

## Civilization 1341

### Chapter 1341: Four Years of Fortune, the Ocean-Faring Tang Ship

The late autumn North Asian coast was filled with a sense of desolation. The shore was lined with withered yellow trees, and the distance held a deep forest. The sky was a gloomy gray, and the sea was a tranquil gray-white. A rare three-decked ocean-blocking ship of the North was lowering all five of its sails, anchored by the river's edge on the coast. This quiet Tang Ship stood in silent contrast to the nearby bustling camp of the Ewenki people, exuding a sense of chill and solitude.

"Frost falls on the plains, Luwei is cold. Far from home, I hold my sleeves tight, yet drift further to the North..."

A cool and elegant haiku floated from the bow of the ocean-blocking ship, carrying with it a sense of melancholy. Yet the one who spoke such a beautiful haiku was a burly and strong monk. He wore a robe made of deerskin, a turban wrapped around his head, and a string of Buddha Beads adorned his neck. Looking at the long Naginata on his back and the conspicuous scar on his face, one might think he was more of a Monk Soldier than a monk.

"Haha! The great sea of the Northern Land, it's my first time here, my first time seeing it, truly unlike the sea of the Southern Ming Dynasty! I never thought, I, a Great General of the Shoni Family... would end up converting to Buddha... and come to this extremely cold North Sea..."

The strong Monk Soldier chuckled with emotion, then walked towards the Samurai with the moon style haircut at the bow, smiling as he asked.

"Murakami-kun, have you already negotiated with the leaders of the Ezo people? Regarding the crucial matter of the Jurchen Stallions..."

Upon hearing this, Murakami Kitamichi of the Kaozaki Family, snapped out of his contemplation. He turned around, casting a somewhat wary glance at the strong Monk Soldier, speaking in a deep voice.

"Watanabe guard, they are Shandan people, not Ezo people! I have already left a deposit and negotiated with the leaders of these Shandan people. They will trade with the Jurchen Barbarians in the southwest to bring over a tall Jurchen Stallion, one that's not gelded... When we return next year, we'll exchange the remaining deposit for the horse! ... And then, this horse is to be presented to the Family Head!"

Hearing Murakami Kitamichi's address, Watanabe Masumi raised his eyebrows, his expression changing slightly. He addressed the other as "kun," a form of respect, yet was rudely called 'guard' in return...

"'Guard' is a low-ranking samurai, subordinate to a 'kun'... Murakami-kun, is this a way to emphasize that he is the leader onboard? Also mentioning that the Jurchen Stallion is to be presented to the Kaozaki Family Head... These levels of vigilance and guarded hostility signify a truly loyal samurai!..."

Thinking of this, Watanabe Masumi squinted his eyes, a murderous intent flashing through his mind. Before he converted to Buddhism, he would have responded to such provocation with a swift slash. But now, he paused in silence, contemplating his Buddhist name...

"Crossing beyond, true clarity... Watanabe... Masumi..."

The Monk Soldier Watanabe muttered to himself, then smiled indifferently. He certainly understood the source of Murakami's hostility. His presence on the ship represented Mori no Kiyoshi's side, or the Miao Courtyard faction, formally intervening in this Far North trade!

In March of this year, the great merchant Mori no Kiyoshi returned to Victory Mountain Manor as agreed, bringing Takeda Nobuhiro two customs ships worth of goods, along with an over two-hundred-ton Ocean-Blocking Tang Ship. However, he also represented his backing forces in proposing a condition for this trade. He wanted his people not only as sailors on the ship but also included in the Far North journey!

Takeda Nobuhiro nodded in agreement. Thus, the Monk Soldier Watanabe Masumi boarded the ship as the group leader of the sailors, a navigator, and a goods appraiser. Or rather, he had been on board since departing from the Capital City and never disembarked.

Currently, on the Ocean-Blocking Tang Ship, there were thirty people, half were Kamaozaki clan Samurai, guides, and apprentice sailors, while the other half were Mori no Kiyoshi's Monk Soldiers, shipwrights, and skilled sailors. Mori no Kiyoshi's shipwrights and skilled sailors were Koreans who spoke Korean. They could barely understand the Kaozaki clan Samurai, with only Watanabe Masumi capable of communication and command. This balance was apparently a tacit compromise by Takeda Nobuhiro, yet left Murakami Kitamichi somewhat frustrated.

"Murakami-kun, it is already the end of October, is this the end of this year's trade?"

After pondering for a moment, the Monk Soldier Watanabe Masumi smiled once more and asked.

"We traded for two shoulder-high Shandan horses, more than thirty bundles of high-quality deer and bear hides, eight white fox pelts, five purple sable furs, twenty superior quality ginsengs, two bundles of antlers, without acquiring sand gold... correct?"

"..."

Listening to Watanabe Masumi's clear count, Murakami Kitamichi pursed his lips, feeling a slight irritation. However, he also knew that these goods wouldn't be kept by the family; they were meant to be traded with merchants from the Capital City. So, the current inventory was merely ahead of schedule.

Half a year ago, he thought that this seafaring journey was a responsibility entirely on his shoulders, commanding the entire ship, his heart full of dedication and loyalty for the Family Head... yet he didn't expect a deputy to come along, intruding in everything, and could determine navigation by looking at stars, which made him seem more like the captain.

"Hmm!"

A few moments later, Murakami Kitamichi gloomily nodded.

"Watanabe guard, the trade for this year ends like this. The horses, furs, and herbs you require, are all here. We've traded with every coastal tribe along the way. If you want better quality furs and herbs, you have to go into the northern snowfields..."

"By the way, the two female horses on the ship are not Shandan horses. Shandan horses are shorter than these horses, not much better than the Kyushu horses. These shoulder-high ones are Mongolian horses or a cross between Mongolian and Shandan horses... I specially had the horse expert Ichiro help choose them!"

"Oh! Two Mongolian mares... How clever!"

Upon hearing this, Watanabe Masumi hesitated for a moment, then revealed a sudden understanding smile.

"Murakami-kun, are you thinking that when the Jurchen Stallion is in hand next year, you'll have them bred before sending them to the Capital City?..."

"Watanabe guard! The Jurchen Stallion is to be given to the Family Head!"

At this, Murakami Kitamichi's expression hardened, staring intensely into the Monk Soldier Watanabe's eyes.

"How the Family Head decides to handle it is naturally up to the Family Head! Do you understand!..."

"Oh! Yes! You are right."

Seeing the anger in Murakami's eyes, Watanabe Masumi raised an eyebrow. He met the gaze for a few moments, then slightly lowered his head in concession.

"The trade in the Far North, of course, takes the Kaozaki Family Head as the primary... May Buddha bless us!"

"Hmm, may Buddha bless!"

Seeing the Monk Soldier Watanabe lower his head, Murakami Kitamichi's expression slightly relaxed. He pondered for a moment, surveying the ocean-blocking ship under his command, his heart gradually filling with pride.

At this moment, over ten docile Korean sailors, dressed in warm leather robes, moved back and forth, preparing to raise the complex five-panel sails. They were Korean individuals captured by various southwestern Samurai, yet ironically, as skilled sailors who mastered the technology, their lives in the Wa Country were actually much better than in the rank-restricted Korea Kingdom.

This ocean-going Tang ship, capable of long voyages, had three decks, five sails, and over two hundred tons. Here, "tons" is a unit of volume, one cubic zhang is one hundred tons, and one ton of displacement weighs about 0.33 tons. Therefore, the over two-hundred-ton ocean-blocking Tang ship displaces about 70 tons. All three decks could carry cargo, making its cargo capacity medium.

The entire ocean-blocking Tang ship was about twenty meters long, over five meters wide, and about four meters high. The hull was constructed with large timber as the keel, its structure robust, featuring multiple decks and a cross-braced wooden frame to enhance the ship's stability and resistance to wind and waves. Additionally, unique "sail planks" were installed at the front and rear of the ship, providing wave protection and safeguarding the vessel in harsh weather.

All in all, the ship employed Song Dynasty maritime technology, although its size appeared similar to the Lake Kingdom's large oar-sail ships, its shipbuilding technology was at least two eras advanced!

Such a complex ocean-going ship wasn't something the Kaozaki clan's shipwrights and sailors could easily manage. In fact, throughout the Wa Country at the time, shipwrights capable of repairing such ships were scarce. For the Samurai of the Wa Country, the best solution when encountering such issues was naturally one word...

"Watanabe guard, where is the Gold Shipwright?"

Murakami Kitamichi looked around, not finding the shipwright. He pursed his lips before he spoke to the Monk Soldier Watanabe.

"Please have him check this large ship once more! Next, we are to head directly east, across hundreds of miles of the North Sea, to the southern tip of Birch Island!"

Chapter 1342: Four Years of Enjoyment, Destined Journey to the Far North Land

"Honorable Sir! I have inspected the hull and the planks, and repaired the cracks in the lower cabin. As long as the storm is not too fierce, there won't be any problem... The wind is currently blowing from the southeast, you can set the sails full, and we can cover two to three hundred li a day..."

The cold winds from Siberia blew from the northwest, howling as they entered the collar, cold and dry. On the ocean shielding ship, the shipwright Kim Sun-su bowed respectfully, bent his waist, tightly wrapped in leather clothing, and saluted the two gentlemen before him. He wasn't tall, his face dark and

unclear in age. Only his large hands, full of calluses, robust and nimble, hinted at his identity as a senior artisan.

"Watanabe guard, what did he say?"

"Oh! Murakami-san, Gold Shipwright said the ship is fine and can set sail!"

The monk soldier Watanabe Masumi smiled at the corners of his mouth, translating just a couple of sentences, clearly omitting a lot. The ship superintendent Murakami Kitamichi frowned dissatisfied but, unable to speak the language, was truly helpless. He pondered for a moment, glanced at the monk soldier Watanabe, then took out two fine deerskins and handed them to the shipwright Kim Sun-su.

