

Civilization 1031

Chapter 1031: Siege Mortar Cannon, the Unbreakable Divine Artifact!

"The Chief Divine bestows upon us a Divine Artifact, unyielding and indestructible!... The cannon burst... it burst..."

A flock of crows flew across the high sky, leaving behind a cacophony of "caw caw." Xiulote sat under the tent top of the large tent, clutching the letter from the Master Caster, his face changing from pale to flushed. After a moment, he calmed his emotions, took a deep breath, and patiently read on.

"Your Majesty, more than two years ago, you mentioned many fragmented, chaotic, and unclear Divine Revelations, and you spoke of a short mortar cannon specifically for sieges..."

"Fragmented, chaotic, and unclear," upon seeing such a candid critique, Xiulote raised an eyebrow and tightened his grip.

However, this was indeed the truth. Many times, the so-called "Divine Revelation" was just him suggesting a seemingly correct technical direction and describing the shape of a creation. As for how to achieve it concretely and the technical details, those were left for the professional Craftsman Masters to explore and overcome gradually.

And during this process, the progress of the Craftsman Masters is quite evident. Just like Tilipi, who has been exploring cannon casting for many years, accumulating a wealth of experience, and even researching and manufacturing mortars on his own.

"...You mentioned that the length of the cannon determines its range, the bore size determines its power, and the weight of the cannon influences its mobility... For heavy siege artillery, the larger the bore, the better, with range being a secondary consideration. Of course, the weight of a siege cannon can be increased as long as it can be transported, even if it's slower..."

"Following this idea, I designed a new siege mortar. It is about one and a half meters long, with a bore size between seven to eight inches, holding thirty pounds of stone balls, weighing over 800 pounds..."

At this point, Xiulote focused his thoughts, picked up his pen, and began calculating.

A bronze cannon one and a half meters in length, with a bore size between seven and eight inches, equivalent to 22-26 centimeters. A matching stone ball would be approximately a half-pound, 6-6.5 centimeters in diameter, with a volume of about 1000 cubic centimeters. Based on the standard density of stone, 2.8 grams per cubic centimeter, the weight of the ball indeed approximates thirty pounds. Converted into pounds, it equates to a hefty 33 pounds! And if it were a matching iron ball with 2-3 times the density, the power would be...

"Hmm, the iron balls widely used in Europe are still too extravagant for the current Alliance. On the contrary, the manpower to machine stone balls is abundant for the Alliance. After all, when the stone balls hit the city walls, the shattered fragments could cause shrapnel damage, more suitable for the current Alliance..."

After a brief pause for reflection, Xiulote began sketching the shape of the bronze cannon on the draft paper.

The density of bronze is about three times that of standard rock, approximately 8.4 grams per cubic centimeter. An 800-pound bronze cannon is approximately 50,000 cubic centimeters. Based on the formula for calculating a hollow cylinder, with an internal diameter of 12-13 centimeters and a length of 1.5 meters, then the external diameter would be...

"External diameter of 24-25 centimeters? A cannon with a wall thickness of 6 centimeters?"

Upon reaching this point in the calculations, Xiulote's face showed surprise. Such a short, stout cannon is practically...

"...just a lump of bronze! This... the Kingdom's cannon casting technology still has significant room for improvement! Phew... with the current technology, making it as mighty and powerful as possible is the only option."

Xiulote held the pen, staring at the bronze cannon he had drawn, and after a while, he marked an "X" underneath. Then, he once again looked at the letter.

"Your Majesty, the casting of this short and broad cannon is considerably easier than that of long barrels. While the Cannon Casting Bureau took one or two years to produce the first one, with this

template, they can manufacture three... no, five this year! ...Please watch and see, I, Tilipi, will exhaust my own life to death and that of my apprentices, to create enough siege artillery for you!"

The candid Master Caster left a declaration, making uncertain promises. Then, with a half-excited, half-anxious tone, he described the cannon testing details.

"During our fire trial, we used five pounds of gunpowder, launching at a forty-five-degree angle as instructed by His Majesty. The thirty-pound stone ball's range was nearly a hundred paces, creating a half-meter deep pit in the soil where it landed... During the second trial, we added ten pounds of gunpowder, reaching over two hundred paces, knocking down several big trees in the woods! Your Majesty, such range could enough to roll the city walls without worrying about the crossbows on the walls!"

Upon reading this, Xiulote's eyes flashed. Based on the parabolic formula, the range of a cannonball is related to the square of its initial velocity and is affected by air resistance. The kinetic energy provided by ten pounds of gunpowder approximately doubles that of five pounds... no, considering the possibility of incomplete combustion, it should be less than double. And since kinetic energy is proportional to the square of initial velocity, which is also proportional to range, factoring in air resistance, if five pounds of gunpowder offer less than a hundred paces' range, then ten pounds of gunpowder certainly will not exceed two hundred paces... Tilipi, my Master Caster, you're boasting again!... Moreover, such a range is slightly short, even for a mortar. Air-tightness during firing needs improvement..."

Xiulote picked up the pen, ready to pen a reprimand in reply. But after contemplating for a moment, he put down the pen without writing any words of criticism.

The last part of the letter contained details of the cannon bursting, described in only a few brief sentences.

"God bless us! The power of this mortar cannon is akin to the Divine's Thunderbolt, capable of shattering wood and stone, even walls cannot withstand! ...The Craftsman from the Cannon Casting Bureau and Gunpowder Bureau were all excited and unanimously decided to test the cannon's range limits. Director Talaya also nodded in agreement, providing the new type of gunpowder..."

"Nonetheless, I underestimated the power of the new gunpowder and added a full fifteen pounds... this resulted in the cannon bursting, and two gunners died. I have already compensated their families... Most high His Majesty, I beseech your mercy, forgive my ignorant error!..."

Upon reading this, Xiulote lowered his eyes slightly. Although Tilipi's mishap resulted in a cannon burst and casualties, such an outstanding Master Caster still deserves generous encouragement and rewards. Of course, this has to wait until the new mortar arrives at the front and demonstrates its castle-destroying, nation-destroying power!

"Your Majesty, by the time this letter reaches you, the new batch of mortar molds should have dried. This time, I'll thicken the cannon's walls again and increase its weight to a thousand pounds, wrapping the exterior with a copper hoop! With this reinforcement, this siege artillery will surely launch heavier stone balls, load more gunpowder, and hit farther distances. They are Divine Artifacts bestowed by the Chief Divine, an indestructible revelation!..."

"Hmm? A thousand-pound mortar..."

Xiulote lifted his pen once again, and after a brief calculation, adding 200 pounds, the cannon's wall thickness increased by another centimeter, further enhancing its sturdiness.

"Ha! Tilipi, my Master Caster, you are on the path of making it mighty and dumb; there's no turning back now..."

Xiulote chuckled quietly to himself. Then, he began calculating again, with a 45-degree projectile trajectory, the projectile height is about half its range. If it can fire a 33-pound stone ball over a hundred steps far, onto a little hill a hundred steps high ahead, then the daunting and hard-to-conquer White Snake Hill City in front...

"Phew! If there truly is such heavy artillery... all nations and cities of the world, before the Kingdom's army, will be as defenseless as a girl, without any power to repel!"

Xiulote's expression turned intense as he put down the letter. He rose to his feet, exited the large tent, climbed the watchtower in the camp, gazing into the northeast sky. There stood a solid hill city like a turtle awaiting the knife, recoiling tightly within its shell. At this moment, a group of Warriors of the Kingdom was escorting two genuinely fragile young girls, slowly entering the camp.

Chapter 1032: Daughters of the Silver Raven Tribe

The February long wind blew across the highlands, unlike the warm coastal lowlands, it carried a hint of chill. The young King sat solemnly on the throne within the grand tent. He surveyed the two submissive, downcast Vastec girls before him with scrutinizing eyes.

The two girls resembled each other closely, clearly sisters, so similar at first glance that they were easily confused. The one on the left was slightly older, her figure more pronounced, her lips lifting slightly in a smile, as alluring as a white orchid in summer. The one on the right appeared somewhat younger, her lips pressed tightly together, looking uneasy, as pristine as a daisy in early autumn.

At this moment, faced with the fearsome reputation of the Great Chief of the God of Death, the two girls pressed their shoulders together, their expressions tense yet carrying an indescribable expectation.

"Hmm? Are you the daughters of Chief Papata of the Silver Raven Tribe, Liuyu and Liuyao?"

