

## Civilization 581

### Chapter 581 - The First Kingdom Army Reform\_2

Bertade's expression was tranquil as he stepped forward and knelt to pay homage. Xiulote, with a solemn expression, bestowed upon him a scepter signifying the rank of Legion Commander, along with a brand-new Commander's weapon, a Qing-style bronze sword.

"The Imperial Guard Legion shall raise the Royal Flag of the Black Wolf. Hold my scepter to command for me; wield my long sword to strike down my enemies!"

"Your Highness, I am prepared to die for you."

Bertade bowed deeply. His brief words carried immense strength.

"Bertade, my Head Warrior, the Copper Armor Personal Army will be under your direct command, accompanying me day and night. My safety is entrusted to you!"

"Your Highness, I shall surely die before you."

The Head Warrior stated affirmatively.

Xiulote nodded slightly and touched the Head Warrior's hair.

Three months ago, the Imperial Guard Legion began drafting elite warriors from various tribes, and by now, it was fully formed. The six thousand warriors of the legion would be fully detached from other duties. These elite samurai would maintain intense daily training and undergo religious cleansing by the Priests, always prepared for the holy war.

The core of the Copper Armor Personal Army consisted of 2,500 soldiers, including 500 heavy-armored Jaguar warriors and 2,000 medium-armored Longbow trusted aides. The Copper Armor Personal Army would always be by the King's side, safeguarding the safety of the King. Under the protection of the new copper armor, the combat capability of this elite personal army would surpass any other imperial guards, sufficient to handle sudden attacks by tens of thousands.

"Life is but fifty years, as if a dream or a fantasy... Being a King, how crucial it is to have proper guards by your side!"

This distant thought momentarily crossed the King's mind. He paused briefly, then solemnly continued to issue decrees.

"Imperial Guard Legion, Powerful Crossbow Squad of 1,500 men, led by the hereditary nobility, the Eagle Warrior Balda!"

Balda had just returned from the Capital City. Upon hearing the Royal Decree, he stepped forward with a reverent expression, bowing deeply on one knee. As an envoy from the lake-enclosed fiefdom, a new obsidian necklace bestowed by King Aweit shimmered around his neck in the firelight.

The Powerful Crossbow Guard, using Stirrup Crossbows, belonged to the Temple Guards of the devoutly Religious Legion, proficient in both ranged and melee combat. This elite battalion of crossbowmen was

originally led by the veteran Etalik. However, since Etalik had gone to sit in Zicao County in the south, Xiulote had appointed Balda to lead this elite guard squad.

Balda had long followed the King. He had not shown prominent military talents nor extraordinary martial arts skills; he was merely an ordinary warrior. However, his compliance and extensive experience had eventually paid off, earning him a position among the senior generals. With the Imperial Guard's rank being half a grade higher than that of regular legions, his experience and seniority were sufficient to command a small army of four thousand.

"Vanguard Throwers, 2,000 men, led by the hereditary nobility, the Black Wolf Torc!"

Upon hearing the Royal Decree, Black Wolf Torc stepped up to the altar silently, bowing his head to accept the command.

The Vanguard Throwers, in reality, were tribal warriors skilled in hurling Clay Tribulus, selected from the Tekos and Chichimec tribes. These barbarian warriors, clad in light armor and armed with short spears, were fierce, agile, and fearless. They could swiftly run across the battlefield, hurling explosive Clay Tribulus and javelins fitted with bronze spearheads. Based on the troop's characteristics, they were utilized for constant mobile harassment or in highly lethal siege engagements.

Torc was bold and brash, with exceptional courage, making him the ideal candidate to lead these barbaric soldiers. However, Black Wolf himself was not satisfied with this position. His distinguished military achievements in the western campaign qualified him to command an entire legion.

Xiulote had pondered for a long time and decided to refine his favorite subordinate's temperament and improve his abilities before making significant use of him. Thus, the King had placed Torc in the Imperial Guard Legion, instructing Black Wolf to patiently follow Bertade and earnestly learn the strategies of commanding troops.

"Royal Decree: Establish the Jingji Legion, totaling 8,000 men. Under its command, 3,000 Mexica warriors, 2,000 Sky warriors, 2,000 Qinchongcan warriors, and 1,000 Qinganbate warrior battalion. The Legion Commander will be the noble Olosh, the Holy City Head Warrior!"

Olosh, resolute in expression, solemnly bowed to the ground. Xiulote likewise bestowed upon him a scepter and a bronze sword.

"The Jingji Legion shall raise the flag of the Divine Eagle. Olosh, the core hinterland of the fief, Qinchongcan's Capital City, all are entrusted to you now!"

"Your Highness, as long as I am here, I will certainly keep our Capital City's old home secure!"

Olosh clenched his fist against his chest, forcefully patting it. Seeing this familiar gesture, Xiulote smiled.

"Teacher Olosh, when you handle things, I am always at ease. The Mexica warrior group will be personally led by you, with all Holy City warriors included within it. I will allocate enough bows and arrows. Train the warriors well, let them master basic archery skills to reduce casualties during war... Teacher, only when the Capital City is entrusted to you, can I truly be at ease!"

The King whispered a few words with a smile before once again returning to solemnity as he continued to issue orders.

"Sky warriors, 2,000 men, led by the hereditary nobility, Sky Family Head, Oorta! Qinchongcan warriors, 2,000 men, led by the hereditary nobility, Huitu Family Head, Puap! Qinganbate warrior battalion, 1,000 men, led by the military nobility, Mining and Metallurgy Bureau Director, Necali!"

The three men stepped forward to accept their commands simultaneously. Oorta respectfully bowed, Puap was beaming with joy, and Necali suppressed the excitement within him, casting a glance at the King at the high table and then at the surrounding great generals. After more than a decade in the military, he had finally reached the ranks of high-ranking officers.

"I have finally ascended to the great hall, even if as the chief of miners..."

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Necali's heart churned as he maintained a solemn demeanor in his salute.

"Your Highness, I wish to be your wings, to live for your will!"

"Excellent! Armed with the War Club, fight for me and serve the Alliance. The light of the Chief Divine will shine upon you!"

Xiulote in turn grasped the hair of the three men, offering a few words of serious encouragement.

Within the Jingji Legion, half were Mexica Samurai and half were Prepetcha warriors. The Prepetcha warriors were selected from the Surrendered Army and divided into the Oorta and Puap factions. The Sky warriors came from the Chapala Lake Region, and the Qinchongcan warriors from around the Capital City, unfamiliar with each other. The design and arrangement of this legion inherently included a certain balance.

"Royal Decree: Establish the Kingdom's First Pike Legion, totaling 8000 men. Under its command are 6000 Pike Warriors and 2000 Militia Archers. The legion commander is the hereditary Nnobility, Kuluka! The legion's flag features the Spear and Crocodile!"

In the Mexica calendar, the days from one to twenty are represented by different symbols, with one symbolized by the Crocodile, and two by the Wind.

Kuluka, sharp-eyed yet maintaining a calm expression, carefully received the legion commander's scepter and sword, bowing deeply again.

"Your Highness, I will serve you unto death."

Xiulote smiled and nodded, grasping Kuluka's hair.

"Kuluka, the First Pike Legion is now fully staffed. You and I together will head to Rivermouth County in the north, and then station there to guard against the Northern Canine Descendants and the Western Chapala Lake Region."

"Your Highness, I will guard the north!"

"Not only to guard, but also to take the initiative to attack, pillaging people. Hm, on the way north, I will discuss this with you in detail."

"At your command!"

Xiulote, satisfied, patted the other's shoulder.

The First Pike Legion had formerly been the Mexica Pike Legion, actually composed of elite Militia promoted from warriors. During the western campaign, many of the Pike Legion fell, hence two units of Prepetcha archers were included. These Militia Archers, chosen through selection, were adept in archery, and high in morale. Armed with Long Wooden Bows or Long Bamboo Bows, they were agile, able to effectively complement the Pike formations.

The First Pike Legion would be headquartered in the north. Kuluka, as the commander and in charge of local military and administrative matters, was the first major official, indicating the King's favor.

"Royal Decree: Establish the Kingdom's Second Pike Legion, totaling 8000 men. Under its command are 6000 elite Pike Militia and 2000 Militia Archers. The legion commander is the hereditary nobility, Ezpan! The legion's flag features the Spear and Wind!"

Ezpan's eyes shone with delight as he approached reverently. He accepted the legion commander's scepter and long sword, looking at them gleamingly before prostrating deeply in grand reverence.

"Your Highness, you are my only sun, the light that holds my life!"

Xiulote laughed heartily. He commanded loudly,

"Ezpan, the Second Pike Legion primarily comprises Militia from the western Surrendered Army. You must intensify their training, properly reorganize them! The Priest's teaching is a top priority, and the legion's fields will also be allocated. Your station will be in the southern part of the Patzcuaro Lake region, always mindful of the surrounding situation!"

"Your Highness, at your will! The Second Pike Legion has completed its selection. Their loyalty to you will be as unbreakable as mine, like rock. I will watch over the south!"

Ezpan remained prostrate as he responded, respectfully not raising his head until he had finished speaking, then he backed away. Seeing the scepter in Ezpan's hands, the other commanders felt some envy. Black Wolf pursed his lips disdainfully and looked up, deliberately avoiding the sight.

The Second Pike Legion was also selected from the garrisoned Surrendered Army. Due to the Kingdom's severe fiscal pressures, both Pike Legions were unable to be fully professional; they owned garrison lands and farmed during the busy agricultural season to stockpile provisions for campaigns, training in their downtime in preparation for war.

Xiulote gripped the Divine Staff, looking around the circle. The commanders bowed their heads. Shortly after, the King tapped the stone floor with the end of the Divine Staff. The crisp ding-dong sound marked the end of the military council.

"Return to your camps, enhance your training, prepare your troops for war!"

"At your command!"



Soon, the commanders saluted and dispersed, leaving only the armored King alone in the grand hall, deep in thought.

After the military restructuring, the Kingdom's forces amounted to four field legions: the Imperial Guards, the Jingji, the First Pike, and the Second Pike, totaling thirty thousand soldiers. This included fourteen thousand Mexica Samurai, fourteen thousand Prepetcha warriors, and two thousand Tribesmen.

This proportion of troops emerged from a consideration of balance. As the relocated populace gradually aligned with allegiance, local-born soldiers from the Lake Region would increase, eventually far surpassing the limited number of Mexica Samurai.

