

Civilization 741

Chapter 741: East and West of the Mountains_2

Kimari's grain shortage made it impossible to keep people's loyalty. He begrudgingly nodded in agreement, and two thousand allied forces left on the same day. Thereafter, he left two thousand warriors from the smaller tribes to block the enemy at the mountain pass. The remaining eight thousand tribesmen quickly headed south, straight toward Hand Snake City.

At the beginning of the month, the allied forces finally returned to the Hand Snake Basin, only to find villages turned to ashes along the way. Everyone was on edge, and upon arriving at Hand Snake City, they were greeted by ruins and the sight of thousands of male skulls piled up into a chilling spectacle!

The strong men of the tribes were gone, the women and children in the city were gone, the chieftain's hall was gone, the wooden houses were gone... and most crucially, the granaries filled with grain were also gone!

Chieftain Kimari rushed into the city and, upon seeing the burnt granaries, was struck as if by lightning. Those granaries had stored several years' worth of grain, enough to feed fifty thousand people for a year! Without the grain, the situation would be more terrifying than losing thousands of warriors. It was a dreadful outcome that the allied forces could not endure!

After inspecting the granaries, Kimari became frantic. He led the tribal warriors himself, sifting through the ashes from dawn until dusk, only to find a scant amount of scorched grain. The nearby villages had been destroyed, and the hill people had fled, leaving no grain to be requisitioned.

Now it was time for the dusk of the hero's journey, the end of the road. Kimari was only the leader of the Tribal Alliance, maintaining control over the various tribes through prestige and strength. However, at this moment, with no victory from the campaign, no spoils from plundering, and the city destroyed, his prestige was nearly gone. Once the people's hearts scattered, they could not be restrained.

Eight thousand allied troops gathered in Hand Snake City, with only enough personal grain supplies to last another seven or eight days. When the various tribes learned that the granaries were empty, the last bit of their morale dissipated. That day, more than three thousand tribal warriors left, with the majority heading towards the southeastern mountains to return to their hometowns. A small number of smaller tribes fled northwest, seeking relief from the western Colima tribes.

And so, under the sudden attack from behind by the Black Wolf, more than ten thousand brave warriors of the Tekos allied forces gradually disbanded without a major battle. In a few days, only over four thousand warriors from the Shield Tribe remained in Hand Snake City; the other summoned tribes all dispersed.

Kimari dispatched envoys, pleading for help from the Colima tribes over two hundred miles away, promising land and tribal allegiance, and expressing willingness to submit to the Noble Chief of Colima. Meanwhile, he sent tribal warriors into the jungle to hunt, and stealthily set up a concealed slaughterhouse within the city, quietly converting the gathered weak and old into food.

The four thousand warriors stayed in the Hand Snake Basin, suffering immensely yet relying on Hand Snake City's defenses, unable to leave as the Black Wolf ravaged the rear.

For, to the north of the basin, tracks of thousands of red-haired barbarians appeared once again. These barbarians from the North pursued relentlessly, like a greedy and persistent pack of wolves. The grain-deprived tribal army, if it retreated southwards, would likely scatter quickly under the pursuit of the wolves. And the two thousand Tekos warriors guarding the rear were certainly devoured by the pack.

"The autumn wind sighs, and the yellow leaves fall from the mountains. I thought I was an evergreen pine, but it turns out I'm just a decaying shrub on the mountain top... The last hope of the trees lies in the mountains to the West..."

As the morning sun rose and the chilly mountain wind whipped up leaves, Kimari stood bitterly on the city walls, gazing westward like a stiff wooden sculpture.

The tribes of the western Colima were his only hope. Even though they had not gotten along in the past, now, faced with the pressure of the Northern Kingdom, they should unite. Well, submission is also a form of alliance.

"...Two months ago, I had an army of over ten thousand, tens of thousands of tribal citizens, wealthy cities, plentiful grain, unparalleled prestige with one call to mobilize all tribes. And now... Ah! Black Wolf, I will kill you!! Roar! Roar!!"

The Chieftain Kimari stood for a moment, his face twisting into a ferocious agony. He growled low like a wild beast until a middle-aged Noble Chief came hastening over, his own younger brother, the Herbs Elder Malina.

"Brother, last night, another hundred or more tribal warriors fled!"

Elder Malina looked somber, reporting the grim news as soon as he arrived.

"Damn it!"

Chieftain Kimari cursed softly, his anger silently withdrawing, replaced by a calm that seemed to know what was to come. In the jungle of wolves, a Wolf King that loses its majesty will be devoured, and the tribes are just like the jungle.

"Malina, my brother, go and appease the tribal warriors for me! Tell them we have enough grain for one more month, that the western Colima tribes have agreed to support us, and that the first batch of support grain is already on its way!"

Elder Malina opened his mouth to speak, then hesitated. Now at the end of January, the tribe's grain stores had already been depleted. The warriors were eating suspicious meat and insects, chewing on barely filling leaves and bark—how could they be deceived?

The envoy to Fire River City also returned without success. The Colima tribes were in disarray, never reaching an agreement. The Noble Chief of Colima did give an unacceptable condition: it was to let the Shield Tribe migrate west and join the Colima tribes.

"Brother, the red-haired barbarians from the North attack the city day and night, and the warriors' hearts are in disorder. Support from Fire River City is also uncertain as to when it will arrive."

Elder Malina spoke hesitantly, in a low voice.

"At this point, the demise of the Palm Family seems inevitable. Our southwestern tribes do not have such deep-seated hatred with the Northern Kingdom... The Northern Kingdom, no matter how powerful,

cannot directly manage a seven-hundred-mile mountain region. Wouldn't they have to allow the mountain tribes autonomy?"

Upon hearing this, Chieftain Kimari turned abruptly, staring coldly.

"Malina, what do you want to say?"

"Elder brother, as long as the Northern Kingdom is willing to cease hostilities and provide some food support... Even if it means our tribes must once again submit to the North, and regularly pay tribute and labor, just like in the era of the Tarasco Kingdom, it's not unacceptable... as long as the tribes can survive..."

"Malina, my brother, the Northern Kingdom is ferociously cruel, a beast that devours without spitting out the bones! They don't even spare their own nobility!"

Chieftain Kimari replied coldly.

"Just look at what they do! They set fire to Hand Snake City, burn all the food they can't take, destroy all the villages, leaving behind nothing but brutal atrocities... They want our lives, where is there any chance they will spare us!"

"...Elder brother..."

"No more!"

Chieftain Kimari suppressed his anger and shouted sternly.

"You may leave!"

"Yes."

Fear was evident on Elder Malina's face. With his head lowered, he turned and left. Soon, the roar of a wild beast sounded from behind.

Hearing his elder brother's roar, Elder Malina paused, his expression changing. After a moment, he pursed his lips and silently walked towards the center of the city.

The houses in the city had been burned down, and people were either living in grass nests and straw huts or cloth tents and wooden sheds. He passed the grass nests and straw huts where the warriors gathered, exchanged a few words, and then left amidst complaints such as, "We can't get enough to eat!" and "When is the food arriving?" Then, with his head bowed, he walked to his own cloth tent.

The quiet before the tent was unnerving, and the two warriors who should have been on guard were nowhere to be seen. Elder Malina stood for a moment, eyes downcast, before finally lifting the cloth curtain and entering.

"Malina, you've finally come back!"

The pungent smell of herbs rushed at him. A burly, middle-aged Noble Chief was sitting cross-legged inside the tent. With blue-green patterns carved on his face, birds and beasts painted on his arms, and his hair intentionally cut short, he reminded one of the jungle at a glance.

"Hunting Elder Topupan, why have you come so early? Get up, don't sit on my herbs!"

Elder Malina's tone was cold and his face grim. As the Elder in charge of herbs, he managed the Tribe's herbs, while Topupan, who also held the position of an Elder managing hunting, was also a famous leader among the Tribal Warriors.

"What am I doing? Haha, you know very well."

Elder Topupan laughed, not moving an inch. Then, his face turned serious, and he asked in a deep voice.

"What did Kimari say?"

"...Elder brother disagrees. He says the Northern Kingdom won't leave us alone. He's also waiting for aid from the various factions of Colima."

"Haha! The Northern Kingdom won't leave us alone? No, it's only him, the chieftain, they won't leave alone!"

Elder Topupan laughed coldly.

"Aid from the factions of Colima is nothing but swallowing us whole! Then not a single person from our Shield Tribe will be left, completely divided up by others. Besides, the Northern Kingdom has long dispatched warriors to attack the roads to the west. Even if the tribes wanted to migrate, they would have to be able to go first!"

Elder Malina remained silent. After a long while, he finally spoke up, accepting the verdict of fate.

"Speak, what are the terms from the other side?"

Chapter 742: The Jungle of the Tribes

Day gave way to night, and the passage of several days was marked by the relentless cycle of the rising sun and setting moon. The beasts of the jungle, driven to madness by hunger, were then hunted and captured by the hunters, even more starved than the prey, turning into nourishment within their bellies, quelling their desperate cravings.

Under the deep cover of the night, bonfires lit up throughout Hand Snake City, yet tranquility filled the air. The tribal warriors, bellies rumbling, had to retire early to sleep, hoping to satiate their hunger in dreams. In the heart of the small city stood the large tent of Chieftain Kimari, and beside it, a flag bearing the shield insignia of tribal heritage quietly billowed in the night wind.

Tonight, no guards stood watch outside the chieftain's tent. From a distance, the bright glow of a bonfire could be seen. The fire, casting upon the tent's canvas, revealed the silhouettes of two people sitting opposite each other in silence, engulfed in a stillness as profound as death. If one listened closely, only the rustling of the night breeze from the sky above, the crackling of the burning fire, and the barely perceptible sound of running water could be heard.

After a long while, one of the figures slowly knelt to the ground. Elder Malina's eyes brimmed with tears, unable to form a sound.

"Brother, our tribe has fallen into dire straits and we are forced to make a choice!... The Northern Kingdom is exceptionally powerful, with tens of thousands of elite warriors, and they come bearing the resolve to conquer—a force that the Tekos people cannot withstand. Before such a mighty kingdom, the tribes of Colima to the west can only fend for themselves. But they too are greedy and seek to devour our beasts!..."

