

Civilization 511

Chapter 511 - Heritage Slab, Common Origin Myth!_3

"A good statement! The same ancestors, different branches... the pyramid witnesses, uniting all people..."

Xiulote pondered for a long time, then solemnly nodded. The Third Era was a thousand years ago, roughly during the period of Rome and the two Hans, also the era of Hellenization and Sinicization spreading... Then, he slightly puzzled, looked towards the learned elder.

"The ancient Gusapoteque? The Loma Alta?"

"The ancient Gusapoteque are ancestors of the Mistec and the Zapotecs. Their location was roughly in the far southeast, in the middle valleys of Oaxaca. Mount Alban is the green mountain."

"As for the Loma Alta..."

Jatili smiled deeply once again.

"They are actually the ancestors of the Prepetcha, settled on the south side of Lake Cuitzeo, north of the Patzcuaro Lake region. Your Highness's legions must have passed there when they marched south. Those fortresses by the lakes, many of them are ancient pyramids rebuilt."

Xiulote, with his hands clasped behind his back, paced back and forth, musing.

"So it can be said, the different tribes of the world can be assigned to different civilizational branches. The Teotihuacanos venerate the Rain Divine Tlaloc, which indeed matches with the deities of the Third Era in Mexica mythology. Hence, the northern communities, the Mexica, the Otomi, the Tlaxcala, the Vastec... all belong to the Teotihuacan lineage..."

Upon hearing this, Jatili gently smiled. A flush crossed Xiulote's face. Since the other was a learned elder, the origins of the Mexica and the Tlaxcala people could not possibly be hidden from him. He continued speaking calmly.

"The tribes of the west, the Tekos, the Tlapanec, the Prepetcha... all belong to the Loma Alta lineage. The southern tribes, the Mistec, the Zapotecs... the ancient Gusapoteque lineage, and the central Totonac, let them continue as direct descendants of the Olmec."

The learned elder nodded, smiling and continuing.

"Thus, all peoples once shared a common ancestor, then branched out into East, South, West, and North. Though their customs may vary, all peoples are essentially one!"

Upon hearing this, Xiulote first nodded, then shook his head.

"No, all peoples share one ancestor, but then split into seven branches. One lives in the far northern wilderness, living a migratory life; one on an island in the Eastern Great Lake, navigating in canoes; and the last one crossed through the distant southern jungle, establishing a kingdom of gold."

"The far northern wilderness... are you referring to the Canine Descendants?"

Hearing this, Xiulote smiled without speaking, as Jatili continued to speculate.

"Integrating the Canine Descendants is both difficult and easy. They establish no culture and venerate force, elusive and hard to locate. Only by thoroughly defeating them and occupying the water sources and farmlands of the northern wilderness can the Canine Descendants be brought under control. Once subdued, though, assimilation is rather quick."

"Canoes on the Eastern Great Lake... Your Highness speaks of the Taino people, the island dwellers who consume cassava? The Taino are delicate and uncivilized, abundant in tobacco. The lake's waves are unpredictable, making their island as difficult to find."

"As for the distant jungles to the south, south of the Maya lands are the forests abundant with jade. Your Highness, where exactly is this golden kingdom you mentioned?"

The young King smiled, declining to answer. He simply looked towards the fourth Heritage Slab and asked softly.

"Sage, is the civilization of the Fourth Era a continuation of the various factions from the Third Era?"

"Your Highness, we may narrate it so, and the people are inclined to believe it as well."

Jatili's wrinkles stretched in his smile, resembling a trembling fox.

"In reality, the Fourth Era is but a few hundred years ago, and the records in various paintings are quite clear. It was an era of erratic cloudbursts, sometimes floods, sometimes droughts. It was also an era of turbulence with northern tribes migrating south. Many who spoke the Nava language, the Canine Descendants, flooded into the Mexican Plateau. They clashed fiercely with native tribes, then quickly integrated, forming new alliances and kingdoms!"

"Canine Descendants migrating southward, tribes speaking the Nava language..."

Xiulote's expression shifted slightly. The Fourth Era coincided with the Five Dynasties and the Song period, accompanied by a global cooling and erratic celestial and climatic changes. It was an era of extensive southern migration by nomadic peoples, an era of massive southern invasions by the Vikings, and also an era of continual southern migration by the Chichimeca Canine Descendants.

All the tribes speaking the Nava language had actually originated from the Canine Descendants migrating south over several hundred years, merging with the local indigenous groups. The former lords of the Mexican Valley, the Tepanec, those from the source of the Balsas River, the Tlaxcala people, the coastal Totonac to the east, and even the inhabitants of the Lake Region, the Prepetcha, were all tribes speaking the Nava language. The Mexica were the last branch of the Nava Tribe to migrate south to the Mexican Plateau. The Nava-speaking tribes, although linguistically similar and resembling each other in appearance, were actually akin to brothers by blood and were naturally skilled in warfare.

In contrast, the Otomi, Vastec, Mistec, Zapotecs... used another similar language, inheriting more from ancient civilizations. Naturally, with the ceaseless wars and interaction among the tribes, their languages also permeated each other.

"Your Highness, the Fourth Era was full of turmoil, symbolized by the Rain Divine. Unpredictable rainfall, disordered agriculture, and the southern migration of the Canine Descendants fiercely impacted the northern regions. The tribes were constantly at war and migrating. If we consider the Canine Descendants part of the same origin, then the Fourth Era was a time when all tribes were reintegrating! And this integration of all tribes is destined to be completed by your hands in this current Fifth Era!"

"All tribes originating from the same source, evolving separately, then moving towards mutual integration, until they reunify as one. A perfectly self-consistent story, divinely destined. This is the fate of the five eras, capable of truly leading the world, connecting all tribes, unifying the legends of all tribes!"

Upon saying this, Jatili's aged face showed signs of excitement. His gaze intensely focused on Xiulote, and the young king too stared back resolutely. Both of their eyes burned with a great fire, eager to blaze through a century across the whole world!

The learned elder looked on for a long time before calming his emotions and spoke again with solemnity.

"Your Highness, the Fourth Era left many precise epics. In the Mexican Valley, the Toltec's kingdom flourished and then declined, ultimately passing on through the hands of the Tepanec to the Mexica. And in the Lake Region were the two successive Urixiu Kingdoms. They perished in the southern migration of the Canine Descendants, revived, perished again, and then arose the establishment and flourishing of the Tarasco Kingdom!"

"These once powerful kingdoms perished not only due to the impact of the Canine Descendants moving south but also due to internal factors. And the essential factor is right here!"

As he spoke, Jatili took a few strides forward. He extended his hand forcefully and pressed it firmly down on the second adjacent Heritage Slab.

Chapter 512 - Heritage Slab, Rise and Fall of the Kingdom

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"Eh?... What is this..."

Listening to Jatili's serious words, Xiulote stepped forward two paces and looked to the second slab.

The slab's imagery was simple yet clear. With just a glance, one could see a vast expanse of dark clouds in the sky, from which countless black lines extended down, like endless rain pouring. Below where the rain fell, there were boundless wavy lines, resembling a vast Great Lake. Among the lines, some small islands peaked out, and at the center, there were people in canoes. The crowd consisted of small figures dressed as Nobility, Samurai, and commoners. They were lifting up a lavishly dressed adult and together throwing him into the lake!

The young King gazed at the scene for a moment. Many symbols, including the sun, clouds, water, earth, maize, sacrifices, death, and destruction, were engraved around the image. And the scene itself always evoked a sense of familiarity in him, bringing many things to mind. He mused and asked,

"Is this... the Great Flood? Sacrifices?"

Jatili smiled and nodded.

"Exactly! Your Highness might guess, who is being sacrificed?"

"Lavishly dressed, and it's an adult depicted. It must be a prominent Divine Descendant Nobility."

"Haha, correct. It is the Prince from the Kingdom of the Lake that followed the Urixiu Kingdom!"

"What! The Prince from the previous Kingdom of the Lake?"

Xiulote's face showed surprise. Sacred sacrifices sometimes used Divine Descendant Nobility as sacrifices, but usually, these sacrifices came from captives or rebellious subjects. If a Prince of the kingdom were to be chosen as a sacrifice, it could only prove one thing... He looked toward the learned elder.

"The King of the succeeding Urixiu Kingdom lost control of the nation? This is an omen of doom!"

"Your Highness is wise!"

