

Civilization 1211

Chapter 1211: Three Years of Peace, Takeda Nobuhiro, and the General's Great Affair

"Let's go, we'll talk in the hall!"

Before the harbor, Kaozaki Mitsuhiro pondered briefly before making a decision. In the Capital City, those who can be addressed as "The Exalted" are only the Emperor and the Shogun. And it must be a "great matter" that urges Mori no Kiyoshi to rush over, it must be... the Shogun! It's only been a short while, and trouble has arisen for the Shogun once again!...

Kaozaki Mitsuhiro felt heavy-hearted, pulling Mori no Kiyoshi along, hurrying to the horses. He extended his hand, pointing to the pony led by Sukezaburou, with an apologetic smile.

"House owner Mori no Kiyoshi, please ride this horse and hurry to the hall with me..."

The elderly merchant Mori no Kiyoshi observed the pony before him, with a shoulder height of only about one meter twenty-three; it was of the common Nanbu horse appearance, likely from the main island's Dewa Province. This was a typical native horse, not tall, and not heavy.

Then he glanced at Kaozaki Mitsuhiro's warhorse, with a shoulder height around one meter fifty, towering over the pony by a whole head. This horse was entirely snow-white, with a robust physique; a fine horse rarely seen even in the Capital City!

"What a splendid horse!"

Mori no Kiyoshi exclaimed in admiration. His expression shifted, recalling the purpose of this visit, he asked with a smile.

"Mitsuhiro, is such a fine horse from across the continent over the North Sea?"

"Yes!"

Kaozaki Mitsuhiro nodded affirmatively. He didn't conceal before an old acquaintance, replying frankly.

"This was exchanged from the Ezo People on Birch Island. It is said they got it from the Deer people further north, the Saha people (i.e., Yakut). This Saha horse is not picky with food, very sturdy, not afraid of cold, familiar with woodlands, suitable for snow and mountain forests. Even in the heavy snow of Ezo land north, it can run as fast as flying!"

"Oh! The vast mountains and forests of Ezo land, samurai venturing to campaign against the barbarians certainly need such fine horses!"

Upon hearing this, Mori no Kiyoshi nodded with a smile. His gaze shifted thoughtfully, and he recalled another matter from memory.

"Mitsuhiro, about your father's chestnut-colored Jurchen horse... is it still around?"

"Hmm? You mean the chestnut one? It died of old age and illness."

Kaozaki Mitsuhiro touched his half-bald shaved head, casting a puzzled look at Mori no Kiyoshi.

"Now my father rides another reddish-brown deer horse, also a Jurchen horse..."

"Oh! Jurchen horse!"

Hearing this, Mori no Kiyoshi's eyes lit up. As he surmised, within the whole realm of seventy nations, the places to truly find good horses are only in the Upper Country, Lower Country, and Matsumae of Ezo land. Because here, through the Shandar Trade, one can get rare high-headed horses from the hunting tribes across the sea.

"Let's go!"

It wasn't an appropriate situation, so Mori no Kiyoshi didn't ask further. The two mounted their horses and galloped towards Victory Mountain Manor without delay. As for the young merchant Matsushita Zou Jirou, he would walk over once the grain from the ship was unloaded.

Victory Mountain Manor was built in the mountains, not far from the sea. After a short ride, they arrived at the white-walled black-roofed Japanese mountain fortress. Then, they handed their horses to attendants, removed their shoes, and walked into the hall.

From afar, Mori no Kiyoshi glimpsed the stable, vaguely spotting a large horse that seemed even taller than Kaozaki Mitsuhiro's white horse. His eyes flickered, and he followed Kaozaki Mitsuhiro into the guest tea room.

"The tea room is somewhat simple... but outside the window is the picturesque view of snowy mountains and sea, perfect for sipping tea while watching."

"Indeed! 'The window holds eternal snow from the western ridge, the door anchors a thousand miles of ship in the eastern Wu.' The Tang poet Du Shaoling's scene can be seen here, a unique moment of Zen!"

Mori no Kiyoshi smiled warmly in his reply. In this era, regardless of public house, Martial Family, or monks, most were familiar with Tang and Song poetry, often exchanging verses in Chinese, and even writing poems in Chinese. Because the literature of Wa people's upper-class society originally came from the Celestial Empire, written in traditional Chinese characters. The true rise of Haiku would be another hundred years away.

Kaozaki Mitsuhiro summoned a page to brew tea, bowed apologetically to Mori no Kiyoshi, and departed in haste. Since something major occurred in the Capital City, he naturally needed to invite the Victory Mountain Manor master, his family head father, Takeda Nobuhiro to come.

Mori no Kiyoshi leisurely sipped his tea. Though his heart was urgent, his demeanor remained calm and composed. It was not until Kaozaki Mitsuhiro returned, leading a gray-haired, resolute-faced old samurai, that Mori no Kiyoshi promptly stood, bowing deeply in respect.

"Miya Mori no Kiyoshi, pay respects to the Kai Takeda Minamoto Clan's branch, Upper Country Protector representative Lord Nobuhiro!"

"Ha! Mori no Kiyoshi, my old friend, sit together, no need for formalities!"

Takeda Nobuhiro laughed boldly, waving his hand. As they took their seats according to propriety, Mori no Kiyoshi observed Takeda Nobuhiro closely. Over ten years apart, he had obviously aged considerably, with even his hair turned white. But his sharp, fierce gaze remained similar to before, possibly even more dignified.

"Your grave enfolds beneath clay-dissolved bone, I wander amid a snow-crowned head..."

Mori no Kiyoshi pursed his lips, pondering the Capital City news he brought and seeing the elder appearance of his friend Takeda Nobuhiro. He felt poignant emotion, quietly reciting Bai Juyi's poem. Bai Juyi's poetry was widely spread in Wa Country, easily quoted by any warrior of the time.

"Lord Nobuhiro! That Wa people could win against Koshama In's battle, defeat the Ezo People, and firmly establish themselves in Ezo land, is entirely due to your bravery and strategy! That praise, I am entirely sincere!"

"Haha! Those were events from over thirty years ago!"

Hearing his friend mention the most satisfying achievement of his life, Takeda Nobuhiro laughed heartily, even his eyebrows twitching. His experiences were also quite legendary, rumored to be from Kai Takeda Minamoto Clan's branch, the Second Family Head of the Wakasa Takeda Clan, guardian of Wakasa and Tango provinces, son of Takeda Nobuyoshi.

Of course, Mori no Kiyoshi didn't believe such a rumor, as Takeda Nobuyoshi probably only predated Takeda Nobuhiro by 12 years, couldn't have bravely fathered a son at 12, could he?...

However, as an informed Omi merchant, he knew, Takeda Nobuhiro, a fellow townsman, indeed hailed from Wakasa Takeda Clan. And Wakasa Takeda Clan didn't come forward to rebuke or refute this rumor. The other party should be of Wakasa Takeda lineage, as for being Lord Nobuyoshi's elder's illegitimate child, it's uncertain.

In any case, Takeda Nobuyoshi had been deceased nearly 20 years, no one could clarify this further. At a little over 20, Takeda Nobuhiro left Wakasa Takeda Clan, ventured to Kanto. He first took refuge at the Koga Kubo Ashikaga Nagamasa's camp, obtained a document, and was transferred to Mutsu Daimyo, the family head of the Sannohe Nanbu clan, Nanbu Mitsumasa's command. Later, gaining support from the Nanbu clan, he sought opportunities in Ezo land.

Soon, he was favored by the Ezo land Hanazawa Manor master Kaozaki Kishige, accepted as a son-in-law and changed his surname to Kaozaki. At the age of 25, he established himself in Ezo land within four years!

Two years later, severe conflict arose between Ezo land's Ainu People and the northward expanding Wa People, known as Koshama In's battle. Ten of the twelve halls in Ezo land's southern path were consecutively overrun. Only Takeda Nobuhiro, brave and fierce, managed to withstand it with Wa People warriors. Then, gathering scattered warriors, he counterattacked various Ainu tribes, personally shooting dead the Ainu leader Koshama In near Nanaehama, quelling the Ainu tribes. This Nanaehama later became Hakodate.

Through this battle, Takeda Nobuhiro's name became prominent in Ezo land! His father-in-law Kaozaki Kishige died in 1462, transferring the Kaozaki Family Head position to the then 31-year-old Takeda Nobuhiro. In the same year, Takeda Nobuhiro began constructing his residence, Victory Mountain Manor, truly establishing his foundation in Ezo land...

Reflecting on this story-like experience, Mori no Kiyoshi felt a deep emotion. Takeda Nobuhiro's eyes also revealed profound nostalgia.

For a moment, the tea room remained silent, until a page came over with hot tea, Takeda Nobuhiro regained awareness, smilingly picked up a bowl of hot tea, savoring it in sips, his eyes returning sharp.

"Mori no Kiyoshi, you said a great matter occurred in the Capital City, concerning the Exalted... what exactly is this matter?"

"Lord Nobuhiro, it involves the General's Family, and it's a matter affecting the whole realm!"

Mori no Kiyoshi pondered for a while, his expression heavy, sighing deeply.

"This news has spread throughout the Capital City, it's no secret... The retired Eighth Shogun Yoshimasa is gravely ill, unable to manage affairs. And the Ninth Shogun Yishan, died eight months ago while campaigning against the Guardian of Omi, Six-Pointed High Lai..."

"Hence, there is no successor to Yoshimasa's lineage. After the Yingren's Chaos, the deposed Shogun Yoshimasa's younger brother Yishi has already brought his son Yicai to the Capital City, returning to Kyoto! It seems the Shogun position, after much turnabouts, will fall back into Yishi's lineage hands once more!..."

"The ten years of Yingren's Chaos, endless warfare, countless casualties in Kansai, who knows for what purpose!"

Chapter 1212: Three Years of Prosperity, Capital City's Bigwigs, Mori no Kiyoshi's Request

"What! The Eighth Generation General Ashikaga Yoshimasa is gravely ill? Ashikaga Yoshimi has taken Ashikaga Yoshizumi to the Capital City?!"

"Is it possible that the position of General could fall back into the hands of the Ashikaga Yoshimi lineage?"

In the tea room, upon hearing such shocking news, Takeda Nobuhiro and his son Kaozaki Mitsuhiro exchanged glances, rendered momentarily speechless.

The Ōnin War has raged for ten years, and the land has been in chaos for the same duration. Although the Ezo land was not directly affected, tales of battles challenging the Shogunate's authority frequently reached them. This devastating war, although essentially a power struggle between the General's Family, the Hosokawa Clan, and the Yamana Clan, was viewed by the world as an internal conflict over the succession between General Ashikaga Yoshimasa's son Ashikaga Yoshihisa and his brother Ashikaga Yoshimi.

With great difficulty, Ashikaga Yoshimi was defeated and exiled, restoring peace to the Capital City, and the position of General fell to Ashikaga Yoshihisa. In the following years, Ashikaga Yoshihisa led large armies on various campaigns, gradually restoring some of the Shogunate's authority... unexpectedly, the 25-year-old Ninth Generation General Ashikaga Yoshihisa died suddenly while on an expedition. And merely eight months later, the Eighth Generation General Ashikaga Yoshimasa became gravely ill and was near death...

"Ashikaga Yoshimi has ascended to the Capital City with his son Yoshizumi..."

Takeda Nobuhiro's expression changed as he contemplated for a long time. Then, with a serious demeanor, he inquired.

"Mori no Kiyoshi, if General Ashikaga Yoshimasa passes away, who will succeed him?"

"According to the Martial Family's laws, it would be Ashikaga Yoshizumi who succeeds as General, with Ashikaga Yoshimi as the Chancellor, effectively controlling the Shogunate's affairs."

Mori no Kiyoshi answered without hesitation. He had pondered this question many times before, and his influential figure behind the scenes had hinted at it before his departure.

