

Civilization 1001

Chapter 1001: Governing 1 million citizens, painting the world! _2

"Your Highness, I heard of the High Priest's news, and my heart is filled with immense sorrow. I wish I could trade my life for the High Priest's life!... Your Highness, from this day forward, you are the highest-ranking Family Head of the Holy City lineage... please take care of yourself and do not easily take risks. With the elders and the High Priest passing one after another, the Lake Capital City is fraught with turbulence, and there is no one left to suppress it..."

"As a Samurai who has served the family for fifty years, I now kneel in respect, daring to offer you this advice: from this point onward, before you inherit the Alliance's throne, please do not step into Lake Capital City even once! Several months ago, the High Priest gave me a letter to hand over to you at the appropriate time. As a matter of fact, the advice just given is also what the High Priest meant in the letter..."

"Hmm? Grandfather's letter? Not to step into Lake Capital City?"

At this moment, Xiulote suddenly rose to his feet, his eyes flashing. He eagerly wanted to know what exactly was said in his grandfather's letter, but given the current situation...

"Ah! When it comes to loyalty, it is still the Samurai who have served the family for generations that are the most reliable. It is precisely for this reason that I chose Elvi for the position of Legion Commander of the Long Snake army..."

After a moment, the drifting memories scattered in the fragrant Divine Smoke. Xiulote suppressed the restlessness in his heart, calmed his inexplicably fluctuating mind, and continued reading.

"Your Highness, as of the autumn harvest, the population of Zicao County is approximately 190,000, an increase of 80,000 from last year. Among them, 10,000 are young and strong Mexica migrants, and 70,000 are newly resettled Tlaxcala Tribes... The cultivated farmland in Zicao County is 1 million mu. Most of the immigrants arrived too late, missing the time for spring plowing. I have already sent Priests and Samurai to organize them in constructing canals and building granaries and thatched huts in villages for next year's spring plowing..."

"This year's rainy season has seen plenty of rainfall. The water level of Atoyac Lake has risen, submerging some riverside farmlands. Although the food production was reduced in the autumn

harvest, it's still enough to support the 80,000 newly resettled young men and women, providing them with grain until next year's autumn harvest..."

Seeing this, Xiulote paused. He knew that in the two southern counties, in order to accommodate 200,000 Tlaxcala immigrants, food supplies would undoubtedly be tight. However, if these immigrants were successfully integrated and organized into farming and production... by the following autumn, both states' grain harvest would see explosive growth!

"Hmm, some food must be gathered from the Capital Region's granaries to supplement the two southern counties... The Fire River Plains has always been wealthy, perhaps a batch of food can be traded with the Colima Chief..."

After calculating over and over, the Kingdom's food supply remains tight. The root cause is the Kingdom's rapid population expansion, and the excessive consumption by the county legions. Yet, as long as they continue to plunder externally and continuously draw support from the Alliance, the Kingdom of the Lake can grow stronger at an exceptionally astonishing speed!

"In summary, Zicao County, with a population of 190,000, one in four to five are active workers, fields covering 1 million mu. Food is tight, needs to last until next autumn harvest..."

The migrated Tlaxcala captives are mainly young men and women. The ratio of active workers is naturally high, even reaching one in five. Similarly, it includes the southwestern Apal County.

"My supreme Sun, your servant Ezpan greets you! Your illustrious achievements in the eastern expedition have already spread everywhere under the heavens, reaching even the mountain regions in the southwest! Even the Colima Chief has sent an envoy to submit in tribute, along with another of his daughters... bowing low, swaying her grace, awaiting your illustrious campaign at any time..."

Seeing this, Xiulote raised an eyebrow, his body heating up slightly. He took a deep breath, savoring the invigorating Divine Smoke, and gently shook his head. Then, he solemnly skipped over the unimportant praise and directly sought the pivotal points.

"The sun shines upon the Apa Plain, making this year a bountiful one because of your radiance!... The newly reclaimed land is exceptionally fertile, and the harvest has exceeded expectations. The 10,000

Mexica immigrants who recently arrived have already been settled. While the 90,000 Tlaxcala people who have migrated in recent months are building villages and thatched huts."

"...In Apal County, there are already 210,000 people and over eighty farming villages. The terrain here is broad, with ample arable land. Each farming village houses about four thousand people, just right for housing a large banner team... If you come here, you will surely be satisfied with the neatness of the villages!... Thousands of tribespeople are basking in your glow, ready at any time to offer you everything they have..."

"This year's spring plowing covers over 1 million mu. The grain produced is ample enough to supply the new immigrants. With the Chief Divine as witness! By next year's spring plowing, the number of cultivated mu in the county will at least double!"

Seeing this, Xiulote nodded to show satisfaction. However, he knew that given Ezpan's character, the report would surely contain some exaggerations. Apal County harbors so many immigrants, supplying both food supplies and preparing sowing grains—food supplies must certainly be very tight.

"Apal County, population of 210,000, one in four to five are active workers, fields covering 1 million mu. Food needs to be imported..."

At this point, Xiulote pondered for a moment before pulling out a scroll again. Suppressing the heat in his heart, he patiently wrote a letter with respectful tone to the Colima Chief, arranging a grain trade. Transporting grain from the Fire River Plains to the Apa Plain covers a distance of about three to four hundred miles, roughly equivalent to deployment from Capital City Qinchongcan.

"Hmm, the reports from the four counties have all been reviewed. Qingqiu County was just established; it's too far away, and there's no latest report yet."

"The Northern Land has always been barren, and even after incorporating all Otomi People from Pamus State and accommodating several thousand south-migrating Canine Descendants tribes, the population barely reaches 100,000. Regarding arable land, the estimated area is less than 800,000 mu with yields lower by twenty percent compared to the South... The only advantage of the Northern Land is the abundance of tribal armies, with cheap recruitment and maintenance!"

Xiulote recalled for a long time and then picked up the pen to note down again.

"Qingqiu County, population 100,000, one in four are active workers, fields 800,000 mu. Guard against White Disaster of the Wilderness, accommodate Northern tribes..."

After a busy day, he finally finished reviewing the documents from the five counties. Xiulote stood up, drained a cup of honey tea prepared by soft hands, feeling a surge of warmth in his chest. Then, he unfolded the kingdom's map, traced his hand in the air, his spirit soaring high.

"Rivermouth County, 260,000 people; Capital Region County, 450,000 people; Zicao County, 190,000 people; Apa County, 210,000 people; Qingqiu County, 100,000 people... The domain of these five counties sprawls north and south, and together, they form a grand nation of 1.2 million people!"

"These 1.2 million people are mostly integrated into the kingdom's military system! There are no encumbrances from traditional nobility, no decaying Priestly Family... The majority of the outdated superstructure has been cleaned away by my hands over the years! Everything in the Kingdom is vibrant, advancing, and ready to conquer!"

Xiulote's voice paused, he spread his arms, standing tall and proud. The passion of a King stirred in his chest, and the taste of power was like the finest aphrodisiac for a man, invigorating his blood. At this instant, a stronger desire rose in his heart, to sweep through the inner and outer dominions of the Alliance, and encompass the entire world!

"Haha! My will shall be enacted throughout the Kingdom! These 1.2 million people will farm for me, labor for me, fight for me, and none will dare defy me! I will steer them forward, unfalteringly, just like..."

"Your Highness~..."

A passionate call suddenly echoed from beside the King, carrying a trembling allure, like the whisper of a white fox. The Highness turned his head, only to see Nashu's bowing waist, alabaster and slender, and her alluring eyes as delicate as silk, almost dripping with seduction.

Xiulote paused slightly, took a deep breath, his eyes immediately tinged with red. Then, with a ferocious expression, he suddenly extended his large hand like a pouncing Jaguar, grabbing the jade beauty and

with a "bang", placed her onto the map of the world. Then, the young Fierce Tiger leaned down, emitting a suppressed yet jubilant low growl from deep within his throat.

"Roar!... Unhindered forward, penetrating thoroughly, is the will of the King! Just like right now, painting upon the world!"

Chapter 1002: Era Epic, Sage's Great Achievement

The lanterns flickered, and the long scroll unfurled, as beautiful as a painting of rivers and mountains. The king lifted his brush, painting the world with sweeping strokes. In the north were undulating highlands, with divine peaks too vast to grasp with one hand; in the south was the long river like a jade belt, gracefully winding, inviting exploration. And at the river's end, on the map, surrounded by valleys, the lotus blooms and withers, reflecting the most beautiful scenery in the world!

"Roar! A myriad of flowers bloom, majestic and magnificent! This Lake Capital City, this taste of conquest... truly exquisite!"

After a night of toil, the flicker of the lamp faded in and out, with no memory of where the brush had landed, only the recollection of tiger roars and fox cries. It was not until the following morning that Xiulote awoke from a deep sleep. He looked at the table, and the painting scroll was long gone. He recalled last night's painting, and the fire in his body reignited.

"Power and beauty, reflecting each other, most alluring... Eh?! As I look at the kingdom's report, why do I feel such a strong desire? Am I... desiring... the world?"

Thinking of this, Xiulote furrowed his brows, pondering silently. He looked at last night's incense burner, already extinguished, with even the ashes cleared away. The king showed confusion, and after a long moment, he breathed out heavily and tapped his head.

"Whew! The temptations faced from the throne are ten times stronger than those of ordinary mortals! If one were to be overwhelmed by desires..."

Xiulote shook his head and stood up. He donned a robe, covering his well-defined, chiseled upper body. Then, he searched with his eyes but saw no sign of the little fox, unsure where it was curled up resting, after last night's exhausting ordeal. The young king chuckled and walked to the door, speaking in a deep voice towards the outside of the hall.

"Bur... Ecatl!"

Ecatl, draped in Leather Armor, appeared outside the hall. He knelt on one knee, respectfully inquiring.

"Family Head?"

"Come! Train swords with me!..."

What they called sword training was actually sparring with wooden blades, just like Obsidian war clubs, only the weapons were lighter. Ecatl wielded his blade with great strength, slashing horizontally. Compared to Bertade, he was less nimble and delicate, but more fierce and unstoppable. Such intense combat allowed no time for thought, and everyone's fighting style was a direct reflection of their character. Through this sparring, Xiulote gained more understanding of the new Guard Commander.

After a bout of sparring, the young king was drenched in sweat, his mind finally cleared of distractions. Finally at peace, he turned to reviewing the remaining kingdom reports. After the documents from the County Magistrates of the five counties, he then opened the documents from the Chief Minister, Sage Jatili, to review the comprehensive overview of the kingdom.

"Honorable Majesty, this old official bows beneath the Divine Tree in the lake, reporting to the Divine Eagle of the sky... After four and a half years, the epic chronicle of the origin of the world has been initially compiled. At the Divine Power University, over ten several-meter-high inscribed stone slabs have been erected, engraved with drawings, pictographs, and square script. Henceforth, all Kingdom Priests in training and visiting foreign emissaries can look up to observe and learn about the common mythology of various tribes and the immortal divine will of the five epochs!"