Xiulote observed for a while, then asked in a calm tone the sisters who nodded like little deer.

"Where is the noble lady of the Silver Raven Tribe, betrothed to His Highness Little Quetelawak, now?"

"Honorable Great Chief of the God of Death, my sister Liulin is already being escorted by more than a dozen warriors from the tribe, headed to the magnificent Lake Capital City by another route."

Liuyu, the elder sister, raised her head and cautiously glanced at the Great Chief of the God of Death above. He did not seem particularly fierce, nor especially robust, yet carried an aura of inherent authority. She pinched the feathers of her short skirt, gathered her courage, and spoke loudly.

"Great Chief, our father respects the Alliance, admires your bravery and renown! He sent my sister and me here to express the tribe's respect for you, to stay by your side, dance and sing for joy, attend to your needs closely... We wish to give you strong warriors and beautiful daughters together!"

"...Cough."

Hearing these candid words, Xiulote's eyelids twitched, he lightly coughed, looking at them with slightly more attention.

The sisters before him were only eighteen or nineteen years old, just at the age of youthful beauty. They came from the warm lowland Crow City, wearing only light short clothing and feathered grass skirts. From their slender arms and calves, and their graceful, upright posture when standing, it was evident they had been trained in dance from a young age. A circle of shiny shells was tied around their ankles, ringing like crisp waves as they walked. On their toes was a faint purple color, from the juice of seaside mollusks, akin to Carthaginian purple dye.

"Cough! Someone, bring them priest apprentice robes and change them into cloth shoes. The weather on the highlands is unlike the lowlands, don't go barefoot all the time..."

Xiulote waved them off, shifting his gaze away. Then he lowered his head slightly, pondering Papata's intentions and the coastal Silver Raven Tribe.

Undoubtedly, Chief Papata of the Silver Raven was showing goodwill to the Kingdom, expressing extremely sincere intentions. However, this sincerity was somewhat sudden, and also overly "earnest."

"Papata's actions were surely a reaction after seeing the Kingdom's fleet. But to directly send two daughters to serve is too... decisive. According to tribal traditions, when a leader sends a daughter, it signifies an alliance or submission. And an alliance with the Silver Raven Tribe, which has tens of thousands of people, occupies a key coastal town, and controls the Rivermouth of the cat owl..."

Thinking of this, Xiulote raised his eyebrows. The Kingdom was in the west, the Silver Raven Tribe in the east, with no direct conflict of interest between them, and this unequal alliance posed no disadvantage for the Kingdom. If Bertade led his troops eastward, he would need a reliable coastal shipbuilding base and a departure port for Cuba, and the location of Crow City was just right.

Of course, there are no benefits in the world without reason, nor beauties sent for no purpose... Thinking of this, Xiulote looked at the two again, his expression serious, asking in a deep voice.

"Clan Leader Papata of the Silver Raven, always respectful to the Alliance, has converted to the Supreme Main God! In my opinion, his loyalty and piety are exemplary for all the Alliance's vassal tribes!... Liuyu, Liuyao, did you bring any other messages on this visit?"

"Yes! Powerful Great Chief of the God of Death, Father says he has always admired your bravery! He is willing, like a reef shark in the great sea, to follow the strongest head shark roaming the vast coast! He wishes to join your hunting army, to hunt sea fish for you, to discover the Holy Land in the sea together, and will not ask for any food he cannot consume..."

The white orchid, Liuyu, was the first to speak. Her voice was clear and lively, like a lark. Then, she quietly stretched out her hand and tugged at Liuyao's grass skirt.

"Ah! Strong... Great Chief... Father says he wants you to manage the lower reaches of the Rivermouth of the cat owl, and lead the southern Mistec tribes to thoroughly convert to the Chief God! The Mistec tribes in the north are plundered by the Canine Descendants, and in the south oppressed by the Telascallan and Tototanak people. And the Alliance, having destroyed the Telascallan tribes, also has the strength to destroy the Tototanak people..."

The daisy, Liuyao, lowered her head, reciting Chief Papata's message as if she were reciting a book. Though somewhat nervous at first, as she spoke, her eyes shone brightly, her words became clear and coherent, and she spoke fluently.

"Great Chief, Father says the King is an unprecedented divine bird, shining fiercely upon the world like the lowland sun! The great army of the Alliance attacks everywhere, invincible like the tides of the sea, unstoppable. The only constraints on the Alliance are the long distances and rugged terrain."

"Wise people do not oppose the tides. Thus, the Silver Raven Tribe longs to enter the Alliance, to become feathers of the divine bird, accompanying it in high flight. And our tribe is not strong enough, lacks the qualifications to directly become the feathers of the divine bird's neck... Great Chief, you are the strongest wings of the divine bird, possessing large ships able to sail the sea. In the future, you will become a divine bird too! Therefore, we wish to follow you, to be your brightest long feathers in the East!"

After speaking, the sisters exchanged a glance, each plucking a red feather from their skirts. Then they bit the feathers in their mouths, holding hands, stepping lightly, coming before Xiulote. Under the watchful eyes of Ecatl, the two girls gracefully prostrated themselves, lifting their heads, biting the red feathers, revealing wheat-colored necks and heaving chests. They gazed expectantly at the young King seated above, their voices tender and melodious, subtly laced with anticipation.

"Mighty (Strong) Great Chief, we wish to offer you our first feathers together!"

"Hmm?"

Xiulote held the Bronze Axe in one hand and grasped the Divine Staff in the other, looking at the two with some suspicion. Watching their actions, he was slightly perplexed until his eyes fell on the blood-like red feathers, and he suddenly realized.

"..."

The young King was silent for a moment before formally responding.

"The Kingdom of the Lake is willing to ally with the Silver Raven Tribe. This alliance is not to be inscribed in drawings or writings, but witnessed by the Chief God! Papata's expansion, I will support. Fifty sets of bronze armor, one hundred fine longbows, and two hundred bronze battle axes are my gifts to him, the testament of our alliance!"

"As for you two... the maids by my side will be involved in drafting the Kingdom Documents, need to know how to read, understand arithmetic..."

Hearing this, Liuyu and Liuyao exchanged surprised glances. A strange and ominous premonition rose in their hearts, seeming to foreshadow future hardships.

"Therefore..."

Xiulote's mouth curved up slightly, as he spoke slowly, assigning the youthful and lovely sisters the most suitable and beneficial task for their well-being.

"You must first go to the Divine Power University in the Capital City... to learn languages, classics, mathematics, rituals, and Divine Revelation knowledge. I hear you are excellent in singing and dancing, so you don't need to learn music and arts... Well, in total, it will be a four-year course!"

Chapter 1033: Asphalt, the Grand Plan for Road Construction!

The military camp extended endlessly, and the sound of the Legion Warriors' training was soul-stirring, with the dirt of the training grounds trampled firm. The patrolling squads that came and went trod out navigable dirt roads. Meanwhile, the resilient weeds of early spring began to sprout along the paths walked by people.

The daughters of the Silver Raven Tribe were arranged to rest in Tree Snake City. They had never seen tens of thousands of Samurai, nor had they seen such a forest of Long Spears and Longbows, and for a moment, they were all shocked and fearful.

Only after the envoy of the Vastek people had left, did another envoy from the exploration fleet arrive, bringing a message from the fleet and two bamboo baskets containing earthen jars.

"Your Majesty, these are two new minerals discovered by Deputy Captain Puap in the vicinity of Crow City! The local Vastek people call them 'Black Mud,' 'Black Stone,' or 'Black Oil.' The Kingdom Fleet's damaged ships were patched using these black stones and oil. They are waterproof and leakproof, and the repaired ships are even better than before!"

After Puap was exiled to the sea, it was together with Black Wolf that he discovered the Divine Mountain iron ore, giving him a chance to be reinstated. Then, he participated in the Kingdom's exploration, bringing back various ores and guano rock with the veteran militia, for which he was rewarded.

In Puap's heart, "Your Majesty has a fondness for strange stones, especially those never seen before." He knew His Majesty's preferences and would search for peculiar stones and minerals wherever he went. This time, after the discovery in Crow City, he specially sent back these two jars of novel minerals through his Prepecha Warriors.

"Hmm? This smell..."

The guard took the two earthen jars, carefully inspected them, and then handed them to His Majesty. One jar contained a black, viscous oil, while the other was filled with oily stones. When the jars were opened, a familiar pungent smell hit him, bringing Xiulote back to memories.