In sum, this restructuring removed thirty-five thousand Tarasco Surrendered Army from the campaigning forces, easing the financial burden on the Lake Region.

The thirty thousand garrisoned troops would arrange for family marriages over the years, integrating the trained strong men into regular civilian villages to serve as a professional logistical corps during large-scale wars. Meanwhile, the five thousand mining conscripts would gradually transition to a permanent garrison in the southwest mining districts, replaced by incoming slaves. Apart from the four field legions, weapons were distributed to each village and civilian post to establish Militia at a fixed population ratio.

Thinking this, Xiulote lifted his head, looking toward the distant horizon.

"With a population of over six hundred thousand supporting thirty thousand combat-ready troops... Even with the excessive profits from copper and glass, and the grain from the military and civilian tilled lands, it still won't last long. Ha ha, such relentless militarism, external conquest is imperative!"

The King's laughing voice scattered in the long wind, soon fading into silence. The flickering firelight, embodying a burning will, merged into the deep night.

A few days later, as February drew to a close, bearing a hint of warmth in the northern wind, the Imperial Guard Legion and the First Pike Legion set out from the Capital City toward Rivermouth County. Black Wolf's Royal Banner waved high, more than ten thousand Warrior Leaf Armors clanged. The great army advanced mightily, against the highland's northbound breeze, boldly moving north.

Chapter 583 - Northern Shipyard, The Starting Point of Navigation!

The spring breeze of March filled the world, as the magnificent army marched gloriously forward. The northern wilderness was already covered in green grass, and wisps of cooking smoke rose from the villages among the commoners' settlements, filling the world with a sense of vitality.

Xiulote stayed at the Rivermouth fortress for over half a month and dispatched a large number of Scouts to the north at the earliest opportunity. Afterwards, he convened priests from villages in all regions, carefully inquiring about the cultivation details of each settlement and the progress of missionary work. Then, before many priests, the King appointed Monkey Kuluka as the overall coordinator of Rivermouth County, that is, the military and political commander.

The First Spear Legion, following the Royal Decree, began to garrison inside the Rivermouth fortress immediately. They were to be arranged on farmland for long-term stationing while also being responsible for the transportation of food supplies for the Royal Army's northern march. Rivermouth County's settlements were established earlier and had a satisfactory harvest last autumn. The fortress had already stockpiled a batch of grain and fodder, enough to supply the six thousand soldiers of the Imperial Guard Legion on their way to the Otapan City-State Alliance. Xiulote certainly would not entrust the critically important supply of grain and fodder to the always food-scarce Otomi people.

Without any delay, the King then inspected the Rivermouth Shipyard around the fortress. He gathered numerous craftsmen to explore new shipbuilding design plans.

Rivermouth Shipyard was actually located on the south side of the fortress by Cuitzeo Lake. It was situated in an inner lake, not very large, with simple facilities, but it had accumulated a lot of timber suitable for building large canoes. The Kingdom's large canoes could carry 40 people and required cedar or oak logs that were at least fifteen meters tall and two to three meters in diameter for the hull. These timber logs, air-dried for many years, were the heritage accumulated over decades by the Tarasco Kingdom, but now they were all benefiting the fiefs around the lake.

At the King's summons, shipbuilding craftsmen with inherited skills from the Rivermouth fortress and Master Carpenters from the Capital City who came with the army, all gathered in the open-air shipyard, listening to the King's will.

The midday sun was warm. Samurai stood everywhere within the shipyard, surrounded by a strict escort. Xiulote looked around, carefully assessing the many senior Master Craftsmen standing in the front row. Dressed in Prepetcha attire, they all bowed their heads in full compliance, expressing profound submission. The King nodded slightly and began to speak solemnly.

"Chief Divine's protection! Today, I've summoned all the Master Craftsmen here for a matter that concerns the divines, the Alliance, and all our people!"

"The Feathered Serpent Divine set sail on the Snake Boat to the Great Lake in the East and made a promise of vengeance. The Divine left descendants of the Feathered Serpent on Snake Island in the East and allied with the fair-skinned tribes beyond the lake. These tribes may at any moment sail their great ships from the distant Eastern Lake, bringing endless war, disease, and disaster. Therefore, the Supreme God decreed, and the Alliance resolved, to move eastward to seek traces of the Feathered Serpent Divine's descendants and to build ships capable of sailing in the Eastern Lake!"

Upon hearing this, the Master Craftsmen of Prepetcha exchanged glances. A low murmur of conversation soon began to spread throughout the shipyard.

Myths of the Feathered Serpent's journey eastward had been passed down for hundreds of years, known to all tribes under the sky. The Divine Descendants of the Feathered Serpent, the fair-skinned foreigners, and building great ships to explore the distant Great Lake... The Master Craftsmen of Prepetcha were actually skeptical at heart. However, since building these great ships was connected to the Supreme God's decree, it was a grave matter that could result in the ruin of their families. They had to be careful and put forth all their thoughts and effort.

After a moment, an elder with a weathered face stood up. The elder's attire was striking, his robe adorned with tree patterns and his neck bearing a sandalwood Necklace. He moved deftly with a dignified yet confident demeanor, representing the many Master Craftsmen as he saluted the King seated above.

"Most high Majesty, in all the world when it comes to shipbuilding technology, the Maya of the far East are first, and we, the people of Prepetcha, are second! In fact, as long as there is a sufficient supply of copper, we have been able to join timber and planks to construct ships many times larger than canoes, capable of navigating the Great Lake!"

At these words, Xiulote was invigorated. He looked towards the leading elder, inquiring.

"How should I call the Master Craftsman?"

"Your Majesty, I am 'The Carpenter of the Lake' Pucuta, chief Shipwright of the Rivermouth fortress! My family has passed down the shipbuilding art of the people of the lake for generations. Many of the Kingdom's Naval Forces' large canoes were crafted by me and my apprentices!"

Xiulote nodded. 'The Carpenter of the Lake' Pucuta meant "Forests' Timber, Craftsman of the Lake". In this era, high-level craftsmen still maintained characteristics of tribal inheritance. Relying on their exclusive mastery of important technologies, they always held a certain influence and status in their locality and even the Kingdom, comparable to that of the military nobility and were also able to command the ordinary craftsmen of their industry.

"Excellent! The army brought two thousand catties of copper with them when we marched northward, specifically for the Shipyard's use!"

The King declared loudly. Hearing the amount of two thousand catties of copper, the Master Craftsmen all gasped. At that time, two thousand catties of copper were roughly equivalent in value to two thousand catties of Gold Dust!

"Pucuta, you mentioned being able to build ships many times larger than canoes that can travel in the Great Lake, do you have any physical models or design plans?"

At the King's query, Pucuta hesitated slightly, then took out a treasured parchment scroll from his bosom and cautiously handed it to the King.

Xiulote felt the material of the scroll, which was unexpectedly made of fig tree bark. Similar to the paper made from tree bark by the Maya, it was fairly durable and long-lasting after undergoing preliminary paper-making processes like soaking, boiling, and drying. However, its raw materials were relatively scarce and the manufacturing cost was high.

The King carefully unfolded the parchment scroll and quickly let out a soft exclamation of surprise.

Chapter 584 - Northern Shipyard, the Starting Point of Navigation!\_2

"Eh! Similar to Polynesian double-hulled canoes? And similar to Papua New Guinean multihull canoes?... Hmm, this design philosophy indeed resembles the iron chain linked boats from the Red Cliffs naval battle."

Xiulote shifted his gaze, only to see at the top of the scroll, two canoes drawn side by side. The two boats were connected by wooden beams aligned parallel to each other, onto which planks were laid for carrying goods or people. At the tail of each canoe, a stern paddle was positioned to control the direction of the boat.

Further down in the scroll, there were several canoes aligned side by side. Similarly, the canoes were connected by wooden beams to form a solid structure. On the outside of the multicanoes, a simple extended row was attached. This row floated in the water, further increasing buoyancy and the vessel's cargo capacity. Naturally, this would correspondingly reduce the vessel's speed.

"Your Majesty, the upper wind canoe moves very fast, designed for naval battles and marching. Wooden planks between the two boats can carry twice the samurai and also provide a shooting platform for archers! The lower water serpent canoe carries heavy loads, designed for transporting personnel and materials. People, or water-resistant goods, can be placed on the outrigger! Of course, to securely connect the boats, expensive copper nails and copper chains are required. But the advantage is that you don't need real large trees to build usable large boats..."

Pucuta looked up, his eyes shining, he looked up at the king, his words brimming with confidence.

Xiulote slowly nodded, showing his admiration. This method of connecting two or more hulls, even installing outriggers, not only increased the load capacity but also greatly enhanced the canoe's stability and resistance to wind and waves. The improved canoe would possess basic deep-sea navigation capabilities, representing the pinnacle of current technological development in canoe evolution.

The tribes of the Polynesian language family relied on this type of canoe to continuously sail and conquer islands across the entire Pacific Rim. They ventured from Malaysia to Luzon, from the Indonesian archipelago to New Zealand, from the Papua New Guinea islands to Fiji, Tonga, Honolulu, all the way to Easter Island, and even a group that left from Sumatra, floated across the entire Indian Ocean, and finally settled in Madagascar!

After pondering for a moment, the King, taking cue from the Polynesian design, prudently made a suggestion.

"Pucuta, it's a very nice design! For these double-hulled canoes, you can erect two cotton sails on the head and the connecting beam in the middle, allowing you to harness wind power for sailing..."

Xiulote took out pen and paper and sketched a simple diagram. Hearing this professional advice, Pucuta was quite surprised. He carefully examined the improved design, thought for a while, and then sincerely nodded in agreement.

"Your Majesty is absolutely right!"

Xiulote smiled satisfactorily, patting Pucuta on the shoulder.

"Pucuta, the water is the home of fish and the den of water serpents. From this drawing, I know that you are not a short-sighted river fish, but a water serpent that can roam and hunt! Since the craftsmen of Prepetcha have such exploratory capabilities and sufficient metal riveting experience, I confidently entrust this important task to you!"

As the King spoke, he took out three drawn diagrams from his robe. He motioned to the surrounding master craftsmen, and several of the most senior shipwrights gathered around to observe them with Pucuta.

Pucuta carefully examined the drawings, noting the first depicted a large, flat longboat with a slender hull, shallow draft, and low gunwales.

