

Civilization 681

Chapter 681: The End of 1485, New Changes

The Congo River awakened from its slumber in the early morning, teeming with life along its majestic stretch. The giant Humpback Carp flickered their silver scales, chasing the uniquely shaped Elephantfish. The Congo Sunbird stretched its colorful feathers, capturing the transparent frogs among the water trees.

Large mammals comfortably nested in the rainforest. In the waters, large pods of hippopotamuses undulated, while small herds of African forest elephants roamed the banks. Truly a river of life, the Congo River harbored countless exotic species thriving on the tropical, fertile land.

Along the riverbank, three caravels bustled with activity. The crew hoisted the anchors and raised the sails, setting sail westward once again. Everyone was so eager, the sailors on the masts ceaselessly adjusted the angles of the triangular sails, all to leave this "demon" land a bit quicker.

On the leading flagship, Sailor Chief Diego sat sprawled at the bow, brimming with pride. He indulged in a captain's lavish meal while directing the busy sailors. Beside Diego, a group of confident sailors gathered, sharing food and laughter.

After chatting for a while, a sailor humorously raised his right hand, mimicking the nobility, and performed a clumsy captain's salute.

"Esteemed Captain Diego, the fellows greet you! We are about to pass by the village of the natives. When shall you lead the fellows ashore for another raid? Foda-se! We've resupplied in this village before, and those chieftains surely have valuable rubies!"

"Ha-ha!"

Delighted by the captain's title, Diego let out a hearty laugh and slapped the sailor heavily on the head, scolding in jest.

"Foda-se! Idiot! Not only does this village have rubies, but it also has dozens of warriors with feathers in their caps! With just us few here, what could we possibly loot ashore?"

"Boss, we could rally the sailors from the other two ships for a raid! Since it's on the way back, we hit them and run, the natives won't be able to catch up!"

"The other two ships..."

Upon hearing this, Diego's eyes flickered. If he could enlist the sailors from the other two ships, they wouldn't necessarily have to return to Lisbon. He could just kill Diego the old dog and Bruno the dumb ox, and even kill all the nobility on the other ships. With the captain's secret sea chart, whether he joined the Moors across the sea, approached the Spaniards to the east, or even the pirates of North Africa, any option was better than returning to Portugal. Perhaps, he could even become a noble himself.

After pondering for a while, Diego finally grinned, revealing his sharp yellow teeth.

"This native tribe is too powerful, brothers, let's hold off for now. When we reach the mouth of the river, we'll find two weaker native villages to strike! We'll slaughter all the men, women, and children in the villages, ransack the gold, gemstones, and food, and take some young women aboard. Then, brothers, we can be merry every day! After all, we're in charge on this ship now!"

"Foda-se! Let's do it!"

"The captain is right!"

"I can't wait!"

Upon hearing about taking women aboard, the confident sailors' eyes gleamed, raising a howl like banshees. Diego laughed with satisfaction, as long as he wooed the sailors, when the time came...aha!

After thinking for a quite a while, Diego could barely contain his excitement and roared at his confidants.

"Go, have the chief cook bring some wine, let the brothers continue to feast!"

A sailor immediately stood up and headed towards the deck opening. The captain's quarters at the stern were not far from the deck opening, where the imprisoned captain remained. The sailor glanced in the direction of the captain's quarters, a habitual reverence surging in his heart, causing him to swiftly salute before rushing below deck.

The captain's quarters were serene. The deck and the blankets had been cleaned, and a section of cardamom, recently obtained from the Congo Kingdom, was lit; its faint aroma spread, masking the moldy scent of blood.

Captain Diogo sat upright on the wooden bed, wearing a freshly washed captain's uniform. His hair was meticulously combed, and his face calm, akin to a sculpture. At that moment, he was looking at the sea chart he had personally drawn, staring at the section where the river exploration ended, utterly silent.

Noble Knight Bruno knelt on one knee on the deck of the captain's quarters, also silent. His expression was full of guilt, as if he had been kneeling for a long time.

The cabin remained silent. It was only disrupted when the laughter of Sailor Chief Diego echoed from afar, causing Diogo to set aside the sea chart and sigh softly.

"Bruno, what are you doing here?"

"Respected captain."

Bruno lifted his right hand, performing a salute to the captain.

"In four or five days, the fleet will reach the mouth of the Congo River."

"Oh?"

Hearing this, Diogo slightly raised his eyebrows and repeated softly.

"It's coming to the mouth of the river."

"Yes, captain."

"After going out to sea, do you plan to return to Elmina Castle?"

"Quartermaster Matim wants to resupply at Elmina Castle, but Sailor Chief Diego wants to plunder the villages along the way and then head straight back to the kingdom."

Bruno nodded, hesitant to speak further.

"I see."

Diogo glanced at him impassively.

"So, have you come today to see me off, back to the Almighty's embrace?"

"Ah, captain..."

Bruno looked startled, then sweat appeared on his forehead.

"Then get on with it."

Diogo calmly took a dagger from his chest and then "thumped" it, throwing it at Bruno's feet.

"Sacred doctrine forbids me from taking my own life, or I would have ended it long ago. Dying at your hands is better than dying at the hands of others."

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"Captain, I, I didn't mean that..."

Bruno knelt on the ground, looking at the captain who calmly faced death, as if he felt the light of the Holy Mother once again.

"Come now, child! Do not burden yourself, you are helping to release me. I am already afflicted with the Demon's curse, and I won't last much longer."

Diego smiled. He reached out, took off the Silver Cross that Dias had given him, and placed it around Bruno's neck.

"Through redemption, the Lord manifests His grace between generations and eternity... Bruno, there is still the light of redemption in your heart! Clasp the Cross around your neck and do not let it extinguish in the darkness of the Demon."

Having spoken, Diego took out a bottle of olive oil, drew a Cross on his forehead, and prayed.

"Per istam sanctam unctionem, indulgeat tibi Dominus quidquid deliquisti, Amen."

This was the anointing of the sick, a last rite. There was no Priest on the ship, so Diego did it himself. Afterward, he quietly closed his eyes.

"Captain!"

Tears filled Bruno's eyes once more. The guidance and promotion given by the captain over two voyages and several years flashed in his mind, finally steeling his resolve. He knelt and stepped forward, grasping Diego's hand tightly.

"Captain, please put aside your courage to face death for a moment. The Kingdom and Church's duty does not allow you to stop here! There is more than one route to the Kingdom of Elder John! Once we reach the sea's mouth, we will leave the Demon's land, and the crew will no longer fear the power of the Curse. We can then continue southward, rounding the boundary of the African continent, and onwards to the East!"

"Oh?!"

Diego's eyes opened in an instant, revealing a lion-like gaze. He abruptly grabbed Bruno's arm and sternly asked.

"Are you willing to go south and explore?"

"Yes, I am willing."

Bruno nodded firmly.

"But you said Matim wants to return to Elmina Castle, and Diego wants to sail straight back to the Kingdom?"

Diego's eyes shone brightly, fixed intently on Bruno's expression.

"Yes, they want to head north and return."

Bruno looked sincerely at the captain.

"Captain, although we all urged you to turn back, we are not in league! You are my captain, elder, teacher, and my heart will always follow you. I am different from them!"

Diego lowered his gaze, slightly tilted his head, hiding all the changing expressions. After a long while, he nodded slowly and asked softly.

"So, Bruno, you intend to eliminate Matim and Diego?"

At those words, Bruno's face froze slightly, and he looked at the captain with a mix of awe. Although the captain was confined in his cabin, he seemed able to see through everything on the ship. Thinking of this, Bruno did not beat around the bush and solemnly nodded his head.

"...Captain, Diego is too brutal. He controls over a dozen sailors and acts with impunity, threatening the lives of us all! Therefore, he must die! Matim is the official in charge of munitions, able to repair weapons, and his men are few. As long as we strip him of his position and power, we can spare his life."

Having said this, Bruno licked his lips. He looked earnestly at the captain and respectfully continued.

"Honorable captain, by eliminating them, you can regain control aboard the ship!"

Diego did not speak or show any excitement. He regarded his personally mentored nephew calmly, with deep eyes. In Bruno's eyes, he saw growing ambition, burning desire, and an increasingly profound darkness.

The silence fell again in the cabin. The flagship flowed downstream, raising the sound of gushing water; a strong wind passed through the wooden window, carrying the wild laughter of Diego. After a long time, Diego finally asked faintly.

"Bruno, tell me, how did Sailing Master Reinaldo die?"

At this question, Bruno's heart shook violently. He knelt on the ground, not daring to meet the captain's eyes.

"Reinaldo... he was... the crew was uneasy about him, worried about the men under his command, so they killed him together."

"Oh? Unfortunate child."

Diego looked deeply at Bruno, his meaning implied. Then, he brought his hands together and prayed somewhat sadly.

"May the Holy Mother bless his soul!"

"May the Holy Mother bless!"