Sage Jatili first mentioned the epoch epic, which he personally oversaw the compilation of. This was an immense and profound task that required great effort from the sage to finally reach this initial stage of completion.

This epoch epic starts with the First Era, narrating the mythological age of 5,000 years ago when the ancestors first emerged and the divine revelations were bestowed upon them; then the Second Epoch, 3,000 years ago, with the Olmec Era, when the ancestors shared the same origin and were one people, the Jiao People; further on, the Third Epoch, 1,600 years ago, the diverse tribes dispersed and built

marvelous edifices during the Teotihuacan Period; following that, the Fourth Epoch, 600 years ago, the turbulent times of frequent floods and tribal warfare; finally, the Fifth Epoch, where the Chief Divine chose the Mexica king, promising the world and the reunification of all tribes, which is the era of integration currently taking place!...

"Unity of origin in the world! The tablet drawings passed down by all tribes, the temples built by all tribes, the pyramids established by all tribes, the turquoise revered by all tribes... For thousands of years, the cultural memories left behind by all tribes share similarities and commonalities. Over these years, I have painstakingly traced the origins of each one, providing illustrated explanations and mutual corroboration... so that future generations may know the truth of the five epochs!"

Upon seeing this, Xiulote nodded deeply, feeling a genuine admiration in his heart.

To integrate the various tribes culturally, it is not enough to compile mythological epics; there must also be illustration boards, wondrous monuments, and artifacts used for explanation and proof. How to interpret the drawn tablets and paintings handed down? How to prove the pyramids constructed are of the same origin? How do ancient artifacts testify to the lineage of the Jiao People? These tangible proofs are the key and the challenge.

"Incorporate two parts indistinguishable imagination into eight parts of reality; from the tangible evidence, derive the desired conclusions... Turn false into true, turn illusion into reality, blend truth with falsehood, intertwine the unreal with reality... Simply put, to construct a mythological epic that convinces, withstands the scrutiny of future generations, to integrate the people's hearts, and be recorded for posterity!"

Reflecting on this, Xiulote's expression flickered. Such grand cultural construction cannot be achieved without sufficient accumulation of knowledge. And without enough power to enforce it in the world, such cultural construction is also meaningless. A unified culture must be coupled with a unified empire! And at this very moment, as the various tribes are still in ignorance and writing is just beginning to sprout, it is the last and best opportunity!...

"The empire's legions can conquer various peoples and rule millions. But if the empire wants to sustain itself without becoming fleeting, cultural integration must be completed to establish a common identity! This task has some similarity to Sima Qian's writing of history books. But facing a more primitive and complex society, it needs to be done more thoroughly... The First Emperor's burning of books and burial of scholars to eradicate old traditions is also necessary!..."

Xiulote pondered for a moment, his determination growing stronger. He tightened his lips and continued reading downward.

"The branches of the common Divine Tree stretch everywhere, northward to the endless continent, southward to the boundless rainforest... All tribes of the world have always come from the same ancestor; they are different branches of the Divine Tree. And the roots of all tribes are tightly connected! Whether it's the Mexica, the Prepetcha, the Tlaxcala, the Tekos, the Totonac, the Vastec, the Mistec, the Zapotecs, the Tepanec, the Maya corn people, the Taino People of the eastern islands, the hunters of the north, the gold people of the south... all are Jiao People! The tribes that scattered during the Second Epoch will surely reunify in the Fifth Epoch! This is the testament of the ancestors, the promise of the Divine, the covenant of destiny, and the journey of a great king!..."

Seeing this, the king lowered his eyes, showing a smile. This was his requirement for the sage to include the North American tribes, Caribbean tribes, and South American tribes in the epic as well.

Decades or even a century later, when the kingdom's colonial teams expand and encounter the Iroquois tribes of North America or the Inca Kingdom of South America, they can present this epic and tell them.

"...We share the same ancestors! Look, in the epic of the ancestors, it is clearly written, you are the dispersants at the end of the Second Epoch! ...And now, the Kingdom's Warriors have come here to reunify you, to return to your ancestral roots!..."

No matter whether their nobility believes it, as long as the Kingdom's Warriors and commoners believe it, it will lay the foundation for integration. Forced cultural integration requires the backing of military force, the support of religion, and it needs to be done before nationalism rises.

"Looking ahead hundreds of years, the road is long and arduous. I might not see the reunification of all tribes in my lifetime. But I must sow the seeds, even if not forming a vast American Empire, at least become a Zhou-Li of interrelated culture!"

Xiulote's eyes lit up, his thoughts wandering far, a deep longing displayed on his face. Of course, the immediate priority is to integrate the various tribes of Central America. To achieve this goal, he has some unique advantages.

"Your Majesty, the initial compilation of the epoch epic is complete, and the subsequent editing and updating must continue. And for this epic to become the consensus of the world, much more needs to be done!... The Kingdom has conquered Cholula City, inheriting hundreds of legacy tablets and Divine Objects. This old official will lead the priests in studying and explaining the legacy drawings, 'discarding the false and retaining the true'... Regarding the priests and elders of various tribes who stray onto wrong paths, spread deceptive words, and refuse correction, may Your Majesty strictly deal with them, so as not to let their poisonous ideas spread throughout the world!"

Seeing this, Xiulote smirked and shook his head in amusement. Sage Jatili, appearing gentle, was ruthless when encountering such "orthodoxy" contests. Yet without such strictness, it would be impossible to accomplish the grand task of cultural unification... He continued reading, looking to the last part of this report, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

"Your Majesty, I have already arranged for half the image and half the text, to carve the printing blocks of the epoch epic. The scale of the papermaking facility in the Capital City has been expanded once again to ensure sufficient amounts of paper... And the first batch of prints will be ten thousand copies!"

Chapter 1003: Kingdom of the Lake: A Slave-Based Military State with Centralized Divine Authority

"The printing technique of the Alliance... A powerful tool for the dissemination of religion and culture!..."

Xiulote stroked the resilient bark paper in his hand, lost in thought. After nearly six years of development, the Alliance's papermaking technology had achieved significant progress, and the scale of papermaking had rapidly expanded. Both Tenochtitlan in the Lake Capital City and Qin Chongcan City in the Capital City housed large-scale papermaking workshops. Smaller papermaking workshops also emerged across the Alliance's various City-States. The papermaking technology was spreading swiftly throughout Central America's realm.

The extremely convenient bark paper, reed paper, and grass paper had already become indispensable everyday consumables among the Priest and nobility classes. Merchants and trading groups from various regions also had an equally strong demand. However, most people still communicated and wrote primarily using traditional graphic symbols on paper.

As for the Alliance's script, it was spreading alongside the papermaking technique, particularly the kana characters that fit the order of the Nava language, spontaneously simplified from Nava pictographic script, were easiest for the ordinary nobility to grasp. High-ranking nobility and Priests studied the scriptures printed by the High Priesthood, seeking the mysteries of the Divine from the intricate square

characters. The use of these scripts had spontaneously begun the process of Mexica localization, with their sentence order and recitation pronunciation differing from that of the Celestial Empire.

"The priesthood of Kingdom and Alliance masters the woodblock printing technique and is keen on printing religious texts and illustrations. Thousands upon thousands of illustrations and scriptures of the Chief Divine are being printed rapidly! Even in the sacrificial altars of Prepetcha villages, illustrations of the Chief Divine are posted, and volumes of the 'Book of Ama Colley' are maintained. Belief in the Chief Divine is flowing to the City-States conquered by the Alliance at an unprecedented pace, like a divine miracle... The faith of the Kingdom of the Lake has already taken root among the Prepetcha! The current priority is to swiftly spread belief in the Chief Divine among the migrating two hundred thousand Telascallan people..."

With this thought, Xiulote picked up a pen and wrote a new Royal Decree.

"Kingdom Priesthood, quickly select Priests to go south and evangelize among the Telascallan. Divine Power University recruits two hundred Priest apprentices from the two hundred thousand new immigrants... Additionally, send the Divine Revelation Priest with hot air balloons to two counties in the South to perform divine miracles again!..."

In the spread of belief in the Chief Divine, "miracles" are naturally the most striking and effective means of evangelizing! Each "miracle" following the ascent of hot air balloons results in a wave of religious fervor. At this moment, the evangelizing effort was overwhelmingly successful. Of course, divine "fireworks" of various sorts also served as auxiliary effects.

As he thought of hot air balloons, Xiulote paused slightly, recalling the towering Cloud Serpent Mountain City. However, the Alliance's hot air balloons were not yet capable of carrying people; the altitude of ascent was rather limited, and the time could not be too long, making it difficult to use in actual battles.

"This is a psychological weapon, to be used at the most critical moment to demoralize the enemy—the final straw... But, preparation can certainly be made in advance; let's first craft one..."

The King pondered for a moment, then looked at the Sage's document, turning to the last portion.

"Your Majesty, the Kingdom of the Lake now has a population of over one million, resembling the old Kingdom in its heyday. However, the number of military merit nobility and warriors supported by the

kingdom far exceeds that of the old dynasty! Seven thousand Imperial Guard Legion, eight thousand Jingji Legion, eight thousand Guajili Legion, eight thousand first Spear Legion, eight thousand second Spear Legion, eight thousand Purple Grass Army... Six legions totaling forty-seven thousand warriors, all have received land and agricultural slaves! In addition to these, counties also have a considerable number of local Militia camps, such as the several thousand Canine Warriors of Rivermouth County and the several thousand Tekos warriors of Apa County... These border Militia require periodic training, their farming is scant, and they do not take part in labor duties. Once they succeed in an expedition and achieve merit, they will be promoted to warriors..."

Reading this, Xiulote felt his old face flush, slightly embarrassed. He had not yet informed the Sage of the Kingdom's plan to establish a seventh semi-full-time Long Snake Legion, also a full complement of eight thousand.

"Once the Long Snake Legion is established, the Lake Kingdom with its 1.2 million people will have fifty-five thousand warriors, plus a large number of border Militia. The proportion of warrior population in both full-time and semi-full-time service will be 4.6%, which can be said as one soldier per twenty people!"

Thinking about it, Xiulote pursed his lips. Perhaps the proportion of warriors to civilians in the Kingdom was indeed a bit high. The land grants and titles granted to the warrior class meant their share of the kingdom's wealth might be far greater than this... The King reflected, continuing to read.

"Your Majesty, the current Kingdom is neither a Priest's nation nor a noble's nation, but a Samurai's nation! Westward expeditions, northward, southward, and eastward... Not a year goes by without war, with each battle destroying City-States and punishing nations. Military merit is accumulated for titles, warriors are granted land, and slaves. Your Majesty favors warriors greatly, rewarding lavishly beyond comparison throughout the realm, even surpassing the Alliance!"