At this point, Elder Malina's emotions grew agitated. Suddenly, he stood up and roared in a low voice.

"Brother, the tribe lacks food, the warriors feed on our own people, and the morale is utterly shattered. The red-haired barbarians lurk mere tens of miles away, waiting for the day our tribe falls. For the tribe's survival, for the continuation of our heritage's flag, we must choose to surrender to the Northern Kingdom!... No matter how harsh their terms or how greedy their tribute... as long as they allow us to dwell in the fertile basin and permit the tribe's self-governance, these conditions are acceptable, and all sacrifices will be worthwhile!..."

With emotions running high, Elder Malina spoke at length. Chieftain Kimari remained seated quietly, not uttering a word. He simply stared with wide-open eyes, unwavering, at his younger brother before him.

It was a good while later before Elder Malina finished venting. He sighed, took two steps forward, and tightly embraced Chieftain Kimari, then gently reached out to close the wide-open eyes of his brother.

"Brother, please don't look at me like that! I have no choice but to do this! I am only trying to free you from this hopeless situation for the sake of our tribe. From the day Hand Snake City was destined to burn, your fate was sealed... Our ancestors will forgive me, our father will forgive me, and you will forgive me too, right?..."

Elder Malina's voice gradually grew softer until it was barely audible. Then, he released his embrace, took a step back, and quietly watched his brother with closed eyes. Abruptly, he thrust his hand forward, forcefully pulling out the dagger from the heart of the other.

The once faint sound of flowing water suddenly grew louder, like a bubbling stream. Chieftain Kimari's body, having lost its balance, slumped to the ground. Beneath him, a small pool of blood had formed. All his life force had long since drained into the deep earth.

"Brother, I will take over as Chieftain of the Shield Tribe and submit to the Northern Kingdom. Just as a wolf pack in the jungle cannot be without a leader, with the old Wolf King dead, a new one must rise!"

Elder Malina, tears streaming down his face, wore a smile tinged with sorrow and unrestrained joy.

"Brother, rest in peace. Your head will go north to see the sights of the Northern Kingdom for me, to see the King of the North for me. I will carry on your will, bide my time, and wait for the tribe to rise again, waiting for a new opportunity..."

Elder Malina murmured to himself, patiently waiting in the tent, no longer looking at his deceased brother.

By now, on the canopy of the tent, only one shadow remained. And unbeknownst to when, several dozen tribal warriors had appeared outside the tent, restoring silence once more, even the sound of blood flowing eventually ceased. After a quarter of an hour, a few trusted aides hurriedly arrived at the entrance of the chieftain's tent, their short spears stained with blood.

"Elder, we have returned."

"How did it go?"

"Everything went smoothly."

"Good! Come in and tell me."

The leader of the trusted aides, carrying a short spear, lifted the tent flap and entered. He glanced at the dead body of the chieftain, bowed slightly, but his face showed no hint of sadness.

The tribe is the jungle. A Wolf King who fails to hunt or even loses his den forfeits all dignity. And a Wolf King without dignity is fated to be devoured by the wolves of the jungle!

"Elder, as per your orders, the War Elder is dead, and those present have been silenced. The hundreds of war guards are still unaware of the changes, still standing watch to the west of the city."

"Hmm, good."

Elder Malina nodded subtly, the sorrow returning to his face. The War Elder was his younger brother, fiercely loyal to his elder brother and in control of several hundred of the tribe's elite guards. After the death of the chieftain, the War Elder became his greatest threat—in every possible way.

"From now on, call me Chieftain."

After a moment of silence, Elder Malina sighed. Then, the expressions of mixed grief and joy faded from his face, leaving only the depths of cold indifference.

"Where is the Hunting Elder Topupan?"

"Chieftain, Elder Topupan is also making his move in the city. Before I came here, I saw fires and heard the cries of battle from the encampments of the southern chieftains."

Chapter 743: The Jungle of the Tribes_2

Upon hearing the news, Malina rose to her feet, turned her ear to listen, and faint sounds of shouting and killing drifted from the south.

Inside and outside of Hand Snake City, there were about four thousand tribal warriors, who in fact belonged to different clan leaders and chieftains. The chieftain and the war elder commanded the elite of sixteen hundred clans, the hunting elder had four to five hundred tribal huntsmen, while he had only a little over a hundred ordinary warriors in his hands. As for the remaining one to two thousand people, they were scattered under the control of ordinary elders and chieftains, who lived in the safest part of the city to the south.

"Send a few men to summon the guards of the chieftains from the north of the city! Tell them to abandon the defense of the north and come to the chieftain's tent for escort as quickly as possible. Then dispatch an envoy... no, go yourself to ask Elder Topupan to come over!"

"Okay, I'll personally go to the south of the city!"

The leader of the trusted aides nodded and was about to leave the tent.

"Wait a moment."

Malina thought for a moment and spoke in a low voice.

"If Topupan refuses to come, tell him the chieftain is gravely injured and has fled, his whereabouts unknown. He must come quickly to discuss the matter!"

The leader of the trusted aides hesitated, looking at Malina.

"Chieftain? Are we going to..."

Malina nodded, a murderous intent emerging on his face.

"Tell the chieftain's guards that Elder Topupan has killed the chieftain and the war elder. I have lost a brother and a brother... I will chop off Topupan's head to avenge my noble kin!"

"I understand!"

The leader of the trusted aides realized what was happening, bowed his head in respect. The chieftain still had to lead the tribe, and tonight's sin needed someone to bear it. Elder Topupan was the perfect choice and a new threat.

"Go quickly!"

"By your command!"

The leader of the trusted aides lifted the tent flap, arranging for several envoys to go to the nearer north of the city, while he personally went to the farther south. Malina sat cross-legged in the tent, waiting once more. He suppressed an inexplicable excitement and restlessness, gazing at the dead Kimari chieftain, muttering under his breath.

"Brother, your spirit should not have flown far. I am your blood brother, between Topupan and me, you must protect me!..."

"Swoosh, swoosh, swoosh!"

Not long after, the whistle of bone arrows suddenly reached Malina's ears. Then, the familiar screams rose, those of the trusted aides outside.

"What's happening!"

Malina's face suddenly changed. He quickly donned the chieftain's leather armor and took up the sharp copper spear. This leather armor and copper spear had come as trade support from the Palm Family before.

"Swoosh, swoosh, swoosh!"

Another flurry of fierce arrows rained down, with several piercing into the tent! Next came the intense shouting of hundreds, shaking the entirety of Hand Snake City.

"Malina has assassinated the chieftain! Elder Topupan is leading men to quell the turmoil!"

"Malina has assassinated the chieftain! Elder Topupan is leading men to quell the turmoil!"

Hearing the shouts, Malina turned pale. He dashed out of the tent, only to see dozens of trusted aides lying dead on the ground, the remaining ten to twenty men guarding the tent, engaged in combat with hundreds of tribal huntsmen. The burly Elder Topupan brandished a bow and arrow, with a still bleeding head hanging at his waist. Malina's eyes widened as he took a closer look at the face, and it was indeed the leader of the trusted aides who had left not long before.

"Topupan?!... You, you despicable old wolf!..."

"Swoosh!"

A sharply whistled bone arrow, long awaiting its moment, struck Malina squarely in the throat's vital spot. Then the bone arrow slightly paused and, with a "thwack," went right through!

"Heh heh..."

Malina struggled to stretch out a hand, pointing at a familiar figure. He "heh heh" roared, but could not utter any words.

"Whoosh!"

Moments later, another bone arrow struck, hitting Malina right in the eye. The obsidian arrowhead pierced through his eyeball and into his skull!

"Ah!"

Finally, Malina was able to speak, a shrill and piercing scream tearing through his throat. Then, he swayed and fell to the ground with a "thud," his head twisted at an angle, motionless. And his other eye, still open in reluctant defiance.

The cruel skirmish outside the tent lasted only a moment before abruptly stopping. Elder Topupan slowly stowed his longbow, a victor's smile on his face. With calm steps, he moved beside Malina's body, crouching down and whispering with a smile.

"Respected Elder Malina, thank you! Thank you for killing the Chieftain and the War Elder for the tribe. And I killed you to avenge them, rightfully becoming the next Chieftain..."

"...From now on, I will be a hereditary noble of the Kingdom, given fiefdoms in the Hand Snake basin! I will lead the various tribes of the Ko'alkoman mountains, swear fealty to the more venerable King, and guard the frontier, uniting the southern tribesmen to become the new Wolf King of the mountains... I will remain loyal, until the tribe is strong enough, or the Kingdom weakens! Haha!"

Topupan laughed heartily as he gently closed Malina's eyes.

"And now, please let your severed head accompany the Chieftain, to see the sight of the Northern Kingdom for me, and also to observe the King of the North!"

Having said that, Topupan rose joyfully to his feet, looking towards the flickering fires in the north of the city, and gave his orders to his trusted aides.

"Send an envoy to stop the Chieftain's guard coming from the south! Tell them that Malina assassinated the Chieftain and the War Elder, plotted a rebellion, betrayed the tribe, and has already been executed by me! And that the Chieftain, before dying, passed on his position to me. From tonight onwards, I am the new Chieftain, and they shall be my guard! All this can be attested by the heads of clans from the south of the city. If they disbelieve, they can also send someone to check the Great Tent!"

"As you command, Chieftain!"

"Also tell them that as long as I succeed as Chieftain, the northern Kingdom will cease hostilities with the tribes and send aid in the form of food supplies!"

"As you command, Chieftain!"

"Haha!"

Hearing the title of Chieftain, Topupan burst into hearty laughter. Looking at the slightly brightening sky, he said contentedly,

"After such a long wait, it's finally dawn! Haha!"

As the sky began to brighten, the orderly sound of marching echoed through the mountains. The rising sun cast its rays on the outskirts of Hand Snake City, illuminating the miles of mountainous pathways, and also shining on the rapidly advancing three thousand Guajili warriors. Following the loose formation of the Canine Descendants' battle group were even more Spear Militia. Each militia carried shiny copper spears and wore white leg bindings, marching swiftly and orderly towards Hand Snake City.