"Buddha bless! Gold Shipwright, you've been a great help to us on this northward journey! These two pieces of deerskin are a gift from me on behalf of the family head!"

"Uh?"

Seeing Murakami's gesture, the shipwright Kim Sun-su was stunned and looked towards the monk soldier Watanabe.

"Gold Shipwright, this is a reward from Murakami-san!"

Watanabe Masumi smiled and said this succinctly. He understood the intention of Murakami, which was no more than to recruit Gold Shipwright for his excellent ship repair skills. However, Gold Shipwright's true identity was a servant of the temple, having no personal freedom. In order to recruit him, the Kaozaki family would need Mori no Kiyoshi's consent. Therefore, there was no need for him to interfere.

"Aigo! Thank you for the reward, Sir, I shall bow to you!"

Soon, the shipwright Kim Sun-su knelt on the deck, giving two heavy kowtows. Seeing this, Murakami's face showed a slight awkwardness. He initially wanted to establish a relationship with the skilled Gold Shipwright, but didn't expect such an outcome.

However, for Kim Sun-su, kowtowing in such a manner was quite common. He was born in Gyeongsang South Province, where generations of his family were craftsmen in government-run shipyards. His ancestor's skills were excellent, and his family used to be well-off, even able to afford precious rice meals several times a month. Nevertheless, in the strictly hierarchical Korea Kingdom, as a commoner, his social status was slightly better than that of the lowest class. Every time in the shipyard or town, whether encountering the high "Two Classes" or the respected "broker", a kowtow was always needed.

This kind of life continued for twenty or thirty years until the terrifying Wa Warriors... oh no, Wa Country Samurai landed, easily breaching the towns and taking him away as a shipwright, subsequently leading to Wa Country... From the Western Country to the Capital City, then from Capital City to the Northern Land, it swiftly passed, and he had left his hometown for seven or eight years...

Thinking of this, the shipwright Kim Sun-su kneeling on the deck felt a bit dazed. He had long grown accustomed to the arrangements of fate, his face full of a sycophantic smile while he secretly sighed in his heart. Then, he respectfully stood up, glanced at the two gentlemen, hugged the two pieces of hide to his chest, and retreated to leave.

"Murakami-san, the herbs we received this year were good, but the hides were somewhat lacking, and the quantity wasn't quite enough..."

The fleet hoisted its sails, leaving the Evenki people's camp, heading towards the vast Eastern Great Sea. Watanabe Masumi gazed at the dark sea, standing shoulder to shoulder with Murakami Kitamichi, avoiding eye contact, and lightly remarked.

"The sailors say that to find truly excellent fox and sable furs... one must go further north to the icefields..."

"...Hmm. The truly good hides are all in the Far North land... and the sand gold the family head wants..."

Murakami Kitamichi nodded slightly, having many thoughts in his mind, but his face remained calm. He gazed at the endless sea, feeling the steady sailing of the ship, and couldn't help but speak out.

"This great ship is truly excellent! It's so stable in its journey! ...Many years ago, I rowed a small sahō vessel north, and it was as if I was rowing at the edge of the Sanzu River, ready to die at any moment... Sometimes a big wave or two would hit, flipping and wobbling the small boat, and I was nearly drawn

into the Kusatsu Abyss... But back then, there was always a spirit of determination in my heart, able to make decisions, fearing nothing!"

Hearing this, Watanabe Masumi's eyes flickered, silently listening. Having anticipated the following content, he knew he needed to be patient.

"...Looking back now, compared to those days, I indeed am somewhat old! This year, with such a fine great ship, I drifted for half a year in the North, still not daring to cross Birch Island to the true North Sea... Buddha witness! In the hands of these tribes, there isn't any sand gold at all... How can I explain to the gracious family head?"

Saying this, a hint of self-mockery appeared on Murakami Kitamichi's face. Watanabe Masumi raised his eyebrows, smiling as he asked.

"Murakami-san, is the true North Sea of the Far North land truly so terrifying? Are you as scared as if facing a tiger..."

"...Huh?!"

Upon hearing this, Murakami Kitamichi's eyes showed an acute glint, about to say something. But after a few breaths, he pursed his lips and calmly replied.

"Watanabe guard, you've never been to the true North Sea, you don't know the storms, ice, snow, fog, and tides there, you don't understand the unpredictability and horror, it's like a white Hell..."

"But, you don't need to provoke me! After we return and complete this trade, preparing adequately for the family head... next year when we set sail, I'll make a trip to the Far North land! And on this trip, I'll sail amidst the raging waves, land on the white coast, seek out various Northern land tribes, and delve into the barren snowfields, heading to their migrating camps to trade... This time, I won't return before the winter sea closure, undoubtedly risking my life, and it'll take two years!"

Upon saying this, Murakami Kitamichi squinted his eyes, looking at the tall and robust monk soldier Watanabe Masumi, laughed coldly, and said.

"What do you say? Watanabe guard, are you afraid? Will you dare to accompany me next year?"

"Haha! Afraid? What's fear?!... Murakami-san, when I disregarded life and death, wielding a blade in the charge and battled among hundreds, you probably were still an inexperienced fledgling!"

The monk soldier Watanabe Masumi laughed heartily, pointing to the scar on his face. Then he pulled open his collar, revealing a deep scar cutting across his chest.

"This slash! It was made by a cavalry warrior from the Ouchi Clan during an assault! If not for Buddha's blessing, I would have died on the spot!... But even then, I wasn't afraid! And now, my life is already sold to Buddha, it's not mine anymore!... Haha! Murakami-san, wherever you go, I'll accompany you!"

"Hiss!..."

Seeing the scar on Watanabe's chest, Murakami Kitamichi inhaled deeply, visibly moved. He paused for a moment, slowly nodding, and changed his address for the first time.

"Good! Watanabe-san! Being able to return from Hell's door, you're as brave as a Ghost Warrior! So next spring, we'll set north from the Kutadai Peninsula, head all the way north, then east around the entire Far North Sea, and return from the Northeast Thousand Islands!... My mind is set, may Buddha bless us!"

"Ha! Then it's settled! Let's go see if the Far North land is truly like Hell!"

The monk soldier Watanabe laughed broadly, the scar on his face moving, fierce as the Fudo Myo-o, yet with a benevolent Buddha-like kindness.

"Amitabha Buddha! Namu Amitabha Buddha! Haha!"

The north wind howled, laughter echoed afar, and the sails high above, the great ship set out, journeying to distant horizons. The cold waves surged across the gray sea, awaiting the freeze of winter, anticipating the thaw of spring, ready to witness the coming and going of ships, no matter where from.

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### Chapter 1343: The Busy Kingdom of the Lake—Road Building and Lime Burning

In November, the far north is cold, gray, and silent, much like a grizzly bear preparing for hibernation. However, the sunlight stretches over a thousand miles, crossing thirty latitudes, and reaches the Kingdom of the Lake, which has just completed its autumn harvest and is in the midst of festival season.

The Mexican Plateau at this time of year is warm, bright, and prosperous, making it the perfect time to mobilize large-scale human labor. From a high vantage point, the entire basin and the kingdom within the lake appear like a vast and flourishing anthill, bustling with people moving and working!

"Yiya Yohei!... Bang!"

With a coordinated shout, two or three hundred civilians exerted their strength, all shouting in unison. They worked in groups of ten or more, simultaneously pulling up the large wooden piles in their hands with ropes. Moments later, the massive piles forcefully slammed down on the newly paved second-level county road, which was a road of rammed earth, creating a thunderous "bang bang" sound! With the impact of the wooden piles, the somewhat loose road surface was steadily hammered solid.

"Witness the Chief Divine! Be careful, tamp down repeatedly, tamp hard! Make sure the roadbed is so firm that even a pinky finger can't penetrate it! We must finish tamping at least two li today, and any failure to meet the requirements will result in five lashes, followed by overnight work!"

Dust filled the air, and voices roared. The leader of garrison Tai Shishan carried the village's banner, shouting and commanding loudly while meticulously inspecting back and forth. Following the village priests' instructions, they gathered able-bodied men in each village unit, assigning each village a section of the road. If any issues arose, the village would be held accountable. At that point, Tai Shishan would be the first to face whipping, punishment, or even beheading!

"Damn! You bunch of clumsy turkeys! How did you dig the drainage ditches on both sides? They need to be straight! How could you dig them slanting, hitting the stone foundation of the road? Can't you see this gray mess?!"

With one eye glaring, Tai Shishan fiercely looked at the civilians digging the channels. His murderous aura from past killings frightened them to the point of trembling, barely able to hold their wooden

shovels. Tai Shishan was once a Prepecha Warrior and was injured during the northern expedition, losing an eye to the Canine Descendants. He then became the leader of a directly controlled village in Rivermouth County, essentially serving as the village head.

In the Kingdom of the Lake, with most of the old nobility in the countryside cleared away, most villages are directly controlled by the kingdom. Many injured retired soldiers like him became village heads or militia captains, as their loyalty is the most reliable and can maintain order in the countryside!

"Chief Divine, what kind of work is this? The priests said these two ditches are for drainage during the rainy season, and they need to be dug below the road level! The ditch should be level with the road, and the bottom must be flat for the water to flow well! If water accumulates and soaks the road for too long, the foundation will be destroyed! Then you will not only receive lashes but also have to rebuild..."

Tai Shishan scolded harshly for a few sentences before explaining carefully to these villagers. After all, they were from the same village, essentially his "soldiers," and he needed to be somewhat lenient. If it were the Kingdom's Warriors or Temple Guards inspecting, the lashes could be deadly.

"Watch closely, see how I dig! Remember, dig as carefully as you would dig irrigation channels in the fields!... You bunch of stupid turkeys, last year we repaired for half a year, and you all forgot after the farming season this year!"

Saying this, Tai Shishan swung his iron shovel, excavating a short section of straight, neat, and deep ditch. Though he had lost one eye, he was stronger than the lean civilians at work. The iron shovel he wielded was produced by the Black Rock Mountain of the kingdom's south, distributed to the village by the priests, and only a few leaders had them.