"Among the fifty thousand in the Legion, there are 1800 First Level Military Merit Nobility! Each is granted 800 acres of land, 40 slaves. The Fourth Level Veteran Warriors alone form a legion. Each is granted 240 acres of land, 12 slaves. Subsequently, the Third Level Elite Warriors number about two legions, each granted 100 acres of land, 5 slaves. As for the Second Level Capture Warriors, their numbers approximate those of the Third Level Warriors, each granted 20 acres of land, 1 slave... Never in history have Warriors of the Kingdom held so much land and controlled so many agricultural slaves. As an elder minister, I often feel anxious, sleepless day and night, not knowing what fate lies ahead for the Kingdom..."

Reading this, Xiulote paused, his expression shifting. He instantly retrieved the Eastern Expedition's reward plan, and tallied the number of promotions across different levels with the Sage Jatili's report. Soon, he calculated the exact numbers and wore a look of surprise.

"After the Eastern Expedition, the promotions would include at least seven hundred Military Merit Nobility, two thousand Veteran Warriors... Thus, within the Kingdom, Military Merit Nobility would rise to two thousand five hundred, occupying two million acres of farmland, ten thousand slaves. The Fourth Level Warriors would be ten thousand, occupying 2.4 million acres of farmland, twelve thousand slaves. The Third Level Warriors would be eighteen thousand, occupying 1.8 million acres of farmland, nine thousand slaves. The Second Level Warriors would be fifteen thousand, occupying three hundred thousand acres of farmland, 1.5 thousand slaves..."

Calculating this, Xiulote's hand shook slightly, nearly sighing audibly.

Throughout the four major expeditions, casualties of the Warrior Corps had been very limited, while the number of enemies killed and captured amounted to tens of thousands! To quickly unite the internal allegiance of the Kingdom by rallying warriors from various City-States and tribes, Xiulote strictly fulfilled the promise of granting land and slaves for military merit. Inevitably, this gave rise to an exceptionally large warrior class.

"Chief Divine! The Kingdom's warriors and Military Merit Nobility occupy a total of 6.5 million acres of farmland and nearly thirty-three thousand slaves! While the Kingdom's total acres of land, including rest fields, barely approach twenty million acres. The Kingdom's total population stands at 1.21 million..."

"In other words, the warriors and military merit class hold at least 33% of the nation's farmland, 27% of the population! And within the Kingdom, more than a quarter are slaves?!"

Actually, the number of slaves was far greater than this. In the Kingdom's two major mining regions, thousands of mining slaves were employed. In the manors of Kingdom's nobility and Priests, there were also numerous laboring agricultural slaves. The overall proportion of slaves in the Kingdom might be close to a third.

Xiulote raised his head, gazing at the towering, majestic statue of the Chief Divine, plunged into contemplation. Through these calculations, he had gained a deeper and clearer understanding of the Kingdom of the Lake he personally established. The young King remained silent for a long time, finally exhaling a deep breath, and murmured to himself.

"Truly, the Western Sea Qin State, America Rome, the Lake military group, a country's army... a centralized divine authority slave military nation!"

Chapter 1004: Ironware, the Revolutionary Productivity!

"The rise of the military merit nobility and the samurai class is challenging the traditional nobility and priesthood, driving the political change of the Kingdom! However, such change still requires corresponding progress in production capacity..."

Near lunchtime, the sound of prayers from tens of thousands of samurais was heard from the camp outside the city. Xiulote listened for a moment, smiled, and then found two documents from the Mining and Metallurgy Bureau in the Kingdom report. The key to the Kingdom's production capacity innovation lies within them.

"Respected Highness, your samurai, Necali, reports to you: In the Qinganbate mining area, there are already eight thousand mining slaves. Among them, there are over six thousand mining slaves in the six copper mining areas. In the three to four coal mining areas, there are more than a thousand mining slaves. In the surrounding logging camps, there are several hundred mining slaves..."

"Your Divine Revelation has always guided us! According to your instructions, your samurais have utilized more ventilation equipment and transport wheelbarrows. More furnaces over two meters high were built in the mining areas, adopting enlarged large bellows. Around the mining areas, walls were constructed using copper slag from the furnaces and stones from the mountains..."

"Now, the average monthly mining and smelting output of copper materials is about eight thousand pounds per thousand people, and the monthly output totals fifty thousand pounds! Chief Divine bless us! In two years, the copper output in the mining areas has doubled!..."

Seeing this, Xiulote nodded with satisfaction, feeling quite gratified.

The copper quality of Qinganbate mining area is indeed excellent. By significantly increasing mining slaves and using vertical furnaces and large bellows, the mining area has reached a monthly production of over twenty tons of copper materials. With such a significant increase in output, more bronze can be directed towards the production of agricultural tools and implements, thus fundamentally enhancing the production capacity of the entire Kingdom. Of course, mining in the Middle Ancient Times was the

most burdensome and dangerous labor, unparalleled. Behind this increase in copper production, the price paid...

"Highness, your samurai begs of you: Can some new mining slaves be supplemented from the Kingdom's eastern campaign captives? The monthly loss in the mining area is about one hundred fifty people..."

Xiulote's eyes twinkled as he silently calculated. A monthly loss of 150 people, which means an annual loss of around one thousand eight hundred. But based on the ratio of eight thousand in the mining area...

"Each mining slave can only live for a little over four years?"

Xiulote lowered his gaze, silent for a moment. Then, his expression unchanged, he picked up the pen and wrote a new Royal Decree.

"Necali, my samurai, you have done well! Continue to increase production capacity and try to reduce losses... Increase the number of mining slaves to ten thousand. Copper output should reach over thirty tons a month!... As for the samurais consumed in suppression, I will replenish them for you!"

After writing the Royal Decree, Xiulote took out the seal and stamped the King's emblem on it. The red emblem appeared in his eyes like blood, yet the blood color was unavoidable; it is the fuel for the progress of the era, as well as the accumulating corpses of all beings. Next was the second document, from the responsible Tecos Warrior, Mavik, of the Black Rock Mountain iron mine.

"To the highest Majesty! Your seaside scales, Mavik reports to you: The rainy season has passed, and lightning no longer strikes, the excavation of Black Rock Mountain iron mining area has returned to its normal state! In the mining area, there are now one thousand six hundred Tecos miners and four hundred loggers, busy day and night... In fact, this is open-pit mining, and the workforce in the mining area can still be increased significantly. However, the food supply in the mining area has always been a bit tight..."

At this point, Xiulote thought for a moment and nodded slightly. Around Black Rock Mountain, the residing Tecos tribespeople total less than ten thousand. Their farming level is also very limited, unable to provide much surplus food. The main food source for the mining area comes from Zicao City, four

hundred li to the north. Through the waterway of the Tarsas River, downstream, this journey is not difficult, and food can be conveniently transported and arrive.

However, since the eastern campaign, Zicao County has settled too many Telascallan youths, and food is very tight. On the river plains north of Trout Fish Village, more than ten thousand Telascallan tribes are currently settled for cultivation. They will have food production only after the fall harvest next year.

"The development of the mining industry requires an agricultural basis. The southern lowlands are wide and sparsely populated, not nearly as fertile as the rivermouth and Capital Region, so further cultivation is certainly needed. Since Black Rock Mountain has iron mines and convenient waterways, the Kingdom's development focus must tilt towards the southern seaside."

Deciding on his plan, Xiulote once again looked at the details on mining and smelting in the report. This portion should be written by the priest and craftsmen, and is quite detailed.

"Majesty, iron ore and copper ore are both essences condensed by the Earth Mother. But iron ore, baptized by the Chief Divine's lightning, is much harder than copper ore! The miners' speed in mining iron ore is much slower than that of copper ore. Moreover, iron smelting is more difficult, and the iron product output is lower than that of equivalent copper ore..."

Seeing this, Xiulote pondered slightly. The iron quality of Black Rock Mountain is obviously lower, showing the distinction compared to the high-quality copper of Qinganbate. Meanwhile, the Mohs hardness of iron ore is 5-6, whereas copper ore is 3.5-4.5. With current technological levels, the cost of mining and smelting iron ore is feared to be higher than copper ore.

"Iron production at Black Rock Mountain has been ongoing for two years. Following the ongoing Divine Revelations from Your Highness, and due to Your Highness's generous rewards, priests and craftsmen have been continuously exploring, and have achieved some results..."

"Firstly, constructing vertical furnaces over two meters tall with kaolin and clay, equipped with large bellows... Fuel below, iron ore above, leveraging the Fire God's mighty power, blowing with the Wind God's strength, melting the Earth Mother's essence... The smelting furnace produces molten iron, solidifying into iron material. However, at this point, the iron material is brittle and unsuitable for use. So, the craftsmen follow closely, placing it in the smelting furnace. The iron material melts a second time, and it gets better."

Seeing this, Xiulote nodded with satisfaction. The product of the smelting furnace is high-carbon pig iron. The second melting aims to reduce the carbon content in the pig iron.

Under his diligent thinking and advanced guidance, the Kingdom's iron smelting technology quickly surpassed the original stage of the bloomery process, arriving at the stage of pig iron smelting with high temperatures in the vertical furnace. This also holds enlightenment from the Celestial Empire, technology emerging as early as the Warring States period.

"... After the smelting furnace is a row of ceramic moulds. As per Your Highness's instructions, the current primary focus is on agricultural implements manufacturing. As for the iron mould you pointed out, craftsmen are still exploring but have made some progress... Molten iron is poured into ceramic moulds, solidifying into various agricultural implements. However, they are still slightly brittle at this stage, requiring blacksmiths to heat and continuously forge... The more forging, the better the effect, until durable implements are produced. This is repeated forging, incorporating the Chief Divine's power, making the ironware harder!... Of course, as per your instructions, after the forging is completed, a quenching step follows, introducing the Rain Divine's strength!... Aggregating the power of All Gods, thus obtaining hard and tough ironware!"

"Majesty... As for the 'extremely hard iron', 'soft iron and hard iron mixed forging', and 'semi-melted molten iron with iron powder stirring steel', 'maintaining molten iron and long-term open-air stirring mature steel'... Uh, priests and craftsmen are striving to explore. Chief Divine bless the Kingdom! By next year, the mining area will surely see breakthrough progress!..."

At this point, Xiulote's expression changed, his eyebrows slightly furrowed. He frowned, pondering the current situation of the Kingdom's iron smelting.

After multiple forging times, the pig iron was forged into relatively poor quality steel, suitable for use as agricultural implements and shorter weapons. This was also the current situation at the Black Rock Mountain mining area, providing some iron agricultural implements for the Kingdom's tillage and further exploring steelmaking processes.

To obtain higher quality steel, the Han Dynasty's "stirring steel method" or the mature "casting steel method" of the Southern and Northern Dynasties would be required to produce wrought iron, then mix with pig iron into steel. These transitive technologies, hoping to replicate them in resource-poor Central America, still require time...

If high-quality steel is urgently needed, the bloomery process can be used to produce wrought iron, then combine it with pig iron from the vertical furnace to achieve relatively high-quality steel. However, the cost consumption and the eventual quality of the finished product leave much to be desired. Overall, the most achievable steelmaking method currently should be the Han Dynasty's stirring steel method.