The dimensions of the vessel were marked as about 18 meters long and about 3 meters wide. The longboat was divided by the deck into upper and lower sides. On the lower sides of the deck, a dense row of paddles extended out, with a steering paddle at the stern. In the middle and head of the deck above, a large and small sail were erected. The central sail was larger, serving as the main sail; the sail at the head was smaller and auxiliary. A shining sharp metal ram was also indicated at the bow of the longboat.

"This vessel is a galley! Below the deck are the paddlers, and the deck above is for transporting soldiers and materials!"

Xiulote gave a light smile. This was an ancient ship type he roughly recalled from films, originating in Ancient Greece, historically known as the galley. Galleys relied on both wind and human power, with relatively simple manufacturing technology that had been in use from the 10th century BC to the 15th century AD. It was an early Mediterranean naval warship, now mostly used as a coastal trading vessel.

"The upper one is a simple single-row galley, where paddlers on both sides are arranged horizontally in a single row, making production easier... The one below is a double-row galley. That is, the sides of the vessel are built outwards, accommodating two rows of paddlers at different heights, allowing an increase in the number of paddlers, thus increasing paddling speed! By the same token, there is even a faster three-row galley."



At this point, the King paused, his expression becoming serious.

"Pucuta, these ships are a Divine Revelation bestowed upon me by the Chief Divine.

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"Your Majesty, the Maya have similar huge paddle-sail ships. Although not as complex as the one in this blueprint, the basic principles are indeed similar. We, the people of Prepetcha, have experience in hull splicing. As long as we have sufficient bronze and timber, give us about a year to explore, and making a qualified prototype ship should not be a big problem!"

Pucuta's eyes were bright, and although his words were cautious, they were still full of confidence.

Xiulote nodded in approval, not hiding his delight.

Shipbuilding is a profound and challenging task, requiring extensive technical exploration and practice. It is not something that can be hastened by just one or two individuals. Even though he was a transmigrator and knew the ship's shape and general structure, if the craftsmen lacked sufficient technical accumulation, it would still be extremely difficult to produce. Pucuta's promise to test a paddle-sail ship within a year was enough to thrill him.

Immediately, the king unfolded the second scroll of the blueprint, once again looking expectantly at the master craftsmen present.

The second scroll depicted the sand ship commonly seen in the Celestial Empire, which was also used in large rivers or near seas and was generally developed during the Tang and Song periods. Its shape had a square stern and bow, a spacious deck, and slightly low freeboard. The most notable feature was its multiple masts and sails, which were large and shallow, making it fast due to its multi-sail design. At the

stern, there was also a lift-operated rudder. Most importantly, the sand ship utilized a flat keel pioneered by the Celestial Empire, which was both wide and thick, capable of withstanding storms, making it unimpeded in the seas!

Xiulote could not remember the complete structure of a sand ship. He simply drew the "three in front, two behind" five mast positions from his memories of Jiangnan's riverside scenes, sketched out the rudder at the stern of the sand ship, and finally emphasized the ship's flat keel.

The dimensions of the sand ship were noted as 20 meters long, 4 meters wide, and 1.5 meters high, making the total volume about 120 cubic meters, with an effective capacity of about 50-60 cubic meters, which is approximately 500-600 stones in the period of the Ming Dynasty. This type of sand ship usually only required seven or eight people to operate freely and was the most classic sailboat style of the Celestial Empire. Its various sails could utilize wind from all directions, making it very cost-effective in transportation, and its carrying capacity had already far exceeded the needs of the Alliance and Kingdom.

Pucuta stared with wide eyes, examining the "Divine Revelation" ship drawing in detail. He scanned every corner of the drawing, noticing many unclear annotations and large connected parts that were blank, which made him frown in concern.

"Your Majesty, this ship drawing... is there a more detailed internal diagram available?"

Xiulote felt slightly embarrassed, calmly shaking his head.

"Divine revelations are always fleeting glimpses, just as the intentions of the gods are unpredictable... This type of sand ship is mainly used for transportation and can sail on the Great Lake, resisting strong storms. What's most noteworthy are the ship's stern rudder for steering and the keel that shapes the hull."

"The stern rudder? The keel?"

Pucuta chewed on these unfamiliar terms, his eyes full of inquiry.

"Please elucidate further, Your Majesty."

Xiulote thought carefully, recalling the principles he had learned from physics textbooks, before he began to explain.

"The function of the stern rudder is actually similar to the paddle at the stern of a canoe that controls direction. It includes a rudder blade in the water, which is the controlling tail paddle, followed by the rudder shaft that transmits force, and the horizontal rudder operated by a person at the stern. If the ship needs to turn left, you turn the rudder left, which drives the tail paddle to deviate right, and then the water flow pushes the hull left..."

Pucuta pondered for a moment, his years of shipbuilding experience confirming what he had just learned. He soon realized and exclaimed loudly.

"Your Majesty, your divine revelation is brilliant! However, this rotation requires great effort; the rudder shaft should be made of high-quality hardwood like birch, red oak, or fragrant rosewood... And this keel, what kind of bone is that?"

Xiulote shook his head with a smile. He said, laughing.

"The keel is merely a metaphor, meaning the sturdy bones of a giant beast. It is actually a longitudinal structure that runs from the bow to the stern along the centerline of the ship's bottom. If made from a robust material, like aged timber, spanning the entire length of the ship, it can make the vessel very sturdy, allowing it to remain stable amidst the storms on Eastern Lake. As for the flat keel..."

Having said this, Xiulote suddenly paused. He only knew the basic concept and was not familiar with the specific details of the keel. After a while, the King spoke somewhat awkwardly.

"A flat keel is just a flat-assembled keel...As for the specific structure, you all should try and make a good effort to explore it!"

Pucuta looked at the King's expression and immediately understood. He bowed his head in respect, then discussed with the Master Craftsmans for a moment before carefully reporting back.

"Your Majesty, this type of Sand Ship is quite novel, a style never seen before, with tail rudders and whatnot. We need to carefully ponder it. If we are lucky, perhaps we can build one in four or five years. If we are not so lucky... it might take ten years or even longer."

Hearing this, Xiulote's expression changed. His gaze sharpened, glaring at Pucuta like a majestic eagle. Pucuta bravely saluted and lowered his head deeply. The surrounding Master Craftsmans also bowed their heads in respect.

After a long time, reflecting on the difficulties of exploring shipbuilding, the King sighed lightly and finally made a decision.

"Pucuta, since that's the case, engage thoroughly in the exploration! From today, the Northern Shipyard is established, directly subordinate to the Divine Revelation Place in the Capital City, and you will serve as its director! The copper from the south will be supplied to you as a priority. Start with twin-hulled and multi-hulled canoes, familiarize yourselves with the technique of connecting ships, and upgrade the Kingdom's Naval Forces. Then, hasten to explore the manufacturing process of sail-and-oar ships. Within one year, I want to hear good news from you!"

"As for the more complex Sand Ship..."

Xiulote pondered for a moment and then promised generously.

"I set no limits on the time for exploration. As long as you can produce a qualified prototype, the leader will be granted a hereditary nobility title, and rewarded with 2400 acres of hereditary land in Rivermouth County! The other senior Craftsmans will be elevated to military nobility, rewarded with gold and silver, feathers, and land!"

Hearing such generous rewards, the Craftsmans' breathing became heavy, and their eyes sparkled with light. Pucuta took a deep breath twice, maintaining his composed demeanor. His eyes sparkled as he looked at the last scroll in the King's hand.

"Your Majesty, this last scroll, what type of ship is it? May I have a look?"

Hearing this, Xiulote lowered his eyes, his thoughts drifting away. He seemed to hear the orderly sound of bugles, followed by the roar of gunfire. Tall warships with sails unfurled slowly crossing the hull, exposing rows of orderly cannon; Thunderbolt erupting in an instant, destroying all enemies onshore and at sea!

After contemplating for a long time, the King shook his head. He put away the last ship drawing, smiling as he spoke.

"This is a gift from the Goddess of Truth and Justice, and it's not yet time to unveil it! I hope that in my lifetime, I will witness its arrival, bringing broad truth to the Alliance...Pucuta, do well! The vast future of the Kingdom lies in your hard-working hands!"

Hearing the King's high expectations, Pucuta knelt down and bowed, repeatedly saying "I dare not." The many Shipwrights also knelt down, their expressions anxious.

Xiulote left the ship drawing and spent the night at the dockside. Then, he discussed with the senior Master Craftsmans for several days and personally oversaw the establishment of the Shipyard. Only after the first twin-hulled canoe was improved did he lead his trusted aides away.

March was ending in a blink of an eye. The Lerma River's shores were adorned with swaying green reeds and the chirping of birds. Envoy from Otapan City had been waiting at the rivermouth fortress, requesting the great Highness to head north as soon as possible.

Steady as mountains, Xiulote first summoned scouts returning from the north to clearly understand the situation around Otapan. Then, he lastly summoned the monkey Prepecha. Prepecha had preliminarily sorted out the governance of Rivermouth County and arranged the logistics of supplies and fodder.

The King expressed his approval with satisfaction and then led six thousand of the Imperial Guard Legion, crossing the tumultuous Lerma River by Naval Forces' boats, heading north once more to Otapan

City. A few days later, the grand Kingdom's Imperial Guard Legion arrived under the vigilant yet respectful gazes of the Otomi people at the impregnable Mountain City.

#### Chapter 586 - Royal Army Heads North, Old Friends Meet at Night

At the start of April, thunderous rumblings hinted at the changing winds. The dry north wind transformed into the moist easterlies, blending the low-hanging water vapor into the clouds above, where the dull gray was ripe with the brewing of spring thunder.

Xiulote stood on the hillock he had visited years ago, looking up. Dark clouds hung low, the sunlight dimmed, and shadows enveloped the land, with distant thunders growling faintly. Not far away, Otapan Mountain City appeared increasingly towering and impregnable, as if touching the skies.

After years of campaigning, the king, driven by the instincts of a commander-in-chief, surveyed the sturdy ancestral mountain stronghold once again. After a while, he shook his head with a profound gaze.

"The terrain is precipitous, and heavy armor is hardly scalable. Whether it's longbows, powerful crossbows or trebuchets, none can reach the city's battlements. In the age of cold weapons, this truly is an impregnable fortress. The Otomi have chosen a fine location! To conquer this place, one must either lay a long siege or blast open the walls with heavy artillery..."