Truth be told, these iron tools were not as durable and reliable as bronze ones, but they were certainly better than stone tools. The priest said these things were mainly advantageous because of their abundance and would become increasingly common!

"Witness the Chief Divine! Just like this, dig, dig fiercely!... The team that does well will be rewarded with an extra cake when eating lunch at the post station! Cornmeal!"

Upon hearing the reward of a "cornmeal cake," the able-bodied men building the road swallowed their saliva, and more strength filled their hands. In recent years, under the guidance of the village priests,

they piled compost, used tools, and also repaired some irrigation channels. The farmland not only expanded but also increased yields by two to three percent. This road construction opened the village granary, allowing everyone to eat three meals a day, enough pumpkin and bean paste to be full. However, corn cakes, usually reserved for warriors, were only available to the best-performing teams.

"Cough, cough! Chief Divine, the smoke is so thick, it's suffocating!"

A gust of wind carried the black smoke of burning wood, along with a faint stinging smell. Tai Shishan lowered his head, covered his mouth and nose, and coughed hard a few times. His one eye was so irritated that tears almost flowed, and he quickly circled around to avoid the direction of the wind before coming to a group of civilians about a few hundred steps away, shielding their mouths and noses while working diligently.

"Cough! Is the burnt lime ready?"

"Almost ready, sir, look, these white lime stones are all swollen, even the big stones are cracking into many small pieces... Estimating that by evening, after cooling overnight, they'll be ready for use tomorrow!"

"What! We have to wait until tomorrow?"

"Yes! It's an order from the priest, the one with two words on their clothes!"

"Hmm? It's an order from the Divine Revelation Priest... well, okay! They say a set of things, even though I don't understand them, but it must have been taught by Your Majesty, so it must make sense..."

Upon hearing this, Tai Shishan scratched his head, looking at the site where the burnt lime was being produced. Large piles of limestone chunks or powder were stacked by the civilians into a small hill shape, with a small fire opening left at the center. Such large piles of burnt lime were not solitary; multiple piles were simultaneously smoking.

Upon closer look, wood was being carefully placed in the small openings, fueling a moderate fire, continuously baking the surrounding limestone. Occasionally, a civilian carefully, using a long wooden tong, added wood to the central bonfire.

"Huh? The white lime stone swelled? How can you tell it's swollen?... Hmm... the big stones are indeed cracking, and these small stone fragments look just like the cured materials for road construction!"

This burnt lime is the most crucial adhesive in constructing the rammed earth road. It can react with the clay in the soil, tightening the bond between soil particles, making the road tougher and more durable. Similarly, burnt lime increases the road surface's water resistance, lowers soil erosion, and prevents weeds from growing. Thus, in the Kingdom of the Lake, where rain is prevalent, adding burnt lime during road construction is much more than in dry regions! This was the experience and insight discovered by the Divine Revelation Priests after completing the road and enduring a rainy season the previous year, rapidly spreading to all regions.

"Simply burn ordinary white lime stone, turning it into road-building burnt lime... Ah! Truly the Chief Divine's power, praise the Chief Divine!"

In the volcano-active region of Central America, limestone is abundant, and production is plentiful. This white-gray stone is more than common.

Tai Shishan approached for a closer look, getting so hot that he broke into a sweat all over. Looking around at the civilians, they too were drenched in sweat, as if just pulled from the water.

"Where is the water?"

"Over there, sir! Covered with a lid, fetched from the post station's well this morning, brought by wheelbarrow!"

"Gulp! Gulp!"

Tai Shishan walked away from the burning lime heap, striding to a row of large barrels. He lifted a lid, and walked to a row of large wooden barrels. He lifted the lid and drank heavily. The well water, fetched that morning from the post's well and carried by wheelbarrow, was quite refreshing, and the kingdom required a few specific regulations.

"Praise the Chief Divine! You did well! This task of burning lime is no small feat... when you go to the post station for lunch, I'll add an extra cake for everyone!"

"Ah! We get a cake?... Praise the Chief Divine! Praise you, sir!..."

Tai Shishan finished drinking his water and promised another batch of cakes before striding towards the post station four or five li away. Noon was approaching, and the newly installed post station was truly envious!... Getting close to noon and working hard all morning, everyone was probably exhausted. He needed to hurry to see how the midday meal was being prepared. This new post office is very envious!

#### Chapter 1344: The Roots of Extending Rule, Inns Along the County Road

The Mexican Plateau in late autumn was still covered with lush long grass and evergreen trees that never shed their leaves. Large flocks of migratory birds returned from the cold north, hovering over the distant mountains and forests, gazing at the bustling scene here, calling chaotically. Based on their limited lifetime experience, such large-scale activities of the bipeds always meant food to be found. Sometimes it was grains, and sometimes it was dead bodies... Of course, there were also dangers here, especially those red-headed hunters with excellent archery skills.

"Oh Chief Divine! So many big birds, if only I could shoot one down and have a feast... Tsk tsk! What a pity, I don't have any skilled Canine Descendants under my command... Curse those archery bastards and mongrels, they shot my eye blind! Otherwise, I would have been a Fourth Level Samurai, maybe even a Military Merit Nobility..."

The leader of the garrison, Tai Shishan, slightly tilted his head, looked up at the sky, spat, and then looked towards the road ahead. On these secondary county roads built last year, he walked both quickly and steadily, and before long, a sizable envoy station appeared before his eyes.

To call it an envoy station was generous; it was actually a large expanse of simple shacks without even a proper wooden house, only a wooden longhouse that was half-constructed. Wisps of smoke rose from the large open space between the shacks and the longhouse, bringing with them a distant aroma of grains.

"Oh Chief Divine! This is wonderful!..."

However, seeing this newly built and simple envoy station, garrison leader Tai Shishan licked his lips with envy. He knew that this station had a well of excellent quality, dug deep enough to provide a stable water source; a very deep and large cellar, used to preserve the transported grains; and a specially guarded wooden shed, storing precious metal tools... And all of this belonged to the station master, the retired Fourth Level Veteran Warrior, Lo the One-armed!

"Praise the Chief Divine! Lo the One-armed, how's today's lunch going? The able-bodied men in the village worked hard all morning, they need to eat their fill!"

"Praise the Chief Divine! It's in progress in the kitchen. Plenty of your pumpkin cakes and bean paste have been prepared. They'll be ready very soon!"

At the entrance of the envoy station, a strong one-armed warrior grinned at Tai Shishan, who was blind in one eye, holding the golden amulet around his neck, praying devoutly. Then, he turned around and walked towards the open-air kitchen at the back. With so many people to feed, the piles and piles of grains had to be cooked outside, they wouldn't fit in the small shed of the station.

The strong one-armed warrior was called "Lo the One-armed," his real name unknown, as that's what everyone called him. He didn't care much about having just one arm; in fact, he was quite proud, often recounting how he got injured in battle.

Lo the One-armed's face was covered with many small scars, like corn cakes sprinkled with chili strips, or patched-up rags, giving a sinister and eerie appearance. His smile was stiff, looking even more fierce than when he wasn't smiling. His accent was peculiar, always carrying a hint of the Southern Kingdom, reminiscent of the mountain forest villagers. The only thing that made him seem approachable was the solid gold Sun Amulet around his neck, said to be personally awarded by His Majesty for his military achievements!

"A pure gold amulet! Personally awarded by His Majesty! ... Truly remarkable! ..."

The garrison leader Tai Shishan widened his eyes, couldn't help but glance again at the glittering Sun Amulet on Lo the One-armed's neck. As for the other's sinister appearance and strange accent, he had long since grown accustomed.

He knew that Lo the One-armed was not a Prepetcha but a warrior from the Tecos Tribe in the southern mountain forests, drafted into the Kingdom's army and even joining the Imperial Guard Legion personally led by His Majesty! Within the Imperial Guard Legion, Lo the One-armed's regiment, like many other Tecos warriors, was known for bravery and piety, part of the vanguard throwing grenades known as the "Divine Power Globes"!

"Oh Chief Divine! The Divine Power globes, the thunder's roar, with just a touch, if not dead, surely maimed! ..."

Recalling the throwing and explosions seen during the northern campaign, Tai Shishan's heart trembled, and he looked at Lo the One-armed with even more respect. He boasted that his scarred face and half-broken arm were from being the first to climb the city wall of Water Valley during the expedition against the Telascallan, where a Divine Power Globe he threw exploded and injured him. Along with many other Telascallan warriors atop the city wall who were killed or injured!

"According to Kingdom law, being the first to mount and kill in battle earns top military merit. Throwing the Divine Power Globes also counts as substantial merit! The vanguard throwing regiment of the Imperial Guard Legion is truly a path to heaven that gambles with life! ..."

Thinking of this, the garrison leader Tai Shishan looked at the vast envoy station and then at the fields surrounding it, unable to suppress his envy.

He knew that after surviving the brutal vanguard siege, Lo the One-armed, along with the surviving vanguard throwers, was collectively awarded a pure gold Sun Amulet and promoted to a Fourth Level Kingdom Warrior! This warrior rank was one level higher than his own Third Level Warrior status.

According to the Kingdom's military merit rewards, a Fourth Level Veteran Warrior should be granted 240 mu of land and 12 servants. Yet the Chief Divine's protection, he returned to the Kingdom at just the right time, coinciding with the establishment of envoy stations, and was thus granted the position of station master and a fief.

"Blessings from the Chief Divine! The position of station manager with its fief... it's almost on par with a First Level Military Merit Nobility!"

Indeed! According to the latest laws of the Kingdom, the position of a station manager is no ordinary petty official, but an actual title that manages a section of the road! This title ranks between a Fourth Level Veteran Warrior and a First Level Military Merit Nobility. As long as there are no major oversights, it can be inherited!

