

Civilization 781

Chapter 781: An Audience in the Capital City

The moist, long breeze from the mountains in the East swept over everyone on the boat, bringing with it the fresh fragrance of grass and trees, refreshing the spirits of all.

On the galleys, everyone was silent, watching the conversation between an old man and a young one. Xiulote pondered for a moment, lowered his head in sincere earnest, and saluted Cacamatzin once again.

"Chief Divine bless! Uncle Cacamatzin, I will follow your arrangements!"

"Haha, very good! Chief Divine bless!"

Cacamatzin laughed heartily, his laughter filled with appreciation. Then, he took Xiulote's hand, and started chatting about family matters and occasionally inquired about the kingdom's situation.

Xiulote answered openly, sharing his experiences in wars in the south and the north and his feelings about governing the kingdom. Both men had their own thoughts, yet they were incredibly sincere, and amidst their hearty laughter, there was great joy.

The two fleets soon merged, majestically heading towards the grand Lake Capital City. From here to the Capital City, there were only a little more than sixty miles of waterway remaining, which could be covered by boat in one or two days.

As July drew to a close, the weather became stormier. Light summer rain fell from the hazy sky, hitting Lake Texcoco and raising a mist as blurred as the sky. The people traveled in their boats wrapped in the misty rain, surrounded by a paradise-like wonderland.

Xiulote stood at the bow, gazing at the heart of the Alliance, the most prosperous place in the world. Villages and towns faintly appeared from both banks, with songs of prayer floating by; merchant travelers made way on the lake, scatterings of exclaimed awe wafting over.

"The Lake Capital City is right before us."

Cacamatzin stood beside, gazing at the smoke-enshrouded Capital City. As the fleet moved forward, huge Chinampas filled the lake, and the white causeways became faintly visible.

"Xiulote, the Lake Capital City, which we Mexica built with our own hands, is a great royal city and the fundamental source of all our divinity!"

Cacamatzin's face bore a smile, yet his words were deep.

"The Mexica kings, belong to the great Lake Capital City. And the great Lake Capital City belongs to us, the blessed Mexica. In the hearts of all Mexica, Tenochtitlan is not just an impregnable royal city, but also a symbol of the sacred and the blessed... No matter where you are or how tall the Divine Tree you grow, this will always be your roots!"

Upon hearing this, Xiulote pondered for a moment and nodded slightly.

"Uncle Cacamatzin, I understand your meaning. The kingdom is a fief of the Alliance, and I am first a prince of the Mexica before I am the king of the Prepetcha."

"Haha!"

Cacamatzin laughed heartily again. He reached out and patted his grand-nephew's shoulder.

"Xiulote, you are the prince of the Alliance, and even more, the future king of the Mexica! For us old folks in the Royal Family, the elders are the evening sun, Aweit is the noon sun, and you, my boy, are the morning sun!... Don't be hasty, don't be skewed. Under the Chief Divine's blessing, the Alliance grows ever stronger. The Divine Tree thrives and will surely rule the world. It's just, everything takes time...Oh, how I wish I could see that day with my own eyes!"

"Uncle!..."

Hearing this, Xiulote lowered his gaze slightly, visibly moved. He didn't know how to respond, just mulled over Cacamatzin's words.

"Don't be hasty, don't be skewed..."

Cacamatzin smiled and nodded. He stretched his hand out, pointing through the thin smoke. The prosperous Lake Capital City was now close at hand, the towering Great Temple stood tall as if a Divine Mountain descended to earth.

"Look! The lofty Great Temple, right within the mist! Walk slowly, and we'll soon be there!"

As was customary, the large fleet moored at a village north of the Capital City, where the King's envoy had long been waiting. It took half a day for the three thousand Imperial Guards to disembark onto the lakeshore. Following were neatly packed dowries and heavy Copper Cannons.

Cacamatzin, full of excitement, looked at these "Strange Bronze Beasts" he had heard about and occasionally asked questions. Then, he commented with a laugh.

"Xiulote, to marry Alisa, you've really put your heart into it! So many precious gifts, even an old fellow like me is quite surprised!...Let them sort out the gifts slowly. Now that they've been brought here, they won't be taken back! Haha, let's head to the Capital City first. You go meet King Aweit, and I, will report back to the elders."

"Alright! Uncle, let's go!"

Xiulote nodded in agreement. He was inclined to inquire about the elder's health condition, but after a moment's thought, he remained silent. Three thousand Imperial Guards were then divided into two groups, with the majority of Samurai staying in the village. Only five hundred trusted aides, escorting Xiulote and carrying the Black Wolf flag, proceeded along the white causeway filled with pine and cypress towards the city.

Since his expedition to the west, Xiulote had been away from the Royal City for four years. He advanced steadily, observing the surrounding scenery.

The Lake Capital City was even more bustling than before. The city's main roads had been rebuilt to accommodate large groups of Samurai. Along the streets, fully equipped toilets and water channels had been constructed to maintain the cleanliness of the Capital City.

The method of composting manure had been popularized in the Texcoco Lake District; approved by the Priesthood, it efficiently increased the yield of Chinampas. The Lake Capital City, with its 250,000 inhabitants, produced an immense amount of fertilizer daily; toilets throughout the streets were owned by various nobility. The produced fertilizer was transported by small boats to the nobles' Chinampas on the same day, where it was composted and then applied to the fields.

On both sides of the streets, likewise, pine and cypress were planted everywhere, especially the Ahuehuete trees. King Aweit liked this type of tree's name as well as its fragrance.

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Xiulote led his trusted aide, walking under the aromatic tree-lined paths.

The passing civilians all prostrated themselves to avoid looking directly at the Divine Descendant. The nobility of the capital city, on the other hand, bowed deeply and sincerely praised the distant figure. Exclamations and praises arose continually, accompanied by soft murmurs that spread across the capital like the humming of a swarm of bees.

Xiulote passed through the North City, and by the edge of the Tlatelolco's large market. He observed the orderly market scene, nodded slightly, and felt reassured. Soon, the group crossed over the long canal that divided the North City District from the main city area, entering the more opulent main city.

In the main city, the wealth of the entire world converged. Everywhere the eye could see, there were buildings of white stone, with roofs of red rock. Even in the civilian district, many large mansions were visible, decorated with luxurious gold and silver. In the nobility district, flowers were planted everywhere, with the fragrant breezes, and young boys and girls played among them.

As Xiulote proceeded, he observed the grandeur of the capital city. Many memories surged in his heart, along with the insight gained after governing the kingdom. To him at that moment, the prosperous sight of the Lake Capital City was truly unparalleled, unmatched even by Qinchongcan Capital.

"Tenochtitlan is located at the center of the world with a population of two to three hundred thousand. A causeway across Lake Texcoco divides it, establishing eight thousand hectares of rich floating gardens, Chinampa. Hundreds of villages along the lake, with one and a half million people working hard just to support such a prosperous capital!"

Thought the King. The prosperity of Tenochtitlan was firstly due to the causeways that controlled the waters, bringing half of Lake Texcoco under control. On that basis, the second was the high-yield Chinampa. Further on, the third was the convenient water transport of the Lake Capital City. The fourth was the stability and prosperity at the heart of the whole Alliance.

"These factors could actually be replicated in Qinchongcan City... I need to request from Aweit a group of master craftsmen skilled in water management, and bring a group of old farmers familiar with Chinampa. Once I return to the kingdom, I will start managing Lake Patzcuaro..."

The group continued south and soon arrived at the Temple and Palace District. The towering Great Temple cast a majestic shadow. Countless prayers, along with waves of pine incense, wafted between the Temples and altars.

Upon reaching the Temple and Palace District, the leading envoy was replaced by a new group. Five hundred Imperial Guards of the kingdom halted outside the Temple District, and ahead lay the residences of the Divine Descendant and the Priests. Other than major festival celebrations and pilgrimages led by priests, this area was usually not open to civilians. From this point onward, only a few could proceed.

Cacamatzin halted his steps. He smiled and patted Xiulote on the shoulder, speaking gently,

"Chief Divine bless you, have a smooth journey! Xiulote, we part here! There's much to prepare for the wedding, we'll meet again in a few days!"

"Chief Divine bless you! Uncle, take care!"

Xiulote bowed his head, saluting Cacamatzin, and the two parted ways.

Cacamatzin walked slowly eastward, escorted by a few followers, towards the Chief Palace where the elders resided. Meanwhile, Xiulote turned southwest, heading towards King Aweit's Palace.

