

Civilization 701

Chapter 701: The Death of Axolotl_2

"Hmm, there's some sense in that."

Xiulote listened for a while and nodded in agreement. The issue with the Canine Descendants' tribal villages now indeed lay in the loss of hierarchy and order. By pulling out their elite warriors, the kingdom had indeed dismantled the Canine Descendants' capacity for rebellion but had also made them difficult to command.

"Axolotl, what suggestions do you have to resolve this issue?"

"Your Majesty, the simplest method is to send some red-haired warriors back to the tribal villages, and then restore the traditional order of the wilderness..."

Hearing this, Xiulote shook his head. It had been hard enough for the kingdom to pull out the Canine Descendants' elite warriors and disrupt the traditional tribal order; how could they possibly send them back.

"... Your Majesty, the second method is to select Valiant Warriors from the Cactus Tribe and dispatch them to command the tribal villages!"

Upon hearing this, Xiulote raised his eyebrows. The kingdom had a limited number of Valiant Warriors; they couldn't station many in the villages. He stared intently into Axolotl's eyes and asked faintly.

"You've mentioned the first and second method, there must be a third."

"..."

Axolotl nodded but remained silent. He widened his eyes, looking hopefully towards the king.

"Speak. If it's good, I'll spare your life."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

Axolotl licked his dry lips and replied solemnly.

"Your Majesty, you have established squads of eight thousand people and sub-squads of four hundred people. Beneath the sub-squad, another level should be added, the 'tent'."

"Tent?"

Xiulote listened to this familiar concept, deep in thought.

"Yes. One tent consists of 50-100 people, 15-30 of whom are able-bodied men, roughly equivalent to the smallest tribe in the wilderness. In a sub-squad of four hundred people, you could establish a leader's tent of one hundred people, with four to six smaller tents of dozens of people. A Guajili village would have about three sub-squads, more than a thousand people, several hundred able-bodied men."

Axolotl paused for a moment, calculating the numbers silently. His mathematical abilities were clearly superior to other Canine Descendants.

"Therefore, each village must have at least three formidable elite warriors as village managers. Each of them would have a leader's tent of one hundred people, commanding four to six smaller tents. As for the leaders of the smaller tents, they can be elected by the dozens of people within the tent, usually the strongest male."

"So you mean I should pull out some Samurai and assign them to take charge of the leader tents in the squads, and let the leaders of the smaller tents emerge through tribal civilian infighting. Through this tent level, effectively manage the village?"

Xiulote was somewhat interested. The grassroots system of the tribes always provided him with a strange sense of familiarity. At present, he had more than 150 Canine Descendant sub-squads, which meant they only needed 150 experienced warriors. Fortunately, an expedition to the north had yielded roughly one to two hundred experienced warriors in need of feoffing.

"Your Majesty is wise!"

Axlotl performed a difficult prostration. His eyes flickered as he looked at the king's expression and smiled.

"This is the first suggestion, setting up tents within squads."

"Oh?"

Xiulote mused briefly, then turned to the Head Warrior.

"Bertade, bring him over!"

The Head Warrior nodded and took Axlotl to the king.

"Clever Axlotl, what's your second suggestion?"

"Your Majesty, the second suggestion is to naturalize the wilderness priests. Turn the wilderness priests into qualified Chief God Priests, then let them manage the tribal villages."

Axlotl glanced at the elderly priest Teya and answered softly. Truth be told, given Priest Teya's frail body and weak temperament, if it weren't for his constant presence in the village, the fierce tribespeople would probably have tied him in a sack and drowned him in the lake long ago.

"Naturalize wilderness priests?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. Most wilderness priests are physically strong, resilient, capable of jumping and shouting, adept in archery or combat. Even the older wilderness priests often have a 'spell' or two up their sleeves, enough to awe and command obedience from the tribespeople."

With that, Axolotl smiled wistfully. In the wilderness, without some real abilities to keep people in check, how could one ever live to old age.

"The tribespeople always have a simple understanding: the more powerful the deity, the more powerful His priest. If the deity's priest is frail, how can he command respect from the tribespeople?"

"The more powerful the deity, the more powerful His priest..."

Xiulote's eyebrows raised. He understood the underlying message. The Guajili Tribe believed in the strong; their thinking was simple and pure. Having a good theory as a priest is useless unless one can fight and intimidate!

"Hmm, naturalizing wilderness priests, the kingdom is already doing that. Now it seems, we can expedite it."

The king was somewhat pleased; Axolotl indeed was talented, living up to his name.

"And the third suggestion?"

"Hmm..."

Axolotl pondered for a good while as scenes of village life flashed before his eyes and formed words in his heart.

"Your Majesty, the third suggestion is to organize robust men for hunting."

"Go on."

"Tens of thousands from the tribe moved south a thousand miles, everyone was down to their last penny. Previously, on the Sattescas wilderness, there were various places with Silver Mountain Ranges, but no one cared for such cumbersome stones, not realizing how much the Southern Tribes valued them..."

"...Now the tribe has settled here, coming into contact with so many new things. The tribespeople like fruit, meat, but can't afford it; they like comfortable cotton, but can't afford it; they like convenient pottery, but can't afford it; they like shiny copper, but can't afford it..."

"...The tribespeople can't afford anything, yet they want it. According to the tradition of the wilderness, that means stealing and raiding. The nearby Prepetcha people are too timid, they wouldn't dare come to fight even if robbed...after a long time, this will cause serious trouble!"

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Axolotl was aware that although the farmers of Prepetcha were compliant, their warriors were equally deadly. The Army of the God of Death's Great Chief was not just for show, and once they started fighting, it would result in rivers of blood.

"Makes sense, continue."

Xiulote listened patiently.

"Our tribe is poor, so we can only think of ways to gather some wealth. Farming only gets us by, and the only skill we can rely on is hunting. Archery, spear throwing—who in the tribes does not know these? As long as the villages organize hunting parties, and we have a yield, we can trade for the items we need."

"Hmm, what are you skilled at hunting?"

"Shooting birds, trapping rabbits, digging out rodents, snaring deer, hunting wolves... and capturing prisoners."

Hearing this, Xiulote fell into deep thought. Slowly, new ideas formed in his mind. After a while, the king nodded and said,

"Once the banners are reorganized, I will arrange for the leaders of each banner to organize a hunt. The Kingdom is in need of manpower and slaves. After the autumn harvest, there will be special squads for

capturing prisoners, led by Jaguar Warriors, heading south or west. The able-bodied men from all parts of Guajili can join."

"Praise Your Majesty!"

Axlotl bowed deeply.

"I will also inform the Kingdom that a market will be set up in the tribal gathering places to trade your hunting yields. The market will have supervisors to maintain fair trading prices to prevent you from being cheated by dishonest traders."

As he said this, Xiulote instructed his trusted aide to record the royal decree. Then, he smiled and asked,

"Do you have any other suggestions?"

"Uh..."

Axlotl racked his brain and answered reluctantly,

"Your Majesty, there is one last suggestion that can temporarily appease the people, especially the tribal warriors who have been conscripted."

"Speak!"

"According to the traditions of the wilderness, tribes have a high regard for red, even willing to give their lives for the sacred red. If you could grant warriors red fur, red feathers, or red dyes, you would be the most generous Great Chief! Of course, if there were red-haired women, that would be even better!"

Hearing this, Xiulote was slightly taken aback. He remembered how the Spanish colonizers in later generations had made a specific offer to "buy peace" with the Chichimeca Canine Descendants by supplying hundreds of red-haired women.

"A good suggestion. Red fur, feathers, and dyes, the Alliance is not lacking. Bertade, take note of this and consider granting them upon our return."

"At your command, Your Highness."

"Respected Majesty, what about me..."

Axolotl knelt on the ground, looking up at the king with a hopeful gaze.

Xiulote's smile was gentle.

"Axolotl, you've already died once, which absolves you of all your guilt. A divine axolotl dies and is reborn, then changes its face. What do you wish to do next?"

"Ah, praise Your Majesty! Thank you for your mercy!... I wish to cross the great river, return to the wilderness, and guard Pamus City for you..."

"No."

"... Uh... I wish to stay here in the village of Guajili, to be a devout village priest, to spread the glory of the Chief Divine for you..."

"No."

"... Uh... I will follow whatever arrangements Your Majesty makes."

"Very well."

Xiulote nodded with a smile, announcing the decision.

"Axolotl, from today, you will join my Personal Guard, serving alongside the Royal Banner."

In the harsh wilderness of the Northern Land, no one who becomes a Great Tribe Chieftain is simple. Axolotl had experience as a Tribal Chieftain and had been hardened by large-scale wars; he was not someone to be casually tossed among the Canine Descendants! It was safer to keep him close at hand.

"Praise Your Majesty!"

Axolotl closed his eyes and kneeled on the ground, as if he had exhausted all his energy.

A few steps away, Ozoma and Keka exchanged glances, both having much to say but remaining silent. Meanwhile, the old Preaching Priest, Teya, knelt alone in the corner, ignored and daring not to speak. His plot had been well-prepared for a long time, but it almost caused a great trouble.

"Priest Teya."

"Ah! Most High Majesty!"

"Soon, a new priest will come to take over your position."

"... At your command, Your Majesty."

The old priest Teya collapsed to the ground, suddenly losing all his strength.

"You, however, will be transferred to the Rivermouth Fortification, serving as a Second Level Preaching Priest."

"Ah!... At your command, Your Majesty!"

The old priest Teya was suddenly invigorated, bowing deeply with a louder voice than before.

"Hmm, Bertade, let us depart!"

Xiulote smiled casually.

"Axolotl, you come with me as well."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The king pondered for a while, looking at Axolotl one last time.

"Remember, you have already died once. From now on, you are to be called Arno!"