"On the Second Level County roads of the Kingdom, every twenty or thirty miles, there is a relay station. Each station has one manager, two or three Samurai, around ten Militia, and thirty servants and agricultural slaves, maintaining the roads for about twenty or thirty miles around! ... And Luoding's fief is 400 acres around the station! In the station, the well, tools, and houses are all ready-made, along with the Kingdom's rewards... As long as nothing goes wrong, this position and the land can be passed on to his son... Tsk tsk! Really makes one green with envy!"

"It is said that this one station manager position was originally eyed by several Veteran Warriors of the Capital County, who wanted to compete for it. But Luoding, though a Tekos, comes from the Imperial Guard Legion and has earned merit as the Vanguard, outshining the others..."

"Hmm, with a relay station set here, accompanied by a small squad of soldiers, the traffic around has improved, making it a bit more stable..."

Tun Tian Leader Taishan thought enviously as he followed the station manager Luoding into the bustling, grain-scented station. Though he didn't understand grand principles, he very well knew that extended roads eased military movement. And with these stations established, the roots of the Kingdom's rule would deepen...

"Whoa! It's lively here!"

Taishan entered the busy cooking crowd, looking around, and smiled greetings at two other similarly unspeaking Tekos Warriors.

"Luocang! Luoqing! Have you gone hunting in the forest recently?"

Hearing Taishan's question, the taller Luocang, carrying a Hunting Bow, said nothing and just shook his head. The shorter Luoqing, however, smiled and replied in broken Prepetcha.

"No! Too much work, busy... Gotta oversee the station, no time."

Luocang and Luoqing, these two Tekos Warriors, were actually relatives of Luoding, also younger cousins from the tribes of the southern mountain forest. Luoding, never having married, was stationed here and brought his two cousins along. They originated from the southern tribes of Tekos, originally having no surname, only names based on birds, beasts, plant life, or tribal encampments. "Cang" was born by the granary, and "Jing" by the wellhead, or conceived there. Simple, innocent, and wild.

As for the surname "Luo," it was adopted by Luoding upon joining the Imperial Guard Legion, taking a character from His Majesty Xiulote as the surname. As a matter of fact, within the two-thousand-strong Tekos camp of the Imperial Guard Legion, nearly everyone had the surname Luo! Notably, "Xiu" (Xo) means "Walking Light," a royal surname imbued with Divinity, which must not be used carelessly!

At this moment, Tun Tian Leader Taishan wasn't thinking about any of that. He looked at the two before him, tugged his hair, and asked hesitantly.

"Expecting troops? Where are they from? We're right on the edge of Capital County; any troops from Rivermouth County wouldn't pass this way, would they? ... Could it be from the Canine Descendants Tribes at the rear? Or from Capital County?"

"Yes! Witness of the Chief Divine, they aren't the Red Hair, bow-carrying hunters, but troops from Capital County! Uh... It's something like that, from the east, also bow-carrying tribesmen..."

"From the east, bow-carrying, and with excellent archery!"

The shorter Luoqing stammered, gesturing but unable to clarify. The taller Luocang, meanwhile, touched the Bow and Arrow on his back, steering the conversation towards archery. At this point, overhearing the three's dialogue, station manager Luoding came over from the open-air kitchen. He glanced at Taishan, thought of something, and said gravely.

"Tai... shan. Kingdom's Scout delivered news. Troops to pass by at noon... Pumpkin, bean paste are sufficient. Cornbread, not enough. Cornbread from your village must be given to the southern Tecos Warriors from Tlaxcala first!"

## Chapter 1345: The Smoking Dust of the March, Prologue to Another Westward Expedition

"Telascallans? Eating our tortillas?!"

The sun was high, blazing brightly. There was no winter on the Mexica Plateau, and the deep autumn sun could still make one sweat. The colony leader, Taishan, with beads of sweat on his forehead, stared intently at the station master, Luo One-arm, and shouted fiercely.

"Old Luo! This is our village's food! Our village's tortillas! What gives the Telascallans the right to eat them?!"

"Taishan...it's in times of war! Kuluka, the Marshal, represents His Majesty and issued the royal decree for the westward expedition! Full mobilization, attacking the Chapala Lake Region in the northwest... this campaign is going to be a big one!"

The station master, Luo One-arm, stretched out his only hand and gestured a "big". His expression was very serious, and his tone was also very firm, allowing no compromise.

"You know this! In our kingdom, war is of utmost importance! During wartime, the warriors are the most important! The Marshal's scouts ordered the logistics and supply, and I must fulfill it!!"

Hearing the station master's resolute words, Taishan, the leader of the colonies, opened his mouth but was momentarily speechless. The Kingdom of the Lake was based on farming and warfare, waging wars every year without fail. And as a retired third-level warrior, he clearly understood the military's requirements during wartime.

The kingdom's military machine operated entirely for war! Without war, there would be no agricultural slaves, no feudal land grants, and no upward path for commoners and tribal warriors!

And without war, the tens of thousands of recently subdued tribes would become internal instability factors in the kingdom. Those warlike warriors from various tribes, if unable to rise, without military merits for titles, and a chance to join the ruling class, might very well become local bandits and rebels... Therefore, for the Kingdom of the Lake, stopping war was not an option.

Although Taishan, the colony leader, did not understand these grand principles, he was well aware of the kingdom's emphasis on war. Once war began, villages everywhere had to serve the kingdom's army, making it their primary task to meet the army's needs. Regardless of whether these troops were local legions, hometown militias, or even foreign troops, or whatever kind of messed-up Telascallans.

"Damn it! Those damned Telascallans... weren't they captured and turned into agricultural slaves? How do such tribes have legions?..."

Taishan's voice grew softer, but the anger on his face did not dissipate.

"Witness of the Chief Divine! Since I lead the team, my word is my bond! I've already promised to reward the hardest-working, best-performing groups with those tortillas! If I break my promise, how will I manage this flock of dumb turkeys in the future!... Old Luo, no matter what, you have to save a bit of those tortillas for me!..."

"Ha! Taishan, of course the Telascallans have legions. Their warriors are formidable! During our eastward expedition, we captured mountains full of Telascalan tribes...many warriors among them were very skilled!... When I was charging the city walls with the Divine Power Globes, the enemy's arrows came down like rain in the rainy season!..."

As an old veteran of the Imperial Guards who participated in eastward expeditions, Luo One-arm waved his hand vigorously, spewing saliva while talking about the eastern battlefield over a thousand miles away, describing the Telascalan's outstanding archery skills, and recounting his own glorious experiences of injury. Although uneducated, he understood a simple truth: The one who catches a rabbit might be a cat, or it might be a jaguar. And to catch a wolf, it could only be a jaguar... Only when the enemy is stronger is there glory in defeating them!

"His Majesty issued an edict last year, forming an entire 8,000-man brigade from tens of thousands of Telascallan tribes captured, stationed right in the two southern counties!... And today, a whole thousand-man camp of Telascalans will come! I must feed them first, and the tortillas definitely won't be enough!..."

At this point, the station master Luo One-arm paused. Looking at the dissatisfaction on Taishan's face, he thought for a moment and suddenly came up with an idea.

"Witness of the Chief Divine! Taishan, you just said, it's not about filling their stomachs but rewarding those who performed well?"

"Yes! I patted my chest and promised them! Good performance gets rewarded..."

"Hmm... since it's a reward, how about replacing it with meat? No need for much, just a couple of bites per person! I suppose the able-bodied men in the village barely eat meat all year round..."

The station master Luo One-arm blinked, looking at his clan brother.

"Luo Cang, take out the twenty or thirty pounds of cured meat you got from hunting, and roast it... oh no, make a big pot of meat stew!... Don't rush, don't do it now! Wait until the Telascalan camp moves past, to avoid causing any unnecessary trouble with the warriors..."

After instructing his clan brother, the station master Luo One-arm turned again to Taishan, grinning with a "ferocious" smile.

"Taishan, how is it? Two pieces of meat per person, and a few mouthfuls of meat soup, surely that can fulfill the promise of reward, right?"

"Ah, eh!... Praise the Chief Divine! If there's meat soup, then that's definitely enough! These foolish turkeys haven't tasted any meat all year, they would be delighted..."

Upon hearing Luo One-arm's arrangement, Taishan, the leader of the garrison, was momentarily stunned, and the anger on his face instantly disappeared, becoming somewhat embarrassed.

"But, eh... Old Luo, this meat is from your own... I brought them to eat... uh... money..."

"Haha! Praise the Chief Divine! It's nothing! Just consider it my treat to you!..."

Luo One-arm, the stationmaster, grinned, and the scars on his face "amicably" twitched.

"Since I'm stationed here, next to your village, there will be more opportunities to interact in the future! When my clan's younger generation comes over, if they join the military, they'll be in the same group as the warriors from your village, considered as fellow villagers..."

"Indeed! Since you are stationed here, anything you need from the village in the future is just a matter of a word!"

Two retired warriors from the kingdom, one blind and one one-armed, laughed and chatted about their past battles, feeling a deep connection, even referring to each other as brothers.

The sun gradually tilted west, and the large pot of food was ready. On the recently constructed county road of the South, a faint dust began to rise. A team of running scouts first arrived, shouting a few phrases in the eastern accented Navajo. Following them, a large group of Tlaxcalan warriors appeared before everyone, carrying long bamboo bows, hefting spears as tall as a person, wearing brand new paper armor.

This Telask warrior camp does not belong to the newly formed Long Snake Legion but is an additionally summoned archer camp, as a long-range supplement to the First Spear Legion of Rivermouth County. Before they were summoned, they were still busy in the newly cultivated farm fields of the South. When the conscription order reached various flag teams, almost all able-bodied Tlaxcalans who could shoot participated in the selection.

"The days of pioneering and farming in the South are really tough! During busy farming times, we rush in the fields, during idle times, we cut trees and build canals. We're exhausted like bees all day, can't straighten our backs, and there's no prospect... It's better to come out, fight for the Divine Descendant King inheriting the Grim Reaper's Skull, establish merits, and receive titles and land!..."