In the Temple District, there was a solemn atmosphere, patrolled by the Royal Warriors and Temple Guards. Xiulote lifted his head and gazed at the towering Great Temple.

Before the Great Temple, the Sacred Fire blazed intensely. At this moment, his grandfather should be busy there, right? After meeting the King, he would visit his grandfather. And his father should be in the outer nobility mansions, not to be seen until tomorrow.

As home drew near, a jumble of indescribable thoughts surged, stirring emotions.

Xiulote walked along the main road, watching as the King's Palace came into view. He remembered the girl in white, licking his dry lips.

"Having faced countless life-and-death moments on the battlefield, I still feel nervous..."

Standing before the King's Palace, Xiulote chuckled self-deprecatingly. He removed his bronze sword from his waist and, followed by the guard, entered the expansive Royal Palace.

Inside the Royal Palace were numerous Ahuehuate trees, along with vast patches of roses and various fragrant flowers. Xiulote walked along the stone paths amidst the flowers and trees. Soon, the triple-height King's Great Hall appeared ahead.

"Yo, yo!"

A loud eagle's cry suddenly rang out above Xiulote's head! Then, a fierce gust of wind blew, raising his hair and startling him abruptly.

Xiulote instinctively took two steps back and looked up. A plump golden eagle, wings flapping and claws thrashing, descended from the sky. Little Aviloztli joyfully chirped and suddenly plunged into his arms, causing him to stagger and nearly lose his balance.

"...Little Aviloztli, how did you suddenly appear again!"

Xiulote was at a loss for words for a moment, he reached out and snapped heavily at the little golden eagle's head. However, it seemed that Little Aviloztli had plenty of experience dodging, as it tucked and bobbed its little head, naturally avoiding the gesture. Then, it proudly raised its head and shrieked loudly.

"Yo, yo!..."

"Bang!"

Xiulote quickly reached out and snapped again. This time, Little Aviloztli couldn't dodge. It let out a pained chirp, then struggled with its wings and talons, and whooshed away.

"Chirp! Chirp!"

The little golden eagle took flight, yelling, "Bad person! Bad person!" Then, it lifted its wings and flew towards a two-story building behind the King's Great Hall.

Xiulote was invigorated. He followed Little Aviloztli's flight path, casting his gaze in that direction. There, above the two-story building, a divine curtain fluttered in the wind. And a figure in white was standing gracefully behind the gauzy curtain.

"Ah!"

Xiulote watched as the little golden eagle flew into the building, passed behind the gauzy curtain, and revealed a stunningly beautiful face as if it were a fleeting reflection of light. The girl in white smiled gently, her eyes lively. She tenderly embraced the golden eagle, then elegantly and lightly twirled, disappearing behind the curtain.

A breeze blew, carrying faint traces of the girl's playful laughter, which seemed to scatter like light gauze. Xiulote stood stunned for several moments, even the King's guard did not urge him on.

After a moment, Xiulote pursed his lips and regained his composure. With this diversion, his tense emotions suddenly dissipated, leaving him filled with nothing but anticipation and an uplifted spirit.

The two passed through the nobles and officials waiting outside the hall, reaching the thick hall doors. Soon after, the door squeaked open, revealing a regally dressed sovereign seated calmly and majestically on his throne.

"Praise the Chief Divine! The incarnation of the Sun God, the great Tlatoani of the Alliance, the supreme King Aweit, The Prince of the Lake Capital, Xiulote offers his greetings!"

Xiulote, solemn, walked slowly into the hall. He respectfully knelt on the ground, bowing to the great spokesman of the Alliance, a senior member of the Royal Family, his childhood teacher, and now his father-in-law, King Aweit.

"Respected sovereign, it has been three years since we last met, yet you still shine over the Alliance like the Sun!"

Upon the Golden Stone throne, Aweit remained calm and unruffled. He did not speak nor show any expression, simply observing Xiulote with a serene yet scrutinizing gaze, as if evaluating the changes and constants in the young man over the long years.

Aweit held his throne regally, remaining silent. Xiulote respectfully knelt, motionless. King and Prince faced each other in silence, yet it appeared as if much was conveyed in their quietude. Xiulote's heart was filled with

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Please wait a moment

Chapter 783: Conversation

The candlelight shone brightly, the King's Great Hall adorned with gold and silver decorations; the bonfire roared fiercely, the divine mural above aglow with dazzling, flowing colors.

The doors of the Great Hall were tightly shut, only two men and a retainer within. All around them was silence, an air of solemnity. Aweit's gaze lifted slightly, watching the mural at the palace's zenith.

The Sun God, the War God, the Mexica Guardian God Huitzilopochtli was in the center of the sky, his head adorned with sunlight-like spread feathers, his hands holding a javelin that radiated lightning, looking down upon dozens of Subordinate Gods and thousands of citizens. And to His lower left, sporting a black wolf's head, a long red tongue protruding loyally, was the God of Death, Xiulotel, protecting the rise of the sun.

Beyond, there was the Rain Divine Tlaloc, the original Sun, Tezcatlipoca, the gods of day and night, Omoteotl, the God of the Hunt Mixcoatl, the Fire God Huitzilopochtli...

Within this ceiling mural, the order of the Subordinate Gods was intentionally designed, seemingly laden with deep meaning. And among these Subordinate Gods, conspicuously absent was the widely worshiped Feathered Serpent Divine Quetzal, obviously a recent addition following the religious reform.

Aweit gazed at the divine mural on the ceiling, lost in thought. The Chief Divine's light shone in all directions, and no matter how valiantly or famously the God of Death fought, he remained a loyal Subordinate God, forever guarding the rise of the sun, never showing the slightest defiance. And the abode of the God of Death in the desolate and distant West posed no threat to the Throne of the Gods. The power of the God of Death could not compare to the Chief Divine who ruled over the world...

Many unforgettable memories surfaced chaotically, like a scroll painted by the divines themselves. The scroll came to life for a moment, only to fade one by one, taking with it certain propositions from the nearby ministers.

After a moment, Aweit's heart finally reached clarity. He smiled confidently, lifted the Divine Staff, and rose from his throne like a Jaguar.

"Praise the Chief Divine! Xiulote, my student, in these three years, you have subdued the three states of Otomi, launched a northern campaign against the Guajili Canine Descendants, headed south to change the feudal divisions, waged wars against the Tecos Tribe... Even in the Lake Capital City, seven hundred li away, I have continually heard good news of you! I look on with pride as you grow day by day, and now, you stand before me, as majestic as a soaring eagle, freely gliding across the vast sky!"

Aweit's words were filled with genuine joy. He strode down calmly and powerfully, coming beside Xiulote. He reached out his hand, tousled the young man's hair naturally, and affectionately helped him up.

"Xiulote, my child, stand up! You needn't be so formal in front of me."

Upon hearing this, Xiulote stood up, his smile gentle, gazing at the King's face.

"Your Majesty..."

"There's no one else in the Great Hall, just call me teacher!"

Aweit's brow lifted, interrupting Xiulote. Then he laughed heartily, giving his student a firm embrace.

"Ha ha, you're just a bit taller than me now!"

"Teacher..."

Touched by the King's affection, Xiulote felt moved. He bowed his head in respect. Then, Aweit turned and returned to his throne. Xiulote followed suit, standing by the throne.

"Xiulote, how is the situation in the Kingdom of the Lake?"

"By the grace of the Chief Divine, all is relatively smooth!"

Xiulote paused thoughtfully, then replied with a smile.

"Whether it's the Otomi from the north or the Tekos from the south, both have sent envoys to submit to the Alliance, offering tributes at the appointed times each year. The Chapala Lake Region, to the west, plagued by attacks from the Guamal Canine Descendants, can hardly fend for themselves, let alone mount an offense to the east... However, the kingdom is newly established with shallow foundations. There's a lack of manpower internally, and consecutive military campaigns have created a bit of a shortfall in food supplies..."

"Manpower and food supplies... I'll think of a solution for you."

Aweit nodded calmly. Then, he took out a large map from beneath his throne and unrolled it before Xiulote.

"After the autumn harvest, the Alliance will mobilize a great army to launch a divine campaign, waging war against the Tlaxcalans, to destroy the eternal enemy in the East!"

Flames of determination blazed in the King's calm eyes.

"The core of the Tlaxcala Alliance is in the Tlaxcala Valley, two to three hundred li to the East! The Alliance will mobilize one hundred thousand Samurai, split into southern and northern routes, advancing eastward to destroy any enemy that dares to stand in their way!"