Chapter 703: Kingdom of the Lake, The Operating Military Machine

The Kingdom of the Lake was busy yet tranquil during the rainy season. The "Three Sisters" crops thrived in the fields, bolstering each day; meanwhile, farmers busied themselves repairing small canals and draining the lower fields. Without sufficient fertilizer, there was no talk of additional fertilization.

By the end of August, this year's harvest could almost be confirmed. With plentiful but not excessive rainfall and no lake overflow, the crops were bustling—it would be a bountiful year!

At the Rivermouth stronghold, the Guajili Legion had already been formed. Following Arno's advice, the king generously rewarded the brave warriors, helping the proud tribal warriors endure the harsh initial training period and gradually adapt to military discipline. Of course, their discipline was far from comparable to that of the Spear Legion, but they could form arrays, obey commands, and would not charge without orders.

Next, Xiulote enfeoffed a batch of seasoned Samurai for the northern campaign to the villages of the Canine Descendants in the east and west. Under various flag teams, new mobilization units at the First Level were added, strengthening the kingdom's control over the squads. Then, he selected a group of battle-savvy War Priests from the army, along with some naturalized wilderness Priests, to replace the ordinary Priests in the Canine Descendant villages. The fifteen Guajili flag teams were further consolidated.

After inspecting the flag teams, the king confirmed that nearly 60,000 tribe members of the Canine Descendants, who had barely held a hoe, were not fit for farming. In the short term, the fifteen tribal flag teams would exercise more military functions and were not expected to generate much economic income. In other words, as long as each part of the Guajili could sustain itself, pay a symbolic tribute, and produce some leather and feathers, it sufficed to contribute labor in times of war.

The Alliance's fleet made two more round trips, bringing in large quantities of grain and tin, and taking away armor and copper. Alisa received a letter from the little golden eagle, which delighted her. She had someone bring little Aviloztli over again, and Xiulote threw another yo-yo.

Alisa's reply was lengthy, filled with many trivial matters, resembling a girl's diary. In the diary, there was also a cute sketch. The drawing depicted two little figures holding hands, a golden eagle perched on the shoulder of the male figure and a green snake coiling at the feet of the female figure. Both the golden eagle and the green snake held a fish in their beaks.

Xiulote held the letter, caressing it for a long time. He had not seen Alisa for many years, nor had he touched the little green snake. The memories of his youth lingered in the distance, while the young king stood atop the stronghold. He was always clad in armor, a bronze sword forever hanging at his waist, unable to be removed, nor allowed to be.

The Alliance's Envoy brought greetings from the King and the High Priest. The King requested an increase in gemstones in this year's tribute, and the High Priest agreed for Olte to serve as the head High Priest of the Otomi. Also accompanying was a top-secret message that the elder was seriously ill and bedridden, and his 90th birthday celebration had not been held as scheduled.

Hearing this, Xiulote felt somewhat dazed. The immortal Sun God had established the Alliance, enduring from the last century to this day, now at the end of another century. Could it be that He was about to be extinguished? No one knew the answer, and the people of Mexica did not wish to know.

August passed in the raindrops, and the fragrant autumn breeze came, turning to September in a blink. The pumpkins in the fields ripened, and farmers began their diligent labor, joy of harvest overflowing everywhere. The Canine Descendants harvested the pumpkins, surprised by the fertility of the soil beneath their feet, finally settling their minds.

The Black Wolf's Royal Banner finally started its slow journey southward. Mid-September, escorted by six thousand Imperial Guard Legion members, the king returned to the Capital City, having been away for a year and a half.

Compared to his departure, there was an added sense of prosperity in Qinchongcan City, Capital City. The villages of the Capital Region recovered their vitality, and villagers could occasionally enter the city, exchanging surplus farm produce for necessary pottery, stoneware, and textiles. Merchants from all over the world continuously flocked, selling grain, cotton, spices, and feathers from the southern regions, while purchasing the kingdom's special copper and gemstones.

The tax officials from various regions worked day and night, gathering the taxed goods to the warehouses in the Capital City, waiting for the Preaching Priesthood to tally and allocate. Indeed, the current commercial tax was still levied in kind, supplemented by a small amount of textiles, cocoa, and gold and silver.

Xiulote had considered establishing a clear currency system. However, the tribal structure across the world was too fragmented, gold and silver reserves too abundant, and the number of goods relatively limited. Often, gold and silver could not function as "money". Many tribes, just like the Canine Descendants of the wilderness, accepted only goods like cocoa, salt, food, textiles, and weapons, scoffing at gold and silver which could not be eaten directly. After all, if they wanted these gold or white stones, they could simply mine and refine them themselves, since the mountains were full of them.

It was the gemstones produced by the Kingdom of the Lake, however, due to extremely consistent quality, very vivid colors, and relative rarity, that were becoming the currency unit of many affluent city-states. Of course, once beyond these wealthy city-states, in the poor villages and rural areas, the value of gemstones was still unacknowledged.

Seeing this situation, Xiulote carefully controlled the output of glass gemstones, maintained the market's credibility and value, and sought to make exorbitant profits from manufacturing "currency". He also continually sent out Royal Family trading caravans, expanding the gemstone trade to farther regions. With ongoing wars, the grain and cotton from various regions were strictly controlled, not to be sold immensely. These gemstones' greatest value lay in their exchange for slaves.

According to estimates from the Sage Jatili, from the beginning of gemstone trading early last year till this September, the Kingdom had purchased about twenty thousand healthy slaves using manufactured glass gemstones, averaging over a thousand people per month. These slaves were mainly obtained through various means from the southern regions of Mistec, Zapotecs, and Tlapanec.

Tens of thousands of adult male losses had drawn the attention of lords from all around. The Mistec and Zapotecs Alliance in the south respectively issued decrees prohibiting the sale of slaves to the Kingdom of the Lake and dispatched Samurai to patrol and crack down harshly. Although the Tlapanec people, who bordered the kingdom, did not dare to prohibit it openly, they had greatly increased the number of "bandits" who hindered trade. The sources of slaves were gradually drying up unless a new source could be found.

The purchased twenty thousand able-bodied slaves had already been distributed to the military nobility of the kingdom as agricultural slaves. Now, Xiulote's most troubling issue was the promise of fief granting to the Kingdom Legion.

In the conquest of the west, the Northern Route Army had 2.2 million acres of land granted, requiring 110,000 slaves; the Holy City Legion's settlement involved 300,000 acres, requiring 15,000 slaves; and the just-concluded northern campaign, which summoned the Otomi Legion, didn't need slaves, as they were rewarded with the fiefs of three ownerless states. The Imperial Guard Legion still needed 400,000 acres of land, along with 20,000 slaves.

In Rivermouth County, the King had set up a large tent and granted fiefs to a hundred or two hundred veteran Samurai from the Imperial Guards who had been promoted to the military nobility. Then, with five thousand Canine Descendants captives and wild mountain people, he barely finished granting the military awards from the northern campaign. But when he returned to the capital city, and saw the report from the Sage Jatili, his headache intensified once again.

The kingdom had been established for over two years, and the fief granting from the western campaign had been completed long ago, but the number of slaves granted was far from sufficient, and most of the granted lands had been forced to lie fallow. Up to today, there was still a deficit of about 80,000 slaves. Although the King's prestige was flourishing, and the Samurai revered their leader without many objections, calmly waiting, the King's credibility was crucial—these gaps had to be filled soon!

And to fill such a huge gap, the only solution was war, war, and continuous war!

"For land and agricultural slaves, the kingdom needs to wage war. And after the victory in war, Samurai continue to be promoted, creating even greater demand and then continuing the war..."

Xiulote stood at the top of the Palace of Wind, looking towards the southwest, in the direction of Qinganbate. The mines there also needed replenishment of manpower to further expand production.

At this moment, thousands of miners were busy day and night, plumes of black smoke rising from there. Numerous copper mines and coal mines were being extracted and then smelted into armor, spears, battle axes, Qin swords, arrowheads, and even bronze cannons! Everything in the kingdom was preparing for military expansion, and only military expansion could solve all the problems of the kingdom!

Thinking thus, Xiulote lowered his gaze, recalling the situation when he had just returned to the capital city. The victory of the northern campaign had greatly uplifted the military nobility. Generals from the capital city had been requesting audiences, while those from other areas continuously sent communications.

The Jingji Legion Commander Olosh suggested expanding the scale of captives in the autumn, thoroughly sweeping the wild tribes around the borders; the Family Head Oorta of the Sky proposed launching a war against the Chapala Lake Region to subdue the Prince with Feathers; the Director of the Mining and Metallurgy Bureau, Necali, suggested campaigning against the southwestern mountains to expand the mining areas; the Second Spear Legion Commander Ezpan spoke of suppressing the rebellious southern nobility, eliminating remnants of the Tarasco Kingdom; the veteran Etalik wrote endorsing the view of Commander Ezpan and provided intelligence on the southern nobility's manpower and private armies. And before leaving Rivermouth County, the Second Spear Legion Commander Kuluka had tactfully expressed his hope to get His Highness's permission to completely devour the forest land of the Saka state to the west.

"What kind of military machine have I actually created by hand?"

Xiulote looked up at the sky, where a red falcon in the lake region was soaring with its wings spread. Its gaze was so sharp, its belly so hungry, always in search of new prey!

After a long while, Xiulote walked back to the palace. Bertade followed silently behind until the voice of His Highness was heard.

"Inform the Deputy Director of Weapons, Chalape, and notify the Director of the Bronze Bureau, Tilipi: let them be ready. Two days later, inspect the Sun Divine Eagle Cannon and the Rain God Tiger Squat Cannon!"

"As you command, Your Highness."

Bertade nodded and went off personally. His heart, too, was full of anticipation, yearning for war.

Chapter 704: The Creation of the Military Workshops, the 2-pounder Divine Eagle Cannon!