Jatili said with a laugh of praise. Then he became serious, earnestly explaining,

"This happened two hundred years ago, considered the end of the Fourth Era and the beginning of the Fifth Era. In the epic records, at the end of the Fourth Era, there was a rain that persisted for 99 days! Torrential rain cascaded down from the sky and also gathered from the surrounding high mountains. At

its peak, Lake Patzcuaro rose nearly ten men high, and Cuitzeo Lake rose six men high. The lower elevation of Chapala Lake, in fact, rose by the height of a dozen men or more!"

"Water levels rising ten men high! The waters would directly inundate the base of the city of Qinchongcan!"

Xiulote was filled with shock upon hearing this. Even in this era, when people were shorter on average, ten men high would be about 15 meters. Without dikes surrounding Lake Patzcuaro, a rise in water level by fifteen meters would expand the lake's area several times over!

"Indeed! In that era, the city of Qinchongcan was not yet the center of the Kingdom of the Lake. The heart of the subsequent Urixu Kingdom was on the western shore of Lake Patzcuaro, near the Takuro Plains. That was the resting place, where birds fell from the sky."

The learned elder looked at His Highness with a meaningful smile.

"Your Highness, you have fought there before against the Prince with Feathers from Chapala. That place is now a prosperous village of farmland, and before that, a lush wetland meadow. And even earlier, beneath the mud brought by those floods, lie the ruins of an ancient kingdom. The greatest threat to the Lake Region, the primary reason for the downfall of ancient kingdoms, was the flood!"

"Two hundred years ago, the Great Flood swept over the lands of the lake! The water levels of the lakes in the Lake Region rose and even connected to each other, forming a vast Great Lake. Elevated hills and peaks became different-sized islands; lower valleys and basins became part of the Great Lake. And when the fertile lakeside farmland and the rich lowland villages were submerged by the floodwaters, the unrest within the Kingdom of the Lake could no longer be contained."

"The gradually rising water levels slowly submerged the densely populated lakeside communities, also forcing those in the lowlands to migrate. These areas were once the essence of the Kingdom of the Lake, home to the largest population! Powerful Nobility lost their fiefs, and numerous Samurai and commoners lost their farmland. They uncharacteristically united and moved toward the unaffected Highlands."

"However, those lands already had owners. Intractable conflicts quickly arose and soon turned into war! The Nobility from the lowlands and the Highlands fought to the death for land to live on. The surging floods hindered the kingdom's transportation, also severing the army's movements in all directions. Amidst the flooding, the King lost the power to rule over the entire situation! Even he was forced to relocate with the royal family of the Capital City."

"Following that, the sudden decrease of farmland and the heavy downpour led to almost a complete crop failure that year! Where the rainwater gathered, loosely kept barns would also be inundated, causing the stored grain to quickly mold. Famine almost immediately followed, striking with the footsteps of the flood and lasting even longer than the flood itself!"

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"The following years were utter chaos. The existing social order crumbled, and might made right. Nobles slaughtered each other in battles over the highland islands, staining the Great Lake with blood! Samurai and militia also butchered each other for the scarce food that was necessary for survival. They pillaged villages, attacked the nobility's fiefs, and even executed nobles in order to plunder manors stocked with reserves!"

"Soon, even the divine authority of the King came into question. Influential nobles from the highlands publicly challenged his legitimacy, claiming that it was the King's offense to the deities that had brought about the disaster! With the help of those harboring ulterior motives, such rumors spread quickly, rapidly fanning the discontent amongst the populace in the wake of the flood. Priests, too, became

divided amongst themselves, their voices growing increasingly opposed to the King, and they gradually aligned themselves with the local power-holding nobility."

"The Urixu King was eventually forced to sacrifice his own Prince in Lake Patzcuaro in order to temporarily appease the fury of the nobles and samurai. However, when a monarch loses both the support of his people and his power, such actions only serve to further expose his vulnerability. Within a few years, the King was poisoned by the nobles. Even though the floodwaters had receded by then, and the lowlands could once again be cultivated, the collapsed order of the kingdom was gone beyond recovery!"

With just a few words, Jatili vividly depicted the downfall of the previous kingdom before the young ruler. Unable to contain himself, Xiulote walked over to the window. He stared at the torrential rains of the monsoon season as they fell upon Lake Patzcuaro, gazed upon the submerged fertile lands by the lake, and fell into deep thought.

"Heavy rain brings floods, floods gather, raising the surface of the lake, submerging basins and valleys. There's a need for water management projects... Similar basin topography can be found in the Dujiangyan of Sichuan, the dikes of Lake Texcoco..."

Xiulote murmured to himself, once again elevating the significance of the water management projects in his heart.

The lifeline of the Classical Kingdoms was the water system, the agricultural areas along rivers and lakes. Especially in Central America, where rainfall was intense and erratic, and precipitation coincided with the heat, just a few droughts or floods were enough to destroy a civilization. He remembered the tales told by the Mayan merchants from Tikalo, how hundreds of years ago the end of the Maya Golden Age and the destruction of the Divine Capital Tikal were inextricably linked to the frequent droughts and floods of the fourth era.

The young ruler pondered for a moment before lifting his head again. He had a rough guess in his heart yet still asked.

"Two hundred years ago, the great flood shattered the order of the Kingdom of the Lake. What then, was the end of this lake-centered kingdom?"

Jatili looked at Xiulote, eyes twinkling with amusement.

"Your Highness, you surely already know. But look here!"

The knowledgeable elder took two steps forward and once again placed his hand on the third slab.

The third slab was a large and detailed painting. A majestic Divine Eagle soared in the sky at the center, and the grand sun rose gently from the East. Accompanied by the sun, the Divine Eagle watched over the vast earth below. On the ground, a procession came from the northwest along the river, with the leader wearing a Divine Crown adorned with the spread wings of a mighty eagle, standing out tall and prominent. On either side of their path were the Lake Region nobility, samurai, and commoners with tributes in hand, welcoming them. Together, they settled by the lake, building houses, towns, and the towering city of Akatla with blue-stone.

Xiulote approached to take a closer look. The painting strokes were ancient and worn, yet they conveyed a certain dynamic vitality. Surrounding the image were various patterns of the Divine Eagle, hummingbirds, crocodiles, feathers, turkeys, cacao... and other motifs. These familiar details also appeared on the enemy's flags on the battlefield to the west! As for the content of the painting...

The young King spoke in a serious tone.

"The original murals in the great hall of the Palace of Wind?"

"Exactly! Your Highness, the terrifying and unpredictable climate also forced the northern peoples to migrate to the south. The Chichimeca Canine Descendants from the north came migrating southwards; they conquered the chaotic and splintered Urixu Kingdom along their way. Though their numbers were few, their ferocity and prowess in battle were unmatched! The old nobility had already suffered heavy losses in the civil strife. They were either mercilessly annihilated or prostrated themselves in surrender. Warriors and the common people alike were tired of the prolonged conflict and yearned for a unified order, and they surrendered to the strongest power one after another."

"The army of the Divine Eagle, with its unstoppable force, marched eastward! They accepted surrenders, ennobled the new elite, and their power grew ever stronger. The descendants of the Divine Eagle traveled through the Chapala Lake Region, across the Takuro Plains, until they reached the gates of Qinchongcan City!"

Jatili's voice carried a lyrical tone, laced with emotional undulations.

"There was no question about the final outcome, but the path that led to it is worth exploring. The new Tarasco Kingdom was established on the fertile soil amid the lakes. The south-migrating Chichimeca Canine Descendants, carrying the ambition and vigor of the northern highlands, founded their capital southeast of Lake Patzcuaro, in the highlands safe from the flood, Qinchongcan City.

"Drawing from the experiences of the kingdom's downfall, the successive Kings of Tarasco implemented a series of innovative measures! They centralized the monarch's power, established new strongholds directly under their control; they managed the nobility of the kingdom, governed the conquered land; they sought the majesty of the deities, and took control of the priests' authority; they even integrated with the Urixu people of the lake lands, giving rise to the new Prepetcha people!"

With these words, the learned elder bowed his head in a solemn salutation.

"Your Highness, allow me to elaborate! These strategies have proved effective over the past one or two hundred years and have been verified one by one. They will surely benefit your governance in the future!"

Chapter 513 - Heritage Slab, Marital Alliances and Enfeoffment

"Very good, excellent indeed!"

In the fleeting dreams that fluttered like summer rain or autumn breeze, he gazed out at the far reaches of time. Changes through the ages ebbed like a retreating sea, the epic saga of bygone kingdoms hammered at the heart of the king—awakening and enlightening him—until Jatili's voice boomed like thunder, snapping Xiulote out of his reverie on the dynastic shifts. Smiling, he regarded the sage elder, his hands warmly lifting him.

