi cured pork. Rich aroma. Deep flavor. If you find it delicious, remember to purchase more."

Wang Weizhang stared at the meat.

Then at the man.

Then at the meat again.

Something in the universe had shifted.

The Enshi Commissioner suddenly leapt onto the city wall like an excited marketplace vendor and shouted toward the common people gathered below.

"Prosperous citizens of Chengdu! Have you tasted true Enshi cured pork? I doubt it! But worry not! Our factories are already built! Our goods will arrive soon! Please support us generously!"

He beamed.

"We Enshi people treat you as family. We came all this way to defend your city. Surely you can buy a few pieces of our cured pork in return. As a learned Han scholar once told me, courtesy demands reciprocity!"

Wang Weizhang nearly choked to death.

"Drag him down!" he shouted. "Immediately!"

No one moved.

Behind the smiling Enshi Commissioner stood a line of Miao soldiers gripping sabers.

Their expressions said clearly: Try it.

Han officials might obey bureaucracy.

Mountain warriors obeyed something else entirely.

The governor's subordinates quietly stepped backward.

Then something even more astonishing happened.

Several Miao soldiers jumped forward onto the wall, each holding cured pork, and began dancing.

Dancing.

On the defensive wall of Chengdu.

While singing.

"Oh cured pork from home, fragrant and rich, dripping with oil! Take a bite and never leave! Why hesitate, why delay, buy today, oh!"

Ran Ke stared.

His jaw hung open.

"You can advertise like this?"

He scratched his head.

"Who taught them? That fellow is even more simple-minded than I am. He would never think of such a scheme."

At that moment Flat Rabbit squeezed out from behind the formation, wiping sweat from his brow.

"Gao Chuwu, Zheng Daniu, Zheng Gouzi," he muttered, "none of them have brains sharp enough for this. Someone smarter from our village must have entered Sichuan."

He squinted thoughtfully.

"Ah. It must be San Shier."

Far away in Enshi County, San Shier sneezed.

He stood in front of newly built pig pens, addressing a group of curious Miao villagers.

"I wonder who is thinking of me," he laughed.

Then he clapped his hands.

"Now listen carefully. The key to pig farming is epidemic prevention. Hygiene must be strict. Do not assume pigs are dirty and neglect cleaning. You must manage the pens properly. Preparation averts disaster."

Back in Chengdu, Wang Weizhang's patience finally shattered.

"We were under cannon fire moments ago!" he roared. "This is a battlefield! Can you show some seriousness?"

The Enshi Commissioner answered calmly.

"The bandits have already retreated. We came as reinforcements. We will camp here two days and observe. Do you expect us to march endlessly without rest and plunge immediately into another engagement?"

He smiled faintly.

"If that is your attitude, we can return to the mountains."

Ran Ke nodded immediately.

"Yes. Return to the mountains."

Other commissioners echoed in chorus.

"Return to the mountains."

Wang Weizhang panicked.

"No, no. Rest. Please rest properly."

The Enshi Commissioner grinned brightly.

"You see? When Miao people rest, we sing and dance."

He waved grandly.

"Music! Continue!"

The dancing resumed.

The cured pork anthem grew louder.

Ran Ke suddenly stiffened.

"This will not do. Our Tujia cannot be outshone!"

A subordinate whispered, "But we brought no goods."

Ran Ke slapped his thigh.

"The bedding. Xilankapu brocade. Take it out!"

At once the Kaixian soldiers unpacked vibrant woven textiles.

They rushed onto the wall, waved the brilliant brocade high, and began their own performance.

"Authentic Kaixian Xilankapu! Durable! Beautiful! Warm in winter! Buy now!"

The city wall had transformed into a trade fair.

Wang Weizhang trembled with rage.

"These are not reinforcements. They are merchants!"

He stormed toward Qin Liangyu.

"Old General Qin, only you can control them."

Qin Liangyu raised an eyebrow.

"The bandits have retreated. Chengdu is temporarily safe. The next strategy is undecided. During this interval, what is wrong with promoting local products?"

She shrugged lightly.

"Fighting is serious. Living is also serious."

The governor's mind went blank.

Qin Liangyu turned and winked at a soldier behind her.

"It is time for Shizhu to participate."

Soon another voice joined the chorus.

"Shizhu Coptis! Excellent medicinal quality! Chengdu apothecaries welcome!"

The city wall now echoed with pork songs, textile chants, and herbal sales pitches.

Smoke from earlier cannon fire still drifted faintly in the air.

Below, the citizens of Chengdu stared upward in disbelief.

War and commerce.

Sabers and cured meat.

Mountain warriors advertising with more enthusiasm than battlefield fury.

Wang Weizhang stood frozen between anger and helplessness, suddenly realizing something he had never understood before.

These people were not mere pawns of the court.

They were communities.

They had homes.

They had industries.

They had pride.

If they were going to bleed for Chengdu, they would also sell to Chengdu.

And on that peculiar afternoon, atop the battered walls of a city that had narrowly escaped destruction, the loudest sounds were not cannons.

They were advertisements.

And somewhere in the distance, San Shier sneezed again.

Chapter 1163 Dispersed Actions

The city wall of Chengdu had only just finished echoing with pork songs and textile chants when reality returned like a cold splash of river water.

Amusing though the chieftains' performances were, war did not pause simply because cured pork sold well.

Before the echoes of advertisement faded, scouts had already ridden north.

They returned before dusk.

Boots muddy.

Faces grim.

They knelt before Cheng Xu.

"The Rebel Army has moved north. They have plunged deep into the mountain forests."

A quiet fell over the command area.

Cheng Xu turned his gaze toward the horizon, where the northern mountain range rose like the spine of some ancient dragon. Endless ridges overlapped into haze. Ravines cut through stone like scars. Forests thick as woven carpets swallowed sunlight whole.

"Into the mountains," he murmured.

His brow tightened.

"The Shu Mountains are treacherous terrain. Ravines interlock. Valleys twist. Once we enter that ground, our artillery range advantage shrinks dramatically. We will be forced into close engagements. Climbing, descending, crawling through gullies. And although we possess reconnaissance hot air

balloons, this region has not suffered drought. The forests are dense. Their canopy will block observation from above."

He paused, weighing the implications carefully.

"The rebels can conceal themselves beneath those trees. They can break formation. They can ambush from any direction. We risk losing cohesion."

The officers listened in silence.

This was no plain.

No open battlefield where cannons sang freely.

This was the belly of Shu.

After completing his assessment, Cheng Xu turned respectfully to Qin Liangyu.

"General Qin. Your wisdom?"

Though well past sixty, Qin Liangyu stood straight as a spear. Her White Pole Soldiers had marched these lands long before Cheng Xu had ever held command.

"Instructor He," she said evenly, "the Shu Mountains must be handled by the people of Shu."

She gestured toward her assembled forces.

"My White Pole Soldiers. The Yellow Pole, Black Pole, Green Pole contingents from various chieftains. Do you think we came here merely to eat and watch?"

Her eyes flashed.

"If our men take the lead through those mountains, no ambush will catch your firearms units unaware."

Cheng Xu's expression brightened immediately.

"Excellent."

Plans were set.

That night, the army rested inside Chengdu.

The mood had shifted.

Less singing.

More sharpening of blades.

At dawn, the entire force assembled and began its northern advance.

As columns moved out, Ran Ke hurried toward the Enshi Pacification Commissioner with the urgency of a merchant who had missed market day.

"How much did you sell yesterday?" he asked in a hushed tone.

The Enshi Commissioner grinned broadly.

"Over five thousand jin of cured meat."

Ran Ke stopped walking.

"Five thousand?"

"We prepared thoroughly," the Enshi Commissioner said with satisfaction. "Each soldier carried several jin. If unsold, it serves as rations anyway."

Ran Ke felt a sharp pang in his chest.

"Our Kaixian Tujia were unprepared. We only demonstrated Xilankapu brocade. When people asked to purchase, we had nothing to sell. Only promises. I am deeply frustrated."

The Enshi Commissioner laughed.

"That is because the one who helped develop your village did not plan commerce carefully."

Ran Ke stiffened.