"Lord Nobuhiro, as you know, during the Ōnin War, the leader of the Hosokawa Clan sided with Yoshimasa's lineage, and now that Yoshimi's lineage has returned..."

"The animosity between the leader of the Hosokawa Clan and Yoshimi's lineage, coupled with Lady Tomiko, the wife of Yoshimasa..."

Takeda Nobuhiro spoke heavily, lamenting aloud.

"The seeds of internal conflict have been sown... from now on, the Shogunate will be rife with troubles!"

"Indeed!..."

Mori no Kiyoshi sighed deeply. The irreconcilable conflict between the General's Family and the Chancellor's Family meant that the Capital City would henceforth face more hardships! And as a great merchant in the Capital City, how could he struggle and survive in such a vortex of power?

Both men remained silent for a long time, understanding the severity of the situation. The Shogunate's internal strife continued, with frequent changes of Generals, and the combat among the leaders weakened the Shogunate's authority. The shocking phenomenon of the lower overthrowing the upper was becoming increasingly common. People with rich experiences like them could vaguely sense that a tumultuous era was gradually unfolding!...

After a while, Mori no Kiyoshi changed the topic, wearing a slight smile with sincerity in his eyes.

"The Tang people once said, 'Therefore, in a troubled autumn, obscure the traces and hide the ends, lest they be the precursors of the green woods.'... Lord Nobuhiro, your establishment of a foundation in the distant and peaceful Ezo land, which is increasingly prosperous and stable to pass on to descendants, is truly enviable!..."

"Ha! With the many troubles of the General's Family, the mission to 'conquer the barbarians' falls on us samurai, and we must strive together..."

Takeda Nobuhiro laughed and shook his head, his words harboring ambition. He pondered a moment, then casually brought up the earlier Tang saying.

"The metaphor of this 'troubled autumn' is quite vivid, but where does it originate?"

"Oh, it is from the Song people's 'North Dream Trivia,' purchased from a Tang Ship. The text is quite interesting. I have a copy on my ship, and if Lord Nobuhiro is interested, I can have it sent over later."

"Ha! The wilderness of the Northern Land, if only I had some Tang's Books to peruse, that would be splendid!"

Takeda Nobuhiro nodded readily, silently noting the term "Tang Ship." He pondered, smilingly inquiring.

"Mori no Kiyoshi, my old friend, you came to inform me of the great matters in the Capital City... is there any affair in which I might be of assistance?"

After some maneuvering, they finally arrived at the main topic. The great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi was invigorated, respectfully bowing and sincerely requesting.

"Lord Nobuhiro, I indeed have something to ask this time!"

"No problem! We are fellow countrymen and have known each other for many years. Whatever the matter, please tell me!"

"Yes!"

The great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi bowed low, narrating earnestly.

"Over the years, I've made a living in the Capital City under the protection of the Tiantai Sect's Nan Rui Mountain Miao Courtyard, and fortunately opened a rice house at the Seven Street Rice Market in Kyoto..."

Upon hearing this, Takeda Nobuhiro raised an eyebrow, his thoughts racing, pondering deeply.

"The rice house in the Capital City... Seven Street Rice Market... Tiantai Sect's Nan Rui Mountain Miao Courtyard..."

The information in this statement was actually quite substantial. Firstly, in the Wa Country, rice was the most important staple food, and "rice trading" was never in short supply, ensuring stable cash flow and being one of the most profitable industries in the land! Those who could open a rice house in the Capital City rice market were top-tier great merchants with incredibly solid connections and methods. Because operating such a profitable livelihood industry in Kyoto without the backing of significant figures in the Capital City would be akin to seeking death, and absolutely impossible to continue!

Mori no Kiyoshi mentioned the Seven Street Rice Market, which was the lower rice center in Kyoto, not far from there lay the Main Hall of the Rengeō-In. This temple was founded by former Emperor Go-Shirakawa and constructed by Taira no Kiyomori. Its status was exceptionally prestigious, often presided over by members of the Imperial Family, with a majestic and splendid style, and thirty-three spaces between its beams and pillars, hence also known as the "Hall of Thirty-Three Spaces." The famous "Hall of Thirty-Three Spaces New Year's Shooting Festival" of the Edo period was held in this temple. And this temple belonged to the "Tiantai Sect's Miao Courtyard."

"Mori no Kiyoshi, we've been friends for many years, and I've always been honest with you! You've had such a relationship with the Miao Courtyard behind you but kept it from me for so long, truly a difficult thing to keep from me!"

Takeda Nobuhiro contemplated deeply, with a hint of anger on his face, and his words became more forceful. In truth, he had known Mori no Kiyoshi for many years, having guessed about the background behind him long ago.

The name "Kiyoshi" symbolized the "sincerity of heart" in Buddhism. Such a name could not be given by any ordinary merchant, and must have been a gift from a high-ranking monk in a Buddhist temple. At that time in the Wa Country, the fusion of gods and Buddhas was flourishing, with Mahayana Buddhism closely integrated with the upper class, giving the Buddhist Sects immense influence, especially in the Kansai region. The Tiantai Sect's strength was paramount among the Buddhist Sects and could naturally influence the nearby Seven Street Rice Market.

With the changing winds in the Capital City, Mori no Kiyoshi had traveled from afar with a request, undoubtedly under orders from a significant figure in the Miao Courtyard...

Analyzing this way, Takeda Nobuhiro had some guesses about Mori no Kiyoshi's intentions. He was merely feigning anger now to take the initiative in the subsequent conversation, to secure more benefits!

"...Lord Nobuhiro, we've known each other for many years, and our friendship is genuine! I won't hide from you; in the Miao Courtyard, there are significant figures from both the public house and the Martial Family, seemingly prestigious, yet truly a bottomless vortex. Though my rice market business has earned some profit, most have to be offered to the elites... previously, I did not mention it entirely out of sincerity, not wanting to involve you!..."

Seeing Takeda Nobuhiro's anger, Mori no Kiyoshi immediately understood. He bowed low to the floor, finally expressing his purpose.

"The winds in the Capital City are changing, beyond everyone's expectations! Within a year, the Ninth Generation General suddenly died, the Eighth Generation General is critically ill, and the Tenth Generation General is about to ascend..."

"The successive Generals' opposing stands even resorted to drawn swords, affecting the entire country... even the significant figures in the Miao Courtyard cannot remain aloof, with any misstep placing them under high walls of danger..."

"The Ezo land and the Shandan on the continent have always had trade relations, even extending through Birch Tai and the Thousand Islands, venturing far into the Far North... Lord Nobuhiro, your renowned reputation further receives tributes from various Ezo tribes... I have come this time, having been entrusted by others, unable to refuse, to seek some rare tributes from you, Lord Nobuhiro..."

Chapter 1213: Three Years of Tribute, Tea Whisking and Appraisal, Gifts and Sincerity

"Coming from the Capital City, entrusted by important figures, seeking the rare tributes of the world..."

The tea room was warm, with a red clay stove boiling an ancient ceramic pot, and a faint aroma of tea permeating the quiet room. Lord Nobuhiro watched Mori no Kiyoshi, who was prostrated on the ground, pondering in silence.

It was apparent that the tribute Mori no Kiyoshi sought was meant to be gifted. To whom? Given the current situation, it was naturally intended for the Ashikaga Yoshimi faction, about to enter and take control of the Shogunate in the Capital City. The reason for the gift seems to be that the major figures behind Mori no Kiyoshi had aligned with the wrong side in the disputes within the General's family. To gain forgiveness from the Yoshimi faction, they were compelled to curry favor by any means...

Of course, those were matters for the major figures in the Capital City, involving the powers of the world, beyond what a local tyrant and landowner of the Ezo land could mock wantonly.

With this thought, the anger on Lord Nobuhiro's face swiftly dissipated, as if it had never been. He then extended his strong hands and helped up the Kyoto merchant from the floor, speaking in a warm voice.

"Mori no Kiyoshi, I understand your purpose... Come, rise first. The soup is ready, let's savor a bowl of group tea together!..."

Saying this, Lord Nobuhiro looked at his son. Kaozaki Mitsuhiro then, with a solemn expression, placed the tea cup by the fire to warm it first. In this Victory Mountain Manor in Ezo land, there were naturally no famous tea utensils like 'Inaba Tenmoku', 'Oil Drop Tenmoku', or 'White Tenmoku.' Even the fine porcelain of the Tang people was absent. The porcelain bowl in Kaozaki Mitsuhiro's hand was merely coarse porcelain produced in Kanto.

"Sit and sip the cool water, watch the swirling dust."

Lord Nobuhiro recited a line of Bai Juyi's poetry leisurely to open the scene. Subsequently, Kaozaki Mitsuhiro carefully placed the evenly ground tea powder into the tea cup, poured a little hot water first, stirring the tea powder into a paste. Then, he held a long-spouted ceramic pot in one hand, pouring a fine, steady stream of water, and with the other hand took a long-handled spoon to 'whisk and flick' in the tea cup. Soon, pleasant small bubbles formed on the surface of the tea soup, demonstrating the skill of 'matcha preparation'.

The Wa people's 'matcha preparation' undoubtedly originated from the Song dynasty of the Celestial Empire. Later, the Japanese style matcha also derived from this. Now, at the end of the Muromachi Era, admiration for Tang and Song culture was deeply rooted in the hearts of the Wa people, so much so that daily rituals, clothing, and food were all esteemed by the customs of the Tang people. The quality of tea art was naturally judged against Lu Yu's 'Classic of Tea' from the Tang dynasty.

"Good! 'The whirlpool swirls but does not move, the surface of the cup is spotless,' the tea and water blend, the cup walls are clean... Mitsuhiro's matcha technique could stand out even in the Capital City!"

Mori no Kiyoshi was seriously admiring, then laughed and praised. Kaozaki Mitsuhiro's matcha technique was performed with solemnity and steady wrists, his skill had indeed reached a competent level. But if it was in the Capital City... Kyoto's tea masters could use group tea to form different patterns and designs, just like the descriptions in famous Song dynasty paintings... hmm, similar to modern-day latte art.

Hearing Mori no Kiyoshi's compliment, Kaozaki Mitsuhiro's face showed pride, while Lord Nobuhiro remained unchanged, just slightly shook his head. He had seen much; not to mention Kyoto's tea masters, even those in the Koga Kubo's camp from Kamakura were two levels above Mitsuhiro.

Of course, samurai did not rely on tea art for a living; it was merely through such elegant hobbies that they gained a good name and served as a means to bond with superiors and colleagues.

The tea soup was ready; Lord Nobuhiro, with a composed demeanor, softly recited another line.

"Without any reason, I hold a bowl, dedicate it to tea lovers..."

Kaozaki Mitsuhiro then, with both hands, respectfully handed the tea soup to the two sitting opposite. They sipped delicately, and with a cup emptied, they felt refreshed and warm all over.

The climate in Ezo land was cold, and there was no good tea. This group tea was brought from the Kansai region during a trade with Matsushita Zou Jirou last time. However, the advantage of group tea lay in its low demand for tea leaf quality. And since Mori no Kiyoshi had a favor to ask, he smiled softly, showing a comfortable and slightly inebriated expression.

With a cup of tea down, the atmosphere between the two returned to one of old friends. Lord Nobuhiro then slightly smiled and inquired.

"Mori no Kiyoshi, I wonder what kind of gifts the people behind you desire?"

"Hmm... The one soon to be the tenth Shogun, Ashikaga Yoshizumi, aged 23, young and spirited, loves fine horses... The soon-to-be retired chief, Ashikaga Yoshimi, enjoys poetry and wine, but needs nourishing medicine due to slightly poor health... And the Shogun's mother, Lady Ryoko, and the Shogun's wife, daughter of Hosokawa, favor exquisite furs, the more exceptional and rare, the better!..."

"Fine horses, medicinal herbs, furs..."