"Is this?... Petroleum and asphalt? Not bad, Puap has been thoughtful!"

Xiulote raised an eyebrow and praised. He was somewhat surprised, but not entirely unexpected.

In later years, Mexico would be the seventh largest oil-producing country in the world. The oil along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico and the oil fields at the US-Mexico Border are so abundant they seem to emerge directly from the ground. However, despite such abundant oil, refining and distilling crude oil seemed a far-off prospect.

"Oil... Oil! The 'black gold' coveted by later nations, holds little significance for the current Alliance. Crude oil's combustion efficiency is too low and the smoke too toxic to be used as fuel... at most, it might be tried for making incendiary war oils. But against gunpowder, it has no advantage."

Xiulote pondered briefly and whispered an instruction. The guard took away the jar of flammable crude oil. Then, his gaze returned to the other jar of asphalt.

"Natural asphalt. Oil and stone in equal measure."

Xiulote extended a finger, cautiously dabbed a bit of the natural asphalt oil, and assessed the adhesive's viscosity, nodding in satisfaction. Then, he picked up a small piece of asphalt stone, placed it in his hand, watching the hard, brittle, insoluble, and naturally toxic stone, a compelling notion began to form in his mind, almost bursting forth.

"... Are there many such black oils and stones around Crow City?"

"Your Majesty, around Crow City, several lower valleys produce such oils and stones. The Vastek craftsmen say that north and south of Crow City, along the coast extending hundreds of miles, many such valleys are scattered. The shipwrights from various tribes use this to repair ships."

The envoy bowed and reported back, and Xiulote nodded in contemplation. Beneath this stretch of coastline, there must be extremely rich oil reserves. Asphalt has always been the "twin brother" of oil, invariably found together.

"Natural asphalt is indeed natural road-building material! Asphalt oil can replace cement as a road surface adhesive, and asphalt stone can be crushed to replace the fine sand and gravel layer. More

crucially, in the lush rainforest, only asphalt pavement can suppress plant growth and endure for a long time!"

Looking at the earthen jars before him, the brilliance in Xiulote's eyes grew ever brighter.

"Road construction!" This was a grand plan that has lingered in his mind for some time. What he hoped to build was not a simple dirt road, but rather sophistications akin to the roads of Rome and the Qin Chidao; an imperial artery connecting the North and South, linking each City-State!

However, Central America is tropically located, featuring both highland and lowland terrains. The richly endowed highland areas of the Alliance receive over 1000mm of annual rainfall, while the coastal lowland within the Alliance's suzerainty, receives over 2000! What's more, such heavy rainfall mostly concentrates in the summer wet season. With high temperatures and abundant rain, the highland shrubs and weeds can sprout surprisingly high within days. The lowland rainforests are more daunting still, with tree roots extending fast, causing unimaginable rapid destruction to dirt roads!

Thus, building roads in the tropical Central America demands suitable materials and comes at a very high cost.

"Referencing Rome's road construction process while simplifying according to the current technology levels, at least three layers are needed: two base layers and one road surface!"

Xiulote looked down at the ground beneath his feet, reminiscing about the long-conceived road construction plan, his chest surging with fervor.

"First, the soil surface must be excavated down to the hard soil layer. Given the current tools and labor, this depth is roughly over one meter. Then, the lowermost base layer is 20-30 centimeters thick of gravel, for leveling the surface and preventing water accumulation."

"The second base layer consists of over 60 centimeters of main filling composed of boulders, gravel, and clay. First, lay large boulders the size of pumpkins, then medium stones the size of human heads, followed by stones the size of eggs, and finish with fine debris and clay. Asphalt oil is applied in this step as a cement substitute or dried crushed asphalt stone as an alternative for small stone filling. As for the topmost road surface..."

Xiulote paused in thought, unable to decide immediately.

Romans had adequate manpower and production tools to cut massive stone slabs for seamless road surfaces. The Qin Dynasty also possessed enough technology and manpower to fry the soil, mix in salt and alkali, and firm it with countless laborers to create roads that continued into future generations. However, the current technology and productivity of the Alliance cannot compare to either.

"If the asphalt production is sufficient, then the highways of the Central American Empire should primarily be paved with asphalt gravel! For future convenience, they must be at least four meters wide to allow two horse carriages to run parallel, and drainage ditches should be dug on both sides."

Having thought to this point, Xiulote gazed toward the distant East. In the vast Caribbean Sea, there was a Great Island full of black wealth, providing later generations of the Celestial Empire with a massive quantity of asphalt for road construction. Then, he turned his gaze southwest, toward the mountainous areas of Colima, with its still active erupting volcanic clusters and volcanic ash left from tens of thousands of years of eruptions. That is the raw material for Roman cement.

"Colima... Kingdom Capital... Lake Capital City... Crow City..."

Xiulote murmured to himself, as an imperial artery spanning two thousand miles east to west was forming in his thoughts. It would require countless manpower, numerous shiploads of materials, years of time, and the ultimate authority to link the world together!

Chapter 1034: Samurai, Priest, and Craftsman - Climbing Up from the Bottom!

"You lazy black birds! The brick kiln has already been fired up, and you all better sleep on it and watch carefully! The Samurai in the county are waiting for the bricks. If the bricks are burnt, I'll pluck all your feathers and hang you naked from a tree!"

Outside Apa County, at the newly built brick kiln site, the charcoal kilns merge into a single stretch, puffing blue smoke like tombstones. Dozens of tall kilns are lined up in a row, with lots of brick batches drying under straw shelters, and piles of charcoal stacked in the corners. A robust middle-aged leader, dressed in short clothes, stood in the middle holding a staff. In front of him were over 400 craftsmen and apprentices, shirtless, sweating profusely, and busy with their heads down.

In front of the kiln, the Construction Chief Koskachi, eyes glaring, with a hoarse yet loud voice, barked at his black-sooted kiln workers, ruling like a king among crows! His tanned face was as dark as charcoal, wielding a bronze rod fiercely, akin to a mighty Samurai. When his stern gaze swept over those present, more than a few hundred strong men bowed their heads, afraid to meet his eyes.

Koskachi looked around, satisfied with his own dominance. In his eyes, craftsmen in the workshop differ from farmers in the field; the most important thing is to follow rules and obey!

How to make bricks, build kilns, light the fire, observe the smoke, everything must be done according to the instructions of the senior artisans, without the slightest nonsense. If negligence ruins the bricks and kilns, delaying the work schedule, by the Kingdom's laws, it would indeed result in execution!

Of course, after wielding a big stick, some hope must also be given. Koskachi tapped the rod on his palm, "pa, pa," and grinned.

"The Chief Divine is watching us, work well! Once this kiln's bricks are done, everyone gets a day off and a bag of food!... In the surrounding Tlaxcala villages, there are many women without husbands, some even with half-grown children! With food, whether you go for a day of fun or find a partner, it's very easy."

"Once the work is finished before the rainy season, done well, there are also rewards in Apa City! By then, find a wife nearby to marry, even the children are ready-made, after raising them for two years, they can work for the family!... The future looks promising, so work hard, everyone, do you hear me!"

"Yes, boss. Work hard, we all listen to you!"

At this, the craftsmen in the kiln site showed joy on their faces, responding loudly. One quarter of them are skilled workers, who came over months ago with the leader from the Patzcuaro Lake region to build the kiln site outside Apa City. The other three-quarters are apprentices, recruited from Apa County, all long-submissive Prepetcha people.

In two southern counties, within a year, twenty thousand migrating people from the East have been settled. Migrants are being settled, establishing small and large villages, with the most important buildings being the brick warehouses! It's known that people can live in wooden houses, straw shelters, or even in caves, but not food. In the humid rainy season of the South, brick-built waterproof

warehouses are necessary to prevent food from molding and spoiling. Secondly, there have to be brick-built sacrificial altars to store sacred scripture tablets and precious copper and iron tools.

Hence, under a Royal Decree, Koskachi led a group south to Apa City last year to build a large brick kiln, to supply building materials nearby. The charcoal-burning plants and smoking kilns operate non-stop day and night, like a grounded giant beast, exhaling the force to transform the Apa Plain.

As the migrants are continuously settled, the kiln site's scale also keeps expanding, recruiting over three hundred more apprentices. These craftsman apprentices are mostly single, robust men expected to settle locally, becoming craftsman households in the county. What is most lacking now is wealth for forming households and wives.