At the foot of the hill, the Imperial Guard Legion bustled about. The personal army donned armor and stood alert, Temple Guards and barbarian mercenaries all pitched in. They used local materials, cutting down trees, digging trenches, and stacking bricks and stones to construct a simple camp of earth and stone. Meanwhile, Otomi scouts, in more than a dozen teams, watched the legion from a distance, ever vigilant and never straying.

"Not enemies, nor friends, a neutral vigilance... Establishing true mutual trust with the Otomi people will require time and planning!"

Xiulote surveyed his surroundings from the high ground with a deep look in his eyes. After arriving at the foot of the city, he had sent envoys to the mountain city, requesting to let his army enter for rest. The envoy from Otapan City replied with utmost humility, offering a bounty of fresh vegetables, meat, and even tribute in the form of wealth and women to appease the troops. However, the request for the legion to enter the city was, without a doubt, met with a polite but firm rejection.

In the wary caution of the Otomi, the army halted on the spot, encamping outside the city. With the spring cultivation yet to commence, many villagers had hidden in the mountains, leaving the surrounding hamlets deserted. A large number of samurai were stationed on Otapan City, while scouts kept watch day and night outside the city walls. It seemed that the horrific war from years prior had left a deep impression on the Otomi, one not easily faded.

The sun set and the moon rose, casting its clear light upon the land, and the night grew deep. The patrol of trusted aides clanked in their armor leaves, and the camp of the legion was solemn, with only the central tent illuminated by firelight.

Xiulote sat cross-legged within the large tent. His eyes drooped as if asleep but not quite, calmly awaiting. Bertade stood behind him, clad in armor.

The campfire blazed, casting elongated shadows of two in the tent. As the silent night passed, it was uncertain how much time had elapsed when a gust of wind stirred, and the shadows and flames swayed together. When the fire settled, suddenly there were three shadows.

"Your Highness, someone is here," the voice of the Head Warrior murmured low. Xiulote abruptly opened his eyes, looking towards the opening of the large tent, which had just closed.



By the entrance, a not very tall, gaunt figure had appeared. The newcomer was cloaked in a broad black mantle, gazing at the king with serene, withered eyes before slowly lifting the hood over his head.

"His Highness Xiulote, I greet you. The ancient tree atop the mountain looks towards the sky, welcoming the resting Divine Eagle. Your Highness, praise be to you! It has been years since we last met, and you have indeed become a true king!"

Xiulote remained expressionless, nodding slowly. His gaze swept over the increasingly emaciated figure of Olte Yue, over the scattered white hair, and finally rested on the Priest's wrinkled face, as old as tree bark.

"Priest Olte, do you know your crime?"

"Your Highness, there are some disputes within the mountain city. This journey is not one to be seen. Coming to visit in the dead of night, I ask for your forgiveness..."

"Olte!"

Xiulote raised the Divine Staff and brought it down with force, the silver end chiming a "ding-dong." Instant silence filled the tent, followed by a chilling voice.

"Otapan is a vassal to the Alliance, and Jiowar has sworn a Blood Oath of fealty to me! I lead the legion here, also heeding your humble plea to march north and convene with the states!"

The king's demeanor turned daunting. He glared into Olte's eyes and reprimanded in outrage.

"The Royal Army, invited here, has tramped through endless forests. Otapan, a vassal city-state, dares to close its gates and refuses entry to the army! Olte, do you realize that the Tarasco Kingdom to the south has been eradicated?!"

At these words, the Priest fell silent, his aged face turning even grayer. After a long moment, he sighed deeply, and for the first time bent his knees, prostrating fully on the ground before the king.

"Your Highness, Otapan City-State has witnessed the downfall of Tarasco Kingdom firsthand. General Jiowar had once led the legion, fighting for you in bloody battles. Envoys from the Lake Capital City have returned. At the recent New Year's grand ceremony, the sacrifice of the Tarasco king astounded the entire world!"

"The situation has shifted; the might of the Alliance is unstoppable, deeply revered by tribes everywhere. We Otomi have waged war with the Alliance, fully aware of its ferocity. Your Highness, that reverence has taken root in the Otomi's hearts, and every city-state desires to gravitate towards the Alliance, following the strongest in the Jungle. This is the best opportunity, which is why I invited you here, to convene with the Otomi states!"

Olte raised his head slowly, speaking with calm assurance. His eyes were slightly clouded, yet his gaze remained sharp.

"Otapan City is the ancestral homeland of the mountain, the spiritual destination for all Otomi people. Since its establishment from the wilderness hundreds of years ago, the mountain city has never been breached by foreign enemies! Its steep and towering terrain, impregnable defenses, and the tradition of defending it at all costs, are the greatest guarantees for the continued survival of the Otomi Tribes."

"Your Highness, your legion is invincible! We, the Otomi people, are willing to bow down and sincerely submit to you. But allowing the Mexica legion into the city... it concerns the safety of the mountain city, please allow us to adhere to tradition."

Xiulote watched the old Priest. Humble in his kneeling, his pale hair hung down, but his spine remained unbowed. After a moment, the King spoke lightly.

"Priest Olte, the times are changing, and the storm has come. The old traditions will become an obstruction, and the new weapons will destroy everything. At this moment, even the strong mountain city can no longer protect you for long... To survive or to perish? The Otomi people always have to make a choice!"

Hearing the veiled threat in the King's words, Olte's face showed bitterness. He sighed softly and nodded.

"Your Highness, my time is running short, and I am about to go to the Divine Kingdom. The Gods have taken away my worldly gains and losses, and paradoxically, I can now see further. I constantly watch the changes within the Alliance and feel the arrival of the War God. New thunderous weapons, new religious reforms, and the new structure of alliances... The Mexica Alliance, towering above the Tribes, is growing ever stronger! Now, when I close my eyes, I can see the ruler of the Mexica raising the Scepter, restoring the unity and glory of the Teotihuacan Period!"

The old Priest's eyes became profound. He looked at Xiulote's face, as if trying to read something from it.

"Your Highness, following the revelation of the Gods, for the future of the Otomi people, I seek the cry of the King's eagle. There is a Sun burning in the sky, and there is also a Divine Eagle soaring. I see that

Divine Eagle flying over the mountain city, heading towards the land in the lake, settling in the newly born Kingdom. The Divine Eagle carries the will of the Sun God. And the ruler of the lake, will transform into the reborn Sun, rising into the highest heavens!... Your Highness, you are the Sun of the Mexica people, the Sun of the Prepetcha people, and the Sun of the Otomi people!"

Though the old Priest's words were full of metaphors, his attitude was quite clear. Xiulote pondered for a while before ending the probe. His expression eased, and the corners of his mouth carried a slight smile.

"Priest Olte, there are no strangers here. You and I have known each other for a long time, there's no need to be so implicit. I aspire to rule the world, seeing all of the Highland Tribes as future Citizens, with no distinction of ethnicity. If you seek a future for the Otomi people, I will grant you a future for the Otomi people!"

The King stood up, took a few steps forward, and helped the kneeling old Priest to his feet. Then, he gazed into the other's eyes, speaking slowly.

"Scouts have reported back to me that the Canine Descendants from the northern Wilderness are moving south in full force, invading deep into Pamus State territory, and even roaming to the borders of Otapan State. The leaders of the three Otomi States have converged in the mountain city, holding a Tribal conference in the ancestral land to discuss important matters. At this time, you are earnestly inviting me to join the conference up north, stating openly that this is a good opportunity for the Otomi Tribes to unite."

"Indeed it is! Your Highness."

The old Priest nodded affirmatively. Xiulote asked sternly, continuing.

"But when I led the army here, I found that the Otomi Tribes along the way were either fleeing in fear or full of suspicion and vigilance. The attitude of Ototpan Mountain City is even more indecisive... Priest Olte, the Canine Descendants from the north, the ancestral mountain city, what is the current situation now?"

Olte contemplated for a moment before replying candidly.

"Your Highness, last year was calamitous, as the Sky God brought down disasters. The northern desert saw the white disaster of the Gods, with an exceptionally cold climate! Countless Canine Descendants froze to death from weakness, innumerable birds and beasts froze dead or dispersed. Springs turned into cold stones of ice, not melting for two months, making this year's spring plowing hopeless. Without food, people starve to death; without clothing, they freeze to death, but people will not sit and wait for death. They will migrate to places where there is food and clothing and consume everything along the way!"

"The white disaster of the Gods, destroying everything... The super cold wave has arrived?"

Xiulote drew a sharp breath. He was aware of the severity of the cold waves in the North American Continent but had not anticipated that the dreadful cold wave could travel all the way south, bringing the cold to the northern part of the Mexican Plateau.

"Yes, destroying everything! Once the cold wave arrives, it signifies the start of a terrible disaster. No one knows how long the disaster will last, or if it will come again. If large-scale cold waves arrive three times within five years, the northern Tribes will disappear at least by half amidst hunger and cold!"

"To avoid the cold wave, from the East's Great Lake to the West's Great Lake, tens of thousands of Canine Descendants are migrating to the warmer south. Along the way they fight viciously, vying for

valleys that can resist the cold waves, competing for water sources that can grow crops. They desperately fight over exceedingly limited food and turn enemies, or even themselves, into food!"

Xiulote's expression was grave as he nodded slowly. The North American Continent's super cold wave was a destructive disaster, and the early civilizations of the Tribal era had no defence against it. In fact, it was the prelude to the Little Ice Age, the Spörer Minimum, with the world's climate gradually cooling and North America's cold waves becoming more frequent and severe.

"Your Highness, the Canine Descendants began migrating south from the end of last year. At first, it was just minor raids by small Tribes which each State could deal with on its own. But with the continuation of the divine disaster and the lack of hope for this year's spring plowing, the size and number of raiding Tribes heading south have increased!"

"At the beginning of February, tens of thousands of Guajili Canine Descendants appeared on the northern border of Pamus State. They consist of eight large Tribes of five thousand people each, and more than sixty ordinary Tribes of a thousand each, tentatively forming an alliance. These Tribes are all armed, with no weakness amongst them. United, they have over thirty thousand able-bodied warriors, a force that the States cannot resist!"

Chapter 587 - The Eight Divisions of Canine Descendants, Plotting Mountain City

"One hundred thousand Canine Descendants moving south?!"

