

Civilization 751

Chapter 751: King's Western Tour: Defending the Southwest, the Third Honored Nobility!

The sun set in the west, scattering light and shadows. Everyone stood on the edge of the mountain region, being blown by the wind of February, which was neither cold nor hot. Marching on the tropical highlands was relatively easy, and there was little need for warmth, so the baggage was not overly burdensome.

Where Xiulote's gaze reached, the sky bore faint traces of marching dust. Even though more than half a month had passed, the procession escorting the captured Tekos still stretched endlessly, winding out from the southwestern mountains. Upon closer inspection, those exiting the mountains had grown increasingly emaciated, clearly having marched for a long time.

The King pondered for a moment, then spoke softly.

"Ezpan," he once said, "if you can bring in a hundred thousand people, you would be the foremost contributor to the southern campaign! Now, how many have you gathered?"

"Your Majesty, in this past month, the army went deep into the mountain regions, cleaning up the aftermath of General Black Wolf's sweep and capturing a bounty!"

Ezpan bowed respectfully and reported in detail.

"In the Serpent Basin, we captured nearly thirty thousand captives, who have all been fully escorted to Apa Plain by now. These include the entire Shield Great Tribe, the families of the Palm Family, and various mountain peoples. South of Wild Mountain Village, within the mountain corridors and valleys, we caught about twenty thousand people, who have just been transported out of the mountains. The large group of captives now passing through Kan River Village essentially constitutes this batch. Further south, General Keka has gathered thirty thousand displaced people along the two hundred li of coastline outside Palm Bay. Most of these people have already arrived at Serpent Basin. In a few days, they'll be leaving the mountains!"

"Oh? By that count, that's eighty thousand Tekos highlanders? That's even slightly more than captured during the northern campaign!"

Xiulote smiled. The Tekos were agricultural tribes from the mountain valleys, familiar with the cultivation of fields, and thus far outnumbered the hunting-dwelling Guajili people. Of course, the combat capability of the Tekos warriors was much inferior to that of the Canine Descendants. He affectionately patted Ezpan on the shoulder, smilingly said.

"Not bad! Very good! It's just a pity that it still falls short of the hundred thousand target. I was actually prepared to reward you handsomely..."

"Ah! Majesty, in the southwestern mountains and along the coastline, there are still many dispersed tribal people hidden. They lack food and do not have fields to farm, so they cannot remain in the mountains for long. Just wait a month or two more, and these people will either starve or come down from the mountains to surrender. And we have the grain tributed by the various parts of Colima, which can bring them all back!...by then, perhaps we can make it to ninety, a hundred thousand people..."

Upon hearing that the rich reward was nearly slipping away, Ezpan's eyes reddened a bit, he urgently spoke out.

In the southwestern Coahuilcoman Tribes, there are altogether just over a hundred thousand people. After successive sweeps, to seize eighty thousand civilians was already near the limit. His initial plan was to raid the tribes on the fringes of the western Colima Mountain Region, capture another twenty thousand to meet the King's "small target." But now, with Colima paying tribute to the Kingdom, sending noblewomen to attend the King and providing an abundance of grain, it was hard to initiate.

"Hmm, let's say that makes ninety thousand then, it won't reach a hundred thousand."

Xiulote smiled, contemplating the arrangements for the ninety thousand Tekos highlanders. He turned his body to watch the setting sun in the west, holding the destiny of tens of thousands in his hands.

"Before the southern campaign, the gaps for grants of land and slaves due to military merits originally had eighty thousand. Zicao City had twenty thousand rebels, Apa City ten thousand rebels, including ten thousand resisting nobles from the south, totaling forty thousand agricultural slaves. From there, pull another forty thousand agricultural slaves from the Tekos captives and completely fill the previous gap!"

Ezpan listened with bowed head, his heart quivering. Facing the King's reduction and reform, out of the over two hundred thousand population of Zicao County, one-fifth had rebelled, and forty thousand were

demoted to agricultural slaves. With this southern campaign, the old nobles of the south were thoroughly erased.

"Yes, forty thousand Tekos agricultural slaves. Serpent Basin has thirty thousand captives, mostly resisters from the core of the great tribes, twenty thousand of whom are demoted to agricultural slaves. One ten thousand agricultural slaves each from mountain corridors and seaside migrants. The remaining fifty thousand people, following the northern flag squad system, will form twelve flag squads of over four thousand each, tens of villages, concentrated on Apa Plain for settlement!"

"I will abide by your command, Your Majesty!"

"The Kingdom will soon send priests to manage these flag squad villages and spread the faith of the Chief Divine! Each flag squad will provide two hundred and fifty able-bodied men, forming a three thousand strong Tekos tribal militia, absorbing experienced tribal warriors. Ezpan, after the southern campaign, you will command the Second Spear Legion, settling on Apa Plain, holding the southwest for me! This Tekos tribal militia, I also temporarily entrust to your command!"

"Thank you for your trust, Your Majesty!"

Ezpan was overjoyed. He would be the first in the entire Kingdom to command a legion with over ten thousand troops, holding the frontier for the Kingdom!

Xiulote nodded. He surveyed the wilderness, Apa Plain was full of lush vibrancy. The unexplored soil was extremely fertile, and the mountain rivers brought stable water sources — a land of abundance akin to Bashu. With proper management, it would serve as the Kingdom's major logistical base for subjugating the realm.

"Ezpan, Apa Plain is surrounded by mountains on all sides, fertile lands stretching for miles. All the way from Apa City in the east of the plain to Tepalcatepec in the west, it spans a hundred and fifty li. From Los Tazumbos in the north of the plain to Grass Forest Village in the south, it's a hundred and thirty li. Roughly calculated, that's eight million mu of fertile land!"

"Yes, Your Majesty! Apa Plain indeed has fertile land suitable for cultivation. Here, the woods are lush, birds and beasts flock. Many rivers flow down from the mountains, interconnecting all sides, forming natural irrigation channels, easily watering the banks. Rio Grada has abundant water all year round,

flowing down from the Great Lake across the entire plain, the largest river. Besides the Rio Grada, there are also Rio Ticuilucan, Rio Buenavista, Rio Tepalcatepec..."

Chapter 752: King's Western Tour: Defending the Southwest, the Third Honored Nobility!_2

Ezpan respectfully replied. More than a decade ago, during the Tarasco Era, he had fought in the southwest for many years, conquering the Tekos people, and was extremely familiar with the local terrain and environment. At this moment, he stood before the king and recounted the details of the Apa Plain one by one.

"Tepalcatepec is on the western edge of the plain, located on the banks of the Bo River, rich in clay and capable of producing high-quality colored pottery. To the northwest of Tepalcatepec is the source of the Bo River, Olive Lake (Los Olives). Around the lake stand fragrant, peculiar forests, abundant in tree resin and frankincense. The villages near the mountain areas all produce furs and feathers..."

Xiulote listened patiently. He became increasingly convinced that Ezpan was the best choice to develop the Apa Plain and guard the southwest.

It must be known that the Apa Plain covers more than 3,000 square kilometers, nearly half the area of the Chengdu Plain. Even in this era, the total arable land on the plain could exceed 2,000 square kilometers. Based on an estimation of 2,500 Alliance small acres per square kilometer, there would be 5 million acres of cultivable land here.

Including fallow land, 5 million acres could cultivate 2 million acres of milpa farmland. And with each person cultivating 10 acres and farming 4 acres, the entire plain could at least support a population of 500,000! This was still based on the lower productivity of this era. When metal farming tools and fertilizers would be widely used, the output per acre of these well-irrigated lands would leap dramatically, supporting a population many times larger!

After a while, once Ezpan had finished speaking, Xiulote nodded with a smile.

"Ezpan, the Apa Plain is fertile, but for the past hundred years, it has not been effectively developed. Do you know why?"

"Your Highness, this area was originally the land of the various Tekos tribes, and it was taken over after being repeatedly conquered by the Tarasco Kingdom. For decades, it has been on the border and has

been continuously plagued by wars. The Prepetcha people and the Tekos people have been killing each other, making it difficult for the riverside villages to prosper. Moreover, during the Tarasco Era, the main focus of development to the south was on Apa City and Kulamo City."

Ezpan pondered for a moment and, based on his experience, tried his best to answer.

"Additionally, the Apa Plain has fertile soil and ample water sources, hence the forests are dense and the weeds are lush. Without a significant labor force or metal tools, cultivation is not easy. And the fierce flow of the Gran River brings floods in the rainy season, creating many undeveloped beaches and marshes."

"Quite right, you have spoken well."

Xiulote laughed heartily with satisfaction, then his smile vanished, and he became serious.

"Now that the southwest Coahuayana Mountain Region has been subdued, eight or nine out of ten Tekos tribes are gone. The submissive submission of the western Colima Mountain Region also means they won't be causing any more disturbances. With you leading the legion to guard here, the Apa Plain can be peacefully cultivated, becoming a great granary for the kingdom's hinterland! As for the bronze tools for cutting and the bronze farming implements for tilling, I will have them dispatched to you from the Northern Kingdom!"

"Thank you, Your Majesty!"