Bruno bowed his head and prayed softly as well.

After the devout prayer, Diogo straightened up and asked in a deep voice.

"Bruno, how many men do you have in your command?"

"The head chef Haroldo and his logistics sailors, the carpenter Ivo and his apprentices, plus a few of Reinaldo's men, and my own loyal followers... roughly about twenty people in total."

Bruno's gaze flickered. It was only by invoking the captain's name that he could command the men of Ivo and Reinaldo.

Though Captain Diogo was imprisoned in the captain's quarters, his prestige of over a decade still ran deep in the hearts of the men. Before, the crew had united to rebel because the captain insisted on exploring the East, disregarding the lives and deaths of all on board. Now that the fleet was on its return voyage, and the crew was gradually moving away from the Demon's land, the captain's authority was somewhat restored. Moreover, they wished to return to Elmina Castle to resupply in an honorable manner, to return to the Kingdom and their homeland with glory.

The captain's status was silently recovering in the hearts of the people. Bruno acutely perceived this, which led to his visit today.

"About twenty men."

Diogo nodded slightly. He pondered for a moment and then revealed the melancholic smile typical of the Portuguese.

"It is not enough. Noble Knight Bruno, since you are here to see me today, you must have other preparations."

Bruno lowered his head, a myriad of chaotic thoughts emerged in his mind and quickly subsided. Facing the lion-like captain, he could not hide anything. And once the lion was released from the cage, how could he ensure his own safety? He hesitated for a while, until he once again gripped the Cross around his neck, personally bestowed by the captain, before he finally made up his mind.

"Respected captain. I am in charge of contacting the other two ships."

Bruno said through clenched teeth.

"Two noble captains, Pero Anes and Pero Dacosta, have been somewhat suspicious of the flagship's situation. As long as I send your secret letter to them, both ships will send their elite sailors to the flagship to follow your command and help you quell the rebellion!"

"To invite Pero Anes and Pero Dacosta to send sailors aboard the flagship?"

At this, Diogo's eyebrows rose, and he carefully eyed Bruno in front of him, the corners of his mouth revealing a faint smile.

"Very well! Bruno, you are bold. Taking such great risks, what exactly do you wish to gain?"

"...Captain, I wish to become an honorable and noble royal Knight like you!"

At this point, there was no need for any concealment. Bruno raised his head, not masking the longing and ambition in his gaze.

"Captain, I also believe in you. I believe in the piety within your heart, I believe that the responsibilities you bear can outweigh your hatred for our mutiny!"

"Oh?"

Diogo looked at Bruno, his eyes narrowing, revealing a lion-like smile.

"Bruno, my piety and responsibilities, what do they have to do with you?"

"Respected captain, after quelling the mutiny, I will assist you in heading south to continue exploration! If you were to die of illness during the voyage, I would steer towards the East to erect the last padrão, the explorer's pillar, in your honor! Then I would bury you on the very land we last reached."

After that, Bruno placed one hand over his heart and grasped the Cross around his neck with the other, solemnly swearing to the Almighty.

"Almighty witness! Not just this once! I shall inherit your responsibilities, continue to explore new routes, and search for Elder John's Kingdom in the East! I will also follow the teachings of Prince Enrique, to explore new seas and seek out unclaimed lands. For the future of our Portuguese people, to expand on the sea!"

Diogo's smile faded, and his expression turned solemn. He gazed into Bruno's eyes, as if he wanted to see right through the man before him. After a long time, he nodded calmly.

"Bruno, a true man should do as he says. My days are numbered, and I won't see your future. Your vows, your promises, I will believe in them one last time. To survive, you may choose betrayal; for ambition, you may be ruthless; for faith, you may even kill."

"All of this, I can forgive you, and so can the Lord. But remember, you are a Noble Knight, a good son of Avis! You must not fail in your courage, your responsibilities!"

"Now go and make your preparations, Noble Knight Bruno."

The Congo River flowed relentlessly, never to return.

Chapter 683: The End of 1485, The So-Called Redemption

November 1485, near the mouth of the Congo River entering the sea, on the land ruled by the local chieftain Soyo—a coastal fishing village.

The tumultuous Congo River poured into the Atlantic Ocean here, without forming the common river delta. Instead, it had carved out a deep drowned valley along the coast. Relying on the rivermouth's

abundant fishing resources, the tribe settled here, forming a peaceful fishing village. On ordinary days, children ran through the village, women bustled about, and the air was filled with vitality.

As the sun set in the west, three caravels were docked alongside the riverbank. A deathly silence loomed over the native fishing village, with the smell of blood permeating the air. The frenzied carnage had just ended, and the beastly desires had been temporarily satiated. At this moment, one or two hundred fresh corpses, regardless of age or gender, were piled upon the central altar of the village, with large bundles of straw covering them.

"Haha! Killing the heathens is rescuing their souls! Haha! And taking their possessions, that's a gift from the Almighty!"

Sailor Chief Diego laughed heartily, shouting with satisfaction as he touched the straw on the altar with the torch in his hand. The twenty or so sailors surrounding him equally looked content, setting fire to the native huts. Behind the sailors were the large bags of looted goods. Seven or eight young, black-skinned women, barely clothed, were strung together with hemp rope, kneeling in front of the burning village, crying desperately.

The raging fire rose quickly, destroying all evidence of the crime. Afterwards, the sailors divided the plundered goods amongst themselves, shouldered the bags of grain, and, dragging the staggering women, they headed towards the boats by the river.

The exploration fleet was running out of food. Seizing the opportunity to resupply upon landing, Sailor Chief Diego had gathered nearly thirty sailors from the three ships, along with five breastplates and three matchlock guns, to attack this small fishing village of a couple of hundred people.

Facing the ferocious sailors, the common native village had no power to resist. The sailors first used matchlock guns to shoot down three native warriors, then the armored sailors took the lead in chopping down the able-bodied men, with the rest of the sailors encircling from all sides. In just a quarter of an hour, the peaceful village had turned into a hell of slaughter. The sailors wielded their curved blades, skilfully slaughtering the villagers, not letting a single soul escape to avoid attracting the wrath of the native chieftain's warriors.

Of course, Diego was not worried about native warriors. The fleet would soon enter the Atlantic Ocean and start the long journey home. Even if the native warriors gave chase, they would not be able to catch up. Thinking this, he laughed loudly, calling out to the other two ships' sailors.

"Foda-se! Today was a blast! But there's not much gold here among the natives. When we get to the Gold Coast, we'll go out and do this a couple more times!"

"Alright! Boss Diego, we'll follow your lead!"

"Foda-se! Following Boss Diego is the best!"

"That's true! We've finally come out alive from the devil's land, even killing has become more efficient!"

"Haha!"

Hearing the compliments from the sailors on the other ships, Diego laughed contentedly. Then, he gestured towards the native women.

"Come, two for each ship, take them back and enjoy!"

Upon hearing this, the sailors from the other two ships glanced at each other. They were tempted, but no one dared to accept the offer. During the Age of Exploration, discipline on transoceanic vessels was very strict. To boost the morale of the sailors, captains of various nationalities would tacitly allow their men to plunder ashore, but they certainly wouldn't permit women on board. In fact, even the most brutal pirate captains, unless they had degenerated to a certain extent, would never allow women on their ships.

"No, Boss Diego, you keep the women! It's getting late; we need to hurry back to the ship with our loot."

The sailors from the two ships hesitated slightly but decided to decline. They bid farewell and quickly boarded the small boat to return.

"Foda-se! These gutless hyenas!"

Diego cursed under his breath. It wasn't easy to incite the sailors to rebel unless they were in a dire situation. It seemed he would need to make more connections and get rid of all the nobility on board. Thinking this, he sneered viciously, and waving his dagger, he bellowed at his trusted men.

"Foda-se! Let's go! Take the women. We're in charge of the flagship now!"

Over a dozen sailors, laughing and jesting, first tossed the goods and grain onto the small boat, then dragged the women to another small boat, and together they rowed towards the flagship.

As a light exploration vessel, the caravel had a low freeboard. Seeing the small boats approach, the flagship threw down three-meter-long climbing rope ladders.

Looking up, Diego grabbed the rope ladder and climbed up first, shouting with confusion as he did so.

"Matim, why are you with so many sailors, standing on deck?"

Quartermaster Matim's face was stiff, and the corners of his mouth twitched. After a pause, he shouted back.

"The guys just couldn't wait to see what you've plundered!"

"Foda-se! We agreed in advance that the food goes to the ship's storeroom, and you don't get a share of the loot! As for the women, well, we can all enjoy them together!"

Hearing that there were women involved, Matim's mouth twitched even more violently. He said nothing, waiting for Diego to board.

"Haha! Guys on the ship, as long as you stick with me, there will be food, drink, and..."

Excited to board the ship, Diego had barely started to yell when his words suddenly halted. His face turned ashen in an instant, and his fingers started to tremble.