"Knowing is easy, doing is hard; accumulating thickly and then emitting thinly. The accumulation of the Kingdom's smelting technology is insufficient; even with a clear route, bypassing several hundred years of exploration, it's still difficult to achieve it in one step!"

Xiulote sighed softly, a helpless expression appearing on his face. For the priests and craftsmen of the Black Rock Mountain mining area, he could not demand more. In the face of sincere faith in the Chief Divine and the Kingdom's alluring rewards, the craftsmen have already done their best. What's remaining, is truly limited in capability and lack of experience...

"If only I could obtain craftsmen from the Old Continent..."

Divine Smoke rises, like ascending desires. The young King muttered softly. His gaze again turned to the East, thousands of miles away.

Chapter 1005: The End of the Year 1488, the Returning Portuguese Fleet

End of December 1488, thirty-five thousand li from the East, Kingdom of Portugal, Lisbon Port.

Countless sails stood tall, masts formed a forest. Hundreds of various merchant ships docked here, flags of dozens of commercial city-states fluttered at their bows. Dark-skinned laborers unloaded goods, exquisite horse carriages carried the nobility, and merchants filled the port market. Here was one of Western Europe's most significant trade ports, and a trade node connecting the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean.

With the Kingdom of Portugal establishing a series of castles and outposts along the West African coast, spices, gold and silver, ivory, and slaves from the Southern Continent were continuously transported by the powerful Kingdom Fleet, infusing this ancient seaside city with the strongest vitality.

Ever since thirty-five years ago, when the mighty Ottoman Empire captured the unconquerable Constantinople, entirely severing the silk and spice routes between East and West, Lisbon Port became

the only stable spice port in the Catholic World. Even though the spices available here were merely a drop in the ocean compared to the vast demand of the Catholic World.

Among many spices, the most beloved by the nobility and bishops of the Catholic World was pepper. Pepper has been an essential culinary spice since the Roman Era. In the Middle Ages, it was also an extremely important medicinal herb. Priests of the church and doctors from academies alike believed that pepper could cure all pains, swellings, inflammations, invasions of evil spirits... and impotence.

Moreover, in this plague-ridden era, pepper, cloves, and cinnamon were also used to prevent the plague, using their unique fragrance to repel the 'putrid air' in the atmosphere. This excellent understanding was even acknowledged by the Pope of Rome.

Thus, spices from the Southern Continent made the port of Lisbon so special and important. The Kingdom of Portugal minting a large number of gold coins also made its commodity trade flourish. Lisbon Port of this era was filled with vitality and excitement!

At this moment, Captain Bartolomeu Dias, an official of the Portuguese Royal Family, stood on Lisbon's port, gazing at this lively seaside city. After enduring a challenging 16-month voyage, he finally returned to Lisbon, stepping onto the land of his homeland.

"Merciful Almighty! Thank You for Your generous gifts! Praise You, for granting Your faithful believers the news of a new eastern route, returning to the kingdom of Our Lord!... Ah! Before Christmas in the year 1488 of Our Lord Jesus Christ, we have finally returned home!..."

Captain Dias closed his eyes, clasped the silver cross around his neck, and prayed softly. Unbeknownst to him, his eyes grew moist.

Bright sunshine cascaded from the sky over the coast, as if the merciful gaze of the Almighty, entering his heart. This long voyage encompassed lands of demons, turbulent waves, potential mutiny, discoveries of new routes, and killings on the return journey... But now, he was finally back, carrying discoveries that would change the world, along with the achievements that would enshrine him after death, he returned successfully!

"...Praise the Almighty!"

Bruno, the newly appointed captain behind Dias, lowered his head, praying diligently, attempting sincerity, trying to shed tears. The return from Cape of Storms took a full nine months, and once again they faced terrifying waves, losing dozens of sailors. During the lengthy return journey, the usually strict Captain Dias relaxed the fleet's discipline, allowing his sailors to plunder ashore. It was like a master leading fierce dogs, loosening their leash, causing the wolf-like dogs to charge ferociously.

Past the desolate Namibian coast, villages along the Congo coast awaited. Sailors swung their scimitars, slaying the frail indigenous tribes, venting desires and pressures onto their dark bodies, further scavenging village treasures. After several rounds of plunder, all sailors gained substantial loot. Their accumulated dissatisfaction and grievances towards the captain's forced explorations were finally replaced with instinctive awe and obedience.

Upon reaching Elmina Castle for rest, five caravel ships loaded with gold, silver, and spices from the Southern Continent joined the returning fleet under the escort of Portuguese soldiers. With the addition of kingdom guards, the wolf-like dogs were leashed, leaving the last leg of the journey without any turmoil.

"Hmm, the number of merchant fleets from commercial city-states at the port is increasing!... Which company should I trade with for the gold, silver, ivory, and spices gathered this time?"

Bruno prayed earnestly while surveying all directions. As the captain, he certainly couldn't return empty-handed. According to maritime rules, official captains could claim one to two-tenths of the spoils of war, whereas pirate captains typically only earned four to five times that of ordinary sailors. Hmm, the disparity brought by official backing was evident. As for privately-acquired spoils, they certainly wouldn't go through kingdom merchants but would flow to higher-priced city-state trading groups.

"Praise the Almighty! Selling the spoils of war this time could afford a knight manor outside Lisbon... Hmm, the kind with a windmill!"

Bruno prayed devoutly, his eyes scanning for potential buyers. The kingdom's port was so prosperous, filled with the scent of wealth. The opportunities brought by the great nautical expedition were enough to completely change the impoverished fate of an illegitimate son of impoverished aristocracy.

"The Southern Fleet of Portugal... These ship holds are all filled with tenfold profit goods!"

A Jewish merchant wearing a small round hat stood dozens of steps away from the military port, searching for possible buyers. With greedy eyes, he gazed at the deep-water Portuguese Fleet. Then, his keen sight paused momentarily on two caravels full of repair marks, pondering. Next, he noticed Captain Dias praying devoutly in front of everyone and furrowed his brows, lowering his gaze, avoiding eye contact with him.

"Devout great nobility... all ruthless butchers from the Hell of Fire!..."

Jewish merchant Eliyahu cursed inwardly, filled with indelible fear, the shadow of numerous massacred kin lingering. Eventually, he spotted Bruno dressed in a captain's attire, observed for a moment, and his eyes suddenly lit up.

"Ah!... This is?... the scent of demons and wealth..."

A moment later, Eliyahu reached out, patting his Slavic retainer's shoulder, issuing quiet instructions.

"Go to the trading group's warehouse and fetch two bottles of wine! Then prepare some exquisite snacks, I'm inviting important guests..."

"Yes, President."

The Slavic retainer nodded naively. He then scratched his bushy beard, somewhat confusedly asking.

"Wine? Which kind? Umm, is it that Bordeaux or... that Jurançon..."

"You fool!"

Upon hearing his retainer's words, Eliyahu instantly flew into a rage, even his goat beard trembled with anger.

"Who told you to fetch expensive Aquitaine red wine? Bring me Aragon's Catalonia red wine! Make sure to mix four-tenths water, add some grape juice!"

"Yes! As you wish, President."

The Slavic retainer immediately turned and headed toward the Jewish trading group at the port. But Eliyahu's voice again came, now tinged with heartache.

"Today's guests are indeed quite important. Fine, make it only two... no, two and a half tenths water!"

"Yes! President."

The Slavic retainer nodded vigorously, paused momentarily, then strode off again. Eliyahu watched for a moment and turned his gaze back, eyes sparkling with brilliance. A new business opportunity was close at hand!

Nearby, devout Captain Dias had finished praying. He turned his head and gave a few serious instructions to the other captains; the captains nodded respectfully, making the cross to swear oaths.

Then, Captain Dias straightened his back, mounted the Lusitano Horse brought by kingdom guards, and galloped away under the lead of two court knights and a dozen knight retainers. Without pause, he rode northward fifty li towards the Sintra Palace. There, the wise and brilliant King Joao II sat high on the throne, awaiting his loyal royal steward.

Chapter 1006: The End of the Year 1488, "That Man," Joao II

"Clip-clop..."

The clattering of hooves echoed on the long path of bluestone, drifting northward. Dias rode his horse, treading the light winter snow of the Iberian Peninsula, with the bright coastal sunlight behind him. Underneath him, the meticulously cultivated Lusitano warhorse stood over a meter and sixty tall, making his figure appear particularly majestic. Beside him, the cavalry of the Royal Family remained silent and composed, well-trained to maintain their formation even while galloping.

A good road of fifty miles, riding on warhorses, only takes one or two hours. Moments later, the surrounding villages gradually thinned, the estates of the nobility faintly visible, and the ancient Sintra Palace lay just a few miles away.

Only then did Dias emerge from his contemplation. He slightly quickened his pace, riding parallel to the two court knights leading the way.

"Praise the Almighty! Esteemed Court Knight Emino, I have just returned from a sea voyage, has any significant event occurred in the Kingdom?"

Hearing this, Court Knight Emino's expression shifted. He glanced at the Royal Steward, who appeared a bit leaner, and recalled the joy on His Majesty's face upon receiving the steward's letter, then replied with a smile.

"Holy Mother protect us! Esteemed Royal Steward, Knight Dias. Over the past few months, His Majesty has been in a good mood. Prince Afonso of the Kingdom is now officially engaged to Princess Isabella. This wedding, witnessed by the Pope, is set for over a year from now, the spring after next!"

"Oh? Prince Afonso and Princess Isabella have set a wedding date? Truly, the Holy Mother protects us!"

Hearing this joyful news, Dias also smiled. Prince Afonso was Lord Joao's beloved only son and heir. Princess Isabella, in turn, was the first daughter of Queen Isabella of Castile.

Decided a decade ago, this political marriage could be considered the only noteworthy outcome for the Kingdom of Portugal in the Castilian succession struggle. At present, Princess Isabella resides on the land of the Kingdom of Portugal, "guarded" by the knights of the Royal Family. Her marriage to the Prince would continue to bring the claim to the Kingdom of Castile's throne to their descendants.

In fact, the relationship between His Majesty Joao II and Queen Isabella is quite complex. They are both adversaries and mutual admirers. Queen Isabella often used another term to refer to His Majesty Joao, "o homem," meaning "that man"!

Dias pondered for a moment, returning from the numerous rumors swirling in his mind, and smiled at the two.

"Holy Mother protect us! Esteemed Royal Knights, upon my return from the Southern Continent, I have brought back some ancient relics, possibly remnants of the Elder John's nation. If you both have time, feel free to come and observe them over the weekend, to explore the enlightenment of my Lord together!"

Hearing this, Court Knight Eminio paused slightly. Then, interpreting the glances from his fellow knight, and considering the abundance of the Southern Continent, he immediately understood, smiling as he replied.