Ezpan knelt to the ground and solemnly saluted. Then he stood up and asked,

"Your Majesty, after the southwest conquest is over, where should the legion's border colonies be located?"

Upon hearing this, Xiulote pondered for a moment, then took a map from Bertade's hands and drew the boundaries that had already been planned.

"Ezpan, the southwestern boundary of the Apa Plain will be established with three military strongholds, and stone forts should be gradually constructed. The western stronghold is Tepalcatepec, controlling the passages to the western mountain region; the southwest stronghold is here, Can River Village, will be promoted to Can River Town, where an encampment will be built to guard the southwest mountain pass; the southern stronghold will be Grass Forest Village, promoted to Grass Forest Town, holding the southern mountain pass. Additionally, troops should be dispatched into the mountains yearly to subdue and gather the mountain people!"

Ezpan thought for a moment and respectfully nodded. Once the three military towns were established, they would control all the major mountain passes, fully encompassing the Apa Plain.

"As for the northern boundary of the plain, it will be set sixty li northwest of Bo River Village, at Snake Bone Village (El Hueso) by the northern mountain pass. Here, a military town will be established to guard against the Chapala Lake Region!"

Snake Bone Village at the northern mountain pass was almost the northernmost territory of Zicao County, virtually at the same latitude as the Apachigan mining area. The terrain there is undulating, rainfall is not plentiful, and there are large sandy areas that will produce grapes in later generations. However, over two hundred more li north of Snake Bone Village lies the vast Chapala Great Lake. When the time comes to conquer the northwest and subdue the Chapala Lake Region, a detouring expedition can be launched from here.

Xiulote looked towards the north. An eagle soared in the distant sky, its desire to hunt never ceasing. After a southern campaign, there would likely be a shortfall of twenty to thirty thousand agricultural slaves in achievements granted. The kingdom's military machine never stops, and after this year's autumn harvest, there would surely be a new war!

"Your Majesty, if the four military cities are the boundaries, how should the fertile Snake Basin be handled?"

Ezpan pondered for a moment, then cautiously inquired.

After contemplating for a while, Xiulote considered the Hand Snake Basin's isolated position in the deep mountains, the difficult logistics, and the high maintenance costs. It was also very close to the various Tribes of Colima, and should there be any unexpected developments... After some time, the King finally made a decision.

"The borders of the Kingdom shall, for now, stop at the Apa Plain. Only when you have cultivated the Apa Plain well, ensuring a surplus of food and population, and the villages and farmlands are dense, can we expand into the mountains once more. Leave this basin unoccupied for now. Just set up a few outposts and leave some personnel, to attract Surrendered Mountain Tribes! Ezpan, when you're gathering the Tribes, be careful to maintain relations with the various Tribes of Colima!"

"I will follow Your Majesty's will!"

"Good. Once you've dealt with the captives and arranged the cultivation of the Apa Plain... this unforgettable southern campaign should come to an end."

Xiulote's expression was solemn. He fell silent, gazing at the western sky. It was not until the red sun shone through the Kan River that he looked towards Legion Commander Ezpan.

"Ezpan, the Rabbit Moon has arrived, the last month of the 260-day sacred year. The old cycle is about to end, and a new one is about to begin."

"Yes, Your Majesty. The Rabbit Moon is the month of sacrifice, the month of courage, and also the month of endings. The Chief Divine bears witness! I wish to offer my loyalty to you, fighting with fearless courage on your behalf!"

Ezpan suppressed the excitement in his heart. He raised his left hand, which only had four fingers, and swore allegiance to the King.

Xiulote nodded slowly. He murmured to himself, yet loud enough for Ezpan to hear.

"In the ancient myths, the cycle of time is endless. The Primordial God awakens in the month of endings, dividing the world into dreams and reality, and leaving behind seeds of connection. When people fall asleep in spring, the world of dreams awakens within..."

Although he did not understand the King's sentiment, Ezpan still listened silently. It was an unprecedented closeness that made the image of the King come alive.

"Ezpan, I have a dream of an Empire in my heart. I know what it looks like, vivid in every detail, constantly urging me forward, always telling me where to go!..."

"Your Majesty, wherever you go, I will follow loyally!"

"Very well, then let us set out together! The time of mortals is ultimately fleeting, and we do not have much left..."

As he spoke, the King paused, his gaze bright as flame, locked onto the once Surrendered General.

"Ezpan, cultivate the Apa Plain, establish military towns and checkpoints, spread the teachings of the Divine Church, and pacify the spirits of the Tribes. You must reduce reckless martial prowess, focus on food production, and aim to pacify Fire River City... I entrust you with all the affairs of the Kingdom's southwest!"

"Your Majesty, thank you for your trust! The Chief Divine bears witness, I shall exert my utmost effort for you, loyal until death!"

"Good! Ezpan, I trust your loyalty. Develop the southwestern plains well for me; it shall be the Kingdom's great rear."

After a pause for reflection, Xiulote made a decision. Although they had not reached the minor goal of gathering a population of a hundred thousand, Ezpan's achievements were already worthy of significant reward.

"Once I return to the Capital City, I will confer honors and rewards. Ezpan, you are the third honored noble of the entire Kingdom, after Bertade and Olosh!"

"Ah! Your Majesty! You are my only sun, my only light! May the gods protect our King, forever ablaze!"

The red sun set in the west, covering the Apa Plain. Both the sky and the plain were red, just like the blazing fire that ignited in the southwest land and sky.

Chapter 753: King's Western Tour: Tepalcatepec and Olive Lake, Precious Specialties

By late February, the air warmed, and flocks of birds headed north. The Royal Banner of Black Wolf moved again, traveling forty li north from Kan River village to Tepalcatepec.

In the local language, this place was "Tepalcatepec," known for its abundance of pottery. Tepalcatepec had a population of over a thousand people, originally the domain of a hereditary nobility from the south, but now directly under the Kingdom. To the northwest of Tepalcatepec lay the shimmering Olive Lake, from which the Kan River and Tao River both originated before flowing east and west, respectively.

Xiulote stayed in Tepalcatepec for two days. He summoned the local pottery master, showing great interest in the local pottery products.

In a semi-open shed, various daily-use painted pottery items were piled up, including pots, basins, jars, pitchers, bowls, and cups. Most of the colorful pottery were the common red pottery, interspersed with some grey pottery. These pottery items were simple and rustic in style, not comparable to the elaborate ones from the Capital City, but they were superior in terms of durability.

"Hmm, this pottery pot, how much?"

Under the strict guard of his trusted aide, who formed a circle outside the shed, Xiulote picked up a naturally patterned red pottery pot and asked the pottery master politely.

"...Ah, Your Majesty, this pottery pot, it's a gift... no charge!"

The pottery master stuttered cautiously. He glanced at the surrounding Armored Warriors and again at the armor-clad King.

Upon hearing this, Xiulote smiled. He looked at Bertade and the Head Warrior then took out a bag of cocoa beans and handed it to the pottery master.

"Is that enough?"

"Ah! It's enough... enough. A pot costs sixty cocoa beans, or it could be exchanged for a turkey. These are too... too many."

"No change needed."

Hearing the price, Xiulote nodded slightly. In the Lake Capital City, a sturdy pot cost a hundred cocoa beans, and a turkey eighty, both significant assets for common households. As the production site of pottery, Tepalcatpek naturally had much cheaper prices.

"With so much pottery piled up here, to whom do you plan to sell?"

"Your... Your Majesty, our pottery is cheap and useful. The mountains to the west want them, the mountains to the south want them, the villages to the east want them... When there's no war, some merchants also come..."

"What do mountain people trade with?"

"Mostly with... dried meat, hides, feathers, sometimes with... grain, and some inferior Obsidian..."

"Not bad."

Xiulote nodded. Tepalcatpek was located at the western mountain pass and had a good geographical position, with spontaneous trade with the Tekos Tribe people. Solely relying on local trade was not enough to sustain so many potters. Such a mutually beneficial border trade could be further expanded later.

"Bertade, let's go."

Xiulote scanned the high stacks of pottery inside the shed, preparing to leave.

The pottery master stood woodenly in place, blinked, and stared at the big bag of cocoa beans in his hands. Seeing the generous King about to depart, he suddenly cried out, his stutter instantly gone.

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty! We have a rare type of white pottery here, unavailable elsewhere! You might be interested..."

"Hmm? White pottery."

Protected vigilantly by his trusted aides, Xiulote turned back, looking interestedly at the pottery master.

"Bring it out, let me see it. Price is not an issue; if it's truly rare, I might buy two pieces."

"Alright, sure."

The pottery master beamed with joy. He carefully moved the pottery pile aside and fumbled inside for a moment, taking out a small pottery bowl, a jade-like cup, and a smooth pitcher. These three items were entirely different in style from the other pottery, not only much more delicately made but also in a fine snowy white color.

"Your Majesty, these three exquisite pieces of pottery seldom appear even in the Capital City; they've been carefully crafted by me. The pitcher and the cup are each worth a tube of Gold Dust, and the bowl half a tube. If you take them all, two tubes of Gold Dust will suffice!"