"What, mobilize one hundred thousand Samurai?!"

Shock rippled through Xiulote's mind at this news. Supporting one hundred thousand Samurai from the back lines would require an equal number of Militia to maintain logistics and secure the rearguard. With a population of three to four million in the Alliance's main body, mobilizing more than two hundred thousand able-bodied men was indeed a massive undertaking!

Naturally, such a conscription ratio was possible because the logistics supply lines were only two to three hundred li long. If the Alliance's territory expanded again, and they waged war a thousand li away against the Zapotecs, the number of troops that could be deployed would be halved.

"Indeed! Fifty thousand Samurai directly under the Royal Family, fifty thousand Samurai from the vassal states of the Four States. The Tlaxcalans, adept in warfare and battling for a century, can mobilize forty to fifty thousand Samurai and nearly a hundred thousand Militia. Even more crucially, they have built many mountain cities difficult to assault, necessitating large forces to siege. In this war, the Alliance does not want tributes or submission, only the complete annihilation of the Tlaxcala Alliance!"

Aweit's expression was stern as he dictated the fate of millions. The Alliance had quietly prepared for three years, just to eradicate their ancient foe in one fell swoop. He looked into Xiulote's eyes and said in a deep voice.

"Scouts have confirmed that our ancient foe, the Tlaxcalans, have secret alliances with the Totonacs from the East, the Mistecs from the South, and the Zapotecs. Once the Alliance heads east, these three tribes might send troops to assist... Xiulote, my Prince, if food is supplied by the Alliance, how many Samurai can your fief in the Kingdom of the Lake deploy?"

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"Teacher, the kingdom can mobilize two and a half legions, about twenty thousand samurai!"

Xiulote had anticipated this and calmly replied.

Apart from the forces stationed in each county, the kingdom could dispatch two and a half legions for the expedition. The main force comprised seven thousand of the Imperial Guard Legion, eight thousand from the Guajili Legion, and then several thousand tribal warriors were pulled from the surrendered Tekos forces to assist. These tribal warriors, if left within the heartland of the kingdom, would be a hidden threat to public security. Yet once deployed to the front lines, under the pressure of tens of thousands of elite troops, they would serve as the best vanguard!

"Twenty thousand samurai...not bad, very good!"

Upon hearing this, Aweit's eyes flashed, quite satisfied. The Kingdom of the Lake was still unstable, given its brief history. In his view, twenty thousand samurai indeed represented the limit for the kingdom's military deployment. That Xiulote could deploy so many elites to fight for the alliance sufficiently demonstrated his loyalty. Given this, he was ready to give his student a choice.

"Xiulote, would you like to join the Northern Route Army or the Southern Army? The Northern Route Army will march directly into Tlaxcala, be mindful of the support from the Totonac people. The Southern Army will attack Tepeyacac, be wary of disturbances from the Mistec and Zapotecs."

Xiulote furrowed his brows, deep in thought.

At this point, the Mexica Alliance already controlled two-fifths of the world. The remaining parts of the world were subtly forming an encirclement. Generally speaking, the Mistecs and Zapotecs from the south had more troops and were more troublesome. However, with the support of the waterways of the Tarsas River, the looted spoils of war could be continuously transported back to Zicao County in the south.

"Teacher, I'll join the Southern Army!"

A moment later, Xiulote made his decision and replied loudly.

He believed that with the strong capabilities of the kingdom's Imperial Guard Legion, they would not fear any field battle! This eastern campaign by the alliance, the land of the Tlaxcala people was clearly not related to the Kingdom of the Lake as a fief. If the campaign were successful, the Tlaxcala Valley would either be directly governed by the alliance or split up as the territory of a Prince, or perhaps both.

What the Kingdom of the Lake would gain were the looted spoils of war in the east campaign. Among them, the large number of captives, which could solidify the kingdom's foundation, were most valuable. Only along the Tarsas River could the population gained from the war be transported thousands of miles back to Zicao County in the south.

As for the Mistec and Zapotec peoples, if they dared to send troops to attack, he would subdue every Mistec state along the river!

"Very good!"

Aweit nodded in satisfaction and exchanged a smile with Xiulote. In just a few words between them, the major military affairs of the alliance and the future course of the world were determined. The

deployment of the great army involved numerous tasks, which would be handled by specific advisors and generals afterward.

The conversation between teacher and student then became much lighter. Aweit asked about the customs and territories of the north and south, while Xiulote also talked about the situations of the tribes in the northern wilderness, as well as the continuous mountains inhabited by the Tekos people in the west.

"So you're saying, the northern wilderness extends endlessly, and even two thousand miles north, there are still tribes of Canine Descendants?"

Aweit was quite surprised. He widened his eyes, resembling a jaguar that had smelled blood.

"Exactly! Teacher, according to a surrendered chieftain of the Guajili, to avoid the godly disaster of cold waves, they moved southwards from the northern wilderness, a thousand miles away, to reach the land of the Otomi people. And farther north, one or two thousand miles away from their once homeland, there are still countless nomadic tribes. The tribes of the wilderness are like stars in the sky, and farther north, in the endless dominion ravaged by cold waves, there are thousands of miles of fertile land covered in thick grass and dense, dark forests. Numerous great rivers crisscross north and south, connecting everything along their paths..."

Xiulote described the vast North American continent, his eyes also gleaming.

"In the northern wilderness, there are vast deposits of gold and silver, exposed among the deserts and rocks. Farther north, there are huge open-pit mines of copper, coal, iron... and other metals. And to the northwest of our world, towering rocky mountain ranges stretch for thousands of miles. That place might be the origin of our Mexica people, the land of Aztlán... and thanks to the blocking by the rocky mountains, many places in the distant northwest won't be affected by cold waves. There, the cultivable fertile land, rivers flowing down from the mountains, more prosperous tribes, and even city-states in the mountains..."

Hearing about such a vast world, Aweit suddenly stood up, his eyes filled with an eagling desire for conquest. After a while, he calmed down and slowly sat back on his throne.

"Xiulote, my student. Hearing you speak like this, I really do want to take the legion and make a trip to the north... You just mentioned that the Tekos people of the west have land spanning thousands of miles?"

"Indeed! From the mouth of the Lerma River to the mouth of the Tarsas River, the Tekos people of the southern and northern parts are scattered over a land of more than a thousand miles. Their land is either along the endless Great Lake or along the valleys and river flows in the mountains, the terrain is highly dispersed and the terrain is quite perilous. Only by forging through the two great rivers of the world and conquering along the sea can the land of the Tekos people be brought under control!"

"Hmm, not bad!"

Aweit nodded slightly. He looked at Xiulote and said with a smile.

"Xiulote, my student. I endowed you with the western lands of the world, not realizing they were so vast! It seems there is much more that the Kingdom of the Lake can do in the future!"

Upon hearing this, Xiulote's eyes sparkled, and he nodded respectfully. He pondered his teacher's words, sensing the underlying message.

"The Kingdom of the Lake can only expand to the west..."

The two men chatted and laughed merrily, unaware of time passing as they discussed the affairs of various tribes and matters of the realm, all contained within the bosoms of the kings and pondered in their minds.

"Xiulote, I heard that you have been rigorously reducing and changing the enfeoffments in the south, cutting more than ninety percent of the Prepetcha nobility's lands?"

A moment later, Aweit gripped the Divine Staff in his hand and asked another question of concern.

"Exactly! Teacher, these southern nobles are remnants of the Tarasco Kingdom, controlling eighty to ninety percent of the lands and people in the south. The tribute collected from the two hundred

thousand people in the south yields less human resources than from forty to fifty thousand people in the capital region."

Xiulote nodded, his expression confident and resolute.

"After my northern campaign, I rested for a season before continuing south to reduce their fiefs. Tens of thousands of elite warriors pressed down like mountains; the old nobility had no chance to resist and had to obediently comply. Those unwilling to submit were completely annihilated, their lands seized, and their children exiled to the northern borders!"

"Good, very good! Excellent!"

Aweit was slightly moved, his words fluctuating with emotion.

"The local old nobility control too much land and population! The power of the central Royal Family must continue to be strengthened! Alas... alas!..."

Hearing this, Xiulote tensed inwardly. He pursed his lips cautiously and watched Aweit's expression closely.

"Teacher, an alliance and a kingdom are ultimately different... There's no need to rush at this moment. Otherwise, the nobility's backlash could be truly dangerous..."