Xiulote was somewhat surprised. The Tarasco Kingdom had possessed regimented Canine Descendant Mercenaries, whose fearless and indomitable spirit had left a deep impression on him. Then, the King was somewhat puzzled.

"Guajili Canine Descendants? Oh, Guachichiles, 'kua-itl' means head, 'chichil-tic' is red, the red-headed Barbarians?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Nearly the entire Guajili tribe has moved south, indeed numbering over one hundred thousand. They are the more aggressive Barbarians from the northern highlands, residing deep within the harsh deserts. They are irascible, move swiftly, and possess excellent Archery skills, capable of hitting flying pinions! They deeply venerate the color red, see shedding blood as a sacred act, and will use any dye they find to dye their hair red. A distinctive trait of the Guajili elite warriors is their bright red hair!"

"Your Highness, the situation among the northern Chichimeca Canine Descendants is complex, they can be subdivided into seven tribes. Apart from the Guajili people, there are the Pamus, aligned through marriage to our tribe, the Guamare close to the west, the Te-cue people farther west, the Kaksho aligned through marriage with the Tekos people, and the distant northwestern Tepeca and Sakate people. The tribes intermingle yet retain distinct customs, forming alliances yet also opposing each other... when there is a chance, I can elaborate further to you."

"Oh? I heard there are eight divisions of Chichimeca Canine Descendants. Guajili people, Guamare people, Otomi people..."

Xiulote paused for a moment, watching the old Priest across from him with a meaningful look.

"Olte, please continue on the main topic."

"Your Highness, we Otomi people have a long heritage, and we are different from them..."

Olte gave a wry smile, knowing what His Highness had left unsaid. He shook his head, making no retort, and continued.

"Facing the invasion of the Guajili Canine Descendants, Pamus State could not hold out for long. By March, apart from a few isolated City-States, most towns and villages had already fallen. Fortunately, the Canine Descendants do not conduct sieges but instead plunder extensively in the countryside. Over the last fortnight, scattered tribes have begun raids in the northern part of Otapan State. What is worse, several leading large Guajili tribes have taken over the fertile grassy lands of Pamus State and are preparing to settle there!"

"Semi-nomadic, semi-agricultural tribes moving south to invade and begin settling down..."

Xiulote fell into deep thought. Based on the old Priest's description, these red-revering, archery-skilled Guajili Canine Descendants must be the most formidable fighters among the Chichimecs. They are a naturally nomadic people skilled in guerrilla tactics, located at the northernmost edge of the Mexican Plateau.

In later times, the Guajili as the main force of resistance among the Chichimecs, fought against the Spanish for nearly half a century, eventually forcing the colonizers to seek peace. Fortunately, these troublesome nomadic tribes did not yet have the most critical horses and livestock.

"Olte, the Otomi people are a Great Tribe of the north, with over twenty thousand Samurai in various states, capable of mobilizing several times that number in Militia. Have you not sent troops to drive out the Guajili people?"

"Your Highness, indeed the warriors of three states number over twenty thousand. But as the fierce Canine Descendants moved south relentlessly, they were everywhere, pouring in without end. Pamus State was besieged, and naturally, tribes moved south toward the north of Guamare State as well. Only the ancestral lands of Otapan could send troops. A month ago, the military leader of the mountain city, Commander Aquili, personally led a legion of ten thousand northward, engaging in fierce battles with several large southward-moving Guajili tribes. Leading his soldiers from the front, he managed to rout



the Guajili's army at one point, but during the pursuit, he was ambushed by a Divine Archer who shot him in the eye..."

"After this battle, although the Guajili people were scattered and fled, their losses were not significant. They continued to firmly occupy Pamus State. Commander Aquili, grievously wounded, died several days later. Lacking a Commander-in-Chief, the Otapan army withdrew directly back to the mountain city. At this very moment, the leaders of various tribes are gathered together, arguing incessantly as they elect the highest leader, the new military leader of Otapan Mountain City!... Your Highness, your arrival is timely, Jiowar needs your support!"

Upon hearing this, Xiulote's eyes brightened. External pressures from the Canine Descendants moving south, internal strife among leaders. The Otomi people, beset by external threats and internal conflicts, indeed presented the best opportunity to subdue them. The King regarded the anxious old Priest and asked with a smile,

"Olte, as the highest-ranking Chaos Priest who has presided over multiple peace negotiations for the Otomi Alliance, can't you decide the leadership of the mountain city?"

The old Priest gave a bitter smile and shook his head candidly.

"Your Highness, precisely because I have presided over the negotiations several times, my reputation is no longer what it once was! I hail from Guamare State, but there is another seasoned Chaos Priest in Otapan Mountain City, Sakate. Ultimately, the control of Otapan Mountain City will be determined by the heart of the Samurai and competed by the military prowess of the tribal leaders... The current candidates for leader are Jiowar, whom I support, and Nelpa, supported by Sakate."

"Your Highness, I have been closely monitoring the changes within the Alliance, and Jiowar is also aware of the Alliance's strength. No matter the reason, we are willing to seek change, submit and pledge

allegiance to you, seeking a way out for the Otomi people. Whereas Sakate is a very traditional Otomi Priest, Nelpa has never dealt with the Alliance... We view the Alliance as friends, they view the Alliance as enemies! The Wolf King will determine the direction of the wolf pack, once Nelpa becomes leader..."

Xiulote looked enlightened and affirmed without hesitation.

"Olte, we can trust each other. I harbor good intentions towards the Otomi people, will support my subjects, and eliminate my enemies!... What is your plan?"

"Your Highness, you are the eagle of Mexica, the sovereign of the Kingdom of the Lake! Your fame spreads across the land, and the Otomi people also believe in your divinity. Therefore, please enter the mountain city personally, participate in the tribal council. In front of the various Otomi clans, openly declare your support for Jiowar!"

"What!"

Bertade had been quietly listening. On hearing this, he finally could not hold back and stepped forward, urgently advising.

"Your Highness, you are the supreme Sun, you must not risk yourself alone!"

Olte also stepped forward, grabbing the hem of Xiulote's robe. He raised his left hand, swearing sincerely.

"Your Highness, I swear by my life to the gods! The Otomi are in grave danger. We long for a new Sun, yearn for the leadership of the strong. We would never dare to harm you or provoke the might of the Alliance!"

"Oh!"

Xiulote's eyebrows rose. He waved to the Head Warrior. The old Priest also relaxed his grip and bowed in apology. The King's expression remained calm, his eyes steadily on the old Priest.

"The eagle needs its wings, and a King needs his majesty. Olte, how many Guards may I bring into the city?"

"Five hundred men, Your Highness, five hundred men. The legendary strongest leader of the Otomi had a guard of five hundred. This number conforms to tradition and can be accepted by the people of Otapan!"

"Hmm. Five hundred elite entering the Mountain City, six thousand stationed outside... Given the situation of the Otomi, the risk of entering the city isn't great, indeed it is worth a try!"

Xiulote pondered for a moment, his face as serene as a lake. He made up his mind silently, giving nothing away in his speech.

"Olte, Jiowar needs my support to become the Leader of the Mountain City. What do I get in return?"

"Your Highness, You will preside over the enthronement ceremony for Jiowar. You will gain control of the tributaries of the Mountain City, loyalty from the Nobility of the Mountain City, and the allegiance of the Otomi people!"

Olte's expression changed slightly as he bowed and replied.

The King shook his head, his demeanor impassive.

"Not enough, Olte. I might be willing to risk entering the city, but I need more. You can give me more!"

"Your Highness, once Jiowar is in position, the Otomi will align more closely with you. The Otapan Legion will head back north to confront the Guajili Canine Descendants. If you help us defeat the invading Canine Descendants... I can assemble the leaders of the three states for a divine ceremony, formally proclaiming You as the Great Chief of the Otomi people!"

"Oh, there's that layer of planning as well?... Olte, you are indeed deep and calculating."

Xiulote looked at the old Priest, a smile appearing on his face. He shook his head again.

"Olte, think about your status. You know what I care about and what I want!"

"Your Highness Xiulote!"

In the Priest's eyes, a profound sorrow and pleading appeared. The King remained unfazed, just steadily staring back at him, then reached up to grasp the Sun God Amulet around his neck. After a long while, the old Priest finally lowered his head. At that moment, his back bent forward, instantly aged.

"Your Highness, the Saka faction is the most conservative and stubborn. As long as Jiowar holds the power, he can issue military orders to force them back to their fief, driving them all out of the Mountain City... You can arrange men on the outskirts, preferably Barbarians whose allegiance is hard to identify."

"As long as they die, the stubborn faction loses its backbone. Jiowar takes control of Otapan City, I influence the State of Guamare, and also the besieged State of Pamus. At that time, I will represent the Priesthood, issuing divine decrees, making the Otomi people of the three states devote themselves to the highest Chief Divine..."

Olte bowed his head, his breathing becoming labored. He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled, his expression hardening again.

"However, Your Highness, the faith in the Primordial God has been passed among the Otomi people for a long time, and He is also the ancestral deity of the Otomi people. When the War God Huitzilopochtli is elevated to the highest Chief Divine, after the Primordial God Omoteotl steps down, please let Him become the second most important Subordinate God! This way, the turmoil of faith will be minimized."

Xiulote looked at the old Priest for a while. The man was like a flickering candle in the wind, teetering, desperately clinging to the fading light, yet unable to change the departure of the old gods. The King pondered for a moment and then nodded. He was not in a rush.

"Very well. Olte, I agree! In the land of the Otomi's three states, the Primordial God will become the second Subordinate God. Remember the promise you've given me!"

"I will. The Otomi people have no other choice... Your Highness, what about your choice?"

"The day after tomorrow morning, open the city gates. I will lead five hundred trusted aides, raising the Royal Banner of the Black Wolf, and enter the ancestral lands of the Mountain City!"

The night wind shifted, the bonfire flickered. The King's voice rose high, spreading into the chilly wind, filled with grandeur and boldness. The long wind sweeping through, entering the towering Mountain City, turned into a poignant dirge. The former leader Aquili had already been buried in the sacred cemetery of the tribe, his relatives praying through the night. Nearby, the longhouses of the chiefs were brightly lit all night. A new fire was burning.

#### Chapter 588 - Entering the City, Crisis!

The cold days had passed, and the rainy season was not yet upon them. Below Ototpan Mountain City, a splendid spring scene unfolded. Vibrant flowers bloomed under the sunlight, their faint fragrance spreading in the warm breeze, uplifting everyone's spirits. Colorful butterflies danced among the flowers, and spirited hummingbirds darted through the trees, drawing distant gazes.