"Hmm?... Bring them here, let me take a closer look."

"Sure thing."

Xiulote smiled, glancing at the pottery master, and took the white pottery pieces. They were quite beautiful, their surfaces finely textured with elegant grid patterns, clearly the work of a master.

"White pottery, fine texture?"

Xiulote pondered silently, a familiar feeling surging in his heart. After a moment of consideration, his eyes suddenly brightened and he asked the pottery master.

"The clay used in making these white pieces, was it white clay?!"

"...Ah!"

Hearing this, the pottery master's expression changed. He responded hesitantly.

"Ah, the clay, that..."

"Give him three tubes of Gold Dust; I'll take all three pieces of white pottery."

"At your command, my prince."

Bertade nodded, drew three tubes of Gold Dust from his breast, and handed them to the pottery master. Then, the Head Warrior coldly spoke out, his hand on his Bronze Sword.

"Answer His Majesty's question, or else..."

"Yes, yes..."

The pottery master took the Gold Dust carefully, pocketing it. He looked worriedly at the King's Armored Warriors, lowering his head to answer.

"Yes, Your Majesty. At the base of a nearby hill, one can extract a rock as fine as White Cloud Soil, crushed it becomes the excellent white clay..."

"Bring it to me!"

Xiulote had a moment of enlightenment and grew ever more convinced. Moments later, the leader of the potters brought over some white clay.

The King briefly examined it—it was as white as a cloud and as delicate as powder, of excellent quality. A joyous smile appeared on his face.

"Indeed, it is White Cloud Soil, kaolin... exceptional clay for ceramics! Also suitable as a fill material in rubber."

Xiulote pondered for a moment, watching the anxious potter's leader, and asked in a deep voice,

"What is your name?"

"Ah! I... my name is Elo."

Unknowingly, the potter's leader, Elo, began to stutter once again.

"Excellent! Potter Elo, you are now conscripted by the Kingdom!"

Xiulote smiled warmly, causing Elo to shiver.

"Bring your pottery tools, bring several bags of white clay. Accompany the Imperial Guard Warriors to the Divine Revelation Place in the Capital City to report!"

"Your... Your Majesty!..."

"Bertade, let us depart."

Xiulote left two samurais behind with a smile, taking Bertade away. It turned out that Tepalcatepec, surrounding the village, produced kaolin. Thus, the trial production of porcelain was now more promising.

"Your Highness, where to now?"

"To Olive Lake in the northwest. I've heard that there is an exotic forest heavy with resin and frankincense."

"By your command, Your Highness."

Bertade summoned a local guide, gave a few instructions, and the guide led them off.

Olive Lake was located six or seven miles northwest of Tepalcatepec. After trekking for a quarter, they saw a vast emerald lake with waterbirds playing on it. The lakeshore was covered with various lush tropical trees and a small Prepetcha village.

The agricultural fields outside the village were small, with numerous trees instead. Dozens of villagers were busy in the forests, and upon seeing the troop of samurais approaching, they fled in panic toward the village.

Xiulote ordered his trusted aides to stop and sent Bertade with some Prepetcha warriors to pacify the village elders.

Two quarters later, Bertade returned calmly with two samples and an elderly village chief to report to the King.

"Your Highness, there indeed are trees producing frankincense around Olive Lake; this jar contains fragrant oil collected by the villagers. The abundant 'resin' refers to the 'tears' of the rubber trees, which the Kingdom uses as rubber."

Rubber trees were not uncommon in Mexico, known as "cauchu, the weeping tree." Rubber was also widely used: rubber balls were standard equipment in human sacrifice ball courts, and rubber cloth was used for ancient raincoats.

The Divine Revelation Place, guided by the King, had mastered the vulcanization technique of smoking natural rubber with sulfur, producing the first batch of vulcanized rubber, used for timber wheels. When

the Imperial Guard Legion moved south, the wheels of the Sun Divine Eagle Cannon carriages were covered with vulcanized rubber to reduce chassis shock and damage. However, even though Xiulote improved the rubber tapping method, the rubber production was still too low.

"Oh? There are wild agarwood trees and rubber trees then."

Xiulote first took the fragrant oil and sniffed it. This was the future Mexican agarwood, primarily sourced from local olive-family trees, sometimes mixed with berries, and widely used in religious rituals.

"It smells quite different from the Celestial Empire's agarwood. Hmm, gentle and meticulous, sweet and tender, more akin to rosewood."

The King pondered for a moment; this fragrant oil was an excellent religious item and a fine trade good that nobility and priests would demand. Next, he examined the local rubber, already solidified into rubber sheets, looking fairly decent in appearance.

Xiulote stood still, briefly conversing with the local village chief. The village, being near Olive Lake, was therefore called Olive Village. He did not station himself in the rudimentary lakeside village but led his trusted aides around Olive Lake for half a day.

The lakeside was filled with fragrant trees, and the air carried a faint clean scent. The King walked along the lake, his mood relaxed and joyful. He hummed softly, beaming,

"Wandering around the lake in early spring, enjoying the scenery, listening to the birds singing—a rare leisure indeed!"

"The lakeside scenery is indeed splendid. However... Your Highness, it is not safe here."

Bertade was meticulous, closely following behind the King. With a quiet smile, he tactfully advised. The area was on the edge of the western mountain region; for the safety of the King, about a hundred scouts were dispersed into the mountains, and six or seven hundred samurais were on guard around the lake.

"Indeed. It is time to return."

Noting the Head Warrior's advisory tone, Xiulote nodded.

"After observing for half a day, Olive Lake is very suitable for cultivating olives and rubber trees. Indeed, this region of Tepalcatepec, abundant with White Cloud Soil, agarwood, and rubber, is worth vigorously developing!"

"Precisely, if fully developed, these specialties are all highly sought-after trade items in the world. However, this place has yet to be taken over by Preaching Priests, and the population is sparse. It will take some time before it prospers."

"Indeed, then let us record this and leave it for the future."

Xiulote stood by the lake, taking one last look at the rippling blue waters. He longed to boat on the lake, to sleep amidst the fragrant forests. But a King at a high position, burdened with the affairs of the world, could not act unreservedly.

"Bertade, let us depart."

"Your Highness, where to?"

"Back to Apa Military City. The envoy brought news of Black Wolf, and I have ordered him to come from Kulamo City. This time, he needs a stern reprimand!"

Hearing this, Bertade briefly tilted his head, noting the King's faint smile, and understood.

"As you command, my King!"

By Olive Lake, the King halted; the western tour ended here. The next day, three thousand Imperial Guards, escorted by the Royal Banner, left Tepalcatepec, looping around the northern Apa Plain, returning to Apa Military City.

Chapter 754: The Secret Guard and the Interrogation

A thousand miles east of the Apa Plain, in the Lake Capital City of Tenochtitlan, there was a secluded manor to the south of the city.

The sun was setting in the west, and Lake Texcoco shimmered with the light of the waves. The prayers of the evening echoed throughout the entire Capital City, reaching into the underground chamber of the manor. The emblem of the Sun Hummingbird stood erect in the dark chamber, casting a faint glow under the dim candlelight. In the shadowy confines of the chamber, several figures sat encircling another figure, and the lengthy questioning continued.

"...you said last time that the King in the north has a huge Bronze Beast, that, once ignited with fire, can launch stone balls and emit smoke, smashing any target in front of it?"

An icy voice asked calmly. Each word in that voice was steadily calm, devoid of personal emotion.

"Yes, yes! The huge Bronze Beast firing stone balls, the poor Yolodila family, right in front of me, was turned into rubble by the terrifying stone balls of the Bronze Beast. It was too tragic, just as tragic as our Zicao family..."

The Zicao Clan Leader Guramo slouched on his seat. His eyes were unfocused, his cheeks flushed, and he breathed heavily, his expression was oddly excited. It seemed as if all his energy had been drained, and before him, everything appeared as shifting shadows. He couldn't control himself, his usual self-discipline had crumbled away, and he couldn't help but blurt out anything and everything.

Querying voices came through the shadows, and he revealed all he knew, without reservation, every sentence true.

"...you also said, there are two types of Bronze Beasts, one capable of firing stone balls, reaching as far as two miles and knocking down robust trees. The other shoots buckshot, which within a hundred steps, turns people into sieves?"

"Yes, yes! We saw the large Bronze Beast knock down trees, and then we knew, manors of nobles everywhere couldn't be defended! We saw the small Bronze Beast kill a group of people and knew that we couldn't win in open battle either! Unable to defend and unable to win, we had no choice but

assassination! I sent my most perfect daughter to assassinate him, but she failed, and our family was destroyed, wuwuwu..."

As he said this, Guramo collapsed to the ground, crying messily, completely surrendering his body to uncontrollable emotions.

The Chief Intelligence Officer Gillim sat cross-legged in front of Guramo, two sharp Bronze Daggers tucked at his waist. His demeanor was grave and meticulous as he solemnly waited for some time. Yet Guramo had not ceased his crying, and his tears and snot flowed together, dampening the mat.

"Give him another bottle of the specially prepared Holy Water."