"Only by reflecting on the kingdom's epic as if it were a bronze mirror, can we clearly discern the rise and fall of the future! Please speak freely, sage, and offer me your counsel and insight!"

Jatili paused briefly, admiration flashing across his face. Then, he rose tall and walked back to the fourth slab.

"Your Highness, please take a look!"

Xiulote peered closely; the fourth panel also featured a trio of images.

The central panel depicted a scene of homage. Under the supreme sun, a monarch with a Divine Eagle helmet, his presence commanding and stature grand, sat centrally on the throne. In one hand a long spear, in the other a scepter, he was receiving his subjects' homage. Below him, immediately, were his bowing ministers, starkly divided into two groups. On the left, they held weapons, clad in beast-helmets and war clothes, with javelins and bows slung on their backs. On the right, they held scepters, donned in splendid robes and traditional broad hats of the Lake Region, with shields bearing familial crests on their backs. Further out still were the kneeling, homage-paying masses—dense and diminutive like countless prostrate ants.

The youthful monarch surveyed briefly—the warriors on the left clearly closer to the Divine Eagle. In such stern political artwork, differences in distance and size symbolized the magnitude of power and status. After a moment's reflection, he murmured softly to himself,

"This scenario... it resembles the current state of the fief quite a bit!"

Jatili nodded with a smile.

"Highness, this central panel depicts the coronation ceremony of the first Divine Eagle monarch, Tarasco's first Cazonci, Tariauri. After a decade of conflict, Chieftain Tariauri had finally subdued the tribes within the lake, taking control of Patzcuaro and Chapala Lake Regions and establishing his kingdom there, with the capital in Qinchongcan City.

Shortly after the kingdom's rise, there were two groups of nobility under Tariauri's command. One was the Nava military nobility that had followed him southwards, and the other was the Uxiu traditional nobility that submitted subsequently. Both groups comprised tribesmen, warriors, and lands. The Nava were adept in combat, had followed for a longer period, and accrued more military achievements, hence their noticeably higher status, though they were fewer in number. In contrast, the traditional nobility of the Lake Region was more numerous and well-rooted, albeit they submitted later.

After Tariacuri's ascension, the first major issue was the division of lands. The Nava military nobility coveted the fertile lands of the Lake Region and hoped for fiefs near the prosperous capital. These lands were partly under the direct control of the royal family, partly held by the traditional nobility of the Lake Region. With unmatched prestige, the lands directly under the royal family were coveted by none. Thus, the Nava nobility began a dispute with the traditional nobility over the lands, soon escalating as each side rallied their factions. Accustomed to using force, the Nava nobility quickly mobilized their tribal warriors."

On hearing this, Xiulote nodded silently. The military nobility's intrinsic craving for lands and a monarch's need to satisfy these demands to harness the strength of mighty legions were apparent.

After the Mexica legion conquered the lake, the first order of business was also the division of lands. This western campaign lasted just over a year, the nobles and warriors had not accumulated enough military achievements for substantial rewards. The young king, relying on his authority, deliberately suppressed the number of great nobles and the size of their fiefs. Even so, the land to be awarded was nearly two million acres, constituting 15-20% of the cultivated land in the entire fief.

Tariacuri, having campaigned for over a decade, surely had several times more military nobles than the Mexica Northern Army. Lacking the strength of the Mexica Alliance, he could not carry out a planned large-scale purge of the old nobility during national wars. The situation he faced then must have been far more challenging than my current one.

With this thought, Xiulote looked towards the other two panels.

The panel on the left depicted a wedding scene, the Divine Eagle monarch dominating the top of the image. Witnessed by the Divine Eagle, a newlywed couple stood side by side, their joined hands tightly clasped. The groom on the left, a Nava Hunter carrying a short bow, was dressed in warrior clothes and cradled a wild deer. The bride on the right, a lake region fisherwoman holding a fishing net, was dressed

in noble attire with a large fish cradled in her arms. Upon closer inspection, one could see the groom was larger and taller, signifying a slightly higher status.

"The integration of newcomers with local tribes is a primary challenge every conqueror king must first address."

The sage elder looked at Xiulote, his eyes twinkling with mirth.

"Tariacuri, the first king of Tarasco, to tackle this issue, personally arranged and presided over the large-scale intermarriage between the two tribes, eliminating the barriers between them. Nearly all the Nava nobility were required to marry into the local Urixiu nobility, and it was mandated that they marry hereditary, legitimate children of excellence! Moreover, the ordinary Nava warriors were required to take wives from among the local commoners."

"In this ancient panel, the deer symbolizes the Nava nobility, and the large fish represents the nobility of the Lake Region. Their union heralded the birth of the first generation of Prepetcha elites, the backbone of the burgeoning kingdom! Legend has it that the first king Tariacuri was blessed by the gods and lived to the age of 80. He ruled the nascent kingdom for decades with his formidable prestige and steadfast patience, achieving the redistribution of noble lands among the newer two generations and establishing a stable factional balance.

Deer meat always remained a rarer and more precious delicacy than fish. In the two hundred years of succession, the merged Prepetcha people no longer distinguished between the tribes and gradually developed a new perception that "nobility eat deer meat" and "commoners eat river fish." Therefore, this meaningful painting was no longer mentioned."

After hearing this narration, Xiulote sincerely voiced his admiration.

Effectively ruling a piece of land often proved more difficult than conquering it. As the leader of the southward-migrating Nava Tribe, Tariacuri possessed enough courage to actively promote the fusion of the two tribes. He spent his lifetime molding the new Prepetcha people, which, compared to some monarchs who rigidly clung to ethnic distinctions, showcased his long-term visionary wisdom.

"The population of Prepetcha tribes in the Lake Region numbers in the hundreds of thousands, while the conquering Mexica legion counts only twenty thousand. To establish a stable reign of the kingdom, large-scale intermarriage between Mexica samurai and Prepetcha civilians must also be implemented as a national policy!"

Xiulote pondered for a moment and made a resolution in secret. He slowly nodded, then looked again toward the right-hand pattern.

The pattern on the right depicted several groups of nobility and samurai on long journeys. At the center was still the radiant Divine Eagle King. The king's feet were upon the grand capital city, his eyes like an eagle's, sweeping over the lands far and wide. There, nobles traveled in different directions, also bearing various banners.

The young King looked at the coat of arms on the banners. To the north were banners with "Crocodile," "Turkey," to the west were "Feathers," "Sky," and "Silver," to the south were "Zicao," "Palm," and to the east were "Red Falcon," "Black Panther." Xiulote mused for a few breaths and then asked confidently.

"Enfeoffing tribal chieftains, guarding the borders in all directions?"

Jatili smiled, his gaze profound.

"Exactly! The new kingdom was established with the greatest achievements from the Nava military nobility. Those powerful great nobility each possessed a tribe, commanding hundreds to thousands of tribal warriors. They longed for vast fertile fiefs. However, the predecessor monarch, not wishing to repeat the mistakes of strong branches and weak roots of the Urixu Kingdom, decided to directly incorporate the entire Lake Patzcuaro region. He relied on his own prestige and the wisdom of the House of Hummingbird, enfeoffing the powerful military nobility across the borders of the kingdom."

"Crocodile nobles guarded the vast northern rivermouths, Zicao nobles suppressed the bustling southern river banks, while nobles from the royal family who were Red Falcons controlled the perilous eastern mountains. Then, the far-flung, prosperous ancestral land of the Chapala Lake Region, was governed jointly by three Nava nobility. These powerful military nobility, when enfeoffed to the borderlands, no longer posed a threat to the central royal power. The great nobility gained vast territories for their free development, using their military prowess to subjugate unwilling border tribes, yet also faced continual military challenges, dependent on strong support from the central Lake Region. Over two hundred years, the borderland great nobility continually expanded the kingdom's living space, spreading the kingdom's influence far and wide."

The sage paused. Seeing the young king's slight shaking of the head, he said with a smile.

"Your Highness, the speed of messengers is limited, and there are no fast roads outside the city. The direct control of the center is inherently limited to the rapidly accessible Lake Region within a few hundred miles. Enfeoffment at the frontier has always been a common practice across the world. Many Nava great nobility, seeking comfort, actually prefer not to leave the rich core Lake Region for the incessant skirmishes at the border.

In the process of enfeoffment, to urge the real power nobility to depart, the first family head of the House of Hummingbird exerted great efforts. He showed rare wisdom among Nava nobility and became the first Chief Minister of the kingdom. Thereafter, all successive Chief Ministers were outstanding members of the House of Hummingbird. Hummingbird thrived alongside Divine Eagle, intertwined in success and decline.