Upon hearing this, Lord Nobuhiro thought briefly and nodded. He had a rough plan in mind. Although Ezo land was harsh and cold, it was connected with Birch Island and the Kuril Islands, bridging the vast far north. Through Shandar trade, he indeed had trading connections with the Ewenki tribes of the northwest continent and the Kamchatka tribes of the far northern snow plains.

Among them, the Wild Man Jurchen had the Jurchen Stallion, and the Sakha people had the Yakut snow horse, both far superior to the horses of the He Country! And the Jurchens, Sakha, Sorun, Yukaghir, and Gilyak... all located in the vast mountain forest snow plains, produced superior quality ginseng, deer antler, and bear paws, all excellent for health. Their ginseng was far superior to that of Korea, even the best for conditioning the body.

As for exquisite furs, Lord Nobuhiro thought, the Ainu people's bear fur, though warm and practical, wasn't exquisite. The truly exquisite ones had to come from the far north!

The purple sable, Arctic fox, Arctic wolf, marten, ermine, and brown bear found in the forested snow plains had the purest, most lustrous pelts, the finest ones being even superior to a maiden's skin. The fur of the purple sable and the Arctic fox, with their pure and lustrous colors, were the most precious of all. Their fine hairs surpassed a maiden's skin in softness.

"To make a round in the far north... just that round will take over a year..."

Lord Nobuhiro pondered for a moment, gaining confidence in his thoughts. The Upper Country, with several manors he commanded in Ezo land, had goods that were better than the treasures of the same type in Kyoto, and could serve as a guarantee. Keeping that in mind, he smiled confidently and inquired with a gentle smile.

"Mori no Kiyoshi, my old friend, I wonder what kind of sincerity the great figures behind you can offer?"

Upon hearing Lord Nobuhiro's words, Mori no Kiyoshi's eyes brightened as he laughed and promised, standing up straightly.

"Mori no Kiyoshi, I promise you with a smile. Even if it's thousands of stones of rice, hundreds of rolls of silk, and another hundred sets of armor and weapons, I won't bat an eyelid!"

"A thousand stones of rice, a hundred bolts of silk..."

Upon hearing such an astounding offer, though, Kaozaki Mitsuhiro's face showed signs of delight, and his breathing became slightly quicker.

In the He Country, the weight of one stone of rice was approximately 230 pounds. According to the He Country farmers, a thousand stones could feed eight hundred people for a year. At that time, silk was very expensive, with superior quality brought by Tang Ship from the Ming Dynasty, much sought after and costly, even more so than some of the imitations on par. As for the last condition of a hundred sets of armor and weapons... Before the Industrial Era, He Country, unlike the various tribes of Central America, does not excel in this, and it was not abundant, to begin with. Omi has many towns of blacksmiths known for producing iron ore...

In other words, this astonishing wealth in the eyes of Kaozaki Mitsuhiro, according to the Kyoto merchant Mori no Kiyoshi, was equivalent to the output of two years of fief! In fact, in the museum of ancient Koga Kubo, even the tea masters from Kamakura were superior to Mitsuhiro.

Still, the samurai were not reliant on tea skills for a living; they only used such elegance as a way to gain fame and as a channel to be close with their superiors and colleagues.

The tea was prepared; Lord Nobuhiro, with an elegant demeanor, softly recited another verse.

"Without any reason, I hold a bowl, dedicate it to lovers of tea..."

Kaozaki Mitsuhiro then respectfully offered the tea to the two seated across from him. Both sipped in small sips, and after finishing their cups, they felt refreshed and warmed all over.

In the cold climate of Ezo land, good tea was scarce. This batch of group tea was brought from the Kansai region during a trade with Matsushita Zou Jirou during his last visit to Victory Mountain Manor. The advantage of group tea is that it does not demand high-quality tea leaves. And with Mori no Kiyoshi needing a favor, he smiled with a comfortable, slightly inebriated expression.

After drinking the cup of tea, the atmosphere between the two returned to that of old friends. Lord Nobuhiro then slightly smiled before inquiring.

"Mori no Kiyoshi, I wonder what kind of gift those behind you want?"

"Ah... The soon-to-be tenth General, Ashikaga Yoshizumi, young and spirited, loves fine horses... The poetry and wine-loving, yet slightly frail Ashikaga Yoshimi needs nourishing herbs... As for Lady Koyuko, the Shogun's mother, and Lady Hosokawa, the Shogun's wife, they both desire exquisite furs. The more unique and rare, the better!..."

"Fine horses, supplements, furs..."

Upon hearing this, Lord Nobuhiro pondered for a moment and then nodded. In his heart, he knew that through Shandar trade with the Ewenki tribes from the Northwest Continent and the Far North Snow

Plains, he had access to various goods, indeed better than similar rare commodities from the Capital City.

Reflecting on this, he smirked with confidence, and with a bright smile, he asked.

"Mori no Kiyoshi, my old friend. I wonder, what kind of sincerity can the great figures behind you offer?"

Hearing Lord Nobuhiro's words, Mori no Kiyoshi's face lit up with a smile as he stood and promised.

"Mori no Kiyoshi, I assure you with a smile. Even if it's thousands of stones of rice, a hundred bolts of silk fabrics, and a hundred sets of armor and weapons you desire, I won't bat an eye!"

"A thousand stones of rice, a hundred bolts of silk..."

Upon hearing such astonishing wealth being mentioned, Kaozaki Mitsuhiro's face lit up with excitement, his breath slightly quickening.

In the Wa Country, the weight of one stone of rice was about 230 jin. According to the He Country farmers, a thousand stones would amount to an entire year's supply of food for eight hundred people. At this time, silk textiles were costly, with superior quality being brought from the Tang ships of the Ming Dynasty, and they were even more expensive. As for the last hundred sets of armor and weapons... Before the Industrial Era, the He Country, unlike the various tribes of Central America, was not known for crafts, and the worth of such goods exceeded expectations.

In other words, the wealth that astonished Kaozaki Mitsuhiro was, to the Kyoto merchant Mori no Kiyoshi, equivalent to the output from a fief of two years! Yet, his wisdom and insight exceeded what his son, raised in Ezo land, could understand.

Lord Nobuhiro lowered his eyes to conceal his inner emotions. He controlled the Upper Country and its several manors in Ezo land. The wealth he held was considerably more exceptional than similar treasures in the Capital City and could serve as a guaranteed fallback. Contemplating this, he wore a self-assured smile, beaming.

"Mori no Kiyoshi, I wonder what kind of sincerity the great figures behind you possess?"

Upon hearing Lord Nobuhiro's words, Mori no Kiyoshi's face brightened with a smile, as he stood straight and promised with a laugh.

"Mori no Kiyoshi, I assure you with a smile. Even if it's thousands of stones of rice, a hundred bolts of silk, and even a hundred sets of armor and weapons, I won't frown a bit!"

"A thousand stones of rice, a hundred bolts of silk, a hundred sets of armor..."

Hearing this astonishing offer, Kaozaki Mitsuhiro's expression brightened, and he breathed a little faster.

In the Wa Country, the weight of one koku of rice is roughly around 230 jin. According to the He Country farmers, a thousand of koku could provide food for eight hundred people for a year. At this time, silk was very expensive, the superior quality was brought in by Tang Ships from the Ming Dynasty, and the price was even higher. As for the last hundred sets of armor and weapons... before the Industrial Era, the Wa Country, compared to various tribes in Central America, did not excel in this, not at all. However, the legacy of Kaga's skilled blacksmiths still holds prestige...

In other words, this wealth, which seemed astonishing to Kaozaki Mitsuhiro, according to the Kyoto great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi, was equivalent to the production of two years' output from a fief! But Lord Nobuhiro's maturity and experience naturally far exceeded his son, who grew up in Ezo land.

Lord Nobuhiro lowered his gaze, hiding the inner turbulence of his emotions. He said nothing more on terms, but instead inquired about another matter with a sip of tea.

"Mori no Kiyoshi, my friend. Since the Shogun is changing, and with such upheaval in the Shogunate, you have backing from the trading group in Omi and the influential figure at Miao Courtyard. What sort of sincerity can they offer?"

Hearing Lord Nobuhiro's words, Mori no Kiyoshi's face lit up with a smile, and he promised while standing up.

"Mori no Kiyoshi, I assure you with a smile. Even if it's thousands of stones of rice, a hundred bolts of silk, and even a hundred sets of armor and weapons, I wouldn't frown for a moment!"

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#### Chapter 1214: Three Years of Longevity: Ming Dynasty's Validation Trade

"Oh! The Shogunate and Ming Dynasty validation trade!"

In the quiet room, the stove's fire was warm. The water in the pot was slightly boiling, emitting a "huhu" sound, mixed with a faint aroma of tea. The Kyoto merchant Mori no Kiyoshi lowered his eyes, gazing at the slightly boiling water, just as turbulent as his inner feelings.

The Ming Dynasty strictly enforced the sea ban, prohibiting foreign merchant ships from trading, and also forbidding private individuals from going to sea. The so-called Shogunate and Ming Dynasty validation trade, in form, was the "Japanese King" Muromachi Shogunate's periodic tribute trade to the Ming Dynasty.

The Shogunate dispatched tribute ships to the Ming Dynasty, boarded by great merchants of their own country, carrying large quantities of Wa Country's special products, reaching the ports of Beijing and Ningbo, to conduct formal transactions with merchants officially licensed by the Ming Dynasty.

This overt trade included two parts: the tribute and return gifts to the Emperor of Ming, known as "public trade," and the goods traded by merchants from both sides on board, known as "private trade."

The trade items demanded by the Ming Dynasty from Wa Country included sulfur, copper, gold, silver, fans, swords, lacquerware, and screens. On the other hand, Wa Country's demands for Ming Dynasty goods almost covered everything, lacking in every aspect. Among these, especially in demand were Ming money Tongbao, books and paintings, silk, and porcelain.

Of course, whether it was "public trade" or "private trade," it was an official trade with the granting of privileges from both countries. The profits from this official trade for merchants on both sides were generally more than ten times, while for the Shogunate's tribute and return gifts, it was two to five times. The only one losing money was the Emperor of Ming.

"Ha! The real profit from the validation trade... is definitely more than ten times!"

The heart of Kyoto merchant Mori no Kiyoshi rose and fell, whispering to himself. He knew that the vast trade demands between the Ming Dynasty and the Wa Country, and the massive gap in goods, could never be satisfied by the annual Ming ships!

Between the Ming Dynasty and the Wa Country, there were not only overt official trades but also clandestine private trades by merchants of both countries. And the amount of such private trade was enormous, with profits so abundant. It resembled an iceberg floating in the far north sea, a gigantic object submerged underwater. In contrast, the overt official trade was just the tip of the iceberg, not even a thousandth.

Given such massive private trade between merchants of the two countries, why participate in validation trade at all? Why not just transport goods directly to the Ming Dynasty's seashore for private trade? Well, this question was carefully considered and boldly practiced by the southwestern countries of the Shogunate, resulting in them being regarded as pirates by the Ming Dynasty's government and hunted down.

The great merchants trading with them within the Ming Dynasty also constantly had the sharp sword of collaborating with pirates hanging over their heads. Once such private trade was exposed, they would be directly discarded by the big figures behind the scenes, facing relentless execution!

As for the Shogunate's side, merchants and samurais engaging in unauthorized private trade were also caught and executed. Only after the Yingren's Chaos did the Shogunate's prestige gradually decline, and its control over various countries weaken, leading to the increasing sea pirates.

"Ah! If one could participate in the validation trade, that would mean obtaining the official status of both countries... truly opening the door to private trade!"

Kyoto merchant Mori no Kiyoshi closed his eyes, envisioning great merchants in Hakata and Sakai Port, who, after engaging in validation trade, had bustling households and servants aplenty.

These great merchants, on their way to the Ming Dynasty, would prepare trade flags officially sanctioned, and trade authorization certificates with seals of both countries. Then, swiftly trade with

acquainted Ming merchants near Ming shores. If encountered by Ming Dynasty's patrol fleet and unable to escape, they would raise tribute trade flags, claiming to be He Ships here for tribute!