Gillim's icy voice sounded once more. Three secret guards quickly approached; one restrained Guramo's body, another gripped his chin, and the last one poured a jug of special "Holy Water" into his mouth without refusal.

"Ah! Haha! ...Ah! How beautiful, this is the ancestral manor of my Zicao family! I want to climb the tall Kapok tree, and from there, soar into the sky!"

In just a moment, Guramo sat up, his face showing uncontrollable joy as he broke out into sincere and hearty laughter.

"...you say, when you attempted to assassinate the King in the north, you had made contact with generals from Tarasco. The second Spear Legion Commander Ezpan did not agree, but hereditary Nobility Huitu Puapu and the Sky Oorta consented, as well as some Warrior Captains from the legions, and Warrior Camp Chiefs from the garrison troops. They promised that after the King's death, they would rise up together and support the Tarasco Prince?"

"Ah? Yes, yes! How wonderful it would have been if the King of the north had died during his northern campaign! There would surely have been revolts among the legion commanders, and our Zicao family could have supported the Prince even further. Ah! But the King did not die in the northern campaign, and the assassination failed too! Leading his troops southward, the despicable Huitu Puapu and Sky Oorta came to silence me, destroying the entire Zicao manor!"

Once again, Guramo became agitated under the influence of the specially made Holy Water, his emotions completely unmanageable as he shouted excitedly.

"Ah! My heart aches, I regret it! If I had known today, why would I have chosen assassination? No, I don't regret it. Could our family really have been sent to guard the northern border? No, I do regret it. Even if it meant guarding the border, we could have preserved our family..."

Intelligence Officer Gillim remained silent, deep in thought.

The latest intelligence had arrived. His Highness Xiulote had reorganized the legions of the Kingdom of the Lake. Huitu Puapu and the sky Oorta were stripped of their powers as generals, one exiled to the seaport, the other reassigned to farm anew, while other involved generals were all exiled to the north of the Lerma River. As a result, any threat of Prepetcha surrendering to the Nobility was eliminated, and the stability of the Kingdom of the Lake was further solidified.

It was a while before Gillim spoke again.

"Guramo, when you contacted everyone, did you reveal Prince Shatini's identity?"

"...Prince Shatini? Ah, right, Prince Shatini. He really is the most suitable prince to be supported, possessing both the Divine Eagle Bloodline and the blood of a Colima Noble Chief, capable of receiving support from both sides... Reveal his identity? I showed some tokens from the Royal Family which were given to me by secret guards. I hinted a few times, but most people didn't catch on. The only one who truly knows Prince Shatini's identity is the great Colima chieftain, Iymar!"

At this point, Guramo seemed to suddenly come to his senses. He painfully knelt down and pleaded with the Chief Intelligence Officer before him.

"Respected Lady Serpent of the Alliance! I contacted the generals everywhere, I supported Prince Shatini, I assassinated the King of the North, all at the insinuation of the secret guards! The secret guards are under your command, so it must have been your instruction behind it all. I followed your orders, I devoted myself to you! Please, you must help me, and restore the Zicao Family!..."

Upon hearing this, Gillim's expression grew even more solemn. His words fluctuated slightly, and a cold light flashed in his eyes.

"Listen to me? Guramo, you never followed the secret guards' plans! The secret guards never told you to assassinate His Highness Xiulote at this critical time, to create chaos in the western part of the Alliance! The secret guards only told you to wait for the right moment, to obediently follow His Highness and gain his trust, to integrate into the Kingdom's system. Your moment to act would come after King Aweit had pacified the four corners. Yet for your own little fief, you rashly committed assassination and raised an army, jeopardizing the Alliance's major plans?"

"Ah! Respected Lady Serpent..."

At these words, a heavy sense of crisis overwhelmed Guramo. He respectfully prostrated himself on the ground, not daring to offer any rebuttal.

Fleeing from the Zicao Manor with much difficulty, traveling discreetly to the Mexica Alliance, and finally meeting the mysterious overseer of the secret guards, who turned out to be King Aweit's chief adjutant, the Lady Serpent of the Alliance!

The Mexica King scheming in the south, planning for the Alliance's chief successor? In that moment, Guramo's premonition turned into reality; he had become entangled in a staggering conspiracy, unknowingly transformed into a pawn. At this moment, his life was in others' hands, his sons taken away, leaving him completely powerless to resist.

"Lady Serpent! Although the Zicao Family is now destroyed, I still have my uses! I have connections with the southern Nobility, I am familiar with the southern mountain and river terrain; I hold the Zicao Family assassin training methods, I am skilled at training beauties and concocting poison; I am more than willing to entrust you with my life and serve you with unwavering loyalty!..."

Gillim sat solemnly in his place. He gave Guramo, who lay prostrate before him, a cursory glance before finally speaking.

"Guramo, rest assured! As the Chief Divine witnesses, you will appear where the Alliance needs you most."

With that, Gillim stood up solemnly, escorted by two secret guards, and made his way out of the dark chamber. As he reached the door, he whispered to one of the secret guards beside him.

"Double the Holy Water, interrogate him again. Then, wait for my order."

"As you command, Lady Serpent."

Chapter 755: Commerce and Religion, The Silhouette of Lake Capital City

As dusk approached, the water reflected the red sun, and the Lake Capital City shimmered in the twilight, like a magnificent painting by the Chief Divine. The expansion of the Great Temple Pyramid was nearing completion, and the tower, standing sixty to seventy meters high, became ever more majestic, resembling the throne of a deity on earth.

Gillim, dressed in a simple long robe and draped in a dark cloak, accompanied by only a few escorts, made his way to the Royal Palace. Though he held the prestigious title of "Lady Snake" and was among the most important advisors to the King of the Alliance, he still led a simple life and maintained a low profile.

Having worked in intelligence for many years, he had long become accustomed to minimizing his presence. At this moment, as he walked the bustling streets of the Capital City, stepping into the shadows of the evening, he moved as if he were traversing a vacant field. No one noticed him, nor could anyone identify him.

The Chief of Intelligence walked past the thriving market, silently observing the merchants coming and going, studying their attire, expressions, and movements. The mid-January New Year celebrations had ended, and the envoys who had brought tributes from various states were gone, but merchants from all over the world still lingered in the Capital City.

With the strength of the Mexica Alliance, wealth from around the world converged here. The Great Nobility had enough wealth to splurge, giving rise to a booming trade. The Alliance itself produced large amounts of obsidian, gold and silver, salt, grain, cotton, and spices, while tribes from all directions contributed furs, tobacco, feathers, shells, rouge, jade, and gold and silver ornaments.

Copper materials from the western Kingdom and the Weytamo mountain area were monopolized by the central government of the Alliance, prioritized for military production. Only merchants with official

backing could engage in limited trade and reap huge profits. The craftsmen's camps operated day and night, forging sharp copper spears, armor-piercing copper arrows, and sturdy bronze cloth armor from vast amounts of copper and tin.

As bronze weapons became more common, the control over obsidian relaxed. Obsidian produced by the Alliance became a highly sought-after commodity among the merchants coming and going. Due to the need for blood sacrifices, there was constant warfare among the tribes. Even the distant Zapotecs annually campaigned against the Maya Tribes of the eastern Rainforest. In Central America, obsidian, a material that could be used as a weapon and held religious significance, was as solid a currency as cocoa beans.

"Why does the Kingdom of the Lake in the west have so many gemstones?"

The Chief of Intelligence cast a scrutinizing gaze at Prepetcha's gemstone shop.

In just a moment, a significant gemstone trade had been completed. A tall-headed Mayan merchant brought out tens of thousands of kilograms of grain and hundreds of rolls of fabric, trading them for two baskets of various colored gemstones. Both parties' merchants were smiling happily, and the nearby tax collector looked pleased as well.

The production of gemstones by the Kingdom of the Lake was so immense and the quality so consistent that it even caused the price of gemstones worldwide to drop significantly. Now, the only ones who could afford to buy a large amount of gemstones were the Mayan merchants who controlled the coastal trade.

The Chief of Intelligence knew that the Mayan merchants were buying high-quality Prepetcha gemstones in bulk, not to sell locally but to transport them eastward to the seaside. They embarked on large Mayan sailing ships to trade with countless island tribes in the sea, purchasing cheap tobacco, spices, fabric, and grain with Prepetcha gemstones, even achieving profits up to ten times over!

At this moment, Prepetcha's gemstones have probably spread to the ends of the world, becoming the third expensive staple currency after cocoa and obsidian.

"Numerous close guards have scoured the kingdom for years without finding any trace of a gemstone mine. All clues, instead, point to the kingdom's Divine Revelation Place's special trade bureau."

The Chief of Intelligence looked at the gemstone shop, lost in deep thought. He already had a startling suspicion, but in the current political climate of the kingdom, voicing this suspicion held no meaning.

Most of Prepetcha's gemstone shops were run by official merchants of the Kingdom of the Lake, who sold large quantities of gemstones stably across the Alliance states in exchange for daily necessities the kingdom needed, especially grain and fabric. These necessities would then be shipped from the northern port of the capital by the kingdom's naval forces to the west.