"Observing Holy Relics and seeking the Lord's enlightenment is the duty of every devout believer! Esteemed Royal Steward, I am most willing to visit. Praise the Almighty! And bless you, fortunate one!"

"Haha! Praise the merciful Almighty!"

Soon, the riding entourage once more fell silent as they moved forward. The crisp clatter of hooves continued northward, until just outside Sintra Palace. About a dozen royal guards stood guard with pikes at the palace gates, while on the tall walls were vigilant heavy crossbows, and the newly fashioned matchlock guns.

The group dismounted here. Dias removed his gloves and hat, laid down his weapons, and strode into the court of Sintra.

This palace, originally built by the Moors seven hundred years ago, was vibrant in color. Over various reigns, it had become a splendid example among Western European courts. Within the palace were uniquely styled domes, sacredly bright spires, and ornately decorated flat tops. The blend of different styles demonstrated a relatively tolerant religious atmosphere in the Kingdom of Portugal at that time.

Paying no glances to either side, Dias proceeded under the guidance of the guards to the grand hall. Once there, he slightly glanced around before kneeling on one knee, reporting excitedly to the King in the hall.

"Great Lord Joao! Your loyal Royal Steward, Dias, has returned from the sea voyage to the Southern Continent! Under the protection of the Almighty and you, we have finally navigated around the edge of the Southern Continent and discovered a route to the East!"

"Good! The merciful Almighty blesses the devout citizens! Dias, the Almighty protects you, protects me, and protects the tribes of the Cape Iris!"

Joao II, at thirty-four, was in his prime. His face was slightly long, eyebrows extended, with remarkably well-defined features, particularly his pronounced nose. Most striking, however, were his bright, flashing eyes. Unconcealed ambition and fervent determination almost radiated from those eyes, akin to blazing flames.

Seeing His Majesty's eyes, Dias lowered his head, his expression full of reverence. He couldn't help but marvel inwardly.

"His Majesty is like a mighty lion, standing atop the mountains of Sintra. All the great nobility of the Kingdom kneel at his feet! What possibly could bring him down? ...Ah, I cannot imagine."

After a few casual exchanges, the lord and minister quickly delved into the main topic. Joao II spoke decisively, inquiring in detail about the route to the East. Dias answered every query, recounting in detail the voyage along the Southern Continent, until that unforgettable storm.

"...The waves were towering, ten to twenty meters high, crashing down relentlessly! The sky was gloomy, with wind, rain, thunder, and lightning, as if the apocalypse had arrived. Our sailboat was repeatedly pressed into the depths by the giant waves, yet with difficulty resurfacing... Only after thirteen days did we sail out of that storm. Then, the fleet turned east, then once more north, and days later, we finally beheld the Southern Continent stretching from east to west once again! Holy Mother protect us!..."

Saying this, Dias's eyes still carried the palpable fear of escaping death. He prayed silently, then bowed respectfully, saluting Your Majesty.

"...Thus I realize, this is the blessing from the Almighty, showing mercy to His faithful! Through me, he reveals the route to India and Seris to your greatness!"

"Praise the Almighty! The new route to India and Seris!"

Joao II rose abruptly. Although he had already learned of the new route from Dias's letters yesterday afternoon, hearing the Royal Steward's answer now, he couldn't contain his excitement!

"A new route, a new Silk Road! What an immense path of wealth, yet so devout a journey of faith!... Merciful Almighty! Praise be to You, bless the Kingdom of Portugal, bless the Iris Tribe, for bestowing such grace!..."

The low prayers echoed in the magnificent hall. After a while, Joao II calmed his fluctuating emotions. He resumed his seat on the throne, pondered briefly, then asked.

"Dias, you said you encountered the local indigenous people at the southernmost point of the Southern Continent? Are they followers of the Cross or believers in the Crescent Moon? Are they members of a powerful Kingdom, or loose tribes?"

"Indeed! Your Majesty, we landed and saw the villages of indigenous tribes. We captured a few prisoners, but their language was entirely different from the western tribes, we couldn't communicate at all. In their villages, I saw neither the Holy Relics of the Cross nor the evil symbols of the Crescent Moon, only some filthy witchcraft totems, all purified by the fire of the Lord!"

Dias pondered briefly, answered carefully. As for the sailors' actions in the village, there was no need to elaborate.

"The tribes there are very loose, with not many people in the villages. Their weapons are very primitive, living in thatched houses, wielding stone-made weapons, with very few ironwares... According to my estimate, there are no formidable indigenous Kingdoms. Just a hundred armored soldiers from the Kingdom could establish a sturdy outpost!"

At this, Dias clutched the Silver Cross on his chest, bowed again.

"Your Majesty, the stormy cape at the edge of the Southern Continent is utterly fierce. This time, the expedition fleet successfully passed through, truly was the Almighty's blessing! To thoroughly pave this route, the Kingdom must establish solid port outposts at both ends of the stormy cape to supply food and water and repair damaged ships. Otherwise, this route would be a nightmare for merchant fleets!..."

"Hmm... Dias, I trust your judgment."

Joao II's eyes sparkled, nodded. Then, he smiled confidently and said.

"However, this cape is a blessing from the Almighty! It ought not be called stormy cape, rather... Cape of Good Hope!"

"Cape of Good Hope? Praise the Almighty! Your Majesty, your spirit is a precious wealth for the Kingdom, which fills me with admiration, just as I admire the conqueror King Alfonso!"

"Haha! Dias, my Royal Steward, only you understand my ambition!"

Hearing such praise, Joao II laughed aloud, nodding with satisfaction. Here, King Alfonso refers to Afonso I, founder of the Kingdom of Portugal three hundred years ago. In Joao II's heart, he often took the great ancestor as an example.

The sovereign and his minister laughed heartily. After a moment, Joao II regained composure, seriously asked.

"Dias, what was the farthest position you reached in the South Latitude?"

Upon hearing this, Dias slightly recalled, remembering the measurement that night, the rotating Southern Cross in the sky, responded confidently.

"Your Majesty, I finally rested at a very wide rivermouth... the position should be between 33 degrees to 34 degrees South Latitude!"

"33 to 34 degrees South Latitude? So far away?!"

Upon hearing this, Joao II rubbed the armrest of the throne, pondered silently. After a while, he retrieved a creased letter from the pile on the desk. This letter was worn, even slightly yellowed. More astonishingly, there were a few lines of Arabic written on its surface,

"Dias, come, take a look at this letter! The exact position of the Elder John's country is inside!"

Chapter 1007: The End of the Year 1488, A Letter from the East, The Seris!

The gold candelabras, hanging on the four walls of the great hall, showcased the wealth of the Portuguese Royal Family. The candlelight flickered, illuminating the large oil painting of the Holy Mother, as if she had descended. The compassionate smile of the Holy Mother, with a human glow, gazed at the two people in the hall. This was the latest holy painting from the City-States of the Apennine Peninsula, completely breaking away from the traditional rigid and abstract holy icons, making the saints come to life!

Under the gaze of the Holy Mother, Dias bowed his head, carefully reading the precious letter in his hand. This letter took over half a year, traveling over eight thousand miles, to reach the court of Sintra, bringing valuable intelligence from the East.

"My respected Your Majesty, your loyal knight retainer, Pero da Covilha reports back... For the grace of the Lord and the glory of the kingdom, I am about to set off from Cairo to the most important holy land of the Crescent Moon, the place where the Holy Book first appeared... I have already learned many rumors about India and Seris from merchants coming and going, and there will be more detailed sea route information on the eastern coast..."

"Knight Pero da Covilha? It's him!"

Upon reading this, Dias's expression flickered, and he was thoughtful. He recalled a young face with Moorish features, both devout and fearless.

"Hmm. Young Pero is from the kingdom, a Beller, and once served the brother of the Duke of Medina Sidonia. A few years ago, he became my knight retainer, tending to my horses. Even though I have already knighted him, he still often regards himself as a retainer."

Saying this, Joao II smiled. It was young Pero's loyalty that made him choose the latter as the envoy and spy for the Kingdom of Portugal.

"Young Pero's ancestry has Moorish blood. His Arabic is proficient, and his appearance is also easily confused... Dias, two years ago, you sailed a sea ship from the Southern Continent around to the East, while young Pero went to Egypt and infiltrated Arab merchant caravans, seeking specific intelligence on India and Seris along the traditional Silk Road... Your discoveries are the kingdom's top secrets!"

Upon hearing this, Dias slowly nodded. He showed an expression of anticipation and continued to read on.

"...The Mamluk Generals of Egypt, along with the troops of the Ottomans, just concluded a years-long campaign in Adana, north of the Syrian province. Tens of thousands of Mamluk forces mobilized massively, defeating two Ottoman legions and capturing their legion commander. The Ottomans' ambition to expand into Syria has been temporarily repelled... As I write this letter, Cairo is celebrating the victory, distributing free bread..."

"However, the Egyptian generals are deeply conflicted, and internal fighting is frequent. This ancient land of Pharaohs seems to be filled with a sort of stale air... In contrast, the Sultan of the Ottomans is like lightning, with a daunting determination... Whew! There is no distinction of good or evil in the wars among the heathens, it is all a fight between demons, and among the two demons, I have more hope for the new one..."

Reading this, Dias furrowed his brow. Due to the fall of Constantinople, the citizens of the Lord generally both detest and fear the rapidly rising Ottomans. Meanwhile, the Mamluk Generals of the Southern Continent have long lost their aggressive spirit and no longer pose a threat to the Catholic World. In fact, the Kingdom of Portugal and the Mamluk Generals of Egypt even have secret trade dealings, and it is through such channels that this precious letter was transmitted back.

"...Your Majesty, during conversations with Egyptian merchants, I discovered the source of their spices and also heard more accurate information from the East. Their spices come from the southeast trade nodes of the Red Sea, connecting with the port city of Aden on the Southern Continent. There, one can find merchant ships traveling to and from India. And this heathen port city will be my next target!"

"The port city connecting the Southern Continent, Aden?"

Dias was slightly taken aback. He vaguely sensed some kind of premonition; it was the northernmost tip of the eastern side of the Southern Continent.

"...When I arrive in Aden, there are not only ships going to India but also ships heading to the eastern side of the Southern Continent. According to another merchant from Lower Egypt, from Aden all the way south, the entire eastern side of the Southern Continent is inhabited by tribes of the Black-skinned Tribe, who follow the Crescent Moon. And the fabled kingdom of King Solomon, the Gate of Alexander, and the Fountain of Youth, the land of Elder John, is surrounded by the Black-skinned Tribes of the Crescent Moon!"

"...Your Majesty, after my repeated calculations, the location of the land of Elder John is at the southernmost part of the Nile's upper reaches, west of Aden's port... somewhere between 15 degrees north latitude and the Equator!"

"Ah? Between 15 degrees north latitude and the Equator!"