Apa County has given rewards, with many single women among the captive migrants. Being able to become a craftsman household here is a highly sought-after opportunity. If they perform well, they could become Craftsman Masters, not much different in status compared to the military merit nobility.

"The Chief Divine's revelation values craftsmen greatly, with generous treatment! Once you become a craftsman household at the Divine Revelation Place, your good days truly begin! Never worry about food and drink, focus on working in the kiln site. After enduring for ten years, you can become a skilled craftsman, with living standards not inferior to the Samurai! Endure for twenty years, and you can become a senior artisan, able to afford up to seven or eight wives and children! If you devise new improvements, there are rich rewards, and possibly like me, rise above others, becoming a Craftsman Master, a Craftsman Priest!... Tsk tsk! Leaving the villages to work in the workshop truly is a blessing from the Chief Divine!"

Koskachi shook his head, waving the big rod, patiently giving guidance and education for quite a while. He spoke sincerely, leading by example. His kiln workers nodded in anticipation, feeling energized for work.

The Kingdom of the Lake now has a population of over 1.2 million. The Kingdom of the Lake is vibrant and expands yearly, continuously plundering population and wealth from outside, cultivating and colonizing internally. This place differs greatly from the Alliance of the East; the upward path is remarkably broad!

The first clear path for advancement is naturally military service. In the Kingdom, aside from thousands of emerging priests and nobles, the highest-ranking are the fifty thousand Samurai among the seven legions! The Samurai lords engage in external conquests, winning every year, plundering spoils of war by

ship and house. They receive military rewards of land and titles, occupying one-third of the Kingdom's land, and own over 300,000 agricultural slaves, acting as the most crucial pillar of the Kingdom!

Chapter 1035: Samurai, Priest, and Craftsman, Climbing Up from the Bottom!_2

However, this smooth path requires risking one's life and possessing a skill. Generally speaking, only affluent common families can afford to raise warriors from a young age. Or they must be hunters from the mountains with shooting skills to become archers. The Kingdom has abundant military resources, with plenty of daring tribal children and war-experienced defectors. Without such a foundation, one can at most become militia, making it hard to be selected into the legion and go to battle as a Samurai.

"I've heard there's a recruitment going on in Apa County and Zicao County to form a long snake legion. The tribal warriors among the Tlaxcala immigrants, who have experienced warfare, have all emerged. The militia of Tekos Company are also clamoring to join. The County Magistrates of the two counties are in fierce disagreement over the allocation of troops. No one knows where this legion will ultimately be stationed; it can't be split between the two counties, can it?"

Koskachi stroked his chin, watching the busy kiln workers and thinking about the situation in the two southern counties. He intended to send his family's young descendants into the army. However, since he followed His Highness and rose from a commoner, it has only been seven years. The family lacks a solid foundation, and the youths they are nurturing have only average martial arts skills.

The Kingdom Legion goes to battle annually, blood is shed with every axe and spear. On the battlefield, only strength and luck matter; it's quite fair. The army is filled with desperate barbarian children, and there's no favoritism. For his family's young ones to stand out on the battlefield, it's admittedly quite difficult.

"Never mind! The Kingdom has never lost a war, nor has it ever seen warriors die by the thousands. The family wants to establish itself, and craftsmanship falls short. Becoming a Priest is beyond them. In the end, they must be sent to join the military!... Yes, I'll spend some money to get the youngsters half-armor in copper. As long as they don't die, they can always rise!"

Koskachi thought for a moment and made up his mind. With the Kingdom's rapid increase in bronze production and new copper mines opening in the two counties, the control over copper armor has somewhat relaxed. As one who has followed His Highness from the beginning and being a Director of the Divine Revelation Place, he has a way to acquire some copper armor for the family's young ones from the Military Works Department for self-defense.

In the Kingdom of the Lake, the second path of advancement is to participate in the Temple selection at the age of fifteen to become a priest apprentice at the Divine Power University. Afterwards, they would study for several years before graduating as priests within the Kingdom. This path is also open to commoner children, but to be honest, most of the slots are occupied by children of the Nobility and priest families.

To begin with, the literacy test in January sees children of Nobility and priest houses educated by their elders for several years, having thoroughly studied introductory scriptures. Conversely, children from commoner families recognize only a few characters and have to start learning from scratch. Unless one is exceptionally gifted, there's no way to compete. As for the subsequent mathematics test, one having been taught compared to the other knowing nothing, there's little that needs to be said.

"Alas! Priests serve the Chief Divine, receive divine grace, and preside over a region. Even if unable to become a preaching priest, just becoming a Divine Revelation Priest who is a craftsman means starting halfway up the mountain, climbing from the pinnacle of craftsmen! This path is indeed smooth!... Hmm, children under ten in the family who show intelligence should be sent early to the community sacrificial altars, sending some gifts to ask the community priests to teach! Without family inheritance, this is the only way to learn culture."

Koskachi gripped a copper rod, watching his busy kiln workers with an almost imperceptible shake of the head. For most commoners, lacking culture, mathematics, and knowledge of Divine Revelation, becoming a Craftsman Master is already seen as divine intervention from the Chief Divine and ancestral protection. But the Divine Revelation Priests who graduate from Divine Power University are directly affiliated with His Highness, can learn various divine revelations, and may even receive His Highness's personal instruction!

Indeed, in the Kingdom of the Lake, the third path of advancement is to become a craftsman. This road splits into two: one is the challenging Divine Kingdom path, the other is the difficult Abyss path.

The Divine Kingdom path involves ordinary students graduating as young Divine Revelation Priests or top students as First Level Divine Revelation Priests, joining the workshops of various Divine Revelation Places. They start in charge of dozens, then rise through First Level, Second Level, Third Level, and Fourth Level priest ranks. Ultimately, they might lead an entire department as a High Priest! As for shortcuts like Koskachi's, who followed His Highness from obscurity and rose swiftly, those opportunities won't repeat.

The alternative Abyss path entails joining various workshops or crafts camps as a craftsman household. After four years of hard work, if skills and experience suffice and the Craftsman Masters recognize them,

they become official craftsmen. This step usually eliminates half the candidates, meaning at least half the craftsmen must engage in basic tasks like brickmaking or charcoal burning. Naturally, eliminated apprentices can retake assessments every four years, so there's always hope.

Following this, craftsmen work another four years to advance from Lower Rank to Upper Rank. Another four years and an assessment grants promotion to Skilled Craftsman. This selection cuts half as well. Upon becoming a Skilled Craftsman, annual rewards are given, comparable to treatment of Second Level Samurai.

After another four years, Skilled Craftsmen face an eight-year assessment to advance to Senior Artisan. This stage culls sixty to seventy percent, with senior craftsman making up usually no more than a tenth of craftsman households. After advancement, they can lead an apprentice team, overseeing construction projects everywhere. Their income, both official and unofficial, rivals that of Veteran Warriors, though their social status is significantly lower, and they cannot pass down land to heirs.

In summary, if everything goes smoothly, an apprentice works twenty years to have a one-in-ten chance of becoming a Senior Artisan. Beyond this, ascendancy to the rare Craftsman Master requires groundbreaking accomplishments and tangible technological innovations!

The promotion to Craftsman Master gets personally reviewed by His Highness, often rewarded with land. Upon becoming a Craftsman Master, they automatically advance to Divine Revelation Priest, achieving a trans-class honor, joining the ruling class!

"Oh, to be a Craftsman Master! If just one of these two hundred kiln workers could independently innovate to become a Craftsman Master, I too, as their leader, would accrue merit and earn rewards!"

Koskachi mused for a while, smiling and shaking his head. Technological breakthroughs are easy to talk about but incredibly difficult to achieve in reality.

Like the grand kiln His Highness mentioned, designing airflow and fire channels to continuously produce bricks without halting the kiln. Beside his senior craftsmen, it took five or six years to show any promising signs. Such technology, when completed, would earn at least two Craftsman Masters!

"...However, there is indeed an opportunity at hand! His Highness entrusted another divine revelation, which in a little over a year shows some progress. If accomplished, it promises great rewards! With His

Highness's level of interest, it could promote two or three Craftsman Masters! Yet, which two talented apprentices should seize this chance?"

Koskachi stroked his chin, pondering silently. Moments later, he sheathed the bronze rod at his waist, left behind the kiln workers, and strode towards the rear camp. There, in the sunlight, a newly-built white wall was shimmering with the semblance of bricks.