"Hmm."

Aweit's expression remained the same, noncommittal. He looked at Xiulote with a concerned expression and asked.

"Xiulote, my child, I heard you encountered a dangerous assassination attempt in the south?"

"Ah! Yes..."

Xiulote lowered his eyes and nodded in response.

"Teacher, the situation was quite dangerous then. The assassin hid frog poison in their fingernails, and I nearly brushed shoulders with the God of Death..."

"Hmm. I heard the details from the Intelligence Officer."

Aweit watched Xiulote calmly. After a long pause, he finally spoke softly.

"Xiulote, my child, the mastermind behind your assassination has been captured by the Alliance and is detained in the nearby Temple dungeon. They attempted to assassinate a prince of the Alliance; their crime is unforgivable. Keeping them alive now is just so that you can meet them once more! Soon, they will be executed, and their heads displayed in front of the Great Temple, a warning to all states!"

"Ah! Guramo has been captured by the Alliance?"

Shock surged in Xiulote's heart, and rising hatred turned into cold murderous intent.

"Chief Divine bless! Thank you, Teacher! I will make sure to meet them!"

"Hmm."

Aweit nodded calmly, unbothered. For a king of the Alliance, the fate of a few noble assassins was but a minor matter. He meditated for a moment, then once more looked up at the ceiling's mural and spoke solemnly.

"Xiulote, let's conclude today's discussion here. Alisa is waiting for you in the rose garden! She has been waiting for quite some time now."

Chapter 785: Kiss and Flower

"A myriad of flowers swaying, butterflies fluttering. Sparse shadows cast obliquely, a hidden fragrance drifts."

Xiulote stepped out from the solemn King's Great Hall, entering the palace's rear, into the vast and secluded Rose Garden. His mood instantly lightened, like a ship that had sailed through a storm and arrived at a tranquil and beautiful harbor.

In the early summer, the roses were in full bloom, unfolding like a brilliant carpet of red and white. Xiulote strolled through the fragrant trees and blooming roses of the garden, with a delicate floral scent lingering at his nose. Hummingbirds and butterflies, attracted by the fragrance, danced among the flowery trees, like elves that had descended to the mortal realm.

"Yo! Yo!"

A clear and cheerful call of a hawk drew the King's attention. He immediately quickened his pace with the agility of a seasoned Samurai. Dashing through the flowers, leaping over the grass, weaving through the thriving cypresses, he soon saw a cloud-like girl approaching.

The girl was dressed in white, her long hair reaching her waist, her face naturally radiant without a hint of makeup. She was breathtakingly beautiful, ethereal and otherworldly, with a pair of pure and bright eyes that contained a moving sparkle, like tranquil autumn waters. At the sight of the young man suddenly appearing, she widened her lovely eyes in surprise. Soon, a gentle smile curved her lips, and she quietly clasped her hands behind her back, standing tall with her blossoming chest, like a lotus rising from water or a delicate cloud swaying in the evening breeze.

Xiulote stood rooted to the spot, gazing spellbound at Alisa. His eyes lingered on the girl's tender yet bright face. He couldn't help but let his gaze drift downward, over her snow-white, slender neck, glancing at the modest mounds, meandering to the graceful curve of her waist, and caressing her statuesque legs. Finally, his eyes rested on the girl's delicate wooden shoes, admiring the crystalline purity, unable to suppress his inward praise.

"Gliding on water with graceful steps, leaving dust on the lustrous silk stockings...as if she were a light cloud veiling the moon, gently fluttering like the returning snow on a breeze..."

Alisa blinked. She looked at the young man who stood dazedly, initially a bit shy and then "pfft" chuckled. Then, with light and sprightly steps, she ran towards Xiulote like a blooming flower with arms outstretched. While running with a merry step, she sweetly called out.

"Xiulote, you naughty brother!"

Xiulote could no longer restrain himself. He sprinted with large strides, as fierce as a lion or tiger, reaching Alisa in two steps and tightly embracing the running girl. He had crossed mountains and rivers to come here, just for this moment, to hold his beloved in his arms!

The girl stopped her steps, feeling the broad and solid chest of Xiulote, and instantly found support. She buried her head in her lover's embrace, rubbing against him like a fawn. After a while, she lifted her head with reddened eyes, looking up at Xiulote's brave face.

"Four years, you scoundrel!...You, finally came!"

"Four years. Alisa, I finally came!"

Xiulote gazed at the beautiful girl, his heart overflowing with irrepressible excitement. Deep love surged within his chest, like a tide flooding the King's heart. He tightened his arms, feeling the cloud-like softness in his embrace, and said with a tender smile.

"My sprite, I am here. Here to take you home!"

Alisa tilted her head back, her eyes red, her cheeks flushed. Then, she closed her eyes and pursed her reddened lips.

Xiulote held his breath, lowering his head deeply, without hesitation, and kissed the girl's lips. Her lips were warm and soft, tasteless except for a purity like that of a lotus flower. Xiulote greedily sucked at them, as if he were a hummingbird drinking nectar, desperately seeking to delve deeper.

"Ah!"

Alisa let out a soft cry, muffled and unclear. As Xiulote persisted in his effort, he finally pried open the girl's pearly teeth. Soon, a softer sensation intertwined at the tip of his tongue, tangling like swimming fish, overwhelming his senses.

As emotions peaked, even time seemed to race. After a long while, they ended their prolonged kiss, panting and parting. Alisa's face was flushed, her eyes dewy. She looked at Xiulote tenderly and chided.

"Naughty brother!..."

"Alisa..."

A warm current rose up his spine, and Xiulote trembled with excitement. The girl's flowing hair tickled his cheeks and nose, causing a mild itch in his heart. He couldn't help but reach out and explore the girl's delicate body.

Alisa blushed. She lowered her head, trying to escape Xiulote's embrace, only to be firmly wrapped in his strong arms, unable to look away. She bit her lip and pressed against her lover's hand. Then, she lifted her head and blinked her eyes.

"Hmph! Xiulote, no mischief allowed."

"Mmm..."

Xiulote turned his face as if he hadn't heard. Then, he lowered his head to kiss the girl's ear.

"Ah!"

Alisa's face grew even redder. She endured the tingling sensation in her ear, extended her hand, and gave Xiulote's waist a hard twist.

"Ah!"

Xiulote let out a low grunt of pain. He swiftly reached out with one hand, capturing the girl's tender wrist, their fingers tightly interlocked. Then, he shifted his 'battleground,' kissing down the girl's neck.

"Mmm, mmm... Xiulote..."

Confronted with a lover as formidable as a lion or tiger, the girl was somewhat overwhelmed. As the blush on her cheeks spread to her snow-white neck, she looked even more alluring, like an apple ripe for the picking.

"Naughty... naughty brother, stop licking... mmm... mmm..."

With protest ineffective, resistance was necessary. Alisa, irritated, clenched her teeth and gritted them. Then, she suddenly turned her head, biting into Xiulote's shoulder like a kitten.

Chapter 786: Kiss and Flower_2

"Ah?!..."

Xiulote's shoulder hurt, and he finally stopped his mischief. Samurai instincts kicked in instantly, and he subconsciously wanted to pull back and protect his side, but fearing he might hurt the delicate person in his arms, he obediently let Alisa bite him.

The pain, like a cat's nibble, came in waves from his shoulder, but it was nothing serious for a samurai. With no other choice, Xiulote reached out to stroke the girl's smooth hair and then flicked her little head.

"Alisa, get up, you've bitten through..."

"Mmm..."

Alisa lifted her head, licked her lips, her cheeks still flushed with an unabating blush. She saw the deep tooth mark on Xiulote's shoulder, some skin broken, and even a little blood. The girl suddenly felt a twinge of heartache, but then, for some reason, she smiled happily.

"Bad brother, that's for being naughty!... Hmph! Leaving my mark on you!"

"Ah!"

Hearing the girl's words, Xiulote felt that familiar itch in his heart again. He leaned close to Alisa's face, sniffing her scent, his expression ponderous.

"Eh! Alisa, there seems to be a special fragrance on you..."

"Ah? The maids have said so too, but I can't smell it myself."

Alisa blinked curiously.

"Xiulote, what does it smell like?"

"Hmm, it's a bit like a faint floral scent, mixed with the lingering aroma of agarwood, and the freshness of herbs."

Xiulote gave it some thought, his face showing a trace of confusion.

"No good, I can't tell! Alisa, let me have another taste, a taste of your flavor..."