"The one who helped us was Flat Rabbit. A righteous and valiant hero. Speak no ill of him."

The Enshi Commissioner chuckled.

"Good men are not always good merchants. The one who helped us, San Shier, he has the face of a schemer. But when such a man helps you make money, the results are impressive."

Ran Ke opened his mouth to argue.

No argument formed.

The drums sounded.

Cheng Xu and Qin Liangyu were already calling for forward movement.

The two commissioners broke off their conversation and returned to their ranks.

Leaving Chengdu meant crossing the Chengdu Plain.

The wealthiest region in Sichuan.

The cradle of culture.

Or at least it had been.

Now the plain lay wounded.

Fields of grain, once golden and hopeful, were blackened and trampled. Unripe crops burned before harvest. Irrigation ditches clogged with ash.

Scattered farmhouses stood hollow and silent. Some were charred frames. Others collapsed inward like broken ribs.

Here and there, bodies still lay near thresholds.

Men who had tried to defend their homes.

Women who had not escaped in time.

Valuables stripped.

Doors smashed.

Silence heavy.

The Gao Family Village Militia marched through this devastation with clenched jaws. They had undergone strict moral and ideological training. Protection of the people was not a slogan to them. It was doctrine.

Many soldiers lowered their eyes.

Others stared straight ahead, faces pale.

Qin Liangyu surveyed the ruin with controlled fury.

"These rebels cannot be allowed to continue," she said quietly. "They must be eliminated swiftly."

Cheng Xu nodded.

"I agree."

But Qin Liangyu's thoughts moved further.

"If we press too hard in a single large offensive," she said slowly, "they may scatter northward over the great mountain barrier and spill into Shaanxi. That would create a larger disaster. We should send word immediately. Shaanxi must prepare defenses. Ideally Governor-General Hong Chengchou should establish fortifications in southern Shaanxi."

Cheng Xu smiled faintly.

"General Qin, you need not worry. We have already arranged for militia forces to construct a powerful defensive line in the mountainous corridor between Sichuan and Shaanxi."

Qin Liangyu blinked.

"You planned that in advance?"

Cheng Xu's expression remained modest.

"Preparation averts disaster."

North of the plain rose Jian'ge Pass.

Famed throughout history.

During the era of the Three Kingdoms, when the Shu Han held it, the Cao Wei forces dared not attack directly. Only when Deng Ai led troops along the perilous Yinping trail did Shu fall.

Such was its reputation.

Now that legendary pass had collapsed without resistance.

The reason was painfully simple.

The garrison was incompetent.

Poorly equipped.

Poorly trained.

Unpaid for months.

When rebels appeared, they fled faster than startled hares.

The Chuǎng Wang now occupied Jian'ge Pass comfortably.

Guo Tianxing bowed.

"We have withdrawn into the mountain forests north of the Chengdu Plain. What is your command?"

Er Zhi Hu spoke quickly.

"We must not defend the pass directly. Their cannons will bombard it relentlessly."

The Chuǎng Wang nodded.

"We cannot hold obvious positions. Nor can we mass in visible formations. Their artillery will tear us apart."

He stepped onto the battlements and looked southward.

A large spherical object floated in the sky.

The reconnaissance hot air balloon.

"A scout device," he said calmly. "They observe us from above. Any large movement will be detected."

The generals murmured uneasily.

"So formidable?"

"It sees large formations," Chuǎng Wang continued. "But not scattered units beneath dense forest canopy."

He turned back toward them.

"Therefore we divide."

He spoke deliberately.

"Break the army into numerous small units. Under one thousand men each. Hide within forests, ravines, caves. No grand displays. No mass gatherings. When opportunity arises, emerge suddenly and drag their firearms troops into close combat."

His eyes hardened.

"In mountains, terrain is the true commander."

A scout rushed in again.

"Government troops approach!"

Chuǎng Wang smiled faintly.

"Then let them come."

Outside, the forests of Shu waited.

Dense.

Silent.

Hungry.

Chapter 1164 Ten Catties of Meat

The rebel army did not retreat in panic.

It unraveled.

There is a difference.

An imperial army retreats like a broken wall collapsing in sequence. A rebel army dissolves like mist. It has no rigid structure to fracture. It simply spreads.

And this, ironically, was one of its greatest strengths.

Unlike the tightly drilled formations of the Ming regulars, the rebel host had always been loosely organized. A minor chieftain commanded a few hundred men loyal to him personally. A mid-tier leader could gather a thousand. Allegiance flowed horizontally rather than vertically. Orders did not descend like law. They spread like rumor.

So when the command came to disperse, they did not hesitate.

Groups peeled away from the main body as naturally as leaves falling from a tree.

Three hundred men slipped into a western ravine.

Eight hundred vanished toward a bamboo forest.

A thousand more climbed toward hidden cave networks only charcoal burners and hunters remembered.

Within a short time, what had once looked like a black tide rolling across the Chengdu Plain disappeared into the vast folds of the Shu Mountains.

From a distance, they watched the reconnaissance hot air balloon drifting in the sky.

They observed its altitude.

Its angle.

The direction of its shadow.

They were not fools.

They chose thick groves where sunlight barely touched earth. They slid into ditches overgrown with vine. They tucked themselves beneath layered canopy where even birds might hesitate to fly.

Only a few scouts moved about, singly or in pairs. Never in groups large enough to catch attention.

The logic was simple.

That balloon sees crowds.

It does not see a single man breathing quietly beneath leaves.

Chuang Wang himself abandoned Jian'ge Pass.

A fixed stronghold was now a target. Cannons loved stone walls.

He gathered his trusted Old Eighth Squad and withdrew into a narrow ravine whose walls rose steep and damp. There, beneath hanging moss and shadow, he crouched.

A wolf does not sleep in open fields.

Southward, a scout rushed to Cheng Xu, holding a bamboo tube just lowered from the sky.

He knelt.

"The observer reports that Chuang Wang has withdrawn from Jian'ge and dispersed into the mountains. Saturation bombardment is no longer feasible."

Cheng Xu exhaled slowly.

"What a shame."

Beside him stood the mass-produced Dao Xuan Tianzun.

He chuckled lightly.

"That may be for the best. Jian'ge Pass is an ancient relic. Destroying such a site would be regrettable. Leave it intact. One day, the people of Sichuan may charge admission and improve their livelihood."

Cheng Xu wisely did not respond.

When Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke of the distant future, ordinary officials pretended not to understand.

The scout continued.

"The balloon observer reports no visible rebel formations. They are hiding extremely well."

Dao Xuan Tianzun nodded.

"This Chuang Wang is not brainless."

Cheng Xu crossed his hands behind his back.

"Fortunately, we anticipated this and invited the Pacification Commissioners."

Qin Liangyu stepped forward.

Her voice cut through the air.

"White Pole Soldiers. Advance."

Ran Ke followed immediately.

"Yellow Pole Soldiers. Move."

The Enshi Pacification Commissioner raised his spear.

"Black Pole Soldiers. Forward."

The mountain troops did not march in neat straight lines.

They flowed.

They dispersed with purpose.

They did not fear forests.

They belonged to them.

Er Zhi Hu lay in ambush with eight hundred elite men inside a dense grove.

The canopy above was so thick that even midday light entered in fragments.

Through a small gap he could see the balloon floating far off.

"They cannot see us," he muttered smugly. "If they cannot see us, they cannot blast us."

His men nodded, confidence rising.

Time passed.

Too much time.

Er Zhi Hu's brow tightened.

"Our scouts have not returned."

A subordinate replied softly, "They should have checked in by now."

"Send another group."

The second scout team slipped out.

They moved carefully. Avoided snapping twigs. Crossed a shallow ditch.

Then they froze.

Bodies.

The first team.

Each with a small arrow embedded precisely in the throat.

One scout crouched.

"Forest-piercing arrow."

Another swallowed.

Those arrows were crafted for mountain warfare. Short, heavy, able to weave between branches with frightening accuracy.

Fear crept in.

One scout stood abruptly.

"We must report—"

Dry leaves beside him exploded upward.

A figure erupted from the forest floor itself.