At the end of September, the corn in the Lake Region had just matured, bending the green stalks. The fragrance of the grains carried in the wind, along with flocks of birds that came attracted by the scent.

The farmers of the village were mobilized, sleeping in the fields day and night, to kill the birds and beasts that stole the corn. These hard days would last for more than ten days, until the corn was fully ripe, and only then would the farmers begin to harvest.

In this era, to maximize yield as much as possible, corn was always harvested late. Tender corn was a luxury for the nobility, while the majority of the common people ate corn that was old, yellow, and hard, biting into which could chip a tooth. From an agricultural perspective, this was to fully utilize the after-ripening process of the crops. It wasn't until the leaves turned yellow, the husks white, and the stalks died completely, that one or two more dou could be harvested.

On this day, southeast of the Capital City, a large group of samurais clad in armor and carrying bows, accompanied by strange golden-brown copper beasts, passed through the fields. The farmers along the way knelt down in awe, not daring to cast a glance at the samurais. The villagers of the Capital Region always had a bit more insight, and even without any flags flying, today's display was certainly that of the highest-level nobility, or even the lofty King himself!

Soon, the samurais vanished behind the hills to the southeast. The villagers whispered to each other for a moment, then continued guarding the village fields. As the sun reached its zenith, suddenly, a mighty roar arose from those hills to southeast, followed by two more!

"Boom! Boom! Boom!"

The sound was as magnificent as thunder, yet it carried a low metallic tremor. What followed was the crackling of large trees breaking. The villagers lay prostrate on the ground in terror, facing southeast and praying devoutly to the Chief Divine.

"Chief Divine, protect us!..."

"Chief Divine, protect us!"

Seeing the result of the shooting, the King's expression was one of extraordinary excitement. He bellowed out with excitement, like the roar of a Jaguar. Behind him, Bertade's mouth fell open in shock, lost in a rare moment of astonishment.

"Your Majesty, this is the blessing of the Chief Divine! An invincible Divine Artifact! The Sun Divine Eagle Cannon!"

The Director of the Bronze Bureau, Tilipi, was brimming with excitement, his face revealing uncontrollable joy. He walked out from behind the craftsmen who had operated the cannon, touching the golden-brown copper beast that was still emitting smoke. Its surface glittered with gold, and where one touched it, it was searing hot, just like his burning chest.

"The cannon weighs 500 jin, the shot approximately 2 jin, the caliber is 8 centimeters, with a length of 1.2 meters. It has a purposed range of 500 meters, and a maximum range of 2-3 li!! Within 2 li, wherever the stone shot falls, there is no warrior in the world that can withstand it! To stand in its way means certain death, just like the large tree in front of us!!"

As he finished speaking, he pointed ahead. The last shot that was fired flew for 1 li, hitting a large tree on the hill and breaking it cleanly in two. He had once tried, and even the sturdiest of bronze heavy armor, before this Divine Eagle Cannon, was as fragile as newly made paper!

"A 2-pound Eagle Cannon, a 2-pound Eagle Cannon, I have finally created a truly era-defining weapon! A real Bronze Fire Cannon!!"

The King's excitement could not be calmed. Because only he truly understood what this Bronze Fire Cannon meant for the civilization of America!

"This is the weapon in my hands that can truly shatter the colonizers' plate armor! In its presence, even groups of plate armored infantry lose their invincible aura, becoming cumbersome and fragile! It is also

the only weapon that can threaten the colonizers' sailing ships! Even if it is only 2 pounds! With it, I hold the truth and justice to resist the Westerners! It will grow even stronger!..."

The Deputy Director of the Armament Division, Chalape, widened his eyes, watching the supreme king with caution. It was the first time he had seen the king lose his composure.

"Haha, the Sun Divine Eagle Cannon, the true bronze fire cannon!"

A few steps away, Tilipi equally exploded into laughter, like a child who had created a beloved toy, shaking with happiness. This was truly not easy!

Since September of the year before last, he had started casting cannons and had met with hundreds of failures; he made over a hundred clay models alone! As the half-year deadline set by His Majesty approached, he was under enormous pressure and had even contemplated taking his own life. Fortunately, His Majesty had led the army to the north, which granted him enough time to continue his slow exploration.

He had been living and sleeping in the workshop, forcing the craftsmen and apprentices to work overtime day and night. After countless difficulties and innumerable hardships, they finally succeeded in producing the first qualified Sun Divine Eagle Cannon in June of the last year! The weight of the Divine Eagle Cannon kept increasing, from 250 jin to 500 jin, and the bore diameter from 6 centimeters to 8 centimeters. They managed to turn a 1-pound cannon into a 2-pound cannon, which eliminated any air leakage from the barrel, not even a bubble rose when it was submerged in water.

After producing the first Divine Eagle Cannon, they immediately sent a report of the belated good news to the north. Following that, they adjusted the clay models and the casting process based on this successful experience. They cast and remelted bronze cannons until August of this year, when they finally cast 10 usable Divine Eagle Cannons out of more than two hundred clay models!

His Majesty once said, "To cast cannons from clay models, achieving two or three successes out of ten is deemed a master! "

Thinking of this, Tilipi almost wanted to spit in His Majesty's face. Clearly, achieving one success out of ten would be a rare blessing for a craftsman! He generously promised his subordinates—craftsmen and apprentices alike—that "as long as one could cast a qualified Eagle Cannon from ten clay models,

regardless of their original status, they would be directly promoted to a First Level Divine Revelation Priest!"

And in the whole two years, he had managed to promote only eight individuals, producing 10 cannons! Right, out of those 10 cannons, he had cast two himself.

Chalape glanced at the excitedly mumbling king, then back at his brother who was still grinning foolishly, unsure of what to say. He cautiously approached Bertade and asked in a low voice.

"Respected Head Warrior, should we call out to His Majesty..."

"Shush!"

Bertade put out his hand to stop him, gently shaking his head with a look of pure joy on his face.

"Let His Majesty enjoy the moment a little longer."

"Right, you are correct!"

And so, the two of them quietly waited in the cannon testing field. The field contained three Divine Eagle Cannons, three Tiger Squat Cannons, and over thirty craftsmen operating the cannons. Beyond the field, there were as many as five hundred personal guard warriors, vigilantly securing the perimeter. Even farther out, there were patrols of warriors driving away merchants or villagers trying to get close.

After a long while, Xiulote finally calmed down. He stepped out from behind the protective earthen wall and approached personally, touching the 2-pound Eagle Cannon. Both the internal and external surfaces of the Eagle Cannon were polished smooth, shining with the golden glow of bronze. After examining it carefully for a while, he asked in a solemn tone.

"Tilipi, have you estimated the lifespan of this Divine Eagle Cannon?"

"Lifespan?"

"That is, how many shots can the barrel take?"

Tilipi blinked, thought for a moment, and smiled.

"Your Majesty, we have fired over a hundred shots, and the barrel of the Divine Eagle Cannon hasn't shown any damage; it seems to have stabilized even more. I estimate that firing over a thousand shots shouldn't be a problem!"

"Over a thousand shots?"

Xiulote pondered for a while and nodded his head. The cannon before him was merely 2-pounder, with a mere 2 pounds of charge and a barrel length of 1.2 meters. The chamber pressure of the cannon was not high, the barrel was extremely thick, the quality of the bronze was very good, and since it was a smoothbore cannon, there was no need to consider wear from rifling... Indeed, over a thousand shots shouldn't pose any problem.

Although the caliber of current bronze cannons is still very small, they have already formed a comprehensive crushing advantage over the wooden cannons used by the Alliance. The range, accuracy, and service life of bronze cannons are all far superior to those of wooden cannons. Moreover, the airtightness of wooden cannons is low, the kinetic energy attenuates significantly, and their lifespan is generally only a few dozen shots, with a range of no more than a hundred meters, belonging to simple temporary firearms. Overall, the two aren't products of the same era at all.

"Tilipi, what is the current success rate of casting cannons? How long does it take to cast a qualified Divine Eagle Cannon?"

"Your Majesty, the current success rate of cannon casting... is about one in ten. But the craftsmen are making rapid progress."

Although Tilipi was internally complaining about His Majesty, he didn't dare show any of it outwardly. At this moment, he slightly bowed his head with an expression of utmost respect.

"As long as we have enough copper, we can start work on dozens of clay molds simultaneously... On average, can we produce 1 Divine Eagle Cannon per month?... Ah, no, if we work overtime, producing 2 wouldn't be a problem!"

Seeing His Majesty's eyebrows raise slightly, Tilipi quickly added.

Xiulote concentrated in thought and slowly nodded his head.

"A success rate of one in ten... two cannons per month..."

In the early stages of technological leaps, the success rate of production is always very low. After all, this is the first successful attempt at cannon casting in the entire civilization of Central America! As long as a breakthrough from zero is achieved, technical experience will accumulate continuously, and the success rate of production will steadily increase.

"Tilipi, did you say earlier that this Divine Eagle Cannon weighs 500 catties?"

"...Yes, Your Majesty."

"Can you cast it lighter? A 500-catty cannon is too difficult to carry with the army; I'm afraid there will be problems traversing mountains and ridges."

Xiulote's brows furrowed slightly. Now without reliable beasts of burden, they surely couldn't expect llamas to carry cannons, could they?

"Your Majesty, the Bronze Workshop can try to reduce the weight of the cannon. But first, we must ensure that the barrel doesn't leak air..."

Tilipi's face showed difficulty as he carefully replied.

Hearing this, Xiulote understood. The kingdom's technology and craftsmanship weren't up to the task, so they could only develop in the direction of rough and crude, just like the later Jin dynasty's approach.

Without considering mobility and cost, if the Divine Eagle Cannon's size were doubled to weigh four thousand catties, creating a 10-pound-long cannon would also be feasible.