His Highness Xiulote stood on a small hill in the military camp. He looked at the gentle spring scenery nearby, a serene smile playing on his lips. With the pleasant breeze, melodious birdsongs filled the air, as if composing a moving melody. He looked up to see flocks of warblers soaring above the mountain city.

It was now April, the time for North American warblers to migrate. These small, grey and white birds traveled from tropical and subtropical jungles northward, migrating long distances to the temperate

continental coast. However, this year, due to a cold wave, they were forced to stay here, singing joyously every day, unaware of the dangerous journey ahead.

The warbler is a natural-born songster in nature, capable of producing ten distinct tones with repetitive rhythms and vibratos. Their calls were exceptionally vivid, and their songs unforgettable, symbolizing beauty and good fortune in Central American culture.

"Truly a blessed and auspicious day!"

Watching the jubilant warblers, the king's face revealed a genuine smile. He was dressed in sturdy bronze medium armor, covered by an elegant High Priest robe, and wore a bronze helmet that partially covered his face, adorned with several tri-colored long feathers, all of which shone brightly in the sunlight, giving him an extraordinary and dashing appearance.

"Your Highness, the envoy from Otapan has arrived in the camp. Five hundred personal army samurai have formed up and are ready to depart at any moment!"

Bertade, dressed in medium armor, stepped forward and reported in a solemn voice.

Xiulote nodded. He waved his hand, signaling for Balda, who stayed behind at the camp.

"Balda, be ready! Follow my previous instructions and stay alert for any messages!"

"I will strictly adhere to your command! Your Highness, go with peace of mind!"

Balda bowed respectfully. Hearing this, Xiulote raised his eyebrows, then turned his gaze back to the front of his personal army, where Black Wolf Torc, in heavy armor, saluted from a distance, and made a gesture indicating readiness. The King smiled and then gave his order in a grave voice.

"Ters, raise the Royal Banner! Bertade, let us proceed!"

Five hundred personal army guards formed a tight formation, guarding the Royal Banner carried by Black Wolf in the center, and marched towards Ototpan Mountain City. Among these personal guards, two hundred were Jaguar warriors clad in heavy bronze armor, and the remaining three hundred were personal guards in medium armor wielding longbows. All were elite samurai selected from the imperial guard, capable of holding their ground for a long time once they formed into formation.

Along the way, the guards were solemnly silent. The only sounds were the clanging of armor and the synchronized steps. In less than half an hour, the King had reached the base of the plateau where the mountain city was situated.

He looked up, seeing the plateau rising forty to fifty meters high, occupying a commanding position in this hilly area. The mountain roads along the way were steep, with large patches of trees and rocks scattered around, hindering the large group's climb and forming a natural defensive barrier. Only a few paths directly facing the city gates allowed smooth upward progress.

Above the plateau were serpentine stone walls of the city. The walls stood five meters high, with thousands of Ottopan warriors and militiamen holding weapons, stationed tightly along the ramparts. These defending troops had piles of stones, wooden blocks, and clay pots at their disposal, and even boasted hundreds of replicas of Mexica longbows.



Guided by the envoy, the group slowly ascended and soon came within range of the city head's attack. As the Mexica Wolf Banner drew near, a sudden uproar erupted from the city walls, accompanied by numerous noisy discussions. A group of Otomi warriors shouted loudly, even drawing their bows and javelins.

Black Wolf Torc, in his heavy armor and longbow, strode to the front. He looked up at the mountain city's defenses, a bead of sweat forming on his forehead, and he could not help but grip the bone whistle around his neck. No matter how heavy his armor, facing stones rolling down from tens of meters high would have the same consequence.

Fortunately, the chaotic and dangerous uproar did not last long. Several white-robed high priests soon arrived to calm things, and the Otomi warriors on the city walls gradually quieted down. They wore complex expressions, looking at the leading envoy, the troops below, and the approaching Wolf Banner, at a loss for words.

Soon, Torc, slightly out of breath, stood under the city wall. Wearing more than forty pounds of heavy armor and facing the pressure from the city head, he was somewhat tired after leading the way. Black Wolf rested for a few moments and exchanged glances with the city warriors for a while, then, remembering his duty, he returned to Xiulote's side.

"Your Highness, climbing from the foot of the mountain to the top, if fully equipped and maintaining combat stamina, will take at least a quarter of an hour. All this time, we are under the striking range of the city head!"

Xiulote nodded imperceptibly. The young king, resplendent as a Divine Envoy, stood solemnly outside the city gate. Soon, the heavy wooden gate opened with a loud thud, and then five hundred armored warriors streamed in, raising the Royal Banner high as they passed through the city gate and into the mountain city. Seeing this, the troops on the city walls finally burst into a clamor of low exclamations.

"Blessed by the Primordial God!"

"It's the Mexica people!"

"The Mexica Highness has entered the city!"

"From the south, the Divine Revelator!..."

"Your Highness Xiulote, your troop is the only foreign army that entered the mountain city within two hundred years."

The High Priest Olte stood at the entrance of the city, personally greeting the King. Dressed in a black and white ceremonial dress of a Chaos Priest with a towering feather crown, his demeanor was poised and solemn. Around him clustered the low-ranking priests and temple warriors guarding him. In this mountain city, the High Priest was one of the two highest positions.

"Such a magnificent city, as long as it is defended properly and united, indeed no human force can conquer it!"

Xiulote calmly observed the city's defending army, smiling as he praised. The number of Otomi militia in the mountain city was enormous, estimated at over ten thousand. Although their clothing and armor were simple and their bodies lean, their expressions weren't dull; there was a certain spirit in their eyes, one of guarding their homeland. Such a force might be easily defeated in an outside expedition but exceptionally resilient when defending their home.

"Your Highness, the native dogs cherish their home and would never venture out to harm others. Us Otomi people's wish is also merely to squat in our homes, living quietly day by day."

"Priest Olte, the trends of this world are like the Long River, rushing forward ceaselessly! With all the tribes at war, where can stability be found? Look at this—this invasion by the Canine Descendants from the south, isn't it a fight for survival?"

"...Your words, Your Highness, naturally hold great reason. May the spirits bless and perpetuate the sacred cocoa."

"The spirits will favor the will of the King. It is the worldly kings who will bless the cocoa!"

The two men looked at each other briefly, whispering in conversation, their words tinged with unspoken feelings. Five hundred of the King's personal army shone in copper armor, encircling the King, exuding an indestructible force. Olte's eyes flickered as he glanced at these expensive and sturdy copper armors. He sighed softly in his heart before continuing to look at the King.

Their tacit exchange didn't last long, soon interrupted by a burst of urgent voices. Scores of fully armed Otomi Warriors, escorted by a dozen high priests, hurriedly rushed from the center of the mountain city. The leading Chaos Priest Saka, within a hundred steps, let out a furious roar.

"Olte, how dare you let Mexica enter the city!"

"Priest Saka, His Highness Xiulote is a friend to the Otomi and the older brother of General Jiowar. His presence at today's tribal gathering is an honor for Otapan City!"

"Pah! Olte, you've been enchanted by the Evil God, betraying the spirits of chaos!"

Saka strode forward, unceasing, quickly closing to about twenty steps from the crowd. He was about fifty years old, with high cheekbones and thick black hair, solid and strong, clearly formidable and younger than the Old Priest.

"Saka, paranoia has blinded you! The new Kingdom of the Lake in the south is an ally of Otapan City-State!"

The Old Priest straightened his spine and roared, like an old yet persistent marmot.

Saka approached nearer but didn't continue disputing with the Old Priest. His gaze was fierce, wolf-like; he first scanned the King under the Wolf Banner, then spotted the several hundred armed Mexica warriors, causing his pupils to constrict instantly. The Chaos Priest immediately halted his steps, positioning himself within the guard of the temple warriors. He paused for several breaths, then turned to look at the large group of Otomi Warriors on the city walls, loudly rallying them.

"Otapan Warriors! The Mexica are our enemies! Years ago, they besieged the mountain city, slaughtered tribes in three states, and countless children of the Primordial God were sacrificed, their blood soaking the earth! They stole our food and burned our fields, causing widespread famine to this day! Even this massive invasion by the Canine Descendants is linked to the Mexica!... The Mexica stole our wealth, killed our loved ones, ruined our lives, and now they want to meddle in the Otomi Alliance's tribal gathering, turning the the Otomi into slaves completely!"

Saka's resonating voice echoed up and down the city walls, reaching the ears of thousands of Otomi Warriors. With the tribal leaders all in the center for the gathering and mostly lower-level warriors stationed as guards, they resonated with the provocative words, growing more and more noisy.

Seeing this dangerous omen, Olte's eyes widened. He rushed forward, angrily grabbing Saka's clothes, loudly scolding.

"By the spirits above! Saka, your words are full of lies! The wars years ago were with King Tizoc, who is already dead! His Highness Xiulote has never been our enemy! On the contrary, the food that saved us during the famine in the mountain city came from his supply! He is our friend!"

"Olte, you are old now! In recent years, under your lead, we Otomi have been like field mice in a cave, skulking and slaughtered at will! Xilotepec City was lost, our legions sent south serve the Mexica for nothing, and even Pamus State has been occupied by the Canine Descendants!... You have lost the courage of your heart, lost the protection of the spirits, no longer fit to lead the Otomi!"

Saka suddenly roared. He pushed the elderly Olte away, extended his hand toward the King at the city gate, and shouted loudly.

"The Primordial God blesses us! Otapan Warriors, show the Mexica our strength! Go forth, attack bravely, capture the Mexica Highness, and make them hand over their weapons, wealth, food, and land!"

Chapter 589 - The Might of the War God

As the Saka Priest incited the crowd with his continuous chanting and agitation, the thousands of Otapan Defending Army soldiers near the city walls became increasingly rowdy. The clamorous noise spread, startling a flock of birds into flight in the mountains.

The agile finches sensed danger, chirping as they flew high into the sky to watch. Below, in the mountain city, the two-legged creatures divided into two distinct groups: one group shouting in disarray, like a converging pack of wolves; the other standing ready for battle, like bears on their hind legs,

Battle seemed imminent. Over a thousand impulsive Otomi Warriors gripped their bows and war clubs, gradually moving their feet, surrounding the Royal Banner at the city gates. Some brandished their weapons, eyes red, loudly taunting the Mexica people.