With that, Xiulote lowered his head again towards the girl's delicate collarbone.

"Ah! Bad brother!"

Alisa was stunned for a moment before she reacted. She stomped on Xiulote's foot, her face as red as a ripe apple.

Then, her eyes shrewdly turning, a plan formed in her mind. She took the upper hand, biting Xiulote's ear gently with her teeth, then whispered into his ear with a breath as fragrant as an orchid.

"Bad brother! Do you have other spirits in your heart?"

"Ah? No..."

Xiulote endured the ticklish sensation in his ear, his heart jolted. He stammered in reply.

"Alisa, by the Chief Divine, I only have you as a spirit..."

"Shh! Let me listen to your heart."

Alisa placed her finger on Xiulote's lips. Then, blinking her eyes, she tilted her head and pressed it against Xiulote's left chest.

"Bad brother, I ask you again, do you have other spirits?"

"No... none..."

"Oh? Really?"

"Uh... Really."

Xiulote felt vaguely guilty. He bit his lip and swore with all sincerity.

"Alisa, by our ancestors, I have only you now, and I love you with all my heart and soul!"

"Oh!"

Alisa's eyes gleamed, seemingly hiding springs in their vivid depths. She spoke with a smile that was not quite a smile.

"Hmm, Xiulote, I believe you! From now on, you must love me with all your heart!"

"Yes!"

Xiulote nodded firmly. He hugged the softness in his arms tightly, his eyes seemingly ablaze with flames. There was still a faint pain on his shoulder, but his heart was filled with a yearning itch. He felt the girl in his embrace, their temples rubbing against each other, his hand once again wandering deeper...

As mutual affections grew, self-control became difficult. While Xiulote was lost in emotion, the girl suddenly spoke up. The first half of her sentence was soft and tender, but the latter half turned into a deep inquiry.

"Hmm, hmph!... Xiulote, the number one beauty of the southern Kingdom, how does she compare to me in beauty?"

"..."

Hearing the girl's question, Xiulote's actions came to an abrupt standstill. His limbs stiffened instantly, and cold sweat broke out along his spine.

"Alisa, I... I... I haven't..."

"Hmph! You have it, you're deceiving me!"

Seeing Xiulote's expression, a mist seemed to form in Alisa's eyes. She turned her head away again, biting down hard on Xiulote's neck.

"..."

This time it hurt much more. The girl was like a little leopardess, clenching his neck firmly with her teeth. As she bit down, she sobbed softly and reached out to twist her lover's waist forcefully.

Xiulote gritted his teeth and didn't make a sound. He silently endured the pain, his heart aching for the girl.

After a while, Alisa released her silver teeth. She looked sadly at the bite marks she had made and reached out to gently touch them.

"Does it hurt?"

"...No, it doesn't."

Xiulote smiled. He took out a handkerchief to wipe away the tears from the girl's eyes and then her drool from the corners of her mouth.

"Alisa, I was foolish at that time... I didn't do anything..."

"I know... Xiulote, I know, someone told me everything. But I always believed in you..."

Alisa pressed her head against Xiulote's chest, becoming as docile as a kitten again. She murmured her confession with tears lingering at the corners of her eyes.

"Xiulote, I can hear your heart. You must not have others... You are my dear brother, belonging only to me!..."

"Do you know how scared I was when I heard you had been assassinated? I feared you would leave, leave this world like our deceased mother... Back then I was young, knew nothing, and yet I managed to pull through. But now, you have stolen my heart. Without you, how could I pull through?..."

Alisa murmured lowly, and Xiulote listened in silence. He didn't know what to say in the face of the girl's attachment; he just held her tighter.

"Xiulote, if you did something bad, no matter how sad and hurt I would be, I would still forgive you... But you must never, ever put yourself in danger!... When I learned you were tempted and almost assassinated, I felt sad and angry, scared and anxious... I was so angry I didn't write to you for two months, but I couldn't stop missing you..."

Alisa looked at Xiulote with tearful eyes. Without speaking, her gaze conveyed her longing directly into Xiulote's heart.

"Alisa, I missed you too. I thought of you every day, dreamed of being by your side, accompanying you, and sharing all I'd been through... I especially wanted to take good care of you, to make your days happy and joyful... I swear! For the rest of my life, to love and cherish you, till death do us part!..."

Emotions surged in Xiulote, his soul trembling. He stared deeply at Alisa, the flames in his eyes seeming to melt everything.

Their gazes locked, they drew closer unconsciously. Then, they kissed passionately, like tightly clinging magnets, unable to part even when breathless.

After a long time, Alisa's tears turned to laughter, dispelling her long-held sorrows. She seemed to lighten instantly; with a swift turn, she broke free from Xiulote's embrace, while still holding his hand.

"Xiulote, look at the garden before us."

Xiulote gripped the girl's soft hand tightly and looked toward the brilliant garden under the sunset. Countless blossoms decked the garden, stretching hundreds of meters. Hummingbirds and butterflies danced around, the pleasant scent of flowers filled the air. These different flowers had different blooming periods, all planted together, the most numerous being roses of various colors.

At this moment, some flowers were buds waiting to bloom, some were in full splendor, some were silently wilting, and some were just grass.

"Alisa, there are so many flowers, so beautiful. They're as beautiful as you are, as delicate as you are."

"Hmm, Xiulote, I don't want to be a delicate flower."

Alisa shook her head. She stretched out her palm, revealing calluses.

"Hehe, I'm a patient gardener."

Xiulote touched the calluses on the girl's hand. They were in places like those of an experienced farmer, left by long-term gripping of a hoe.

"Alisa, you..."

"Xiulote, whenever I miss you, I plant a plant in the garden. Some are flowers, some are herbs, and some are trees."

Alisa looked at the thriving garden, feeling both the pride of a creator and a special gentleness.

"Xiulote, you've been gone from me for one thousand five hundred days. Whenever I miss you, I plant a plant, waiting for you to come and see. Now, there are two thousand three hundred plants in this garden... Hmm, do you know why there are two thousand three hundred plants?"

"Ah! Alisa, my sprite."

Xiulote tightened his grip on her hand. He was moved by the girl's thoughtfulness and also felt a bit of heartache.

"Why are there two thousand three hundred plants?"

"Because, half of the days, I have to visit father, accompany my brother, and greet my elders. And the other half of the days, I'm thinking of you twice as much!"

Alisa smiled sweetly, her big eyes speaking volumes.

"Xiulote, when I miss you twice as much, I plant two plants. I really miss you a lot..."

"Alisa!"

Xiulote turned abruptly.

Chapter 787: Sunset and Darkness

The warm breeze was gentle, the setting sun painted the evening sky, and the fragrance of flowers drifted with the wind. Time always sped past for lovers. The young man and the girl embraced and kissed in the garden, shared their thoughts with each other, then hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, they watched the red sun sink down. At this moment, their hearts were filled with warm happiness, and even their smiles and eyes sweetened.

"Eek! Eek!"

A loud eagle's cry came from not far away, carrying with it a joyous note.

Xiulote paused slightly, then remembered the little golden eagle he had neglected. He turned to Alisa, asking with confusion,

"Alisa, where did little Aviloztli go? I heard its call on my way here from the Royal Palace and followed it to find you..."

"Little Aviloztli is by the fish pond eating fish, together with the little green snake."

Alisa blinked her eyes, smiled cutely. To prevent little Aviloztli from causing trouble, she had sent the little golden eagle to the fish pond in advance.

"Xiulote, I'll take you to see the little fish!"

"Err, alright!"

Arm in arm, shoulder to shoulder, leaning on each other, the two made their way to the fish pond beside the Royal Palace.

The fish pond wasn't large but was dug quite deep. The tropical fish were extraordinarily vibrant, and watching their playful swimming had always been a favorite pastime of the nobility of the Alliance. Hundreds of fish shuttled about in the pond, golden, silver, blue, yellow, red... A myriad of colors intertwined underwater like a swimming rainbow.

The little golden eagle was squatting by the pond, holding down a small red fish under its talons, pecking at it now and then. Seeing the two people coming over, it tilted its little head, looked up, and let out a couple of happy cries.

"Eek! Eek!"

Xiulote smiled, reached out his hand, and quickly flicked the little golden eagle's head, provoking a disgruntled chirp. The little eagle shook its head, glanced at Alisa, and snuggled up to her for approval. Then, it flapped its wings, gesturing at Xiulote.

"Chirp! Chirp!"