Chapter 1036: The Strange White Wall

The February wind comes from the Highland, bringing a slight chill with its dryness. It's the dry season now, yet the freshly built white walls of the camp are damp, as if it had just rained.

At this moment, a young craftsman in his twenties, tanned to a dark hue, is standing by the stone white wall, studying it intently. He places his calloused hands on the surface of the white wall, feeling the wall's hardness and moisture. Then, using his fingernail, he scratches the surface, leaving shallow marks.

Upon closer inspection, there is already a row of scratch marks of varying depths on the long white wall. These marks seem to express some natural mystery, or perhaps a mysterious Divine Rune, elusive and enigmatic.

"How strange... It changes every day..."

The young craftsman frowns, looking at the scratch marks on the wall, as if trying to discern something. Beside him, there is a large pottery jar filled with river water sourced nearby, with a wooden ladle floating on the surface. The young craftsman spends a moment in thought, then scoops some water to pour over one side of the stone wall. His hand is steady, pouring as evenly as possible, so he pours very slowly.

Within moments, Koskachi strides over, carrying a copper rod, exuding an air of authority. He stands before the white wall, examining it for a moment, lost in thought. Then he draws his rod, takes a deep breath, and swings it fiercely.

"Bang!"

The copper rod strikes the white wall with force, creating a small dent. Observing the surface of the dent, you can finally realize that this neat white wall isn't actually made of stacked stone! Yet, no one knows what methods the craftsmen in the camp used to build such a deceptive white wall.

"Hmm... A depth of one knuckle, shallower than a few days ago..."

Koskachi extends his fingers, measures for a moment, then nods. His face shows a hint of a smile, accompanied by the same curiosity as the young craftsman.

"How strange..."

"Chief Divine bless! Leader, you're here!"

Seeing the newcomer, the young craftsman bows his head, paying respectful courtesy. Koskachi's lips curl into a faint smile, casually accepting the salutation, before chuckling and speaking.

"Chief Divine bless! Tan Bird, you've been overseeing this stone wall for the past few days. Any discoveries?"

The young craftsman before him, named Tan Bird, is one of Koskachi's apprentices. However, he never liked being called "Master" by his apprentices, preferring to be addressed as "Leader." This title, akin to the leader of a wolf pack or a bird flock, made him feel the obedience of others. As the Leader of craftsmen of commoner origin, what he cherished most was the obedience of his subordinates.

"Leader, look at this side, and then look at this side!"

Tan Bird nodded, first pointing to the side of the white wall that was watered, and then pointing to the side that wasn't, explaining seriously.

"The side that's been watered is harder than the side that's not!"

"Hmm?"

Koskachi tapped the front with the copper rod, then the back, stabilizing his strength. Afterward, he used his fingers to measure, indeed finding that the marks on the front were shallower.

"How strange... It grows harder every day; the watered side is harder than the dry side... This creation doesn't match the description given by the His Highness. Could this be some sort of Divine Revelation cement?"

Koskachi contemplated the Divine Revelation from His Highness, stroked his chin, and looked at Tan Bird.

"Tan Bird, how long have we been building this wall?"

"Leader, let me think... Last year, in the bad days before the New Year, I hurried back from the Colima mountains. Fifty or sixty people came back with big sacks, thousands of pounds of volcanic ash. Then, everyone together, we prepared quicklime on site. Finally, we mixed these volcanic ashes with quicklime separately, added stones, and built six or seven walls..."

Tan Bird counted on his fingers as he reminisced, finally arriving at an approximate duration.

"It's now late February; even if it's less than two months... it must be at least a month and a half!"

"A month and a half..."

Koskachi frowned, tapped the white wall with the rod again, listening carefully to the sound, and then murmured quietly.

"Tut-tut. This hardness is somewhat like undercooked earth bricks. Still more brittle compared to stone. Hmm, it's not solid enough inside, but it's better than a few days ago. Truly strange, His Highness said that in five or six days after finishing, it would be as hard as stone, seamlessly fused. It's been nearly two months, and it's still not fully done!"

"Leader, there's no rush. This wall started off as brittle as mud, just like the other walls. At that time, I thought it failed again. Who knew, after a few days it seemed to come alive, continuously hardening, now even resembling some kind of brick... The other walls have been torn down, right now, we're just relying on this one!"

As Tan Bird spoke, a smile rose on his face, eagerly looking at his mentor. Koskachi's brow twitched, he pondered for a moment, then nodded.

"Alright! The volcanic ash sent from various parts of Colima last year was of no use, not even knowing where they randomly dug it from. His Highness didn't clarify exactly what kind of ash is needed! In the end, it's thanks to you making a trip yourself, carrying sacks over, gathering various kinds of ash, busy enough that you didn't even celebrate the New Year. If this succeeds, regardless of what others say, I'll put your name at the top of the report!"

"Ah! Praise the Chief Divine, praise the master... no, praise the leader, praise the old man!"

Upon hearing this promise, Tan Bird immediately kneeled, "bang, bang," knocking his head to the ground several times. Then, he looked up, forehead red from the impact, but his face beaming with joy.

Chapter 1037: The Strange White Wall_2

"Boss, I've never had a father since I was young, so I've always seen you as one!... If I become a craftsman master, I'll definitely take care of you in your old age!"

"Ha, it's not like I don't have sons! Charbird, just make sure you live up to me in the future!..."

Seeing this, Koskachi burst into laughter, feeling quite pleased in his heart. He reached out, heavily patted Charbird on the shoulder, and said with a smile.

"Work hard, you're still young! A craftsman master in his twenties, it's fortunate you followed me!... If you catch the attention of His Highness, who knows, you might even get a chance to visit Divine Power University!"

"Ah, Divine Power University? What kind of place is that?"

Hearing this, Charbird was a bit stunned, his dark face showing confusion. He never had a father since young, and his family was extremely poor, his mother even remarried. After becoming a craftsman apprentice, he belonged to the kiln master's household and had no relation with his family. As for this university, he had never heard of it.

"Ha! That place is where weeds leap and turn into corn! If you're lucky, you might even touch the edge of cocoa..."

Koskachi shook his head with a smile. He reached out, patted Charbird's head, and with a solemn expression said.

"That's a long way off. The most important thing right now is to really produce the cement that His Highness ordered!... I ask you, the mix used to repair those walls, can you recognize it if you see it again?"

"Boss, I definitely can!"

Charbird nodded heavily, responding with a smile.

"It's gray-white, choking. Fine like sand, very hard, and doesn't dissolve in water. To remember that ash, I've tasted it many times, the surface is like crushed obsidian, cutting my tongue... that taste, I'll remember it for a lifetime!"

Hearing this, Koskachi raised an eyebrow and smiled with satisfaction. He was very pleased with his apprentice's determination.

"Coming from a poor family, without such determination, how can you compete with others?..."

Thinking about this, Koskachi was a bit worried, his two sons had everything but this determination. As he looked at his apprentice Charbird, his eyes softened, and he sincerely reminded him.

"Charbird, remember! Even if it takes a long time, as long as this wall is as hard as bricks and stones in the end, you can give His Highness a satisfactory answer! And if His Highness is satisfied, you'll be prosperous!"

"Yes, Boss, I'll listen to you! I'll water this wall morning and evening!"

Charbird nodded repeatedly, while speaking, he picked up the water ladle, and poured water on the other side of the wall.

"Hmm? Your method of watering..."

Seeing this, Koskachi furrowed his brows again. His Highness explained clearly that the cement would set in a few days, adding water only in the first few days. Add ash if there's too much water, and add water if there's too much ash, stop when it hardens. But what Charbird was doing...

"Boss, don't worry! I've tried for over a month, just keep adding water! This wall seems alive, constantly absorbing water, turning hard once absorbed. There might be a water spirit inside, or how else would the soft mud turn into hard stone?"

Charbird grinned, his smile bright and confident. He had touched this wall thousands of times, indeed it seemed alive, changing every day. If there really was a spirit inside, he hoped it was a woman...

Koskachi reached out, touched both sides of the wall again. He couldn't figure it out, but the side with water added was indeed harder. After a while, he waved his hand.

"Alright! You make the decision, if it works it's your credit. If it doesn't, don't blame me for not giving you a chance!"

"Thank you, Boss!"

A loud voice echoed in the camp, resonating around the white walls, carrying a hint of joy. The master and apprentice touched the stone, closed their eyes crossing the river, but indeed took a step that could change the kingdom, even the world!