Typically, Ming Dynasty's naval forces would only collect a tax and, claiming that the tribute time hadn't arrived, would drive away the He Ship. Even if the naval generals covet the wealth on the ship, they wouldn't directly seize an officially recognized tribute ship as a pirate. Because attacking a barbarian tribute ship was too risky, potentially ending their political careers and costing their lives.

"These limited, hard-to-obtain validation trade flags and permits... are protective talismans for private trade, capable of turning into a floating gold ship!..."

After contemplating for a long while, Mori no Kiyoshi finally opened his eyes, took a deep breath, then exhaled forcefully. With a wry smile, he looked at Takeda Nobuhiro, who had a faint smile on his face, shook his head, and sighed.

"My Tiantai Sect's method of practice has always been 'stopping and observing.' Only by stopping desires can the mind be calm, and only by peaceful observation can wisdom come, and when 'stopping and observing' are practiced together, one can cultivate 'calmness and wisdom'..."

"Lord Nobuhiro, you've stirred my inner greed, disrupting the practice of my peaceful mind, aiming to break my cultivation!..."

"Haha! Mori no Kiyoshi, Master Ji Zang once said, 'Without breaking, there is no collection; breaking the heresies entirely. The true Dharma of Buddhism can neither be affirmed nor denied, nor distinguished as inner or outer. The real aspect of all phenomena is neither existent nor non-existent, what can be broken, what can be collected?'"

With this, Takeda Nobuhiro folded his hands, revealing a solemn smile.

"So, in my opinion, the real aspect of all phenomena requires neither breaking nor establishing. You are thus attached to appearances!"

"..."

Hearing this, Mori no Kiyoshi shook his head. He did not argue with the other but replied with a wry smile.

"Lord Nobuhiro, yours is the method of the Sanron Sect, taking the path of sophistry... This is the evil view of 'wrongly grasping emptiness,' which does not align with my Tiantai Sect."

At this, Takeda Nobuhiro lightly smiled, remaining silent. He knew that his Buddhist knowledge was far inferior to Mori no Kiyoshi of the Myohua Monastery.

However, since the other responded this way, it meant his desires had been stirred. Once desires rise, the ambitions are large, and the balance of forces between both parties changes. Therefore, he would have to invest more capital, offering more benefits! To put it plainly, if you want better and more tribute gifts, to connect with influential figures, you need to add more money!

"Mitsuhiro, brew the tea!"

Takeda Nobuhiro solemnly instructed, and Kaozaki Mitsuhiro quickly put away his perplexed expression, respectfully beginning to brew the tea. Then, with a respectful demeanor, he handed two cups of tea to both of them. They consumed them in one gulp, with no further small talk.

"Validation trade, I indeed have the possibility to intervene. But the premise is, I must handle this matter well! I not only need to present rare and stunning tribute gifts to the newly inaugurated General's Family to fulfill the instructions of influential figures. I also need exceptional valuable gifts to satisfy the powerful figures behind me, the leader of the Xichuan, and the leader of Hatakeyama... Even so, my chance of obtaining the validation trade permit is only fifty percent!..."

Merchant Mori no Kiyoshi regained his composure, hiding his gentle expression, revealing for the first time a sharp demeanor. He looked at Takeda Nobuhiro, calmly stating.

"Lord Nobuhiro, everything in the world relies on human effort. Between us, one prospers, both prosper; one loses, both lose. If I obtain the validation trade permit, I will not forget your help today! And your furs, herbs, sand gold, and horses from the far north... if transported to the Ming Dynasty, could yield profits over thirty times!"

"I, Mori no Kiyoshi, vow to the Buddha! If this scheme succeeds, I will give you ten times the profit of thirty times!"

"Give me ten times?!"

Upon hearing this, Takeda Nobuhiro, with a usually calm expression, finally nearly lost it. After thinking for a moment, he finally nodded, solemnly taking an oath.

"Mori no Kiyoshi, I swear by the Takeda family name to the Buddha!... If so, your matter is my matter!"

"Good!"

Merchant Mori no Kiyoshi extended his hand, shaking hands with Head of the Kaozaki Family Takeda Nobuhiro, clapping heavily as a pledge. Beside them, Kaozaki Mitsuhiro's eyes widened, watching the exchange between the two, utterly dumbfounded. Then, once again, he heard his father Nobuhiro's loud command.

"Mitsuhiro, brew more tea!"

Takashi Mitsuhiro, standing nearby, hurried to obey, though his movements were a bit slurred and his expression was somewhat dazed, but no one spoke up. Mori no Kiyoshi slowly drank the tea, exhaled deeply after placing the cup down, and gave a wry smile, looking at the solemn Takeda Nobuhiro, shaking his head and sighing.

"Our Tiantai Sect's doctrine always practiced 'stopping and observing.' Only by ceasing desires can the mind be still, only by serene observation can wisdom be gained, and by cultivating both 'stopping and observing,' can one attain 'calmness and wisdom'..."

"Lord Nobuhiro, you've stirred my deep desires, disrupted my focused practice, and you wish to break my cultivation!..."

"Hahaha! Mori no Kiyoshi, Master Ji Zang once said, 'There is no breaking and no gathering; the errors are fully broken. The True Dharma of Buddhism cannot be said to have or to lack, nor is there any

distinction between internal and external. The real aspect of all phenomena is neither having nor lacking; what to break, what to gather?"

Saying this, Takeda Nobuhiro clasped his hands, displaying a solemn smile.

"So, in my view, the true aspect of all phenomena needs neither to be broken nor established. By seeing it this way, you are still attached to appearances!"

"..."

Hearing this, Mori no Kiyoshi shook his head. He did not argue with Nobuhiro but replied with a wry smile.

"Lord Nobuhiro, you are following the doctrine of the Sanron Sect and taking the path of sophism... This is the evil view you mistakenly hold, which does not agree with my path of the Tiantai Sect."

Hearing this, Takeda Nobuhiro knew his Buddhist understanding was far inferior to Mori no Kiyoshi of Miao Hua Temple and smiled without arguing further.

He understood that stirring Mori's desires was enough to achieve his aim, as greater ambitions lead to a change in the balance of power between them. Thus, more investment and benefits were called for! Simply put, if Mori wanted more and better tribute gifts, and to network with influential figures, he'd need to offer more!

"Mitsuhiro, prepare the tea," Takeda Nobuhiro commanded, and adjourned the conversation. Kaozaki Mitsuhiro, standing nearby, watched in a daze as the two of them engaged in negotiation. Then, at his father's urgent command, he set about brewing the tea, his movements a bit unsure, though unnoticed by both men.

After sipping the tea in silence, Mori no Kiyoshi finally set down the cup and took a deep breath, then exhaled it forcefully. He revealed a wry smile and shook his head while looking at Takeda Nobuhiro, who stood in front, seemingly amused.

"My cultivation within the Tiantai Sect has always emphasized 'stopping and observing.' Only through ceasing desire can the mind be calm; only watchful observation engenders wisdom, and practicing both 'stopping and observing' leads to 'calmness and wisdom'..."

"Lord Nobuhiro, you are stirring my inner greed, disturbing my peaceful endeavor; do you intend to disrupt my practice?..."

"Hahaha! Mori no Kiyoshi, Master Ji Zang once said, 'If you do not break, you cannot reassemble; once the heresy is broken, it is completely gone. The True Dharma cannot speak of existence or non-existence, nor is there any dichotomy of internal and external. The real nature of all things neither exists nor does not exist, hence there's nothing to break or gather!'"

At this, Takeda Nobuhiro folded his hands in a solemn smile.

"Therefore, to me, the real nature of all things needs neither breaking nor building. When you do this, you become attached to appearances!"

"..."

Hearing this, Mori no Kiyoshi shook his head. He did not argue with Nobuhiro, but responded with a wry smile.

"Lord Nobuhiro, this is the method of the Sanron Sect, and you are taking a path of sophistry... This is not in alignment with my Tiantai Sect."

Knowing this, Takeda Nobuhiro smiled slightly, understanding well that his knowledge of Buddhism could never compare to Mori no Kiyoshi of the Myohua Temple.

He knew that the desires within Mori no Kiyoshi had already been piqued. When desires arise, the ambition is immense, and further investment and benefits are inevitable! Simply put, if you want richer and more stunning tributes, you have to spend more! Make the connections with influential figures, and that means offering more!

"Mitsuhiro, prepare the tea,"

The surrounding Kaozaki Mitsuhiro immediately stepped forward to brew the tea the moment Takeda Nobuhiro sternly instructed, already following their negotiation closely. He watched their exchange wide-eyed and was left in a daze.

After slowly finishing his tea, Mori no Kiyoshi placed the cup down, took a deep breath, exhaled heavily, offered a faint smile at Takeda Nobuhiro, and shook his head with a sigh.

"Lord Nobuhiro, my old friend... Tell me, what do you desire?"

Chapter 1215: Three Years of Enjoyment, Three Conditions—Sea Ship, Craftsmen, and Founding a Domain

The two exchanged pleasantries, probing back and forth, before revealing their intentions, placing their pieces without regret. When their minds met, they exchanged a smile, both showing a hint of greed.

The old Samurai, Takeda Nobuhiro, remained sharp and ambitious. He contemplated for a moment, slowly extended a finger, and said with a smile.

"Mori no Kiyoshi, my first condition, is the premise for working for you. I need a good ship, preferably a Tang Ship from the Ming Dynasty, to voyage the seas of the Far North. The waves are large in the North, this ship must be bigger, sturdier, and capable of transporting Jurchen Stallions!"

"A good ship? Transporting horses?"

Upon hearing this, the great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi was momentarily stunned. He pondered for a while, then asked.

"Lord Nobuhiro, how did you acquire your Jurchen Stallions?"

"Ha! My current horse is called Ruma. It was tribute from the Ezo Tribe of Birch Island to show their allegiance, brought from the North for me! Of course, I also gave them some ironware in return."

As Takeda Nobuhiro talked about this, he displayed a sense of pride on his face. He shook his head with a smile and continued.

"The hall hosts periodic Shandar trades, exchanging products from the Far North through the Ezo Tribe of the Kutadai Peninsula and Kuril Islands. But this kind of transaction is very slow. What can be exchanged is also very uncertain... Mori no Kiyoshi, your affairs cannot wait for so long. And to obtain good things, you must personally go to the Far North to directly trade with Wild Man Jurchen, Evenk Tribes, and Kamchatka Tribes!"

"And to directly trade in the Far North, the hall's small customs ship is not suitable. The waves there are unlike anything you've ever seen, quite different from the large basin of the Seto Inland Sea! I need to dispatch the hall's warriors to brave the sea's challenges for you, so you must invest more... Hmm, don't you have connections with Ming Country merchants? If you can procure a sturdy Tang Ship, that would be best!"

"A ship for transporting horses... Ming Dynasty Tang Ship..."

The great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi pondered for a long time before slowly nodding.

"Speaking of Tang Ships, I do recall one... There's a replica Ocean Shielding Ship at Sakai Port, modeled after the Song Dynasty's Tang Ship style, built by Korean shipwrights, capable of navigating deep waters and large waves! This Ocean Shielding Ship was initially prepared by Sakai Port merchants for validation trade. However, validation trade permits were based on ships. This ship is small, only two hundred materials, not very profitable, hence it was left unused."

"Oh! Two hundred material Song Dynasty style Ocean Shielding Ship? Korean shipwrights?"

Upon hearing this, Takeda Nobuhiro showed interest.

"How did Korean shipwrights come to build ships at Sakai Port?"

At this point, the great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi's eyes twinkled, smiling as he spoke.

"It was naturally the warriors from the Southwestern Fiefs, who invited them from Korea, and later they were invited by Sakai Port merchants..."