A Black Pole spear thrust forward.

Thud.

The spear pierced the scout cleanly.

The warrior laughed coldly.

"The First Warrior of Enshi is here."

Around them, grass and leaf cover burst open.

More Black Pole scouts.

Silent until they struck.

Within moments, Er Zhi Hu's second scout team lay dead.

The First Warrior let out a series of bird calls.

Moments later, the Enshi Pacification Commissioner emerged with a large Miao contingent.

He glanced at the First Warrior.

The warrior nodded.

"No resistance. We proceed."

The Commissioner beamed.

"Excellent. I will record this as great merit. Upon return, your household shall receive ten catties of cured meat."

The First Warrior's eyes widened like a child promised festival sweets.

"Ten catties?"

To a mountain family, that meant winter security.

He straightened proudly.

The Black Pole Soldiers continued advancing, clearing the path.

Behind them followed a thousand Gao Family Village Militia under Gao Chuwu.

With tribal scouts ahead, the firearms unit moved smoothly, never walking blindly into traps.

Back in the grove, Er Zhi Hu waited.

First scouts silent.

Second scouts silent.

Realization struck him like cold water.

He leapt up.

"The imperial troops are closing in!"

A stern voice rang out from the trees.

"Too late."

A forest-piercing arrow streaked through the branches.

Such an arrow did not travel straight. It curved, adjusted, threaded gaps between trunks as if guided by memory.

It flew for Er Zhi Hu's throat.

He barely saw it.

A loyal subordinate beside him lunged forward.

Thud.

The arrow buried into the man's chest.

He collapsed instantly.

"Enemy attack!"

A volley followed.

Arrows slicing through foliage.

Rebel soldiers raised shields hurriedly.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Several fell screaming.

Er Zhi Hu gritted his teeth.

"Charge! They are only tribal archers!"

His eight hundred were hardened fighters. They roared and rushed toward the arrow source.

They burst through thick undergrowth.

And stepped into a clearing.

Waiting there calmly stood a large formation.

Firearms leveled.

Gao Chuwu at the front.

He barked.

"Fire."

Gunshots erupted.

Thunder within forest walls.

Smoke rolled outward.

Rebels fell instantly in clusters.

Panic rippled.

Still, a few fearless bandits charged forward through the smoke.

One rushed straight at Gao Chuwu, saber raised.

Gao Chuwu laughed loudly.

As the saber descended, he sidestepped casually.

With a smooth motion, he drew the heavy-backed broadsword gifted by Xing Honglang.

The blade flashed.

It did not merely cut.

It cleaved.

The charging rebel froze mid-stride.

Then split at the waist.

Even a small tree behind him snapped in two from the residual force.

The militia soldiers holding firearms felt chills crawl down their spines.

Gao Chuwu looked at the fallen tree and scratched his head.

"Ah. I did not restrain my strength. Apologies."

He turned to the First Warrior of Enshi.

"Do not waste that tree. Good wood for spear shafts."

The First Warrior wiped sweat from his brow.

He stared at Gao Chuwu with newfound humility.

"What a formidable general," he admitted quietly. "I am not his equal."

And deep within the forest, the rebel ambush had already collapsed.

Ten catties of meat had bought more than merit.

They had bought momentum.

Chapter 1165 Pursuit to the Border Marker

Whether they were White Pole, Yellow Pole, or Black Pole Soldiers, the terrain of Sichuan was not merely a battlefield to them. It was home. They had grown up among these mountains, eaten from fields carved out of slopes, slept beneath pine canopies that whispered in the night wind, and learned from childhood which cliff paths could bear a man's weight and which would crumble under careless steps. For them, mountain warfare was not a skill acquired through drills. It was instinct refined by a lifetime.

When the scattered rebel remnants collided with these vividly bannered Pole Soldiers inside the dense forests, the imbalance revealed itself almost immediately. The rebels were brave, yes, and not lacking in ferocity, but courage meant little in terrain that swallowed formations whole. Every time a rebel detachment tried to conceal itself in a ravine, spears would suddenly thrust from above. Every time they attempted to ambush along a narrow pass, arrows descended from tree cover they had failed to notice. The Pole Soldiers did not fight the mountains. They moved as part of them.

Inside a cave behind Jiange Pass, Chuang Wang listened to the steady drip of water from stone while messengers knelt before him one after another.

"Reporting, Chuang Wang. Er Zhi Hu was routed by the Enshi Pacification Commissioner and is now fleeing in disarray."

His expression tightened, but he remained silent.

Another messenger hurried in, still panting from the climb.

"Reporting. Guo Tianxing was ambushed in a mountain gully by the White Pole Soldiers and suffered heavy losses."

Before that weight could settle, yet another voice rang out.

"Reporting. Ma Tianxing was intercepted by the Kaixian Yellow Pole Soldiers and utterly defeated."

The cave seemed to shrink.

Not a single scrap of good news had arrived. His commanders were not fighting evenly matched engagements. They were being systematically crushed, stripped apart in terrain that turned every mistake into catastrophe.

Chuang Wang pressed his fingers against his temple. A doubt he did not wish to acknowledge surfaced anyway. Had he erred in ordering the army to disperse into small groups? He had reasoned that scattering would deny the firearms unit a concentrated target. Yet in doing so, he had sent his men into mountains dominated by chieftains who had mastered guerrilla warfare long before he was born.

If they had remained united as one great host, perhaps their strength could have forced open a path. But then the image of cannon fire rose in his mind. A massed army was precisely what the firearms unit desired.

As that thought crystallized, another rebel soldier burst into the cave.

"Reporting, Chuang Wang. Sweeping King and Wa Guanzi heard of the other defeats. They refused to continue dividing their forces. They defied your orders, gathered over ten thousand men, seized a small hilltop, and are openly challenging the White Pole Soldiers."

Chuang Wang's heart sank.

"Fools," he muttered, rising abruptly. "Send word immediately. Tell them to abandon the hilltop. Retreat. Do not hold an exposed position."

He had not even finished speaking when the mountains answered him.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

The thunder of cannons rolled across valleys and echoed from cliff to cliff, each detonation overlapping the next in relentless succession.

Chuang Wang rushed from the cave and climbed a nearby tree with surprising agility for a man burdened by command. From the treetop he could see it clearly. In the distance, a hilltop was being devoured by smoke.

White smoke rose in thick spirals. Black smoke billowed beneath it. Yellow dust surged upward where earth and stone were torn apart. Within that churning mass, flashes of flame erupted and vanished, as if the mountain itself were being hammered by invisible giants.

He could not hear the screams at that distance, but imagination required no assistance. He knew what it meant for ten thousand men to stand upon a hill under artillery fire.

When Er Zhi Hu had previously reported that Tieshan Ping was shelled, it had been words on the wind. Now he witnessed the annihilation with his own eyes, and the difference between hearing and seeing was the difference between rumor and nightmare.

Cold prickled across his skin.

He understood in that moment with brutal clarity that there was no winning formation. Gather together and be obliterated by cannon. Scatter apart and be hunted through the mountains by masters of ambush.

"What are we to do?" he whispered to himself.

For the first time since raising his banner, Chuang Wang felt the hollow sensation of being strategically cornered.

After a long silence, he clenched his teeth.

"We retreat north. Cross the Sichuan mountains and return to Shaanxi. We rely on speed and agility to evade this firearms unit. Such a force cannot be large. Cannons and powder are expensive. The imperial court cannot afford many of them. If we keep moving, they cannot pursue us forever."

His decision spread quickly through the ranks.

Soon after, a White Pole Soldier scout reported back to Cheng Xu and Qin Liangyu.

"The Dashing Army is retreating north. Their route suggests they intend to pass through Guangyuan and return to Shaanxi. Hanzhong Prefecture will likely be their first stop."

Qin Liangyu and the assembled chieftains exchanged uneasy glances.

They could not cross provincial borders without explicit authorization. Even Qin Liangyu, loyal to the court beyond question, understood the political implications. As for the other chieftains, their willingness to march to Chengdu had already been a concession. Pursuing rebels into Shaanxi was another matter entirely.