As the kingdom developed, the power of the borderland great nobility began to inflate. The duties of the Chief Ministers also evolved from integrating the directly governed Lake Patzcuaro region and supporting military actions at the frontier to balancing the powers of the borderland nobility. This Chief Minister, Jinjinni, served three monarchs. He assisted in controlling the ninety large villages of the Lake Region, personally led campaigns against the Tekos people for decades, and effectively suppressed the northern Crocodile Clan, maintaining balance among the three houses of Chapala..."

Xiulote tilted his head up, staring at the pattern of enfeoffment, yet his mind envisioned the vast expanse of the North and South American continents.

With an ample supply of cheap metal tools, large-scale road construction could be undertaken. With advancements in ships and the future introduction of Old World horses, the directly controlled area by the ruling center could significantly expand, perhaps by multiples or even tenfold. The entire realm of Central America could fall under the direct control of the future empire. However, this speed of communication enhancement through messengers would be far from sufficient to cover the vast North American continent, let alone reach the distant lands of South America.

To maximally extend the empire's influence and compete with the European colonizers for dominance in the New World, it was imperative to integrate the indigenous tribes of the Americas thoroughly. Military enfeoffment in the frontier was inevitable, and even more remote areas needed the spread of faith quickly, the ennoblement of local chieftains, and their inclusion in a tributary system similar to the Celestial Empire!

"To harbor the world in one's heart is like bearing a great weight on one's shoulders. Every step taken by a King is as if watched by the masses, altering the footsteps of an era. A true King must have a resolute will, as strong and pristine as steel and jade, and meticulous thoughts, as if treading on thin ice!"

The young King sighed softly. His face displayed a solemnity uncommon for his age.

"My future path is not only to shine brightly upon the world but also laden with great responsibility and a long road ahead!"

Chapter 514 - Heritage Slab, Two-element Third Level

The abrupt downpour gradually ceased, leaving the earth profound and serene, with only the flowing streams merging into the Great Lake. As the clouds in the sky slowly dispersed, sunlight streamed through the gaps, piercing through the translucent holes to fall upon the Stone Hall. The pure light shone upon the ancient slabs, igniting the tales of past kingdoms in the heart of the King.

Xiulote gazed at the dust-covered Heritage Slab, silent and still. In the ancient Stone Hall, void of wind, the breaths of only a handful of people decided the paths of tens or even hundreds of millions.

The learned elder observed the contemplative young monarch, a sharp light twinkling in his eyes. And a few steps behind, the Head Warrior was silently watching him. It wasn't until Xiulote made a gesture to continue that Jatili moved toward the rear of the hall.

"Your Highness, this fifth slab is also a set of two paired images. It was personally drawn by a sage from the Royal Family more than a hundred years ago, and it tells of the governance system of the Kingdom in its early days. In simple terms, it is a dual three-tier system!"

"The so-called dual system refers to the two governing centers of the Royal Family, which evolved from two ancient holy sites of the Lake Region at the founding of the Kingdom. Religion is a tool that commands the hearts of people and cloaks the ruler in divine authority. The Tarasco Royal Family has done a great deal in this regard. If you have the patience, there will be slabs dedicated to this later on."

Xiulote nodded in affirmation and respectfully performed a salute.

"The words of the Sage are like rain after a long drought, greatly beneficial to me. I wish to treat you with the courtesy due to a teacher, and I humbly ask that you share your wisdom without reservation!"

"It is an old man's honor to be heeded by Your Highness, and it is the blessing of all people."

Jatili stepped aside slightly, avoiding the King's salute, and then reciprocated with a subject's propriety.

"Enlightened by divine wisdom, Your Highness, I dare not presume to be a teacher... I am but an old turtle in the lake, hoping only to repay the pond that nurtured me in my final years. To touch the Divine Tree with my own hands would be the highest honor!"

Hearing the Sage's words, Xiulote reflected for a moment, understanding in his heart. The governance of the fief could not be separated from the support of the Prepetcha elites. Compared to the generals who commanded armies, officials capable of managing state affairs were even rarer and more valuable! He firmly grasped Jatili's arm, affirming clearly.

"The great affairs of the fief involve all peoples and parts, and we cannot do without the help of the Sage. The same applies to the great matters of the future world. Sage, I desire to establish a Central Official office, set up counties and prefectures, abolish the autonomy of Nobility, and take charge of all political affairs of the fief. And you could serve as Chief Minister of Policy, participating in state affairs, responsible for the establishment of national laws, compiling historical and literary works, and overseeing the education of the populace!"

Hearing the position of Chief Minister of Policy, a flash of surprise crossed Jatili's eyes, which then turned into a sparkling smile. He stepped back and once more prostrated himself respectfully, paying homage.

"Your Highness, the river turtle emerges from the mud pond to gaze upon the sunlight in the sky, illuminating the patterns on its shell. Your Highness is a born King, and this old minister wishes to ride on Your Highness' wings, accompanying you to soar high!

Your Highness aims for all parts of the world, to unify mountains and rivers and all peoples. And what this old minister seeks is to sort out a lifetime of learning for you, letting uniform doctrine spread throughout the world!... I will exert my utmost effort, and I shall not fail your heavy trust!"

"The study under royal officials... the dismissal of numerous schools... The ambition of the Sage is no weaker than mine by a single bit!"

Xiulote's thoughts raced, and with a thoughtful smile, he uttered an enigmatic sentence. From this point on, the formal relationship between monarch and minister was confirmed, and the wise elder leaped into the very core of the decision-making circle of the fief.

A short distance away, the usually stoic face of the Head Warrior showed envy for the first time. It was not the official post granted to Jatili that he envied, but his profound knowledge, deep wisdom, the ability to truly understand the complexities of governance, and to resonate with the divine-inspired monarch in thought.

The young monarch graciously accepted Jatili's salute, then lifted the robust Sage.

"Please continue, Chief Minister."

Jatili nodded and confidently walked back in front of the fifth slab.

The first image on the slab showed two rows of Akatla Pyramids, surrounded by countless worshipping people. The first row had five pyramids, with their height declining from the center to the sides, looking very familiar; they were the House of Wind in the Capital City. The second row featured three Great Pyramids, with a separate small pyramid on each side.

"Your Majesty, the dual governance of the Tarasco Kingdom, the ancient two holy lands, is located slightly north of the Lake Region, in Qinchongcan Capital, and slightly south, in Ihuatzio City! The Predecessor Monarch established the capital in Qinchongcan, both considering its location on the Highlands, which could fend off floods, and its significance in the hearts of the people of the Lake Region."

"Your Majesty, just as the magnificent Lake Capital City of the Mexica Alliance can be divided into the political center, the main city of Tenochtitlan, and the trade center, the North City of Tlatelolco City. The political center of the Tarasco Kingdom is in the grand Qinchongcan City, while the trade center is in the prosperous Ihuatzio City.

"In the recent century, with the exploitation of southern copper mines, Ihuatzio City, with its wide-open terrain and excellent location, has become the center of copper trade in the world. The Royal Family has a large garrison of court Nobility there, firmly controlling the trade coming in and out of Ihuatzio City. And the strong control of obsidian, copper, Cotton Armor, food, and salt is another effective way to constrain local Nobility...

"Your Majesty, Ihuatzio City suffered significant damage during the westward conquest, but it is worth rebuilding for the Kingdom!"

Xiulote watched for a moment and nodded lightly. He had led his army in capturing the unwallled Ihuatzio City and had some recollection of its several pyramids. But at that time, with the great battle imminent and the march hurried, he had just vigorously collected a group of Craftsmen and miners but had not deeply inspected and understood the city.

Chapter 515 - Heritage Slab, Two-element Third Level_2

"The Chief spoke well, Ihuatzio City holds both religious and economic significance. Therefore, I will rebuild Ihuatzio, transform the pyramid into the main Temple, expand the marketplace, and further control the trade within the Fief!"

The elderly scholar smiled slightly and moved his finger to point at the second painting.

The second painting was more complex, depicting several finely dressed adults. They were laid out in layers like a pyramid, divided into three levels. At the very top was a Monarch wearing a Divine Eagle crown. His figure was extremely tall and striking, holding a Divine Staff and Long Spears, occupying one-third of the entire scroll.

"The so-called three levels refer to the hierarchy of the Tarasco Kingdom. Similar to the Mexica Alliance, they are broadly divided into the King, Nobility, and Samurai, and do not include the ordinary commoners. Naturally, at the very top, is the King of Tarasco, the ruler of the land in the lake, the clan leader of the Royal Family, Cazonci."