In this era, Europe has already witnessed the emergence of "terrifying" 18-pound long-cannons (culverins) and 10-pound demi-cannons (Demi-culverins), which have replaced stone shot with iron shot, used in the fierce fortress sieges.

A standard 18-pound long-cannon weighs 4500 catties, with a calibre of 13-14 centimetres, a length of 3.5 meters, firing a shot that could "rot away" twelve or thirteen miles. Of course, the effective aiming distance was only about three miles. The common 10-pound demi-cannons weigh 3000 catties, with a calibre of 10-11 centimetres, a length of 2.6 meters, a maximum range of nine miles, and an effective range of one and a half miles. These represent the most advanced level of cannon crafting in current Europe and are making rapid, continuous progress.

However, for the rough terrain of Central America, there is yet no need to worry about these European "heavy cannons". The challenging rainforests and complex mountains would render all heavy artillery immovable scrap metal.

Xiulote, from the beginning of cannon foundry, had a clear direction in mind. The Empire's future artillery would inevitably be dominated by lightweight infantry cannons. With this in mind, he looked again at the side of the Divine Eagle Cannon, where there were three 0.4 meters long, 4 centimetres in calibre, and weighing around a hundred catties—short, small, and lightweight Tiger Squat Cannons. The Tiger Squat Cannon body was tightly bound with copper hoops and fitted with fixed copper claws. The casting difficulty of this kind of cannon was much easier than that of long cannons, and they were also easier to transport.

"Tilipi, how powerful is this type of Tiger Squat Cannon?"

The King asked with a smiling face.

A confident smile appeared on Tilipi's face. He extended his hand in an inviting gesture, pointing towards the earthen wall behind.

"Chief Divine's blessing! Your Majesty, please step behind the earthen wall. I will now have the gunners test fire the Rain God Tiger Squat Cannon!"

"Good! Chief Divine's blessing!"

The long wind blew, bringing the smell of gunpowder in the air. The King sniffed it twice, revealing a sincere smile. This scent was so intoxicating, filled with the power of brightness and righteousness.

Chapter 705: The Creation of the Military Workshops, the Rain God Tiger Squat Cannon!

The brilliant sunshine fell from the sky, making the bronze cannons shine with a golden light. The rainy season had ended, the sky was cloudless, yet the rumbling of thunder echoed among the hills, like the roar of a giant beast. The continuous roars kept coming, leaving the villagers within dozens of miles in a state of shocked awe. While praying to the Chief Divine, they looked towards the direction from which the roars emanated.

In the nearby villages, the Preaching Priests had just received instructions to calm the villagers under their jurisdiction and prohibit them from approaching the source of the thunder. For there, the Divine Revelation Priesthood was holding a sacred ceremony, receiving the Divine Power bestowed by the Chief Divine! Upon hearing the news, the village priests prayed devoutly for a few moments before hurrying off with their apprentices and militia to soothe the hundreds of villagers.

In the artillery range, Xiulote stepped back dozens of paces. He wore a bronze helmet and stood behind a chest-high earthen wall, patiently observing the operations of the gunners.

"Boom! Boom! Boom!"

Soon, the thunderous booming sounded again! Countless stone projectiles flew out from the cannon's mouth, and plumes of white smoke billowed up. After a round of firing, the gunners began to load anxiously.

First, they added half a length of slow match at the touch hole, the pending fuse to be lit. The location of the touch hole was about 6.5 centimeters from the bottom of the cannon, with a length of about 4 centimeters and a width of 1.3 centimeters. Around the touch hole was a ring designed to gather the gunpowder—an innovation proposed by Xiulote to facilitate ignition. The Divine Eagle Cannon also featured such a touch hole, which was much more convenient than the previous wooden cannons.

After inserting the slow match, the gunners carefully, in turn, added half a pound of gunpowder, a two-inch layer of earth, and nearly a hundred stone balls to the muzzle. The so-called "earth-separating method" involved using mud to separate the gunpowder from the stone balls. Since they were using the sturdy bronze Tiger Squat Cannon, the charge was somewhat larger than that of the Cast Iron Tiger Squat Cannon.

After loading, a gunner quickly checked the claw nails at the front of the cannon and the iron fetters at the rear, ensuring the cannon's stability. This lesson was taught in blood. The Tiger Squat Cannon was too light; if not secured properly, it would recoil several meters upon firing. In the initial test firing, two apprentices of Tilipi were directly hit by the recoiling cannon, dying on the spot with broken ribs and coughing up blood. Since then, Tilipi dared not stand behind the cannon anymore.

After the check, the gunners cautiously lit the slow match with a torch and then quickly covered their ears, crouching on both sides of the cannon.

"Boom! Boom! Boom!"

Once more, the terrifying thunder crackled! A thick plume of smoke rose, shrouding the cannons. And when the smoke had cleared, the wooden target 100 meters away was riddled with holes. The extreme range of the Rain God Tiger Squat Cannon was about 500 meters, with an effective range of around 200 meters, and the optimal firing distance was within 100 meters. If aiming for armor-piercing, the distance could be even shorter. In fact, it was a large version of a "blunderbuss," the closer the target, the greater its power. Firing buckshot at close range would take out a large swath with a single shot!

The King knew that in the battle tactics of Qi's troops, the firing of Tiger Squat Cannons was arranged after a range of about 100 meters, following the bird guns and Fire Arrows, acting as the decisive killer move.

"Good! Very good! Excellent!!"

Watching the firing effects of the Tiger Squat Cannon, Xiulote's eyes gradually shone. His face radiated joy; in Central America, where armor protection was lacking, such light cannons were slaughterous weapons to sweep through infantry formations!

"If I had ten such Tiger Squat Cannons during the battle against the Tarasco Royal Army, arranged among the trusted Samurai, the Tarasco Copper-axe Guards wouldn't be able to break through at all!"

The King contemplated with emotion as memories of the arduous campaign flooded his mind. With the bronze cannons, future battles would be much easier to fight! Especially when facing the Tonsured Guard, the Eagle Warrior Battalion, the Jaguar Warrior Brigade, the Copper-axe Guards... these shield-bearing Battle Groups formed by elite warriors would no longer need to be stubbornly chewed through by elite Samurai!

Afterward, he used his experience with battle formations to imagine the use of these light cannons.

Due to their range limitations, the Tiger Squat Cannons had to be placed at the forefront of the battle line, firing under the cover of infantry formations. And since the cannons' fire would raise smoke, obstructing the Archers' line of sight, they would advance alongside the shield-bearing infantry. On either side of the cannons, valiant assault infantry would be positioned. After several rounds of bombardment, when the enemy formation became shaky, a charge would be launched to break the enemy in one fell stroke!...

"Boom! Boom! Boom!"

Xiulote contemplated for a long time until the third round of thunderous booms suddenly exploded! He snapped back to reality, estimating the firing speed of the cannons. The gunners were skilled, but their operations were not yet succinct; there was still room for improvement. The Divine Eagle Cannon fired slightly faster than the wooden guns, approximately two shots per quarter hour; the Tiger Squat Cannon fired faster still, about three shots per quarter hour.

"Hmm... This firing rate..."

The King mused silently. It seemed that the first volley was of utmost importance. They would need to get as close as possible, firing right in the face of the enemy formation!

"Your Majesty, what do you think of the power of the Rain God Tiger Squat Cannon?"

Tilipi stood up straight, gesturing towards the wooden target ahead. Xiulote followed the gesture, seeing that the target, after three rounds of firing, was already shattered and scattered on the ground, with stone balls and wood fragments all around. Judging by the spread, five Tiger Squat Cannons could effectively cover a front of a hundred men wide on the battlefield.

"Praise be to the Chief Divine!"

Xiulote spoke with a smiling face.

"This is the Divine Artifact given by the Chief Divine to the Alliance, to command the world!"

"Praise be to the Chief Divine! And praise the King of Divine Revelation!"

Chalape came forward, pulling Tilipi down with him to kneel and salute. Then, Chalape respectfully raised his head to look at the majestic King.

Chapter 706: The Creation of the Military Workshops, the Rain God Tiger Squat Cannon!_2

"We present to You, the only Sun in the world, the Divine Artifact granted by the Chief Divine for the Kingdom to rule over all!"

Hearing this, Xiulote was taken aback, his heart stirred. His expression remained calm as usual, and he nodded with a smile.

"Rise! You are all heroes of the Kingdom and the Alliance!"

Upon his words, the two Master Casters and technical officials stood up, waiting for the King's order. A few steps away, Bertade watched the scene with a calm demeanor, a slight smile curling at the corners of his mouth.

The smoke cleared, and the Bronze Cannon shone with a golden light once again. The King sniffed and asked in a deep voice.

"Tilipi, what is the success rate of casting Tiger Squat Cannons? If there is an ample supply of copper, how many can be cast in a month?"

Tilipi stretched out his fingers and pondered for a long while.

"Your Majesty, it's easier to make Tiger Squat Cannons. Their molds are simple, and they require a close range and low airtightness... The success rate is about 60 to 70%! And with the manpower it takes to make one Divine Eagle Cannon, we can produce more than ten Tiger Squat Cannons! So, if we don't make Divine Eagle Cannons, we can produce 20 Tiger Squat Cannons a month."

Hearing this, Xiulote paused. He mulled over the implications of Tilipi's words, raising his eyebrows.

"Are you saying that the entire Bronze Workshop, with a thousand craftsmen and apprentices, can only produce 2 Divine Eagle Cannons or 20 Tiger Squat Cannons in a month?"

"Wise Your Majesty, the vast majority of people in the Bronze Workshop are tasked with forging bronze Armor and weapons. There are only one or two hundred people in the Cannon Casting Bureau. Moreover, what currently limits the Workshop's output is mainly the production of copper."

Chalape, with a beaming face, quickly explained.

Hearing this, Xiulote pondered for a while and then slowly nodded. After all, the shortfall in copper was just too significant!