Ran Ke spoke first. "We may pursue as far as Guangyuan. If we cross into Shaanxi without orders, we commit a capital offense."

Zhu Yujian, who had been traveling alongside Cheng Xu, stepped forward anxiously.

"Esteemed generals, the rebels have not been eradicated. Driving them out of Sichuan is not enough. Only by pressing the pursuit can we end this threat."

Ran Ke's gaze was steady.

"Rules bind us as tightly as chains. We cannot cross."

Zhu Yujian fell silent. He of all people understood the price of overstepping authority.

Nearby, Zhu Cunji stood atop a rocky outcrop wearing a battered straw hat and green scholar's robe, quoting loudly with theatrical enthusiasm, "The Sichuan Road is hard, harder than climbing to the blue sky. When Li Bai wrote those words, he must have meant this very stretch from Guangyuan to Hanzhong. Let us see whether I can cross it myself."

Zhu Yujian rubbed his forehead, unsure whether to laugh or despair.

At that moment, Cheng Xu stepped forward and bowed respectfully.

"Generals, I understand you cannot leave Sichuan. I do not ask you to. I only request that you pursue them closely to the border marker. We can encamp there to prevent their return. That alone will suffice."

Ran Ke smiled faintly.

"As long as we do not cross the marker, there is no problem. I owe Flat Rabbit that much courtesy."

The Zhongxian Pacification Commissioner added, "Gao Chuwu has aided Zhongxian County greatly. Out of respect for Instructor Gao Chuwu, we will pursue to the border marker."

One by one, the other chieftains nodded.

Cheng Xu allowed himself a subtle smile.

"Reaching the border marker will be enough."

Between Hanzhong and Guangyuan rose a towering mountain range so treacherous that even seasoned travelers hesitated before entering. It was here that Li Bai once composed his famous lament about the hardship of the Sichuan Road. Jagged peaks pierced the sky, narrow paths clung to vertical faces, and each ascent felt like a negotiation with death.

The Dashing Army moved carefully, yet caution could not eliminate danger. Even so, dozens of men slipped from cliffs and vanished into the abyss below.

Chuang Wang cursed under his breath as he watched another stretcher carried past.

Just then, a scout from the vanguard returned.

"Brother, we found signs left by Mi Chuang Jiang. He camped in a cave ahead."

Chuang Wang's eyes brightened for the first time in days.

"Mi Chuang Jiang passed through here?"

"Yes. The markings are clear."

Relief stirred within him. Mi Chuang Jiang had inherited the title of Dashing General and had separated months earlier. If he had reached Hanzhong successfully, perhaps he had already secured the prefecture.

"Then we follow his trail," Chuang Wang said firmly. "Once we cross this mountain, we regroup in Hanzhong."

For the first time since witnessing the cannons devour a hilltop, he allowed himself a fragile hope that beyond these brutal mountains lay rest, consolidation, and the chance to rise again.

Chapter 1166 Rallying Forces

At the border between Guangyuan and Hanzhong, atop Zengjia Mountain at a narrow pass known as Gourd Neck, a newly constructed Gao Family Village watchtower stood like a lonely sentinel against the sky.

The location was harsh beyond description. Jagged ridgelines overlapped like waves of stone, and the mountain path that coiled upward was so narrow in places that two mules could not pass each other without one stepping aside in fear of the abyss. It was here that the Gao Family Village engineers had originally entertained an ambitious idea. They had hoped to transport cement up the mountain and construct a proper reinforced tower so that the sentries stationed there could live with a bit more comfort and safety.

In the end, reality won.

To move cement along the Shu mountain paths would require either divine intervention or utter madness. Even carrying grain up the slope demanded extraordinary effort. Transporting heavy building materials was nothing short of fantasy.

The engineers reluctantly abandoned their vision and turned instead to the forest itself. Timber was felled locally. Beams were carved and joined by hand. What rose from the summit was a sturdy wooden outpost, practical and unadorned, crouching against the wind like a hunter wrapped in rough fur.

Because of the difficulty of supply, the garrison was drastically reduced. While other outposts might house fifty soldiers, Gourd Neck had only ten. Even feeding those ten required careful coordination. Every sack of grain and every bucket of oil had to be hauled upward step by aching step.

Yet the hardship came with one incomparable reward.

From the summit of the Shu Road, one could gaze across endless mountains layered into the distance like brushstrokes of ink. Clouds drifted beneath the tower on certain mornings, turning the peaks into islands afloat upon a white sea. It was a view so grand that even Li Bai, who once lamented that the Sichuan Road was harder than climbing to the blue sky, had likely never stood at such a vantage.

Unfortunately, all ten sentries were illiterate. Not one among them could compose a single immortal verse to match the scene before their eyes.

Around noon that day, one of the sentries followed his usual routine. He descended a short way down the slope to draw spring water, balancing the bucket carefully as he returned, intending to boil it for the midday meal. As he approached the edge of the cliff near the outpost, something unusual caught his eye.

Far below, along the winding mountain path, movement rippled like a dark river.

He narrowed his eyes.

It was not wildlife.

It was not a caravan.

It was a dense, sprawling mass of human figures packed tightly together.

"Brothers," he shouted, voice cracking through the thin mountain air. "Come look at this."

The others rushed out, boots pounding against wooden planks, and crowded near the edge of the cliff. From above, the mountain path resembled a thread stitched across stone, and along that thread crawled an army.

The squad leader did not waste time guessing. He pulled out a telescope and steadied it against the wooden railing. When he focused the lens, a banner came into view among the chaotic ranks below. The character for Chuang flapped violently in the wind.

His face changed.

"It is the Dashing Bandits," he said sharply. "They have entered Shaanxi."

He snapped the telescope shut and rose in one motion.

"Light it. Quickly, light the beacon tower. Rally the forces at once."

The men moved instantly.

The beacon tower at Gourd Neck was simple in construction. A circle of stacked stones formed its base, and within it lay a carefully prepared pile of combustible material designed not merely to burn but to produce thick, dark smoke visible across vast distances. This method, refined over centuries, was one of the ancient strategic arts of the Central Plains, simple yet astonishingly effective.

When the fire was set, the result was immediate and dramatic. Black smoke surged upward in a thick column, so dense that the sentry who had crouched too close while igniting it emerged moments later

coated head to toe in soot, his face darkened so completely that his companions burst into startled laughter despite the tension.

The smoke did not laugh.

It rose straight into the sky.

Miles away, at the Shanwu Head outpost, another group of sentries noticed the plume in the southern sky.

"That is Gourd Neck," their squad leader said grimly. "Beacon lit. Rebels have crossed into Shaanxi. Light ours as well."

Soon a second column joined the first.

Then another.

Then another.

Smoke signals leapt across the mountains in sequence, each tower passing the message onward until the entire southern horizon bore witness to the alarm.

In Hanzhong Prefecture, life had been proceeding with relative calm. A large steam train rolled into a temporary station, its pistons hissing as it slowed. Prince Rui, Zhu Changhao, as was his habit, leaned across the counter of the modest ticket booth and asked the attendant in a tone that mixed curiosity and calculation, "How many tickets did we sell today?"

"Sixty taels," the ticket seller replied.

Prince Rui blinked. "Only sixty? That cannot be correct. Business declines each day. How much silver am I losing? This will not do. There must be a method to increase revenue."

The ticket seller, seasoned by countless conversations with travelers, offered a suggestion. "Your Highness, I heard that the Prince of Qin's heir once faced similar trouble. He developed tourism along the railway route, promoted scenic sites, and encouraged travel. Ticket sales improved greatly, and the attractions themselves generated profit."

Prince Rui's eyes brightened immediately at the word profit.

"That is worth studying," he said thoughtfully. "I shall dispatch someone to learn the method."

Before he could elaborate further, a collective shout rose from the platform.

"Look to the south."

Prince Rui turned.

Against the southern sky, a thick column of black smoke swayed with the wind, unmistakable in its intent.

He frowned. "What is that? Someone curing meat on an enormous scale?"

Wang Er, who had remained stationed in Hanzhong, reacted differently. He sprang to his feet.

"Enemy sighted. Bandits have entered Shaanxi. Dispatch riders to Xi'an immediately. Mobilize the militia."