Red Frog Keka, donning leather armor, a longbow on his back, and clutching a copper spear, led the march at the front of the Canine Descendants' battle group.

The night before, fires blazed all night long in Hand Snake City and the intense sounds of combat echoed for miles. Upon hearing this, the leader of the Second Spear Battle Group, Ezpan, immediately ordered the Red Frog battle group to march south quickly, with the Spear Battle Group closely following. According to Ezpan, negotiations in Hand Snake City had made a breakthrough, and Tekos's inside man had initiated the promised rebellion and surrendered to the Kingdom!

At this thought, Red Frog Keka raised his head, looking ahead. The charred remnants of Hand Snake City were now in view, marked by the traces of burning. The low city walls were stained with fresh red, and the newly repaired gates were flung open.

A burly middle-aged Noble Chief stood outside the city gate with hundreds of hunters waiting. With short hair and blue-green tattoos marking his illustrious battle achievements on his face, his arms were tattooed with animal patterns and also stained with blood not yet washed away.

Seeing the approaching red-haired barbarians, the middle-aged Noble Chief smiled. The situation in the city had not yet fully stabilized, with hundreds of the War Elder's elite refusing to acknowledge his position as Chieftain, supporting another warrior leader from the Kimari Family. Now, he needed the Northern Kingdom's support to assert dominance over the tribes without bloodshed!

With the gates of Hand Snake City wide open and the inside still instable, Red Frog Keka also wore a smile. He looked towards the middle-aged Noble Chief and speculated in his heart.

"So, this is the victor from the Tekos civil strife? What's his name again..."

Red Frog Keka stared at the familiar face but couldn't recall his name. After a moment, he just shrugged indifferently.

"No matter, as long as the God of Death, the Great Chief, remembers. That's good enough!"

With this thought, a smile on his face, he met the also-smiling middle-aged Noble Chief and gripped his copper spear tighter.

The breeze blew through the unsettled Hand Snake City and over the silent jungle outside. The Tekos people, lacking food, hunted day and night, consuming all the wild animals in the jungle.

The old hunters grew weak and mad from hunger, turning into new beasts. Then, as agreed upon, the new hunters came to the jungle with smiles, patiently waiting, armed with longbows and copper spears, to complete the final hunt!

Chapter 744: The Siege of Apar, The Roar of Cannons

The beginning of February promised clear skies, shallow streams, and a gentle breeze. Splendid sunshine fell upon the Apa Plain, bringing life's hope to the fertile fields. The warm wind caressed the mountains and forests, coaxing delicate new buds to poke their heads out from lofty treetops. In the rivers of the South, juvenile salmon had just hatched from their eggs, frolicking in the fresh waters of the streams. When they grew big enough, they would return to the vast ocean in the West to begin a new cycle of life.

But when the wind traveled eastward to the city of Apachigan, the scenes bursting with life vanished abruptly, replaced by the stillness of death and destruction. The surrounding farmlands lay withered and yellow, the villages desolate, trees felled, and wildlife scattered. The formidable military city of Apachigan had been besieged in desperation for nearly three months.

During these three months, the red-haired legion moved swiftly like the wind, raiding and ambushing before departing; the spear legion stood firm as a mountain, establishing besieging camps, while sending half to move westward. Then the Royal Banner of the Black Wolf arrived, with the Imperial Guard Legion surging forth, bringing the destruction of a thunderbolt.

At this moment, the Royal Banner of the Black Wolf stood to the south of the besieged city, symbolizing the presence of the King. Over ten thousand Royal Army samurai stood forbiddingly, completely encircling the military city, leaving no hope for survival. The camps of the besieging Royal Army stretched over the terrain, blocking the rugged north and east, and occupying the flat terrain of the west and south.

The military city of Apachigan was built against the mountain, easy to defend but difficult to attack. To the north of the city lay steep mountain ranges, to the east rolled hills, while to the west and south lay fertile plains.

The fortress-like military city stood six meters tall, beneath which lay hundreds of fallen corpses, while thousands of demoralized militia stood on its walls. By the militia's side lay unused stones, logs, and pots of lime. The rocky walls of the city were pitted and dented everywhere, also scorched black by fierce fires. Even the air was permeated with the smell of gunpowder.

"Boom!"

A terrible explosion like thunder suddenly exploded outside the South City! Then, a two-pound stone shot, spinning through a distance of over two hundred paces, crashed against the stone wall of the military city under the horrified gaze of the militia on the parapets. In an instant, the stone shot fell, stone chips blasted in all directions, and the wall was cratered shallowly, causing the surrounding walls to tremble slightly.

Xiulote, clad in copper armor, stood with hundreds of trusted aides outside the southern camp, watching the two-pound Divine Eagle Cannon bombardment.

A hundred paces before him, ten Divine Eagle Cannons were lined in a row. The muzzles of the Divine Eagle Cannons faced the city of Apachigan over two hundred paces away, their barrels braced and reinforced with bronze and wooden frames, and their backs pressed to the ground. Dozens of artillerymen busied themselves around the cannons, while over a thousand armored Imperial Guard Warriors stood guard. The ten Divine Eagle Cannons, like bronze beasts of the God of Death, emitted fearsome roars. And should the militia in the city dare to attack, they would be reaped by the waiting Armored Warriors.

"Boom!"

Another booming explosion echoed. Accompanied by the smoke from the muzzle, another stone shot was propelled, flying over the heads of the militia on the city walls, and crashed within the mountain city, hitting a simple wooden hut directly. With a "bang," the hut splintered, scattering a great quantity of wood and thatch. Then the roof cracked, the rafters broke, and the simple hut collapsed violently, half demolished. Several citizens within the city screamed in panic, bolting from the house, praying wildly to their deities.

"Hmm, not bad."

Watching this, Xiulote nodded with a smile. The two-pound Divine Eagle Cannon was unable to inflict effective damage on the stone walls, but it had ample destructive power against wooden structures. And if precision was not demanded, the two-pound Divine Eagle Cannon could reach up to two li, striking the majority of the buildings in the entire mountain city.

"Damn it, aim better! His Highness is personally watching!"

After two shots went astray, Camp Commander Tupa's face turned red with fury, and he roared in a low voice. His fierce gaze swept across the artillerymen, who all tensed up.

"Let me do it!"

The seasoned artilleryman, Eagle Eye Wadika, called out and promptly stepped toward the third Divine Eagle Cannon that was ready to fire. Seeing him approach, the gunners at the third cannon immediately cleared the position.

Eagle Eye Wadika, originally from the Mexica Temple Guards, was once an outstanding longbowman, then was transferred to the Stirrup Crossbow squad, becoming an excellent crossbowman. He had always been a skilled shooter, especially at long range, earning him the widely recognized nickname "Eagle Eye."

When the Artillery Camp was established, he became one of the first gunners. But the primitive artillery could not control accuracy, rendering his nickname meaningless. It was only with the advent of the Divine Eagle Cannon that he truly became an outstanding gunner.

Eagle Eye Wadika squinted, aiming with the rudimentary sight on the Divine Eagle Cannon. This aiming device, suggested by His Highness the Divine Revelation, was roughly similar to the sighting mechanisms on crossbows. Familiar with bows and crossbows, Wadika handled the Divine Eagle Cannon as if he were operating a giant crossbow.

"Raise it a bit more! A bit higher! Lower a little!...Almost there! Stop!!"

Following Wadika's shouts, seven or eight gunners worked together, urgently lifting or lowering the tail of the cannon. The Divine Eagle Cannon had only recently been cast and did not yet have a convenient mechanism for adjusting height. To adjust the firing angle now, gunners had to dig pits to lower or prop up stones to raise the base at the end of the carriage, or use similar crude methods beneath the wheels.

"May the Chief Divine protect us!"

Eagle Eye Wadika stretched out his arms, opening and closing his eyes, gesturing for distance and angle, feeling it should be almost right. He silently prayed, then shouted loudly.

"Ignite!"

The gunner lit the touch hole's fuse, then all the gunners simultaneously covered their ears, crouching on either side of the barrel.

"Boom!!"

A thunderous blast suddenly erupted, causing everyone's eardrums to ache. A heavy stone projectile "whooshed" out with peerless force, howling towards the battlements! It moved so swiftly that the militia atop the wall could only let out a half scream of terror before being precisely struck by the projectile!

"Crack!"

In an instant, blood splattered and bodies were torn apart! At such close range, the massive stone shot was utterly unstoppable, rolling over the bodies of the militia, leaving behind a trail of blood several

meters long before crashing down onto the ramparts. Three or four militiamen died on the spot, their bodies fused together, beyond separation.

"Good! A very precise shot!"

Xiulote exclaimed in admiration. The 2-pound Divine Eagle Cannon fired solid stone shots, which manifested their power in long-range precision shooting. Once the gunners could achieve sufficient accuracy, they could execute decapitation tactics within a battle formation or target specific weak spots in the city walls, crushing the enemy and breaching the city!

"Get him to change the cannon and fire again! If he hits the target once more, I will reward him handsomely!"

The King's command was passed to the front. Eagle Eye Wadika turned red with excitement. His Highness was always a man of his word; a generous reward was sure to be substantial. He spat twice, rubbed his hands together, and then proceeded to adjust the fourth cannon.

"...Good! All set! Stop! Ignite!"

"Boom!!"

A few breaths later, a second thunderous roar shook the air, and a deathly howl accompanied the stone that struck another part of the rampart! This time, the 2-pound projectile hit a wooden shield erected on the battlements, shattering the shield into pieces.

"Crack!"

Countless splinters scattered instantly like flying blades, injuring more than a dozen militiamen clothed in plain fabric. The militiamen howled hysterically and blindly ran down the castle, some even leaping from the wall. Soon after, the disciplinary squad at the base of the wall executed several men, driving the militiamen back up to defend.

"Excellent, just excellent!"

Xiulote laughed with satisfaction. Two consecutive hits were not by blind chance, but a sign of genuine skill. He immediately waved over a trusted aide to disseminate his reward.