Under the Royal Banner, five hundred Copper Armored Imperial Guards occupied the entrance of the mountain city, forming a tight defensive circle. Encircling them were two hundred Heavy Armored Jaguars. These elite veteran warriors, accustomed to combat and skilled in battle techniques, could easily break through enemy ranks several times their own. Clad in heavy armor and holding shields, they remained composed even when surrounded, their eyes filled with the intent to kill. Within the inner circle of the formation stood three hundred Medium Armored trusted aides, also chosen from among thousands. Skilled in archery and martial arts, they were formidable at any range. The trusted aides now took out their longbows, nocked their copper arrows, and aimed at the Cotton Armored Otomi Archers opposite them.

The priests of the Otomi within the city were also divided into two groups. Those under Olte outnumbered the others, loudly admonishing the surrounding Otomi Warriors to keep most of the defending army in place. Though fewer in number, the priests accompanying Saka were younger and more spirited. They shouted throughout the crowd, continuously stirring up hatred, urging the warriors to advance. The two groups of priests glared at each other, shouting invectives and even coming to blows when they got close.

"Saka, have you lost your mind? To attack the Alliance at this time? Do you want to destroy the Otomi people?!"

Olte steadied himself and, from nearly ten paces away, bellowed in anger. A dozen priests and guards hurried forward, shielding the elder Priest behind them.

"Olte, you're old! The Otomi people need a strong leader, someone who will face everything with stoic bravery, to be reborn in this cruel world!"

Saka stood among the Temple Warriors, protected by their shields. As he looked at the increasingly out-of-control situation, a smile crept onto his face, and he muttered under his breath.

"When two cheetahs vie for the same forest, he who yields has only death ahead! I cannot be the one who fails!"

The Tribal Assembly of Otapan had just begun, with tribal leaders from various lands gathered in one place, in the process of electing the military leader of the mountain city's ancestral ground. The two Head Warriors of Otapan City, Nelpa and Jiowar, were locked in fierce competition for the leadership of the mountain city.

At this critical moment, the elder Priest Olte unexpectedly, without the Priesthood's permission, allowed the distinguished Mexica Prince into the city. The Mexica Prince had always been close to Jiowar, and his presence would undoubtedly have a decisive impact on the election of the military leader.

With the situation urgent and arising suddenly, Saka made a snap decision, stirring the Otomi Warriors stationed at the city gates to clash with the Mexica people. The tribal leaders were all gathered at the city center, and no one was there to control the rank-and-file city defenders. Once the Otomi Warriors began fighting and both sides saw blood, there would be no turning back for the warriors' tribes! Whether the Mexica Prince was expelled or captured, the situation in the mountain city would shift in favor of the side that would benefit!

The Wolf Banner fluttered, armor clinked, and an eerie silence fell over the Samurai. Xiulote, lips pursed, remained calm and collected, observing the unfolding situation.

Under the instigation of the opposing priests, the situation was gradually descending into chaos. The King's gaze swept over the defending army on the city walls. Most were shouting aimlessly; the Militia stood confused in their ranks, while the Warriors hesitated, watching the divided Priesthood. The closest thousand Otomi Warriors, influenced by the hostile atmosphere of the field, were shouting as they pressed closer.

The King furrowed his brow. He had five hundred of the finest Armored Warriors at his command, and even faced with the charge of thousands of Otomi Warriors, they could fully protect themselves. The Mexica Warriors also held the position at the city gates and could retreat the same way they came at any moment.

"But once blood is shed, the situation will be hard to calm! This is not what I desire!"

Xiulote looked around. The Otomi had no tribal leaders to organize them, just chaos under the Priests' provocation. Although they seemed as boiling as soup, they could be intimidated with the right approach.

""Bertade, withdraw the trusted aide's shield and reveal my form!"

"Your Highness?"



The Head Warrior was somewhat worried.

"Withdraw the shield! I am clad in copper armor; the arrows of the Otomi pose little threat to me."

Quickly, the trusted aides lowered their shields and dispersed to the sides, revealing the shining armor at the center. Xiulote stood upright, towering beneath the Royal Banner, and bellowed loudly.

"Black Wolf!"

"Present, Your Highness!"

"Advance the plan, blow the Bone Whistle!"

"By your command!"

Toltec, clad in heavy armor, stood at the very front of the military formation. He raised the pale Bone Whistle, as long as two hands, to his lips, then puffed up his cheeks and blew with all his might.

"Whew! Whew! Dee!... Whew! Whew! Dee!"

The piercing notes burst forth suddenly, resonating with a particular melody at the city gates. Black Wolf exerted his full strength, the shrill sound of the whistle cutting through the heavens, traveling far and wide until it reached beneath the Mountain City! The sound had such penetrating power that it made onlookers dizzy and brought a hushed stillness to the surroundings.

"Praise be to You! The Chief Divine, Sun God, War God Huitzilopochtli!..."

In the brief respite that followed, Xiulote raised the Divine Staff in his hand and chanted loudly, capturing the Otomi's attention. His body shone with golden light, his arms wide open, looking up at the sun. This was the gesture of a Priest praying to the gods!

"...The War God brandishes thunder and roars, revealing His power!..."

The King chanted loudly, his voice soaring and pure, infused with a certain mystical cadence. Then, he slowly lowered his head to level his gaze and suddenly pointed forward with the Divine Staff.

"...The War God descends, the deity has arrived!"

Witnessing the Mexica prince's solemn prayer, the approaching Otomi Warriors abruptly halted. In that era, the majesty of the gods was deeply ingrained in the hearts of the people, and the power of the gods seemed omnipresent. Considering the reputation of the "God of Death," the warriors waited in trepidation for a moment, but nothing happened."

Xiulote pointed the Divine Staff, motionless, his expression divine. The Otomi warriors stopped in their tracks, looking at each other in confusion, momentarily silent. After a brief pause, the lead Saka priest was the first to snap out of it. He roared angrily.

"The Primordial God protects the mountain city! This is the Divine Realm of Ometeotl! Warriors blessed by the deity, charge for me..."

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

Earth-shattering thunder suddenly exploded, like apocalyptic waves rising from the ends of the sky, roaring up and engulfing the entire mountain city. Thousands of Otomi defending soldiers had terror written on their faces. They looked up, but instead of clouds, they saw only the blazing sun!

Hearing the familiar sound of cannons, Xiulote's expression remained unchanged, and he let out a sigh of relief. After counting four consecutive cannon blasts and estimating the time, he swung the Divine Staff again and bellowed.

"War, God, descends!"

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

Another four thunderous bellows pierced everyone's heart! Seeing the prince's praying movements and hearing the angry roars of the deity, the present Otomi could no longer contain their fear and cried out in panic.

"Ah! War God Huitzilopochtli!..."

"The Grand Deity of the Mexica people protects them!..."

"The incarnation of the deity, the God of Death Xiulotel!..."

Voices of terror created a chaos. The Otomi warriors in the front ranks dropped their weapons and dispersed the encirclement. They backed away with heads bowed, their shouts were meaningless, and they dared not look directly at the radiant king. Soon, Ottopan warriors who had participated in the western expedition cried out.

"I've been to the southern battlefield; this is the Mexica legion's ritual to summon the God of Thunder! The Divine Arts that defeated the Tarasco people!..."

Memories of the western expedition flooded back, the thunderous sounds at Rivermouth fortress were unforgettable. Seeing the black Wolf Banner, hundreds of Ottopan warriors who had joined the western expedition knelt down, prostrating themselves before the former marshal.

"Divine Blessings, Your Highness!"

Hundreds of warriors kept shouting, over a thousand Otomi defending soldiers dropped their weapons, bowing their heads in fear. Many Otomi militia even knelt to the ground, saluting the king as if participating in a sacred prayer.

"Warriors, do not fear... this is the howling of an Evil God, harmless to the children of the Primordial God..."

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

After a short silence, the earth-shaking thunder resumed, interrupting the Saka priest's shouting and causing him to lose his balance. Amidst the divine roar, more and more Otomi knelt down, their faces filled with awe, and the present priesthood also showed fear.

Watching this scene, the old priest had a complex expression, staying silent. He kept a close eye on the changes of the Mexica, knowing that the thunder wasn't a divine power but a new type of weapon. Although he had sent many scouts, he had never been able to learn the way to produce this weapon.

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

The thunder had a certain pattern, two rounds, four blasts each time, with a quarter interval in between. In fact, the Imperial Guard Legion brought a total of eight Eight-Gate Wooden Cannons, with a dedicated cannon team. Early that day, all eight cannons had been loaded and stood ready, waiting for the king's signal.

Xiulote looked around again, nodded slightly, and maintained the posture of a deity. All the Otomi had laid down their weapons, and the city walls were filled with prostrate figures. Tribal leaders from the city center were startled by the cannon fire and were hurrying over from not far away; leading them was Jiowar, whose narrow eyes and coyote-like appearance.

"Black Wolf, blow the whistle!"

"Whistle! Whistle! Whoosh!... Whistle! Whistle! Whoosh!" The piercing sound of the whistle cut through the sky, traveling far down the mountain, conveying new orders.

The Otomi fell into utter silence, looking towards the king, radiant with light. Xiulote waved the Divine Staff solemnly, his voice high and resonant, chanting the final verses of the prayer.

"Praise the Chief Deity! The light of the god envelops the earth, its great power is everywhere! The god watches over us!..."

Jiowar approached briskly, arriving in haste, followed by a large group of tribal leaders. He glanced at the situation around him then looked towards the old priest Olte.

The old priest gave a slight nod. He gestured a salute and then raised the Divine Staff, calling out loudly to the Otomi.

"Praise the War God! He is the Sun God, also the deity of the Otomi!"

"Praise the War God! Praise the Sun God!"

Jiowar was the first to shout, kneeling to the ground, saluting in front of Xiulote's Royal Banner. Behind him, the tribal leaders hesitated momentarily before they too knelt down to salute.

"Praise the War God! Praise the Sun God!"

Devout prayers rose and fell, echoing over the majestic mountain city. With the arrival of the tribal leaders, the Otomi warriors each bowed their heads, and the situation within the city was finally under control again while the roar of the deity was no longer heard.

Witnessing the changing situation, Saka's complexion turned pale. He stared fixedly at the king beneath the Wolf Banner, unable to see the young face beneath the Bronze Helmet, only hearing a concluding chant.