"Invited? Oh! Invited by warriors with swords... The location of the Southwestern Fiefs, being able to go to Korea and the Ming Dynasty, is truly enviable!"

Takeda Nobuhiro appeared to understand, shaking his head with a smile, expressing admiration. Then, he furrowed his brows, asking in confusion.

"What kind of ship is this Ocean Shielding Ship? Capable of navigating deep waters, not afraid of large waves?"

"Hmm, I have traveled on this ship; although the style is older than Ming ships, it is truly an ocean-going ship!"

Speaking of this, the great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi displayed confidence, affirming. He had always paid attention to validation trade and had some knowledge of these sea ships.

"...Ocean Shielding Ship, which is essentially a Song-style Sand Ship. Though it is a Song-style Sand Ship, not as advanced as current Ming Ships, it is still far superior to our country's customs ships! It features a square bow, square stern, a wide deck, a deep and small hull, and low gunnels... It has numerous masts and can sail against the wind and water! Additionally, the ship has water-shedding planks along the sides, a raising and lowering stern rudder, and compartments below decks... I've personally traveled on it twice to Ryukyu; it is indeed a fine ship!"

"..."

Upon hearing the description of these ships, the old Samurai Takeda Nobuhiro stroked his chin, pondering silently. His understanding of ships was actually quite limited, not as knowledgeable as Mori no Kiyoshi. However...

"Mori no Kiyoshi, what did you go to Ryukyu for?"

"...For business, only it turned out unsuccessful."

The great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi chuckled, offering a vague answer. This was a matter from several years ago. Ryukyu had tribute ships from the Ming Dynasty, with Ming Dynasty goods that could be sold at high prices. They were granted special privileges by the Emperor of Ming, allowing them "one tribute per year," even "multiple tributes a year," which made the Wa People envious...

But when he arrived in Ryukyu, he discovered that business there was monopolized by the merchants from the various fiefs of Kyushu. If it weren't for his connection with the Miao Courtyard, he might have been hacked to death by the ruthless Western Country warriors.

"Hmm... Two hundred material Ocean Shielding Ship..."

Takeda Nobuhiro didn't think much about it. He just furrowed his brows, contemplating the size of two hundred material.

"Material" is a unit of volume. A two hundred material Ocean Shielding Ship was roughly six zhang long, one zhang wide, half a zhang deep, with a volume of around two cubic zhangs. Simply put, one hundred materials provides a volume of one cubic zhang. Calculating based on 3.1 meters per zhang, the ship's dimensions would be approximately 20 meters long, 4 meters wide, 2 meters deep. And one cubic zhang is equivalent to 30 cubic meters. The volume of a two hundred material Ocean Shielding Ship is around 60 cubic meters...

Overall, the size of this ship is comparable to the Alliance's oar-sailed longship, but the technological advancements mark at least a generational difference.

"Although it's a bit small... it's sufficient for trading valuable goods."

Takeda Nobuhiro pondered for a while, then made his decision. He looked at Mori no Kiyoshi, smiling freely as he agreed.

"Great! Mori no Kiyoshi, the Northern Coast thaws around March as spring begins. If you can deliver the ship by March, I can arrange manpower and set sail north in April! This way, by navigating the coast and returning by October before it freezes over, the ship can return with its cargo!"

"Oh! Sailing in April, returning in October? May Buddha bless us!"

Upon hearing his old friend's response, Mori no Kiyoshi couldn't help but smile. He looked at Takeda Nobuhiro, smiling as he asked.

"Lord Nobuhiro, that's just the first condition. What is your second condition?"

"Ha! The second condition is not difficult for you."

Takeda Nobuhiro stroked his beard, his tone becoming gentle. Since the negotiation began, the attitude between him and Mori no Kiyoshi had subtly shifted, with Mori no Kiyoshi taking a more aggressive stance. After all, it's said that the hand that takes becomes soft, the silent wealth grows.

"As you mentioned earlier, a thousand stones of rice, a hundred bolts of silk, and a hundred sets of armor and weapons, you wouldn't bat an eye. Beyond these goods, I'm developing in Ezo land and although there are some ordinary craftsmen, I lack good craftsmen!... For instance, shipwrights, leather workers, carpenters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths... Help me bring one or two families of each from Kansai..."

"Hmm... Gathering these goods is not difficult. I can deliver them to you when I bring the ship in March. But craftsmen..."

At this point, Mori no Kiyoshi's eyes revealed a playful glint as he observed his old friend's expression, chuckling.

"Shipwrights for repairing fishing boats, leather workers for tanning leather, carpenters for constructing houses and furniture, blacksmiths for manufacturing weapons and farming tools... These craftsmen are indeed needed in your place..."

"Lord Nobuhiro, but what do you need goldsmiths for? Have you discovered a gold mine in Ezo land? Or have you acquired some sand gold in exchanges with the Ezo People?"

"...Mori no Kiyoshi, your nose is too keen... How can one 'cut off all senses and transform them into accomplished wisdom, fulfilling all deeds for sentient beings?'"

Takeda Nobuhiro glared with old eyes and jokingly scolded his friend.

Upon hearing this familiar rebuke, Mori no Kiyoshi lowered his head, eyes reflecting memories. After a moment, his expression turned devout as he recited in a low voice, quoting from the "nose passage" of the Shurangama Sutra.

"...Sudatta rose from his seat, bowed before the Buddha, and said: 'I lack the ability to recite and memorize extensively...'"

After reciting the passage, Mori no Kiyoshi sighed and spoke with a smile.

"Lord Nobuhiro, I can't help it. My greed is just a bit heavy. If you have a substantial amount of sand gold, selling through me will definitely fetch a higher price than elsewhere!"

Takeda Nobuhiro chuckled without comment. Then, he assumed a serious demeanor and spoke solemnly.

"In addition to these two conditions, I have the final and most important condition!"

Seeing Takeda Nobuhiro's stern look, Mori no Kiyoshi straightened up and sat upright.

"Please, speak clearly!"

"If the time is ripe... my Kaozaki Clan wishes to break away from the Ando family and be recognized as an independent country by the General!"

## Chapter 1216: Three Years of Peace, A Promise and Tang Poetry

"What? Lord Nobuhiro, the Kaozaki Family intends to break away from their liege and establish their own country?"

The aroma of tea in the quiet room had not yet dissipated. The two people in the room were both taken aback by such words.

Kaozaki Mitsuhiro's expression shifted, shocked by his father's ambition, yet secretly agreeing.

As deputies of the Tsugaru Ando Family, the Kaozaki Family served as Upper Country Guardians of the Ezo land, required to regularly pay tribute and comply with Tsugaru Ando Family's military demands. This vassal relationship constantly depleted the Kaozaki Family's finances and manpower, while limiting their expansion in the Ezo land.

"Lord Nobuhiro, please think twice! The Tsugaru Ando Family was the Emishi Governor during the Kamakura period, with territories spanning across the Mutsu, Dewa, and Ezo land, once a major power in the Northeast! Although the Ando Family is now divided in two, with the Hinoki-yama Ando Family opposing the Minato Ando Family of the Upper Country..."

"But even the Hinoki-yama Ando Family, whom the Kaozaki Family is loyal to, has at least sixty thousand stones of direct land, controlling over fifty thousand people, with two thousand samurai! Compared to the various vassals of the Hinoki-yama Ando Family, the Kaozaki Family..."

The great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi paused at this point, his expression somber, saying no more. But the implication was clear.

Kaozaki Mitsuhiro, standing nearby, lowered his head and sighed silently. The Kaozaki Family's strength was only one-tenth of their liege's, just over two hundred samurai, half of whom were not fully armed.

Although in the Ezo land, the Koyozaki warriors could subdue various Ezo tribes due to better equipment and combat skills, when faced with the countries of the Northeast, they were negligible! To defy their liege and achieve independence? It seemed like a fool's dream.

"Indeed, the strength of the Hinoki-yama Ando Family is more than ten times that of the Kaozaki Family! Directly rebelling for independence is absolutely impossible."

Takeda Nobuhiro's expression remained calm, smiling as he spoke.

"Therefore, Mori no Kiyoshi, I wish to use your connections to implore the General Ashikaga or the leader of the Xichuan to issue a decree that would even acknowledge the Kaozaki Family's position in the Ezo land..."

"Absolutely impossible! Lord Nobuhiro, neither the General nor the leader would risk estranging the Tsugaru Ando Family just to elevate an aristocratic family in the Ezo land... Moreover, this is defying one's superior!"

"Mori no Kiyoshi, do not rush. I never said it would be now, nor did I intend to supplant the Hinoki-yama Ando Family."

Takeda Nobuhiro's demeanor was leisurely, leaning forward slightly, his words earnest.

"The foundation of the Kaozaki Family has always been the Ezo land, always about advancing northward! I have no designs on any territories in Dewa, Mutsu, nor will I get involved in the struggles on Honshu Island. My greatest aspiration...if the Shogunate could grant independence, establish us as a country, appoint the Kaozaki Family to govern the Ezo land, even elevate this Great Island to Hokkaido...I would die without regret!"

"Likewise, even if the General could grant such a decree now, I wouldn't dare accept! The Hinoki-yama Ando Family has not yet declined; their power in the Ezo land remains strong. This third condition is left to my son Mitsuhiro, even my grandson Yoshihiro..."

"It is only when the Hinoki-yama Ando Family is sufficiently weakened, the Kaozaki Family grows strong enough, and with the General's support...that would be the opportune moment for the Kaozaki Family to establish independence and claim the Ezo land!"

Upon hearing this long-term, shrewd plan, the great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi looked deeply at Takeda Nobuhiro and asked solemnly.

"Lord Nobuhiro, are you so sure the Hinoki-yama Ando Family will decline?"

"An old tree that has grown for too long finds it hard to sprout new buds."

Takeda Nobuhiro replied with a smile. Though his face was aged, his eyes remained sharp, as if seeing through the passage of time.

"Moreover, beside this old tree, there's a strong and flourishing tree competing for sunlight and rain! The world will only grow more chaotic, but our Kaozaki Family, positioned in the Ezo land, is enough to protect ourselves. The Kaozaki Family will not miss any opportunity, continuously expanding northward! As long as we endure like snow-breaking grass, we will wait for our blossoming winter!"

Saying this, Takeda Nobuhiro turned his head to look at his son Mitsuhiro.

"Mitsuhiro, did you remember? The aspirations here, and the means to achieve them..."

"Father, I have remembered your teachings!"

Kaozaki Mitsuhiro nodded respectfully, answering solemnly.

"The Kaozaki Family will extend its roots in the Northern Land, endure the winter, and quietly await the time to blossom..."

"Hmm? Another large tree? Lord Nobuhiro, do you mean the Nanbu clan?"

On the other side, the great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi's eyes flashed as he contemplated silently. Then, watching Takeda Nobuhiro, he asked in a low voice.

"I recall you have some dealings with the Nanbu clan as well... Could it be?..."

"Haha! Mori no Kiyoshi, the affairs of this world are ever-changing; how can they be seen too clearly? When it cannot be seen clearly, what is spoken may just be a possibility..."

Takeda Nobuhiro stroked his beard, his laughter subdued, asking solemnly.

"Mori no Kiyoshi, this third condition might not apply to us, but to our descendants. So, are you willing to take it on?"

The great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi was silent for a moment, then clasped his hands together, swearing to the Buddha.

"Buddha as my witness! I, Mori no Kiyoshi, pledge to assist the Kaozaki Family in achieving independence!"

"Good! Good!"

Takeda Nobuhiro nodded with satisfaction, laughing heartily.

"Haha! Today's matters have all been settled! Once outside this door, not a word must slip! ... Go, Mitsuhiro, have the servants prepare food and drink. Tonight, I wish to toast with an old friend!"

Having said that, Takeda Nobuhiro began reciting a poem by Le Tian, his voice rising and falling, though spoken in the Tang Language.