Seeing the little golden eagle complaining, Alisa's eyes curved into a beautiful smile. Xiulote, gazing at the exquisite smile of the girl, felt his heart firmly hooked by those lovely crescent curves of her eyes and brows.

"Naughty brother, don't bully little Aviloztli!"

Alisa reached out her hand, gently touched Xiulote's forehead, and gave him a firm flick. Then, she looked at the bewildered young man and smiled playfully.

"Little Aviloztli has even sent me messages, it's so clever!"

"Ah!"

Xiulote rubbed his forehead, subconsciously reaching out his hand, touched Alisa's tender face, and gently pinched it.

"If I can't bully little Aviloztli, then I'll bully you instead!"

The young man grinned, posing as a grinning coyote. The girl shrank her neck, pretending to be an innocent deer. The coyote chased after the deer, finally caught her, and then with a howl, bit onto her tiny face, and followed with a lick.

"Delicious!"

"Mm, mm... naughty... naughty brother!"

After playfully messing around for a while, the two finally stopped, panting. Xiulote wrapped his arms around the enervated girl, and only then remembered the topic they had momentarily forgotten.

"Alisa, did little Aviloztli successfully deliver back all the letters I wrote?"

"Mhm, they came back!"

Alisa nodded, her pretty face blushing.

"Little Aviloztli can fly seven hundred li in a single day, from the Kingdom of the Lake back to the Capital City. It even brought back a field mouse, having hunted during the journey. The letters it brought back were a bit wet; next time it would be better to seal them waterproof..."

Hearing this, Xiulote's expression became thoughtful, and he pondered for a moment.

"Seven hundred li in a day's flight! Golden eagles are so convenient and they don't fear attacks from birds of prey. When I return to the Kingdom, I'll raise several more in the Capital City and send them to Capital City as emergency messengers..."

Alisa quietly watched the handsome young man deep in thought. His eyes were like stars, his face as smooth as jade, and as he contemplated, he bore a majestic and resolute demeanor, like a pine standing firm. Unwittingly, the girl pressed against the young man's chest again, hugging him tightly.

"Xiulote, from now on, I'll be by your side, there's no need for the golden eagle to fly such long distances..."

Xiulote snapped back to his senses and hugged the delicate girl in his arms, gently stroking her hair.

"Alright, alright! Alisa, you shall be by my side, and I'll be by yours..."

"Chirp chirp?"

Little Aviloztli cocked its head, puzzledly looking at the two masters in front of it. They were hugging each other, and now they were kissing again?... Curious, the little golden eagle watched for a while and shook its head. Then it felt a coldness on its feet, and a deep intimidating sound suddenly came from beside it.

"Hiss, hiss!"

Startled, little Aviloztli fluttered its wings, leaping two meters in an instant. It whirled around warily, only then realizing it was its old rival, the little green snake, which had just crawled up from the bottom of the fish pond.

After not seeing each other for four or five years, referring to it as "little green snake" might no longer be accurate. By then, the green snake had grown to over one and a half meters long, as thick as an arm. When fully extended, it was almost as tall as a person. The green snake swayed its head, measured up its old "timid" pal with its cold vertical pupils, and then looked at Xiulote, whom it hadn't seen for a long time.

"Hiss, hiss?... Hiss, hiss!"

The green snake looked puzzled for a moment, sniffed vigorously a few times, and then suddenly got excited. It swiftly crawled toward Xiulote, soaking wet, leaving droplets in the grass. Then, with its tail propped up, it shot out, "whoosh," and coiled around Xiulote's leg.

"Hmm?"

Xiulote felt a chill on his calf, looked down in surprise. He saw a thick viper tightly coiling around his right leg, then quickly slithering upwards. The fast-moving snake body glided over his body, bringing a cold touch, and a damp sliminess.

Chapter 788: Sunset and Darkness_2

"Ah!"

Xiulote cried out in surprise, about to pull out the Obsidian Dagger from his bosom, but Alisa gently restrained him.

"Xiulote, don't worry, it's Little Green!"

"Eh? Little Green? It's gotten so big!"

Xiulote blinked. Little Green hadn't stopped, and by now, it had coiled around his waist. Then it poked its head out and gently hooked around the young man's neck, resting its head against Xiulote's face and forming a simple exclamation mark, "!"

"Hiss!"

The icy touch invigorated Xiulote. He slightly turned his head, staring at Little Green's familiar vertical pupils, and old memories surged into his mind. Little Green had accompanied him during the seven days of confinement by the elders and had also been with him in the capital city for a long and eventful year.

In Xiulote's memory, Little Green was as thick as a stick, over half a meter long, only capable of hunting frogs. But now, the Little Green before him had become a king of the waters, able to hunt big fish!

"After a few years, I didn't expect you to have grown so much!"

A smile emerged on Xiulote's face. He gently stroked Little Green's forehead and carefully pinched its serpentine body. Little Green showed no resistance and, just like before, happily shook its head.

"Hiss!"

"As the tree, so the person."

As Xiulote caressed Little Green, he felt a pang of inexplicable sentimentality. However, this sentimentality might seem a bit pretentious coming from him, a young man not yet of age. Soon, he thought of a truly time-worn old man.

"I wonder how the revered elder's health is now..."

The Great Temple stood majestically, shimmering with a divine glow under the setting sun. Thick shadows cast by the pyramid stretched toward the East. The palace of the Chief Minister, mostly hidden in the temple's shadow, only had its red flat roof persistently shimmering in the sunset. However, as night gradually approached, how long could this last gleam persist?

At the top of the palace, the aged elder lay on a soft bed, slightly raising his head to gaze at the twilight in the sky. He had just awoken from an involuntary deep sleep, his eyes still somewhat cloudy.

"Montezuma... brother..."

"Chief Divine bless! Elder, you're awake!"

Cacamatzin grasped the elder's withered hand, carefully helping him to sit up in bed. He had hurried back to the palace early to find the elder in deep sleep and stood patiently by his side, unwilling to interrupt his father's rest.

Over the past year, the elder's health had clearly deteriorated. He couldn't eat, his legs were weak, and gradually he couldn't walk either. He often fell into deep sleep, with the periods of sleep growing longer and the times of wakefulness shorter. In his dreams, he saw many of the old friends and foes who had passed away, all opening their arms to welcome him. He would also remember many small, once-forgotten incidents, each appearing vividly before his eyes. The past years cascaded like flowing water, and he was sinking into it.

"Brother..."

The elder called softly twice before the murkiness in his eyes began to clear. He looked at Cacamatzin standing by his side, his eyes slightly downcast, and remained silent.

Cacamatzin, feeling the thinness of his father's body beneath the thick robe, couldn't help but tear up. He gently sniffed the increasingly strong scent of an old man and asked in a low voice.

"Father, your body..."

"Call me elder."

"Yes. Elder, you..."

The elder, expressionless, waved his hand. Then, he glanced at the Samurai standing on the other side, holding a clay pot— Guard Commander Cevali.

"Bring it."

Cevali nodded, took out a bottle of pale green potion from the clay pot, and then carefully opened it and slowly fed it to the elder.

The elder, with his eyes downcast, took two sips. The power of the herbs spread through his body, gradually clearing his aged mind. Feeling his thoughts become clearer, the elder restrained himself from drinking more and once again waved his hand.

Cevali carefully put away the potion and then quietly stood in his place, once more turning into a statue.

The elder closed his eyes, taking a few light breaths. Soon, he opened his eyes, which were once again filled with unmistakable resolve. He pondered for a moment before speaking softly.

"Cacamatzin, this time, I asked you to see that child. What do you think?"

Hearing this question, Cacamatzin bowed his head, pondering carefully. The elder did not rush him, simply waiting in silence. After a long while, Cacamatzin, looking serious, replied in a deep voice.

"Elder, your grandnephew Xiulote has a stature like the great Emperor Montezuma!"

"Brother..."

Hearing this, the elder's expression shifted slightly but quickly returned to impassiveness. He recalled the recently faded dream, a heroic face barely discernible. After a while, he calmly instructed.

"Tell me more."

"Yes, Elder, my grandnephew Xiulote is young but possesses a heroic and resolute appearance. He is incredibly determined, a man of his word, and acts decisively, clearly having specific goals and long-term plans... These are the most important qualities for a king."

"Hmm, will and determination."

The elder nodded slightly, listening calmly.