If Xiulote was here, seeing this white wall, studying it carefully for a while, he'd probably have a revelation. This is exactly the cement he wanted, not the Portland cement that appeared in later times, but the Roman cement that had been around for over a thousand years!

Portland cement, which is ordinary silicate cement, is the most common type of cement in later countryside, and it's the easiest to make. The basic manufacturing process is grinding limestone and clay into raw material, then calcining them till partially or fully melted, called clinker. Lastly, mix the clinker with iron powder or iron ore slag, grind into cement.

For making cement, all other steps can be done manually, only the calcining process requires temperatures over 1500 degrees, consuming a lot of fuel! Reaching 1500 degrees is easy in later times, but very hard in this era. Considering the consumption of charcoal and manpower costs, multiplied by huge demand, it's something the current kingdom cannot afford!

The main component of silicate cement is calcium silicate. It reacts with water to form calcium silicate hydrate (CSH) and calcium hydroxide. The real determinant of cement hardness is calcium silicate hydrate. To simply put it irresponsibly, the more calcium silicate hydrate produced, the harder the solidified cement, and the higher the strength.

Roman cement hardens by forming green calcium silicate hydrate too. Its manufacturing process requires no calcining, it's mixed in ambient temperature with quicklime+volcanic ash+water. The primary component of volcanic ash is silicon dioxide ejected from volcanic activity. In other words, silicon dioxide+calcium hydroxide+water ultimately results in calcium silicate hydrate.

This reaction process is much milder and slower, requiring constant moisture. But the final strength, i.e., the calcium silicate hydrate gel produced, is often higher than silicate cement. The further it goes, the stronger it gets, naturally fitting Central America's climate!

Of course, real Roman cement had the corrosion-resistant tobermorite (silica-alumina mineral). It could react for a long time, continuously providing strength, maintaining Roman structures' rigidity for thousands of years. The presence of this component is related to special volcanic ash.

The volcanic ash from Colima volcanic area likely lacks this component. Cement made with it, strictly speaking, can't be called "Roman cement," only "volcanic ash cement."

"Cement... truly the creation of Divine Revelation! If you mix the two ashes together, add water, and mix in sand and stone, it can slowly turn into solid blocks of stone..."

Koskachi squinted, inspecting the short wall in front. In a daze, he seemed to see a towering temple standing right before him, built by his own hands!

"...If so, building massive temples, constructing noble estates, building brick granaries, even roads beneath our feet... will no longer need expensive corn-husk slurry, nor massive blocks of stone!..."

"...If so, how much easier it will be to construct buildings! And what changes this will bring to the Kingdom of the Lake?"

Koskachi looked ahead, pondering for a long time. He had no answer, because it had never happened before, so he couldn't imagine it. He just grinned, turned and headed for his wooden cabin. He wanted to take out his treasured tequila and drink heartily with coastal salt, not stopping till drunk!

"Haha, Chief Divine bless! Divine bless His Highness... and bless us too!"

Chapter 1038: The Second Kingdom Exploration, The Divine Object of Hidden Serpent City

The dark clouds drifted in from the sea in the East, carrying moist water vapor that fell as sudden rain upon the seaside. Giant, strange human face stone statues stood silently like giants, unmoved in the wind and rain, standing by the sea for thousands of years. A mighty river surged into the sea, spreading fertility to the riverine fields. And amidst the vast fields, there lay an ancient city, sustained for thousands of years, perhaps even longer.

This is the Caribbean coast, with its tropical rainforest climate, where it is hot and rainy year-round, with precipitation exceeding 2000 millimeters. The ancient city lies one thousand three hundred li away from the Lake Capital City, on the outskirts of the Tototanak territory, a flourishing coastal city-state, the Hidden Serpent City (Coatzacoalcos).

The river that flows through the Hidden Serpent City from deep within the jungle is known as the Hidden Serpent River. According to legend, it was here that the Feathered Serpent Divine embarked on a serpent raft to venture into the endless Eastern Sea...

"What? We rowed seven hundred li by sea to get here from the Feathered Serpent City. How is it that this place is also the legendary departure point of the Feathered Serpent City to the sea?!"

The old militia member Chiwaco scratched his head, looking at the bald-headed Maya merchant Tikalo above him. He eyed the nonchalant bald merchant with suspicion and voiced his skepticism without reserve.

"Tikalo, you bald fox. Exactly how many Feathered Serpent Gods are there in the legends? How many times did it set out to sea? Do you even know the details of these city-states?"

"Ahem! Captain Chiwaco, of course, I know!"

Tikalo choked for a moment, touching his smooth divine-like head, and forced a laugh in response.

"Legend has it that there's only one Feathered Serpent God, and it only set out to sea once! But the location of its departure... For the coastal departments that worship the Feathered Serpent God, it's a holy land of pilgrimage, bringing not just a sacred aura to the divine descendants of the city-states but also substantial pilgrimage income..."

"So, the various coastal city-states often claim that the river near them is the river where the Feathered Serpent God set out to sea!"

"Hmm, no, wait! ... With so many river mouths seen by the fleet along the way, are they all holy lands? Surely, the Tototanak tribes by the seaside are no fools; there must be details in the legends to discern the true holy land, right? ... Besides, after so many years, even the turtles in the water could figure out who is the millennia-old tortoise and who is the phony toad!"

Chiwaco glared at Tikalo, speaking with the most basic dialectic. He instinctively felt that this bald merchant was unreliable.

"Ahem! Ahem!..."

The Maya merchant Tikalo coughed several times before responding, somewhat embarrassed.

"Captain Chiwaco is truly... like an old sea turtle, seemingly ordinary yet possessing great wisdom. Indeed, all this disputation would surely yield results. Whichever city-state is strongest, whose surrounding monuments are oldest, and who influences the most tribes, that's the genuine holy land!"

"As of now, the Tototanak's holy land, truly believed by people, is down to two. One is the Feathered Serpent City to the north, and the other is the Hidden Serpent City to the south. Both city-states are very strong, each with over a thousand years of heritage, and distanced from each other, they are trusted by surrounding tribes... They're like the East and West holy lands!"

"Oh, I see, just like the Kingdom and the Alliance."

Huitu Puapu scratched his head and casually uttered a remark out of turn. Quickly, his sight was drawn to the enormous statues by the sea. Curiously, he glanced at them for a moment and inquired repeatedly.

"Chief Divine bless! What are these giant stone heads, three men tall, used for? Some of them have standard features, very much like ours. Others have faces that protrude significantly, I don't know which tribes they resemble!... And their expressions, why so melancholy? What's with the hats they're wearing?"

"...Uh... those are giant stone heads carved by the Divines of the First Era, modeled after themselves. The Divines hailed from various parts of the Divine Realm, hence the differing appearances... They knew from long ago that the era's end would come one day, which is why their expressions are mournful."

"... Within those giant stone heads lie the seeds of divinity left behind after the Divines' departure. Only the noble-blooded divine descendants can inherit them. To the seaside tribes, nobility is innate, divinity is divinely bestowed. Divine descendants inheriting divinity are destined to lead the tribes! When a noble divine descendant is born, reaches adulthood, or dies, the major tribes conduct rituals under the giant stone heads to inherit the ancient and esteemed divinity and tribal authority! As for the hats on their heads..."

The Maya merchant Tikalo pondered for a while, being unsure, he concocted an explanation.

"Those hats are used to connect with divine power. When worn, the lightning from the sky will strike down with divine power, 'boom'..."

"Boom!"

Just as Tikalo finished, a thunderclap struck down from the heavy clouds, hitting the nearby sea. All three on the ship were startled, showing fear for various reasons.

"Ah!... So dangerous? It's best to steer the ship further away, far from these giant stone statues!"

With reverence, Puapu looked up at the heavy, rain-laden sky. He gave a few instructions, and the sailors waved flags to notify the other ships, then moved two or three li into the river mouth, before finally dropping anchor outside Hidden Serpent City. The flag signals used aboard were devised as a simple means of inter-ship communication, inspired by the divine revelation of His Majesty.

As the Kingdom Fleet approached the city-state, the ancient city gradually revealed itself. The White Stone Temple stood tall, while the low green-bricked walls surrounded it closely. The nobility's houses were luxurious and spacious, while the common folk's straw huts were simple and crowded. At the center under the towering Temple of the Feathered Serpent, there was a wide central market. At this moment, departments from both southern and northern skies gathered here for trade.