"In the Prepetcha language, the King Cazonci is also called Camacha cupeni, which means governor, the one who groups, the one who manages others. He has the authority to administer the entire Kingdom's people, whether they are Nobility, Samurai, or commoners. He also has the right to determine everyone's status!"

At this point, Xiulote's eyes lit up.

This title implied the concept of an autocratic Monarch, similar to the true "King" in the Huaxia philosophy. And, as part of the Nava language family, in the Mexica language, the "Great Tlatoani" merely had the concept of a major decision-maker. Though he holds the highest authority in speech, he does not possess absolute power over all the subordinate entities. It seems that the centralization of the Tarasco Kingdom is indeed higher than that of the Alliance and the Prepetcha people's compliance with central authority is likely to surpass the various tribes of the Alliance.

"Chief, I am quite interested in these governing terms of the Prepetcha language. Could you speak a bit more about their deeper meanings?"

Jatili paused for a moment, then nodded with a smile.

"Then this old servant will speak a few more words. Your Majesty, the Central Government you just mentioned is called Camachacupecha in the Prepetcha language. It means that those who have the force, the powerful ones, come together to command the ordinary commoners. They then humbly establish friendships with friendly strong parties and harshly conquer and deal with hostile ones."

And the authority of the Government is called Ch'echesiqua. It refers to the feeling that instills fear, and this fear can remain over time, repeatedly evoking it.

The ordinary Nobility is called Urechadanini, which means the ones who speak first, the ones with the power of speech. The ordinary commoners are called Haripantatani, which means the owned, the governed..."

The young King pondered deeply the social philosophies and group characteristics hidden within these everyday words.

Language and writing are important because of the cognitive concepts contained within, which subtly influence the user's ideas from minute details. Looking across world history, ethnic groups with similar languages and writings tend to be consistent in certain traits. And when it comes to modern times, the first step of national awakening is often the creation or strengthening of a script unique to the ethnic group.

"The Government is a union of the strong to dominate the commoners, unite with or oppose other strong parties... Authority is the fear of violence... Nobility are the decision-makers, commoners are the subjects..."

Xiulote frowned slightly and murmured to himself.

"These ideas are similar to those of the Mexica language. This means that in the traditional Nava language recognition, there is no concept of benevolence and trust for rulers. The governance of the state is maintained by violence, and the commoners have almost no rights, the whole society is in a typical slave system era."

"It seems that when I have spare time, I should still recall the concepts from the times with similar productivity in the Celestial Empire, especially Legalism's rule of law and Confucianism's benevolence. Then I'll convene Priests and Scholars to appropriately modify and handle them, and introduce them to the relatively primitive culture of the Fief. The mixture of Confucianism's facade with Legalism's backbone, the combined use of Kingly and Hegemonic tactics is the core that allows the vast Celestial Empire to maintain a stable rule..."

Myriad thoughts flashed through the young King's mind. For him, governing was still a continuous exploration and practice. What he could rely on were the stories that had emerged in history and the trajectory of future development. He would reference and grope his way until he carved out a unique path for the Celestial Empire of America!

The learned elder watched Xiulote's expression, pausing at just the right moment. When the King signaled again, he smiled and continued.

"The second level of the Kingdom are the various Nobles and High Priests. Your Majesty, please look at these personages dressed differently. The order in which they are arranged symbolizes their status, and the items in their hands represent different powers."

In the forefront is Ivachi, Royalty, holding a Scepter. This usually represents those of the highest standing, Lords who are closest in blood to the King. Indeed, the origin of Ihuatzio City's name is because it was first awarded to the closest branches of the Royal Family. And when King Aweit left, he took nearly all of the Royal Nobles with him.

The next is Carrachapacacha, the Nobles with real power, holding weapons. It is close to the term used for the Central Official, meaning local enforcers. They control the local Samurai and Militia, managing regional order. Although their titles are hereditary, they are subject to the influence and interference of the Royal Family. If the direct sons are unable to independently sort out their standing, they must turn to the authoritative Royal Family for adjudication.

Chapter 516 - Heritage Slab, Two-element Third Level_3

During this western campaign, nine out of ten of the effective nobles from the north and the Lake Region had not survived, while the southern effective nobility remained largely intact. For them, the central Kingdom decided whether to absorb or dispose of them, or take conditional actions, and these decisions were all up to the King. But it was best after the autumn harvest."

The sage did not speak for the old nobility; he simply made a detached suggestion. Xiulote nodded, having plans of his own for the arrangement of the South.

"Moving forward, the Kanchalicha, the frontier military nobility, wielding weapons and shields, wearing beast helmets. Originally, they were military chiefs during wars, but later evolved into military nobility constantly waging wars in the frontier regions. Their titles passed down without interruption, their fiefs were remote, and their positions were more independent, with inheritance rights seldom interfered with by the central authority.

Of course, like the Crocodile and the Feathers, those from the great nobility of the Tarasco Kingdom, who supported the survival of the kingdom, their political status was almost the same as Ivachi, yet their autonomy far exceeded it.

In the western campaign, the military nobility were conscripted on the spot by the Kingdom to stand at the very front lines against the Alliance's two corps. They suffered the heaviest losses in the war, either falling on the battlefield or becoming prisoners."

Images of gruesome battles surfaced in Xiulote's mind. He nodded slowly, his expression unchanged, indicating his understanding. Jatili continued, moving his fingers to point at a figure dressed in priestly attire, holding a gemstone-laden divine staff.

"Petamuti, the High Priest. In the early Kingdom, religious authority still held considerable influence. The high priests from various regions also controlled tribes and samurai. They possessed their own lineage systems, and even had their own temple schools.

However, the Divine Eagle Royal Family, learning from the experiences of previous kingdoms, intentionally suppressed the priests' influence. The Royal Family claimed the realm by force, taking direct control of two sacred religious sites and intervening in the selection of priests. Over more than a hundred years, the originally independent priestly power gradually became vassals of the Royal Family. After the war of the western campaign, very few of the kingdom's high priests remained."

A glint sparked in Xiulote's eyes. The blue flames of the House of Wind Temple were unforgettable. Deep down, he favored the secularization of religion. However, he had entered the Alliance's upper echelons as a Black Wolf Priest, and his grandfather was the supreme priestly leader. His background limited his choices. Moreover, together with the elder's will, he ultimately steered the Alliance's reforms toward a path of theocracy.

"Apart from these three, from the middle period onward, the Kingdom gave birth to a new type of nobility."

The sage looked at the Kingdom of the Lake's priestly ruler for a moment, then decided against commenting further on the topic of priests. He moved his finger from the High Priest to the last figure, which was depicted slightly newer, a bejeweled noble holding a drawing tablet.

"Achacha, the court's advisory nobility. Most were by-blows of the effective nobility, inheriting knowledge but unable to receive fiefs. The Royal Family absorbed them as bureaucratic officials, overseeing directly governed towns and villages, managing urban trade taxes. They had no fiefs, and their incomes came entirely from the Royal Family's support. These individuals were the pillars of the Royal Family's centralization, the true administrators of the kingdom. During the Alliance's western campaign, many of these individuals survived but lost their original positions."

Xiulote pondered in silence, not responding. Unlike the civil official system of the Celestial Empire at this time, this was a fledgling form of the traditional nobility system.

The degree of centralization in the Tarasco Kingdom was higher, naturally requiring more administrative bureaucrats. Unlike the Alliance, the kingdom lacked broad community schools, and with the priest class suppressed, knowledge became even more concentrated among the upper layers of the powerful nobility. Also, as the kingdom's nobility propagated over several generations with many descendants, it was easier to select administrative talents from among them.

"The future administrative officials of the fief can absorb some of the nobility's descendants. However, the main administrators should come from the current commoner priests, commoner military officers, and future commoner civil servants. The path from bottom to top needs to be open!"

The young King extended his hand, pointing directly at the third tier's bottom layer.

"Chieftain, this first person on the third level, wielding a war club and shield, wearing a forked feathered helmet, I have encountered many on the battlefield. No need to mention more, this definitely represents the high-level samurai of the Lake Region. As for these few behind, please elaborate further."

The sage nodded. He was well-versed in the content of these drawings, and now he narrated the details meticulously.