"Matim, you..."

Matim lowered his eyes, sighing softly.

Two steps behind him, five musketeers crouched in a row, each holding a loaded matchlock gun, all aiming at Diego who had just boarded. The guns' touch holes were open, with lit match cords dangling at the metal serpents, burning slowly and unsteadily. From a few steps away, if the musketeers only lightly pulled the triggers, the lethal lead balls would shoot out, punch through Diego's breastplate, and blast a gaping, bloody hole. And beside the musketeers, ten elite soldiers, each clad in breastplates or leather armor, held sharp curved blades, ready to strike.

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"Matim, my brother! Let's talk this out! What do you want? All the plunder from this journey, I'll give it to you! And you can be the head on this ship!... My fellow sailors, I, Sailor Chief Diego, have never wronged you!..."

Diego shook all over, lifting his hands in fear. He shouted with all his might, trying to persuade everyone on the ship. Behind him, four of his loyal men had just boarded the ship, only to be forced to surrender with raised hands. The rest of the sailors stayed on the small boat, watching the situation onboard with trepidation.

"Alas!"

Quartermaster Matim sighed. He slowly turned around, revealing a familiar face from behind. Only then did Sailor Chief Diego see that Noble Knight Bruno was holding a dagger, pressing it firmly against Matim's back.

"Foda-se! Bruno! It was you!"

Diego was stunned for a second, then his eyes almost burst with rage as he roared angrily.

"Foda-se! Damn you! That night in the cabin, I should have chopped you into mincemeat!..."

Bruno's eyes were cold and contemptuous as he glanced at Diego, like looking at a madly barking defeated dog. He gestured abruptly to the Armor-clad elite soldiers and ordered sharply.

"The captain has ordered! Sailor Chief Diego has incited mutiny, betraying the Kingdom! They are evil worshipers of the Demon! Seize them!"

At his command, ten elite soldiers looked simultaneously towards the stern captain's quarters. Captain Diogo sat solemnly and calmly at the doorway to the cabin, nodding at the people on the deck. The soldiers surged forward from both sides, ready to capture Sailor Chief Diego and his loyal sailors.

"Foda-se! You are the guards from the other two ships! Foda-se! Diogo, you damned diarrheic dog!"

Upon seeing the captain emerge, Diego screamed in despair. He roared and wildly waved the curved blade in his hand.

"Fire!"

"Bang! Bang!"

On Bruno's command, two musketeers pulled their triggers directly, and the ends of the matchlock guns ejected a puff of white smoke. Two lead bullets spun rapidly and shot out—one struck Diego in the knee, shattering the fragile patella joint, the other hit his arm, tearing the thick upper arm into a bloody blur.

"Ah!!"

Diego screamed miserably, the tremendous kinetic energy exploding within his body as he fell to the ground, soaked in blood. The elite soldiers wielded the iron handles of their short swords, knocking down the sailors behind them, then took out sturdy hemp ropes to tie up Diego and his sailors.

Seeing this, Matim could no longer stand. He fell to his knees on the deck with a "thud," hugging Bruno's legs.

"Brother Bruno, I've never wronged you! You are a distinguished Knight, please spare my miserable life! From now on, I'll be your dog, listening to everything you say!..."

Bruno frowned, kicked up a foot, and kicked Matim to the ground.

"Get out! The captain is in charge now! Matim, if you want to live, crawl and beg the captain!"

Then, Bruno hurried forward two steps, coming to where Diego lay writhing and wailing. He looked down at the other's wretched state and laughed heartily.

"Ha-ha! Diego, how does it feel to be shot by a matchlock gun? Come on, let me give you a good inspection!"

With that, Bruno stepped on Diego's knee, causing him to curl up in pain, resembling a cooked red shrimp.

"Tsk ts, the knee is broken ah! Oh, the arm is broken too ah!... To be in such pain and yet not cry, you really are a tough guy!"

Bruno's face sported the smile of a victor. Then his eyes flashed wickedly, he lifted his foot, and with all his might, stomped down on Diego's lower body!

"Foda-se! That's for coveting my wife!"

"Aaahhh!!"

The terrifying scream that wrenched from Diego's lips was chilling to the bone. Nearly ten steps away, the head cook Haroldo shivered deeply as if he heard the sound of something cracking.

On the other side, Quartermaster Matim trembled all over. He crawled difficultly to the front of the captain's cabin, lying on the ground a few steps away, abjectly pleading with the captain.

"Respected captain! Noble royal Knight! I beg you, in light of my faithful service of over ten years, please spare my life! Even if it's as a laboring sailor..."

"Oh? Matim, how long have you been with me?"

Captain Diogo looked serene, with profound eyes. He stopped the guard next to him, gazing down at Matim at his feet.

"I... I have been with you thirteen years... starting as a sailor apprentice..."

Matim lay on the deck, his voice quivering.

"Yes, thirteen years and six months. That was the year 1472 after the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. At that time, I had just become a captain. We followed the respected Navigator Joao Santarem and discovered Annobón and Príncipe islands in the Gulf of Guinea..."

Diogo's eyes lowered, he drifted into distant memories.

That year was generally calm throughout Europe. The Portuguese had explored the Gulf of Guinea and the Gold Coast; to the east, Moscow's Grand Duke had married Sophia, the princess of the fallen Byzantium. And in the unknowable Celestial Empire of the East, a man of unparalleled wisdom was born, his name was Wang Shouren.

After some time, Diogo then smiled faintly, his expression showing the passage of years.

"Matim, the Almighty said not to test the loyalty of men with time, but to offer them a chance for redemption. Now, let the Almighty Himself decide your fate!"

With those words, Diogo pulled out a newly minted Portuguese Crusado coin. On the front of the coin was the crowned Portuguese coat of arms, and on the back, the holy Cross. He spoke gently to Matim.

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"Matim, I will throw this gold coin to let the Almighty judge you. If the kingdom's emblem faces up, I will strangle you bloodlessly according to the kingdom's laws and hang you from the mast at the bow. If the holy cross faces up, I will follow the Almighty's teachings, forgive your past sins, and give you a chance for redemption. How does that sound, fair enough?"

"...Captain, very, very fair..."

Watching the gold coin in the captain's hand, Matim had gone pale and shuddered in response.

"Well, I will count to three, and the judgment will officially start."

A smile like that of the Holy Mother spread across Diogo's face.

"Come, pray sincerely to the Almighty!"

"One,"

"Two,"

"Three!"

Diogo tossed the gold coin high with his left hand. Matim's gaze followed the coin, spinning up and down, just like his rapidly beating heart. Then, Diogo's left hand shot out and his right hand covered it — the coin suddenly vanished from mid-air.

Matim's knees wobbled, and his forehead was covered in sweat. He knelt on the ground, praying devoutly while desperately trying to look at the surface of the coin. However, the coin was tightly covered by the captain's large hand, and nothing could be seen.

Diogo withdrew his left hand and slightly lifted his obscuring right hand. He glanced at the coin on the back of his hand and revealed a mysterious smile.

"Tchau!"

Matim's knees faltered sharply, nearly collapsing to the ground. In the Portuguese of that time, "Tchau" carried both the meanings of a greeting and a farewell, akin to the Chinese "hello" combined with "goodbye."

"Haha!"

Diogo rarely laughed so joyfully. Then, he sobered up and said solemnly to Matim.

"Congratulations, Matim! It is the cross facing up, you have survived. The Almighty witnessed, I forgive all your past sins!"

"Ah! Thank you, I sincerely thank you for your mercy! Respected Captain, I am eternally your servant!..."

Matim, tearful and overjoyed, collapsed on the deck, his sailor's outfit completely soaked. He clutched at the captain's lower legs, endlessly grateful.

Diogo shook his head gently. He looked sternly at Matim.

"Do not thank me, thank the Almighty! It is the merciful Almighty who heard your prayers and granted you a chance for redemption! From now on, you must devoutly believe in the Almighty and redeem your past sins!"

"Yes, yes! Praise the Almighty, He is the light of the world. I will follow His guidance, I will not walk in darkness, but will attain the light of life..."

Matim, babbling, prayed more devoutly than he ever had before. Diogo listened quietly, a smile appearing on his face. Once the other had finished praying, he calmly commanded.

"Matim, my old friend. Go execute Diego and his confidants, personally redeem your sin."

"Yes, I will follow your will, my master!"

Matim knelt on the ground and bowed deeply. Then he turned around, stood up, and walked fiercely toward Diego.

Seeing Matim stride over, Bruno raised his eyebrows. The quartermaster had only spoken with the captain for a brief moment but seemed completely changed. He stepped back, observing the quartermaster's behavior.

Matim silently took a sturdy hemp rope from the hands of the surrounding sailors.

"Fuck! Matim, what, what are you doing!"

Sailor Chief Diego, covered in blood, lay on the deck. He stared in horror as Matim, clutching the rope tightly, approached and let out a terrified scream.