"Reward the cannon operator generously! Offer him ten bolts of cloth, two bags of cocoa, and ten gemstones! Promote the samurai two ranks, and if he is a senior samurai, raise him to military nobility! Also appoint him as a hundred-man commander within the Artillery Camp, compile his shooting experience, and disseminate it throughout the army!"

The generous rewards spread throughout the Artillery Camp, and the eyes of the gunners turned red. A single moment of accurate shooting was worth several years of fighting!

Eagle Eye Wadika knelt down toward His Highness and repeatedly kowtowed, shaking with excitement. Having served in the military for many years and already being a senior samurai, his promotion to the rank of military nobility was an essential breakthrough in class, making him a member of the nobility from now on!

Seeing this scene, Xiulote nodded in approval with a smile. The Artillery Camp was recently established, and there were many aspects still to be explored and perfected. He was setting such examples to encourage the fervor of the gunners.

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

One by one, the Divine Eagle Cannons fired in turn, constantly bombarding the Defending Army of South City. Every quarter of an hour, a stone shot was launched, either shaking the walls, bursting into the city, or striking the battlements, creating a new wave of panic. With the continuous bombardment over several days, the morale of the Defending Army had plummeted. The militiamen all looked pale, stiff in limbs, and numb in spirit. Only the disciplinary squad hidden behind the walls still held on to their resolute will to fight.

Xiulote watched for a long while, a confident smile on his face. Apa City, besieged until now, was ripe fruit ready to fall at any moment. The city's defenders were desperate animals, clinging to the fleeting hope of support from the Tekos people as their last breath. With only a few thousands of his elite Imperial Guards attacking mightily, and a few hundred casualties, they could breach the city in less than two days.

"Black Wolf's three thousand elites entered the enemy's rear in the mountain areas, looting extensively. The Tekos Allied Forces fled north in disarray, struggling to survive. Ezpan led his army in pursuit, cutting the grass to remove the roots... The Palm Family within the city had long lost any chance."

With these thoughts, Xiulote shook his head with a smile. He was somewhat critical of Black Wolf's rashness; as a Great General, he always liked to take risks alone. But in his heart, Xiulote greatly admired this kind of spirited and lofty vigor and even felt some envy. For he, the ruler of a million citizens, carried the weight of responsibility and had long lost any opportunity for adventurous combat.

"Apa City is within easy reach and there's no hurry at the moment. It is the perfect opportunity to use this robust military city for the newly formed cannon crews to practice and familiarize themselves with the Divine Eagle Cannon's siege warfare."

Xiulote smiled confidently, memories from the past months flooding his thoughts. The campaign to the South was coming to an end, the overall situation had been determined. Although there were some twists, it was mostly within the plan.

Chapter 745: A Holy Omen

The past month on the surface seemed calm and stable, but underneath, it was fraught with turbulence. Under the suppression of tens of thousands of Royal Army soldiers, the southern nobility, after a painful struggle, ultimately had no choice but to comply with the reforms. They relinquished their lands and populations, taking only a few hundred of their direct kin to garrison the north side of the Lerma River. With the arrival of the Priesthood from the Capital City, the population of over two hundred thousand in Zicao County was being systematically registered and established in military settlements, gradually becoming directly subordinate to the Kingdom. The Tekos Tribe from the southwest would also be dealt with during the southern campaign.

At the beginning of January, the Imperial Guard Legion, seven thousand strong, spent a tranquil New Year in Zicao City, also known as Kulamo City. The King himself held the New Year sacrificial rites, summoned the newly appointed priests from the Capital City, and also pacified the purged Jingji Legion. Then, the fourth batch of five thousand rebels set off. By now, all twenty thousand rebels had embarked on the road to serfdom in the north. The Crow Family was the first among the southern hereditary nobility to head north for the reforms, followed by a dozen other families.

At the same time, Black Wolf ventured deep into the southwestern mountains, losing contact with the Kingdom Legion. Ezpan, after leaving three thousand men in Apa City, continued to follow the Royal

Decree westward. He took over the five thousand Guajili Legion troops left by Black Wolf, commanded nearly ten thousand warriors, and pursued the retreating Tekos Allied Forces day and night.

In early January, Xiulote set out from Zicao City, escorted by a seven thousand-strong Imperial Guard Legion, heading two hundred leagues westward with forty bronze cannons. The southern nobility en route willingly relocated northward, and the two noble families who dared to resist had their wooden forts demolished by Divine Eagle Cannons in a single day, with all male members of the families executed!

In the latter part of the month, the black banner of the Wolf King reached Apa City. The Imperial Guard Legion encamped in the recently constructed siege camp. Over the following days, the Imperial Guard Legion fully deployed, blockading all passages outside of Apa City. Then, ten Divine Eagle Cannons were set up south of the city, bombarding South City for days on end. Today is the second day of February, which is also the fifth day of the cannon bombardment.

Three days ago, the Royal Army organized a tentative offensive to test the siege effectiveness of the Rain God Tiger Squat Cannons. The hundreds of bodies from both sides beneath the city walls were left over from that attack.

Under the protection of the shield guards of the Heavy Armor warriors, the gunners pushed dozens of Tiger Squat Cannons within fifty paces of the city walls. Subsequently, the Royal Army Archers suppressed the archers at the top of the wall while the Tiger Squat Cannons bombarded the top of Apa City, managing to fire three volleys.

The Tiger Squat Cannons, being extremely light scatter-shot cannons, had their power greatly diminished when lobbing shots at six-meter-high stone walls. The scattered stone balls could only manage to injure some militia in plain clothes and could not break through the shields on the ramparts. Instead, the thunderous roar from dozens of cannons firing simultaneously had a tremendous psychological impact on the Defending Army. The militia of South City, panicked, shouting the names of deities, scattered twice toward the city below, only to be forced back to their positions by the palm-armed warriors who were supervising the battle.

The morale of the Defending Army was still strong, and a forceful attack would not only have been a waste of warriors but also have reduced the population gained after victory. Xiulote watched for a moment before halting the attack. Afterwards, the ten Divine Eagle Cannons continued their slow bombardment, creating psychological pressure on the defenders while experimenting with cannon tactics, all the way until today.

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

In the thundering sound of the Divine Eagle Cannons, Xiulote returned to the main siege camp. He sat cross-legged in the Royal Tent, smiling as he said to Bertade,

"May the Chief Divine bless us! According to the holy calendar of the Alliance, today is the last day of the month of Ehecatl, also known as the Jaguar day (Ocelotl)."

"The holy wind spins in the sky, creating disorder and chaos. The old order dissolves in the divine wind, and new rules gestate amidst chaos. And in the storm of death, unpredictable changes are imminent, vitality flows within the wind of death! The brave Jaguar symbolizes exceptional combat, warriors willingly sacrifice their lives to keep the flame of the sun burning forever!..."

"May the Chief Divine bless us! Praise Him, who bestows divinity on the storm, courage on the Jaguar!"

Hearing the sacred chronology, Bertade respectfully saluted. He then cautiously asked,

"So, Your Highness, in the eyes of the sacred priesthood, what does it also predict?"

"Eh, it signifies that..."

Xiulote pondered for a moment, thought of Black Wolf wherever he might be, and smiled confidently,

"It signifies that good news is soon to come!"

Black Wolf would not let me down, the King thought to himself, without saying it aloud.

"Praise the Chief Divine, divine protection unto Your Highness! The southern campaign will surely be a grand victory!"

Upon hearing this, Bertade replied with a smile. He never doubted the complete success of the southern campaign.

Xiulote nodded without saying more. He spread out the map of the south, browsing through reports from different regions, planning the post-campaign arrangements.

Time silently passed, and the sun slanted slightly to the west. Several red-haired Hunters with bamboo baskets dyed red, carrying red flags, appeared from the plains to the west. In just a couple of quarters, the red-haired Hunters had sprinted close by. They cast an awed glance at the roaring bronze beasts spewing stone projectiles, then under the guidance of Imperial Guard Warriors, passed through several checkpoints to wait outside the Royal Tent in the camp.

"Your Highness, Miwa, the vice general of the Red Frog Battle Group, has come from the southwestern mountains, bringing news of victory!"

The Tekos Shield Guard reported back with joy in his demeanor. Bertade appeared surprised, looking reverently at the prescient Highness.

"Ah? Good news? Excellent, let Miwa come in."

Xiulote lifted his head, startled and then burst into joyful laughter. He remembered the stubborn red-haired trusted aide who was once eager to strike the enemy at night, so rash that he even risked his own life in the process.

Red-haired trusted aide Miwa immediately entered the tent, bringing several bamboo baskets, and knelt down ten steps away. All his weapons had been removed, and even his fingernails had been inspected. On each side of him was a trusted aide armed with an axe watching over him.

Chapter 746: Holy Omen_2

After the assassination in Medina, the security level in the Royal Tent significantly increased. Ordinary envoys not only had to be thoroughly checked but also had to report from ten steps away from the King under the close supervision of a trusted aide.

"O Great Chieftain, God of Death! Four days ago, under the command of Chief Ezpan, Chieftain Red Frog crushed the Tekos Allied Forces, breached Hand Snake City, and annihilated the Great Tribe of Shields! The army slaughtered all the Noble Chiefs, Priests, and Chieftains of Tekos, capturing nearly four thousand Tribal Warriors and more than ten thousand women and children from nearby Tribes!"

The red-haired trusted aide Miwa knelt and bowed deeply before handing over several bamboo baskets. The aides inspected them briefly, and a strong scent of blood permeated the tent.

Sensing the smell of blood, Xiulote's eyebrows lifted, and he understood. He glanced at the bamboo baskets and spoke with a smile.

"Praise the Chief Divine! Praise Him for granting us victory! Miwa, you did very well. Cut to the chase. Whose heads are in there?"

"Ah! Great Chief, the heads of the Tekos Noble Chiefs are all in here, about twenty or thirty of them."

The red-haired trusted aide Miwa approached the largest bamboo basket, his face bearing a simple smile. He reached in, blindly feeling around for a moment, then suddenly yanked out a middle-aged head, eyes closed.