Faced with the enthusiastic conscription of the able-bodied Tlaxcalans, the kingdom's recruiting officer had to temporarily raise the standards: fifty feet distance, aiming at military leather helmets with the Tlaxcalan Bow, hitting seven out of ten shots with bone arrows not dropping, to join the legion. Even with such stringent standards, a thousand archers were selected. Apparently, even after multiple selections, there were still quite a few Tlaxcalan warriors hidden among the Colony Tribes.

In mid-October, a thousand Tlaxcalan archers were recruited from various Colony flag teams, and without pause they were led to the Capital City Qin Congcan. In the large camp outside the Capital City, they changed into new paper armor, bamboo longbows, and close combat spears.

Then, a batch of Mexica and Prepetcha officers were drawn from the Jingji Legion, officially organizing these thousand tribal archers into a Thousand-man Archery Camp. The camp commander of the Thousand-man Camp was Aitz under the command of Olosh, a Warrior Captain from the Holy City, and also a family warrior of the Royal Family of the Holy City.

"Phew! Chief Divine bless! After rushing for half a day, finally, we can rest!"

Among the large group of Tlaxcalans carrying bamboo bows and wearing paper armor, a young leader wearing an Eagle Feather Crown, carrying a long spruce bow, and holding the camp's battle flag was particularly noticeable. He was the camp commander of the Thousand-man Camp, "Woodpecker" Aitz.

In the Mexica Alliance, being named after the Woodpecker is not a mockery. On the contrary, "Woodpecker" has excellent vision, and its beak like a sharp arrowhead is an honorary title for archers with outstanding skills, roughly equivalent to "Divine Shooter". Among the Mexica warriors who value close combat and don't focus on archery, there are actually very few shooters with such a title.

"Quick! Tell the stationmaster to bring up the prepared food!... Quick! Everyone, hurry up! Within an hour, eat entirely and get ready, continue heading north!"

Woodpecker Aitz waved the battle flag in his hand, pointing here and there with agile and swift movements. His voice was very loud, his tone was short and powerful, like the "knocking" sound of a woodpecker.

"Chief Divine witnesses! Quick, everyone hurry up! The day after tomorrow, the day after tomorrow is the Grand Festival of departure!"

"This time, for the Grand Festival, the Alliance's High Priesthood even sent a Fifth Level Elder Priest! And the Kingdom Priesthood's Fourth Level Chief Priest will also attend in person! Both the Alliance and Kingdom's Supreme Priests are present, I must arrive on time! No one is allowed to embarrass me! Quick!..."

Chapter 1346: A Prosperous Kingdom—Samurai Manors and Chinampas!

The sun rose to its zenith, while the smoke from cooking fires never ceased. A thousand Tlaxcalan archers sat and squatted outside the post station, messily having their lunch. They had just formed up and trekked from the southern counties, their military bearing and discipline at the level of the kingdom's trained militia.

However, after enduring the exceptionally brutal eastern expeditions, the strict obedience at the garrison in Water Valley City, the long and uneasy migration of thousands of miles, and the arduous southern garrison and road-building within the kingdom... these Tlaxcalan archers, who had struggled to stand out, had completely erased any notion of tribal resistance and had become obedient and compliant, turning into a usable kingdom army.

"Hmm!... They understand reverence, follow orders, they're a good bunch of eagle hatchlings!..."

Woodpecker Aitz finished his corn tortillas in two bites, then hoisted the battle flag and made a round among his archers. Wherever he appeared, the Tlaxcalan archers would immediately stop eating and respectfully bow their heads in greeting.

Aitz looked closely, and in the eyes of these archers, there was not only fear and obedience but also a distinctly evident spirit! This spirit, like that of the conscripted agricultural slaves Aitz had seen, was a desperate desire to earn military honors, to be granted land and slaves, to change their own and their families' fates. For these warlike tribes, used to life and death and familiar with sacrifices, killing and being killed were nothing out of the ordinary to achieve that goal.

"Military honors and land grants... the only path of surrendering tribes to ascend the kingdom's high mountains..."

Aitz pondered, his gaze lowered slightly. In this thousand-man camp, the majority of the tribal archers wore amulets of the Sun Hummingbird around their necks; some had the emblem emblazoned on their foreheads, and others even carried an additional God of Death Black Wolf amulet. This added faith in divine spirits, the ample food supply along the way, and the incentive of military rank managed to maintain the army's morale at a level capable of battle.

"Praise the Chief Divine! Praise Your Highness! Having finished eating, everyone line up and depart!"

The battle flag waved, pointing northward. The kingdom's officers waved the shafts of their copper spears, shouting loudly, using "striking" and "yelling" to align the tribal archers into a somewhat disorganized marching formation. Then, under the gazes of Postmaster Lo Duanbi and Garrison Leader Taishan, they marched noisily northward, leaving behind a trail of disorder and dust.

"Oh Chief Divine! This chaotic camp is finally moving on!..."

Garrison Leader Taishan pursed his lips, watching the departing tribal archers and shaking his head.

"Old Lo, look at their sorry state. They can't even form up properly; do they look like they can fight?"

"They look like they can!"

Postmaster Lo Duanbi's answer was brief but very assertive.

"Huh? Why?"

"Look at their eyes, arms, fingers, they're excellent archers! Archers shoot from afar, they don't need to form neat formations."

"...Well! Whether or not they can fight isn't just about archery alone..."

Garrison Leader Taishan pursed his lips, somewhat unconvinced, and retorted.

"When I was campaigning northward, I also encountered those skilled canine descendants. As long as we charged in formation, engaging in close combat briefly, the large groups of canine descendants would flee, running as fast as rabbits!..."

"Chief Divine testifies! Taishan, this is different."

"What's different? They're all the same mess, all good at archery!"

"Hmm..."

Postmaster Lo Duanbi scratched his head with his single hand, thought for a moment, and replied earnestly.

"They have the kingdom's weapons, armor, and food; they also have kingdom officers commanding them..."

"They are devout to the Chief Divine, and the spirits will give them courage. They came from the east and then from the south; there is no way back for them..."

"Like me back then, they must risk everything, desperately hold onto this only chance, and fight for... the Chief Divine's protection!"

Upon hearing this, the garrison leader Taishan nodded towards the northern horizon, watching the disappearing figures, and remained silent for a long while. It wasn't until the able-bodied men of the village returned in teams that he let out a low sigh.

"May the Chief Divine bless us! Old Luo, it's time to stew the meat..."

The deep autumn in the highlands is a season with little rain and is suitable for marching. After building segments of dirt roads and county paths, the speed of the march increased significantly.

Woodpecker Aitz estimated that before the road was built, a long march on the highlands could maintain a stable speed and enough strength for a thousand-man camp to cover about 30 li a day. However, after constructing smooth dirt roads and county paths, the daily marching speed could be increased to 50 li.

"May the Chief Divine bless us! With the smooth county paths, marching saves much effort... and from here to Northern Rivermouth County, it's only 80-90 li. Hurry up and catch the pace, by the day after tomorrow before noon, we can definitely make it!"

With this thought, Woodpecker Aitz felt much relieved. His archers were light troops, and without needing to account for the next day's actions, their speed could be doubled. Therefore, they were certain to arrive on time for the grand festival at noon the day after tomorrow, in front of so many nobles and priests!

"Haha! Although these northern villages and fields are only two hundred li away, they are quite different from the Capital Region!..."

With ease in his heart, Woodpecker Aitz leisurely observed the villages and fields along the road. He also recalled what he had seen and heard along the way, comparing the differences across the kingdom.

"The characteristic of Capital County is the military merit manor. Everywhere there are fourth-level samurai awarded land, first-level military merit nobility, and manors of all sizes, as well as Chinampas on the lake..."

Woodpecker Aitz stroked his chin, recalling his manor in the Patzcuaro Lake region. As a first-level military merit noble, he had been granted eight hundred mu of land and forty agricultural slaves. But in reality, after a few years of conquest and reclamation, the area of his manor had actually exceeded a thousand mu, with more than fifty agricultural slaves and over a dozen family members who had come from the Mexica Alliance. All his neighbors were likewise nobles of military merit, owning hundreds to thousands of mu of land, accompanying their lord on western expeditions and conferred frontiers of the kingdom.

These military merit manors of various sizes filled the entire Patzcuaro Lake region, and the military merit nobility and samurai in the manors were the most loyal pillars of the kingdom. During the recent autumn harvest season, the entire Capital County was a scene of prosperity and flourish everywhere!

"With the construction by countless captives and slaves, a long dyke of white stone has been erected on Lake Patzcuaro, and 'cement' mixed with volcanic ash has been poured. This large lake prone to flooding in the rainy season has been preliminary tamed, like a giant water serpent that submits under the feet of the Chief Divine, obediently following the divine will..."

"During the just-past rainy season, the rainfall was retained and accumulated by the dykes, preventing any flooding. Neatly built canals directed the lake water, irrigating the vast fertile fields along the lake, nourishing the farmland on them. Groups of agricultural slaves worked diligently in the fields, wielding new farming tools, harvesting the emerald and yellow maize fields. Small patches of Chinampa floating fields were finally established in the corners of the lake, preparing for multiple annual harvests! And in

the corners of the fields were the dug compost pits for preparing fertilizer for the high-yielding Chinampa floating fields..."

Thinking of the Chinampa by the lake, a smile spread across Woodpecker Aitz's face. With the Chinampa floating fields, it truly felt like the home of the Mexica! And if the entire Lake Patzcuaro could be wholly divided and tamed like Lake Texcoco by the kingdom, then just the Chinampa floating fields and Milpa farmlands along the lake could support the entire Capital's population of five hundred thousand!

Indeed, following the conquests and migrations of the eastern expedition, the Capital region of the Kingdom of the Lake, spanning over two hundred li, had reached a population scale of five hundred thousand. Of the Capital's population, four-tenths, nearly two hundred thousand, were agricultural slaves, industrial slaves, and mining slaves producing wealth.