"Matim!! I'm screwed!... Uh! Uh! Ha!..."

Bruno's heart trembled. He watched as Matim coldly knelt down, looped the rope around Diego's neck, braced his knee against the man's spine, and then suddenly exerted force with both arms!

Sailor Chief Diego struggled desperately, flailing his legs forcefully. Yet Matim remained unyielding and unmerciful. A serene smile of redemption even fleetingly crossed his face. Within just two or three minutes, Diego's face turned purple, his eyes bulged out, and he stuck out his long tongue, eventually becoming motionless.

Matim checked Diego's breath and nodded in satisfaction. Then, continuing to hold the rope, he methodically strangled each of the remaining four loyal followers of Diego. Afterward, his expression lightened as he went to report back to the captain.

The deathly screams resonated over the ship, striking fear into all the sailors' hearts. Diego looked serene as his gaze swept across those on deck. Everyone respectfully bowed their heads and saluted the

revered captain. The lion was out of its cage, once again dominating the ship's jungle and decreeing life and death over everyone.

Diego's gaze lingered on Bruno's face. The Noble Knight bowed respectfully. His gaze then shifted, falling on the chubby face of Head Chef Haroldo, who fell to his knees, followed by Carpenter Ivo...

After glancing around, the ship fell as silent as if no one was aboard. He spoke calmly, his voice reaching everyone's ears.

"Earlier, in an attempt to persuade me to turn back, a mutiny occurred on the ship."

Upon hearing this, many tightened inside. Bruno held his breath and quietly reached for his dagger.

"The ringleaders were Sailor Chief Diego and his loyalists. The other participants were coerced into involvement. The Almighty grants redemption to everyone; I will forgive all others, including those sailors who plundered without permission!"

"Ah... Praise the Almighty! Praise the captain!"

Heavy sighs arose on the deck, followed by messy prayers. The devout captain swore by the Almighty not to pursue the responsibility for the mutiny, relieving everyone. Because of this, they believed that the respected Captain Diego would never break his sacred oath.

Under everyone's gaze, Diego extended his left hand, made the sign of the Cross on his forehead and chest, and prayed briefly. Then, he spoke with conviction.

"The Almighty has given me a revelation! The route to the East is not far; it only requires rounding the southern tip of the African continent! There lies the mighty Kingdom of Elder John, the rich India, and Seris, the land of Silk! Should you discover the Eastern route, the generous King will reward each of you! Your names will also reach the ears of the Holy Pope and reserve your places in Heaven! This is your only chance for redemption!"

Upon hearing this, the sailors' expressions changed, and they vaguely sensed what was coming. Sure enough, the next moment, Captain Diego slowly stood up and issued an irrefutable command.

"Stow the gangplank, raise the sails, hang the rebels' bodies from the three masts! Adjust the heading, hoist the signal flags, tell the entire fleet! We continue our expedition, turning south! May the Holy Mother protect us!"

"...May the Holy Mother protect us!"

The deck quieted for a few moments. Then, low prayers emerged from among the sailors. Everyone followed the captain's orders and once again busied themselves. Bruno silently exhaled, lowered his head, and walked to the ship's side. He looked at the restless sailors on the gangplank and shouted.

"The Almighty bears witness! The captain has forgiven your sins! Bring food and valuables quickly on board. Bring no women!"

The eight or nine sailors on the gangplank looked at each other, nodded in agreement. In the harsh wilderness of the tropical jungle, on the Demon's land, leaving the fleet meant death! Without hesitation, they drew their curved knives, slit the throats of the native women, and then kicked them into the Congo River. The turbulent Long River, carrying blood-stained waves, merged into the vast ocean, just like the eternal jungle.

After a brief flurry of activity, the three caravel ships slowly turned, driven by the northeast monsoon of winter and against the Benguela Current, made their arduous journey southward.

Everything was under control. Diego slowly turned and entered the dim captain's cabin, silently closing the door behind him. Finally, a look of sickly weariness appeared on his face. Then, he smiled calmly and relaxed his tightly clenched right hand. A Crusado coin finally revealed itself on the back of his left hand, showing the emblem of the Royal Family.

"Praise the Almighty!... for He has done marvelous things. His right hand and His holy arm have worked salvation... Amen."

Diego softly recited, a hymn of praise, the Lord's salvation, Cantate Domino.

Chapter 686: The End of 1485, The Death of Diogo

The azure sky was cloudless, and the bright sun shone brilliantly, casting glimmering waves over the South Atlantic. The ocean was vast and boundless, the horizon open and endless, with no sign of human life for thousands of miles.

Three caravels from the Kingdom of Portugal were sailing on the deserted sea, pushing the boundaries of the known world. In the intense sunlight and sparkling waves, they pursued the path of the wind, searching for elusive hope. The south of the African continent was so vast and desolate, it seemed to have no end.

The exploratory fleet set out from the mouth of the Congo River, heading south, crossing the Equator into the highlands of Lower Guinea. By now, they had sailed more than four thousand miles and arrived at the deserts of Namibia.

Groups of Namibian seals frolicked freely along the coast, chasing the delicious schools of fish. The Benguela Current rose here, creating a rare and bountiful fishing ground in the middle of the "blue desert."

The abundance of food attracted massive beasts, and huge blue whales drifted not far away. They swam freely through the vast ocean, sometimes leaping to splash the water, sometimes spouting mist, then emitting heart-stirring calls!

In this era, blue whales, the largest creatures on Earth, had no natural predators. Their songs carried far and wide, leisurely telling of the million-year-old loneliness of this sea.

"Almighty Lord! I pray earnestly to Him to protect us from the devouring sea monsters!"

Bruno stood at the bow, reverently addressing his prayers to the Lord. Beside him stood a dozen sailors, also praying. They looked in the direction of the whale songs, faintly making out massive figures resembling the deep-sea giants of myths.

The Age of Discovery was just dawning, and the oceanic myths from Ancient Rome still held sway in people's minds. In the traditional European perspective, the movement of waves could lead to the

merging of animals, forming terrifying hybrid leviathans. Thus, the deeper and more remote the ocean, the more likely it hid terrible sea monsters, sleeping embodiments of destruction.

The monstrous calls ceased temporarily after the prayers. The sailors praised the Lord aloud, finding a measure of relief. Bruno rolled up his sleeves, nimbly climbed the mast, and stood atop the watchtower, tens of meters high, searching for the edge of the Southern Continent. From his vantage point, the red sand dunes of the Southern Continent undulated ceaselessly, stretching beyond the horizon to the point of despair.

"Tenho saudades! Kind Holy Mother, please give me divine revelation... Does the end of the Southern Continent truly exist? And can I return home, to see my wife once again?"

Bruno, holding onto the rigging, stood on the high watchtower. It was a place closer to the Almighty, so he prayed again with devotion. The flag of the Portuguese Royal Family fluttered above his head, having endured countless storms and waves, yet remained intact.

White seagulls flew over from the sky, drawn by the sight of the unfamiliar sails. They circled curiously, emitting loud "Ooh, ooh" calls, and occasionally pecked at the bones hanging from the mast. Indeed, after more than a month of tropical voyaging, these bones were all that remained of Sailor Chief Diego.

After finishing his prayer, Bruno glanced at the bones and agilely climbed down the mast. With a heavy heart, he approached the captain's quarters and gently knocked on the door.

"Praise the Lord! Honored captain, Noble Knight Bruno sends his greetings to you!"

It was a long while before a weak voice replied.

"Cough, cough... Praise the Lord... come in."

Bruno quietly opened the cabin door and entered the captain's quarters, immediately met with an indelible stench of blood.

Diogo lay with his eyes open, his face haggard and utterly pale. He was on a wooden bed, arms stretched out thin, trying to rise but unable to muster any strength, and could only look up with difficulty.

Bruno quickly shut the door and hurried to the captain's side. He carefully propped up the captain, feeling his increasingly emaciated body beneath the wide captain's coat, so light it almost seemed to float.

"Like a piece of papyrus from Ancient Egypt, covered in symbols of death."

Bruno lowered his gaze, mourning in his heart.

By the banks of the Congo River, the relentless Anopheles mosquitoes brought the dread of malaria and dengue fever. Although they were far from the Demon's land now, the cruel tropical diseases had penetrated deep into the captain's marrow, tormenting the weakened "Noble Lion" day and night. Chills and fever afflicted him in turns, coughing up blood and vomiting simultaneously; muscles and bones severely ached, while bleeding from the gums and skin was incessant...

Barely more than two months into the sickness, Diogo had exhausted all his vitality. No matter how robust his physique, no matter how devout his faith, no matter how steel-like his will, none could withstand the laws of nature. At this moment, he was but a dying pilgrim, seeking the holy end, yet heeding the Almighty's call too soon.

"How... is... it?"

Diogo struggled to open his mouth, and asked three words.