"...He is neither arrogant nor impatient and treats people quite amiably. Even towards ordinary sailors, he shows some kind of, some kind of concealed respect. It is said that in the Kingdom of the Lake, he is famously affectionate towards the common folk, yet very strict with the nobility... One can see his imperial guard warriors truly respect and adore him from their hearts."

"Nobility, commoners, and warriors... Samurai loyalty."

The elder pondered for a moment, expressionless.

He believed that the nobility were an important source of strength for the alliance, yet not so easily controlled. Over time, the established nobility would increasingly become a liability. Commoners were the plodding lower class; although numerous, they lacked significant power and voice. They just needed to remain stable and obedient. The real reliable force was only the middle-class warriors, warriors fighting on the battlefields.

"In the Kingdom of the Lake, how many warriors are there now?"

"Elder, according to reports from the priesthood and the king's advisors, there are about six full-strength legions. Five of these are veteran legions that have experienced battle, and one is a newly formed legion. Of the six, three are standing armies, and three are semi-retired garrison troops."

"Six legions?"

Upon hearing this number, the elder slightly frowned.

"Exactly. The Kingdom of the Lake has inherited most of the military forces of the Tarasco Kingdom and has also incorporated the northern Guajili Canine Descendant tribes. Over the years, the kingdom sends out troops annually to wage war..."

The elder lowered his eyes and interrupted softly,

"I know... continue."

"...What puzzles me the most is the divine revelation he received."

Cacamatzin hesitated as he reached this point, organizing his words to express what he had observed as precisely as possible.

"During his years in the Western Kingdom, the boy developed some very powerful new weaponry... One is a large bronze cannon that fires stone projectiles, capable of destroying wooden palisades and shields from hundreds of steps away. Another is a smaller cannon, which can break enemy lines in open field battles..."

"Hmm? Hundreds of steps away, destroying wooden palisades?"

The elder's eyes suddenly opened wide, looking with an imperceptible majesty.

"Did you see it with your own eyes?"

"Yes, indeed so."

Cacamatzin nodded. During a stop on his journey, he had requested to see the cannon firing. Xiulote had not refused and frankly displayed it. The scene at that time made a deep impression on him, and was very hard to forget!

"Elder, with such copper cannons at hand, we can attack small cities, easily breach wooden fortresses. And if we attribute this power to the force of the gods, many weaker tribes would probably be greatly intimidated and their resistance significantly reduced, even leading them to surrender..."

"Divine inspiration... in the name of the divine..."

The elder mused in silence. His gaze flickered, clearly lost in thought. After a while, he asked wearily,

"Anything else?"

"There is also a huge galley. It has hanging sails that can take advantage of the wind and manpower to quickly traverse rivers and lakes... Ordinary single-canoe war boats cannot match it."

"Galleys... Are they of the Maya type?"

The elder briefly reminisced, conjuring images he had seen at the seaside. He was young back then, on a mission to the Totonac seaside city-states. The large commercial ships used by the Maya city-states for long voyages had left a deep impression on him.

"The sails look somewhat similar, but the ship design is sharper, probably better suited for combat."

Cacamatzin was not sure. He didn't know much about naval combat.

"Hmm. Anything else?"

"...No more."

Cacamatzin shook his head.

"Elder, as per your will, I will officiate the marriage between the boy and Alisa. After some days, I will come back to report to you!"

"Hmm. Go ahead, make sure the wedding is well conducted!"

The elder nodded calmly, waved his hand, and slowly leaned back on the wooden bed, looking towards the palace's exterior, a pitch-black sky.

"It's gotten dark..."

Chapter 789: Palace Night Talk, Temple Prayer

The night was deep, and a veil of darkness enveloped Lake Texcoco, large bonfires were lit all around the capital city. The royal palace was bright with firelight, and servants bustled about. Joyous singing and laughter floated through the rose garden, while inside the King's Great Hall, there was still an atmosphere of quiet and solemnity.

Aweit sat on the throne with paper and pen in hand, attending to the affairs of the Alliance. His expression was indifferent, and with each stroke of the pen, he decided the fate of others. After a while, he set down his feather pen and glanced at the dim sky outside the hall.

"It's so late already..."

Aweit's brow furrowed slightly, busy until now and indeed feeling a bit hungry. He instructed a guard in the hall.

"Go check what Alisa is doing, whether she has eaten or not."

"As you command, Your Majesty!"

The guard hurried off. Aweit stretched out his hand and rubbed his brow. In a few months, the Alliance was to embark on a major eastern campaign, and it was necessary to start transporting large amounts of food and military supplies now, while nobles and samurais from various regions were also beginning to mobilize. An eastern campaign was a significant military affair, years in the making, demanding careful planning.

A moment later, the guard quickly returned, respectfully reporting.

"Your Majesty, the princess and His Highness are in the garden, eating grilled fish and singing. Both the princess and His Highness are in high spirits, there are musicians playing bamboo flutes and clay ocarinas, and the servants have prepared many fruits and snacks..."

Upon hearing this, Aweit's eyebrows raised. He asked in a deep voice.

"Didn't Alisa invite me to join them for dinner?"

"Your...Your Majesty."

The guard bowed deeply, slightly nervous.

"The princess is in good spirits, having fun and probably, maybe... forgot. I'll go ask..."

Aweit thought for a moment with a stern face, then waved his hand.

"Never mind! Prepare some rice wine and a meal for me, right here in the hall!"

"As you command!"

The guard quickly left. Aweit remained seated on the throne, looking in the direction of the garden. After a long moment, he sighed softly, shaking his head.

"My daughter is grown, truly beyond my grasp now..."

Thereafter, the king of the Alliance continued to review the documents, feeling somewhat irritable and helpless. He stood up and paced around the splendid hall, resembling a deity in a mural. Supreme and commanding all, yet solitary and without companionship.

Before long, a refined meal was brought into the hall, arrayed in a row on a low table. Grilled fish, fragrant deer meat, stuffed turkey eggs, honeyed black bean paste, and thin corn cakes.

Aweit looked at the food, suddenly feeling even less of an appetite. He pondered for a moment and commanded in a deep voice to the guard.

"Prepare the same food for Alisa and send it to the garden. Also, tell her the night air is cool, not to stay out too late..."

"...As you command!"

The guard respectfully saluted and exited the hall. He ran back and forth, breaking out in a fine sweat. A late breeze blew, and he let out a comfortable long breath. The early summer wind was warm, hardly cool at all.

The king of the hall sat alone, gazing up at the mural on the ceiling, until the wooden doors of the hall suddenly burst open, and a figure in a black robe silently walked in.

"My king!"

"Gillim, you've returned."

Aweit looked up faintly and nodded slightly. He gestured toward the food on the table, saying calmly.

"I don't have much of an appetite alone, join me for some food and drink."

"Yes, my king."

Gillim nodded solemnly. He approached the lower end of the table and sat down with dignity. Aweit then returned to the head of the table and sat relaxed.

"Here, have a drink!"

Aweit casually sipped some tequila and asked in a deep voice.

"How is it?"

"My king, I personally reviewed the tributes for His Highness Xiulote and talked to certain individuals among the Imperial Guards, inquiring about some public information."

Gillim responded calmly. A significant portion of the Imperial Guard were samurais from the Mexica Alliance, closely linked with the central Royal Family, entwined in myriad ways.

"His Highness Xiulote's tributes are quite valuable, totaling hundreds of thousands of boxes... among them, there are 36 Rain God Tiger Squat Cannons and 4 Sun Divine Eagle Cannons. It's roughly half the current number of cannons in the kingdom."

"Half of the cannons. Hmm, good!"

Aweit nodded in satisfaction. Then, intrigued, he asked in a deep voice.

"Rain God Tiger Squat Cannons, Sun Divine Eagle Cannons?"

"Yes. Rain God Tiger Squat Cannons are small bronze cannons for field battles, while Sun Divine Eagle Cannons are large bronze cannons for sieging. Both are much more powerful than wooden cannons."

Gillim recalled the cannons he had touched, his expression slightly moved, emotions fluctuating.

"My king, I asked the Foundry Bureau craftsmen, and these two types of bronze weapons are quite large, making them very difficult to produce. Especially the Sun Divine Eagle Cannons; the alliance's master craftsmen aren't sure... it might be necessary to summon master craftsmen from the Kingdom of the Lake or request them as part of the tribute..."

"Hmm?"

Aweit frowned, displeased.

"This is Alisa's wedding!"

Gillim instantly understood. He respectfully bowed his head, immediately changing his wording.