"This is Chieftain Kimari of the Shields!"

"Oh? Kimari is dead? Excellent! Very excellent! Ezpan and Keka did very well!"

Xiulote looked at the head and admired it with a smile. He had always been worried that the highly esteemed Great Chieftain Kimari might escape to the mountains with his people and engage in guerrilla warfare against the Kingdom Legion, supported by the southwestern Colima Tribe.

"Praise the Chief Divine! Praise the Great Chief!"

Hearing the Great Chief's praise, the red-haired trusted aide Miwa beamed. He reached in again, grabbing another middle-aged head by the hair, eyes closed. On closer inspection, the face resembled the previous one.

"Great Chief, this is the Herbs Elder Malina, Kimari's younger brother, and it was he who personally killed Kimari."

"Very good!"

Xiulote looked over the head and nodded. It sounded like an internal conflict had erupted within the Tekos Tribe. In fact, he was completely unaware of the negotiations in the southwestern mountains. Ezpan had secretly negotiated, promising hereditary nobility titles, which of course, he never intended to honor.

"May the Chief Divine protect us!"

The red-haired trusted aide Miwa prayed with a smile, then pulled out the last middle-aged head, eyes open. The man had short hair, and his face bore tattoos symbolizing bravery.

"Great Chief, this is the Hunting Elder Topupan. He killed Malina, and there was great chaos within the city. Chief Ezpan seized the opportunity, crushed the enemy in one fell swoop, and killed him as well. As for the other Tekos Noble Chiefs, they were all killed outright, their heads are all here!"

"Oh? So you mean to say, Chieftain Kimari, Herbs Elder Malina, Hunting Elder Topupan... They all killed each other, and in the end, their heads ended up here?"

"Yes, exactly. Great Chief, the Tekos people in the southwest devoured each other, their morale utterly broken. After this battle, none in the southwest dared resist. When I left, Chief Ezpan had already ordered a large raid across three hundred miles of the southwest, capturing Tekos people running low on supplies, all the way to the endless Great Lake!"

Hearing this, Xiulote pondered silently, frowning slightly. With such a formidable enemy in front, the Tekos wouldn't have recklessly engaged in internal conflict... He could vaguely guess there was a hidden agenda, and Ezpan must have interfered. As for slaughtering all the Tekos Noble Chiefs, it was probably to silence them, burying the past into oblivion. On this note, he was certain Ezpan left no loose ends.

Ezpan was a Surrendered General by origin. To gain trust from the King, he would even endure the pain of cutting off his little finger. His style of combat was both flexible and ruthless. He used to be the deputy to the Monkey, acquiring flexible tactics from the Monkey's teachings. The ruthless style was inherent in his bones. After his victorious campaign to the west, his purge of the old nobility in Tarasco was even more thorough than that of Mexica commanders.

And the red-haired Miwa, hailing from the Wilderness Tribes, was even less likely to show mercy. What these two could accomplish together was evident.

"Well... too much clarity leaves no room for fish to swim. Let's straighten things out when he returns."

After thinking for a moment, Xiulote nodded. He gave a faint smile, looking at Miwa, who awaited orders with his head bowed.

"Miwa, Ezpan sent you here, is there anything else to say?"

"Great Chief, Chief Ezpan requests that you send as much grain as possible to the south!"

Red-haired trusted aide Miwa raised his head and respectfully replied.

"Great Chief, Black Wolf suddenly attacked the mountain areas, a fire scorched all the Tekos' grain! According to the captured Tekos, Black Wolf has already reached the Seaside. Thousands from the legion plundered southeastward, completely sweeping through the southwestern Tribes and created nearly one hundred thousand Tekos refugees!"

"Chief Ezpan has confirmed that the Tekos refugees will soon fall into famine and cannot stay in the mountains for long. As long as there is sufficient follow-up grain, the legion could either recruit or capture most of the Tekos refugees and bring them back to the Northern Kingdom as slaves!"

"Black Wolf continues the invasion? One hundred thousand Tekos refugees?"

Hearing this, Xiulote's eyes widened in surprise, and he abruptly stood up. He paced back and forth, thought for a moment, then loudly agreed.

"Very well, tell Ezpan to act freely! I will levy the grain of the southern nobility and supply him fully!"

"The southwestern mountain region is too remote and the environment is complex, hard to govern directly. Tell him, I only want the population! As long as he captures enough people, no matter what methods he has used before, I will not hold them against him! And if he can get a hundred thousand people, he will be the most meritorious in the southern campaign! At that time, I will richly reward him and provide his legion with a thousand Copper Armor! And Keka's Red Frog Battle Group will also receive a rich reward!"

"Ah! By your command! Praise you, Great Chief!"

Red-haired trusted aide Miwa prostrated himself, his face beaming with joy.

"Also tell him to secure the rear, and be wary of the Colima Tribes! Since the southwestern mountain region cannot support ten thousand legions, have a portion of the legions return with the captured population to settle in Zicao County first. Also, tell Ezpan and Keka to be kinder to the ordinary Tekos refugees! Only those Tribes who resisted the Royal Army will be demoted to agricultural slaves, others will be enrolled into the flag teams to reclaim land in Zicao County."

"As you command, Great Chief!"

Miwa bowed again. His face was bright with a warlike eagerness, like a hound waiting for a hunt.

Xiulote issued a few more instructions, then waved his hand for Miwa to leave. Next, the King studied the three parallel heads closely and inexplicably felt an arrangement of fate, yet, there seemed to be some slight discord.

"Bertade!"

Xiulote looked on for a moment, then suddenly spoke.

"Your Highness?"

"Close the eyes of the last head."

"By your command."

Head Warrior immediately complied, closing the eyes of Topupan. Now, the three heads stood in a row, all with eyes closed, arriving in the Northern Kingdom to meet the Northern King.

"Yes, just like that."

Xiulote nodded, looked on for a while longer, and felt much more at ease. He clapped his hands and ordered indifferently,

"Send these three heads, along with these few bamboo baskets, into Apa City! Let the Palm Family have a good look at the fate of their allies!"

"As you wish!"

Bertade stood up saluting, smiling toward the north. As the heads entered the desperate Apa City, no more hope remained. And the holy omen would once again come to pass.

Chapter 747: The King's Western Patrol: Apa Plain, A Thousand Miles of Fertile Fields Part One

The dry season's sunlight was always bright, and the sacred breeze soared through the skies. Following the windy thirteenth day of the Wind Month, came the Eagle Month (Cuauhtli), symbolizing spirituality, control, movement, and fortune. Since the southward campaign, all plans and efforts had come to fruition.

A valiant Prepetcha warrior, bearing the head of the Tecos Noble Chief, entered Apa Military City and conveyed the King's decree: surrender within three days without bloodshed. After three days, the army would storm the city and annihilate everyone!

The southwestern allies had already perished; Apa City remained a lone fortress devoid of any vitality. The defending army within the city had lost their last breath of resolve, visibly dispirited all day. Under the terrifying bombardment of the copper beasts, the nobility were mostly mentally shattered. They argued fiercely for two days, even breaking into minor skirmishes before coming to a decision.

By noon on the third day, the gates of Apa City were finally thrown open. The remaining people of the Palm Tribe laid down their weapons, exited the city, and pleaded with the Royal Army for mercy. They knelt down outside the city gate, allowing the Imperial Guard Warriors to tie them up, leaving their lives in others' hands.

Following this, Bertade led three thousand Imperial Guards into the city to take inventory.

The military city wasn't large and didn't have many inhabitants, but it had a substantial amount of food reserves. The Royal Army captured six thousand able-bodied militiamen and four thousand women and children, totaling ten thousand rebels. In the city's granary, astonishingly, there was food enough to sustain thirty thousand people for a year! These military provisions, surrendered by the defending army, were not burnt.

Xiulote did not enter the city. He simply stood calmly under the Royal Banner outside the city, watching the downfall of the Palm Glory Family. It was not until the Head Warrior came to report, informing him of the food reserves for thirty thousand people for a year, that he showed surprise and expressed his admiration.

"Mountainside allies, a fortified military city, and ample food reserves... So, this is the confidence behind Zotol, leader of the Palm Clan, in his rebellion!"

Upon saying this, Xiulote burst into hearty laughter.

"Haha! Zotol has been ambushed and killed, and the internal strife of the Tecos has led to their destruction. Apa Military City and its ten thousand tons of food reserves now belong to the Kingdom Army. These reserves will be used to recruit tens of thousands of displaced Tecos!"

With the King leading a grand army here, he was most concerned not with the mountainous enemies but with the logistical support of food supplies. The Imperial Guard Legion, Jingji Legion, Second Long Spear Legion, Guajili Legion... four entire Kingdom Legions were stationed in Zicao County, where local

food was far from sufficient and had to be transported over more than two hundred li from the Lake Patzcuaro Region.

Due to the scarcity of food, the King had no choice but to scour the noble fiefs intensely, and had to send back half of the Jingji Legion, escorting tens of thousands of rebels northward. Even so, the tens of thousands of Tecos captives and refugees soon to arrive still brought him a significant food burden. But now, with the surrender of Apa City and a large cache of captured food, the Kingdom's burden was alleviated considerably.

"Hmm, consuming one tan of the enemy's food is worth transporting three tan over three hundred li. This is Xi's strategy."

Xiulote made a joke. Then, with a stern face, he instructed Bertade.

"Within three days, have two thousand from the Long Spear Legion set out, escorting ten thousand rebels of Apa City back to the Jingji! These ten thousand will be demoted to agricultural slaves and distributed to warriors with military exploits!"

"At your command, Your Highness!"

Xiulote nodded slightly, with a smile on his face. Twenty thousand rebels from Zicao City and ten thousand rebels from Apa City were all made into agricultural slaves, filling the gap of thirty thousand slaves. As for the deficit of fifty thousand agricultural slaves, they would have to figure out a way to get them from various Tekos tribes... What, you ask about the shortfall in the fiefdoms for this southern campaign? That would have to wait for the next war to be filled...