Tikalo stood at the prow, tiptoeing to glance at the market, soon squinting his eyes. The Hidden Serpent City was at the junction of the northern Maya city-states and the western Nawa departments, linked to various inland cities by the Great River. Unsurprisingly, he saw elongated divine heads, the trademark of his Maya counterparts from various city-states. What vexed him more was that his colleagues there all had hair on their heads!

"Ha! A bunch of not-so-smart fools..."

Tikalo gritted his teeth and softly cursed.

"What? Tikalo, what did you say?"

The old militia member touched his hair, carefully observing Tikalo, his eyes filled with ongoing doubt. In sailing to this point, they had completely left the influence of the Mexica Alliance. The Silver Raven Tribe's osprey no longer recognized the way ahead. Continuing east would bring them into the Maya city-states. Maya merchant Tikalo was their sole navigator for every departure and docking along the uncertain path, far from Alliance reach. Hence, it was crucial to keep a close watch on this cunning merchant!

"Uh..."

Tikalo slightly lowered his head, avoiding the old militia's gaze. Before this keen-sensed old captain, he felt an inexplicable dread, hesitating over his long-schemed plans. After a few breaths, he looked up, wearing a sincere smile.

"Honorable Captain Chiwaco! This Hidden Serpent City has over a thousand years of history and is the center of various city-state remnants of the Olmec forebears! Here, if you possess a keen enough sense, there's a great chance of obtaining the unique divine objects left by the ancient forebears!"

Chapter 1039: The Second Kingdom Exploration, The Vanished "Mother," The Mysterious Four Ancient Cities

"Ah? The divine relics of the ancestors!"

Upon hearing the words of the Mayan merchants, Puap's face lit up with joy, and his heartbeat quickened. The old militia blinked, showing no change in his expression.

"Uh, this oily old fellow, will he keep following me? Such a hassle..."

Looking at the leisurely old militia, Tikalo's eyelid twitched, though he still wore a smile. He spoke in a tempting tone, recounting legends buried in history.

"One hundred and thirty miles southwest from here lies the ruins of the First Ancient City in the jungle! Established over three thousand years ago, it was the first powerful city-state of the Jiao People! To this day, myths about it are still passed down. It was the First Era, the first resting place for the divine beings that emerged from the jungle. Located on fertile riverbank soil, it spanned a vast area with no city walls. In the city's ruins, there are dozens of grand divine stone statues, the tallest reaching five or six people high, embodying divine characteristics passed down for thousands of years!..."

The First Ancient City ruins are located in today's Veracruz State, Mexico, at San Lorenzo-Tenochtitlan, the oldest known Olmec city-state, and the initial flame of Central American civilization.

"In the First Ancient City, the ancient divine objects produced are various stone humanoid sculptures! The true divine object can confer upon your descendants the talent of the sculptured figure. Imagine if you could obtain a warrior sculpture divine object, your son could become a mighty warrior! And if it were a priest sculpture, it would inherit the wisdom of a priest..."

"Divine gifts bestowing talents to descendants, mighty warriors, wise priests?"

Hearing this, Puap's eyes instantly brightened, and he swallowed hard. Tikalo smiled and looked at the old militia. The old militia, fiddling with his hair, calmly watched him, showing no semblance of excitement. After all, he knew his own body, and having more descendants was likely impossible.

"...this troublesome old fellow..."

Tikalo pursed his lips and again enticingly described.

"One hundred miles to the east from here is the Second Ancient City along the coast! The name of the ancient city is now unknown, only recorded in the heritage tablets of the Feathered Serpent Priests as a sacred place for ancient rituals. In this sacred site, there is an ancient pyramid over thirty meters high, equally huge human heads, and more than a dozen stone altars! The divine beings of the Second Epoch once held divine rituals there, leaving behind much potent divinity..."

The Second Ancient City is the ancient ruins in Tabasco, the city-state La Venta, with a history of over two thousand years. In later civilizations, it was a city-state focused on religion, providing faith bonuses and giant divine heads...

"The divine objects from the Second Ancient City are the peculiar black and red stone mirrors, holy cinnabar divine bones, and exquisite jade ornaments! It is said that the stone mirror can reflect fate, altering your future. The divine bone can grant you power, from its original owner. And the jade ornaments...uh, they are very ancient and spiritual!"

Tikalo's words were highly enticing. Puap glanced at the market, secretly gripping the gemstone in his pocket, already a bit impatient. The old militia, however, furrowed his brows, thought for a moment, and voiced his question.

"Tikalo, that cinnabar divine bone you mentioned, isn't it...dug up from someone else's grave? If so, that's truly...horrible to the point of being unbearable, can't even look!"

"Uh..."

Hearing this, Tikalo opened his mouth but couldn't speak for a while.

Cinnabar is a local specialty, said to have divinity due to its red color. When buried in the graves of the divine descendant nobility and long covering the bones, it stains them red. The black-red mirrors and exquisite jade ornaments are burial goods of the divine descendant nobility. Simply put, the Second Ancient City has excellent feng shui, very divine, burying many nobles over two thousand years. Then, their burial goods were dug up, the red bones included, sold as divine objects.

Doing such profitless business naturally carries high profits. The Mayan merchants have bought and sold many, lacking integrity for sure, but they haven't yet reached the point of being smoked.

"Well, the bones of the divine descendants always carry some divinity. Witnessed by the Chief Divine! Digging them up is benefiting future generations..."

Tikalo stammered a bit, then sidestepped the topic, continuing with his story.

"Three hundred miles northwest from here are the ruins in the mountains, the Third Ancient City. Established at the end of the Second Epoch, it also has nearly two thousand years of history. The city once hosted many sages from various tribes, recording the history and legends of two epochs. And in the center of the abandoned ancient city stands an ancient divine stele. One side holds the divine Jaguar, sitting high on the Throne of the Gods, holding a scepter. The other side of the stele is..."

Pausing here, Tikalo the Mayan merchant thought for a moment, uncertain of his thoughts. The Dark Snake beside him listened intently. Waiting for a while, he finally couldn't resist asking.

"What is on the other side of the divine stele?"

"It is an ancient long count calendar, like the stone steles of Maya city-states, recording numerous years, marked with special symbols, hinting at important events of the past. The earliest starting point of that stone stele is 7.16.3.2.13."

Mentioning the Long Calendar Steles, the Mayan merchant's expression darkened, filled with sorrow.

In the once Mayapan, there was also a similar Long Calendar Stele. The earliest Olmec people were actually the "mothers" of the Mayans. The most brilliant part of their culture was inherited by Teotihuacan in the northern highlands and the Maya city-states in the central basin. The former conquered in all directions, becoming more valiant, while the latter developed highly abstract writing.

Numerous Long Calendar Steles once stood among the various Maya tribes during the Golden Age, recording a thousand years of glory! Until eight hundred years ago, when the dreadful divine catastrophe struck, the Divine Capital Tikal suddenly destroyed, the central basin abruptly desolated, the classical Maya Golden Age suddenly ended, and the Long Calendar Steles were interrupted... All of this is an eternal wound in the hearts of the migrating Mayan nobility heading south and north!

"Sigh... it's all in the past. The ancestors spoke ambiguously, no one can figure out what happened eight hundred years ago... And what was the dreadful divine catastrophe? Was it really just alternating droughts and floods?"

The Mayan merchant reminisced for a moment, shook his head silently, not believing it. He thought of the Third Ancient City, perhaps within it might be hidden the prophecies and revelations about the divine catastrophe, just he hadn't found it.

The Third Ancient City is located at today's Tres Zapotes. Beside the ruins is Río Papaloapan, also known as the "Butterfly River". Large city-states always have rivers nearby to provide the necessary water sources for agricultural production.

"Hmm? 7.16.3.2.13... what does this ancient number represent? Could it be an omen of evil descending?"

Chief God Priest Tomate listened for long and then spoke for the first time. Holding the scripture in one hand and a bronze axe in the other, his eyes sparkled with readiness to fight for the Chief Divine at any moment.

In the Kingdom Epic circulated among the Priesthood, the Olmec people are the origins of all the tribes under the heavens, the mother of the Mexica! And the Mayans are the long-lost same clan brothers of the Mexica for a thousand years. Although, the Mayans do not think so. But it's okay, they have just stayed in the rainforest too long to temporarily lose their memory. The Alliance will help them find the real history, and ultimately, brothers will reunite...