"Cannon casting technology is of great importance, which could significantly benefit the Alliance in warfare. Perhaps it can be requested during the autumn tribute, letting the High Priest and Vice Legion Commander convey it."

"Hmm."

Aweit pondered briefly, nodding in agreement.

"Xiulote is in need of labor. Let's exchange five thousand robust men and women for a few cannon craftsmen from the kingdom!"

"Yes. As per your command."

Gillim saluted solemnly. Then, after pondering for a few breaths, he made another suggestion.

"My king, the kingdom's Naval Forces have recently launched a new type of massive galley, significantly superior in naval combat to canoes. The alliance's naval forces likewise need the technology to build these warships..."

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"Certainly."

Aweit pondered briefly and nodded in agreement.

"Handle it. Give the Kingdom of the Lake some compensation and transport a batch of food there."

"At your command!"

Gillim bowed to the ground. Then, he raised his head once more.

"Your Majesty, based on the latest intelligence, we can infer that the gems of the Kingdom of the Lake are produced in large quantities by some method that doesn't require a vast labor force for mining..."

"Hmm? Large-scale production?"

Aweit paused, somewhat surprised.

"Are you saying that the Lake Gems, so hard and exquisite..."

"Exactly."

Gillim nodded in affirmation.

"The Lake Gems, there is a ninety percent chance, are some kind of man-made creation."

"Is that so!"

Aweit was actually a bit astonished. He had seen many Lake Gems, and the treasury also held many. He had once greatly admired the stable quality of these gems. Now it seems that it might be as the Chief Intelligence Officer had said...

"Divine Revelation's power is indeed so..."

"Your Majesty, the technology to create these gems..."

Gillim's eyes shimmered. He grasped the trade intelligence of the Alliance and knew what a lucrative trade these Lake Gems were.

Aweit fell silent and cast down his gaze, pondering for a long while, but in the end, he shook his head.

"Forget it! The Lake Gems have nothing to do with military campaigns, they're merely a small amount of treasure. Since Xiulote invented it, let him continue to sell them!"

"Your Majesty..."

Gillim pursed his lips. He was aware of the number of legions in the Kingdom of the Lake. Without the gem trade as a significant source of revenue, with the Kingdom of the Lake's foundation, it would be extremely difficult to maintain such a size of army. Thinking of this, he bowed respectfully and once again made a suggestion.

"Could we impose an additional luxury trade tax on the Lake Gems? Previously, out of support for the kingdom, the trade tax on these gems has always been low."

"Additional trade tax..."

Aweit was somewhat tempted. He mused for a moment, then looking in the direction of the garden, he said faintly.

"Tell Xiulote that after the marriage, the kingdom's gem trade is to be managed by Alisa. If he doesn't agree, the Alliance will impose additional trade tax."

"...Understood."

Gillim bowed once more, and a flash of disappointment crossed his mind. The Kingdom lay to the west of the world, with lucrative trade that had to go through the Alliance. With taxing rights, he could devise ways to control the gem trade. If the gem trade were under the Alliance's control, the Alliance could maintain another legion, while the Kingdom would have one less. The difference between the two could be quite substantial.

"Gillim, is Alisa's dowry prepared yet?"

A calm voice came, carrying an undeniable will.

"My daughter shall not suffer the slightest injustice."

"Yes, Your Majesty, everything is ready,"

Gillim replied solemnly, his expression unchanged.

"Jade, gemstones, gold and silver, feathers, clothing, colored pottery... all have been doubled in the gifts from the kingdom."

"Five hundred hectares of Chinampa fief, ten thousand direct serfs, and five hundred samurai families, are they all prepared?"

Hearing the question, Gillim felt a pang of pain in his heart. With an expressionless face, he prostrated in salute. Having served the King for so many years, he was well aware of the King's likes and dislikes. On the matter of the princess's dowry, he knew better than to speak out.

"Your Majesty, the five hundred hectares of royal Chinampa can sustain ten thousand serfs of the lake region. The princess's fief is situated on the western side of Lake Texcoco, carved out from the confiscated lands of the Tlacopan nobility. The five hundred samurai families are all experienced and elite, and there are over a thousand servants at their service. In addition, there is a magnificent prince's mansion in the palace district of the capital city, which shall serve as the princess's residence when she is in the capital; this mansion is not far from the King's Palace,"

"Hmm. Not bad, very good!"

Aweit, quite satisfied upon hearing that everything was properly arranged, and much of his irritation had abated. He chuckled heartily and raised his cup.

"Come, my dear snake advisor, you've worked hard all this way, join me in emptying this cup!"

"Thank you, Your Majesty!"

The two drank heartily, and amidst the blaze of the grand hall's fire, the solemn atmosphere finally gained a touch of liveliness.

A night hastened by. The next day, Xiulote woke up alone in the King's Palace, the outside already bright with daylight and the birds chirping cheerily. Turning his head, he saw no one beside the soft cloth bed. Since Alisa was not yet wed to him, she could not share his bed.

Xiulote smiled, relishing the joy of their date the day before. He couldn't help but curl the corners of his mouth upward, lightly licking his lips as if he could still taste the girl's softness and warmth. After a moment, he dressed neatly with a laugh and went to bid farewell to the King.

Aweit had risen early and had already taken his breakfast, sitting in the grand hall reviewing documents. He cast a cursory glance at Xiulote, nodded, and gave a few instructions. Xiulote then bowed and took his leave from his teacher and future father-in-law.

Outside the grand hall, one of the princess's handmaids stood holding a cloak, waiting respectfully. After a night's passage, Alisa had snapped out of her joy from their reunion. Remembering their date from the day before, she felt shy and didn't appear, but sent her handmaiden to deliver a fine cloak to Xiulote.

Xiulote understood with an enlightened smile and donned the cloak. In Mexica culture, a cloak holds special meaning. And in the sacred wedding ceremony, it is also an important symbol. Next, he would proceed to the Great Temple to pray to the Chief Divine before officially visiting the High Priest.

The Temple District was always solemn and awe-inspiring. The Temple Guards, armed with sticks, stood guard among the temples like statues. The priests of various levels passed by, clad in different robes, carrying scrolls and documents. Amid the greetings and salutations of the people, Xiulote slowly ascended the Great Pyramid Temple, seventy meters high, with the entire capital city sprawling beneath his feet.

Xiulote donned the attire of a High Priest and stood solemnly before the sculptures of the hummingbird and the sun. With great reverence, he lit the incense and offered a sincere prayer to the Supreme High Divine. On both sides, a line of High Priests chanted loudly, welcoming the arrival of the Supreme High Priest of the Lake Region. A High Priest of the third level respectfully led Xiulote to the Priest Grand Hall behind the Great Temple.

The Priest Grand Hall was majestic and solemn, with large curtains fluttering in the wind, adorned with the mythic images of the Chief Divine. The surrounding walls were filled with murals that told all the miracles and legends since the birth of the Chief Divine.

The somber incense rose slowly from the burners, bringing a divine presence to the entire hall. Seven or eight Elder Priests wore serious expressions, sitting in the middle of the hall. At the center of the hall, an elderly man adorned in a robe and wearing an Obsidian Feather Crown sat on the Throne of the Gods.

Xiulote knelt in the grand hall of the temple and respectfully saluted the High Priest, his grandfather, who presided over the proceedings.

"May the Chief Divine bless us! Teotihuacan's Xiulote, Supreme High Priest of the Lake District, extends his respects to the revered High Priest! May the majestic light of the Chief Divine shine upon you, illuminating the entire Mexica Alliance and caring for the myriads of citizens!"

"May the Chief Divine bless us!"

The High Priest's face was as serene as a placid lake, solemn like a deity. Even seeing his direct grandson after four years, he showed no sign of joy.

"Supreme High Priest Xiulote, you have traveled far, and the journey has been arduous. May you spread the light of the Chief Divine throughout the wilderness of the Lake District. Let the myriad lost citizens convert in the glory of the Chief Divine!"

"Praise the Chief Divine! Believe in our god Huitzilopochtli, whose mighty power is boundless, who controls all existence from past to future, until the end of days!..."

Uguel, looking plump and solemn, led the prayer. The Elder Priests around him chanted in response, followed by the priests standing outside the grand hall. Soon, the sacred prayers echoed within the towering temple and spread far and wide. The surrounding priests, samurai, and nobility all prostrated themselves on the ground, praying devoutly to the Chief Divine.

The chanting of prayers spread far, sounding like

Please refresh in a moment for more.