The Black Wolf soared through the southwestern sky, riding the long wind. Three days later, twelve thousand people set off northward, significantly reducing the number of mouths to feed.

Xiulote left behind the last two thousand of his Long Spear Legion in Apa City and also left four thousand of his Imperial Guard Legion, including the Artillery Camp, to suppress various places and maintain the grain supply. Then, he led only three thousand armored members of his Personal Army to inspect the vast Apa Plain to the west of Apa City.

The Royal Banner of the Black Wolf slowly made its way southwest, with scouts sent out twenty miles ahead. The Apa Plain, abundant with streams, lush water grass, and dense forests, saw the King stopping from time to time to survey the surrounding terrain. It took the three thousand Imperial Guards four days to travel over a hundred miles, finally reaching the Grass Forest Village by the Emon River (present-day El Charapo).

Grass Forest Village was located at a mountain pass, surrounded by the fertile river basin, and had once been a large village of more than a thousand people. However, it had become dilapidated after enduring war and being looted twice by troops from the Tekos Tribe and the Canine Descendants Legion.

Xiulote looked at the thriving weeds in the farmland outside the village and pinched some fertile soil from the field, nodding in admiration.

Then, he climbed a nearby hill to look southward. The towering mountain range undulated and stretched three to four hundred miles until it reached the Pacific Ocean. According to the Tekos vanguard in the army, at the end of this mountain road lay a fishing village called Neshpa, surrounded by the largest beach area within hundreds of miles.

Deep in the southwestern mountains from Apa Plain to the Pacific coast, there were two common mountain paths. One path followed the Kan River, passing through Kan River Village, to Hand Snake City, and then to the seaside. The Black Wolf had swept through this path. The other more treacherous route followed the Emon River, cutting through deep mountains from Grass Forest Village, to reach Neshpa by the coast. In other words, Kan River Village and Grass Forest Village were the two key valley mouths that divided the Apa Plain from the southern mountains, dominating the passageways into the southern mountainous regions!

He then looked northward, where the vast Apa Plain unfolded before his eyes. Surrounded by mountains, the Apa Plain was extensive and fertile, featuring exceptionally flat terrain, a warm and pleasant climate, free from drought or flood.

Upon closer inspection, the plain was crisscrossed with streams, lush forests, fertile fields, herds of deer running around, and troops of howling monkeys. In the vast fertile fields, villages of the Prepetcha people alternated sparsely with tribes of the Tekos people, with cultivated riverbank farmlands covering less than one twelfth of the entire plain.

"Flat terrain, suitable temperature, abundant water, and interlacing streams. The Apa Plain is indeed a rich land of plenty under the tropical sun!"

Xiulote looked at this fertile land, his heart surging with emotion and deep in thought. In future generations, the Apa Plain would become one of the most important grain storage areas in central Mexico. The arable land here would far surpass that of the Patzcuaro Lake Region, a truly immense fertile land! With this in mind, many past plans flashed through his mind, but he needed to complete his inspection before making any final decisions.

A day later, the three thousand Imperial Guards moved westward again, traveling over seventy miles in three days, reaching Kan River Village by the river. Ezpan left behind two thousand Long Spear Legion in this place to guard the rear. Tens of thousands of Tekos captives were escorted by the samurai from the mountains, batch by batch, heading down to Apa City.

The Black Wolf's flag flew high, and three thousand armored Imperial Guards passed by, with all the Tekos captives showing expressions of fear. Xiulote stood under the Royal Banner, watching patiently for a long time.

In front of him, the long procession of captives stretched for dozens of miles, divided into different batches. Each batch ranged from hundreds to a thousand people, linked in groups of twenty and guarded by small teams of Royal Army samurai along the way. Most of these Tekos captives were young men and women, all with sallow complexions and haggard expressions. Disheveled and bearing signs of hunger, they struggled along the riverbank.

A new batch of Tekos captives soon arrived at Kan River Village, totaling around a thousand. The commander of the Long Spear Camp shouted loudly as he dispatched two hundred samurai wielding copper spears, and then produced several barrels filled with food. The aroma of the grains wafted through the air, causing a stir among the captives, which was soon suppressed by the whip-cracking samurais.

Under the stern orders of the samurais, the captives lined up, holding out their hands in turns to receive their food for the day. After receiving their food, they immediately squatted around the perimeter, buried their heads in their hands, and ate their fill in a few quick bites. Their daily food rations were extremely limited; if they didn't finish quickly while under the watchful eyes of the guarding samurais, others might steal their food come evening. Those who tried to get more were promptly pulled out by the samurais and mercilessly whipped ten times.

In short, despite the chaos, the captives maintained a basic order under the harsh control of the samurais,

Xiulote observed for a moment but couldn't make out anything clearly from his distance. He pondered briefly and then spoke to Bertade.

"Have the person in charge here come over."

"At once."

The Head Warrior strode away. Soon, a robust and fierce-looking samurai, as ferocious as a wolf or tiger, arrived beneath the Royal Banner. The samurai respectfully knelt down, struggling to force a friendly smile.

"Chief Divine bless! Your Majesty, I am Pimeng, a seasoned samurai of the Second Long Spear Legion from Patzcuaro, at your service!"

Xiulote nodded slightly and looked calmly at Pimeng before asking.

"Chief Divine bless! What are the captives eating?"

"Your Majesty, they are eating grain dumplings."

"Oh? Fetch me two from the barrel to try."

"Ah! This? This..."

Pimeng looked up in astonishment, at a loss for words.

"Go! Take them from the captives' barrel!"

"...At once."

Upon hearing the King's command, Pimeng gritted his teeth and headed to the barrel. He carefully selected a moment and picked out two barely decent-looking grain dumplings, wrapping them cautiously in his garment before returning to the King's presence.

"Your Majesty, these are the grain dumplings the captives eat. You are a distinguished King, and such food..."

Xiulote took a dumpling, held it in his hand, and examined it closely. The dumpling was about the size of a fist, oddly green in color. It felt cold, having been made a while ago, and though it lacked any bad smell, there was a pleasing scent of palm leaves.

Xiulote stared at the green grain dumpling, hesitated for a moment, then prepared to take a bite. Seeing the King's action, Bertade quickly reached out, snatching the dumpling.

"Your Highness, I'm hungry, please allow me to take the first bite."

"...Very well, thank you for your effort."

Xiulote nodded slowly. The Head Warrior unflinchingly took two bites in front of a shocked Pimeng.

"Hmm, it's cooked just right; there's old pumpkin, fresh wild greens, and half-cooked sweet potatoes. And there's...uh..."

Bertade paused for a moment, his face turning from pale to purple. After a while, he swallowed quietly, gave Pimeng a cold look, and spoke calmly.

"There are some insects, a tender taste similar to Giant Wing ants, coupled with a bit of palm flavor."

"Ah! Respected Eagle Warrior, you truly are knowledgeable!"

Camp Commander Pimeng, sweating coldly, managed to pay a compliment.

"Indeed, indeed! These dumplings contain Giant Wing ants, freshly harvested a few days ago and soaked in salt water; they were wrapped in the dumplings today. As for the taste of palm, it comes from the palm weevils on the palm trees, plump and juicy, freshly collected by the warriors from the trees just yesterday..."

"..."

Upon hearing this, Xiulote's face twitched, and Bertade struggled to remain calm. The two exchanged glances, momentarily at a loss for words.

Chapter 748: The King's Western Patrol: Apa Plain, A Thousand Miles of Fertile Fields Part Two

The vast mountain wind swept by, gently shaking the trees in the wilderness and carrying the fresh scent of palms through the air.

"...Bertade, you have worked hard."

After a few moments of silence, Xiulote looked at the Head Warrior with an apologetic expression and decisively handed the flavorful mixed-grain dumplings back to Pimeng.

"Pimeng, how many of these dumplings do the prisoners eat in a day?"

"Your Majesty, it depends on how fast the prisoners can walk."

With caution, Pimeng glanced at the composed Head Warrior and respectfully replied.

"Legion Commander Ezpan decreed that the prisoners are not allowed to carry food with them, nor are they allowed to leave the group to forage during the journey. Offenders are whipped the first two times, and executed upon a third infraction. Every thirty li, there is a samurai camp where food is provided. And in each camp, the escorting samurais may eat their fill, but prisoners can only receive food once."

"Hmm, a camp every thirty li is still reasonable."

Upon hearing this, Xiulote nodded. Lacking beasts of burden, a large infantry unit's consistent marching speed ranged between thirty to sixty li per day, varying according to the load and terrain.

"However, the prisoners are all mountain folk accustomed to traveling. They don't need to carry equipment or food and without these burdens can easily cover at least fifty li in a day."

"Exactly, Your Highness is wise!"

Pimeng nodded in agreement and continued.

"Legion Commander Ezpan has ordered that with limited food supplies, only one mixed-grain dumpling is provided per meal. If the prisoners can cover ninety li in a day, they'll get three dumplings; for sixty li, two dumplings. And for less than sixty li, they only get one dumpling and will also face the samurais' reproach and whipping!"

"Ah? Only one dumpling per meal? They must at least travel sixty li a day?"

Hearing this, Xiulote was taken aback. Eating a mixed-grain dumpling for thirty li, this level of hardship was akin to the Celestial Empire's proverb, "A single grain of rice to pass three barriers, three grains of rice to climb over mountains." To force a march of sixty li a day with such meager provisions meant an inevitable calorie deficit. By the time the prisoners reached the outskirts of Apa City, after traveling three or four hundred li from the deep southwest mountains, they would all be significantly thinner—losing two jin a day would be easy.

Thinking of this, Xiulote frowned slightly and turned to the Camp Commander Pimeng.

"Pimeng, the food supply for the prisoners seems too scant. Starving them and forcing the march like this, I'm afraid some won't make it to the outskirts of Apa City."

"Ah! Your Majesty, Legion Commander Ezpan said that the mountain folk are unyielding and fierce by nature. Only when they are starved and exhaust their strength daily will they refrain from harboring superfluous thoughts. As for the weak and elderly who die of hunger, they wouldn't have survived in the mountains anyway."

Pimeng scratched his head, cautiously glanced at the King, and attempted to justify the conditions.