The Director of the Mining and Metallurgy Bureau, Necali, had written several times, saying miners were being consumed too quickly and requesting more manpower for the mines. The vast mining area, like a greedy monster beneath the earth, was endlessly devouring lives from above and spewing out the sealed-off Wealth from beneath. Now, the copper mines had over three thousand miners, with a thousand averaging over six thousand jin of copper mined and smelted each month, which is to say, twenty thousand jin of copper a month. While that sounds like a lot, it's really just over ten tons.

All things considered, the Kingdom can only produce around 130 tons of copper a year. And copper is needed everywhere: for Cannon Casting, shipbuilding, Armor, weaponry, farming tools, even arrowheads! When the copper is allocated to these various expenses, hardly any remains.

Although the Alliance had started mining the copper mines in the Weytamo mountain region, the copper production is probably less than half of the Kingdom's, barely meeting the demands of the Mexican Valley. Including the large copper mines exploited by the Zapotecs in the distant Oaxaca region and the scattered open-pit copper mines of the Maya people... The entire copper output of Central America, in the King's carefree estimate, would be less than 300 tons a year. Such a copper output is far from sufficient to drive the further advancement of Central American civilization!

Compared to that, the copper output during the Song Dynasty's Xining Era was 20 million jin, which is 10 thousand tons. And that was just the officially recorded official production, not counting the unknown quantities of private mining. In the Edo period, the peak annual production of the large Copper Mountain mine could reach 1200 tons.

In fact, the Qinganbate mining area is located on Copper Mountain and a giant mine vein, with reserves of tens of millions of tons, exceeding the Copper Mountain, and could continue to be mined until the 21st century! It's potential for exploitation remains far from being fully unleashed; what it lacks are miners, or slave miners.

Considering this, Xiulote lowered his gaze. The entire Kingdom was permeated with a hunger for war—a profound desire for resources, land, and manpower arising from rapid national development.

"Your Majesty?"

"Hmm. Tilipi, starting this month, cast 1 Divine Eagle Cannon and 10 Tiger Squat Cannons every month! If there is not enough copper, pause the casting and research the casting technology for larger cannons. After testing, hand all the Bronze Cannons directly to the Artillery Camp. New gunners will be recruited into the Artillery Camp. You must assign skilled craftsmen to station there. They are responsible for the maintenance and repair of the cannons and for teaching the operations. Summarize all points of attention into documentation!"

"As you command, Your Majesty!"

Tilipi knelt down and gave a salute.

Xiulote reached out his hand and patted the Master Caster's hair. Then, he smiled warmly and announced loudly.

"Tilipi, you've made great strides in cannon casting! From today on, I hereby confer upon you and your descendants the hereditary nobility of the Kingdom! Hereafter, your family has the right to participate in politics and will forever share in the Kingdom's prosperity! Praise to the Chief Divine!"

"Ah! I thank you! I thank you for your generosity! Praise to the Chief Divine!"

Tilipi was visibly moved, his eyes moist with emotion. His relentless hard work day and night for the past two years had finally borne fruit!

At his side, Chalape bowed his head, letting out a soft sigh. From this day forth, the Metal Family would be divided into two branches.

"Remember, the Divine Eagle Cannon and the Rain God Tiger Squat Cannon are only the beginning! Next, you must continue to explore the art of cannon casting! Improve the mold-making process, enhance the quality of the cannon barrels, modify the length and shape of the barrels, add more stable gun carriages... And more importantly, manufacture cannons that are bigger, thicker, and longer!"

Xiulote instructed sternly. Numerous images flashed through his mind, albeit fragmented, they pointed towards the future direction.

"When we return, I will draw some illustrations for you to use as reference!"

"Blessed by the Chief Divine! Your Divine Revelation Majesty!"

Tilipi bowed respectfully, his praise sincere, his thoughts drifting far away. Although most of the time, His Majesty's guidance seemed like disheveled slag, there were always some ingenious ideas, like the fortunate yield from a stroke of luck, that could inspire and save much effort... Hmm, it must be because His Majesty didn't study carefully during his Divine Revelations! If it were up to me...

"Tilipi!"

"Ah, yes!"

The Master Caster hastily responded.

"How many bronze cannons are there in the Bronze Workshop now? When will the next batch of cannons be delivered?"

"Ah! Your Majesty, we currently have 10 Sun Divine Eagle Cannons and 30 Rain God Tiger Squat Cannons. The new batch of clay molds is drying, but due to the rainy season and the humid air, there's been a delay..."

"Hmm? A delay again?"

Xiulote raised an eyebrow, scrutinizing the Master Caster before him. The man was middle-aged but had already started to go bald and looked much thinner than he was two years ago. The King exhaled quietly, then said calmly.

"Tilipi, try to fulfill what you've promised me on time. Do not delay too long."

"Yes, yes, Your Majesty."

Tilipi nodded with a pained expression, agreeing reluctantly, a sigh of lamentation in his heart.

"Your Majesty, when will you go on a campaign again..."

As if hearing his inner thoughts, the King's voice came again.

"Tilipi, ensure that all the cannons in stock are tested and delivered to the Artillery Camp before October. I have great plans for them next!"

"I obey your orders, Your Highness!"

Tilipi beamed with a radiant smile. He smiled looking at Chalape, the elder brother smiled toward Bertade, the Head Warrior smiled back at His Majesty. Everyone's face was adorned with smiles. Because war was coming again!

Chapter 707: Military Settlement Camp, Barbarian Soldiers March South

Golden autumn October, the scent of the harvest came with the north wind, spreading the fragrance of fruits over the fields. The corn in the farmland was fully ripe, and tens of thousands of farmers busily labored, reaping the fruits of a year's cultivation. Joyful smiles were on their faces.

With ample rain before the autumn harvest, this year's yields were very good. After paying tribute, there was still enough grain to fill the reserves in the granaries. And once the corn was harvested, they could return home and truly get a good night's sleep.

The able-bodied men of the military settlements used bronze sickles, which made reaping much faster than in the ordinary villages. No sooner had they finished the busy harvest work, new military orders came from the capital city. The officials of the settlement opened the storage in the camp and distributed the long spears and shields that had been stored for a long time. Soon, they would be moving with their weapons to the southern parts of the Capital Region for stationing.

The scorching sun was like fire, shining down on the military settlement's campsite in the Lake Region, making people's faces burn. In the center of the campsite was the drill ground, one side lined with thatched cottages, and the other side housed the armory, granary, and cookhouse. Smoke rose from the cookhouse, wafting the scent of grains. That was the cooks preparing cornbread for the march to come.

At this moment, the old Militia, Chiwaco, sat in front of the empty armory with crossed legs and a stern face. He wore a simple old cloth robe and a broken straw hat to shade from the sun. A sturdy long spear lay at his feet, and he held a tangy, unripe cactus fruit in his hand, taking a bite now and then.

"Ptooeey, ptooeey, so sour, and it cracks the teeth!"

After two bites, Chiwaco opened his mouth and spat out a bunch of tooth-cracking seeds. Then he cursed out loud, venting his frustrations.

"Ptooeey, why the rush? Eat before it's ripe! Nibble here, nibble there, can't you just quietly stay and tend your fields? Always making life hectic for everyone. I bet one unripe bite will sour your big teeth!"

The campsite was deserted, with no one to respond. This morning, Chiwaco had distributed weapons for self-defense to his Militia and then had sent them all away with a day off. Those with homes nearby could go back and check on things. Those without homes or with homes too far away would head back to their quarters, cover their heads, and get some proper sleep. The plow soldiers would soon be departing, and there would be no time for rest.

"Uncle, why are you sitting here, what are you doing?"

Weizti, wearing a turban and short clothes, had just come back from a small creek outside the camp. He was still dripping with water, clearly having washed up nicely. The Lake Region in October was still hot, especially around midday when the sun was intense.

"What am I doing? Are you blind, can't you see?"

Chiwaco cursed irritably. After cursing, he extended his hand and pulled a ripe cactus fruit from his bosom. He tossed the fruit over to Weizti.

"Eat. Just picked from behind the camp."

"Thanks, Uncle!"

Weizti caught it perfectly in his embrace. Then he wiped his hands on his clothes and eagerly brought the fruit to his mouth.

"Crunch, crunch..."

In just a moment, Weizti finished the fruit, with purple-red juice flowing down from the corner of his mouth. He sighed contentedly.

"Uncle, this fruit is so sweet!"

Chiwaco's eyes widened in surprise as he stared at Weizti.

"You blockhead, you finished it already?"

"Yeah! Sweet, juicy, delicious. Uncle, is there any more?"

Weizti grinned and looked expectantly at his uncle.

"...Where are the seeds you ate?"

Chiwaco stared at Weizti, dumbfounded.

"Seeds? Crushed them, swallowed them!"

Weizti looked back innocently at Chiwaco.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry, see what haste gets you!"

Chiwaco, after being dumbfounded for a while, suddenly exploded in rage. He snatched up the long spear from the ground and, pointing it backward, started to whack Weizti with the spear shaft.

"Uncle, Uncle, don't hit me, don't hit. Ouch, it hurts! If you hit too hard, Luwei will be upset!"

Hearing the name Luwei, Chiwaco finally stopped and glared with agitated old eyes.

"Why did I ever think to promise Luwei to you!"

"Hey, hey, on the way here, it was just me and Luwei left!"

Weizti replied with a smile, then moved closer to Chiwaco, face brimming with expectation.

"Uncle, today you distributed weapons to the Militia, and in a few days, we're heading south. What's going on?"

"What's going on?"

Chiwaco gave him a look before letting out a sigh.

"May the Chief Divine protect us, there's a war coming."

"A war? Who are we fighting against this time? Didn't His Highness...the King just come back from battling in the north? I heard he captured a lot of Canine Descendants."