Prince Rui startled at the sudden urgency.

"Again?" he exclaimed.

Instinctively, he ran toward the train and shouted at the engineer, "Drive to Xi'an. Quickly. Hide until the fighting ends."

The engineer leaned out with an expression halfway between amusement and disbelief.

"Your Highness, the train is meant to carry soldiers here, not flee and abandon you."

Prince Rui froze.

Then clarity returned.

"Right. Of course. Proceed to Xi'an and bring men back at once."

After the previous crisis, he had finally grasped the true value of the great steam machine. It was not merely a tool for commerce. It was an instrument for rallying forces with unprecedented speed.

Hanzhong entered war readiness without delay.

Zhao Guangyuan, Regional Commander of Hanzhong, assembled his household guard and garrison troops. The prefect ordered militia instructors to summon their men. The steam train roared northward and returned swiftly, its carriages filled with militia members drawn from Baomei First Factory, Chang'an Automobile Factory, Xigang First Factory, and other organized units.

Men disembarked asking in loud voices, "Where are the bandits?"

"Zengjia Mountain," came the reply.

"Then let us move."

Unlike before, the militia did not rely solely on their legs. Roads now stretched partway into the Micang and Zengjia Mountains. While they could not penetrate the deepest Shu paths, reaching the foothills posed no difficulty. Vehicles from the Chang'an Automobile Factory, supplemented by Gao Family Village solar cars requisitioned in urgency, transported troops in steady waves toward the southern approaches.

Meanwhile, after enduring the treacherous plank roads of Mingyue Gorge, Chuang Wang and his weary forces finally emerged onto more stable ground.

They counted their losses.

Nearly two hundred men had fallen from cliffs or been injured along the way.

Chuang Wang looked back at the jagged ridges and spoke with bitter certainty, "I will never traverse the Shu mountain paths again."

As he rested briefly upon a stone, he lifted his gaze forward and saw it.

A black column of smoke pierced the distant sky.

His expression changed instantly.

"A beacon," he said.

Guo Tianxing stepped closer. "And what of it?"

"It means we have been seen," Chuang Wang replied. "It means they are warning others."

Guo Tianxing shrugged. "Everywhere we go, alarms ring. What has it changed? Aside from a few capable generals and that strange firearms unit, what can the court do to us?"

Chuang Wang considered this carefully.

There was truth in the words. Time and again, alarms had sounded. Time and again, they had broken through.

The smoke might signal danger, but it did not guarantee defeat.

At last he raised his hand and pointed toward the horizon where the beacon burned.

"Continue the advance," he ordered.

The army resumed its march northward, unaware that along iron rails and winding roads, forces were already converging in response to that single column of black smoke rising from Gourd Neck.

Chapter 1167 Your Worker Grandpas Are Here!

The rebel army continued its advance northward, winding like a long dark serpent through the folds of the mountains.

Before long, they reached the foot of Huluhing Peak.

Chuang Wang lifted his head and looked upward. The peak pierced the clouds, steep and jagged, and from its summit a column of black smoke still coiled lazily into the sky. The beacon had long since done its job, yet it continued to burn as if deliberately mocking him.

Originally, he had intended that once his army reached the base of the mountain, he would dispatch men to dismantle the beacon tower completely. If they were ever forced to pass this way again, he did not wish for the same alarm to sound.

However, after measuring the near vertical ascent with his eyes and imagining the cost of sending troops scrambling up such terrain, he hesitated.

Before he could decide otherwise, several heads appeared above at the edge of the summit. A voice carried down through the wind.

"Rebel scum. You dare set foot in Shaanxi? Let this elder advise you. Turn back now. Go fight the Sichuan troops to the death instead. Better that than walking into Shaanxi to die."

Chuang Wang's face darkened instantly.

"I have not even dealt with you yet," he snarled, "and you dare bark so loudly."

He swung his arm sharply.

"Two hundred men. Climb up there. Tear down that rotten beacon tower."

Two hundred seasoned rebels stepped forward without hesitation and began the ascent.

Above them, the ten sentries showed not the slightest fear. They rolled stones to the edge and began hurling them downward. The rocks bounced erratically along the slope, gathering speed, smashing against outcroppings before hurtling toward the climbers.

Chuang Wang watched, astonished.

Ten men.

Facing an army of over one hundred thousand, yet daring to provoke them and defend their post.

"Where do these soldiers come from?" he muttered. "The court still breeds such fierce men?"

No one answered.

The climb was brutal. Several of the assaulting rebels were struck by falling stones and tumbled backward, taking others with them. Curses echoed off the cliffs. Blood stained the rocks.

Chuang Wang's anger deepened.

"Outrageous," he growled. "Simply outrageous."

After paying for the ascent with several lives, the elite detachment finally reached the summit. They found only a crude wooden outpost, hastily abandoned. The ten sentries had already slipped down the far side of the mountain using prepared rope paths, leaving behind two small bags of grain and a few scattered supplies.

The rebels seized the grain and set fire to the wooden structure. Flames consumed the beams quickly in the thin mountain air. Only then did they descend and report.

"Great Brother, it was only a small outpost. We burned it and seized two bags of grain."

"Two bags," Chuang Wang repeated flatly.

For the loss of men and time, that was all.

He suppressed his irritation and ordered the march to continue.

Several li later, another treacherous peak rose before them. This was Shanyoutou, and once again a column of black smoke spiraled skyward from its summit.

"Another beacon tower," someone muttered bitterly.

From above, heads appeared again along the cliff edge. A sentry cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted down.

"Shaanxi lies ahead. Do not say we failed to warn you. This scout advises you kindly. Turn back while you still can. Beyond this lies only death."

The rebels erupted in fury. They had just burned one arrogant tower, and now another dared to taunt them.

This time Chuang Wang did not even need to issue an order. A detachment of hardened fighters surged forward and began climbing.

Once more, stones rained down.

Once more, curses filled the air.

Once more, after struggle and sacrifice, the rebels captured the summit. And once more, they found a shabby wooden outpost, hastily evacuated, with two bags of rice left behind.

They burned it and descended.

"It was the same as before," the returning soldiers reported.

Chuang Wang frowned deeply.

"These repeated outposts show that the court takes the defense of Shaanxi seriously. There may truly be a heavy ambush waiting ahead."

Ma Tianxing stepped forward.

"Great Brother, you worry too much. We know the court's strength. They can barely field competent troops. I say this is Sun Chuanting's trick. He builds a few wooden shacks, stations a handful of men, and hopes to frighten us away."

Chuang Wang did not immediately respond.

The reasoning was not entirely without merit, yet he did not dare accept it blindly.

Guo Tianxing added, "Great Brother, the White Pole Soldiers from Sichuan are still chasing us like persistent ghosts. They will not stop until we cross into Shaanxi. Even if we wished to turn back, we cannot. If danger waits ahead, can it truly be worse than the firearms unit pressing from behind?"

That argument struck home.

What Chuang Wang feared most was not conventional generals like Cao Wenzhao or Sun Chuanting. Against them, he could still maneuver. What chilled him was that mysterious musket force with its cannons and terrifying precision.

After a long silence, he nodded.

"Press on."

The army passed Shanyoutou and continued toward Shaanxi.

Soon a scout returned.

"Reporting. Ahead lies Bashan and the Qiangshui River."

Chuang Wang stared at him for two full breaths.

"Bashan again?"

The scout coughed awkwardly.

"Yes. There is an old stone tablet on the mountain bearing the characters for Bashan, and a wooden sign by the river reading Qiangshui."

Chuang Wang felt too weary to even criticize the naming habits of the region.

"Very well. We camp by the Bashan Qiangshui River and rest."

A collective sigh seemed to ripple through the massive army. After the torment of the Shu Roads, rest sounded like salvation.

Yet as they approached the riverbank, they saw it.

Another beacon tower.

Black smoke rose from the ridge above the watershed.

Even the boldest rebel could not possibly settle down to sleep beneath an enemy beacon tower. The insult alone was unbearable.

Chuang Wang roared.

"Two hundred men. Burn it."