"Cinnabar meets fire without a trace, old man turned clay returns unceasingly.

Thankful for the wine immortal to warm and heat, pine and cypress to drunkard's arrival lead..."

Upon hearing this, the great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi raised his eyebrows, also replying in perfect Tang Language.

"In a hundred years, how long does youth last, in a single spring, how many days of clear weather.

When meeting, do not refuse drunkenness, listen to the fourth song of Yangguan!"

The exchange of Tang poems was in the Tang Language, eyes revealing what burdens them, something heavy, aged, yet longing for transcendence.

Nearby, Kaozaki Mitsuhiro looked confused. He did not understand the Tang Language, nor could he grasp his father's poetic chanting. Naturally, he could not comprehend the meaning hidden in the poem.

With the decline of the Muromachi shogunate, the world gradually became turbulent, and the new generation of Wa Country samurai favored bows and swords, no longer practicing the Tang Language. At this late period of Muromachi, it was likely the last era in the Wa Country that cherished Tang Style. Beyond that, the new Wa Country culture would fully branch out from the Celestial Empire's culture.

Only friends could understand the shared resonance of poetry. Having completed a recitation, the great merchant, Mori no Kiyoshi tightened his lips, gazed at Takeda Nobuhiro's aging face of laughter, and his eyes revealed a faint sorrow. He understood the meaning within the other's verse and knew the reason for speaking in the Tang Language.

"...Life is all suffering, transcendence is so difficult... Lord Nobuhiro, it seems the escape from this sea of suffering is but a few years away..."

#### Chapter 1217: Three Years of Abundance, Hokkaido Fishery's Seafood

The sky gradually darkened, the glow of the sunset fell from the western horizon, casting a golden red hue over the tea room overlooking the snow and sea. The old Samurai, Takeda Nobuhiro, and the great merchant, Mori no Kiyoshi, stood side by side at the window sill. Both watched as the red sun sank into the vast sea and the lingering clouds faded into darkness, their emotions stirred, followed by a sense of eternity.

Standing side by side without a word, in the culture of the Wa People, was a rare closeness and relaxation. As the sun completely set and night fell, Takeda Nobuhiro finally spoke with a smile.

"The dinner is ready. Mori no Kiyoshi, you must have never tasted the delicacies of Ezo land before!"

"Ha! In that case, it's better for me to humbly accept!"

The great merchant, Mori no Kiyoshi, nodded with a smile, though inwardly somewhat dismissive. Coming from the Capital City, what kind of delicacy had he not tasted? However, upon entering the banquet and smelling the aroma of the dishes, his appetite was piqued, and he looked surprised.

The banquet featured precious white rice, miso soup with tofu, and side dishes garnished with sardines...all were delicacies enjoyed only by the lords of the samurai. However, these were common to Mori no Kiyoshi; only the white rice from Ezo land, with its faint fragrance, slightly caught his attention. But when he picked up a peculiar-looking long onion and took a bite, his face immediately lit up with amazement.

"What kind of onion is this? It tastes like large onions, garlic, and even has the flavor of chives... Oh! It's wonderfully varied and leaves a lingering aftertaste!"

Hearing his old friend's praise, Takeda Nobuhiro smiled with satisfaction without speaking. Matsushita Zou Jirou, sitting beside them, knew but couldn't speak on behalf of the host. So Kaozaki Mitsuhiro laughed and explained.

"This is a special leek from the Northern Land! It can be eaten raw with miso, added to soup, or pickled into delicious side dishes, all extraordinarily tasty!"

Hearing this, the eyes of great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi lit up. His merchant instincts kicked in, and he immediately thought of a way to profit.

"Oh! Such a good thing, delicious and tasty, why not introduce it to all regions of Honshu? Just selling pickled products could be a trade worth tens of thousands of gold!"

At these words, Kaozaki Mitsuhiro smiled slightly without explaining. It was Matsushita Zou Jirou's turn to speak, he lowered his voice, leaned close to Mori no Kiyoshi's ear, and whispered.

"Family Head, this item has a long history and is favored by the Ezo People. In local customs, it's used to offer to wild gods and is related to religion. Buddhist sects all dislike it, considering it one of the 'five

pungent spices.' And the lords of the Capital City might think that the food of Ezo people doesn't match their status..."

"Ha! What a pity, what a pity! Such a delicacy, yet can't be eaten, that's a 'knowledge barrier' instead!"

Mori no Kiyoshi shook his head, sighed lowly, but said no more. He himself didn't mind much, tried two more leeks, and then reached for the real meat dish at the center of the banquet. Only Takeda Nobuhiro and he touched their chopsticks for this rare meat dish; no one else would eat it.

"Oh! The texture, the flavor rich, the meat tender, delicate and not greasy, truly a delicacy... Hmm, the venison from Ezo land is superior to that of any country in the Northeast!"

Mori no Kiyoshi tasted a piece of medium-rare venison, his face showing admiration. However, venison was rare and not a business he could do. He extended his chopsticks again, reaching for sashimi white meat smeared with sauce on another side, which was a common and cheap type of salmon from Ezo land. Before trying it, Mori no Kiyoshi looked at Kaozaki Mitsuhiro and asked in a low voice.

"This piece of sashimi?..."

"These salmon come from the far north seas, containing very few parasites. Before cooking, they have already been frozen in the deep snow of the Northern Land for ten days, removing the parasites... It's safe to eat!"

"Hmm."

The great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi nodded slightly, picked up a piece, and put it into his mouth. As he tasted the smooth texture, his eyes lit up, and he asked with a smile.

"Buddhist sects do not prohibit fish. What about the production of this fish?"

"Very large! Around Ezo land, there are dense fish schools, especially numerous in the southeast! Each fishing season can last for four months, and right now is already the end of the fishing season. During

the fishing season, when going out to sea, the fish are so numerous that they can jump right into the boat, filling nets and entire boats!"

Undoubtedly, the fishing season and fishing grounds mentioned here are indeed the world's largest fishing grounds, the Hokkaido fishing grounds! The history of the Wa People and the Ainu People fishing here dates back to ancient times.

The great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi's eyes moved, briefly pondered, and then asked with a smile.

"Oh! I also heard the North Sea fishing season is quite spectacular. Besides this cheap salmon, are there any other good items?"

"Hmm... The most caught fish are herring, followed by mackerel pike and salmon, all three are cheap enough for commoners to eat. Slightly more precious are Alaska pollock, large squid, and large crabs from the sea. The most precious is the North Sea abalone, large and meaty, two can weigh one jin, and even one jin each! However, this requires summer warmth, with female divers diving deep to catch... And this item sells at an exorbitant price of hundreds of cash apiece!"

The sea crab here is the king crab, which is also abundantly produced in the Hokkaido fishing grounds. However, according to the prices at the time, buying one was only equivalent to over ten jins of rice. And the North Sea abalone, two weighing one jin, were dual abalones, and one jin was the valuable single abalone. These top-quality abalones have become exceedingly rare due to overfishing in later generations.

"Oh!"

Upon hearing this, the great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi turned his head and glanced at Matsushita Zou Jirou, who also lowered his head.

If such large abalone were to enter the Capital City, one could sell for a thousand cash. If dried and sold to the Ming Dynasty, one could sell for several gold, even over ten gold. In fact, the common seafood is so expensive in the Wa Country because they are highly sought after by the Ming Dynasty scholar-officials, thus driving the price up!

"Hmm, a business can surely be made with these seafood!"

In front of Takeda Nobuhiro, the great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi nodded, smiling with a promise.

"The cheap herring, mackerel pike, and salmon can be pickled and then shipped to the Capital City for sale. I have some connections in the Capital City and can receive them with a ten percent markup. Meanwhile, the Alaska pollock, large squid, and large sea crabs need to be packed in ice barrels, transported by fast ships, and marked up by thirty percent. As for large abalone, they will be dried with salt here, made into dry goods... I'll double the price!"

"Good! Very good!"

Takeda Nobuhiro had been smiling silently until this moment, hearing Mori no Kiyoshi's promise, he finally spoke cheerfully.

"Come! Mitsuhiro, raise the sake and toast to Family Head Mori no Kiyoshi! He is my peer, and we have known each other for over twenty years. From now on, you must call him Uncle!"

"Hai!"

Kaozaki Mitsuhiro respectfully raised the cup, bowed his head, and toasted to the newly made "Uncle."

"Uncle Mori no Kiyoshi, I shall finish this cup first!"

"Ah? Lord Nobuhiro, you this..."

Great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi's face froze for a moment, then revealed a wry smile. It's not easy to take advantage of a samurai family head, to become this convenient Uncle means spending more money. Spending more money is no big deal, the real fear is getting caught up in some disputes in the future...

Mori no Kiyoshi sighed, glanced at the smiling Takeda Nobuhiro. Somehow, from the other's smiling eyes, he saw a hint of plea, even a touch of entrustment. He pondered for a few moments and finally nodded in agreement.

"So be it! I've watched you grow up, it's a fate of more than twenty years. In that case, I'll shamelessly call you nephew! From now on, we're also considered family..."

#### Chapter 1218: Three Years of Longevity: Trade to the Far North

In the blink of an eye, several days had passed, and the customs ship from the rice house had unloaded its cargo of grains, salt, sauces, and liquor, and was now loaded with Ezo land products, ready to return.

Speaking of Ezo land at this time, there weren't many major products available for sale. The potential of marine products was vast, but not fully developed yet. As for high-quality wood, it's laborious to fell, and transporting it to the Kansai region didn't offer more competitiveness than the timber from various Northeast countries. As for rice and beans, the local consumption was still inadequate, requiring imports from Honshu Island.

Therefore, the returning customs ship only carried some local Northern Land specialties like furs, seafood, and a few herbs and supplements. The bulk of the cargo was ballast in the form of sand iron ore. It's worth mentioning that Hokkaido has abundant iron ore and coal mine resources, providing a foundation for industrialization. Iron ore in this area, mainly shallow sand iron ore, is easy to mine and widely dispersed.

Near Victory Mountain Manor, there is a small surface sand iron mine that can be mined nearby for smelting ore to forge swords and helmets. Regarding the production of complex armor, the manor lacks skilled craftsmen and thus cannot produce them. And for such skilled Master Craftsmen, it depends on whether Mori no Kiyoshi can find a way to bring some in.

The development of Ezo land hasn't been long and relies on resources and personnel from Honshu Island. Yet, all of this cannot depend on the General and nobles from the Capital City, but relies on familiar merchants. Therefore, Takeda Nobuhiro, disregarding the cold, stood firm with his aging body, personally leading a number of samurai retainers at the port to see off Mori no Kiyoshi.

"From the mountains I see you off, as nightfall hugs the wood gate.

Each year spring grass turns green, will the noble son return?"

With a smile on his face, Takeda Nobuhiro recited a farewell. This time, instead of Bai Juyi's poem, he switched to Wang Wei's.

"Return! I will definitely return! Lord Nobuhiro, in no more than three months, I will surely come back with the ocean-shielding ship. Please wait a while!"

The great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi smiled and nodded, shaking hands with his old friend. This custom, learned from the Tang people, is like in Tang poetry that says, "Holding hands with an old friend, parting feels like three autumns, traveling far with the aid of a staff." Handshake farewells carry a sense of reluctance, yet it's a very intimate gesture.

"Good! 'Do not ask more, the white clouds drift without end.'

Takeda Nobuhiro nodded and recited another verse. This meant to urge Mori no Kiyoshi to leave quickly.

Mori no Kiyoshi laughed silently, shaking his head. He glanced at the Jurchen Stallion behind Takeda Nobuhiro, bade farewell to everyone, and then the two customs ships hoisted their sails, paddled their oars, and soon disappeared into the horizon.

It wasn't until the two customs ships vanished at the edge of the sky that Takeda Nobuhiro turned around. He looked at the snow-covered mountain forests and the Victory Mountain Manor he had personally established high in the mountain, reminiscing for a long time. After a moment, he straightened his expression, looked at the samurai, and issued orders decisively.