Weizti scratched his head as he gazed towards the south.

"Heading south... we're not going to fight the Tekos barbarians, are we? Those ravines are not easy to fight in!"

"You fool, use your brain!"

Chiwaco cursed in frustration. He was particularly bad-tempered today.

"Who do you think? With the way the plow soldiers are, can they go into the mountains and fight barbarians? Obviously, we're going to fight the nobility in the south!"

"Ah!"

Weizti gasped, staring at his uncle.

"Uncle, aren't the southern nobility our own people from the Kingdom? Why are we fighting them?"

"Why?"

Chiwaco shook his head and sighed.

"The nobility from the south, they belong to the old kingdom, not the new one. They are stingy, their tribute for the entire year isn't even close to what our tens of thousands of ploughmen army contribute. So now, His Majesty has taken draconian measures and wants to pluck them clean."

"What!"

Weizti's mouth fell open in surprise as he looked at his uncle. But the uncle squatted down in front of the armory, using the cool shade of the building to leisurely munch on a cactus fruit.

Chiwaco had always stayed in the ploughmen's military camp, looking like an old farmer. But in fact, he had many friends, and was well-connected, with a clear understanding of the kingdom's situation. Huitu Puapu from the Jingji Legion, who commanded two thousand Samurai under Qinchongcan, often visited him for a drink. The details of the southern campaign had come from the mouth of Puapu.

One night, when Puapu got drunk, he even began to speak incoherently about taboo topics, and Chiwaco scolded him severely, finally bringing him to his senses.

Chiwaco squatted and chewed, Weizti stood and watched, and once again, the camp fell into silence. All they could hear were the sounds of the cookhouse steaming corn cakes and the snoring of the Militia from the nearby barracks. Everything was so peaceful, even the sour cactus fruit seemed delightful.

That is, until a deep horn suddenly sounded from the north of the camp.

"Woo... Woo..."

Chiwaco sprung up from the ground "swish," like a cat whose tail had been stepped on. Weizti looked closely to see that, at some unknown moment, his uncle had dropped the fruit and gripped a spear tightly in his hand, displaying a nimbleness that rivaled that of a youngster.

"Eh? Uncle, is that a horn?"

"Shh!"

"Woo... Woo..."

The deep horn sounded again, shaking people's hearts from afar. Chiwaco dashed to the camp entrance in two strides and quickly climbed up a big tree with ropes hanging down, at least ten meters high, with a wooden platform on top for resting. This was the most convenient watchtower; the height of the tree determined the height of the watchtower.

The old Militia stood on the high platform, embracing the tree trunk with one hand and shielding his eyes with the other. He concentrated and looked out, and soon, at the edge of the sky, a dark line appeared. The line was heading south, growing larger and moving swiftly. Then, he finally saw what the dark line was!

"Damn, it's the fearsome northern barbarians!"

Chiwaco's eyes widened in shock, nearly falling from the tree. It was a horde of barbarians, carrying Longbows and Long Spears, with their hair dyed red! Their expressions were ferocious as they rapidly advanced toward the camp!

"Uncle, what do you see?"

Weizti called out, looking up.

Chiwaco didn't reply. Instead, he stretched out his hand vigorously and rang the alarm bell tied to the tree,

"Ding Ding Ding!... Ding Ding Ding!..."

The piercing alarm bell instantly rang out in the camp, spreading far and wide. Weizti also realized the situation. He quickly ran to the center of the training ground, seized the bronze gong, and began to strike it heavily.

"Bang Bang Bang!... Bang Bang Bang!..."

The once calm camp erupted into chaos, like a pot of boiling porridge. Militia were startled from their sleep, some snapped out of their games, and then hurriedly searched for their weapons. Afterward, squad leaders shouted and scolded, gathering their Militia, arranging crude Spear Formations. And the one who scolded the loudest was the old Militia, who somehow had returned to the center of the training ground.

The chaos lasted a full quarter hour before it subsided slightly. The Militia managed to form a rough battle line, armed with Long Spears, defending behind the camp's fences. When the large group of red-haired barbarians charged up to the camp, they were met with a roughly shaped forest of Spears.

"Eh? This military encampment reacts swiftly!"

Black Wolf Torc waved his hand, and the red-haired hunters halted on command. He wore the cloak of a legion commander, had a bronze sword at his waist, and a plume from the commander's helmet stuck into his own. In short, any kingdom officer who saw him would immediately recognize him as one of the five legion commanders.

"Ozoma, how far has the legion marched today?"

"Respected legion commander."

Ozoma bowed his head, speaking deferentially.

"The legion set out at dawn and marched without stopping. Now that noon has passed, we have covered sixty li!"

Black Wolf Torc nodded with satisfaction. A legion of eight thousand, divided into four groups, had marched sixty li in half a day. The pace was indeed astonishing, but such rapid marching was characteristic of the canine descendants.

"Good! We will rest here for half an hour, take in some food and water, and then continue towards the capital city! By this evening, I will report to His Majesty in the capital city!"

"Commander, you are correct!"

Ozoma pondered for a moment, then smiled in agreement. Demonstrating the Guajili Legion's swift movement capabilities to His Majesty would ensure their greater utility in the upcoming war. Then Ozoma quickly stepped forward, and amidst the wary gaze of the encampment militia, he tossed the token to the leading old militiaman.

"Blessed by the Chief Divine! We are the northern Guajili Legion, our general is the unparalleled Black Wolf General! We are summoned by His Majesty from Rivermouth County to the capital city!... Open the camp gate swiftly, prepare food and water! The warriors will rest briefly and then continue southward! There are three more groups of troops behind us!"

Ozoma bellowed to the thousand-plus militia across from him. This was a novel excitement for him – the feeling of wielding greater martial force and authority.

The Guajili Legion, thousands strong, had been marching quickly; only such a military farming camp could provide ample food and water. Although the canine descendants were accustomed to enduring harsh marches and could subsist on cold food and water, it was still more comfortable to have a warm meal when marching within the kingdom's heartlands without concern for safety.

"Uh, the northern Guajili Legion? Why are they all barbarians?"

Chiwaco cautiously pinched the token, turning it over and over again for a long time but finding no trace of forgery. Only when the fierce red-haired barbarians showed impatience did he sheepishly ask.

"Respected sir, why are so many fine warriors suddenly moving south? Our camp has received no news..."

"Ha, as if a messenger could outrun us!"

Ozoma snorted with a smirk. Then, with a fierce look, his hand resting on his war club at his waist, he barked out.

"What are you asking so many questions for? Open the camp gate quickly! The Black Wolf General is waiting outside!"

Chiwaco took a cautious look at Black Wolf and shuddered immediately. That proud face had appeared countless times in his dreams, wielding a longbow to shoot people. Without further doubt, he lowered his head and ordered his men to open the camp gate.

The farming troops gathered their long spears and stepped aside to clear a path. The fierce barbarians poured into the camp like a tide. They seized the cookhouse, cursing and helping themselves, snatching up the prepared cornbread to share. Black Wolf General, surrounded by the flattery of red-haired barbarians, indulged in eating and drinking water, laughing heartily.

"..."

Chiwaco pursed his lips and remained silent. He just looked towards the south, shaking his head.

"Oh, you nobles of the south, ferocious barbarians are heading your way! In a moment, your fur will indeed be stripped away!"

Chapter 708: The Sage Meets the King, Offering Advice and Reporting

October brought the harvest completion, and the Kingdom swiftly marshaled its forces. Qinchongcan City was buzzing with tumult as the horns of war sounded.

The Guajili Legion marched southward from Rivermouth County, covering a hundred miles each day, and reached the military camps outside the Capital City in just two days. The Jingji Legion had 20,000 troops moving southward, stationed to the south of Ihuatzio City. The Jingji Legion under Olosh was ready and could strike at any moment. Within the King's Imperial Guard Legion, an Artillery Camp had been formally incorporated, which currently comprised five hundred gunners, ten Divine Eagle Cannons, and thirty Tiger Squat Cannons. The necessary gunpowder and projectiles were being urgently supplied and would soon be replenished.

As the early sun rose, smoke from cooking fires wafted through the air. The prayer to the Chief Divine resounded in the Capital City, as though the Divine Kingdom had descended to the mortal realm. This was morning prayer, held before the start of breakfast. The sound of prayer, like a grand symphony, drifted into the Palace of Wind, reaching Xiulote's ears and lifting his spirits with a smile.

"Praise the Chief Divine! After years of hardship, the faith in the Chief Divine has finally stabilized in the Capital City."

Following this, the King continued to look down, studying the sandy terrain map in front of him. Although roughly crafted, the map of the southern territory of the Kingdom was very intuitive. The map marked towns, villages, and convenient roads, including those in Zicao County and the southwestern mountain areas.

Around the sand map, three Legion Commanders were gathered: Bertade, Olosh, and Toltec. Meanwhile, Ezpan from the Second Spear Legion had been constantly stationed at the southernmost part of Jingji, ever vigilant toward the nobles of the south. The group had been discussing through the night and were now somewhat exhausted. Servant girls then brought sour-sweet honey floral tea and sticky purple figs as refreshments to alleviate fatigue.

At that moment, a trusted aide came from outside the great hall and reported with a bow.

"Your Majesty, the Chief Minister, Sage Jatili, requests an audience!"

Hearing this, Xiulote was a bit surprised. He glanced at the sky; the sun had just risen, so why so early?

"Quickly, invite the Sage into the hall!"

"As you command, Your Majesty."

The trusted aide was about to leave when the King changed his mind.

"No, I shall personally greet him at the hall's entrance!"

Having been on a northern campaign for two years, the prosperity and harmony of the Capital City, the Lake Region, and the entire Kingdom, were all thanks to the governance of Sage Jatili and the Preaching Priesthood. In other words, the Preaching Priesthood was effectively managing the Kingdom as "Civil Officials," and the Chief Minister was essentially the Kingdom's "Prime Minister." Although their power had been significantly diminished in the Kingdom's military system, their roles were irreplaceable.