Bruno silently shook his head.

"Respected captain, the Noble Scholar Martin calculated the latitude today. We are already 21-22 degrees south of the Equator. We have sailed at least four thousand miles south from the Congo River. And when I climbed up to the crow's nest, the desert of the Southern Continent was still boundless, the edges nowhere to be seen..."

Diogo remained silent and slowly closed his eyes. After a while, he suddenly coughed violently, and blood uncontrollably flowed from his mouth and teeth.

Seeing this scene, Bruno stood up in alarm, unsure of what to do. He clumsily took out a piece of cotton cloth to wipe the captain's mouth, but ended up smearing the blood everywhere. The stench of blood in the captain's cabin grew even stronger.

It was quite some time before Diogo's coughing subsided. He breathed heavily with difficulty, and his lungs produced a sound like flowing water. Then, Bruno realized with fear that, at some point, two streaks of pale red blood had begun to flow silently from the captain's nostrils, dripping quietly onto the deck.

"Captain!..."

Diogo closed his eyes and lay down on the bed with difficulty. The blood from his nose flowed back slowly and then seeped from the corners of his mouth, impossible to stop.

There was an aroma of death enveloping the captain's quarters. After a while, a feeble voice called out.

"Bru... no..."

"Captain, I'm here!"

"What... day... is it... today?"

Bruno paused, calculating carefully in his mind. After a moment, he replied uncertainly.

"Is it December 27 today? Ah! Christmas has just passed, and tomorrow is Holy Innocents' Day."

"Hmm... Holy... Innocents'... Day."

Diogo responded softly with his eyes closed. The captain's quarters fell silent once again.

In this era, Christmas inherited the tradition of Ancient Rome's Saturnalia, and was more of a celebratory festival. Though religiously significant, it was far less important than Easter, which celebrated Christ's victory over death. December 28 was the day when, according to legend, King Herod massacred the infants of Bethlehem. The infants martyred themselves for Christ, and so it was a day of ill omen.

Time passed in quietness, and Diogo seemed to have fallen asleep. Bruno was about to stand and leave when he heard a faint whisper.

"Olive... oil."

"What?"

"Ol... olive... oil."

"Captain! You..."

Bruno stood rooted to the spot. He understood the meaning of these words, but found it hard to accept in the moment.

"Go... prepare... notify... call them..."

Bruno's nose felt a bit sour. He silently lowered his head and walked out of the captain's cabin. Outside the captain's cabin, the sun was slowly setting, staining the sky with a glow of twilight. The red sun sank, disappearing into the depths of the sea; the waves rose up, resembling the Twilight of the Gods.

As the sunset disappeared completely and night fell from the edge of the sky, endless darkness rolled in, swallowing all the light. A precious candle was quietly lit in the captain's cabin, illuminating the stained wooden bed.

With tears in his eyes, Bruno knelt by the bed, holding a bottle of olive oil in his hands and a precious handwritten Bible by his side. Beside him stood two solemn noble captains, Pero Anes and Pero Dacosta.

Diogo lay calmly on the bed, his face showing an abnormal flush. He smiled gently, and even his speech suddenly became fluent.

"Lord protect! Noble Knight Pero Dacosta, after I am gone, the fleet will be in your hands!"

"Lord protect! Respected Royal Knight, Captain Diogo Cao, please do not speak so. The Holy Lord will bestow a miracle and heal His devoted saint..."

The middle-aged noble, Pero Dacosta, clasped his hands together, about to pray for Diogo.

"Lord witness! Old Pero, after taking over the fleet, will you continue southward?"

Diogo struggled to turn his head, gazing at the middle-aged noble.

"Er... Diogo, the fleet has fewer than a hundred sailors left, food is also scarce, and there are many damages on the caravel..."

Pero Dacosta appeared uneasy. He bowed his head slightly, unwilling to look directly at the dying captain.

"Indeed."

Diogo slowly nodded. He didn't ask any further, instead, he continued to give instructions.

"Lord witness! Noble Knight Pero Anes, please make a copy of our sea charts and, on the way home, hand them to my old friend, Sir Dias."

"Lord witness! As you wish."

The other younger noble bowed his head in acknowledgment.

"Young Pero, here is my will and the seal of my knighthood. Please deliver it to my eldest son."

Diogo stretched out his hand with difficulty and took out an already prepared cloth bag, handing it to Pero Anes.

"I swear on the honor of my family! As you wish."

The young noble accepted the cloth bag and swore solemnly. Diogo nodded, then turned his gaze to Bruno, kneeling on the ground.

"Noble Knight Bruno, the flagship is now yours."

"Captain..."

"Lord witness! Take good care of court advisor Martin and escort him safely back to the Kingdom. This is my final command."

"Lord witness! I will obey your orders!"

Bruno knelt on the deck, silent tears falling from his eyes, his heart filled with a mix of emotions.

Diogo thought for a while and then instructed on some matters of navigation. Afterward, he closed his eyes and stopped speaking. Countless images flashed before his eyes, tenderly pulling him into a peaceful slumber.

Everyone gathered around, waiting patiently.

The candle slowly burned down, and time silently passed by. The waves of the ocean rocked the creaking caravel, like the cradle of a baby. In that cradle, Diogo opened his eyes for the first time, revealing a carefree smile, reminiscent of the innocence of childhood.

"I hear the Lord's call. His light is so clear, shining before my eyes. Listen, that voice, is so clear..."

Seeing this, old Pero quickly reached out his finger, dipped it in olive oil, and drew a cross on Diogo's forehead, then chanted the Latin words for the last rites.

"Per istam sanctam unctionem, indulgeat tibi Dominus quidquid deliquisti, Amen."

After he finished, his face filled with sorrow, he was about to burst into tears but suddenly stopped himself. Because Diogo's eyes were still open.

Diogo blinked silently, revealing a childlike, mischievous smile.

"Bruno, has midnight passed?"

"Ah, it has!... Captain, today is the Feast of the Holy Innocents."

Bruno hurriedly responded, but did not hear a reply from the captain for a long time. When he looked up, Diogo had closed his eyes and tilted his head, sleeping like a child.

"Ah! Diogo, my old friend..."

The sound of weeping finally burst forth from the captain's cabin. Then, more cries joined in, over the vast sea, in the lonely sea breeze.

Chapter 687: The Starting Point of the Year 1486, The Revelation in the Ballad

The day after Diogo Cao's passing, the Portuguese exploration fleet ceased its navigation. The three sailboats docked on the nearest coast, and it took two days to erect the last padrão, an explorer's stone pillar. Beside the pillar was a shallow mound of earth, atop with a brand-new cross was erected.

Bruno stood in front of the stone pillar, silently reciting the Portuguese inscription etched upon it.

"...In the year of creation 6684, and the year of our Lord Jesus Christ 1485, the most noble, excellent, and powerful sovereign, King Joao II of Portugal, sent his royal knight, Diogo Cao, to discover this land, and to erect this stone pillar...We dedicate this rich land to the great Kingdom of Portugal, to the great Joao II... Pray for us!"

After reading, Bruno bowed his head, praying devoutly.

"Honorable Captain Diogo, may the Almighty bless your soul! ...And may the Holy Mother protect us too!"

Afterward, with a respectful demeanor, Bruno approached the fleet's new leader, a middle-aged noble knight, Pero Dacosta.

"Praise the Almighty! Honorable noble knight, Pero Dacosta."

"Praise the Almighty! New captain Bruno."

"May I ask, how should we arrange tomorrow's voyage?"

Upon hearing this, the middle-aged noble Pero glanced at Bruno somberly before speaking in a deep voice.

"By the Almighty's witness! Our fleet is severely damaged, lacking sailors and insufficient supplies. Come dawn, the fleet must set sail to return!"

"Yes!"

Bruno suppressed the joy in his heart and bowed respectfully.

"Honorable knight Pero, how shall we name this place on the sea chart?"

The old Pero fell into a silent reverie. He stared blankly at the tomb beside the stone pillar, at the cross that stood upon it. After a long while, he spoke softly.

"Ah, this is the cross that marks where the living are buried... Let's call it Cape Cross."

Bruno nodded. Cape Cross, the Cross Cape, was also the southernmost point of this exploration.

At that moment, in the whole world, only one person knew. The endless Namib Desert would extend southward for more than three thousand miles. The further south one sailed, the higher the latitude, the chillier the climate would become. At the southernmost tip of the desert, the moisture from the Atlantic Ocean passed over the cold sea surface, producing continuous dense fog that often caused storms, making navigation dangerous and difficult. But once one crossed the hundreds of miles of dense fog and storm area, it was the boundary of the Southern Continent, the turning point of the eastern sea route, the hopeful Cape of Good Hope!

As the sun set and the dawn arose, another day passed. Under the golden sunlight, the sailors roared with joy, drinking the last of the wine and feasting on fresh seal meat. Their excitement celebrated the arrival of the new year, even more, they celebrated the fleet's return voyage!