Another detachment advanced, already half expecting to seize yet another pair of grain sacks.

They climbed halfway up the slope.

Then something changed.

From the cliff edge near the beacon tower, not ten heads appeared.

Not even twenty.

The entire ridge seemed to sprout faces.

Dozens.

Hundreds.

Voices thundered down the mountain.

"Marauding rebels, your worker grandpas are here."

"Let us show you the might of the model workers from Baomei First Factory."

"Xigang First Factory will not lose to Baomei."

"Quiet. Private enterprises boasting so loudly. We from Chang'an Automobile Factory are a defense industry enterprise. Stand aside and witness real strength."

The rebels froze in confusion.

Workers?

Factories?

Before they could make sense of it, several men at the summit rolled something heavy into position.

It was not a stone.

It was a cannon.

Chapter 1168 Packed with People

When the cannon was finally rolled out from behind the crude wooden barricades and pushed into the open, the reaction on the mountaintop was nothing short of explosive.

The workers from Ba Coal Plant No. 1 and Xi Steel Plant No. 1 froze where they stood. A few of them were still gripping rocks in their arms, ready to hurl them down the slope at any moment. Others were panting, faces smeared with coal dust and sweat. They were militia, nothing more. In their hands were cast off smoothbore muskets, old bird guns that misfired half the time, and even antique Three Eyed Arquebuses that looked as if they belonged in a museum rather than on a battlefield. Every single one of those weapons had been discarded by the regular army.

And now, right in front of them, stood a cannon.

A real one.

The iron barrel gleamed dully in the afternoon light, mounted on a heavy frame that creaked as it settled into position. It looked serious. It looked terrifying. It looked far too advanced to belong to a group of part time workers who spent most of their lives hauling coal and forging steel.

One of the coal workers swallowed hard and muttered, "You people... you can even make cannons?"

The workers from Chang'an Automobile Factory puffed out their chests like roosters at sunrise.

"Hahaha! Now you understand the strength of a true military industrial enterprise, right?" one of them shouted proudly. "Do you think we only know how to assemble trucks? This beauty is a towed cannon designed for armored vehicles on the front lines."

The surrounding workers stared at the cannon as if it were some divine artifact.

Another man asked cautiously, "If it is for the front lines... why is it here?"

The Chang'an worker coughed lightly and scratched his head. "Well. It is technically a defective unit."

Silence.

"What kind of defect?" someone pressed.

The answer came in a perfectly casual tone, as if he were describing a slightly crooked door hinge.

"When the muzzle points downward, the cannonball tends to slide out."

For several seconds, nobody said anything.

The wind blew across the mountaintop.

Somewhere below, the rebels were shouting as they climbed.

One of the Xi Steel Plant militia blinked slowly. "It... slides out?"

"Yes," the Chang'an worker admitted. "Which is why the militia procurement team rejected it and told us to melt it down and rework it. But we figured, waste not. So we brought it here."

Before anyone could continue the discussion, a sharp voice suddenly cut through the air.

"Oh no! It is sliding out! It is sliding out!"

All eyes snapped toward the cannon.

The rebels were climbing up from below, so naturally the workers had angled the cannon downward toward the slope. Unfortunately, this particular cannon did not believe in gravity resistance. The moment the barrel dipped too low, the heavy iron ball inside shifted.

Then it rolled.

The Chang'an workers shrieked in panic and rushed forward, grabbing the carriage and trying to lift the muzzle upward again. Their boots scraped against stone. Their hands strained. Someone even attempted to wedge a rock under the wheel.

Too late.

The cannonball slid cleanly out of the barrel.

It bounced once against the rocky slope.

Then it began to roll.

The iron sphere gathered speed as it descended the steep mountainside, bouncing from rock to rock, accelerating with terrifying inevitability.

Below, a fierce bandit was scrambling upward with a blade clenched between his teeth.

He never even saw it coming.

Thump.

The cannonball struck him squarely on the head. There was a dull, heavy sound, and the man collapsed instantly, flattened like a nail driven into wood.

The rolling ball continued downward a short distance before lodging between two rocks.

On the mountaintop, the militia stared.

Then one of the Chang'an workers burst out laughing.

"It hit! Direct hit! Did you see that? Our gunnery skills are unmatched!"

"What unmatched skills?" a militiaman from Xi Steel Plant No. 1 snapped back angrily. "You did not even fire it! That was blind luck."

"Luck is also part of skill," the Chang'an worker replied shamelessly.

"Stop arguing!" someone from the pig farm militia shouted while heaving a massive stone over his shoulder. "If you have time to boast, you have time to throw rocks!"

That snapped everyone back to reality.

Ba Coal Plant No. 1 workers gritted their teeth and began lifting rocks with renewed ferocity. Years of hauling coal had hardened their arms and backs. One particularly burly worker roared with laughter as he hurled a boulder downward.

"Look at this strength! Coal carrying builds real power!"

Large stones thundered down the slope in waves. Compared to the ten sentries stationed at the previous two outposts, this force was overwhelming. The mountain seemed alive, vomiting rocks onto the attackers below.

The two hundred bandits who had been climbing with confidence moments earlier were instantly crushed by chaos. Some were struck. Some slipped. Others scrambled desperately, abandoning any thought of continuing upward. Within moments, their formation dissolved entirely. They slid and tumbled back down in utter disarray.

At the base of the slope, Chuang Wang watched the scene unfold.

His brows knit together.

Something was wrong.

At the previous outposts, there had only been ten defenders each. Ten. Easy prey.

But this mountain was crawling with people. Figures stood shoulder to shoulder along the ridgeline. More silhouettes moved behind them. The peak looked less like a defensive position and more like a marketplace during festival season.

"What is happening?" he muttered.

Beside him, Guo Tianxing suddenly pointed toward another peak.

"Brother, look at Red Cliff."

Chuang Wang turned his head.

On Red Cliff, across the valley, human figures stood packed together just as densely. Militiamen were even shouting across the distance.

"If you have guts, stop attacking Fenchu Ridge and come try us here!"

Laughter echoed from that direction.

Another voice cried out, "Look over there!"

Farther away stood a peak crowned by a large cave known as Immortal Cave. Its summit was also crowded with defenders. Everywhere he looked, there were people.

To enter Shaanxi, they had to pass through the valleys threading between these mountains. But any commander with sense would hesitate to march through valleys overlooked by enemy held high ground. Rocks alone would be devastating. Add firearms, and it would become slaughter.

Chuang Wang's face darkened.

"To enter Shaanxi, we must take these peaks first," he said quietly. "We must seize the high ground before passing through the valleys."

Guo Tianxing shouted to a scout, "Can you estimate their numbers?"

The scout shook his head, breathing hard. "Too many. They are packed together. We can only count heads along the ridge. We do not know how many are hidden. Each peak must have at least five thousand defenders."

Chuang Wang felt a chill.

Historically, rebels held the advantage in numbers. Government armies were constrained by funds and supplies. A single general often commanded only a few thousand troops. Even combined forces rarely exceeded twenty thousand.

But here, a single peak might hold five thousand.

How many peaks were there?

He glanced back at his own forces, proudly claimed to be over one hundred thousand strong. Yet half were families. Elderly. Women. Children. The true fighting force was far smaller.

For the first time in a long while, the advantage of numbers did not belong to him.

Before he could decide on a course of action, another scout galloped back in panic.

"Brother! Disaster! The firearms troops and the White Pole Soldiers have passed through Mingyue Gorge and are pursuing us. With the White Pole Soldiers guiding them, they moved through the Shu Road much faster than we did."

Chuang Wang's expression changed instantly.

Blocked ahead. Pursued behind.

A trap closing from both sides.

For a brief moment, silence settled around him despite the chaos.

Then he hardened his gaze.

"We force our way into Shaanxi. Charge. The firearms behind us are even more dangerous than those ahead."

With that, he led his army into the northern valleys.

The militiamen above responded without hesitation.

Rolling logs thundered downward. Massive stones followed. Discarded flintlock rifles cracked sharply. Bird guns belched smoke. Three Eyed Arquebuses roared clumsily. Even the oldest hand crossbows from Gao Family Village fired in volleys. Among them, colorful toy bows and toy catapults bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun joined the barrage, absurd yet deadly in numbers.

