

## Civilization 185

### Chapter 185 The King and the Merchant, The Youth and an Old Friend

With Xiulote's emphatic suggestion, the Temple fell into silence for a moment, and even the curling wisps of smoke quietly dissipated.

The Capital City Elder leaned slightly forward, stealthily extinguishing the divine smoke in his hand. Then he stretched out his hand to adjust his clothing, and the half-smoked offering vanished from his sleeve. Following that, the Elder's face twitched slightly. The divine smoke had just been extinguished, and the embers still hot, had fallen inside his garment, a sensation both painful and oddly refreshing. He bore the pain silently, making no sound, but watched the imposing High Priest and the bowing Xiulote, considering deeply within his heart.

The High Priest nodded in approval, scanning the surroundings.

"The sections of the doctrine regarding the merchandising tax have not yet been defined. Although Priest Xiulote's suggestion is insightful, we still need everyone to discuss and refine it point by point,"

The Elder Priests nodded in response. Since the High Priest had set a tone of approval, naturally, no one openly objected. They then composed their bearing and sat solemnly in a circle to discuss each point publicly.

The factions of Central America were in strife, and the city-states stood in opposition to each other. There has always been a loose alliance between the city-states, with no powerful government to exert strong control and form a unified market. Great merchants made huge profits from the price differences among the factions, thus becoming influential. Often, they would spend lavishly, becoming wealthy and even hiring hundreds of Samurai.

But although the merchants were rich, they were still a weak and powerless class, the ruled, like crops in the fields waiting to be harvested. Local Nobility of all sizes coveted the merchants, demanding from them as they wished. If the timing was right, some of the Great Nobility would even collude with hired Samurai, launching raids on merchant caravans, leaving no survivors.

In the city-states, the Great merchants were strictly limited in the amount of land they could own and the level of garments they could wear. The loyalty of the hired Samurai had its limits. The Great merchants needed to tribute many goods to obtain the protection of the local rulers.

The Elders in the Temple had all received generous gifts from the merchants, but now none spoke for them. To the grand Priesthood Divine Tree, merchants were but insignificant insects. In the sacred Temple, Xiulote's proposal to reform commercial laws and to regulate merchants of low status met no resistance from the Elders.

Regulating market laws, management of currency and measures, controlling market prices, and managing strategic materials were all considered rightful duties. Such discussions had taken place in the past, but due to a lack of written records and manpower, very few executed them.

The Elders first briefly discussed the exchange rates of currency, establishing standard amounts for cocoa beans, lengths for cotton cloth, and weights for Gold Dust. Then they decided to send lower-ranking Priests to manage the salt mines near the Capital City, collect tin ore Tribute from the southern city-states of Mexica, and impose in-kind taxes on copper ore merchants. Lastly, they dispatched more judges to restrict the sale of weapons and armor.

Controlling luxury goods did not cause much uproar either. Mexica society had a strict class hierarchy, advocated for moderation and restraint, and valued agriculture and warfare. Samurai and commoners should not overstep their rank to indulge in expensive luxuries. Levying a luxury tax would increase revenue, but it necessitated the deployment of precious talents proficient in accounting.

When discussing the control of divine smoke, the Capital City Elder who had smoked earlier made a subtle gesture, and another Capital City Elder spoke up in a deep voice.

"Divine smoke is a medium for communication between gods and men, allowing us to hear the voices of the gods and to heal bodily afflictions. Samurai do not need to communicate with gods and can be prohibited. But for Priests, perhaps there's no..."

The High Priest's authoritative gaze swept over, pressure emanating from his calm demeanor.

The Capital City Elder met his gaze, paused, and then continued, "Perhaps it's not without reason."

The High Priest nodded and decisively declared, "There are many ways to treat illnesses. Divine smoke can damage vitality, so care should be taken when adding medicinal herbs. Regardless of what you do in private, in public gatherings, Priests are not allowed to smoke divine smoke. Violators will be fined initially, whipped on the second offense, and demoted on the third!"

The Elder Priests all sobered up and bowed deeply to accept the command. Xiulote pondered for a moment, his grandfather's new rule seemed to have deeper implications, and it could be used in the future to cleanse the overstated local clergy.

"Manage foreign merchants, revoke their autonomous rights, but also protect their safety. Deploy military force when necessary to subdue 'bandits' along the way!"

Xiulote reiterated his last suggestion, emphasizing the word "bandits."

At this, the Elders exchanged glances. After a moment, an Elder from the Holy City hesitated before raising a question.

"From where shall the troops to subdue the 'bandits' be assembled?"

"Deploy the Temple Guards!" Xiulote answered decisively.

"We need to expand the Temple Guards, station troops at important passage points, maintain them through the collection of merchandising taxes. These Temple Guards are an extension of the will and action of the Priesthood. Their purpose is not only to protect the trade routes and fight common bandits but also to strike against any 'bandits' who dare to obstruct the Priests' actions on a local level!"

The crowd was inwardly taken aback. Under the pretext of maintaining trade routes, sending Temple military force to the localities was self-evident. They turned their attention to the High Priest.

The High Priest pondered for a moment, remembering the recent cleansing in Texcoco. His killing intent flickered and then vanished, and he nodded slowly, expressionless.

"Very well. The Chief Divine is omnipotent, and His majesty must not be offended. Regardless of status, those who rebel must be cleansed with Holy Blood!"

The Elder Priests remained silent. The Elders from the Holy City were the first to bow and accept the decree. Those from the Capital City hesitated for a moment before also respectfully agreeing.

The meeting that followed unfolded calmly. The Elders established goals, first to double the size of the Temple Guards in the Capital City to four thousand men. Then they planned to send Envoys to communicate with the King, requesting assistance from the Royal Family's direct Samurai to combat bandits. Afterward, they continued to settle the details of the doctrine.