"...The god has departed!"

Chapter 590 - Tribes Election

Faint clouds scattered, and the midday sun shone through sparsely, quieting the sky above the mountain city. Startled songbirds once again gathered, singing high above in a chorus, as if voices drifting from the Divine Kingdom.

The Black Wolf's royal banner rose high among the birds, standing in the center of Tribe Square in the mountain city. The city's history was ancient, and its buildings still retained much of the tribal era's character. At the center of Tribe Square was a massive fire pit, where a roaring bonfire danced in the wind, emitting red glows, heat, and blue smoke. Not far from the square to the East was a heavy earth platform surrounded by bluestone. Various flags and banners fluttered above the platform, while beneath it lay the cremains and belongings of over a dozen generations of mountain city leaders.

At this moment, hundreds of tribal leaders and noble samurai sat around the fire pit in a circle. His Highness Xiulote, accompanied by dozens of trusted aides, sat to the east where the sun rose, his back to the graves of the Otomi ancestors.

The sun brought rebirth, and the earth embraced death. Rebirth and death were eternal motifs in Central American culture. Over the past centuries, the Otomi people discussed affairs, socialized, ate and drank, danced, held religious ceremonies, and even had romantic rendezvous in the square, all under the watchful eyes of their ancestors, just like today's chieftain election.

The tribal chieftains formed a circle. They watched with varied expressions, all focusing on the two Legion Commanders in front of the fire pit.

Jiowar, with feathers in his vine hat and dressed in a thick cotton armor covered by a long cloak, held a sharp war club in his hand and a costly bronze axe at his waist, looking proudly at his opponent.

"Nelpa, give up. You stand no chance! You are a mighty Head Warrior of our tribe, and your bravery should be displayed on the battlefield, not here!"

"Jiowar, though I may not understand the governance of a city-state, I possess the heart of an Otomi!"

Nelpa, equally armed and holding a war club, was in his early thirties, younger, strong, and an exceptional warrior. Each of his cheeks bore several butterfly-like scars, emblematic of his combat achievements, akin to the record of slaying ten or twenty opponents.

"Saka the Priest is right, beneath the facade of an Otomi lies the heart of a Mexica!"



Nelpa looked toward the eastern royal banner of the Black Wolf, to Mexica's highness sitting before the ancestral tomb, rage igniting in his eyes.

"Jiowar, to secure an independent future for the Otomi, I must stop you and Olte the Priest from walking further down this misguided path!"

"Nelpa, your spirit is lost in the forest, shrouded in mist, and can no longer communicate. Let us then follow the tribe's tradition and let the chieftains decide!"

Jiowar knit his brows, looking at the warrior brainwashed by Saka the Priest, and shook his head in resignation. He then turned to the seated tribal chieftains, the ultimate election before him.

"Praise the Chief Divine!"

His Highness Xiulote stood up and walked toward the center of the square, followed closely by the Head Warrior and the Black Wolf. Under the awed gaze of the crowd, the King approached Jiowar, raising the Divine Staff in his hand.

"Before the tribal election, I wish to inform all chieftains that I come with my legions and good intentions!"

The King's gaze, sharp as an eagle's, swept over those present. The chieftains bowed their heads one after another, in a show of respect.

"My good intentions are reserved for those I trust! Jiowar is my blood-sworn younger brother, who risked his life for me in battle! For life, I shall shelter him. If he becomes the leader of the mountain city, then I, representing the powerful Alliance, will protect the ancestral lands of the Otomi people!"

A low murmur arose in the square. Saka's face grew solemn as he stood up and shouted to the assembled chieftains.

"Chieftains of the Otomi! Do not forget the wars and famines of the past, and everything the Mexica have done to us! They worship the War God and are cruel, greedy beasts. They continually look for sacrifices, and the hunger in their bellies is never satisfied! Now they stretch their claws once more toward the ancestral lands of the mountain city, toward the necks of millions of Otomi..."

On hearing the words of Saka the Priest, the murmur grew louder. Some chieftains looked hesitant, but most tribal chieftains remained unfazed, their expressions flickering. They, who held the power of life and death over thousands in their hands, would not be easily swayed by words of hatred like the lower samurai.

"My children! The Canine Descendants are moving south, and the Otomi are in peril! Most of the Pamus State has fallen, and the barbarians have settled on our ancestral lands. With unending wars, this year's spring plowing will be greatly delayed, and a new famine looms ahead!"

Olte the Elder Priest stood solemnly, raising his voice in urgent entreaty.

"The Otomi need warriors adept in combat as well as grain to overcome this hardship! At this moment of survival, the Divine has granted us protective light! The Kingdom of the Lake to the south is a reliable friend. And His Highness Xiulote is the Sun of the Otomi..."

As the Elder Priest's words spread, the chieftains instantly fell silent, and then a low murmur rose. The Sun was not a title used lightly, as it was considered the supreme ruler of the world among the peoples of the land, and to call someone the Sun often meant submission!

After some time of disorderly noise, the gathering quietened. A chieftain from Pamus State rose first. He bowed respectfully to the King and then, representing the northern Otomi Tribes, he spoke urgently.

"Respected highness of the Mexica, Mespa of Pamus State salutes you! The beasts of the jungle submit to the strong, and the northern Otomi need your protection! If you send your legions north, we will submit to you and follow your banner into battle!"

...

Xiulote nodded and offered a serene smile. He looked around the hall once again, then lowered the Divine Staff and tapped its end to produce a "ding-dong" sound.

"The Chief Divine's light shines on the Otomi as well! However, the gods' protection requires devout offerings, and the cost of destiny's gifts has long been marked! Otomi, I come with the King's goodwill and await your goodwill in return!"

The tribal chiefs looked at each other before another middle-aged chieftain from the Guamare State stood up.

"Praise the War God! Respected Your Highness, we revere your courage to enter the city and submit to the voice of Divine Revelation, and we trust in the selection by Priest Olte! Fate is a raging river, and as we approach it with our shadows, we must let our legs be immersed. But..."

At this point, the middle-aged chieftain paused and warily looked toward the King.

"The canine descendants on the wilderness are endless, the highland to the north is always barren, with even more desolation further north. The Otomi can only fight, build, and farm! We lack the wealth of the Southern Tribes, nor do we have the rainforest's bountiful produce. We yearn for your aid, but what can we offer in exchange?"

Hearing this essential question, Xiulote's eyes grew profound.

"I am a generous King, I will not covet the mouths you feed, the fields you till, or the control of the mountain city. The Otomi shall elect their own leaders, continuing the glory of their ancestors... But, you must bathe in the Chief Divine's light, accept sacred guidance! You must gather beneath my banner, and fight for the holy will! You must trade valiant and loyal combat for the rewards of wealth and glory!..."

He continued, his voice rich with meaning and laced with a smile.

"Of course, all this is based on our mutual trust, and the election of the chieftain before us!"

Hearing this, the middle-aged chieftain nodded in understanding and bowed his head solemnly in salutation.

"Your Highness, my respects. I am Chalki of the Guamare State, please remember my name..."

"Enough! The sun has reached its zenith, and the Ancestral Gods watch over the land. Now, let the election begin!"

The bone horn was played, and an elderly female voice rose, just as it had thousands of years ago in the age of tribal times. The old Priest stepped forward, raising the Divine Staff in his hand. Across him, Priest Saka's face turned ashen, as he also stepped forward. The former leader Aquili's wife entered the center of the hall, walked between the two legion commanders, and continued to call out with a shrill voice.

"Chieftains, the Ancestral Gods watch over us! According to tradition, follow the man of your choice with your feet! Those supporting Nelpa, stand behind Priest Saka. Those supporting Jiowar, stand behind Priest Olte!... The ancestors witness everything, and all Tribes must abide by the Tribal Assembly's decision. No matter the outcome, the Otomi must not divide!..."

The Otomi chieftains exchanged glances, then silently rose, casting their votes with their feet. Chieftain Mespa was the first to stand, walking behind Priest Olte, followed by many chieftains from the Pamus State. Then, Chieftain Chalki nodded at the old Priest and led the chieftains of the Guamare State right behind them. The chieftains of the Otapan State erupted into a quarrel and left in discontent. Three-tenths of them went to Priest Saka, while the rest, seven-tenths, came to stand behind Olte.

The result was clear at a glance. The old Priest stood tall, backed by a massive throng; Saka looked downcast, with only a sparse twenty or thirty people behind him. Nearly ninety percent of the Otomi chieftains ultimately chose to support Jiowar, electing him the military leader of the mountain city homeland, the nominal speaker of the Otomi Alliance!

"The ancestors witness from their graves; a new leader has been born! The Tribal Assembly decrees, the chieftain of the mountain city homeland, heir to the Ancestral Scepter, is..."

The elderly woman's voice rose again but was abruptly cut off by a loud cry of anger.

"The ancestors and gods witness! Jiowar, you traitor who has betrayed the tribe!"

Seeing the situation irretrievable, Nelpa clenched his teeth, his face showing a determination to die. He suddenly raised his War Club and roared loudly.

"I swear on the Samurai's dignity and equal honor, I challenge you to a holy duel! The graves of our ancestors will be our graves too. I will duel you to the death!"

"Nelpa, have you gone mad? To risk your life and challenge me to a duel?"

Jiowar was taken aback, almost in disbelief, as he looked at the middle-aged Samurai before him, standing firm as a rock.

Even after failing to secure participation in the territorial election, Nelpa was still a powerful tribal chief, with a prestigious position, commanding thousands of Samurai, and with no threat to his life. The holy duel to the death was only between equals in status and was bound to end with one's fall. Although it was an old tradition to resolve significant disputes among the tribes, a remnant of the era of tribal warfare, it had been years since such a duel had occurred among the chieftains.

"Jiowar, if you are a coward who fears battle, then step down from the position of chief! Only a leader who does not fear life and death can lead the Otomi to vitality!"

Hearing this, Jiowar glanced at the many chieftains present and deeply furrowed his brow. Among the warrior-prizing highland tribes, being called a coward was the most contemptible of insults. With the conversation reaching this point, despite his right to refuse Nelpa's challenge, he would leave a lifelong stain and struggle to command respect ever after. Besides... Jiowar squinted his narrow eyes and laid his hand on the robe at his waist, then his brow smoothed out.

"Nelpa, since you are so bent on seeking death, then come!"