"Second, Anjiangmecha, village chieftain, the village manager. The kingdom's villages are divided into three types: those near the frontier are mostly owned by Lords, while most of those in the Lake Patzcuaro region are directly affiliated. In the forests, there are many tribes that pay homage. The land there is barren and the terrain is harsh; many tribes semi-farm and semi-hunt, are rough and difficult to tame, and the cost of tax collection is very high. Their villages retain a higher degree of autonomy, and village chieftains can almost be considered low-level nobility Lords. In the distant southeastern mountains of Weytamo, their villages are even completely autonomous,"

"The kingdom uses force as a threat but only requires them to pay tribute once a year, offering food, wood, feathers, and leather, and to provide labor during wartime. At the same time, the royal family controls the import and pricing of salt and cotton fabrics, taxing them in a more gentle manner."

Xiulote's eyes flickered slightly as he understood.

The Mexica Alliance handled mountain tribes in the same way. However, the Alliance, being martial, often employed more severe methods. Longbow Hunters from the Toltec were thus recruited from the mountains. These hunters have now been promoted to First Level Samurai and still serve in the army. Their tribes, totaling about twenty thousand mountain villagers, will gradually migrate from the Holy City Teotihuacan to the damaged fief in the north, replenishing the population of Rivermouth County."

"Third, Kasixuale, low-level priest. In the villages, priests often come from local families with many members and high influence. They hold the power to conduct festival sacrifices and arrange marriage and funeral ceremonies, and they are revered and respected by the commoners. Their status is second only to the tribe chieftain. During the Alliance's westward campaigns, grassroots priests didn't have much influence. In fact, many low-level priests are quite flexible about faith. As long as the identity of the Sun God is slightly adjusted, it is possible to effectively absorb many grassroots priests..."

"Chief, low-level Prepetcha priests can be absorbed. However, they must travel to the Lake Capital City to worship at the Great Temple of the Chief Divine and then receive complete priest training!"

Grasping the implication in Jatili's words, Xiulote responded solemnly.

"In the tribes and villages of Prepetcha, the priest and village elder are often the same. I know, Chief, as a sage renowned among the tribe, you certainly have a great influence on the lower priests. Please assist me earnestly in naturalizing the priests!"

"The Alliance is willing to accommodate these low-level priests and can temporarily regard Prepetcha's Sun God Curicaveri as an incarnation of the Chief Divine Huitzilopochtli. However, as the Alliance is founded on religion and promotes the will of the Chief Divine, this decision is irreversible! For the vast majority of commoners, the Alliance demands devout faith."

The young King displayed a regal gaze. He watched the knowledgeable elder until the latter averted his eyes and respectfully lowered his head.

"Your Majesty, I have understood your will and shall assist diligently,"

"Good!"

Faced with Jatili's submission, Xiulote nodded slightly before he smiled gently.

"The future path of the Alliance is one where divine and political powers are unified. Kings govern the world with genealogical laws. As the Supreme High Priest of the Fifth Level in the whole Tarasco district, I can grant the elder the rank of Fourth Level Chief Priest, to facilitate your endeavors."

"...Thank you, Your Majesty!"

Upon hearing the honor of a religious title, the knowledgeable elder remained calm, offered his respects, and then stroked the last vacant position of the Third Level and leisurely added,

"Your Majesty, actually, this Third Level should also include newly emerged Trade Tax Officers and high-status Craftsmen. They are newly formed groups that have gradually emerged with the development of the kingdom's trade. Since Your Majesty strictly controls trade and encompasses many materials into state enterprises; and at the same time, you dispatched legions to take control of the craftsman camp upon taking over the Capital City...Certainly, you already have a complete Divine Tree in mind, and there is no need for this old official to speak more."

"With that, the binary Third Level system of the kingdom has been largely explained. I hope it will be of assistance in your administration of the fief. Now please step forward two paces, and behold these last two important Heritage Slabs!"

Chapter 517 - Heritage Slab, Centralization of Power

The sudden rain had ceased, the setting sun dyed the clouds red, and cast magnificent silhouettes. Light swayed through time within the Stone Hall, morphing from a bright golden glow to a deep, rich crimson. The sunset hues bathed the last two Heritage Slabs, reminiscent of the closing chapters of the Kingdom Epic.

Xiulote lifted his head, his eyes reflecting the light of the setting sun. Jatili focused his gaze and saw that on the handsome and composed face of the young King, there were eyes bright as the morning stars, as though reflecting a meditative deity in a painting. The learned elder was momentarily lost in thought before he pointed at the sixth Heritage Slab and spoke out loud.

"My King, this sixth Heritage Slab encompasses five panels. It recounts the policies promulgated by successive Tarasco kings to establish Royal Family authority and centralize the Kingdom's power!"

Upon hearing the phrase "centralizing power," the young King raised his eyebrows and looked attentively.

At the center of the first panel was a towering, majestic Divine Eagle King standing proudly. Before him, knelt a row of nobles clad in magnificent apparel. The King's radiance shone like the Sun, and his demeanor was as solemn as that of a deity. He was handing over a wooden tablet scroll to the influential nobles before him.

"The King's torso radiates stripes outward... Chief, is this the King representing the Sun God in a fief-granting ceremony?"

Xiulote observed the details of the panel with seriousness.

"Exactly, My King. In fact, it should be more appropriately called a granting ceremony!"

Jatili smiled meaningfully.

"This was a massive granting ceremony held towards the end of the Divine Eagle King's reign! As time went by, the original influential Great Nobility grew old and died. Their numerous descendants, because of issues with title and land inheritance, had many disputes. As the Divine Eagle Royal Family had the supreme authority to decide, these conflicts were adjudicated by the King."

"Upon the suggestion of the second Hummingbird Chief, the Divine Eagle King finally carried out a 'generous' granting. He accounted for the number of legitimate descendants of many nobles, and in the Lake Patzcuaro region, he granted fiefs to 220 influential nobles in one go, allowing these heirs to equally divide the lands of the Great Nobility."

"The second Chief's suggestion? An equal division of land in a generous granting? Truly a bold and clever proposition!"

Upon hearing this, Xiulote suddenly widened his eyes. He looked at the learned elder in surprise; this scenario was all too familiar.

"Indeed! My King's wise Divine Revelation, it seems you already comprehend the subtlety in it."

Jatili praised softly, then spoke earnestly.

"Under the witness of the Sun God, this fief-granting had two steps: first, many heirs of nobility in the Lake Patzcuaro region, whether Nava Nobility or Lake Region Nobility, had to submit wooden tablet scrolls and nominally return their fiefs to the King.

"Then, the supreme King, unbiased and just, under the witness of deities, did not usurp any nobles' lands. He merely generously granted everyone titles, then divided these lands into different parcels, and gifted them back to the nobles' heirs. In this process of submission and re-granting, the King's authority was reinforced, legally possessing all rights to dispose of the land."

"At the time, some older nobles of the Lake Region starkly opposed the large-scale granting, using tribal traditions as their rationale. However, the outcome was that the granting still strongly proceeded under the authority of the King and the manipulation of the Chief. After the massive granting, the influential nobles of the Lake Region, now numbering in the hundreds, completely lost any capacity to resist the King. The entire Lake Patzcuaro region was finally, over the decades, fully integrated directly under the Royal Family."

The learned elder smiled subtly, his gaze deep and distant.

"My King, I must remind you that this 'generous' granting, while clever, harbored great risks. To the older nobility, the malice hidden in the large-scale granting was unequivocally apparent! The Divine Eagle King had harbored this idea for a long time but patiently waited for decades. Only when the prestigious first-generation nobles had nearly all died did he allow the Hummingbird Chief to cautiously make this proposal."

"Even then, to minimize opposition, the scope of this granting was carefully limited. It focused only on the central Lake Patzcuaro region and did not involve the border military nobility. Under the witness of the deities, the Divine Eagle King used his prestige to make promises, ensuring the independence of inheritance rights for the border nobles. The border nobles also altered their inheritance rules. Numerous covert efforts and compromises by the Royal Family ensured the peaceful execution of the entire granting ceremony."

"My King, governance is a compromise of power, a confrontation of different groups, different forces. Even if one wishes to employ trickery, a sufficient foundation of power is necessary. Because, the mighty will tightly control the power and wealth, never easily relinquishing it..."

Hearing this, Xiulote pondered for a moment and nodded seriously.

"Thank you for your teachings, Chief! Direct central power is fundamental to administration. Governing a great state is like cooking a fish in the lake; after adjusting the heat, what follows is a slow wait... Chief, I still have one question: If the control over the influential nobility is limited only to the central lake area, how then does the Tarasco Royal Family handle the border military nobility who possess troops?"

At this, Jatili's eyes twinkled. He carefully looked at the young King for a while, smiling as he answered.