"Notify the villages in the territory to select experienced fishermen who have been to Northern Land! Prepare for trade with the Ezo, and hurry to forge a batch of trade iron axes!..."

"By the way, Murakami Kitamichi, you, who are in charge of the ships and have ventured out to the open sea, come with me into the manor, I have important matters to instruct!"

"Hai'ye!"

The samurai all bowed their heads, riding through the snow away. A weather-beaten, middle-aged samurai mounted his small horse, following Family Head Takeda Nobuhiro back to Victory Mountain Manor.

The two did not enter the tea room and knelt directly in the main hall. In front of the samurai of the territory, Takeda Nobuhiro would not recite poems or speak Zen, nor use the reception style for Capital City figures. His expression was serious as he asked sternly.

"Murakami Kitamichi, I recall you went north of Birch Island and traded with the Reindeer Tribe?"

"Yes! That was ten years ago. I rowed a small boat with two samurai, going there to purchase deerskins..."

Speaking of the experiences back then, a trace of horror was still visible on the timeworn face of Murakami Kitamichi.

"That journey was tumultuous, the small boat rose and fell with the waves several times, almost overturning several times... Fortunately, with Buddha's blessing, we found the coastal Saha people, exchanging two iron axes for two bundles of finest deerskin. I then used the liquor I carried to trade for a small bag of sand gold. Upon returning, all were handed over to the manor..."

Hearing this, Takeda Nobuhiro nodded, showing a look of reminiscence.

Back then, Murakami Kitamichi was still a young samurai. Because of his brave expedition at sea, he brought back valuable furs and sand gold, and loyally offered them to the family, proving his courage and loyalty!... It was then that Takeda Nobuhiro valued him, promoting him to the position of ship master, which has now been ten years.

"Murakami Kitamichi, you also saw the people from the rice house this time."

Takeda Nobuhiro's expression was solemn, his words slightly gentle.

"There's a major event happening in the Capital City, and the Northern most products of the main family are highly pursued in the capital. Some important figures need the main family's fine horses, medicines, and furs, the more precious and rare, the better!..."

"Therefore, after spring, I intend to have you personally sail to the Far North tribes to trade directly with each tribe. Kitamichi, this matter concerns the major plans of the family, and only you can shoulder this great responsibility!"

"Trade in the far north?..."

Remembering sailing the small boat through the turbulent North Sea ten years ago, Murakami Kitamichi's heart surged with waves. Yet, with Family Head Takeda Nobuhiro personally speaking, having reached this point, refusal was not an option. After several breaths, Murakami Kitamichi bowed deeply on the ground and accepted loudly.

"Hai! I will risk my life to journey through all the far northern tribes and bring back precious goods for the Family Head!"

Seeing Murakami Kitamichi's declaration, Takeda Nobuhiro nodded with a smile on his face. He pondered for a while and then reassured him slightly.

"Kitamichi, this journey is focused on trade; there must be both going and returning. The family will not let you sail a small boat and face a near-death experience. Before spring, the rice house will send a two-hundred-ton Tang Ship, called the Ocean Shielding Ship. This ship can sail the sea and should withstand the wind and waves, navigating the Northern Land's tides."

"Ocean-Blocking Tang Ship?"

Upon hearing this, Murakami Kitamichi was slightly taken aback. He had heard of such ships; they were probably the best sea ships that could be built by the various countries of Honshu Island. He just didn't expect the rice house to actually acquire such a ship and give it to the Main Family. One must know, just the cost of this one ship was enough to match the family's income for one or two years.

Thinking of this, Murakami Kitamichi's shoulders instantly felt much heavier. He pressed his lips together, lowered his head, and softly sought permission.

"Family Head, I have heard of such ships. The sails and oars are very complicated... I can't operate it..."

"No problem! The rice house will equip this ship with dedicated sailors. The fishermen in the manor will also have to learn alongside once on board. As for your task, it remains to search out and trade with all the far northern tribes!"

At this point, Takeda Nobuhiro pondered again and added.

"Kitamichi, this time, the food and sake on the ship will exceed the regular allocation for you. The exchanged goods will also be lightweight and high-value ironware and rice wine. The ship's capacity is limited, so prioritize trading for precious furs and herbs. As for horses, if they don't fit, you can go again next year..."

Takeda Nobuhiro paused; the matter of horses wasn't urgent. If necessary, he could even give his Jurchen Stallion to Mori no Kiyoshi.

Of course, from the goods exchanged from the Northern Land, furs, herbs, and even horses will be underpriced by merchants. But what he valued most was actually...

"This time northward, you must pay close attention! The far northern tribes do not know the value of gold; the price is extremely low. If they have sand gold, you must trade for it all! And if there is news of a gold mine, make sure to inquire clearly!"

With a solemn expression, Takeda Nobuhiro carefully instructed. Other goods all had to go through the hands of merchants, yielding profits, but the large portion would be taken by others. What truly yielded hundredfold profits was the Jin Shi in the hands of the northern tribes! Because, this was the true big money, the kind that could be spent directly!

"Hai! I will risk my life, explore all the far northern tribes, and collect sand gold for the Family Head!"

Murakami Kitamichi prostrated once more, loudly pledging. Satisfied, Takeda Nobuhiro nodded and gave a few more instructions before letting him step down. Before stepping down, he said in a deep voice.

"Kitamichi, before you set out, you can go to the treasury and take twenty kan of wealth, and also get some clothes and rice for your family. If on the journey north... your child, I will have Mitsuhiro adopt them and raise them."

Hearing this, Murakami Kitamichi paused his lips tightly, saying nothing. He knelt solemnly, bowing three times heavily to Takeda Nobuhiro before turning and leaving.

Takeda Nobuhiro nodded, watching him walk away, and sighed softly.

"The samurai of the Northern Land are poor yet resolute, loyal yet brave; they will surely leave their name under the heavens!..."

The moonlight was like water, and in the blink of an eye, it was late at night. That night, the old Samurai Takeda Nobuhiro lay under the moonlight, unable to sleep. He sat up cross-legged, his old eyes dim, gazing at the deep snow sea of the mountain forest outside the window, sighing and reciting.

"Growing old with my lord, asking myself how to be at ease in old age. Eyes weary at night resting first, head lazy not combed in the morning..."

Midway through reciting, he suddenly stopped and switched to another poem, the reply between Liu Yuxi and Bai Juyi.

"Being experienced in affairs makes one familiar with them, seeing people as seeing rivers. Thinking carefully, all are fortunate, thereafter one is carefree. Don't say the mulberry and elm are late; they still fill the sky with clouds at dusk..."

"Don't say the mulberry and elm are late; they still fill the sky with clouds at dusk..."

The old Samurai Takeda Nobuhiro's expression shifted as the resoluteness and fighting spirit of his life rose to his heart once again. He muttered softly, perhaps talking to himself, or maybe addressing someone else.

"Great changes are about to happen in the world. Our Kaozaki Clan must seize every opportunity! Increase strength, acquire wealth, raise more samurai, expand the number of citizens; that is the foundation of the family!... And all this, in Ezo land, can only rely on trade with the various barbarian tribes, growing step by step!"

"The time to expand the family... while I'm here, I can still seize it. As for my son, he only has the talent to maintain... Perhaps, my hope lies in the generation of the grandchildren..."

Having said this, the old samurai Takeda Nobuhiro lay down again and soon fell asleep. Listening to his snoring, a slender young man squatted at the doorway, silently for a long while, then quietly left. After he left, the snoring in the room gradually ceased, leaving only a sigh.

"Ah, timing, lifespan... Buddha's blessing..."

Chapter 1219: The First Great Tribe on the North American Continent's Western Sea Coast to Convert to the Chief Divine

The cold wind of January blows from the continent to the coast. On Hokkaido, the west side of the Pacific Ocean, it carries the northwest monsoon from the northwest continent. On the North American coastline on the east side of the Pacific, it blows with the northeast trade winds from the Northern continent.

The trade winds howled fiercely, while a festive atmosphere pervaded the Yoreim tribe's camp. A massive Kingdom fleet was anchored there. Over a thousand Kingdom's Warriors, militia, and sailors swarmed into this coastal Northern Great Tribe, celebrating the New Year's Chief Divine Festival with the locals, the Mayo people!

"Praise the Chief Divine Huitzilopochtli! We conduct the sacred rite, inviting the presence of the Chief Divine!..."

The Preaching Priests of the fleet set up a high platform, kindled a blazing Sacred Fire, and chanted scriptures praising the Chief Divine. The devout Warriors of the Kingdom surrounded the altar, striking

long spears against shields, and performed the war dance in celebration of the divine. Meanwhile, the militia and sailors cheered and shouted, their cries echoing like thunder.

Three thousand tribespeople from the Yoreim tribe gathered at the outermost circle of the altar, behaving cautiously and obediently. They mingled with the militia of the Kingdom of the Lake; some appeared very close, some were anxious, and many more carried fear and submission.

Upon closer look, one could see that those tribespeople who appeared close had the Chief Divine's emblem engraved on their foreheads. The faces of the tribal chieftains bore stiff, fearful, and reluctant smiles, welcoming the more than a thousand "Lake Central Tribe Warriors" who had descended uninvited from the sky.

As for the chieftain Kalan of the Yoreim tribe, he wore the most formal sacrificial garments, a headdress with red deer antlers, a patterned robe, and an American gourd at his waist as he boarded the flagship of the Kingdom fleet. He was "warmly invited" by the fleet's captain and deputy captain, the Divine Revelation Priest Zuvaro and the Second Level Priest Miki, to board the ship's bow to watch the sacrificial rite ashore and the "Chief Divine's Thunderbolt."

"Praise the Chief Divine Huitzilopochtli! He is supreme and great, omnipresent, and omnipotent! He bestows upon us sunlight and dew, food, and fish. He protects our harvests, allowing our people to flourish, and he will also bring down the Divine Punishment of Thunderbolt! We prostrate ourselves, praying to Him, offering pious sacrifices!..."

"The God has come! He descends upon the sun in the sky, gazing at us majestically!"

The Second-Level Preaching Priest, Utadori Quetzalcoatl, sang and praised devoutly, his voice loud and authoritative. He took from the Warriors, one by one, the young wolves with drained blood, the deer shot by arrows, and the plump and robust river fish. Then, the priests brandished Obsidian daggers, chanting together in unison, and dissected the "three sacrifices" as offerings, throwing them into the blazing Sacred Fire in succession!

"Praise the Supreme Main God, we offer you the Coyote! He is the Sun's companion, protecting the perpetuation of the tribes!"

"Praise the Supreme Main God, we offer you the deer! He is the spirit under the Moon, ensuring our peace after death!"

"Praise the Supreme Main God, we offer you the river fish! He is the darling of the earth, ensuring the harvest of the fields, fisheries, and hunting grounds!"

Faint black smoke rose from the Sacred Fire, emitting the smell of charred protein. Then, the Preaching Priests took out the sulfur charcoal powder from their pockets and threw it into the fire! Instantly, the flames rose, enveloped in a mysterious blue color.

Upon seeing this scene, the Warriors and militia of the Kingdom all prostrated themselves on the ground, devoutly eulogizing the Chief Divine. Meanwhile, the surrounding Yoreim tribespeople exclaimed in awe and finally could not contain the reverence in their hearts, all prostrating themselves on the ground, praising the Chief Divine of the Lake Tribe! In the end, only a dozen or so tribal chieftains, looking grim, reluctantly kneeled down under the sharp gaze of the Kingdom Priests.

"...The God has witnessed it! The sacrificial rite ascends to the sky, and the Chief Divine grants promises! He promises the continuation of the tribe, the Divine Kingdom after death, and protects our harvests!..."

"He is merciful and generous, protecting all tribes who convert! And from now on, you all shall convert to the Chief Divine, becoming his devout followers!... Praise the Chief Divine! He protects us!"