"... That was 1526 years ago (36 BC)! In that year, a Divine King descended from the sky with the bravery of a Jaguar and the wisdom to measure the earth. He sat on the throne and guided all people, personally establishing the Third Ancient City... This is also the graphic engraving on the front of the stele."

Mayan merchant Tikalo looked westward, his eyes revealing longing. The ruins of the Third Ancient City were too far away and not near the sea. He only heard others talk about it, never having been there himself.

"Not far east of the Third Ancient City is an active volcano (Verona Volcano). It produces volcanic rocks and obsidian. The divine artifacts they passed down are also volcanic rock stone balls and obsidian round balls. On the stone balls and round balls are engraved lands, mountains, and divine beings... These divine artifacts are said to have the divinity of the Earth Mother Goddess, able to protect the bearer from harm by others!"

"Volcanic rock and obsidian round balls? Is divinity a shield?"

Puap touched his chin. He felt these things were produced both by the Alliance and the Kingdom, nothing too surprising. However, any ordinary item holds value when legend gives it "divinity" and "mana"... that value is incomparable to ordinary objects.

"From here westwards for two hundred miles, lies the last ancient city, the Fourth Ancient City, Hill City! Around this ancient city, there are as many as a hundred ancient mounds!"

Tikalo quickly adjusted his mood, speaking with a smile, his tone gentle and appealing.

"In this ancient city, there are no massive stone head sculptures. Legend says the divine beings never reached that city. But they exiled one hundred strong Divine Descendants there because those bold Divine Descendants dared to rebel against the divine beings, against their Father God and Mother Goddess... The exiled Divine Descendants held various divine powers and established a prosperous city-state. However, they were not divine beings and soon died with their divinity, being buried in the hundred mounds. The Earth Mother Goddess wept for the deceased descendants, forming a Holy Lake among the hundred mounds..."

The Fourth Ancient City is located at Laguna de los Cerros, also the last Olmec relic. After this, the era of the Olmec people completely ended.

"In the Fourth Ancient City, there are one hundred strong Divine Descendants buried, with a full hundred divine artifacts!"

Tikalo looked at everyone before him, laughingly shouted.

"A hundred! A hundred Divine Descendant potteries, absorbing their divinity, becoming peculiar divine artifacts! These pottery divine artifacts have a hundred different functions: enabling the elderly to reproduce, allowing priests to foresee the future, letting ordinary people become resilient samurai, and granting divine blessings to families, increasing prosperity!..."

Upon hearing about old men having children, Chiwaco's old face flushed, and his heart finally stirred.

"If I could have another son..."

At this moment, the surrounding three, Chief God Priest Tomate, aboard apprentice Dark Snake, and Gray Soil warrior Puap, all had shaken expressions, showing anticipation.

Seeing Chiwaco's changing expression, Tikalo secretly smiled, quite pleased with himself. He thought he finally found this old guy's weakness. Then, the Mayan merchant's expression softened, smilingly extending his hand to point towards the market in Hidden Snake City.

"Chief Divine bless! The divine artifacts are precious, hidden in the market waiting for the predetermined one by destiny. Let's all disperse and seek our destiny!"

Chapter 1040: The Second Country Exploration, the "Eccentric" Preaching Priest

The coastal weather is capricious; it was just cloudy with sudden rain, and now the rain has passed, and the sun is shining. A beam of golden sunlight permeates the scattered clouds and falls on the temple of White Stone, like a blessing from the Sun God. On the walls of the temple, the bas-reliefs of the serpent divine shimmer with golden light, lifelike, as if they are moving, revealing their divine nature.

The Totonac people in the city pass by the edge of the temple, bowing their heads piously and saluting the towering temple. Below the temple of the pyramid, the bustling market is crowded with stalls and bamboo sheds selling goods. Shouts in various dialects rise and fall, and foreign merchants in different costumes come and go... This gigantic city-state market accommodates at least thousands of people!

"Wow! What a huge city!"

Chiwaco landed on the shore, gazing at the scenery of the city. He widened his eyes, quite amazed. Such prosperity reminded him of the Qinchongcan Capital of the kingdom. However, many unseen divines are carved on the architecture and murals of this city-state, leaving him in awe yet somewhat cautious.

"So many divine carvings, unlike those in the Feathered Serpent City. Over there is one big snake, and here it's a snake nest..."

Tikalo nodded with a smile, looking at the familiar scene and recalling the numerous past trades here, replying leisurely.

"Haha! Captain Chi, you are indeed sharp. Hidden Serpent City is known for its snakes, worshipping many serpent divines and has a tradition of raising pet snakes. People here not only believe in Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent Divine, but also in our corn people's Heavenly Serpent Sun God, Itzamna, and the Northern Maya's Feathered Serpent God Kukulcan..."

"Huh? Your Feathered Serpent Divine, isn't it the same as those of the seaside tribes?"

Hearing this, Chiwaco was slightly taken aback, somewhat puzzled.

"Tikalo, when you prayed in the past, did you pray to 'Quetzalcoatl' or 'Kukulcan'?"

"Well..."

Tikalo curled his mouth and suddenly remembered the oath of allegiance made before the shrine. He suddenly laughed very happily, triumphantly stating.

"Neither! The main divine of our family is the Heavenly Serpent Divine, Itzamna. Only an oath to Him cannot be violated!"

"Heavenly Serpent Divine..."

The old militia scratched his head, somewhat clueless. He had never heard of these Maya gods before. But Tikalo changed the topic, speaking confidently.

"Captain Chi, let me tell you, the world is vast, and Hidden Serpent City is truly the center of the world! The various tribes on the Mexican Plateau and the Mayan lowland tribes converge here, exchanging knowledge from two worlds and trading specialties from two regions... And we wandering Mayan merchants are the envoys connecting the East and West under the guidance of the serpent divine..."

At this point, Tikalo sighed slightly. He glanced towards the northeast, where the family's former glory lay, along with the ancestral and divine homeland. But now, all of this had been... Tikalo slightly lowered his eyes, suppressing his emotions, and turned his gaze to the south.

"...Travel southwest for about eight hundred li, and you will reach the Oaxaca Valley of the Zapotec people, also connected by waterways. Heading southeast, there are the various tribes of the Maya highlands. Merchants from all tribes will trade here and exchange what they have for what they need!... Esteemed captains, revered Chief God Priest, here flows vast wealth, and there are divine objects from ancient eras; let us enter the city now!"

The lake fleet docked by the shore, and from the seven longships, four to fifty people disembarked at once. Warriors and sailors, each armed and with bulging waists, carried gemstones in their arms. The exploration fleet needed supplies and goods. The leaders of each ship and the sailors also wanted to buy some items for themselves, well, using the fleet's gemstones...

Everyone was raring to go. Chiwaco wore a straw hat, a short coat, and carried a short spear for protection, looking very plain. At a glance, he looked like a militia.

The group entered the city gates guarded by Totonac Warriors without drawing much attention, only paying the foreign merchant entrance fee, a bag of cocoa beans. Then, they merged into the crowd, much like hundreds of other tribal merchants, flowing into the tide of wealth!

The flow of people came and went, treading on a wide dirt road leading straight to the central market. Soon, under Tikalo's guidance, the group didn't take a single detour and reached the plaza market beneath the temple pyramid. The cheerful atmosphere hit them immediately, bringing with it the shouting of thousands of people, causing temporary ear ringing.

Chiwaco opened his old eyes, touching his straw hat, watching the prosperity in front of him, genuinely admiring.

"Selling venison, turkey, beetle meat, pumpkins, beans, cornmeal, and even pottery, stone tools, and straw clothes... The villagers here look spirited, living very well!"

"...Oh."

Hearing this, Tikalo's mouth twitched. He looked around, everyone else was looking for strange and exotic divine objects, only Old Chi was fascinated by these earthy products with no profit, this truly...

"He really doesn't recognize quality!"

Tikalo criticized silently in his heart, his eyes scanning a few spots in the market. Then, he smiled confidently.

"Haha! Villagers live well, not from selling earthy products... It's because the legends of divine objects here attract countless foreign merchants! "

The Mayan merchant smiled, casually pointing to a spot in the market.

"Look, ancient relics are buried on this land, leaving numerous artifacts. The stalls on the ground, these local villagers, will sell some ancient items unearthed from the ground. But, divine objects are rare; finding a genuine divine object among these many ancient items depends on the blessing of the divine!"