Among them, the agricultural slaves of military merit nobility and samurai accounted for about eighty-five percent; the mining slaves in Blackstone City mining area and smelting sites accounted for ten percent; the construction slaves of the royal family's central dyke and temples made up the remaining five percent. This number was constantly growing with the kingdom's external expansion, as batches of captives kept arriving, but the proportion remained roughly the same.

For the kingdom's slaves, there were two routes to change their fate. One was to endure a long time, according to religious law, and become a commoner after ten years of labor. The other was to join the military campaign, achieve military merits for the lord's family, and independently elevate themselves to the rank of samurai, thus automatically shaking off the status of a slave.

Of course, Woodpecker Aitz was not aware of these numbers and figures. As a military merit noble who had forged his own future, his memories of the Capital Lake region were of a prosperity blessed by the Divine, guided by the lord, and created by the kingdom's warriors!

"In the prosperous Patzcuaro Lake region, new military merit manors were emerging everywhere. Boats loaded with stone and timber continuously transported building materials from the western mountains. In the military merit manors along the lake coast, stood tall wooden and stone houses, vast fertile farmlands, enclosed wooden market squares, and patrols of the kingdom's warriors...!"

"In front of the tall houses, young samurai trained in martial arts and practiced archery under the guidance of their elders. Each family manor routinely had several samurai and an equal number of retinue soldiers. The samurai dressed in meticulously crafted leather armor, wore helmets, carried a

greatbow, and wielded bronze axes and long spears... Their equipment was of high quality, ready to face any enemy, with their retinue equally well-equipped...!"

"In the vast farmlands, agricultural slaves wielded wooden, stone, iron, even bronze farming tools, harvesting the abundant crops. Priests guided the new harvest 'rituals', fertilizing the earth, and even discovered some stone that increased yield... Grain filled the granaries, and pumpkins kept the agricultural slaves well-fed. No one desired to escape, for in the wilderness, the likelihood of starving, being killed, or captured was far greater..."

"In the enclosed marketplace, goods from all directions awaited trade. There were Obsidian ritual artifacts from the Alliance, gold and silver jewelry from the Cloud People, spices and dyes from the Seaside People, feather garments from the Woodlands People, as well as jade and opals from the southwestern mountains, even furs and horn leather from the northern wilderness... all awaited trade with military merit warriors!"

From the perspective of a military merit noble, Woodpecker Aitz saw this as the expected prosperity of the kingdom. This prosperity stemmed from the samurai's battles, the conquest of the legions, and also the labor of the agricultural slaves. It was a prosperity of the military merit nobility, as well as the stabilizing foundation and inexhaustible impetus for the kingdom's expansion!

And this prosperity, compared to the Mexica Alliance, which belonged only to the great nobility, was more likely to receive the sincere support and allegiance of the samurai!

"Prosperity from the land, and also prosperity from war... The samurai's manors bloomed like flowers on the Capital's Lake Patzcuaro, like the most beautiful Chinampa!... Praise be to the Chief Divine and the King!..."

After reminiscing for a moment, Woodpecker Aitz felt invigorated. He couldn't help but chant softly, reciting praises created by the poets of Qinchongcan Capital. And after chanting, as he looked at the harvested fields and the village communities on both sides of the road, he once again sensed another kind of prosperity. A kind that was somewhat unfamiliar to him, rarely seen in the Alliance, a prosperity belonging to the commoners!

Chapter 1347: The Flourishing Kingdom, Overflowing Granaries, and the Village Chief's Incense Burner

"The villages of Northern Land... the communal work villages..."

The sun tilted westward, casting a sky full of red clouds. Woodpecker Aitz led the tribal archer camp, having traveled over fifty li in a day, and was truly exhausted. The kingdom officers around were similarly fatigued. However, the lightly-equipped tribal archers, though tired and hungry, showed no sign of complaint. They seemed as obedient and resilient as worker ants, wearing only a set of paper armor, with leggings wrapped around their legs, seemingly capable of marching through the night.

"It's getting dark! Let's reach a nearby village, have a hearty meal, and get a good rest!..."

The kingdom officer of the camp discussed with the garrison leader of the nearest village for quite a while before the latter stiffly agreed. Yet when the Tlaxcalan archer camp arrived at the village, what they saw was a rather enthusiastic "welcome" scene.

At the entrance to the village, as many as four hundred strong men of the village were fully mobilized. Their faces were full of vigilance, a sternness born of simplicity. Each held a two-meter long spear, most of which were sharp obsidian, and even dozens were of shiny copper spears. The militiamen in the front rows held plain shields, standing shoulder to shoulder. The formation they put up seemed even more orderly than that of Woodpecker Aitz's archer camp!

"Oh Chief Divine! Are these village militiamen of Rivermouth County trained in spear arrays as well?"

Woodpecker Aitz watched in surprise for a moment before realizing that the truly well-organized ring was just the outermost circle, consisting of a hundred or so trained militia who had participated in kingdom campaigns. Inside that circle, older men in their thirties and forties, a dozen or so children, and the confused-looking "green melons" were surrounded by the outer ring, not presenting much of a threat.

However, in any case, given that Rivermouth County was engaged in continual battles yearly, these trained militiamen had genuinely been on the battlefield. The array they presented was a real combat formation. Such a scene of "reception" instantly provided a silent deterrent to the tribal archer camp.

"Damn! Are these northern villagers mistaking us for mountain bandits to guard against? This is within the kingdom's borders, and under my command are supposedly well-trained... uh... alright!..."

Woodpecker Aitz stood there in a daze, annoyed for a few moments before coming to his senses. Presently under his command were not reliable Mexica warriors or Prepecha warriors from his homeland, but newly recruited tribal archers. These Tlaxcalan archers had only submitted to the kingdom for a little over a year. Merely two years ago, they were fighting fiercely against the Alliance's army. Undoubtedly, their forefathers were much the same... such vigilance and precaution from the villagers of Rivermouth County are indeed unsurprising.

"Fine! The villagers' caution and defense, if it deters the tribal camp, it is not a bad thing..."

Thinking of this, Woodpecker Aitz felt somewhat relieved. After all, he was also concerned that these tribal archers might seem obedient on the surface yet secretly cause some robbery trouble, especially within the kingdom's heartland, right when the Grand Festival was approaching.

"Praise Chief Divine! I am Tuniao, the village's Preaching Priest. Esteemed military merit nobility, your accommodation is the village chief's longhouse. Your officers will each have separate huts. As for these skilled tribal warriors... the village has vacated dozens of grass huts and grain drying yards..."

Naturally, the one who came out to speak to the kingdom officers was the highest-ranking village priest. During the westward expedition that year, Rivermouth County was the front line of repeated battles and underwent stringent cleansing. The old nobility of the Tarasco Kingdom was nearly eradicated, with not a single family left. After destroying the old noble territories, nearly all of the hundred villages in Rivermouth County established communal farms, incorporated directly under the kingdom.

The highest status in the village belongs to the village priest presiding over sacrificial rites. These village priests often communicate with the kingdom's priesthood, receiving "Divine Revelations" for guidance on agricultural reform, promoting composting, new tools, and field management.

The village priests bring spiritual comfort, increased grain production, and orders from the kingdom government, naturally occupying the highest power position. In truth, in the obscure Central America, they are the masters of advanced culture and productivity. Without them, the village could not find anyone capable of reading the "Book of Ama Colley" and understanding the kingdom's religious laws.

Beneath the village priests are the garrison leaders who allocate manpower and oversee canal and road repairs, and the militia captains who train the village militia. These are often retired or injured samurai, forming the grassroots of the kingdom's power in the countryside. The "Divine Authority," "Government Authority," and "Military Authority" they hold, working in concert, constitute the basic rural order. This "faith in the Divine," "strict discipline," and "Samurai supremacy" rural order certainly has many flaws

and cannot be called fair. However, merely establishing and maintaining a stable order exceeds the chaos found all over Central America!

"Praise Chief Divine! Greetings to you, esteemed Chief God Priest! I am the kingdom's Thousand-man Camp Commander, Woodpecker Aitz!"

Facing the young village priest, Woodpecker Aitz bowed slightly, showing respect in his demeanor.

"Hmm... I stay in the longhouse, the officers in the huts, the archers in the grass huts and grain yards..."

He then thought about the village arrangements, finding them quite suitable, and nodded with a smile in response.

Chapter 1348: The Flourishing Kingdom, Overflowing Granaries, and the Village Chief's Incense Burner

"Very good! The Chief Divine blesses, let's do it this way then! Thank you, Priest Tuniao!"

"The Chief Divine blesses! Camp Commander Aitz, is there anything else the village needs to do?"

"Hmm... It might be a bit cold during the late autumn nights, pile more straw in the sheds and grain storage... Also, make sure our camp eats well tonight, we have to travel tomorrow!"

"Okay! The village has collected plenty, enough straw for warmth. This year's harvest was good, plenty of pumpkins and bean puree!..."

The young village priest Tuniao smiled and nodded, about to turn and make arrangements. But before leaving, he thought of something and turned back to remind.

"Honorable Military Merit Nobility... the village latrine is located on the west side of the fields, there's a row of dug pits... please inform the camp to leave fertilizer there... Also, next to the latrine is the compost pit, very deep and sticky, like a swamp. Be extremely careful not to fall in. If you do fall, don't struggle, but shout for help to avoid drowning..."

"Uh!... Priest Tuniao, I understand!"

Hearing this, Woodpecker Aitz's lips twitched, he reluctantly nodded. He knew the kingdom's composting technology had been promoted by priests to various counties and villages. For these garrison villages, accumulated manure is precious wealth that must be collected by any means.

Near the Capital City Qinchongcan, many neighboring villages send people into the city each morning to dig manure from public latrines. More absurd, militia from city communities guard these public manure pits, charging farmers "fees" for manure. These fees are usually countryside produce, like a basket of pumpkins or corn, traded right at the manure pit...