Upon seeing this precise description, Dias was startled. He finally understood why the King inquired about the latitude of the voyage. It turned out, from the Cape of Good Hope eastward and northward, along the edge of the Southern Continent, one has to traverse as many as 40 degrees of latitude to find the land of Elder John!

"Dias, young Pero told me, the entire eastern side of the Southern Continent stretches for thousands of miles, all inhabited by the Black-skinned tribes who follow the Crescent Moon. There are many Crescent Moon merchant fleets there, especially caravans by the coastal Omanis. It is said that there is a Malik dynasty in the east of the Peninsula, near India!"

Upon saying this, Joao II's expression became solemn, and he spoke in a deep voice.

"These heathen merchant fleets control the spice trade of India. For the kingdom's merchant fleets to head north, they must defeat them!"

"The Omanis?..."

Dias nodded, pondering silently. The kingdom's explorer fleets had gone through great hardships, rounding the Southern Continent and heading north, only to end up clashing with the Crescent Moon heathen fleets!

"Therefore, the Kingdom must establish naval outposts along the Southern Continent, but should not be too aggressive. Do not advance too far before accumulating sufficient strength to attract the navy of heathens."

Joao II lowered his eyes and set a new maritime strategy. The route to East Africa is too distant, cut off by the storms of the Cape of Good Hope, and the enemy is too powerful. At this stage, it is still necessary to focus on consolidating the interests along the West African coast, building more fortresses and outposts, and controlling the coastal chiefdoms and gold mines."

Understanding the underlying meaning of the King's words, Dias felt a bit anxious. He earnestly spoke once more.

"Your Majesty! The route to India is just one step away! I am willing to lead the fleet and set sail again..."

Joao II extended his hand to stop the plea of the royal steward.

"Dias, do not rush. Continue reading. Young Pero will infiltrate the Omani fleet and follow them to India. Furthermore, he will record the latitudes and landmarks along the way, providing more accurate information for the Kingdom's future voyages."

"...Yes."

Dias pressed his lips tightly, once more looking at the tattered letter in his hand. For the navigators of the Kingdom of Portugal, the East had never felt so close.

"Your Majesty, I learned from an Indian sailor that the lands once conquered by Alexander the Great are now occupied by the Kingdom of the Crescent Moon! The Crescent Moon Religion has already penetrated the prosperous India. The Mongol Khan, who once defeated the Ottoman people and controlled Persia and the northwestern India, has been dead for years. His empire has also shattered and divided..." "And in Mesopotamia, the Turkmen's White Sheep Dynasty is also mired in division and civil strife. All the threats to the east of the Ottoman people have vanished, and there is no longer any counterbalance..."

Seeing this, Dias's expression became solemn. He secretly sighed and looked again to the end of the letter.

"Almighty's protection! Your Majesty, at the end of the letter, I have one last piece of good news! It is intelligence from the Seris, the silk country of the East!"

"Over fifty years ago, the Emperor of the Seris sent an extraordinarily large merchant fleet that reached the port of Aden! It is said that the fleet consisted of one or two hundred large Clark ships, with more than ten thousand sailors and soldiers, fully loaded with the East's valuable silk and porcelain, coming from the southernmost parts of the Indian continent... The immense wealth that fleet brought made the Omani merchant caravans remember it even half a century later!... "What! One or two hundred large Clark ships, more than ten thousand sailors and soldiers?"

Dias's face was full of shock. A moment later, he shook his head and laughed. Such a vast navy, even larger than the combined total of the Western European countries at that time, must surely be an exaggerated rumor! However, the silk and porcelain of the Seris...

Dias raised his head and looked at Joao II. In both their eyes, a deep longing sparkled! A light Byzantine silk short garment was worth two hundred Venetian ducat gold coins, almost a hundred times its own weight. And a real silk robe from the Seris, that value would drive the Kingdom's nobility mad!

"The Seris of the East... a silk-rich country flowing with wealth..."

Dias gingerly held the letter, as if he were holding the exquisite and costly silk of the Seris. He eagerly looked towards the letter's conclusion.

"Benevolent Almighty, shelter the Kingdom! Your Majesty, I am about to board the Omani merchant ship, head to the Crescent Moon Holy Land, then to the port of Aden, in search of the prosperous India and Seris!"

"I also purchased from the Omanis some paper of the Seris, it contains a thousand words poem composed of Seris characters, said to be learned by children for enlightenment. And the Kingdom's future, if it wishes to trade with the Seris, must learn their script... May the Almighty bless me, allowing me to return safely!"

"A thousand enlightenment characters? A poem of the Seris?"

Dias looked at the King, curious in his eyes. The Seris have been glimpsed in ancient epics, enduring for thousands of years. All that they are, seems shrouded in mystery, apart from the silk and porcelain that symbolize wealth, it seems they also possess an ancient and splendid civilization."

"Hmm. The characters of the Seris, as recorded by Ancient Roman scholars, are peculiar block-like scripts that resemble mystical drawings..."

Joao II nodded, offering a faint smile.

"I have already asked the court envoys of the Royal Family to study it well... The Kingdom's fleet continues its progress, and one day, we shall meet the Seris and obtain the true wealth of the East!"

Chapter 1008: The End of the Year 1488, Changing Situations in Europe, Seeking New Allies

The candlelight flickered, igniting the scent of whale oil, which lingered in the grand hall. In this era, the Portuguese colony of the Azores Islands had been established for over thirty years. Whaling activities also began to rely on the islands, becoming active in the surrounding seas. A steady stream of whale oil flowed from the sea into the court of Sintra.

"The spices of the East have a similar aroma, only stronger!... "

Joao II closed his eyes, taking in the rich amber fragrance. Even with the wealth of a Portuguese King, it was impossible to burn the tremendously expensive spices of the Catholic World as divine smoke, like the Mexica Alliance of the New Continent did. Just the thought of such a spectacle was quite distressing.

"The East... the East!..."

Dias looked towards the East, his eyes filled with intense desire.

For a moment, the palace was silent, and the two remained in quiet reflection for a long time. After a while, Joao II opened his eyes and said with a smile.

"Dias, India and Seris are still far away. But right in front of us now are the disputes of the Vatican and the Granada War of the Dual Kings!"

"Disputes of the Vatican?"

Hearing this, Dias was slightly taken aback. He had been away from the Kingdom of Portugal for two years and truly knew nothing about the current state of affairs at the Vatican.

"Yes. The current Pope, Innocent VIII, is showing his weakness quite clearly. The King of Naples, Ferdinand I, has already twice pressured Rome and intimidated the Pope..."

Saying this, Joao II's eyes shimmered, as if pondered something.

"Ah! King Ferdinand has twice pressured the Pope?"

Upon hearing this, Dias exclaimed in surprise. The King of Naples, Ferdinand I, and the King of Aragon, Ferdinand II, were both kings of the Aragon-Trastamara Dynasty. They shared the same name and were very close in bloodline, being cousins.

Ferdinand I was the King of Aragon-Naples, the legitimized illegitimate son of Afonso V. Upon Afonso V's death, the Kingdom of Aragon was inherited by his brother Juan II, while the Kingdom of Naples was inherited by his illegitimate son Ferdinand I. Then, ten years ago, Juan II passed away, and the Aragonian throne was passed on to his son Ferdinand II, who is Queen Isabella's husband, one of Spain's Dual Kings.

Simply put, King Ferdinand II of Aragon and King Ferdinand I of Naples both have weak claims to each other's throne. If the Kingdom of Naples falls into the hands of his rival Ferdinand II, it would be a true disaster for the Kingdom of Portugal!

"Indeed. Pope Innocent VIII, to maintain influence on the Apennine Peninsula and obtain more revenue, sought to forcibly levy taxes on the Kingdom of Naples. After the King of Naples refused, the Pope allied with King Charles VIII of France to send troops against Naples."

At this point, Joao II curled the corners of his mouth into a mischievous smile.

"However, just as the war between the Pope and Naples began, King Charles VIII of France became embroiled in the 'Mad War.' King Charles attacked the rebellious Duke of Brittany. Subsequently, Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I joined the war, supporting the rebels. King Henry VII of England also joined, supporting the rebels. Of course, Maximilian I did much, while Henry VII only deployed the navy, waving flags and cheering."

"This 'Mad War' lasted four full years and only ended two months ago. Duke Francis II of Brittany surrendered, signing an agreement to become a vassal to King Charles. This old fellow, afraid of Charles' annexation, wanted to marry his daughter to Maximilian I and even wrote to find me..."

Joao II paused, shaking his head. Then, with a complex expression, he sighed deeply.

"The Duchy of Brittany, with a population of over a million, is a grand duchy! With the northern countries of the Catholic world in turmoil, no one could respond to the Pope... Pope Innocent VIII was caught off guard. Thousands of troops from Naples approached Rome, and the Pope had no choice but to sue for peace and rescind the orders. After this incident, the prestige of the Vatican was severely diminished!..."

"After all, the Catholic World has long since changed. It is no longer the era four hundred years ago when Pope Urban II could command the kings of various countries at his will, and thousands of knights would swear to crusade!..."

Upon hearing this, Dias pursed his lips, feeling a mix of emotions. As a devout member of the Lord's people, he naturally had an inherent inclination towards the Vatican, which influenced all nations. After a long silence, he spoke softly.

"The current Pope lives lavishly and corruptly, has had many children, and there are even rumors of secret dealings with the Ottoman Sultan... His integrity and reputation are indeed inferior to his predecessor! Perhaps, the next Pope will be much better..."

"Haha!"

Hearing this, Joao II laughed heartily. He looked at his trusted Royal Steward and said with a smile.

"Dias, the next Pope, it's either going to be Bishop Julius II or Bishop Alexander VI. Both of them have numerous illegitimate children... How much better can they control the Holy See?..."

"Alas!"

Dias gritted his teeth and said no more. As the Royal Chamberlain, he knew many inside stories and also sensed the decay of the Vatican. The senior priests were habitually greedy, and all the bishops had wives and children, almost disregarding the Lord's commandments entirely!

"Perhaps the Catholic Church has reached a point where it needs to change!"

A bold idea flashed in Dias's mind. Moments later, he was startled by his own irreverence and repeatedly bowed his head in repentance.

Joao II did not repent. He pondered for a moment, looking southeast, his expression becoming grave.

"Dias, do you know? At this very moment, the Dual Kings of Spain are leading an army of sixty thousand in a Holy War in the South! They have made up their minds to completely conquer the Moors' Kingdom of Granada!"

"What! Sixty thousand troops?!"

Hearing this number, Dias was truly taken aback. If the Dual Kings of Spain could easily deploy an army of sixty thousand, then they could turn westward and flatten the Kingdom of Portugal...

"Yes, sixty thousand troops. Among them, 20,000 are knights and chamberlains from England, France, the Holy Roman Empire, and even various Scandinavian countries, participating in the southern Holy War. The remaining 40,000 soldiers come from Castile and Aragon. About 10,000 are cavalry, and 30,000 are infantry, all of them regular troops or elite militia."