After all, Xiulote couldn't expect the military nobles to manage the whole country well. Neither did he wish to entrust the state governance to military commanders.

Outside the great hall, Jatili appeared stern, holding the Sage's staff and draped in the robe of the Chief Priest. His meticulous and ethereal demeanor commanded immediate respect. Upon seeing the King approaching briskly, he solemnly bowed in salutation.

"Your Majesty, I pay my respects!"

"Respected Sage, the day has just dawned, and here you are."

Xiulote said warmly, smiling.

"I have yet to break my fast; why not join me for breakfast in the palace?"

Jatili bowed deeply.

"Your Majesty, I request a private audience with you!"

"Ah! A private audience?"

Xiulote was somewhat surprised. He pondered briefly, guessing the other's intent, and found it somewhat troublesome. In the entire Kingdom, probably only Chief Jatili and the Preaching Priesthood were cautious about the war.

On one hand, many elites from Prepetcha had joined the Kingdom's Preaching Priesthood, maintaining connections with nobles across the south, and their resolution in dealing with the south was not firm. On the other hand, launching a war would consume substantial financial and material resources, leading to further strengthening of the military nobles' power. A war within the Kingdom would also severely reduce trade taxes. Many foreign merchants in the Capital City had already sensed the impending conflict and left the Kingdom early. All of this was detrimental to the governance by "Civil Officials"...

"Indeed. I request a private audience with you!"

Jatili waited a moment, then knelt on the ground, making his request once more.

"Very well, as the Sage wishes!"

Xiulote quickly stepped forward to help the Chief Minister to his feet. Then, as he led the Sage into the hall, he instructed.

"Olosh, Toltec, you may return to the legion to prepare. Bertade, you stand guard outside the hall!"

The Head Warrior hesitated, glancing at the stern-faced Sage, then headed outside. The two other Legion Commanders also took their leave. The surrounding trusted aides dispersed, and soon only two were left in the great hall.

Jatili knelt on a hide mat, giving the occasion a solemn air. Xiulote also felt compelled to kneel opposite him.

After a few moments, the Sage calmly inquired.

"Your Majesty, do you intend to lead the army southward?"

The King responded frankly.

"Exactly."

"What is your intent?"

"To rectify the south."

"Your Majesty!"

Jatili sighed.

"The south is part of the Kingdom. Why must you mobilize such a large army and even summon the fierce Canine Descendants Legion?"

"Sage."

Xiulote replied gravely.

"This is a matter of great military and state importance; it cannot be avoided."

"Your Majesty, please heed my words: You are acting too hastily."

Jatili bowed and spoke earnestly.

"The Kingdom has just begun to stabilize after the northern campaign, which was a massive drain. Accommodating the Canine Descendants, rewarding military achievements, the treasury is already depleted. You have also formed new legions and produced new weapons... with a population of 700,000 supporting a standing army of 30,000, the treasury is entirely reliant on trade. And yet, merchants from every country come from the south; worried about the conflict, they have started to leave the kingdom, and trade tax revenues have plummeted..."

"... The southern nobles have become fearful; they are now conscripting samurai and able-bodied men, hoarding grain and fortifying strongholds. They had no intention of rebelling, so why force them into war? If the war drags on and delays next year's spring plowing... I fear the foundations of the Kingdom may be shaken, and collapse could be imminent!..."

Chapter 709: The Sage Meets the King, Offering Advice and Reporting_2

Hearing this, Xiulote remained silent. After a while, he finally spoke.

"Sage, the kingdom has just begun to prosper, there should not be such haste. Yet, the arrow is on the bow, and I must shoot. The promise of feudal appointments upon the Western conquest is unfulfilled to this day. Southern Nobility secretly ally with each other, impeding the spread of faith and occupying the water routes southward..."

"Sage, do you know? In Zicao County, which has a population of two hundred thousand, the Zicao and Palm families alone account for sixty thousand! The rest of the dozen or so Great Nobility control at least a few thousand each, some even tens of thousands. Over eighty percent of the land and population are in the hands of these Great Nobility. And they neither pay tribute nor taxes, each commanding their samurai, making me feel like there's a fishbone in my throat that must be removed!"

This time, it was Jatili's turn to fall silent. He cast his eyes down for a long while before he advised again.

"Your Majesty, you once said that governing a great country is like cooking a small fish in a lake, after controlling the heat, what follows is a slow wait. I deeply agree and have always kept it in my heart! I am but a rotten wood, mostly buried in the ground, and even I am not rushed. Your Highness is just a new sprout, like the sun at dawn, why the rush?..."

Xiulote shook his head, did not reply, but his expression was resolute.

Jatili sighed, his voice full of deep concern, his face showing fatigue.

"Your Majesty, governing the kingdom is like the growth of the Divine Tree. The Divine Tree roots in the soil, it is only when it is deeply rooted and lush that it becomes stable and enduring. If it is top-heavy, with shallow roots but flourishing branches and leaves, the more it grows, the more dangerous it becomes. I spend day and night trying to consolidate the hearts of the people, to promote education and integrate culture, to solidify the foundation... yet I cannot keep up with the pace at which the branches flourish, and I often feel anxious."

"Your Majesty, why not wait just a little longer? Look, as the Divine Tree grows, within a hundred meters all small trees naturally wither. Because the Divine Tree receives sunlight from the sky, absorbs the vitality from the earth, coming with great momentum, showing no flaws. It always works silently, eliminating everything, ultimately remaining unshakable!"

Xiulote nodded, yet did not respond. Accumulating silently and exploiting sparingly is the righteous path. Given a choice, he too wished for "building high walls, storing abundant food, claiming kingship slowly". Yet... the King smiled calmly and said.

"Sage, there are many paths in the world. This time during my northern campaign, I saw a forest fire. The fire roared fiercely, devouring everything, turning vast stretches of forest into ashes! Then, on my return, I saw new sprouts emerging everywhere above the ashes, growing vigorously day and night. And the sunlight from the sky, the vitality from the soil, all belonged to the new sprouts."

Hearing the underlying meaning in the King's words, Jatili was startled. He immediately said.

"Your Majesty, how can a mere mortal harness a forest fire? I have also seen wildfires, their ferocity devours everything, leaving no way out. One careless moment, and it may consume oneself and others together... Additionally, among the trees in the mountains, there are also good woods, which are also your citizens!"

Xiulote shook his head again.

"Sage, among the mountain trees, many are rotten, covered with parasitic vines and mushrooms. They are fundamentally crooked. If they are not completely knocked down, there will be no space for new

sprouts to receive sunlight and dew! I only wish to personally plant new sprouts and watch them thrive!"

Jatili pondered for a long time, then finally advised.

"Your Majesty, the Zicao family has approached me, intending to offer their daughter as your concubine. The Palm family has done the same. If Your Majesty promises, they are willing to hand over half of their population and land, in exchange for peace with the kingdom."

Xiulote lowered his eyes, thought for a while, and shook his head.

"No. These people have established no merit, how can they rest as equals with the kingdom? I have made up my mind. A King's resolve is unshakable!"

Jatili looked complex, remained silent for a long time. He finally sighed.

"Since Your Majesty has made up your mind, I shall follow. The southern nobility once gave gifts of several chests of wealth, which I have not touched at all, all handed over to the Preaching Priesthood... I only worry that the fierce heat may last too long, destroying old trees completely, and the new sprouts failing to emerge!"

Upon hearing this, Xiulote smiled confidently.

"Sage, you need not worry! To me, the southern Nobility are like bones in the soil. Once the army arrives, they will undoubtedly submit! Those who dare to resist have no stronghold, all face a dead end!"

"Your Majesty, what if the Tekos Barbarians in the southwestern mountains get involved?"

"It does not matter. Before the northern campaign, I still had some worries, but now, with the establishment of the Guajili Legion and the Artillery Camp, the tribal encampments in the mountains no longer pose an obstacle!"

After finishing, Xiulote reached out and grabbed the Sage's arm.

"This time, in order to reassure the hearts of the people in the south, I must ask for the Sage's assistance again!"

Jatili nodded, with a mix of regret and relief.

"Your Majesty's resolve is unshakable, as high as the Divine Eagle and as broad as the sun. As an old servant, I naturally support Your Highness. I have sent students to contact the priests and chieftains in villages everywhere. Now, even if they are reluctant to respond to Your Majesty, they will not oppose you. And when Your Majesty establishes dominance, they will naturally know how to choose."

"Good, very good!"

Xiulote was quite satisfied. Even a lion uses its full strength to catch a rabbit. Being able to divide the enemy before taking action is certainly the best choice.

"Your Majesty, your old servant has a request."

Jatili knelt in deference.

Xiulote calmly accepted it and smiled.

"Whatever the Sage requests, as long as it doesn't contravene the major strategies of the kingdom, I can agree to it!"

"Thank you, Your Majesty!"

Jatili said profoundly.

"I also ask Your Majesty to leave a way out for the people in the south."

"Rest assured, Sage. I am not a man keen on slaughter; I have already left them a way out."

Xiulote smiled and took out a scroll from his robe, handing it to Jatili.

"Please have a look, Sage."

Jatili opened the scroll, and at the very top were five big characters: "Decree of Reduction and Reform". He was already fluent in the language, quickly finished reading it, and nodded gently.

"Your Majesty is merciful!"

The two exchanged a few more words of small talk, and then the Sage stood up, bowed, and took his leave. This important and sudden audience had finally concluded. A consensus was finally reached in all quarters of the kingdom.

At the end of October, after the spring plowing was completed, the autumn tributes from various places were successively submitted. The autumn tribute from Zicao County was still very meager. The King finally ordered the Jingji Legion, the Guajili Legion, and the Second Spear Legion to head south simultaneously, entering into Zicao County!