Thinking about these, Woodpecker Aitz's appetite became unsettled. But honestly, the promotion of composting technology, establishment of public latrines, and strict enforcement of hygiene teachings in the city indeed improved the city's sanitation greatly.

"Farmers' output comes from the fields... everything that can increase the harvest is the Chief Divine's blessing!... A private manor wants more yield, but relying on the manure of dozens or hundreds isn't effective. The Alliance has a method of burning and grinding bones for fertilizer, but bone sources are scarce, it takes too much labor and firewood, and isn't very useful..."

"Right! Those stones brought back by southern merchant ships, said to be bird feces, have no odor at all. And the Divine Revelation Place grinds these stones and buries them in fields, surprisingly increasing yield by several percent!... Wonder when the kingdom can acquire them in large quantities... Chief Divine! Indeed, mysterious sea, these peculiar things are just like in myths..."

Woodpecker Aitz mused absent-mindedly while having dinner. The village meals were simple, consisting of three main foods: corn, pumpkins, beans, oh, and slightly sweet sweet potatoes.

As night fell, bonfires were lit. Food was brought out from the granary, and the aroma spread throughout the village. To feed one thousand hungry Tribal Warriors, at least a thousand to two thousand pounds of food is needed. Without oil, fatigued from marching, warriors commonly eat a pound of pumpkin bean puree per meal.

However, it seems these years' garrisons indeed did well, field yields are sufficient. Villagers' faces, though reluctantly sorry, show no desperate signs. Because, village's stored grain is sufficient to last

until next autumn's harvest, and there's a surplus. And these grains supplied to the army will be recorded by Priest Tuniao, offsetting some tribute transported to the county.

The kingdom's garrison villages adopted the traditional collective community system. A village as a whole, or a "tribe." Villagers collectively farm using communal implements, harvest is stored for entire village use.

This tribal communal model is traditional in Central America's tribes. Individual families can't withstand harsh natural conditions alone, nor resist conflicts among scattered tribes. Even village children are raised collectively, taught by village elders or priests.

Of course, this traditional community isn't a communal feast, and naturally has clear ranks. Village's "Three Elders," village priest, garrison leader, militia captain are the first level, enjoying the best of everything. Second level includes village's warriors, militia, hunters... these strong men can fight and hunt. Smart Priest Apprentices within second level are highest in status. Below are farming men, strong women, and weak elderly.

For collectively raised children, depends on village's grain abundance to decide their treatment. Like now, with ample reserves, children eat well, even receive training from warriors and hunters to see if any good seedlings can be nurtured...

"Hmm? This village chief's longhouse looks pretty decent!"

Woodpecker Aitz entered the longhouse, lit the hearth, placed dry firewood, warming and lighting the wooden house. He looked at the soft thick straw bed, covered with a Sisal mat, even had a coarse cloth blanket on top. And behind the wooden wall by the bed, was an empty shelf. Approaching carefully, observing scratches and ropes on it, he understood.

"Bow and Arrow... Bronze Axe... Leather Armor... this village's garrison leader seems like a retired warrior of the kingdom. Yet these weapons armor... hmm, still wary of us!"

Understanding this, Woodpecker Aitz smiled wryly. Next, he looked at the shrine for divine reverence, inside was a stone-carved Chief Divine figure, surrounded by ritual cocoa beans, shells, bird feathers, centrally offering a silver Sun Amulet, fronted by a gray pottery incense burner.

The whole house had a faint pine scent. Woodpecker Aitz searched a while, noticing the freshly burnt pine resin in the incense burner before the divine sculpture. Judging by accumulated ash, it was evidently frequently prayed upon.

"Retired kingdom warrior, devout garrison leader, prosperous village life..."

Having examined these spots, Woodpecker Aitz understood the situation. He rubbed his tired legs, found leftover half pine resin, lit it, comfortably lying on the straw bed, covered in a soft cloth quilt.

"The Chief Divine witnesses! Trained militia with copper weapons, harvested communal fields, stacked field fertilizers, villagers able to eat well, village chief living in comfort... Of course, most importantly, grain-filled village granary!..."

"This is the kingdom's prosperous garrison village, prosperity for commoners, prosperity from land!..."

"Hmm... Let me think how to chant this? Kingdom's poets haven't sung for commoners... "

"Got it!... Village granaries like green leaves, spread across wide fields, filled with harvested grains, like incense burners full of pine resin! Praise the Chief Divine and the Kingdom!"

"Haha! I'm truly a natural poet! I'll dedicate this poem to the esteemed lord! ...But, missing a section, need three more complete verses... What to write?..."

Pine aroma gently burned, relaxing the mind. Bonfire calm, warming the body. Woodpecker Aitz pondered the unfinished poem, lying on the comfy straw bed, soon fell asleep. Tomorrow, he must be energetic, continue traveling. Particularly taking note upon reaching those Canine Descendant Tribes' banners, wonder what they'll be like...

Chapter 1349: A Prosperous Kingdom, Impoverished Tribal Flag Teams

The autumn night was quite peaceful, and the scent of pine resin made people feel relaxed. Regardless of whether the village militia was asleep or how the tribal archers in the encampment were sleeping, Military Merit Nobility Aitz was comfortably asleep on the village chief's grass bed anyway!

"Praise the Chief Divine! This sleep was so comfortable that my whole body feels relaxed... Ah, not bad, truly not bad!"

The next morning, Woodpecker Aitz was smiling as he ate the village's flatbread and made "promises" to the garrison leader Tagu beside him.

"Chief Divine bless! When I return from fighting next year, if I pass through here again, I will definitely come and sleep once more!..."

"Ah?!..."

Upon hearing Woodpecker Aitz's words, the garrison leader Tagu felt as if struck by lightning. His hand trembled, causing the warm flatbread to fall to the ground. He glared at Aitz with wide eyes, wishing he could pick up his spear and stab Aitz right in the face.

Well, the garrison leader Tagu indeed possessed a two-and-a-half-meter legion spear. He was actually an retired warrior from the first spear legion of Rivermouth County. He wasn't wounded, nor was he old; he retired according to the orders of Legion Commander and County Magistrate Yinkuluka.

When the kingdom established Rivermouth County's civilian garrisons, each garrison needed a few village leaders and warriors for management. Monkey Kuluka, having a plebeian background, had neither Mexica nobility nor hereditary family warriors under him. Therefore, his solution was to transfer a group of reliable veterans from his legion to manage each village, especially those near Rivermouth County, close to the Canine Descendants' flag team, they placed trusted personnel.

And after the veteran spear warrior Tagu became the garrison leader, he implemented simple drills for the able-bodied men of the village according to the legion's training methods. This was how Woodpecker Aitz received the grand "welcome" he saw yesterday.

"Cough! Chief Divine bears witness! Esteemed Military Merit Nobility... I followed the Legion Commander in raiding... oh, campaigning in the Northwest Chapala Lake Region. The Feathered King of Chapala is very cunning; I'm afraid he's not so easy to deal with!..."

The garrison leader Tagu picked up the flatbread and brushed off the dirt. He kept his head down, hiding his expression, but his voice trembled slightly.

"This expedition is to completely occupy that Northwestern lake region. That lake region is vast! There are many City-States by the lake, lots of Barbarian Children from the North, and many chaotic tribes in the mountains... next year, you might not be able to finish and come back!..."

"Haha! The Thunderbolt of the Chief Divine shelters us! No village, no City-State can resist the kingdom's attack!"

Upon hearing this, Woodpecker Aitz laughed heartily, with both pride from the Capital City and unconcealed smugness when facing these information-deprived warrior bumpkins.

"Chief Divine bears witness! This expedition isn't just Rivermouth County alone; there's also an eight-thousand-member long snake legion, advancing north directly from the southwest, piercing the heart of the Chapala Lake Region! Moreover, behind our camp, there's an unbeatable legion head, which is the newly formed Thunder... cough!"

"What? Thunder what? Is it the cannon regiment from the northern campaign?"

"Haha! Different, it's different. They will also travel along the county road, just slower. I can't say much, but keep an eye out at the relay station, you'll see!"

Woodpecker Aitz shut his mouth in time, stopping his words mid-sentence. Then, he glanced at the inquisitive face of the garrison leader Tagu, who seemed eager to stab him, and stood up with a smug look.

"Chief Divine bless! Finished eating! It's time to set out!... Tagu, see you next year!"

"Er... Chief Divine bless! Next year... let's talk then..."

The garrison leader Tagu lowered his voice, muttering to himself. He watched as the Tlaxcala troop stepped over the harvested field ridges onto the newly built dirt road, cursing angrily in his heart.

"High-and-mighty Capital City nobility! Only speak half the truth... May you fall into a pit while squatting and struggle to climb out!..."

"Tagu, next year I want to sleep on your grass bed again!... By the way, I'll also bring you some spoils of war!"

"Uh!..."

"Haha!"

Woodpecker Aitz lifted his chest and once again hoisted the camp's battle flag, leading his archers towards the northeastern Rivermouth County. As they moved forward, the terrain gradually elevated, with hills and small mountains beginning to appear on both sides. The road beneath Aitz's feet transitioned from a secondary county road made of compacted gravel to a simple, leveled dirt road. This section of the road clearly required difficult construction and a lot of work, and the secondary county road in the county was not yet completed here.

"Hmm? There are woods on both sides, and birds flying around... Right! Once we cross these small mountains and hills, we should be able to overlook the Cuitzeo Lake at Rivermouth... I recall, the Canine Descendants Tribes that moved southward should have quite a few flag teams settled in this area..."

Woodpecker Aitz mused as he looked around at the hills on both sides. Around the dirt road, he could vaguely see a large area of low huts and straw houses, gathered in the small valleys around a stream flowing down from the mountains. By the riverside in the valley, there were also roughly cultivated fields, which were noticeably disorderly.

"Chief Divine! What are they planting here? Yams? The weeds are as high as the crops, and no one seems to care?!..."