"Moreover, Your Majesty, food supplies in the camp are already insufficient! Currently, there are a full seven thousand of the Royal Army, deep in the southwest mountains. Keka, the leader, has arrived at Palm Bay with two thousand Guajili warriors, capturing—no, gathering—displaced locals. Ezpan himself leads two thousand samurai to guard against the various tribes of Colima in the Wild Mountain Village. Then there's a thousand warriors stationed at the Hand Snake Basin. As for the remaining two thousand Canine Warriors, they must maintain the long supply line as well as oversee groups of displaced locals leaving the mountains..."

"And Hand Snake City was burnt to the ground by Legion Commander Black Wolf, with all the food supplies along the way destroyed... There's a dire shortage of food in the mountains, with no chance of timely resupply!"

Hearing this, Xiulote was lost in thought and silently nodded.

Now the starting point for food transport was Apa City; the supply train traveled a hundred and fifty li of flatland, reaching Kan River Village. From there, it entered the mountains and followed a hundred and twenty li of smooth mountain roads to reach Hand Snake City. Then it traveled another sixty li to reach Wild Mountain Village, where Ezpan was stationed. From Wild Mountain Village, they would set off on a hundred and twenty to thirty li of rugged mountain paths to reach Palm Bay, where Keka was located.

To supply food from Apa City to the frontline at Palm Bay, the Royal Army would have to cover a total of four hundred and fifty li! And the deeper into the mountains they went, the more difficult the terrain became, with transport losses increasing. The most critical issue was that all the villages along the way had been burned down by Black Wolf, leaving no local supplies to requisition, forcing all provisions to come from the rear and also sustaining the Tecos tribespeople they had gathered.

"Black Wolf, oh my Black Wolf, you've been too harsh..."

After a moment of thought, Xiulote sighed helplessly. Ezpan's measures were correct; it was essential to exhaust the strength of the mountain folk to their limits, driving them to emerge from the depths of the forests with the greatest speed and the least consumption of resources. Otherwise, should famine spread, the death toll would be far greater.

"Your Highness, it's difficult to transport food during the initial three hundred li of mountain roads, so it can be done as General Ezpan has planned. However, the Apa Plain is flat, making food transport easier. Once we reach Kan River Village here, for the final one hundred and fifty li, we can provide ample food to let the mountain folk properly rest and recover before continuing the march."

Guessing the thoughts of His Highness, Bertade smiled and made his suggestion.

"Indeed, we'll do as you suggest!"

Xiulote nodded gravely, looking toward Pimeng.

"Pimeng, the Imperial Guard Legion has accompanied the army and brought a batch of food here. All this food is allocated to you, and more will be delivered later. Starting from Kan River Village, double the food supply for all mountain people! Furthermore, separate the weak mountain people and children into a single camp and march them at a standard of thirty miles a day! Yes, this is a Royal Decree!"

"Ah?! Your will shall be obeyed, Your Majesty!"

Pimeng scratched his head and bowed deeply with respect. He thought for a moment and tried to offer a compliment earnestly.

"Your Majesty, you are as mighty as a brown bear and have the gentle heart of one, unlike the Jaguar who glorifies in killing. You are the divine Great Bear!"

"I am the divine Great Bear?..."

Hearing this, Xiulote showed no expression. He had never heard such praise and for a moment didn't know whether it was sarcasm. The King observed the other's sincere eyes for a while before nodding slowly.

"Very well, you may leave! Pimeng, ensure the captives are well settled. I will remember you!"

"Ah! Thank you, Your Majesty!"

Ecstatic, Pimeng knelt on the ground. He bowed deeply several times before bustling off excitedly.

"Food... food... the food in the mountains..."

Xiulote stood rooted to the spot, lost in thought. He gazed towards the Colima Mountain Region to the west and asked in a grave voice.

"Bertade, what are the various Tribes in Colima doing? Have they sent envoys over?"

The Head Warrior recalled for a moment and shook his head.

"Your Highness, the Tribes in Colima should have completed the mobilization of the Militia and are now holding their ground on the defensive. The last time they sent an Envoy was four months ago, expressing nominal obedience."

"Select two Tecos trusted aides who are fluent in the language and send them to Fire River City!"

Xiulote paused briefly to ponder before making a decision.

"As the army heads south, we will destroy the Palm Family and obliterate the tribes of the Alcoman Mountain Region, so Fire River City must be trembling in fear by now! The Fire River Plains have always been known for fertility, yielding two harvests a year; Fire River City cannot be lacking in food. Command them to hand over enough food for twenty thousand people for one year and to transport it to the wild mountain village where Ezpan is located, as a Tribute for the army's campaign southward! Tell them that if they fail to comply, tens of thousands of the Royal Army will continue their campaign westward and set Fire River City ablaze!"

"Your will shall be obeyed, Your Highness!"

Upon hearing this, light shone in Bertade's eyes. Fire River City was only two hundred miles from the wild mountain village, and if enough food could be provided from there, Keka's Red Frog warriors could continue to capture or gather refugees along the Seaside. The supply of food for the frontlines would be much easier.

The Head Warrior immediately arranged for envoys, carrying a pictorial letter stamped with the Kingdom's seal, to set out for Fire River City. After everything was properly arranged, he returned to the King's side and asked softly.

"Your Highness, what should the Royal Army do if Fire River City refuses the Tribute or even sends out troops to attack?"

"If they refuse the Tribute or dare to send out troops..."

Xiulote looked towards the towering mountains in the west. The legendary Fire River City stood on the fertile volcanic ash plains. To the north rose the four-thousand-meter-tall Colima Volcano, under which lay a giant iron ore vein, a hundred meters deep. There were red volcanic rock city walls, countless tribal villages, and the ancestral lands of the two hundred thousand Tecos Tribes of the west.

The King's gaze grew deep, and a strong desire for conquest rose in his chest.

"If they don't give us the food, we'll go and take it ourselves! Even if we can't take down the sturdy Fire River City, we'll set the rich Fire River Plains ablaze!"

The long wind swept across the sky, causing the forest to sway noiselessly. The Head Warrior regarded the King's profile and sniffed the scent in the wind. The fragrance of the palms reached his nose, yet it smelled of gunpowder.

Chapter 749: The King's Western Tour: The Envoy of Fire River City

Three thousand Imperial Guards, escorting the Black Wolf's Royal Banner, stayed in Kan River Village for over half a month. The Kingdom's Envoy traveled night and day, following the mountain trails for nearly four hundred miles to the west, arriving in Fire River City, to deliver the King's will.

Ezpan also coordinated in Ye Mountain Village, sending out over two hundred red-haired Scouts to spy on the Fire River Plains. The various tribes of the western Colima immediately tensed. Over five thousand mobilized tribal warriors set out from Fire River City towards the mountain pass on the eastern edge of the Fire River Plains, to further strengthen the defenses of their forts.

In Fire River City, numerous Tekos Noble Chiefs argued fiercely for several days. In the end, it was Colima's Greater Chieftain Iymar who convinced the tribes to make a decision, to submit respectfully to the powerful Northern Kingdom.

"Your Majesty, Ezpan of the Kingdom of the Lake sends his greetings! Praise be to you, I am your loyal servant, and you are my supreme Sun!"

In front of Kan River Village, Ezpan, dressed in the magnificent attire of a Legion Commander, excitedly prostrated himself before Xiulote, not caring that he dirtied himself with dust and mud. Even as he was now a revered Legion Commander, he remained as loyal as a King's servant.

"Chief God bless! Your Majesty, the conquest of the southwestern mountains has gone smoothly!"

"Chief God bless! Ezpan, my Legion Commander, you and Keka fought well!"

Seeing this, Xiulote nodded in satisfaction. He extended his hand and, smiling, helped the other from the muddy ground.

"I heard you came with the Envoy from Fire River City?"

"Indeed, Your Majesty!"

Ezpan stood up, respectfully acknowledging and carefully replying.

"The tribes of western Colima, in awe of Your Majesty's supreme renown, request to submit further to the Kingdom! Not only do they agree to hand over the food for twenty thousand people for last year's Tribute, but they are also willing to pay the same portion of food every year as annual Tribute, in exchange for Your protection!"

"Oh? Food for twenty thousand people, as an annual Tribute?"

Upon hearing this, Xiulote showed surprise. He pondered for a moment before asking.

"Do the Colima tribes have any other requests?"

"Yes! Your Majesty, the Colima tribes request that the Kingdom send Priests of the Chief God to preach in Fire River City! They are willing to renounce the faith of the three gods and submit to the supreme Chief God!"

"Renounce the faith of the three gods and submit to the supreme Chief God?"

Xiulote was visibly moved, deep in thought.

The Tekos tribes originally practiced polytheism, believing that mountains, rivers, grass, and trees each had their own spirits. And, based on the differences in their ancestral lands, they also had different preferences. Fire River City, located at the foot of a volcano, revered the Fire God. Hand Snake City, situated amidst the forests, revered the Serpent Divinity, while Sea Woman City, by the Seaside, worshiped the Water Serpent.

In the recent half-century, after the rise of the Tarasco Kingdom, the spreading of the three gods' faith began with continuous campaigns against the southern Tekos Tribes. As the tribes gradually submitted, they revered the three gods as supreme. And when the Tarasco Kingdom fell, and the Kingdom of the Lake rose, the faith in the Chief God came along with it.

Now, facing the pressure of the Northern Kingdom, the Colima tribes made another choice. Regardless of whether the conversion was sincere, the act itself symbolized great respect and submission to the Kingdom.

"Very good!"

Xiulote nodded slowly. How should the Kingdom handle the respectful submission of the Colima tribes? He considered this question, as his attitude subtly shifted. After a while, he asked again.

"Anything else?"

"Yes! Your Majesty, the Greater Chieftain of Colima, Iymar, requests to have his youngest daughter Yilian come to the Kingdom to serve by Your side! The Envoy who accompanied me from Fire River City is the sixteen-year-old daughter of the Great Chieftain, the noble lady Yilian."

"Send his daughter to serve by my side?"