The Alliance, reliant on agriculture and war, has always had stringent controls on military and food resources. After the reforms to the religious laws, the outflow of military supplies was strictly prohibited. However, the Kingdom of the Lake was an exception because of its extremely close relationship with the Alliance and received special treatment. His Highness Xiulote, having enfeoffed the external states, both the king and the High Priest took great care of them, providing various kinds of support year after year.

In fact, without the continuous support from the Mexica Alliance, the Kingdom of the Lake could not have possibly restored its production order so quickly, let alone repeatedly deploy troops for conquest.

Apart from support with food, fabric, and tin ore, King Aweit even generously decreed to allow the Kingdom of the Lake to recruit impoverished Mexica farmers and city dwellers from the heavily populated Texcoco Lake District and relocate them to the western lake regions for settlement. The High Priest also ordered village priests throughout the region to cooperate and meet a certain migration quota annually.

Gillim slightly lowered his eyes. According to the intelligence he had, last year alone, more than ten thousand people had migrated from the Texcoco Lake District to the kingdom in the west. The Holy City of Teotihuacan had the highest number of migrants, almost two thousand.

"The king's trust in His Highness is indeed greater than that for his own children..."

The chief intelligence officer pondered for a moment, then smiled wryly. Next, he watched a slightly overweight tax collector in the market holding an abacus. With the Alliance strictly prohibiting smuggling and forbidding local unauthorized tax collection to protect merchant safety, regulate commodity prices, unify measurements and standards... a series of commercial law reforms had rapidly

increased the commercial taxes of the Texcoco Lake District. Now, the taxes collected by the Alliance each year were sufficient to support two legions of eight thousand troops each.

The position of the tax collector, controlled by the Priesthood and the Royal Family, had now become a notorious "lucrative post" within the Alliance. The sons of the Great Nobility who secured this position visibly grew fatter.

"The position of the tax collector can be used to appease the Great Nobility dissatisfied with centralization. And those who hold this position, mostly children of the Great Nobility, gradually wear down like Obsidian weapons, losing their fighting spirit..."

Gillim smiled faintly, catching the attention of the slightly overweight tax collector.

After observing Gillim for a moment, the tax collector suddenly trembled, his complexion ashen. It was the infamous "Lady Serpent," who had executed the most nobles within the Alliance! Rumors among the nobility held that Lady Serpent not only controlled the inspector warriors but also the secretive detective warriors. Not long ago, several tax collectors within the Alliance had been ruthlessly executed for taking bribes and allowing the military trade of foreign merchants.

Thinking of this, the tax collector immediately bowed and began walking towards him with small steps. Gillim glanced indifferently, waved his hand, and silently left again.

The chief intelligence officer continued forward, passing through a community temple. The evening praises emanated from the temple, and the scent of pine incense filled the air. Outside the temple, hundreds of people knelt on the ground, sincerely praying in the direction of the Great Temple under the guidance of the priests.

"Praise the highest Chief Divine! He grants us food, He protects our souls... He shields us during the night, promising a beautiful tomorrow!..."

Seeing this scene, Gillim frowned slightly and quickened his pace. Although knowledgeable in theology, he held little reverence for the divine.

Over the years, religious reforms had deepened, and the glory of the Chief Divine had taken root in the hearts of the people of the Lake Region. In the entire Lake Capital City, the belief in multiple gods had shifted to that of the supreme singular god. The image of the Chief Divine was gradually changing, becoming more abstract, transforming from the cruel and bloody Hummingbird War God to the majestic and benevolent Almighty Chief Divine.

Gillim could feel that with the strengthening of the monotheistic faith, the completion of theological doctrine, the complexity of prayer rituals, and the elaboration of the afterlife world... religion was increasingly controlling people's hearts, with the priests' power rapidly inflating and their influence growing daily. Throughout the countries beyond the Texcoco Lake District, devout believers would travel hundreds of miles regularly for pilgrimage.

"The priests' prayers are getting louder, their speech more forceful, gradually suppressing the Great Nobility across the Lake Region. For the centralization of power by the Royal Family, this is not a bad thing. But the exalted status of the High Priest together with His Highness Xiulote's Kingdom of the Lake... once the immortal sun departs, how could the king maintain balance and stay securely on his throne?"

Thinking this, the chief intelligence officer was filled with worry. The immense divine power in the hands of the High Priest, closer than even the seven-hundred-mile distant Kingdom of the Lake, was an even more worrying hidden issue within the Alliance. The elder had already heard the calling of the Chief Divine and would not linger in the mortal world much longer. Without Him to suppress everything, should the Great Nobility dissatisfied with centralization collude with divine authority, it was to be feared...

Gillim looked up, the monumental shadow of the Great Temple engulfing the central Temple District and the insignificant mortals below. At the base of the Great Temple, over a thousand believers from various states, tears streaming down their faces, prostrated under the magnificent shadow, praying to this awe-inspiring spectacle, glorifying the Chief Divine!

The chief intelligence officer silently watched for a moment, imperceptibly shook his head, then turned around and headed towards King Aweit's palace.

There, King Aweit, who had endured through blood and fire and controlled strategies, was seated high on his throne, waiting. The king's gaze, as calm and deep as Lake Texcoco yet as piercing as the burning red sun, looked towards the East.

Chapter 756: The King and His Confidant

The sunset faded away, and the King's palace lit up with unceasing fire torches, while the divine curtains fluttered in the night breeze. Guided by the Royal guard, Gillim headed towards the magnificent hall. In just a moment, he heard the light flute music, mingling with a bird-like singing.

The Chief Intelligence Officer frowned slightly, looking at the guiding guard. The guard hesitated, then spoke in a low voice after a slight pause.

"His Majesty is in a poor mood and has had some refreshing honey wine, watching the Vastec beauties' song and dance for a while."

The Vastec people dislike lavish attire and excel in song and dance; they always present some beautiful songstresses and dancers each year in lieu of monetary and grain tribute. And at the banquets of the Great Nobility in the Capital City, Vastec beauties are also highly sought after.

Gillim nodded silently, thoughtful. He walked solemnly into the great hall, ignoring the graceful dancing girls, and strode up to the King. Next, he bowed solemnly, kneeling deeply on the ground, without uttering a word.

"Hmm? Gillim, you're here?"

King Aweit leaned on his throne, his face showing pleasure, yet his eyes remained clear. He lifted an exquisite silver cup, took a sip of the sweet honey wine, and smiled at his most trusted female serpent.

"Come, take a cup, and drink with me to the last drop!"

Gillim's expression was solemn, and he bowed once more, still without reply.

King Aweit's brow furrowed. He glanced indifferently at the Chief Intelligence Officer and waved his hand in a calm manner.

"Everyone, leave!"

The music and dancing came to an abrupt halt. The dancers, singers, and musicians all bowed and then swiftly exited the hall. Soon, only rows of candles and the two men remained in the great hall.

"Your Majesty, today is not a sacred festival. Why are you drinking in the solemn great hall?"

Gillim raised his head and asked in a deep voice.

"...I am in high spirits today, so I called upon the newly presented Vastec beauties to enjoy themselves for a bit. What is it, my loyal advisor, would you even counsel me on this?"

King Aweit's expression turned cold as he glanced at the kneeling Intelligence Officer, resembling an awakened Jaguar.

"Your Majesty, you are displeased."

Gillim replied solemnly. Then, he bowed respectfully and inquired.

"Could it be because of the Elders' decree? His Highness Xiulote has come of age, and Princess Alisa also awaits eagerly. Moreover, the Kingdom's grand strategy requires it..."

"Ding-dong!"

The sound of metal clashing rang out suddenly. King Aweit, in a sudden outburst of anger, threw down his silver cup and shouted loudly.

"Silence!"

Gillim closed his mouth and once again knelt to bow.

After a good while, the King's face regained its calmness. He spoke indifferently.

"Have the envoys to the various states set off?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"What about those to the Kingdom of the Lake?"

"They set off a month ago."

"Is everything ready in the Capital City?"

"It is ready. It will be a grand celebration for the entire city."

"Have all the Royal Family's close relatives been invited?"

"Everyone has been invited. Even the Elders will make an appearance..."

King Aweit inquired meticulously for a good while, until there were no more issues to be found. Finally, he sighed resignedly.

"Enough, let's wait for Xiulote to come! After the grand event, we shall offer a blood sacrifice. Once the celebration is over, we will make preparations to conquer the Tlaxcala!"

"Yes, Your Majesty. May the Chief Divine protect the Alliance, and may the Ancestors grant you a great mandate! You are the Royal Eagle and the Sun of Summer; you are destined to rule in every direction, uniting the entire world!"

Gillim bowed once more, a smile on his face. He chanted in a deep voice, with immense confidence.

King Aweit straightened up and nodded solemnly. He lowered his gaze and asked seriously.

"Gillim, about the rumors of the Divine Beast to the south of the Kingdom of the Lake, what have you found?"