Woodpecker Aitz observed for a moment, his brows twitching. When he first joined the army, he didn't think much of it, but now that he owned his own manor and had personally managed his fields, he found it unbearable to see these tribal "fields" that were such an eyesore.

"No! No! Damn, it's already November! Why haven't these haphazardly planted yams been harvested?!"

At this thought, Woodpecker Aitz gritted his teeth somewhat. He glared fiercely towards the tribal camp in the valley and made eye contact with the tribal chieftain who was also watching from the camp. Immediately, dozens of blue-haired, face-tattooed tribal warriors and hunters rushed out in a mass, charging at the marching camp along the mountain road.

"Ah! Draw your weapons! Prepare for battle!... Drip drip!..."

The piercing sound of horns startled both the marching tribal archers and the camp warriors charging forward. Both sides reflexively raised their long spears and set up their bamboo bows, with identical weapons.

A few breaths later, it was the tattooed tribal flag leader who reacted first. He skillfully pulled out a flag of the Chief Divine from behind him and waved it forcefully. Then, he took out another flag with a wobbly painted stone balance on it, the symbol of the Kingdom's market.

"Praise the Chief Divine! Praise the one who raises strange carrots!... Down there! Tribes! Oh no! Samurai!... Come! Look! Exchange goods! Good stuff!..."

The tribal flag leader, Babbe, shouted loudly in a halting yet deep and melodious Navajo-accented voice, calling out to the archery camp on the dirt road. The strange tone immediately evoked thoughts of the vast and desolate north. He came from the Bosalous people, a hunting tribe from the far northeastern wilderness that only moved south in early spring the year before last.

In recent years, the Red Crow Great Tribe had been conquering east and west, annexing tribes everywhere, causing disruptions and scattering the northeastern tribes. The northern cold waves frequently moved southward, although they were minor cold waves, not terrifying major ones, but were still difficult for the tribes to endure. Contemplating his situation, having heard that the Great Chief Balamo of Qingqiu County was recruiting, he led his tribe to join.

Who knew the cold-hearted Great Chief Balamo would just chant a few incomprehensible verses and bestow upon him the surname "Ba". Then, Great Chief Balamo picked out a few Divine Archers from his tribe and sent them all south in a package deal, selling... oh, handing them over to the more powerful "Divine Monkey" Great Chief, Kuluka.

"Hey! Why do both Great Chiefs prefer red-haired tribes adept at archery?... Our blue-haired ones are fierce too! We can hunt javelins and chase northern giant beasts!..."

Considering the treatment from both attempts to join forces, Flag Leader Babbe felt quite resentful. Fortunately, though the "Divine Monkey" Great Chief didn't value them highly, he didn't treat them poorly either. Not only did he organize them into a flag team, but he also allocated them a patch of mountainous forest and valley, and sent Chief God Priests to teach them farming. His group of just over 400 people perfectly constituted a small flag team.

Being a struggling tribal flag team, they didn't have to pay the establishment-like strict grain taxes, and in practicality, they were too poor to contribute much. Each year, each flag team only needed to symbolically offer some forest game and tribute to the Great Chief. But in return, they had to adhere to strict conscription orders! Whenever the Great Chief issued a conscription order, each small flag team had to provide 40 able-bodied men, equipped with their weapons, to accompany the Kingdom's army on expeditions!

"Accompanying the army on expeditions, with provisions and lodging covered. On the battlefield, fight to win spoils of war and captives. After the plunder, sell the goods and people, earn military merit, and even receive rewards... could even join the legion and become the Great Chief's Warrior... oh no, Samurai!..."

Recalling the perks of expeditions, Flag Leader Babbe drooled. Back on the wilderness, he had never seen stone houses or large villages, let alone "cities" formed by merging populations of dozens of tribes! And in the villages and cities, just grabbing something could surpass a year of farming!...

As for dying in battle, that was common on the wilderness. People were said to live only twenty or thirty years or so. Only priests and shamans who were blessed could live to forty or fifty...

"Hey! Why didn't the 'Divine Monkey' Great Chief summon us for this Western Expedition? Does he think we weren't brave enough in the last battle? Come this year's tribute, we must ask the Great Chief's Warrior, oh no, Samurai!..."

Flag Leader Babbe, lost in thought, eyed the camp along the road enviously. Until the moment when a chieftain with a Feathered Helmet, carrying a banner, seemingly wealthy... oh, powerful, approached

with several armored warriors. Thereupon, the chieftain curiously glanced around before inquiring in Mexica Language.

"Good stuff? Exchange?"

"Yes, yes! Exchange!"

"Hmm, witnessed by the Chief Divine!... What do you have?..."

Chapter 1350: The Prosperous Kingdom, The First Settlement of the Tribes

The trees are lush, hills stretch endlessly, and the simple dirt road rises and falls, making walking quite laborious. Woodpecker Aitz stops the camp in place for a rest and curiously browses through Captain Babe's small and large baskets, looking at what constitutes "good stuff."

"Chief Divine! What is all this? Red pottery figurines made from the vibrant, delicate Rain Divine clay? Uh... how come it's missing an arm?"

"...White oak trinkets, combs, spoons, wooden bells... huh? What's this, half of the heritage wooden board? Seems like old hieroglyphs from the Tarasco Kingdom? Where's the other half? Ah?!..."

"...Obsidian Stone tools, no, this should be ritual artifacts? Scattered obsidian beads, glowing brilliantly. This is high-quality obsidian! Why do they all have holes... Oh! Did you snatch the necklace from one of the Three Gods' priests? The string is broken, and the beads are scattered severely. Foolish, fools! The number and shape of these beads are supposed to match divinity, match divinity! If scattered and fewer, they are worthless, don't you understand?..."

Woodpecker Aitz frowns, picking up items for a long time, his expression shifting between delight and disappointment. These apparently primitive tribes don't even know how to rob properly. It's exasperating how they've managed to make these valuable ritual artifacts broken and incomplete.

"Red pottery, white oak, obsidian... Is your team so poor that you even rob such junk?... Oh no, it wasn't junk originally, but after you robbed it, it became junk. You must have robbed an old god's high priest, where's his Divine Staff? Where's his gemstone Dharma Instrument?..."

"Ah? What?! It's worthless now after we robbed it?! Why!"

Woodpecker Aitz's words are quick and forceful, like the "duo duo" of a woodpecker on a tree, making Captain Babe's head whirl. He stares wide-eyed and dazed at Aitz, pulling at his hair with force before hesitantly asking.

"Divine... Divine Staff? Is it that shabby, broken-down wooden stick? We didn't take it. That thing is valuable? ...Oh, red ruby? That thing has already been traded! Traded for several copper spears. The red-haired barbarians said they liked red, so they traded copper spears for it..."

"Ugh! So you were already picked clean? No wonder nothing good is left!"

Woodpecker Aitz shook his head, turning to leave. Captain Babe quickly stepped forward, grabbing him.

"Wealthy Chieftain! Great Chieftain! Don't go! There are still good things!... Oh! There are still a few silverware pieces. The red-haired barbarians want them, but I didn't give them. They must be good stuff!..."

Saying that, Captain Babe called out behind him. Then, two blue-haired hunters handed over a ragged grass bag to Woodpecker Aitz.

"What is this? Oh! Silver masks, silver chains, silver bracelets, hmm... the patterns look old, like carved by the Otomi People... and there's a silver cup... huh? Why did you crush this cup? Darn! The patterns are all bent!..."

Woodpecker Aitz looked for a moment, his blood pressure surging again. He couldn't hold back and began scolding this bunch of corn cobs fiercely.

"Chief Divine bears witness! Next time you go out looting, could you be more careful?! Pottery figurines crack easily, heavy and not worth the trouble. Heritage Wooden Boards must be intact; can't understand them anyway, what's the use of half of one?! Obsidian Necklaces need to be complete, every bead shouldn't be missing! The old Divine Staff you threw away is worth more than all this junk!..."

"Also! Trading the ruby dharma artifact for a few copper spears, are you stupid? Sell it directly to a priest, and you could trade for ten bronze axes! Silverware isn't very valuable to begin with, only worth anything because of the divine patterns on them, the older the better. Why would you smash them?"

"Ah? Ah!... We... we just thought smashing them made them smaller, easier to bring back..."

Captain Babe stammered, his honest face full of both heartbreak and sadness. But soon, he responded loudly, cursing.

"Curse it! Those red barbarians scattered like ashes in the wind! Tricked us out of gemstones!... Next time we encounter them, I'll definitely pound them!"

"Leader, the red-haired barbarians are many, with quite a few teams, more than fingers can count! They all have leather armor and good weapons, we can't beat them..."

"Rubbish! Then let's join forces with Guamar's wind barbarians! Not only did the red-haired barbarians take our gemstones, but they also took the gold items the wind barbarians looted!... "

"Leader, but we don't get along with the wind barbarians either! Last time, we almost fought each other trying to sell war prisoners to the Great Chief!... "

"Darn it, shut up! It was you who smashed the silverware!... "

"Leader, you say! I had even picked up that priest's old stick intending to use it as making straps. It was you who told me to throw it away, saying it's a worthless wooden thing..."

"Ah! Shut up!... "

"... "

Watching these team hunters arguing amongst themselves, Woodpecker Aitz feels somewhat speechless. He shakes his head, turns to leave, but is grabbed again by Captain Babe.

"Praise the Chief Divine! Wealthy... Oh no, great chieftain!... Choose what you like, and trade something for it! We won't ask for much, name your price, take as you please!..."

"Hmm? This pile of junk..."

Woodpecker Aitz turns his head and sees Captain Babe's dark, unrefined face from the wilderness. However, witnessing his opponent's wide eyes now filled with pleading and longing, stubbornness and resolve, Woodpecker Aitz's eyebrows rise. He pondered for a moment, guessing that if he truly leaves without trading anything today, this bunch of barbarians possibly wouldn't hesitate to follow them, and perhaps even stealthily shoot an arrow at him in the middle of the night...