Weapons abandoned by regular troops found new life in the hands of ordinary people.

The valleys erupted into chaos.

No single valley could contain such a vast army. The rebels split apart, flooding into every ravine they could find.

And in every direction, the peaks were occupied.

The rebels had always relied on the power of the common people against the official army.

But here, in Dao Xuan Tianzun's liberated zones, the people themselves were the army.

This was not a contest between equal forces.

It was something entirely different.

Through dust and screams, Chuang Wang charged forward with several bandit chiefs. At last, ahead of them, he spotted what seemed to be an unguarded valley exit.

Hope flared.

He urged his men forward.

But as they reached the mouth of the valley, an army stood waiting.

At its head was a burly, imposing man with a thick beard and powerful build.

Chuang Wang recognized him immediately.

"Wang Er of Baishui," he breathed.

And in that moment, he understood that this was no mere skirmish.

It was a wall of people.

Chapter 1169 It Was Actually Wang Er

The moment Chuang Wang saw the man standing at the mouth of the valley, his heartbeat seemed to miss a step.

For a split second, he wondered whether exhaustion had finally begun to play tricks on his eyes. The burly frame, the thick beard, the steady gaze that did not waver even in the face of an army crashing toward him, all of it felt impossibly familiar.

"Wang Er... of Baishui?" he muttered under his breath.

The rebels around him also froze. They had all believed Wang Er to be long dead.

Years ago, after Wang Jiayin's brother in law Zhang Liwei and his kinsman Wang Guozhong had attempted to assassinate Wang Er, forcing him to flee from within the rebel ranks, he had vanished completely. No body had been found, no grave discovered. Rumors had circulated for a while, but in the brutal world of rebellion, absence usually meant death. Eventually, people stopped talking about him.

And yet his name had never truly faded.

Among the rebels, Wang Er of Baishui was still spoken of in low voices, sometimes with regret, sometimes with admiration. He had once been a figure of weight.

Now he stood there in flesh and blood.

Chuang Wang's voice trembled despite himself. "Wang Er from Baishui, you are actually still alive? No wonder. No wonder I felt something was wrong. The men on these peaks did not move like government troops. So they are all your subordinates? You gathered this many people just to ambush us? Back then it was Brother Wang Jiayin who wanted you dead, not me. Is this enormous display truly for revenge?"

Wang Er looked at him quietly and then slowly shook his head.

"Give up," he said in a calm voice. "Dashing General. No, I should call you Chuang Wang now. Your methods are wrong. This realm should not be contested in this way."

Those words struck harder than any blade.

Chuang Wang's jaw tightened. "If you command so many men, even more than I do, then why have you hidden in Shaanxi all these years? After Brother Wang Jiayin died, if you had stepped forward and called for support, heroes across the land would have flocked to you. You would not have needed to kill me to take the title. If you want it now, I will hand over the name of Chuang Wang. I will return to being Dashing General. Say the word."

Wang Er gave a faint, lonely laugh.

"I am no great hero," he replied. "If I gathered people like you and raised another banner, what would it change? Would it save the common people? No. It would only shatter more families, burn more homes, and leave more children wandering without parents. I have seen enough of that."

Chuang Wang could not answer.

For years he had told himself that rebellion was justice. That overthrowing corrupt officials would bring relief to the people. But standing before Wang Er, surrounded by peaks filled not with imperial troops but with ordinary militiamen, something in that logic felt fragile.

Wang Er extended his hand.

"Lower your weapons and surrender," he said steadily. "I will guarantee your life. But if you resist and are captured after defeat, there will be only death. No one will save you. Just like the previous Chuang Wang."

Steel rasped against its sheath.

Chuang Wang drew his saber in one swift motion. The blade flashed in the light.

"Wang Er," he said coldly, "you may command many men, but that does not mean you can defeat me."

Seeing the blade, Wang Er understood that words had failed.

He sighed softly. "Does power blind a man so completely? Once seated in the position of Chuang Wang, would one rather die than surrender?"

"Enough talk!" Chuang Wang roared.

He spun around and shouted toward his rear ranks, "Old Eighth Squad, prepare to fight to the death!"

Behind him stood the Old Eighth Squad, men from Mizhi County who had followed him from the earliest days. They had marched through mud and snow, starved together, fled together, killed together. Among all his forces, they were the most loyal and the most capable.

In unison, they drew their sabers and stepped forward.

The air grew taut.

Across from them, Wang Er raised his hand slightly.

"Wang Village Militia," he ordered calmly, "prepare for battle."

The men behind him were from Wang Village in Chengcheng County, his most trusted core. With smooth, practiced movements, each man lifted a bolt action rifle to his shoulder.

The metallic clicks of bolts sliding into place were crisp and disciplined.

When Chuang Wang saw the rifles clearly, his face darkened.

He had encountered these strange firearm troops before. They had appeared first in Shaanxi, then extended operations into Shanxi, Yunyang, Henan, even into Sichuan. Their activity had always centered

around Shaanxi. He had once drawn a rough map, circling their area of operation, trying to trace their origin.

Now understanding dawned.

"So it was you," he said sharply. "The strange firearm unit. You created it."

Wang Er shook his head. "I do not possess such ability."

Before Chuang Wang could press further, something flickered in his eyes.

He turned his head abruptly and shouted at the top of his lungs, "Old Eighth Squad, run!"

The shift was so sudden that even Wang Village Militia hesitated.

Moments earlier Chuang Wang had declared a fight to the death, blade drawn, spirit blazing. Now he was already turning to flee.

But the Old Eighth Squad did not hesitate for even a heartbeat.

Years of fleeing across battlefields had forged reflexes sharper than steel. At his shout, they pivoted instantly and dashed sideways toward an eastern valley.

For two heartbeats, Wang Village Militia stood stunned.

Then Wang Er barked, "Fire!"

Gunshots erupted.

The sharp cracks echoed between the mountains as bullets tore through the air toward the fleeing men.

One of the Old Eighth Squad cried out and fell, blood blooming across his chest.

Another was struck in the shoulder, stumbling.

Yet the men beside them did not stop. They hoisted the wounded onto their backs and continued running. Their formation scattered fluidly, weaving between rocks and trees, using every scrap of terrain as cover.

Years of being hunted had taught them the art of escape better than any military drill.

More shots rang out.

Another man fell, clutching his leg.

This time, he knew he could not continue. He pushed himself upright, turned to face the pursuing fire, and roared, "Brothers, run! Avenge me later!"

He planted his feet and held his saber horizontally behind the retreating men. Bullets struck him. His body jerked once, twice, then collapsed heavily onto the ground.

Gunfire continued in grim succession.

Despite the barrage, Chuang Wang and more than half of the Old Eighth Squad burst out of the valley's far side. They sprinted into the eastern forest as rocks and rolling logs continued to crash down from the peaks.

The forest swallowed them.

By the time the smoke cleared, they had vanished.

"Damn it," several Wang Village militiamen muttered. "He escaped?"

Some of them wanted to pursue immediately.

But they could not enter the valley. Militiamen on the flanking peaks were still hurling rocks at the remaining rearguard rebels. Charging in now would invite friendly casualties.

Wang Er lowered his hand slowly.

Even after everything, they had failed to capture him.

He exhaled deeply. "After all this, we still could not keep him. Could it be that Heaven believes he should not die yet?"

He paused at his own words.

Heaven. Did that mean Dao Xuan Tianzun?

Not necessarily. The heavens might contain many beings. Perhaps Chuang Wang was shielded by other deities, less benevolent ones. It was even possible that some unruly immortals interfered. Matters above were never simple.

Shaking off the thought, Wang Er issued his next command.

"Send word to all outposts. Every road leading into Shaanxi must be monitored. Chuang Wang must never re enter. He has few men left, but as long as he lives, there will be no true peace."

Meanwhile, the battle across the forested valleys continued.

The rebel army had splintered completely. Men ran in every direction, pursued by rocks, logs, gunfire, arrows, crossbow bolts, and even toy catapults that Dao Xuan Tianzun had once bestowed. What had once been a grand host was now a scattered mass of terrified fugitives.