The deadly exploration had finally come to an end! After an exploration lasting a year and three months, where nearly seventy percent of the sailors perished, even Captain Diogo Cao had been called by the Lord, the Portuguese fleet finally turned about, beginning the voyage northward!

Across the decks of the three sailboats, nearly a hundred sailors of the entire fleet were celebrating fervently, all but one whose face was ashen.

Somewhere within the cabin of the flagship, scholar and nobility, Martin Behaim, was in a state of terror. Like a helpless lamb, he huddled into a corner of the cabin, clutching a splendid short dagger in his hand. Before him stood four fierce men, resembling wicked wolves, each wearing leather armor and wielding sharp weapons.

"...New captain Bruno, Quartermaster Matim, head chef Haroldo, carpenter Ivo... what, what do you want to do!"

"Almighty bears witness! Respected Nobility Scholar, Martin."

Bruno smiled with a gentle tone.

"Please don't worry. We only want to leave a small mark on you. Almighty bears witness! As long as you cooperate patiently with us, we will not harm you."

"Ah! A mark? Cooperate? Bruno, you?!"

In Martin's eyes appeared disbelief, followed by deep fear. Thinking of the terrible things, he abruptly placed a dagger across his throat, ready to commit suicide. The chilly dagger on his skin brought a stinging coldness, like the call of death. The Nobility Scholar shuddered violently but could not bring himself to proceed.

"Such a cowardly nobility!"

Matim scoffed and took a quick step forward.

"Bang!"

With a deft movement, he used his short dagger to knock Martin's dagger away. Then, with a swift knee strike, he knocked Martin to the ground.

Bruno's expression remained unchanged. He said to Matim with a smile.

"Nice moves! Matim, strip off his clothes!"

"Ah! Ah!..."

Martin let out a desperate squeal like a slaughtered pig, and swiftly Matim had him stripped bare. Next, Carpenter Ivo brought out a small brazier, and Haroldo took out a sharp small dagger, repeatedly heating it in the fire.

In just a moment, Matim proficiently tied Martin up and turned to ask.

"Boss Bruno, we want to brand this lad with the Demon's symbol, to get a hold over him so he doesn't talk nonsense after he gets back... But what, exactly, is the Demon's symbol?"

"The Demon's symbol, huh..."

Bruno pondered for a while, those terrifying memories surfacing in his mind. Even after all this time, they still made him tremble inside. He recalled the ancient ceremonial dress of the Voodoo High Priest, the bizarre Temple with lizards hanging, the frightening altar inset with human heads... His hands waved non-stop, trying to sketch the evil symbol of Satan's Apostle.

"I've encountered it on the land of the Demon, a tremendously powerful Satan's Apostle! I mustered my courage, struggled valiantly against her, and under the Almighty's protection, I destroyed her witchcraft, then broke out from amidst hundreds of native warriors... The symbol should be like... this, twisted... this, converging... this, coming together, like a swarm of mosquitoes..."

After a while, Bruno finished speaking haphazardly. He hesitated and asked.

"Did you understand?"

Everyone exchanged glances and shook their heads in unison, leaving the cabin silent for a time.

A moment later, Head Chef Haroldo stepped forward hesitantly and said in a low voice.

"Boss Bruno, you've ventured deep into the land of the Demon and seen the real Demon. But the Church lords living in wealthy towns, served by hordes of servants, when have they ever seen any evil? These real Demon symbols, if we carve them out, nobody would recognize them!"

Bruno thought for a moment, then asked in a heavy voice,

"Makes sense!...Haroldo, what do we do now?"

"The simplest way is like this..."

Murmurs whispered lowly, echoing inside the cabin. Martin lay in a corner, straining his ears to eavesdrop but he could not understand the sailors' dialect. After a while, everyone nodded in agreement, casting malevolent glances at Martin. Martin shivered intensely, screaming hysterically.

"I beg of you! My father is a senator of the Republic of Venice, my family is hereditary nobility from Nuremberg... I can pay you a large ransom! Mmph... Mmph..."

Bruno took out a piece of cotton cloth and stuffed it directly into Martin's mouth. Without further hesitation, the men held Martin down on the floor, belly up and back pressed against the deck, like a lamb awaiting slaughter.

Haroldo smiled bizarrely, pinching the heated handle of a small knife, and slowly stepped forward.

Martin turned deathly pale, shaking like a leaf. He first struggled desperately, then moaned ceaselessly for mercy. Martin, impatient, reached out and grabbed Martin by the neck, choking him unconscious.

"Haroldo, do it now!"

Bruno ordered in a deep voice.

"Alright, Boss Bruno!"

Chef Haroldo smiled casually as he extended his hand, tattooing Martin's abdomen. In the chef's grip, the sharp knife was so precise and steady. Even when the scholar noble awoke in pain midway, it didn't

affect his tattoo work in the slightest. After he finished, he inspected his handiwork, nodded in satisfaction, and then cowered back into his usual demeanor.

"Done!"

"Really nice!"

"That'll do!"

"Praise the Holy Mother!"

The crowd glanced over and collectively breathed a sigh of relief. The noble scholar had fainted from pain once again. Bruno checked for breath, then stood up relaxedly.

"Blessed by the Holy Mother! Let's be off! Give him some time to accept this."

"Blessed by the Holy Mother! May we return safely to the kingdom!"

"Blessed by the Holy Mother! He seems quite wealthy, after we return, we can seek some sponsorship from him..."

"Blessed by the Holy Mother! Don't make trouble. Hurry to the celebration!"

The four men prayed for a while, then one by one exited from the scholar's cabin. Before leaving, carpenter Ivo lingered considerably. He untied the unconscious Martin, removed the cotton gag, put on an oversize robe to cover him, and draped a thin blanket for warmth.

The setting sun cast a splendid glow across the sky. The vast sky teemed with countless colorful birds; upon the mighty ocean, only three sailboats navigated. The sun-soaked waves glistened red, reflecting on the crimson desert – another magnificent vista.

The deck was filled with light; the cabin submerged in gloom. The sailors' celebration could be faintly heard. Before long, someone began singing loudly, a song from home, and everyone joined in chorus.

"Beautiful girl, you ask me, what is the sea? But I don't know..."

I sail the seas, wave after wave crashing against me, leaving a moist luminescence.

It is the Mother calling my youthful heart, the sea is affection!..."

Bruno, now the respected captain, having resolved all his worries, was somewhat carried away. He laughed heartily and stepped into the center of the sailors, then sang aloud,

"Beautiful girl, you ask me, what is the sea? But I don't know..."

I sail the seas, I saw a dead young man. His lips parted to kiss the waves.

A light remained in his mouth, desiring to consort with the light in yours, the sea is a kiss!..."

Upon hearing this, Matim chuckled. He waved to Haroldo, who shook his head in response. Matim then raised his hands, singing alone,

"Beautiful girl, oh, the crescent moon reluctant to sink, draws the sprawling night sky.

Your hair unfurls, floating with me in the water, like a breeze from within my heart.

With my own hands, I smooth your waves, the sea falls into my palm. You blossom like a silver lotus on my fingertips!"

Then, the crowd erupted in laughter, singing together in the sea breeze,

"Beautiful girl, you ask me what is the sea? But I don't know..."

I sail the seas, standing barefoot on the beach, eagerly awaiting the dawn.

Turns out, the sea is a white vision, sparkling amidst the stones.

Blessed by the Holy Mother! Having crossed it, we come home again!..."

The exuberant singing went on all night. Amid the sailors' celebratory song, Martin woke to pain. He moaned softly, rubbing his forehead vigorously. Then, he suddenly opened his eyes wide, touched his body back and front in terror, and then he heaved a heavy sigh of relief.

But soon, Martin felt a stabbing pain on his abdomen. Illuminated by the twilight, he tremblingly lifted the robe to inspect the tattoo and instantly his face turned ashen. After a long moment, the noble scholar muttered to himself, reciting a passage from the Bible, the Apocalypse, "Revelations."

"...Let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is six hundred sixty-six..."

"...The demon incarnate as a beast, inscribing the sign of evil. This is the count of the beast's name, the demon's code, shunned by the very essence of perfection, the irredeemable '666'... Ah! The real demon, it turns out, is right here, among these mariners!..."

Martin's voice took on a weeping tone. He was after all just a well-born, scholarly noble youth in his twenties.

"What should I do? Merciful Almighty, grant me a revelation, save me from the evil aboard this ship!"

Chapter 688: Settling the Canine Descendants, Birds of Spring Fly

The March spring breeze was warm and nurturing, like the gentle hands of the Goddess of Plants and Trees, as it tenderly brushed over the lands by the riverbank. The spring grass was a rich green, and the spring water shimmered with ripples, filling the banks of the Lerma River with vitality.