"Praise the Chief Divine! Protection! Protection!..."

When the Preaching Priests sang up to this point, the surrounding cheers grew louder, echoing along the coast and under the sky. Listening to the shouts of reverence and submission from the tribespeople, the faces of the kneeling tribal chieftains became even grimmer, revealing a tinge of deep-seated fear.

On the longship of the fleet, chieftain Kalan pursed his lips, his expression rigid, and said nothing. A few days earlier, the massive Kingdom fleet had suddenly descended on them, launching an assault on the tribe, catching him completely off guard.

With the cooperation of over a hundred Kingdom Warriors stationed there and dozens of devout tribal believers, four hundred Armored Warriors and eight hundred bow spear soldiers directly landed ashore and flooded every corner of the Yoreim Great Tribe!

The Kingdom army moved swiftly, with very clear objectives. Led by the tribal believers, they immediately attacked each longhouse, taking control of the chieftain and the leaders. Soon, the tribal chieftain and leaders declared surrender, and those who refused to surrender were executed on the spot. Under the absolute military pressure of a thousand Kingdom soldiers, hundreds of warriors and hunters within the tribe also gradually laid down their weapons and surrendered.

In just three days, the Yoreim Great Tribe of three thousand people changed masters and came under the jurisdiction of the Kingdom of the Lake. Chieftain Kalan felt anger and despair, yet was helpless. For such a massive fleet, with so many elite warriors, even a frontal battle would mean the Yoreim Great Tribe could never be a match and would have to flee into the eastern wilderness.

The annexation of wilderness tribes was thus barefaced and merciless! The tribe's warriors obeyed the powerful, as long as they could maintain their original lifestyle without being driven to desperation... they would not fight for the chiefs in a hopeless battle.

Once the tribe changed hands, there was no chance to turn the tables. Chieftain Kalan only regretted not being on guard sooner, allowing the Kingdom's Preaching Priests to preach and spread their religion throughout the tribe for nearly two years. He also resented the greedy leaders of the tribe, dazzled by the exquisite gifts from the Lake Tribe, without any vigilance. More than that, he loathed the foolish tribespeople who were so easily converted by the Preaching Priests, becoming followers of the Lake's Chief Divine...

Thousands of thoughts surged in chieftain Kalan's heart, morphing into anger and unwillingness. However, in front of more than a dozen armor-clad, spear-wielding Warriors, all of chieftain Kalan's unwillingness was buried in his heart, not daring to reveal it. Two steps away, Divine Revelation Priest Zuvaro and Miki spoke in low voices in the Prepetcha language, faces solemn.

"Scholar Mikki, listen to my explanation! This sudden action, I only received notice two days in advance, I didn't mean to hide it from you... The Second-Level Preaching Priest Utadori Quetzalcoatl, has been preaching in the Northern wilderness for nearly two years, converting over a hundred tribal believers and migrating over a hundred Kingdom Warriors, establishing deep roots. However, the chieftain and leaders of the Yoreim Great Tribe remained obstinate, unwilling to submit to the Chief Divine. Tribal shaman priests also interfered incessantly, suppressing the Kingdom's preaching..."

"Therefore, when news of us leading the fleet north with more than a thousand warriors came, the Songbird Priest made the decision to send a small boat to contact our fleet, aiming to capture the Yoreim Great Tribe in one fell swoop! I worried you might hesitate and not strike hard, which is why I told you only before action..."

"Thankfully, everything went smoothly, with almost no bloodshed, only a few dozen unwilling-to-surrender leaders and warriors were killed. The vast majority of the Yoreim tribespeople did not harbor a blood feud with the Kingdom and, as expected, accepted everything submissively. Next, after this New Year's grand ritual, there will be an equally sacred conversion ceremony to soothe the people's hearts. We need to engrave the Chief Divine's emblem upon them, make them swear a blood oath, fully convert all Yoreim tribespeople, and transform them into the Chief Divine's followers entirely!"

"The fleet needs a stable rear base to explore the North. Establishing such a base cannot be accomplished in one or two years. Throughout the Northern land, there is no place more suitable than the Yoreim Great Tribe, deeply permeated by the Kingdom with its believers! This tribe is excellently positioned, with a large population, fertile riverside soils suitable for cultivation, vast gold and copper deposits, and it connects with the wilderness via rivers. Further north, in Yaji people's territory, lies a vast coalfield... Moreover, their language is similar to the Alliance's, facilitating the Kingdom's rule and assimilation. This is the land the Chief Divine promised!"

"After capturing the Yoreim Great Tribe, this will be the first large tribe in the Northern continent to convert to the Chief Divine, and the Kingdom's first large settlement in the Northern continent! Henceforth, the Kingdom's exploration in the North will have a strong pillar. Our maritime exploration journey will also be able to continuously and nearby supply food, materials, and sailors! This resolute decision to launch a surprise attack is the reason for my conviction..."

#### Chapter 1220: Expansion Strategy for the North American Continent

"The Supreme Main God, protects His believers, bestows limitless mighty power..."

Blue smoke rises, and the chanting of the Preaching Priests spreads between the sea and sky. They dance mysterious ritual dances, shaking wooden bells in their hands, singing the myths and miracles of the Main God!

Thousands of people kneel on the ground, expressions either devout, numb, or fearful. They inhale the pungent smell of burning sulfur, listen to the strange singing of the priests, hear the deep bell sound,

and their minds begin to feel dizzy. And the image of the Main God seems to rise gradually in everyone's hearts, becoming more elevated.

"The methods of the Preaching Priests, indeed reach deep into people's hearts!..."

Scholar Miki watches the divine ritual on the shore, eyes thoughtful.

Though all are Priests of the Main God, the affairs of the Preaching Priests focus more on manipulating hearts. As long as it's to spread the faith of the Main God, the Preaching Priests do not mind what methods they use. Their methods include communal rituals, psychological suggestion, gentle hypnosis, use of Divine Smoke, and the most awe-inspiring and absurd special potions!

However, the duty of the Divine Revelation Priests is to follow existing order, studying the laws of world operation. They must discover the rules of Divine Revelation and use these rules to create more effective production and life tools.

Their responsibilities are completely different, and their styles of action are entirely opposite, just as this plan for ambush is somewhat incompatible with Miki's principles.

Thinking of this, Scholar Miki sighs and says deeply.

"Zuwaro, Chieftain Kalan of the Yaolem Great Tribe, after all, once agreed amicably with the Kingdom's exploration team! He has never overtly shown hostility, yet we've taken his tribe by such means...Doing this once is fine, but if done repeatedly and it spreads among the tribes, where does that leave the Kingdom's credibility? In the long run, it's not necessarily good for the stability of the Main God's faith either..."

Hearing this, Divine Revelation Priest Zuwaro raises his eyebrows. He smiles on his face but feels differently in his heart. Among these tribes who kill and struggle on the wilderness, how many have clean hands? The process of the Kingdom's missionary work itself is a contest for control over the tribespeople against the Chieftains and leaders. If not by some thunderous means, do the Chieftains and leaders obediently relinquish power? Faith must be spread first before discussing stability...

"In the end, Miki still spends too much time in Divine Power University and the Divine Revelation Place, unaware of the dangers of the human heart."

Divine Revelation Priest Zuvaro contemplates silently, then says with a smile.

"Scholar Miki, there's no need for you to worry too much. The coastal tribes have limited ranges of activity, and information doesn't spread quickly. Also, the change of tribal chiefs and leaders isn't uncommon. If the Kingdom wants to quickly expand in the Northern Land, the strategy should be like this: first engage in trade with local great tribes, then send priests to preach, and once there is a certain base of believers, then inside and outside support each other, to fully convert the entire great tribe to the Main God!..."

"The Main God protects! As long as we establish a foothold in the Northern Continent, showing enough military strength, the surrounding small tribes will all flock and submit to us!"

"The Main God protects! Zuvaro, I am not denying your and Priest Utadori's expansion strategy...However, when the Kingdom takes action, it must be careful to maintain its reputation! For example, Chieftain Kalan and the surrendered leaders cannot be executed arbitrarily; at least spare their lives. To truly stabilize the hearts of the tribe, introduce the Kingdom's trade goods to improve the lives of the tribespeople. Also, have priests guide the local tribes in farming, increasing the yield per mu of farmland..."

Scholar Miki says solemnly and in detail. His stance is inevitably on the side of the Kingdom. So, his words at this moment supplement the follow-up to this radical expansion strategy.

"Take the Yaolem Great Tribe, near the guano rock deposits, it can use this natural fertilizer nearby to boost farmland output! It is also near copper ore deposits, allowing for the smelting of copper materials, producing copper tools. If tin ore can be found, then bronze tools can be manufactured here...And only after converting to the belief in the Main God, improving tribal life, can the faith of the tribespeople truly stabilize!"

The two leading Divine Revelation Priests seriously discuss, perfecting the strategy for expansion in the Northern Land. Meanwhile, the divine ritual on the shore is gradually coming to an end.

The Second-Level Preaching Priest Utadori squints his eyes, standing on the altar, looking at the prostrate crowd, his heart joyful. After nearly two years of preaching in Yaolem, he has finally reached today! Soon, after the divine ritual ends, it will be the highest honor for a Preaching Priest, the great conversion of the entire tribe. In the great conversion, cutting hair, blood oath, tattooing, and imprinting, none can be omitted. And before officially converting, they still need to demonstrate the Main God's majesty to awe the hearts of the people!

"The Supreme Main God can grant generous protection to His devout believers, and can also wield the Thunderbolt of Divine Punishment to those who disbelieve and betray! ...Sound the horn! Witness Divine Punishment!"

With a fierce shout from Preaching Priest Utadori, several priests blew shrill conch horns. Hearing the horn, both Zuwaro and Miki paused their discussion. Zuwaro's expression becomes solemn, he immediately takes out a red command flag, waves it towards the woods on the shore, and orders in a deep voice.

"Prepare the Tiger Squat Cannon! Fire!"

Twelve longships lined up, the Tiger Squat Cannons on the bow were ignited. Moments later, a terrifying Thunderbolt roared and exploded!

"Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!..."

The thunder roars continuously, shaking the sky as if Divine Punishment from the Main God has descended! Seeing the lake tribe capable of wielding thunder and fire, thousands of participating local tribespeople are terrified. At this moment, they completely prostrate on the ground, fearfully praying to the Main God!

Even the most proud tribal leaders show undisguisable fear in front of the Copper Beast they have never seen before. They are unafraid of face-to-face slaughter, unafraid of arrows, but in the face of the Thunderbolt said to be Divine Punishment, facing threats spoken of by the priests about the soul's fall, they have no choice but to bow their heads.

On the flagship longship, Chieftain Kalan stands beside the "Copper Beast". Facing the deafening Thunderbolt, breathing in the acrid smoke, imagining the unknown Evil Demon, at last his knees

weaken, and he falls to his knees on the deck. Seeing this, Divine Revelation Priest Zuvaro reveals a satisfied smile.

"Very good! The firing of the ship's cannon saves so much effort in intimidating hearts! Haha!"

Scholar Miki touches his chin, his eyes flickering, without speaking. Until all the cannon firing is complete, the branches of the woods on the shore also break, leaving a mess. Thousands of tribespeople's hearts quake, with no further resistance. And the ceremony for converting believers officially begins!

Batch after batch of tribespeople are led by the Kingdom's Warriors, kneeling before the burning fire basin. Then, they have their hair cut, thrown into the fire, their palms cut, taking a blood oath, then drinking blood wine, reciting the Main God's name three times, and finally having the Sun Hummingbird tattooed on their foreheads...

Preaching Priest Utadori smiles, looking toward the base of the altar, everything in orderly fashion. He ponders briefly, then heads to the flagship longship. Then, with Chieftain Kalan's frightened eyes, Priest Utadori expressionlessly raises an obsidian blade, swings it steadily down!

"Ah!..."