The nobles in the south were greatly alarmed. The various clan leaders mobilized their private soldiers, gathered their able-bodied men, and were on guard day and night. The nobles in the southwest even fled into the mountains and built fortified villages to defend themselves.

At the beginning of November, Xiulote personally led the Imperial Guard Legion south from the capital to the small town of Aotuo. Kulamo City and the Qinchongcan Capital were 320 miles apart, this place being the midpoint between them. The Imperial Guard Legion immediately set up camp and raised the Royal Banner.

Then, the King issued an order, summoning the nobles, clan leaders, and chieftains from the south: they were to come to the site of the Royal Banner within ten days to have an audience with the King!

Chapter 710: Southern Nobility

The Tarsas River originates from the mountains of Tlaxcala and flows westward for over a thousand miles, forming the wide Atoyac Lake in the southern part of the Kingdom. In the local language, Atoyac means "Great Lake."

The Atoyac Great Lake spans hundreds of miles with its vast expanse, where busy canoes traverse, linking the north and south of the Great Lake, trading goods from all directions.

To the south of the Great Lake are endless undulating mountains and forests, scattered among them are the Tekos Tribes, calling the land below their feet Sakatura. Further east from Sakatura is the newly acquired mountainous region of Weytamo by the Alliance. On the north shore of the Great Lake are the rarely seen fertile plains, where Prepetcha's villages are rich and bustling, with thousands of acres of farmland collectively sustaining a major lakeside city.

That is the trade center for all the southern Tribes, Zicao County Government, Kulamo City. The city boasts a population of over twenty thousand, numerous Temples, and a massive trade market, making it the most prosperous place within a two-hundred mile radius.

East of Kulamo City lies an exceptionally spacious Manor. This area is densely wooded and vividly landscaped, evidently long tended with care. Beautiful broken trees flourish outside the Manor, majestic dahlias bloom within, and hundreds of Samurai are stationed throughout the premises.

Entering the Manor, the architectural style is quite luxurious, built on a foundation of White Stone and red rock, embellished with Gold and Silver, incorporating many features of the people of the East. Along the garden path, deep inside, stands a solemn main hall. At this moment, a group of southern Great Nobility dressed in fine clothes, sit surrounded, facing each other in silence.

The main hall, built of blue stone, has a skylight separated by a thin veil, and walls adorned with painted deities, quite spacious within. The seating arrangement inside is orderly; seated directly in the center are two middle-aged Nobility. On the left, a Nobility with a handsome visage and lean figure, carries a restrained grandeur. On the right, a Nobility with a full face and stocky build, has a fierce demeanor.

The heavy silence lasted for a long time before the stocky Nobility could no longer hold back. He looked at the handsome Nobility and angrily asked,

"By the three Gods! Zicao Clan Leader Guramo, will you join me in taking up arms or not!"

Guramo pondered for a moment, then calmly responded to the stocky Nnobility,

"By the three Gods! Palm Clan Leader Zotol, with tens of thousands of Royal Army troops marching south, raising troops now is simply a no-win situation!"

"Bah! What of tens of thousands?"

Zotol spat vehemently, his voice ice-cold.

"Guramo! Violent robbers seek your men and land; are you really going to open your doors wide and hand over the legacy left by your ancestors?"

Upon hearing this, Guramo's expression changed, and he lowered his head without a word.

Zicao Clan Leader Zotol waited a moment but received no reply. He decisively stood up, addressing the Great Nnobility in the hall,

"We are the Nnobility of the Tarasco Kingdom! This land has belonged to our generations! How can we simply hand over what our ancestors left us!... Let us pick up our weapons and fight to the end against the invaders from the North!"

"Palm Clan Leader is right, let's fight those Northern Barbarians to the end!"

The atmosphere in the hall grew even heavier. Some young Nnobility stood up, loudly cheering in agreement, while more Nnobility remained silent.

Seeing this, Guramo sighed and spoke softly,

"Guramo, it's not yet that stage! The King has summoned us to Aotuo, surely there will be decrees issued. Perhaps we can negotiate... even if we have to give up thirty to fifty percent of our lands, if it can secure the Kingdom's promise, it would be acceptable!"

"Right, it's not settled yet, is it? Maybe the King is just levying a Tribute!"

"Indeed, the King has just returned from the northern campaign; he must rest for a couple of years. We can pay a Tribute for peace."

"Let's go meet the King first and hear the Kingdom's decree..."

Most of the Nobility then began to speak, and a disordered chorus of agreement sounded in the great hall. The Kingdom's southern region had long been peaceful, and the Great Nobility enjoyed the commercial benefits of the Tarsas River, exceedingly wealthy. They had preserved themselves from the brutal campaigns in the west and still felt fortuitous.

"Ha! You bunch of cowardly fools, still thinking about an audience! The King from the North is coming down with tens of thousands of Samurai, do you think he's here for a getaway?!"

Zotol looked around at everyone, cursing resentfully.

"The Samurai and Militia in my territory have been fully mobilized, ready to fight to the death with the Mexica! You haven't even raised your troops yet; what will you use to resist when the enemy is at your doorstep? Or do you plan to be the fish in the pot, meekly stewed?!"

Hearing this, Guramo's eyebrows rose as he looked toward Zotol.

"Zotol, aren't you going to listen to what the King has to say?"

"Listen to hell! I came here today to find you cowards and take action together!"

Zotol's face turned beet red.

"There are a thousand Mexica stationed in Kulamo City. I've brought five hundred Samurai; we can join forces and clean them out, taking control of Kulamo City! Guramo, I ask you one last time, are you in or not?"

"...Zotol, the time is not right yet."

Guramo replied in an even tone, rejecting the proposal.

"Kulamo City is full of our people; we could take it anytime. The key now is the tens of thousands of Northern Royal Army... We should first meet the King and hear his decree."

"Ha! Ha!"

Zotol, fuming with rage, laughed mockingly.

"Guramo, are you planning to bring your rose-daughter, Medina, to see the King with you?"

Upon hearing this, Guramo's eyes drooped, and his voice turned cold.

"Zotol, not everyone is like you. Your family is near the southwestern mountains, closely connected with the Tekos Barbarians. If you really can't resist, you can still lead your people into the mountains. We, however, have no defense and our roots are all on the plains by the lake."

"Ha!"

Zotol scoffed and looked away from Guramo. He surveyed the other Nobility, asking,

"And what about you? Surely you don't all have a rose-like daughter like Guramo!"

Most of the Nobility still shook their heads silently. The elder noble, Xiteli, advised in a low voice.

"Zotol, we understand what you're saying. Everyone is mobilizing, it's just the situation right now... let's wait a bit longer."

"Then keep waiting! A bunch of howler monkeys waiting for death!"

Zotol turned and left directly. Before leaving, he continued to mock,

"No, you're not even as good as howler monkeys! Even they know to make noise before they die! You are like ants' eggs, just scoop out and eat right up!..."

"Hey, Zotol, where are you going?!"

The elder noble, Xiteli, shouted as he followed behind.

"I'm returning to my fief to move the women and children into the southwestern mountains! Our brave mountain warriors will kill all the invaders in the rugged forests... no matter how many there are! Roar!"

Zotol roared lastly and strode out of the grand hall. Some nobles from the southwest left with him.

The grand hall fell into a dead silence. After a while, Guramo rubbed his forehead and forced a smile,

"Well then! Let's go have an audience with the King first, but do not stop mobilizing everyone in the fief, be prepared on both fronts."

The Great Nobility murmured a few agreements and exchanged some meaningless platitudes, then stood to leave. The old noble, Xiteli, intentionally stayed back. When no one else was around, he approached Guramo and asked softly.

"Guramo, there are many Prepetcha nobles in the northern Royal Army... how well have you contacted them? Can you persuade them?"

Hearing this, Guramo's brow furrowed instantly, and his pupils constricted. While reaching for his Short Dagger at his waist, he asked with a smile,

"Xiteli, from whom did you hear this news?"

"Ha! Guramo, being tied up and killed is not your style. I watched you grow up. Zotol is just a noisy baboon. You, however, are a deadly viper!"

The elderly Xiteli chuckled and watched Guramo's hand, also securing his own Long Dagger at his waist.

"My fief is north of you, how could I not know about the envoys you sent out... Besides, at this point, what secrets do we have between us? Surely, you're not thinking of succeeding alone?"

Upon hearing this, Guramo slowly let go of his hand and smiled faintly.

"Xiteli, you old crow, your eyes are indeed sharp... they have all accepted gifts, and some have agreed. But given the current situation, none can be relied on..."

"That's also true. Things have come to this point, and previous agreements can't hold. Now in every village of the different Tribes, northern rural Sages can often be seen. It's possible that the Chieftains are also having other thoughts."

Xiteli shook his head and sighed softly.

"Truly, I envy Zotol, having the deep forests to hide in; I also envy you for having a beautiful daughter. And here I am, this old bundle of bones, unable to rely on anything!"

After speaking, the old crow Xiteli turned and left, staggering out the door. Guramo silently watched as his figure disappeared. After a long while, he murmured in response,

"Old crow, I envy you too. Having no choice, you needn't suffer like this."

Afterward, the handsome Guramo stood up, slowly pacing in the empty grand hall, admiring the vibrant murals.

The murals on the four walls featured many bare-skinned dancing spirits and many provocatively posed women. The style of these paintings was actually more inclined towards Maya, a kind of indulgent extravagance. The Zicao Family, in a land of abundance, had diverged from their northern kin for over two hundred years. Generation after generation, the Family Heads lived sumptuously, delighting in beauty and dances, deeply influenced by the customs of the southern City-States.

After a long while, Guramo finally looked around at his trusted aides and ordered in a deep voice,

"Go, summon Medina and the musicians!"