On the north shore of the Long River were dense forests. Red Feather's tics were soaring among the trees, while white-winged doves perched atop the cacti. Scattered wooden forts dotted the forest, garrisoned with Otomi Militia who had opened up farmland at the base of the forts. In the early spring, the fallow fields sprouted patches of green grass, and unknown wild flowers bloomed in the fields, attracting brightly colored butterflies to dance.

There were even more farmlands on the south bank of the Long River. From the Rivermouth fortress going south, along the edge of Cuitzeo Lake, as far as the eyes could see, there were endless Milpa farms revived with vitality, village settlements bouncing back to life, and hundreds of single-log canoes.

The lake dwellers of Prepetcha were sailing on the lake. They caught plump river fish as tribute to nourish the frequently training Spear regiments. They collected silt from the lakebed to fertilize the communal fields of the village soon to be cultivated. This was the new teaching of village Priests, just as accumulated manure, it was the "Chief Divine's gift of vitality, to moisten the earth and achieve a bountiful crop harvest."

Not far away, the banner of the Chief Divine flew high, beside it the Royal Banner of the Black Wolf. The Rivermouth fortress lay like a silent beast, calmly watching over the spring scenery of the riverbank. This was the last leisure period before the sowing of the spring crops, and it was the quietest time of the year. And beside the blue stone fortress were two newly constructed vast barracks. Thousands of Guajili warriors were training in the barrack amid shouts that startled flying birds. They were undergoing basic formation and discipline training under the command of Mexica officers. When the military training paused for a moment, orderly prayers arose in the barracks, drifting far with the spring breeze.

"What a joyous spring scene,"

Xiulote stood quietly in a white robe atop the Rivermouth fortress, taking in everything before him.

Suddenly, a fierce wind howled in the sky! A massive golden eagle spread its wings, pouncing from a great height at a speed of forty meters per second. In just a few seconds, it fiercely descended in front of the King, bringing with it a chilling wind pressure that ruffled the King's hair. Then, the golden eagle abruptly stopped, extending its eagle claws that could tear through tigers and wolves!

"Clack!"

A plump river fish fell from the eagle's claws, accurately hitting the King's foot. Following that, little Aviloztli flapped its wings proudly, emitting a delighted shriek.

"Whoo-hoo!"

Xiulote looked down to see the river fish by his feet, not yet dead, its tail still reflexively flipping. He then lifted his head, silently gazing at the returning little golden eagle.

"Aviloztli, why have you come back?"

Little Aviloztli cocked its head, gauging its master's expression. It then rolled its round eyes to look at the dangerous person beside its master, feeling utterly threatened. After pondering for a moment, it flapped twice on the fortress's rooftop and swooped into Xiulote's arms.

"Whoo-hoo!"

The grown little golden eagle, even with folded wings, was nearly one meter long. Xiulote staggered as it pounced on him. He smiled bitterly as he reached out his arms to hug little Aviloztli, much like holding a giant turkey.

Behind the King, Head Warrior Bertade silently put away his Longbow and Copper Arrows, a faint smile on his face.

Xiulote affectionately tousled the "giant turkey" in his embrace, then extended his left arm as a sign.

Little Aviloztli landed on the ground, flapped twice more, and jumped onto the King's left arm. It carefully retracted its sharp talons, revealing slender eagle legs. Around them was a small roll of tightly bound cotton cloth, containing the letter Xiulote wrote to Alisa, narrating the concluding events of the northern campaign.

By late November, Xiulote had reclaimed Pamus Valley and held a victory ceremony and conversion ritual. He then left two thousand Samurai, five thousand Canine Descendants Tribes, and all the Otomi

Agricultural Slaves with Balamo. By the end of November, an army of twenty thousand and tens of thousands of captives began to head south.

From Pamus Valley to the Rivermouth fortress was a journey of over seven hundred miles. Canine Descendants Tribes were rearranged into dozens of flags, each with four thousand people, who, under the supervision of Samurai and Militia, migrated south in batches. Along the way, the mass migration left deep marks, and sporadically robust Canine Descendants fled, only to be captured by patrolling Red Monkey Tribe and subjected to whipping, fasting, or even hanging.

Tens of thousands marched out of the undulating mountains, trekked across vast wildernesses, passed towering mountain cities, and arrived at the mouth of the Lerma River. There, the long-awaited Naval Forces of the Kingdom ceaselessly ferried batch after batch of Canine Descendants across the great river, settling them in villages on the southern bank. The mighty Lerma River surged tumultuously. Once across the great river, the Canine Descendants said their final goodbye to the wilderness, with no return in sight.

On the return from the northern campaign, the Royal Banner of the Black Wolf moved very slowly. It was not until the end of December that Xiulote finally reached the Ototpan Mountain City and held a New Year's ceremony in the city. The banner of the Chief Divine waved in the Temple of the mountain city, Otomi Priests chanted the new scriptures from the Book of Ama Colley, guiding a hundred thousand Otomi people to pray jointly to the Chief Divine. Only after praying to the Chief Divine would they address the now Subordinate God, the Primordial God.

After the ceremony, Xiulote convened Otomi nobility and Priests for a feast that lasted into the dawn. The Otomi nobility presented gifts, Priests offered poetry, and the King reciprocated with gemstones.

Thereafter, he consulted with the elderly Priest Oorta, Prince Jiowar, and Chalki Great Chieftain on the arrangements of fiefs for the three northern states, rewarded nobles who contributed to the northern campaign, and punished chieftains who had failed to send troops. He then left two thousand stationed Longbow Militias near the mountain city before continuing the journey southward.

Chapter 689: Canine Descendants Settlement, Spring Day Birds_2

The Otomi Legion had dispersed at the mountain city. Each state's Otomi Warriors, led by the Nobility, returned to their fiefs to prepare for this year's spring plowing. Further south from Ototpan Mountain City, the first Spear Legion of the Monkeys Kuluka took charge of leading them.

By late January, Xiulote had finally returned to the southern Rivermouth Fortress with the Imperial Guard Legion and the last over ten thousand prisoners. The Royal Banner of the Black Wolf was erected at the Rivermouth Fortress, with six thousand Imperial Guards stationed inside the fortress. The King stayed there, personally inspecting the settlement of the Canine Descendants Tribes.

Over the course of several months, sixty thousand members of the Canine Descendants tribes were settled in Rivermouth County. The villages and farmlands here were already established, and with the Chief God Priest delving deep into the villages, Rivermouth Fortress was further fortified with troops stationed there.

During the era of the Tarasco Kingdom, the population of Rivermouth County was over two hundred thousand. Then the western expedition began, and brutal wars were waged on this land. Refugees fled south, able men were conscripted, armies clashed, until the western expedition ended, and the traditional Nobility rule completely collapsed, with the Great Nobility of Tarasco utterly purged. Only about one hundred thousand people, mostly women and children, were left in Rivermouth County.

After establishing the new kingdom, Xiulote prioritized the Capital Region and Rivermouth County. Settlements were established in Rivermouth County, households organized, and Priests arranged to manage. Initially, twenty thousand mountain tribes were relocated from the Mexican Valley, and another twenty thousand captives were traded from the hands of the Guamal Canine Descendants. With the additional sixty thousand Canine Descendant Tribes, the population finally recovered to the scale of two hundred thousand.

With the replenishment of the population, the boundaries of Rivermouth County continued to expand westward, absorbing nearly half of the Saka state. With patient management for two years and adequate accumulation of provisions, the kingdom could progress westward from here and completely eliminate the Feathers Prince entrenched in the Chapala Lake Region.

Of course, the immediate priority was to quickly assimilate the sixty thousand subdued Guajili Tribes, spread the belief in the Chief God, and stabilize their incorporation under the kingdom's rule.

One must understand that these were sixty thousand fierce wilderness Canine Descendants, not the docile Prepetcha peasants. The Guajili Canine Descendants had always hunted on the wilderness, excelled in archery and combat, and had been baptized by war. Once they started rioting, they could scurry everywhere, instantly causing great chaos in the northern regions of the kingdom.

Therefore, Xiulote kept the Royal Banner at the Rivermouth Fortress, unable to move south for the time being. He personally stayed with the Imperial Guard Legion, suppressing the northern kingdom while reorganizing the various Canine descendants. Thinking of this, he stroked the feathers of the small golden eagle and looked towards the loyal Head Warrior.

"Bertade, have the Canine Descendants Tribes been properly settled in the south?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

Bertade nodded solemnly. Then, he glanced subtly at Aviloztli, scaring the little golden eagle to shrink its neck, chirping twice "bad person".

"As per your instructions, the sixty thousand Guajili Tribes were disrupted and reorganized into fifteen banner teams of four thousand people each. Then, they were separated into the east and west, respectively. Six banner teams were settled in the east, mostly Canine Descendants from the Red Fox Valley, near Tepopolo's fief. Nine banner teams were settled in the west, all being Canine Descendants from the Pamus Valley, close to the mountains of the Saka state."