Not long after, Cheng Xu arrived with Gao Family Village's First Main Regiment. Behind them marched the pole wielding soldiers in their varied colors.

When they looked toward the peaks ahead, they saw hillsides packed with militia, still hurling rocks at rebels trapped below.

One of the pole wielding soldiers muttered in disbelief, "How many militia units did Shaanxi mobilize for this battle?"

Qin Liangyu observed calmly, "We will not advance into that valley. The rocks will not distinguish friend from foe. It is enough for us to block escape routes here."

Caught between relentless attacks from above and armed forces closing in from the rear, the rebels finally broke.

One by one, then in clusters, then in waves, they threw down their weapons.

They knelt.

They begged.

The peaks gradually fell silent as militiamen ceased their barrage.

When the counting was finished, the scale of the collapse became clear.

Chuang Wang's once mighty host was shattered. Vast numbers had died beneath stone and shot. Over seventy thousand were captured and designated for labor reform. Many bandit chiefs were seized. A few, with trusted retainers, escaped through obscure mountain paths, vanishing into the wilderness.

The rebel army that had once rampaged across Sichuan had met its end among these valleys.

Only Chuang Wang himself remained at large.

And as long as he breathed, the story was not yet finished.

Chapter 1170 Rebuilding the Shu Road

More than one hundred thousand militiamen marched out of the mountains.

Behind them came over seventy thousand captured rebels, bound, herded, exhausted.

The mountain passes that had swallowed armies for centuries were now disgorging humanity in a single overwhelming tide.

This batch of labor reform prisoners was unprecedented. The numbers dwarfed every previous capture.

On the walls of Hanzhong Prefecture stood three men.

The Hanzhong Prefect.

Regional Commander Zhao Guangyuan.

Prince Rui.

They looked south.

When the militias had first arrived from Xi'an as reinforcements, they had come in fragments. Trains carried a thousand at a time. Cars and buses delivered them in batches. Even those who marched on foot were split into small units.

Their numbers never felt terrifying.

Now they came out all at once.

Over one hundred thousand militia.

Over seventy thousand captives.

More than two hundred thousand people moving together.

The sheer weight of it pressed against the horizon.

Prince Rui blinked.

"Oh my. This King did not even notice. Did we truly deploy so many people?"

Regional Commander Zhao Guangyuan's face turned pale.

"If these militias were to rebel," he murmured, "they would be even more terrifying than the outlaws."

The Prefect stroked his beard and spoke like a man lecturing a classroom.

"Water can carry a boat, but it can also overturn it. This is the inherent power of the common people. To harness such strength for our purpose... the newly appointed Governor is truly a genius."

After a moment, curiosity crept into his voice.

"With over seventy thousand captives, I wonder how His Excellency intends to arrange them."

As if summoned by the thought, the long wail of a train whistle tore through the air.

The great train rolled in again.

The moment it stopped, Sun Chuanting leapt down and strode into Hanzhong City without delay.

The Prefect and Regional Commander hurried forward and bowed.

"Your Excellency, Governor."

Only Prince Rui remained upright, smiling as if watching a stage play.

"Master Sun," he said cheerfully, "your militias are formidable indeed. You crushed the main rebel army in a single stroke and captured over seventy thousand. However, with so many people, this King is quite curious. How do you intend to settle them?"

"This official has long since devised a method," Sun Chuanting replied.

He climbed the South Gate tower and looked down.

Below him, the vast sea of labor reform prisoners was being escorted toward the city gates. Surrounded by over one hundred thousand militia, they did not dare stir. They huddled together meekly, eyes lifted upward in dread.

Sun Chuanting took out a tin megaphone.

"You all know the severity of your crimes," his voice thundered across the field. "Beheading would be a light punishment. However, Heaven cherishes life. This official has decided to give you an opportunity for redemption."

He swiftly recited Gao Family Village's long established labor reform policy.

No execution.

Food provided.

Work assigned.

Reform through labor.

The captives exchanged looks.

They thought, They will not kill us. They will feed us. We work.

That is acceptable.

Very acceptable.

Sun Chuanting's tone shifted.

"The task assigned to you is this. You will construct a grand road from Hanzhong in Shaanxi to Guangyuan in Sichuan."

The reaction was immediate.

Shock rippled through the mass.

Widen the Shu Road?

Had he gone mad?

Sun Chuanting continued calmly.

"The Shu Road is harder than ascending to the heavens. For centuries it has obstructed communication between Shaanxi and Sichuan, severely hindering trade and cultural exchange. You have burned, killed, and plundered. Many of your hands are stained with innocent blood. To cleanse your sins, you must make immense contributions to the people. Opening the Shu Road is the finest way."

The rebels stood stunned.

Then the crowd parted.

A prominent outlaw stepped forward.

Mantian Xing.

A great general under Chuang Wang, Li Zicheng. A seasoned rebel who had raised banners for years. This was not even his first time accepting pacification.

During the suppression efforts of Yang He, Mantian Xing had already surrendered once.

So though he now stood as a prisoner, his heart held no panic.

He was thinking.

Endure. Survive. Rise again when the wind changes.

His expression was subdued, but his spirit remained unbroken.

He looked up at Sun Chuanting.

"Your Excellency, Governor," he called out, "the difficulty of the Shu Road is no laughing matter. When we entered Shaanxi from western Sichuan through the Mingyue Gorge section, more than a hundred of us died or were injured from falls before we even began working. If we carve mountains and dig rock there, the danger will be even greater. At any moment we could fall to our deaths. If you want us to widen that road, are you not simply sending us to die?"

Behind him, the expressions of more than seventy thousand rebels grew grim.

He was right.

The initial and final sections of the Shu Road were difficult but manageable.

The Mingyue Gorge plank road section was another matter entirely.

Cliffs rising sheer.

Wooden planks clinging to vertical stone.

To widen that into a grand road?

How many lives would it devour?

Even imagining it felt impossible.

A calm smile appeared on Sun Chuanting's face.

"Rest assured. This official understands the difficulty of the Mingyue Gorge plank road section. You will not need to work there. You are only required to repair the beginning and ending sections."

Murmurs spread.

Mantian Xing narrowed his eyes.

"Oh? Not clearing the middle section? Then what is the point?"

Sun Chuanting spoke solemnly.

"For that middle section, a Celestial Immortal will come to help us clear it."

In truth, Sun Chuanting had long received instructions from Li Daoxuan.

The labor reform prisoners would repair the initial and final sections.

The ancient Mingyue Gorge plank road in the middle would be left untouched.

It was reserved.

Reserved for Li Daoxuan's personal intervention.

The beginning and ending sections alone required crossing towering mountains and treacherous ridges. Even those would take years for common laborers to complete.

By that time, Li Daoxuan's Field of View Expansion would have reached the area. He would be able to reach into the box from outside.

With modern tools such as hammers, crowbars, and electric drills, transforming the ancient Shu Road into a flat passage would be simple.

If he became impatient, he could simply pull the entire mountain out of the box and keep it as a bonsai.

His villa at Zhaomu Mountain was still missing a proper rock garden.

But when Sun Chuanting declared that a Celestial Immortal would assist them, the words sounded utterly ridiculous to everyone present.

The Prefect blinked.

Regional Commander Zhao Guangyuan frowned.

The rebels stared in disbelief.

Prince Rui burst into loud laughter.

"Master Sun, what joke is this?" he guffawed. "Celestial Immortals helping us build roads? Hahaha. This King cannot stop laughing."

Mantian Xing also wore a mocking expression, though as a prisoner he dared not laugh aloud. A wise man does not court immediate disaster.

Then it happened.

Boom.

A tremendous roar split the air.

The ground trembled violently.

It was as if something enormous had descended from the heavens and slammed into the earth beside them.

Dust rose.

Stones cracked.

Everyone instinctively turned toward the source of the sound.

And in that single glance, they saw it.

A giant.

Dozens of meters tall.

It had just descended from the sky and was steadying itself after landing.

The sound they had heard was the sound of its feet touching the ground.