Chapter 518 - Heritage Slab, Centralization of Power - Part 2

"In the King's heart, there is an eternal Divine Tree... For the military nobility at the border, the Royal Family has summarized a strategy, that is, to control the tribute and establish checks and balances. Among these, controlling the Kingdom's tribute is of paramount importance, the foundation for establishing balances!"

"Your Majesty, please observe the second, third, and fourth paintings!"

Xiulote moved closer to inspect. The second painting was quite artistic, at first glance resembling a simple landscape painting. At the top of the image was still a sun, at the center of which was a Divine Eagle. Below in the image, there was a mountain with trees, a lake with fish, and a valley with mines.

The third painting was easier to understand. A majestic pyramid stood in the center, surrounded by a bustling market, and beyond that, a city without walls. Countless merchants arrived from all directions, their backs laden with gold and silver, gemstones, obsidian, cloth, feathers, food, salt, spices, and shiny bronze ware. On the roads passed by the merchants, many noble advisors holding albums were inspecting and taxing the goods. Notably, on the merchants themselves, there were also emblems of the Divine Eagle.

The fourth painting abstracted once more. A burly deity emitting radiant lines of light was coiled at the center of the design. He had large round eyes, narrow and flat mouth, with an unusual red-backed chair behind him. Around the deity, various busy craftsmen were depicted. Some held stone tools, others held pottery; some made weapons, others sewed leather armor; some lit flames to craft gold and silver ornaments; others mixed two metals to forge precious bronze!

Xiulote paused, observing the deity in the fourth painting closely. The figure always gave him a strangely familiar feeling, possessing facial features akin to a toad...

"Eh, where have I seen this before... Chief, who is this deity?"

"Haha, Your Majesty must have seen him! This is the Toltec's deity of craftsmen, master of music, dance and art, lover of flowers, plants and beauties, skilled in metallurgy, painting and craftworks, Sochipili! He is both the craftsman god of the Prepetcha, with the body of a lake frog, and simultaneously the craftsman god of the Mexica, the Prince of Flowers!"

"So it is! The Prince of Flowers, a deity common to both peoples..."

Xiulote nodded in sudden realization. He finished looking at the paintings, waiting for Jatili's explanation.

"Your Majesty, these three paintings depict the central control of the Kingdom over national finances and tribute collection. The second painting's meaning is that the King, like the sun, shines upon the land, owning everything upon it! Whether it's the trees on the mountains, the turtles in the lake, or the minerals in the valley, they all belong to the Royal Family. The Divine Eagle Royal Family owns the water sources, forests, and minerals of the fief, and maintains possession of these resources with a strong legion.

Under the leadership of successive kings, the Royal Family selects valuable industries to deploy large manpower for development, just like the salt springs in the East, the copper and gold and silver mines in the South, and the Stone of the Dead in the West. As for other resources, the rights to exploit and utilize them are granted, for a fee, to local nobility and merchant groups."

"Your Majesty, through the development of these resources, the Kingdom can obtain long-term and stable additional tribute beyond field taxation, to support more loyal Royal Warriors!"

"Excellent! The treasures of mountains and lakes, the industries of forests and marshes, all belong to the state, transforming into the power of governance!"

Xiulote smiled, these measures coinciding with his own plans. Since the Prepetcha people have such traditions, the 'official mountains and seas' fief policy will be even easier to implement.

"Please continue, Chief!"

"Your Majesty, the fourth painting depicts the Kingdom's control over trade. The city of Ihuatzio in the South is the economic center of the Kingdom, as well as a necessary passage for merchants from all directions. Your Majesty may recall, as previously mentioned, the Kingdom has set up specific Trade Tax Officers to take a proportion of the goods in transit and to tax large transactions.

The Kingdom stations troops to patrol the strategic locations along the shoreline of the Lake Region, strictly cracking down on private trade and protecting the taxed merchants, limiting local nobility's interference in commerce. Moreover, for the profitable foreign trades, the Royal Family actually forms specialized merchant fleets."

The wise elder paused, placing his hand on the merchant with the Divine Eagle emblem.

"Copper merchants from all over the world generally have the backing of the Tarasco Royal Family. They also simultaneously serve the function of gathering intelligence. Before the western conquest, the Tarasco merchants in Tenochtitlan had sent back warnings, advising King Su'angua to be wary of the new king's coronation war of the Mexica Alliance. However, afterward, they lost contact. It was said that for committing the unforgivable crimes of rising above their station, wearing jade, and offending the gods, they were publicly executed by the Mexica people!"

Upon hearing this, Xiulote was slightly startled, and memories surfaced.

He recalled his meeting with the Mayan merchant Tikalo. At that time, to develop stable copper trade routes, control the military supplies within the Alliance, and to intimidate the Mayan merchants, he had ordered the Monkey Kuluka to deal with the Tarasco merchants... The young king merely thought for a moment, then focused on a more practical issue.

"After the fall of the Tarasco Kingdom, where did these royal-controlled merchants go?"

"Your Majesty, although the merchants possess wealth, they are merely beautiful birds bred by the Divine Eagle. Without the protection of the Divine Eagle, what fate could beautiful birds have in front of predators? If they were wise enough to abandon most of their wealth, they might escape the claws of the greedy nobility of various countries. If they were not wise enough..."

Chapter 519 - Heritage Slab, Centralization of Power - 3

Upon hearing this, Xiulote slowly nodded.

"Beautiful birds will attract misfortune due to their precious feathers. Head Warrior, thank you for your reminder! These great merchants are familiar with international trade routes and control the information and sales networks of various places. They are a force worth retaining!... The newly born Kingdom of the Lake also needs to make its own voice heard across the world."

The young King pondered for a moment and then looked back at the Head Warrior.

"Bertade, take note of my command!"

"Understood, Your Highness."

The Head Warrior took out pen and paper and bowed his head to write.

"Dispatch envoys to notify the surrounding countries: The newly established Kingdom of the Lake, a collective kingdom of the Mexica and the Prepetcha, will protect the lives and property of the Prepetcha merchants from all countries. From the day the envoy arrives, any harm done to the kingdom's merchants will be recorded by the kingdom. The Kingdom of the Lake, under the Mexica Alliance, will send envoys, dispatch squads of Samurai, and even deploy legions to pursue forces daring to offend the alliance!"

Bertade wrote swiftly, quickly finishing the document. He handed the paper order to the King for inspection. Xiulote looked it over and nodded in approval. Afterward, the Head Warrior summoned a trusted aide, handed over the order and Jade Talisman, and kept a simple backup. In just a moment, the trusted aide took the Royal Decree and left.

Jatili watched the process of issuing the royal command, his thoughts apparent. His graying eyebrows twitched slightly, thoughts flashing through his mind, yet he remained silent. Moments later, only when the King looked his way again did he smile and speak.

"Such a decree from Your Majesty is a divine blessing to the Prepetcha people! I shall spread word of Your Majesty's kindness and majesty to priests and scholars everywhere. Similarly, I will also raise a call amongst the civilians, urging the Prepetcha merchants from all regions to submit to Your Majesty as soon as possible."

"Excellent, then I leave it in your capable hands, Head Warrior!"

Xiulote smiled, his voice filled with joy.

For the young King, Jatili's allegiance was significant. In every aspect of government within the fief, learned elders could fully wield their influence. In reality, behind these scholars was a group of

Prepetcha elites actively moving closer to the alliance, intending to join the newly formed kingdom and enter the ranks of rulers.

In this era, knowledge was concentrated in the hands of a few elites. Ordinary citizens had neither the cultural heritage nor the voice of their tribes. They could be organized into armies and perform military functions but had difficulty participating in governance. Since the governance of the fief had decided to suppress the Prepetcha nobility, who held the majority of wealth and population, it was essential to unite the remaining village priests, tribe sages, lesser nobles, and senior craftsmen who held technical expertise, along with a portion of measured merchants.

"Your Majesty, river turtles, lake fish, and waterbirds all wish to serve the true Divine Eagle!"

Jatili said with a smile, continuing his previous narrative.

"As Your Majesty has observed, this fourth painting tells of various craftsmen of the kingdom gathering under the patronage of the Craftsman's God, all serving the Royal Family. The kingdom values craftsmen and also uses the production of craftsmen to obtain a vast amount of tribute and military supplies, supporting the formidable Royal Legion.

In Qinchongcan City, there is a massive Craftsman Camp housing thousands of craftsmen engaged exclusively in the production of royal goods and military supplies. Meanwhile, in Ihuatzio City, there are specially organized official craftsmen who manufacture exquisite clothing, bronzeware, and crafts for the purpose of profitable trade.