Xiulote lowered his gaze slightly, lost in thought. To serve by his side meant to establish an actual marriage alliance without seeking any title. The Great Chieftain of Colima's move was obviously to show further submission and strengthen relations with the Northern Kingdom. After a while, the King looked towards the Head Warrior.

"I remember, the King of Tarasco, Su'angua, also took a daughter from the Great Chieftain of Colima as a wife and had offspring, didn't he?"

"Indeed, Your Highness. The Great Chieftain of Colima has many children, with marital ties to various Tribes. When Qinchongcan City fell, all of Su'angua's wives and concubines were executed by the Chief of the Hummingbirds. And the daughter of the Great Chieftain of Colima left a son, who was one of the captive Tarasco Princes, Shatini. However, those Princes should have all been sacrificed to the Chief God during the Alliance's victory Sacrificial Rite."

Xiulote nodded in acknowledgment. He turned his gaze back to Ezpan.

"Ezpan, in your recent campaign in the southwestern mountains, did you gather any information on Colima's Great Chieftain Iymar? How old is he, and what is his reputation like?"

"Great Chieftain Iymar of Colima..."

Ezpan thought deeply for a moment before meticulously answering.

"Your Majesty, Iymar the Greater Chieftain is near fifty, robust and imposing, a rare long-lived Chief. In the rumors among the Tekos people, his mother was favored by the Fire God, who granted her Divine Blood, resulting in his birth – as one with Divine Blood. As a Divine Descendant, he has always been blessed by the Fire God, often bathing and praying in the volcanic hot springs. He has sired dozens of children over time..."

Upon hearing this, Xiulote's expression flickered. Being slightly deified by the Tekos people in the mountains proved that Iymar was a very powerful Chieftain.

"Iymar has been the Chieftain for over twenty years and holds high prestige among the tribes, with great influence over the tribes of the Fire River Plains. In earlier years, he led the Colima tribes in resistance to the invasion of the old Tarasco regime, repelling the Tarasco legions several times by using the terrain to their advantage in the mountains, and he became the leader of the Western Tekos Alliance. Eventually, under his leadership, the Colima tribes nominally submitted to the old Tarasco regime but actually maintained their autonomy and independence. After the fall of the old regime, he again sent envoys to the Kingdom to express submission to you."

Chapter 750: King's Western Tour: Envoy of Fire River City_2

"Hmm, the first New Year's grand ritual since the establishment of the Kingdom, and there are envoys from the Colima Tribes."

Xiulote clearly remembered. Although before the southern expedition, the tributes from the Colima clans were merely symbolic gifts, their ceremonial gestures were meticulously conducted... The Great Chief of Fire River City, Iymar, was likely not an easy opponent. Contemplating this, the King furrowed his brows.

"Ezpan, how is the defense at Fire River City?"

"Your Majesty, according to the Scout's report, the size of Fire River City is not large, the city walls are over six meters high, roughly equivalent to Apa Fortress. However, the Fire River Plains are surrounded by mountains, and to attack Fire River City, one would need to capture several passes to the northeast or southeast. The most suitable route, is to dispatch troops from the wilderness village to attack the relatively wide southeast pass!"

"Hmm."

Xiulote recalled the map of the western mountain regions. Due to the mountain barriers, there were only two routes to attack the Fire River Plains, one was to first head southwest, passing through the wilderness village then turning northwest. The other was to head northwest, delve deep into the western mountains, then turn southwest. Departing from Apa City, the distances of both routes were about five hundred li, mostly mountain roads, an absolute nightmare for logistics.

"Ezpan, how many Samurai do you need to defeat Iymar and break through Fire River City?"

"Your Majesty, with sufficient food supplies, allotting a thousand sturdy Copper Armors, and enough support from the Canine Warriors, I can break the enemy for you!"

Upon hearing the King's question, Ezpan's face lit up with excitement, like a hunting dog scenting meat.

"I only need my Spear Legion, along with the Guajili Legion, and we will be able to defeat Iymar, set the Fire River Plains ablaze, and breach Fire River City!"

In mountainous terrain, the Guajili Legion is indispensable. These Canine Light Infantry are incredibly useful, especially proficient in pursuing fleeing enemies.

"Ezpan, I'm not asking you to plunder and leave."

Xiulote shook his head.

"I want you to occupy Fire River City, firmly control the Fire River Plains, and organize thousands of miners to excavate the Colima mines."

"Ah? You want to bring the Fire River Plains under our rule?"

Ezpan hesitated. Capturing a territory required only formidable military power. However, to occupy and rule such a remote mountainous territory required controlling the local population. The difficulties of the two tasks were not on the same level. After thinking it over, Ezpan clenched his teeth hard.

"Your Majesty, I can do it! After conquering the Fire River Plains, first forcibly relocate tens of thousands of Tekos people out of the mountains, then send the Canine Legions to sweep the surrounding two hundred li of mountain villages! Then, each autumn, set fire to the mountains, burning down villages and farms, driving away birds and game. Next, block the mountain passes, forbidding the entry of sea salt..."

"After destroying the guerrilla Tekos tribes in the mountains, relocate tens of thousands of compliant civilians from the Kingdom, mix them with the submissive tribal people, and set up military colonies on the Fire River Plains... Continuing this for a few years, once the faith in the Chief Divine is stabilized, we can control the Fire River Plains!"

"Hmm."

Xiulote gazed deeply at Ezpan for a moment, without offering any comment. He pondered for a long while and said blandly.

"Let the envoy from the Colima Tribes come to see me!"

A trusted aide hurried off. In less than half a quarter, a wild Tekos girl, barefoot, wearing an Obsidian necklace, dressed in a bright short robe, appeared before the King. The girl was indeed twenty-eight, with delicate eyebrows and eyes, a high-ridged nose, and slightly pursed lips. Her figure was slender and upright, moving with the agility of a female panther, exuding the vitality of youth and a wild aura. Behind her followed a maid carrying an ornate wooden box.

"Mighty God of Death Great Chief, Colima Tribe's warrior, Yilian, pays respect to you!"

The girl Yilian knelt on one knee, saluting the King. Her gaze was curious and untamed, boldly sizing up the King, seemingly evaluating his strength.

Xiulote raised an eyebrow, looked at the wild pretty girl, and spoke calmly.

"You are Iymar's daughter?"

"Great Chief, Iymar is my father, but I am the warrior Yilian!"

Yilian held her head high, confidently responding.

"Haha!"

Hearing the girl's defiant words, Xiulote smiled, asking with interest.

"What has Iymar sent you here for?"

"Father sent me here as the envoy of the tribes to deliver gifts!"

Yilian took the ornate wooden box from the maid's hands and handed it to the king's trusted aide. The aide inspected it briefly before passing the box to the king.

Inside the box, there was a pair of fist-sized jade stones, a necklace made of obsidian, a golden chalice, and two extremely sharp daggers. Spanning five hundred miles east to west and three hundred miles north to south, the Colima Mountain Region is an area with frequent volcanic activity, known for producing jade, obsidian, and gold and silver. The necklace and chalice themselves demonstrated the manufacturing level and forging capabilities of various parts of Colima.

Xiulote's attention quickly focused on the daggers. These two daggers had a silver-gray color, and they felt cold and hard to the touch, as if they were made of rare iron!

"What are these?"

"Great Chief, these are divine weapons passed down by the tribe, gifts from the Fire God! My father, to show his sincerity, especially dedicated these divine weapons to you!"

"Divine weapons passed down..."

Xiulote's expression became serious.

"Yilian, how common are such divine weapons among the various parts of Colima? How were they made?"

"Great Chief, divine weapons are rare. They are ancient legacies of various tribes, legend has it that they are related to gifts from the Fire God. As for the method of their creation, it has been lost by the tribes for a long time."

Yilian shook her head, answering earnestly.

"Only these two divine weapons exist in the Great Colima Tribe, and today they are all presented to you! They are gifts from the Fire God, thus they must not be in contact with water for extended periods, or they will lose their power."

Xiulote was silent for a moment, speculating. Long ago, the Colima Mountain Region may have had scattered surface iron ore, discovered by the ancestors of the Tekos people and forged into ancestral divine weapons. And when the surface ore was exhausted, the divine weapons were lost... After a while, the King nodded slowly.

"Iymar has been considerate. I will remember his submission."

"Mighty Great Chief, aside from these, my father has also dedicated his most precious gift to you!"

"Oh? What is it?"

"It is me!"

The young lady Yilian spoke boldly, not shyly. She directly removed her robe, revealing her lean and tight body, an abdomen with defined abs, and solid, round thighs.

"Great Chief, my father has sent me to serve you! I can sing for you, dance for you, help you bathe, be by your side for pleasure! But I can also don armor, wield a spear, draw a bow for hunting, protect you, and kill your enemies!"

After speaking, the girl looked earnestly at the king with an intense gaze.

"..."

Xiulote was at a loss for words. Memories of Medina flashed across the king's mind, causing him to sigh. He wasn't planning to keep the young lady Yilian near him for the time being. However, as the daughter of the Great Chief of Colima, who was a significant hostage in a sense, she could not be simply sent away or assigned at random... After a moment of silence, the king made a decision.

"Yilian, I will not keep you by my side. You will go to the Capital City's College of Divine Might and study with the priests of the Chief Divine, learning about divine enlightenment!"

"Um, divine enlightenment? School? What is that?"

The wild young lady looked puzzled. In her soul, she had a premonition: this was something more challenging than hunting and fighting.

"That is about writing, chronology, herbs, theology, nature, and the future promised by the Chief Divine!"

Xiulote gave a slight smile and waved his hand to the puzzled young lady.

"Off you go, Yilian! Go and study well!"

Afterwards, the king had Ezpan prepare a return gift for Fire River City. The return gift included a pure gold Hummingbird Sun Amulet, an illustrated version of the "Book of Ama Colley," a brand new bronze sword, and a set of sturdy bronze armor. These were the symbols of the kingdom's religion, culture, and military power, a message the Great Chief Iymar would understand.

Once all this was arranged, the Royal Banner of the Black Wolf would set off once more. However, before that, Ezpan had his final report to deliver.