"Your Majesty, the merchants' tales of the Divine Beast are not credible. I have received reports from the scouts and interrogated the nobility from the south of Apachigan... The so-called Thunderbolt Divine Beast is likely a new weapon from the Kingdom of the Lake, a bronze-forged cannon! It comes in two sizes: the larger copper cannons can shoot one to two miles, destroying wooden fortresses, suitable for sieges. The smaller copper cannons fire a hundred paces, piercing samurai shields, fitting for field battles..."

"Hmm, if these two types of cannons truly possess such power, they are indeed vital weaponry for a military state!"

King Aweit nodded. He pondered for a moment, then calmly asked,

"In this year's tribute from the Kingdom of the Lake, are there any bronze cannons?"

"...There are none."

"Hehe, what a stingy child."

King Aweit shook his head with a chuckle, a glint of shrewdness in his eyes.

"When His Highness Xiulote arrives, I will have a good talk with him."

"As you command, Your Majesty."

Gillim bowed his head in respect. After a moment of contemplation, his expression unchanged, he asked in a grave tone,

"Your Majesty, the royal guards recently captured several Prepetcha nobles who attempted to assassinate His Highness Xiulote. How should they be dealt with?"

"Assassinate?"

King Aweit squinted his eyes, looking at Gillim dangerously for a moment.

"Gillim, did the Alliance's royal guards partake in this matter?"

"Your Majesty, I swear by the Chief Divine! The royal guards were only gathering intelligence in the Kingdom of the Lake; they were not involved!"

Gillim declared, his fist clenched in an oath. And he spoke the truth, the Alliance's royal guards had plans laid out for much later and had no intention of attacking His Highness at this time.

"It was His Highness Xiulote's harsh policies of reducing fiefdoms and changing appointments in the south that stirred the rebellion and assassination by the old nobility."

"Hmm. Gillim, remember your duty. Do not fail my trust..."

King Aweit watched Gillim for a moment, ultimately choosing to trust him. He implicitly permitted the Chief Intelligence Officer to station many royal guards in the Kingdom of the Lake, because such clandestine monitoring by the Alliance also existed in the territories of the Great Nobility in various states. In fact, the Alliance's annual expenditure on both internal and external intelligence was nearly equivalent to the expenditure of an entire legion.

"Reducing fiefdoms and changing appointments? Not bad, not bad at all. This is exactly what the central royal family has always wanted to do, yet has not been able to achieve!"

"What should be done with these captured assassins, Your Majesty?"

"Local nobility conspire in rebellion, attempt to assassinate the Alliance's Prince, their crime cannot be forgiven. Execute them all, and erect their heads in front of the Great Temple, as a warning to all states!"

"I will follow Your will, Your Majesty."

Gillim bowed solemnly, thereby sealing the fate of Guramo and his compatriots with those unemotional words! In the eyes of the supreme monarch, they were merely dust-like ants, their lives as insignificant as drifting duckweed!

"Gillim, my confidant, rise and come forward!"

King Aweit beckoned. He then took a scroll of paper map from behind the throne and unfolded it on a small table—it was a topographic map of the Tlaxcala Valley.

"Are the fifty thousand direct samurai already re-equipped?"

"Your Majesty, the re-equipment with bronze weapons is complete! Ordinary samurai now use bronze long spears instead of obsidian clubs. As for the experienced samurai accustomed to the use of war clubs, the craftsman camp has improved the clubs by replacing the obsidian edges with bronze blades. Additionally, samurai of the third level or above have been additionally equipped with bronze axes..."

Gillim respectfully bowed his head, reporting the latest military intelligence.

"One thousand from the Jaguar Warrior Brigade, one thousand from the Eagle Warrior Battalion, have all been equipped with bronze Cloth Heavy Armor. Eight thousand from the Royal Legion are equipped with bronze Cloth Medium Armor, with the majority already outfitted, and the process will be completed within two months."

"Excellent! Ten thousand elite armored warriors, eight thousand longbowmen, a hundred wooden cannons. And how could our enemies in the East, Tlaxcala, possibly withstand this?"

King Aweit laughed heartily, his smile filled with a cruel killing intent, as well as boundless confidence.

With the deepening of centralized power, the reassignment of Great Nobility territories, the central royal family now exercised direct control over the entire Texcoco Lake District, overseeing a population of 1.6 million people and fifty thousand standing samurai. Outside the Lake District, an additional 1.5 million people from traditional Mexica states were also gradually falling under central royal family control.

Sustained by a populace of more than three million, the central royal family had accumulated fifty thousand elite direct samurai over three years, with vassal samurai exceeding fifty thousand. Among the direct samurai were ten thousand armored troops, eight thousand longbowmen, and several hundred cannon operators. Moreover, over a hundred wooden cannons had been constructed, with approximately one hundred thousand jin of gunpowder stockpiled.

The Mexica were a nation founded on farming and warfare, devout in their faith, and admiring martial prowess, engaging in fifty years of incessant battles. If the nascent Kingdom of the Lake was a rapidly developing new military machine, then the traditional Mexica Alliance was an even stronger old military machine. Although there were many obstacles and hindrances within the Alliance, once mobilized, there was no force in the world that could stop it!

Gillim tilted his head up slightly, gazing at the confident and proud King Aweit.

"Your Majesty is only in his mid-thirties, at the prime age for strength and energy, capable of ruling the nation for another twenty or thirty years. After subjugating the Tlaxcalans, it will be time to attack the Mistecs to the south, the Totonacs to the east, and then the Zapotecs further south! In time, once the world is pacified, royal succession assured, and the young prince grown..."

The candlelight in the grand hall flickered brightly, reflecting the thoughts and emotions of the two men. The monarch looked proudly in all directions, like an eagle spreading its wings, intent on conquering all and swallowing the world! And the Chief Intelligence Officer stood respectfully by, secretly considering the future of the Alliance, plotting the legacy of the family and the nation.

Kings are born in blood and fire; confidants hide in schemes and shadows. Standing opposite each other, they were like a mural of alternating light and shadow, silently etched into the great hall, deciding the fate of the entire world.

Chapter 757: The End of the Southern Expedition, Black Wolf's Divine Stone

At the beginning of March, the warm spring breeze swept across the southern plains, painting the growing flora with tender shades of green. It was the season of wildlife reproduction, and life thrived at every turn.

Xiulote led three thousand Imperial Guards, inspected the Apa Plain, and then returned to the Apa military city in the East. With this completion, the southern campaign came to an end. The lands in the south had to be reorganized and the gathered populations settled and assimilated. The hunting falcons had their fill for now, and in preparation for next year's hunt, they quietly conserved their energy.

Before Xiulote headed south, the Zicao County in the south had around 210,000 inhabitants, with over 70,000 in the east, over 60,000 in the center, and over 70,000 in the west. After reducing enfeoffment and swapping and punishing the rebels, four thousand rebel civilians from Zicao County were sent to the Capital Region and demoted to agricultural slaves. Nine thousand people were rounded up in the campaign against the southwestern Coahuiltecan tribes. Four thousand of them were also moved to the Capital Region to serve as agricultural slaves, while the remaining fifty thousand were left in the west to cultivate the Apa Plain. In the north of the Lerma River, the three states of Otomi had all had one to two thousand exiled nobility and officers.

By rough calculation, after the southern campaign, the population of Zicao County was around 220,000. Centered around Kulamo City in the east, there were over fifty thousand in each, the east and center, totaling one hundred and ten thousand, mostly Prepetcha descendants. Centered on Apa City in the west, the Apa Plain was home to another one hundred and ten thousand people, half of whom were Prepetcha, and the other half Tekos descendants.

During his survey of the west, Xiulote pondered the arrangements for the south.

The Apa Plain would focus on agriculture, reclaiming wasteland, and integrating the mountain people of the Tekos. The areas around Atoyac Lake, outside of Kulamo City, would focus on external trade and develop the shipbuilding industry. Both regions would station a semi-professional army of eight thousand, each led by Ezpan and the veteran Etalik.

"The south is vast and the developmental focuses are different. The veteran Etalik, with his deep experience and being a family Samurai from the Holy City, is not under the same command as Ezpan, a model surrendered general from the Prepetcha who is about to be promoted to the nobility. Whichever one I select to lead overall, the other will not be content."

After much consideration, Xiulote finally decided to split Zicao County into two, with separate counties for the west and the east-central regions. Fifty li east of Apa City was set as the boundary, with Apa County to the west, governing one hundred and ten thousand people with its seat in Apa military city, led by Ezpan in both military and administrative matters; to the east remained Zicao County, also governing one hundred and ten thousand people with its seat in Kulamo City, and simultaneously bringing the coastal Tarsus directly under control, overseen by Etalik.

Since both held significant troops with the power to levy taxes, the King created a new official position for them called County Magistrate, similar to what was established in the Chu state during the Spring and Autumn period. County magistrates commanded both troops and finances, wielding the power to suppress internal insurrections and expand territory externally, acting decisively without restriction, a role that could only be entrusted to a true confidant.

Upon reaching a decision, the Royal Decree was immediately communicated to the south. Meanwhile, a Messenger also arrived from Monkey Kuluka, the County Magistrate of the North Coast.