"Oh, the Kingdoms of Castile and Aragon have also organized a musketeer and artillery regiment with over a thousand people. In Seville and Cordova, there are kingdom arsenal factories producing gunpowder. Last summer, when Ferdinand II attacked Malaga City, he mobilized dozens of large-caliber cannons to bombard the Moors' castle clusters. And Malaga City, with its five thousand soldiers and fifteen thousand inhabitants, was forced to surrender after only holding out for just over three months!"

"What! Under the bombardment of cannons, the rugged Malaga City only held out for three months?!"

Upon hearing this, Dias's expression was shaken. He knew the fortitude of Malaga City, a Moorish stronghold that had been difficult to conquer in the Reconquista over the past few centuries. And now, under the bombardment of heavy cannons... The Royal Chamberlain keenly sensed that the nature of warfare in Europe had undergone a tremendous transformation, and the Dual Kings of Spain were leading all Catholic Kingdoms!

"Your Majesty, with the fall of Malaga City, the connection between the Moors and the Southern Continent has been completely severed. And without the support of the Moorish nobility of the Southern Continent, the Moors besieged in Granada won't be able to hold out for much longer!"

Hearing this, Joao II lowered his eyes and clenched his hands silently. He naturally knew the Moors' inevitable defeat, and Granada would fall into the hands of the Dual Kings. However, as a Catholic king, he did not have the appropriate pretext to participate in this devout Holy War.

"Ah! The failure in the Castilian throne succession struggle is the biggest mistake the Kingdom of Portugal has made in the past two centuries!"

Joao II gritted his teeth, a vague pain in his heart. Unwillingness and desire burned within him, difficult to extinguish.

In this era, the population of the Kingdom of Portugal was around two million. The population of the Kingdom of Castile was about twice that, between four and five million. As for the Kingdom of Aragon, it also had a population of around two million.

All along, although the Kingdom of Castile had a large population, it also had many powerful duchies, so the degree of centralization was weaker than that of the Kingdom of Portugal. The kingdom's army

mobilized by the Kingdom of Castile did not have an absolute advantage. Therefore, the three Catholic kingdoms on the Iberian Peninsula maintained a certain balance of power.

But at this moment, the unification of the Dual Kings of Spain now possessed a population of six to seven million! With mutual support, the royal power was greatly strengthened, suppressing the great nobility of both countries, obtaining more taxes and conscription. The Holy War in the Kingdom of Granada proceeded smoothly, and the Dual Kings' prestige continued to rise! If they managed to consume the one million plus Moors of Granada, exploit them heavily with taxes and conscription...

"Your Majesty! The proximate Dual Kings of Spain are the greatest threat to our kingdom!"

Dias contemplated for a moment and spoke with resolute determination. He stepped forward, knelt on one knee in salute, his eyes showing urgency.

"With the Moors' downfall imminent, the Dual Kings will set their sights back on our kingdom, plotting the unification of the Iberian Peninsula! The Vatican's prestige is waning and may no longer support our kingdom. And the English are utterly unreliable! We must divert the Dual Kings' attention and find new allies..."

At this, Dias's face showed a struggle, biting his lip. Loyalty and piety wrestled within his heart, unable to settle the conflict. After a pause, he spoke softly.

"No matter if these new allies are heathens..."

Joao II's eyes instantly flashed with brilliance. He lowered his eyes, saying nothing, merely bowing his head in prayer. The rich amber fragrance spread through the great hall of the Royal Palace, like elusive divine smoke drifting into the distance.

Chapter 1009: The Starting Point of the Year 1489, Despair, Columbus!

Leader "Stray Cat on the Windowsill"

In January 1489, in the outskirts of Lisbon. The noisy celebration sounds gradually fade away from this commoner community. In the morning and evening cooking smoke, the aroma of roasted whale meat can no longer be smelled. Although whale meat in this era is cheaper than lamb, it is still not something ordinary commoners can consume for long. The Christmas Day celebration, along with the New Year, has moved away, and the suburb commoners' busyness has started once again.

Thanks to the expansion of the Southern Continent, the Kingdom of Portugal is becoming increasingly prosperous. The wealth brought by the great voyages, although mostly flowed into the hands of nobility and merchants, the small amount that trickled out still made it easier for the commoners in the Capital City to find a job and not struggle on the brink of poverty.

Life in the Middle Ages was tough, especially for farmers controlled by their Lords. Poor smallholder farmers and tenant farmers not only had to pay land rent but also head tax, family tax, mill tax, and undertake heavy labor. Oh, and there's also the essential church tithe related to the soul's salvation.

In the Catholic World, apart from the highly autonomous and martial Swiss mountain folk, most Western European farmers have struggled for hundreds of years under the dual oppression of the Lords and the Church. However, no matter how difficult life was, all farmer revolts were obliterated under the martial suppression of the knights. The bright Middle Ages belonged to Priests, nobility, and knights, and now it also starts to belong to merchants, though it has nothing to do with the farmers who make up ninety percent of the population.

Of course, the life of the Portuguese commoners, although worse than Italian City-State citizens, is still better than the destitution of French and English farmers. Among all farmers, the German farmers, who were particularly attended to by the Priests, were placed at the very bottom of Purgatory.

Thirteen years ago, the previous Pope Sixtus IV formally conveyed the newest will of the Almighty to the Catholic World: the living must seek absolution from Priests for their deceased friends and relatives still in Purgatory, to ascend to Heaven sooner. The way to seek absolution is by purchasing an Absolution Coupon. The promulgation of this church decree not only put German farmers in Purgatory but also caused their deceased relatives, who struggled hard to be freed, to fall back into Purgatory.

Under the pretense of buying Absolution Coupons, taxes from the German Lords immediately increased. The demands of Church Priests became increasingly greedy, making it unbearable even for citizens of the free City-State of Shenluo.

At this moment, the German literary scholar Johann Tetzel has abandoned his studies to follow the Lord, joining the Dominicans and becoming an honorable monk of the Lord. The theological monk Tetzel is about to start his journey of promotion, selling Absolution Coupons from Shenluo to Poland, and back to his hometown Shenluo, collecting funds for the Church. Ultimately, he will utter the famous line that has been passed down for thousands of years, completely overturning the foundation of Catholic doctrine salvation and preparing the most abundant fuel for the religious reform blaze!

"When you donate Silver Coin for a soul in Purgatory, and it goes 'ding' in the donation box, it emerges from Purgatory!"

Likewise, at this time, in an elementary school in Mansfeld, Saxony in Shenluo, a six-year-old child is for the first time flipping through a Latin Bible. He widens his clear eyes and reads it with difficulty.

"1.in principio creavit Deus caelum et terram. (1. In the beginning, God created Heaven and Earth) 2. terra autem erat inanis et vacua et tenebrae super faciem abyssi et spiritus Dei ferebatur super aquas. (2. The Earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God hovered over the waters)..."

The child reads while pondering. His young mind cannot comprehend these sentences. He is merely reciting the enlightenment of the Almighty instinctively with his young, pure heart. His name is simply Martin Luther.

Evening descends with the sea breeze, and fishermen return from the sea. Low prayers resonate in the wooden stone church, spreading across the outskirts of Lisbon. A simple house stands in the commoner community. Inside, the space is modest, with a wick grass candle burning on an old wooden table, bringing precious light.

A faint light flickered in the room. A middle-aged man in his thirties bowed his head, holding a quill at the wooden table, writing briskly. His eagle nose and long face, prominent cheekbones, and blue eyes gleamed as if about to emit light. To his left lay Marco Polo's "The Travels of the East," and to his right was Ptolemy's "Geocentrism."

In front of him spreads out a huge "Toscanelli Map." The map marked a distinct red route, setting sail from Lisbon, Portugal, heading west around half the circumference of the Earth, leading to the enticing "Spice Islands," "India," and "Serica!"

"To the sacred, respected, pious, wise Goddess-like beautiful... Queen Isabella. The experienced, brave City-State navigator Columbus greets you!... According to my estimation, according to Marco Polo's travel records, according to the calculations of the great scholar Toscanelli, the Earth's circumference is..."

Pausing here, the experienced City-State navigator Columbus glanced at the "Toscanelli Map" on the table. This was the world map drawn by the late Florentine astronomer, Paulo dal Pozzo Toscanelli, emphasizing the location of "India" and "Serica," just to the west of Europe.

Fifteen years ago, Toscanelli had sent this map and a plan to sail west to reach the East to the Priest Fernao Martins of Lisbon Cathedral, who then forwarded it to the Portuguese King Afonso V. Afonso V handed the map to court scholars for review, but only to receive a reply from experienced maritime astronomers that said "completely wrong calculation."

Following this, the navigator Columbus, who also hailed from Italian City States, learned about this map and wrote to Toscanelli to request it. He received Toscanelli's reply with immense joy, treating the map as a treasure and giving birth to a new navigation plan. And the son of the commercial city-state's wool weaver was far more persistent than astronomer Toscanelli. He clung to this plan for ten years. Now...

"...The Earth's circumference should be 12,000 kilometers! And the length of the Eurasia should be 8,000 kilometers..."

Columbus confidently and wisely wrote. He pursed his lips tightly, dipped cheap blue ink, and carefully wrote down the calculation formulas in the letter... After a section of perfect calculation, there was his groundbreaking conclusion.

"In that case, as long as we set sail from the port of Palos on the southwestern coast and head west for 4000 kilometers, we can reach the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, where lies the land of wealth flowing with abundance, the spice-laden India, and the silk-rich Seris!... India and Serica, just 4000 kilometers overseas!"

Columbus lowered his head, his eyes full of hopeful light. The flickering candle on his table glimmered like the brilliant stars outside the window, shining with limitless possibilities. However, just as he was full of hope, writing diligently...

"Bang!"

A violent crashing sound suddenly came from in front of the wooden door of the small cabin. In just two or three breaths, the wooden door was burst open, and even the simple wooden lock was broken with a single blow!

"Vaffanculo!"

Columbus cursed angrily. He looked up, and his heart trembled at once. Two Slavic brutes holding big axes stood like stone pillars by the small cabin's door. A skinny Jewish merchant with a small hat on his head looked at him with a half-smile.

"It's you! Eliyahu..."

Seeing the creditor, the anger on Columbus' face was immediately replaced by unease. He reached out his right hand, feeling for the sailor's dagger in the corner, and asked in a low voice.

"How... how did you find this place?"

"Hah! Columbus, with your big mouth, how difficult could it be to find you?"

Eliyahu's expression was leisurely, and he smiled lightly. He squinted at Columbus' outstretched right hand and unhesitatingly ordered.

"Go! Grab him!"

The two Slavic brutes immediately took action, striding forward. In the cramped cabin, there was no room to maneuver. Columbus had just reached for the dagger's hilt when a heavy big axe came straight at him!

"Bang!"

The Slav henchman turned the axe handle, easily knocking Columbus to the ground. Blue ink spilled instantly, completely staining the letter intended for the Queen. In just three or four breaths, the seasoned and brave City-State captain was firmly pinned to the ground, his face pressed against the dirt, even his mouth in the mud.