In the western campaign, the Royal Legion's rapid imitation of the longbow was a contribution from the Qinchongcan Craftsman Camp. The robust bronze weapons used by the Royal Legion also came from this camp.

It was only with the supply from these official craftsmen that the Feathered Serpent Royal Family could establish the powerful Copper-axe Guards, forming an overwhelming military advantage over the military nobility on the frontier. The centralized control over craftsmen and the strict regulation of military supplies also played a crucial part in controlling these frontier military nobility...

Your Majesty, this old official has observed your administration and knows that you have always valued craftsmen, and have established within the Alliance a new Divine Revelation Place for researching new weapons. On this point, naturally, I need not say more.

Xiulote nodded slightly. He had already arranged for the Head Warrior to restore production in the Craftsman Camp and had established a new Divine Revelation Place around the palace district. The new center for gunpowder production would also, like the Alliance, be established on a small island in Lake Patzcuaro.

Subsequently, the learned elder moved his finger, pointing to the last drawing on the slab. The scene once again depicted a tall Divine Eagle King. The King, wielding a scepter, pointed towards a forest-covered mountain range. Numerous simple figures, each holding different weapons, lay prostrate and knelt in front of the King.

"This fifth painting represents the Royal Family's check on the frontier nobility."

Jatili ran his finger along the edges, over the figures' diverse tattoos, clothing, and weapons.

"Tattooed with Feathered Serpent, the Tepanec; with marks of the wind, the Guamal Canine Descendants; in black and white war clothes, the Otomi; in wide hats and narrow skirts, the Tekos... While deploying the Legion to subdue the barbarian tribes of the frontier, the Kingdom also enfeoffed chieftains, incorporating border tribes that were willing to submit, even relocating southward-migrating

Guamal Canine Descendants and settling the fleeing remnants of the Tepanec. These submissive tribes of the wilderness were assigned lands on the frontier. They accepted the Kingdom's dispatch, served in the military for the Kingdom, even received sustenance from the Royal Family, obeyed the Royal commands, and did things that the Kingdom Legion found inconvenient."

The learned elder paused, then smiled meaningfully.

"The remnants of the Tepanec..."

Hearing this, Xiulote's expression transformed, his gaze turning stern. He suddenly recalled an ambush years ago at the outskirts of an Otomi village. It was the closest he had come to death in his life.

Jatili observed the King's demeanor, carefully waiting a moment before continuing cautiously.

"These submissive tribes stationed at the border effectively balance the military nobility of the frontier and also provide the Royal Family with a considerable number of foreign mercenaries. The Royal Family can smoothly command these foreign border people, relying not only on the strong deterrent of the Royal Legion but also on the financial support and bribery from the fief."

"The strength of the central hub lies in its financial advantage; the stability of the frontier, in its military balance!"

The learned elder stood tall, his expression solemn, and bowed solemnly to the King.

"Your Majesty, the centralized government office is like a towering tree! The powerful direct-controlled legions are its main support, but the most crucial roots are the financial resources of the fief! The labor of the villagers, the toil of the craftsmen, the mining of the miners, the traffic of the merchant caravans... the fields, workshops, mines, and merchant groups, all of this, the fief office must intervene in everything, incessantly absorbing nutrients, only then can a large, stable central Divine Tree truly grow!"

Chapter 520 - Heritage Slab, Faith Remolded

The sky after rain was clear and pure. A deep red sun hung low at the end of the horizon, watching over the realm of humans like the lowered eyes of a deity. The sky was illuminated by the setting sun. The glow spread gradually until it turned into an endless expanse of blood red, covering the skies above Qinchongcan City, like a cape unfurled by the Sun God.

Xiulote walked to the translucent window and looked down at the Capital City and all its people under his rule.

The spectacular celestial phenomenon had already caught the attention of the city's inhabitants, and it was time for the evening prayers. The continuous chants rose within the majestic Capital City. The young king listened closely; he heard the name of the Mexica Chief Divine, Huitzilopochtli, resounding high and fervent, accompanied by the priests' singing; he also heard the venerated name of the Tarasco Sun God, Curicaveri, its sounds deep and buzzing, spread across all corners of the Capital City. In a more subtle presence, he also caught the names of the Earth Mother Goddess, Velavaperi, and the Moon Goddess, Haratana.

"The old beliefs of Tarasco still circulate among the people of Prepetcha. Changing faith is no overnight feat. And once it's wholeheartedly adopted, it becomes indelible," Xiulote mused with a calm and profound gaze, bearing the dignity of a king and the patience of a priest.

Jatili listened in silence for a moment before smiling and pointing to the seventh slab.

"Your Majesty, this final slab tells the story behind the deities of Tarasco."

"Oh? What lies behind the deities?" Xiulote asked with a smile.

"Naturally, the people who give the deities meaning," Jatili responded sagely.

Hearing this, Xiulote paused thoughtfully. He scrutinized Jatili for a moment, his expression grave.

"Chief, in a kingdom devoted to deities, it seems you do not possess the appropriate faith."

"Your Majesty, if you, like me, knew the ancient epics well enough and understood how the predecessors monarchs and sages reshaped the faith in the deities... then the light of the deities could no longer pierce into a heart filled with knowledge," Jatili replied with a smile still gracing his lips. He looked at the king's serious face, bowed his head slightly in a gesture of respect, yet his eyes saw through much more.

"Prepetcha deities... reshaping faith..." Xiulote contemplated for a moment. His mind conjured the murals in the corridors of the Chief Palace and the elders' transformation of Mexica mythology... The king slowly nodded in understanding. He waved his hand, dismissing the trusted aides and leaving only the Head Warrior with him.

"The secondary chambers are empty, Chief. Please, speak freely and share with me in detail," he said.

Jatili's smile spread across his face. He walked to the last slab and raised his hand to point to the first set of illustrations.

The first illustration was abstract and mystical, at its center two radiant deities, one with a cold male visage, the other with a gentle female smile. Behind the male deity was a brilliant sun, painted with powder of gold, sparkling intermittently. Behind the female deity lay a massive highland, painted on a copper base, already oxidized to black over time.

Beneath the two deities stood two exquisitely dressed nobles, a man and a woman, embracing each other. The man wore the hunting attire of the Nava people, with rigid lines delineating the man's strength. The woman was clothed in Prepetcha ceremonial garb, with smooth curves symbolizing feminine grace. Beneath the man's feet were cacti from the highlands, while beneath the woman's feet were islands in a lake. Both were also holding a baby together.

Looking closer, Xiulote noticed a faint round moon behind the infant. The moon was colored with silver powder, still shining brightly now. After a moment of contemplation, it dawned on the young king.

"The Chief Divine Sun God and the Earth Mother Goddess, the Nava people and the Urixu people. The union of the two tribes gave birth to the Moon Goddess... Is this the interconnection between gods and humans, the deities reflecting the mortal world?"

"Indeed! That's correct!" Jatili replied with a light smile.

"Your Majesty, this painting was created in the early days of the Kingdom. At that time, the most pressing issue in the Kingdom was reconciling the differences between the two tribes. The Predecessor Monarch, after establishing the Capital in the Holy Land and curbing the power of the priests, undertook the task of reshaping the Kingdom's faith. He reinterpreted the deities of the two tribes to consolidate the Royal Family's rule and strengthen the fusion between the migrated and the native Tribes.

In this painting, the migrated Nava people are descendants of the Chief Divine Sun God, Curicaveri, deities of Heaven. The native Urixiu people are descendants of the Earth Mother Goddess, Velavaperi, deities of the Earth. As the two deities are joined in matrimony, naturally the tribes of these two deities intermarry as well. From the union of the deities, the new Moon Goddess Haratana is born, she who reigns over the mortal realm and governs life and death. The Moon Goddess symbolizes the people of Prepetcha, reborn from this union!"

The sage paused, looking at the king with deep meaning in his words.

"Your Majesty, indeed, gods and people are interconnected. However, it's actually the mortal realm that reflects upon the deities!"

Xiulte's eyes flickered as he nodded slowly. He remained silent, choosing instead to continue observing the second set of illustrations.

The second set of illustrations seemed to be a continuation of the first, yet it held many differences. The Nava noble and the Urixiu noble combined, giving birth to a glowing infant. The divinely blessed infant later grew into a king wearing an Eagle Helmet, wielding a scepter and long spears. Behind this Eagle king shone a golden sun!

"Your Majesty, this second painting was made after the passing of the Predecessor Monarch. By then, the initial integration of the two tribes had been largely achieved. The second Predecessor Monarch began revising myths and beliefs, on one hand uniting the newly-formed nation and on the other bestowing divine status upon the Royal Family.