Last year, at the end of the year, Monkey mobilized four thousand Spearmen and conscripted another four thousand Canine Descendants who joined forces with the Naval Forces, and headed west along the Lerma River. Eight thousand troops took advantage of the unprepared Feathers Legion, pillaging the borders of the Saka state and the Chapala Lake Region. After three months of raiding, they returned with twenty thousand captives. The Canine Descendants gained much, which further solidified military morale.

The Rivermouth Legion, relying on the Naval Forces and using Canine Light Infantry, was quite swift in action. To prevent the Kingdom's pillaging, the Lake Region dispatched hundreds of canoes to patrol along the Lerma River. The Kingdom's Naval Forces battled the Lake Region's Naval Forces several times, leveraging their numerical superiority with catamarans to gain a firm upper hand and killing hundreds of the enemy. Once the Galleys were launched, the Naval Forces' advantage would amplify. All was ready, and the time to conquer the Chapala Lake Region was ripening.

Benefiting from the spoils of war, the population of all four counties of the Kingdom increased. Rivermouth County grew by twenty thousand to a total of 230,000; the Capital Region grew by eighty thousand to 360,000; and both Apa and Zicao Counties grew to one hundred and ten thousand each. The four counties combined amounted to 810,000 people, steadily augmenting the foundations of the Kingdom, which only needed time to integrate.

"Throughout the Kingdom, there is an eager desire for war, a delight to hear of battles! Once the door opens to granting nobility for military merit, it becomes thrive in war, perish without it."

Mulling over these thoughts, Xiulote fell silent. Not long before, the veteran Etalik had sent an Envoy from Kulamo City with a letter discussing two matters.

One was that the three thousand Black Wolves were resting in Kulamo City, with many spoils of war that either needed to be transported to the North or converted into more portable goods such as cacao beans or cloth on-site. The other was the underpopulation of Kulamo City; hearing of the King's victorious return from the campaign and the great number of captives acquired, they inquired whether there were surplus people to be sent to Kulamo City?

"The Tekos captives would either be relocated to the Capital Region or develop the Apa Plain, so where would there be surplus people..."

Reading this, Xiulote shook his head slightly and continued reading the letter.

The Black Wolf returned from his raid on the mountains with a thousand Tekos fishermen, several hundred canoes, and thorough intelligence on the southeastern Tekos tribes. Four to five thousand Tekos tribesmen nearby Sea Woman City, relying on that small coastal city for defense, had no more than a few thousand able fighters. The reorganization of the Jingji Legion was completed, leaving four thousand Samurai in Kulamo City. The newly formed Zicao Legion also reached three thousand, sufficient to suppress the locals.

Thus, Black Wolf Torc and the veteran Etalik jointly requested authorization.

"Your Majesty, four thousand Jingji Samurai and three thousand Guajili Legionnaires, sailing down the river, are enough to break Sea Woman City and bring back tens of thousands of captives in plunder!"

Chapter 758: The End of the Southern Expedition, Black Wolf's Divine Stone_2

Seeing such a request, Xiulote pondered silently. As long as the grain supplies delivered by the Naval Forces could keep up, an army of seven thousand breaking through Sea Woman City did have a high chance of winning. However, the civil unrest in Zicao City had only been quelled three months ago; the people's hearts had not yet settled. Spring farming in May would soon begin, and even if tens of thousands of people were plundered, it would be impossible to catch up with this year's farming. They would have to be supported until next year's autumn harvest before they could be self-sufficient. Additionally, the spring cultivation in Zicao County might be delayed to support the large army...

After much deliberation, Xiulote made a more prudent choice.

"Prepare for the spring farming with peace of mind! Before the autumn harvest, Zicao County is not allowed to mobilize troops. The Jingji Legion will soon be redeployed north to suppress the tens of thousands of agricultural slaves who migrated into the Capital Region."

No sooner had the King's Messenger departed, than Black Wolf Torc, with his trusted aides, came personally from Kulamo City.

"Your Highness! I, Black Wolf Torc, have fulfilled my mission, penetrating deep into the southwestern mountains and burning grain over seven hundred li before returning!"

It had been half a year since the two had seen each other since the southern expedition. Torc, overcome with emotion, knelt on the ground, raising his head and puffing out his chest as he reported back to the King.

"Very well, very well! My Black Wolf, you've fought excellently!"

Xiulote's face broke into a smile, and he, too, was somewhat excited. He stepped forward and lifted Black Wolf off the ground. Having been apart for months, Black Wolf had grown somewhat thin, but his whole being exuded greater vitality. At this moment, with his sword-like brows and starry eyes, he resembled an unsheathed bronze sword—sharp in spirit and strikingly conspicuous.

The two chatted with smiles on their faces for a while; then Xiulote straightened his face and gave strict instructions.

"However, my Black Wolf, as a Legion Commander, you must prioritize your own safety! In your future military campaigns, you mustn't be so reckless! The entire Guajili Legion rests upon the shoulders of the Commander-in-Chief. As long as you are here, so is the legion!"

"By the Chief Divine, I swear! Your Highness, it was a rare opportunity! The hinterlands of the southwest tribes had hardly any defenses, and their military strength was extremely sparse. We also had Tekos

trusted aides as guides. If we missed this chance and the enemy prepared or fled to the mountains, we wouldn't know when the campaign would end..."

"Hm?!"

"Your Highness, I will listen to you from now on, listen to you!"

Seeing the seriousness on His Highness' face, Black Wolf Torc repeatedly bowed, respectfully consenting. Then, with a gleam in his eye, he cautiously asked.

"Your Highness, about the conquest of Sea Woman City..."

"There's no possibility before the autumn harvest!"

Xiulote firmly shook his head. The hearts of the people in the south were unsettled, and the population of captives numbered in the tens of thousands; the foundation of the Kingdom was indeed unstable. Only after the flag squads were assembled, the Priests had spread the faith, and both the spring farming and autumn harvest were successfully completed could things begin to settle down slightly.

"Then after the autumn harvest..."

"Torc, you left more than half of the legion and only took three thousand for the campaign, do you not want the remaining five thousand?! Go immediately to the camp outside the city and ensure the five thousand strong Guajili Legion is well pacified!"

"Uh... Yes, of course! The more troops, the better. It's just that there isn't enough grain. If I took eight thousand men into the mountains, we would surely starve halfway. Otherwise, with eight thousand men, I could directly take down Sea Woman City..."

"Hmm?"

"Your Highness, I'm on my way!..."

Watching the hurried departure of Black Wolf, a smile formed on Xiulote's lips. After a long period of nurturing, he had finally personally developed his first outstanding Great General, capable of leading on all fronts.

A few days passed like this. Xiulote sat in command at Apa Army City, soothing the various southern tribes, occasionally dining and drinking with Black Wolf and other commanders. Until one day, after a banquet, Torc suddenly produced several dark blue stones and displayed them before everyone.

"Your Highness, these are the strange Divine Stones I obtained in the Tekos Divine Mountain outside Trout Fish Village, where I killed a Tekos Priest together with Puap!"

Black Wolf, having drunk half his fill, had a flushed face. He laughed as he placed the Divine Stones in his hands, then turned his back and vigorously rubbed them together for a while.

"Your Highness, guess how many Divine Stones there are now?"

"Six."

Xiulote, slightly drunk, laughed as he guessed. He had only glanced at them briefly and had counted the number of dark blue stones.

"Ha ha! No, there's only one!"

Black Wolf laughed heartily. He brought his hands from behind to the front and slowly opened them. All of the Divine Stones had gathered together to form one large dark blue stone.

"Your Highness, these Divine Stones are very interesting! The Tekos Priest said that the Divine Stones were endowed with Divinity, possessing a twin spirit of yin and yang residing at both ends... I offer them as a gift to you! From now on, whenever you see this Divine Stone, you'll remember my military exploits..."

"Like poles attract and opposite poles repel? Is this, is this a magnet?!"

Xiulote was startled, his eyes instantly lucid. He abruptly stood up, eagerly stretching out his hand.

"Let me see!"

Black Wolf was somewhat taken aback. Noticing the exceptionally stern expression on His Highness' face, he sobered up substantially, feeling uneasy and said carefully.

"Your Highness... These are the creations of the Evil God, and they might indeed offend the Chief Divine. I didn't mean to..."

"Hand them over!"

Black Wolf obediently approached. Xiulote then took the "Divine Stone" and examined it closely in his hands. These "Divine Stones" were predominantly dark blue with strong magnetic properties. Their mutual attraction and repulsion were stronger than the Black Gemstones offered by the Mayan merchants from Cuba; they were undoubtedly magnets, or rather, naturally occurring magnetite.

"Black Wolf, where did you get these magnetite stones?"

Xiulote looked on for a moment, suppressing the excitement and exhilaration welling up inside and asked in a low voice.

"Eh? Magnetite stones?"

Chapter 759: The End of the Southern Expedition, Black Wolf's Divine Stone_3

Black Wolf pondered over this perplexing word with curiosity. It seemed that His Highness was very concerned about these Divine Stones.