"Merda! Mmm... mmm! Eliyahu, you demon who deserves to burn in the Hell of Fire!... Your soul is destined to struggle in the blazing flames..."

"Ha! Columbus, the fleet of the Kingdom of Portugal has already returned from the Southern Continent. This time, they have rounded the edge of Africa and truly found the route to India!"

Eliyahu spoke leisurely. His face carried a smile, but his light blue eyes were mercilessly cold.

"The Kingdom of Portugal has mastered the new trade routes! As for your navigation plan, heh heh..."

Saying this, Eliyahu squatted down, reached out his hand, and gently patted Columbus on the face.

"I think it's time, once again to discuss your debt problem with you. As your old friend over these years, I'm quite interested in sending your soul... underground... ha ha!"

Chapter 1010: The Starting Point in 1489 AD, Columbus's Choice

The cold January wind blew through the broken gate, sending chills down everyone's spine. The surrounding commoners, hearing the commotion, extinguished their lights and bolted their doors and windows. No one dared to show their face or ask any questions. The lonely starlight shone on the simple houses in the suburbs, as if at the end of the world.

"Ooh, ooh! Damn demon! Help! Sheriff, help!..."

"Columbus, stop shouting. The agreement you signed with your own hand means even if you call the sheriff, you still have to pay back the money! The merciful Almighty won't allow any injustice!"

The Jewish merchant Eliyahu smiled as he pulled a parchment ledger from his thick linen robe. Then he opened the ledger, flipping from the last blank page forward. Soon, Eliyahu found the most recent records, pausing when he saw the transactions of spices, ivory, and gold ornaments, nodding in satisfaction, indifferent to the cries beneath him.

"Haha, goods from the Southern Continent! This price, just by transporting them to Venice and finding the City-State's noble councilors, means double the profit! And if you can connect with the lavish bishops of Rome, that's triple the profit!..."

Eliyahu reminisced for a moment, his eyes filled with mirth. In this deal, he used a manor mortgaged by a declining noble and a newly wealthy captain returning from a voyage to make a profitable transaction, essentially earning double. And such business could continue as long as the voyages did!

"Tsk tsk, the Moors of the Peninsula are about done. Their orchard farms will all fall into the hands of the Crusader knights of the South. Haha, knights who don't understand arithmetic are the best to do business with!... However, these knights of Castile and Aragon are too fanatic; I need to find a local merchant to act on my behalf to acquire these spoils of war. The profits in there are substantial!"

"...Right! After the Holy War ends, a large batch of Crusader knights will be dismissed and will no longer receive salaries from the Kingdom. They have no Moors to loot, and many are already deep in debt from purchasing weapons, plate armor, and warhorses... At that time, there will be another wave of mortgaged manors and estates. However, collecting debts from these deadly knights will be quite troublesome. I can only rely on... the priests of the inquisition!"

Flipping through the ledger, in just a few breaths, two more money-making ideas emerged in Eliyahu's mind. For him, making money was an innate skill, and the best ways to earn it came from the commoners of the towns and the mid-tier, low-ranking knights.

Over the decades, the Vatican had become increasingly corrupt, tightening its ties with various Jewish trading groups. When the bishops of the Holy See needed money, they would turn to these trading groups. In return for funding, the powerful priests at all levels provided other conveniences. In the end, if it weren't for the vast influence of the Church backing the Jewish lending groups, they would have been torn apart by the nobility long ago. In fact, these trading groups themselves served as the white gloves of high-ranking priests and the Great Nobility of City-States.

The current Pope Innocent VIII lived in extreme luxury, with more than a dozen illegitimate children to support. He was often short of money, even secretly pawning the papal tiara and treasures of the Holy See to Jewish merchants in Rome. Of course, this information must not be leaked, or it would be a dead-end road!

Thinking of this, Eliyahu shivered, preferring not to know such deadly secrets.

"Compared to us who lend money and help the commoners, it is the corrupt Vatican that should truly go to the Hell of Fire!..."

A moment later, Eliyahu finally found Columbus's loan record. Smiling, he read it to the captain, who was pressed to the ground with his face against the dirt.

"Columbus, eleven years ago, you borrowed 20 Ducat gold coins, deducting a 25% advance fee, with an annual interest rate of 48%. Five years ago, we settled an account, accumulating the interest into the principal, totaling 210 Ducat gold coins, 3 Grosso Silver Coins, and 16.5 Denarius copper coins. Then, unable to repay, you signed a new loan agreement, agreeing to a loan amount of 211 Ducats, and consenting that in case of default, the annual interest rate would increase by half."

With these words, Eliyahu fumbled for a moment, pulling out a fully documented loan agreement. He flashed a devilish smile, waving the paper around like a death warrant before putting it away. Then, coldly and without emotion, he continued.

"A loan of 211 Ducats, with an annual interest rate of 60%. With five years of interest accumulating into the principal, it amounts to..."

Eliyahu reached out, picked up the paper and pen on the table, and casually calculated on Columbus's letter. 211 multiplied by 1.6 five times results in a daunting...

"2212 Ducat gold coins, 9 Grosso Silver Coins, 21.8 Denarius copper coins."

Eliyahu pronounced the sum with a mocking smile. He looked at Columbus, whose face turned pale in an instant, as if looking at a dead man.

"2000 Ducat gold coins?"

Columbus mumbled the terrifying number in despair. At that moment, it felt as if a heavy mountain lay on his back, or an endless abyss opened beneath his feet.

"...Eliyahu, you... you demon!"

Eliyahu remained indifferent. He gazed at the wooden table, glanced at the two old books, and then the unfolded map, not paying them any mind. His attention then fell upon the beer pitcher under the table, the small basket of bread in the corner, and the paper and ink for writing.

"Huh? Columbus, it seems like you've got some money?"

The Jewish merchant paused slightly before reaching out to pick up a delicate letter, made of fine parchment.

"...To the revered King of Castile-Leon, the holy, great, and generous Queen Isabella, commands the Castile Navigational Committee to grant Your Excellency a reward allowance... 14,000 maravedis (maravedis)..."

Upon reading this, Eliyahu's expression shifted.

Venation Ducat gold coin is roughly 400 Castile Maravedi copper coins, and 14,000 maravedis are 35 Ducats. This is roughly equivalent to the annual income of an experienced sailor or a trading group assistant. It's not a lot, but also not too little, enough for a living.

Thinking of this, Eliyahu extended his hand to pick up the letter drenched in ink.

"To the holy, esteemed, devout, wise, goddess-like beautiful... Queen Isabella?..."

Seeing this, Columbus struggled on the ground with all his might, like a fish flapping after being pulled ashore. That was his hard-won hope!

"Ah! Damn, you maggot crawling out of the Hell of Fire! Don't rummage around!..."

"Hit his mouth!"

"Smack! Smack! Smack!"

The Slav attendant reached out his large hand, delivering three slaps, leaving Columbus dazed and unable to make another sound.

"What is this?"

Eliyahu held the letter, looking at the bruised and battered Columbus.

"Don't lie. You only get one chance."

"... That is the reply for Queen Isabella of Castile. The Castile Maritime Committee just sent some money..."

"Oh?"

Hearing this, Eliyahu's eyes lit up. He smiled and gestured to his Slavic follower to help Columbus up from the ground.

"Columbus, since you have money, we can talk properly again. Hand it over! You may not be able to pay the principal, but you should have enough for the interest of these dozens of gold coins, right?"

"... You!..."

Columbus trembled all over, looking at the amiable smiling Eliyahu. After a long moment, he bent down and fished out a jingling cloth bag from the linen lining of his leather coat.

"Hmm?"

Eliyahu took the cloth bag, weighed it in his hand, and frowned. He opened it and counted for a while, his expression turning cold.

"So little? Only twenty ducats!"

"... The Castile Maritime Committee sent 13,000 Maravedi coins. I used a portion, and this is all that's left."

As for the 14,000 coins designated by the Queen, why only 13,000 were sent? No doubt, the fire tax and handling deductions exist both in the East and West.

"Columbus, this little money is not enough!"

Eliyahu shook his head. He smiled and said.

"I've heard from other sailors that you boasted last year about getting a young unmarried Castilian girl pregnant, and she bore you a son right in Cordova (Córdoba)... In the Sultan's court in the East, there is always a need for obedient boys..."

"Ah! No, don't! I beg you, Eliyahu... For the sake of all these years we've known each other, give me more time!"

Hearing about his newborn son, Columbus suddenly became weak. The Sultan's courts do not lack boys, but lack eunuchs from the Catholic World. Since the castration process violates Crescent Moon doctrine, it was always done by Jews. Thus, Jewish merchants indeed have ties in the Sultan's court.

"This, what Queen Isabella gave, is an annuity! I can receive it every year, and I can pay... thirty gold coins of interest every year."

"Annuity?"

Hearing this, Eliyahu was a bit surprised.

"Why? The Queen gave you an annuity, yet it's so little? Your proposal for western navigation, wasn't it always considered by the Castile Maritime Committee and never approved?"

"..."

Columbus pressed his lips tight and was silent for a moment. After receiving the Queen's annuity, he was ecstatic for days and thought about this issue. Though reluctant to admit it, he was forced to respond.

"The Queen's annuity is due to Portugal's successful voyage... Two years ago, Diogo's fleet brought back tokens from Prester John's realm. This news has already spread among the seasoned captains and sailors! The Queen shows great interest in maritime exploration. She generously grants an annuity to every captain who submitted a proposal to the maritime committee..."

At this, Columbus paused slightly, his expression turning fervent. He excitedly shouted.

"But only I, only I am correct! Sailing westward will definitely lead to spice-rich India, and certainly to the heavenly prosperous Seris! I have compiled books, with Marco Polo's travel routes and Ptolemy's map of the earth!..."

"Mr. Christopher, I'm not interested in all that. I'm only interested in gold coins."

Eliyahu gave a faint smile, reaching out to weigh the jingling cloth bag again. Twenty Ducat gold coins, though a bit less, exceeded his expectations. Moreover, he could collect many times.

"Columbus, this is just the interest. I will come for you again when your annuity arrives. You'd better gather more money... or else..."

The Jewish merchant shook his head, adjusted his black round hat with his hand, then turned around, swaggered away with his two Slavic followers.

The cold wind of January blew through the humble hut. The broken wooden door constantly creaked and swayed. Winter's snow and icy wind pierced through Columbus's chest, sending a chill through his entire body.

Columbus touched his swollen, beaten cheeks, sat on the ground, and stared at the empty doorway, filled with grief and anger. After a while, he gritted his teeth, his heart hardened.

"Damn it... can't stay any longer! There's no hope in the Portuguese Court! The only one that might accept my navigation plan is..."

With this thought, the experienced, brave middle-aged captain suddenly stood up, looking eastward. The Royal Palace of Madrid lay just thirteen hundred miles away!