Xiulote nodded slightly. Separate settlements were to avoid the risk of large-scale Canine Descendants gatherings, as well as to reduce the risk of rebellion. There was also a certain estrangement between the eastern and western Canine Descendants.

As for the banner team system design, it referenced the organizational form of the nomadic tribes combining soldiers and farmers. Each small banner consisted of four hundred people, with a leader and Priest appointed. Then, ten small banners formed one large banner team of four thousand people, similarly appointing a leader and Priest responsible for warfare and agriculture, respectively.

Larger and smaller banner teams were made up of people with combat experience, shared lineage, or from the same regions. The banner team system, integrating soldiers and farmers, was tightly organized and could continuously accommodate surrendered tribes from the north. Overall, the establishment of the banner team system was for the long-term future, aimed for military expansion of the empire in the wilderness and even North America. And now, this new trial had just begun.

"Are the newly-settled Guajili Tribes satisfied with the land for settlement?"

"Your Highness, they are amazed by the richness of the southern forests and the fertility of the land by the rivers. Ordinary tribal people praise the Earth Mother Goddess, and there are no complaints. The first batch of Chief God Priests has already gone to each banner team, spreading faith and guiding the upcoming spring plowing."

The Guajili Canine Descendants were not skilled in farming but excelled in hunting and combat. Xiulote deliberately settled the Canine Descendants near the eastern and western borders' forests, intending to maintain their martial tradition, even if just for one or two generations. Similarly, the combat-skilled Canine Descendant Tribes could also exert certain boundary pressure on their neighboring tribes.

"Are all leaders compliant? Any alliances and disturbances?"

"During the reorganization process, some leaders who lost their tribes attempted rebellion, but they were swiftly suppressed by the Red Frog Chieftain Keka and the Red Monkey Chieftain Ozoma."

Bertade smiled, bowed his head respectfully.

"Your Highness, your great banner remains here, with the Imperial Guard Legion, Jingji Legion, and the first Spear Legion stationed in Rivermouth County. The prestige of the 'God of Death Great Chief' suppresses everything, and the southern bank of the great river is stable and peaceful, just like the Snake Mountain where the War God resides."

"Excellent! Hmm, the first Spear Legion of the Monkeys..."

Xiulote pondered for a while, then ordered in a deep voice.

"Quickly select two thousand Guajili Hunters to replenish the Monkeys' legion completely."

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"Yes, Your Highness."

"Keka and Ozoma... order them to reorganize the Red Frog and Red Monkey legions."

The King pondered for a while and decided to solve the problem once and for all by completely dispersing these tribal warriors.

"Enlist all tribal warriors into the flags! Then, each small flag will provide 40 men, and each large flag will provide 400 men, producing 6,000 warriors from fifteen large flags, forming six battalions. Divide these 6,000 into two groups, assigning them to Keka and Ozoma!"

"Your Highness..."

Bertade's expression shifted. He cautiously advised.

"Isn't this a bit too hasty?"

"No destruction, no construction! Without demolishing the old wooden towers, new stone houses cannot be built. Sixty thousand Guajili tribespeople were defeated and captured, transported to the south, and they have just been settled; now is the best opportunity!"

Xiulote's eyes gleamed with determination, and his tone was resolute.

"Let Olosh's Jingji Legion stay for two more months, until the spring plowing in May. Three Kingdom Legions, twenty thousand elite Samurai stationed here, the Guajili Tribe will not be able to stir any waves. Yes, send orders for Keka and Ozoma to come and dine with me this evening!"

"I will obey your command, Your Highness."

Bertade respectfully complied.

Next, Xiulote stroked the feathers of a small golden eagle for a long time without speaking. It wasn't until Aviloztli curiously pecked at his wooden-like master that Xiulote came back to his senses.

"Bertade, once eight thousand sturdy men are drawn out, the sixty thousand Guajili tribespeople will no longer have the capability to rebel. Two thousand Archers will be settled in the First Legion. As for the six thousand men of Keka and Ozoma, I plan to establish a standing legion."

"Establish a standing legion?"

Upon hearing this, Bertade was somewhat surprised. The Kingdom currently had only four legions, the First and Second were pioneer legions, only the Imperial Guards and the Jingji Legion, totaling fourteen thousand, were standing armies.

"Yes. Guajili warriors are skilled hunters, and their elite redhead Hunters can even injure Samurai in Copper Armor. Such a fine source of troops is too good for simply settling. They are skilled at fighting but not at farming. Once the Guajili Legion is organized, start military training immediately. I will soon have a great use for them!"

Xiulote made his decision and inquired.

"Can the Kingdom's food supply keep up with the maintenance of an additional standing legion?"

"Your Highness, the northern campaign consumed a great deal, and settling the tens of thousands of Guajili tribespeople also requires a large amount of food and materials..."

Seeing the expression of His Highness, Bertade sighed. He took out a scroll of maps from his chest, flipped through it briefly, and responded.

"If we expand the gemstone trade, and request a batch of aid food from the Alliance, the Kingdom can last until this year's autumn harvest. And once the Guajili tribespeople can sustain themselves, and river mud and compost are widely used in military and civilian settlements, there will be a surplus in the Kingdom's food supplies."

"Let it be so! Instruct the village Priests to hasten this year's spring planting, promoting new agricultural tools and fertilizers."

Xiulote smiled satisfactorily. He reached out and touched the letter on Aviloztli's leg, and the small golden eagle tilted its head in confusion. "Chirp?"

"Not long ago, the Royal Family's Envoy came with a fleet, transporting a batch of Tin Ore and taking away the Kingdom's Copper Ore. The Envoy also brought a verbal message from King Aweit, requesting more Bronze Armor and weapons. I have already written a letter to Alisa, exchanging the Kingdom's surplus Bronze Equipment for the Alliance's abundant food... Now, the letter is right here."

Hearing this, Bertade scrutinized the "messenger" before him and asked doubtfully.

"Your Highness, do you need me to dispatch another Envoy to the Alliance?"

"Haha! I have already sent another Envoy, bearing exotic flora from the Northern Land, especially the Wilderness Priests' Black Feather Jade... And now, let the world's fastest messenger make a trip."

Xiulote laughed lightly. He reached out and patted the small golden eagle's head firmly.

"Aviloztli, no more playing! I have taken your fish, which I will serve to our guests from the north tonight. Now, hurry back to the Lake Capital City!"

"Chirp chirp!"

Aviloztli retracted its head a bit from the pat, then its little eyes widened, wearing a puzzled look as it gazed at Xiulote.

"Chirp chirp?"

"Go!"

Xiulote raised his arm and tossed the matured golden eagle into the air. According to the falconer's explanation, Aviloztli now possessed the intelligence of a six-year-old child. It had the concept of home in its mind, which was the Lake Capital City where it had lived for many years. Even if it flew thousands

of miles away, it could find its way back, just like migrating birds. However, currently, it remembered only one home.

That is, Aviloztli was now a one-way messenger or a yo-yo capable of extremely long flights. Throwing it out, it would take less than four hours to return to the Lake Capital City, 700 miles away, directly arriving at Alisa's palace!

Then, having flown too far, it would not be able to find its way back. The next time it came over, the falconer would have to bring it along.

"Chirp, chirp, chirp?"

Aviloztli circled above Rivermouth Fortress, calling out in confusion. Xiulote stretched out his hand, pointed towards the East, and smiled as he shouted to the golden eagle.

"Go, Aviloztli! Take my letter to Alisa!"

"Chirp chirp?"

Aviloztli flapped its wings non-stop. Then, suddenly, its call changed, its body trembled briefly, and it dashed toward the East.

"Tweet tweet!"

Xiulote watched the golden eagle fly away, vanishing at the edge of the sky, and he sighed deeply.

Behind him, Bertade silently put away his longbow and hidden arrows, and smiled faintly.

"Bertade."

"Present, Your Highness."

"Who do you think is suitable to be the Legion Commander after the formation of the Canine Descendants Legion?"

The King, with his back turned, watched the distant bird as he asked in a calm voice.

Bertade hesitated briefly, then responded cautiously.

"Your Highness, I follow your will in all things."

"Has Black Wolf's injury healed?"

"Toltec's injury has healed. He feels guilty about his previous failure and has been too ashamed to meet you, only reading in the camp."

"Oh? Having gone through this trial, he has finally calmed down."

Xiulote looked at the sky, his face full of smiles.

"As his mentor, what do you think of him?"

Bertade bowed his head, his expression respectful, and answered again.

"Your Highness, I follow your will in all things."

"Hmm. Go then, and tonight have Toltec come over as well, tell him I invite him for fish."

"...As you command."

"Haha!"

For some reason, Xiulote felt quite joyful. On this beautiful spring day, he hummed a tune lightly, shed his royal coat, and became a boy again.

"The spring's golden eagle flies to my window, sings a song, drops a fish, and then flies away again~
Springtime bird~"