"Your Highness, the Divine Stone is in the Tekos Divine Mountain, west of Trout Fish Village. There's a low hill there, but it has a Mountain God, capable of attracting lightning during the rain season... The location is about sixty miles west of Tarsas River's mouth."

"Magnetic Iron Mine? The Magnetic Iron Mine near the rivermouth and the coast?"

Xiulote's expression changed, and the joy on his face could no longer be contained.

"Truly the Chief Divine's blessing!"

The King held the "Divine Stone", whispered a prayer, and fell into thought. After a moment, he made up his mind, looking at the Head Warrior beside him.

"Bertade, I will personally go to the Tarsas Rivermouth, to take a look myself!"

"Ah?! Your Highness, that place is nearly four hundred miles away from Apa City..."

Bertade's face lost its usual calm. According to the original plan, His Highness was to stay in Apa City for a month. By April, once the south had stabilized, he was to lead the Imperial Guard Legion back to the Capital City to oversee the spring plowing. Thinking of this, the Head Warrior cautiously advised.

"Your Highness, the spring plowing is about to begin. Deploying a large army now, going deep into the southern rivermouth, we might consume too much food..."

"No need for a large army! There are no hostile forces on the southern coast, and there's also no intention to attack Sea Woman City for now. This matter is of great importance; I will leave the Royal Banner in Apa City, only bringing two thousand loyal Personal Royal Guards. We'll discreetly travel south by boat to Divine Mountain to see for ourselves. Within a month, we'll return."

Xiulote's expression was resolute, as he made his decision.

If this so-called "Divine Mountain" was truly a Magnetic Iron Mine, the strategic planning for the Kingdom's south needed a complete adjustment. The significance of an iron mine to the Kingdom of the Lake, and indeed the whole world, could not be overstated no matter how much one emphasized. It was the key to the development of civilization in Central America, the leap across the bounds of time, the crucial element in achieving a formidable leap in the development of productive forces!

Since arriving in this era, Xiulote had been searching for iron ore for far too long.

The Colima Mountain Region was too remote and challenging to conquer, and the iron ore buried deep underground was too difficult to access. Within the constraints of reality, Xiulote accepted the submission of the great chief of Colima, maintaining peace with the various tribes. But in his heart, the King always carried some frustration and regret, until now. As word of the southern Magnetic Iron Mine reached him, his inner excitement and anticipation could no longer be suppressed, turning into a determinate force driving him southwards!

"...Very well. I'll comply with your will, Your Highness. I'll arrange everything as quickly as possible!"

Seeing His Highness's expression, Bertade knew that the King's mind was made up and that no amount of persuasion would work. Though the journey south to the rivermouth was long, it indeed carried not many risks and required careful preparation.

Xiulote nodded in satisfaction and turned once more to the astonished Black Wolf. He smiled gently, placing a hand on Black Wolf's shoulder.

"Torc, my Black Wolf. I am very satisfied with your gift! The Chief Divine blesses the Kingdom, bringing sacred enlightenment. If that 'Divine Mountain' is truly as I suspect... you too shall have a great reward!"

"Ah? Great reward?"

Black Wolf paused, blinking his eyes. His Highness always kept his word; a great reward was surely not to be taken lightly. But to be given a great reward just for a few peculiar "Divine Stones"?... He was somewhat baffled but still respectfully prostrated himself on the ground.

"Your Highness, you are the Wolf King blessed by the Chief Divine! I, Black Wolf Torc, will never let the Wolf King be disappointed!"

"Haha, blessed by the Chief Divine! Black Wolf, my beloved commander, fate favors you!"

The King burst into laughter, sounding as carefree as a spring breeze brushing the face, as birds soaring high in the sky.

Chapter 760: I'm Here!

Mid-March, the gentle spring breeze headed south, traveling hundreds of miles along the Long River, to the edge of the infinite Great Lake. The blue Pacific Ocean was boundless, its waves sparkling with a glint, the tides rising and falling day and night, instilling awe in all who saw it.

"Such a vast ocean! Truly the romance of men!"

Xiute, riding in a canoe, paused at the edge of the sea, lost in a reverie of longing. There was a part of him that yearned to explore the azure depths, but he knew it was an unattainable dream in this lifetime.

Hundreds of canoes were docked at the mouth of the Tarsas River. Two thousand elite members of the Imperial Guard Legion disembarked and spread out to secure a defense perimeter over ten miles. The King ascended the western bank of the Tarsas and immediately spotted Huitu Puap, the slightly chubby-faced noble clad in Leather Armor.

The Scouts had already arrived first at the Rivermouth, where Huitu Puap had been guarding and waiting for some time. Upon meeting, he excitedly prostrated himself, offering his respects to the King.

"Chief Divine's protection! Your Majesty, your faithful general, Huitu Puap, presents his greetings! Even at the edge of the vast lake, I am always ready to dedicate my life to the Kingdom!"

Xiute smiled faintly, observing the exiled noble without a word.

"Your Highness, the general has rendered great service by discovering the Divine Stone. He is devout in faith and fearless of the Evil God. Although his Martial Arts and battle skills are average, he possesses a rare tenacity and courage!"

Black Wolf Toltec stepped forward to speak highly of Huitu.

Only then did Xiute slightly nod and wave his hand.

"Puap, rise! You have merely guarded our borders for a few months and already achieved commendable deeds, indeed worthy of utilization!"

At the phrase "worthy of utilization," Huitu Puap was moved to tears. For four months he had endured the ocean winds by the sea, his days spent with naught but sand and trees, no sight of any prosperous scenery. His days consisted of creatively savoring sea flavors, and commanding villagers in their tasks, growing hopelessly portly. He respectfully prostrated himself once more.

"Your Majesty, witnessed by the Chief Divine, I am willing to live and die for your will!"

Next, the King surveyed the Kingdom's encampment by the sea. The camp was taking shape, accumulating some lumber. Under the watch of the Prepetcha Warriors, over a hundred villagers from Tekos wielded the distributed Bronze Axes, felling the nearby woods.

Xiuote nodded in satisfaction. After enjoying a tasty seafood feast in Trout Fish Village, he couldn't wait to lead the Imperial Guard Warriors westward. They trekked across the green grass of spring, inhaling the fragrant wildflowers, arriving ten miles west of Trout Fish Village at the Tekos Divine Mountain.

To the north of the Divine Mountain lay the tail end of the Sierra Madre mountain range. Compared to other peaks, the Divine Mountain wasn't towering; rather, it was sparsely forested with few birds or animals.

Xiuote inspected the Divine Mountain carefully. Seeing the scorch marks left by numerous lightning strikes, his face lit up with joy. He circled the entire summit from the base, spiraling upward. Whenever he spotted exposed reddish-brown rock or vast expanses of dark blue stone, he would take out a magnet and feel for the magnetic force upon it.

"Leave five men here, armed with the prepared Bronze Pickaxes, to dig into the mountain! Dig through the soil, and stop upon hitting hard rock. Collect a rock sample, note the distance, and report back to me!"

"By your command, Your Majesty!"

For every ten meters ascended, Xiuote left five Imperial Guards to excavate the surface soil of the mountain and to extract rock samples. The more he inspected, the more intense the joy on his face grew. When he reached the summit of the Divine Mountain, he could confirm that beneath this modest peak lay a small magnetite mine—a mine he had long sought after, one that could change the era: Iron Mine Mountain!

"Chief Divine's protection! Divine blessing upon the Kingdom!"

Standing atop Divine Mountain, Xiuote's expression was solemn as he prayed toward the midday sun in the sky.

Although he did not know the quality or the exact reserves of the iron ore, the presence of iron ore was significant in itself. Even the smallest iron mines have reserves in the millions of tons, sufficient for the Kingdom's initial extraction and use. The exploration of Iron Smelting Technology could finally set off on the right track!

At that moment, the call of the Iron Age was as real as the sound of the Pacific Ocean's tides, already clearly echoing in his ears.

In fact, in the Mexico of later times, this iron mine would be known as Mina las Truchas. Only a small amount of ore was exposed on the surface of the Divine Mountain. Its true strata lay twenty to a hundred meters below the surface, with a surface reserve of roughly eleven million tons at an average grade of 37%, which was just on the edge of being economically mineable.

This ore vein was of hydrothermal origin, formed by the compressing Pacific and American plates, containing a large amount of irregularly shaped magnetite. The main vein underground ran for about seven kilometers in length and was roughly two kilometers wide. There were deeper veins as well, but the extraction costs were prohibitively high, clearly surpassing the mining capabilities of the era.

"Chief Divine's protection! Divine blessings upon Your Majesty!"

Seeing the King in prayer, Huitu Puap cautiously approached, loudly exclaiming his praise. Hearing his shouts, the Imperial Guard Warriors also prayed loudly, bestowing blessings upon the King.

After a moment, Xiuote finished praying. He looked at Puap with a smile, his stern gaze softening.

"Huitu, you have indeed earned considerable merit!"

The King said with a beaming smile.

"What reward do you desire?"

"Ah?! Your Majesty, I wish to return to the Jingji Legion and lead your Samurai into battle once more!"

"Oh?"

Hearing this, Xiuote chuckled and shook his head.