

Civilization 901

Chapter 901: The Cold Divine Mountain, the Dark Red Dead Blood_2

"Elder Wezil, I have received a Divine Revelation, and I can both see the past and know the future! The Mexica, and the people of Teotihuacan, are entirely different. And this era is completely unlike the past eras!..."

"...Conquering the world is not just the mission of the Mexica; it is the overwhelming trend of the era! If this cannot be achieved, with the dawn of a new era, there will only be destruction and death in the world!..."

"Ugh..."

Upon hearing such an apocalyptic prophecy, Elder Wezil furrowed his brows, pursed his lips, and remained silent for a moment. He felt very troubled. Although the Mexica's Highness was young, his resolve was extremely firm, leaving no opportunity to exploit. After quite a while, he sighed and in a different manner, softly implored.

"Your Highness, the Holy City of Cholula has been passed down from the Toltec Era, and it is the beacon of civilization under the teachings of the Nawa universe! It holds a unique meaning in the hearts of people everywhere! I beseech your legion to retain a sense of piety and benevolence toward the gods!"

"Oh? A beacon of civilization... deeply entrenched in the people's minds... showing benevolence?"

Hearing these familiar words, Xiulote felt an inexplicable urge to laugh. Nonetheless, he shook his head and spoke candidly.

"In my view, leaving this so-called Holy City holds no significance for the Alliance!"

"...Your Highness, you have not dispatched a legion to directly attack the Holy City... which implies that you have reservations and care about the significance of the Holy City!"

Elder Wezil straightened his posture, his tone growing slightly firmer.

"All the tribes in the world revere the Holy City of Cholula! Whoever attacks the Holy City will lose the hearts of the people!"

"Haha, the hearts of the people?"

Xiulote continued to smile and asked calmly.

"The hearts you speak of, are they the hearts of the priests, the nobility, the samurai, or the commoners? Can I win these hearts if I do not attack the Holy City?"

"Your Highness!... You..."

"Ultimately, there should only be one Holy City in the world!"

Xiulote's expression turned cold as he resolutely replied.

"I restrain my legion not to attack the Holy City directly, only because I'm waiting for a suitable excuse!... Or a satisfactory answer!"

"Hmm?... An answer... satisfactory?"

Elder Wezil lowered his head, pondered for a moment, and decided not to beat around the bush anymore. His eyes shone brightly as he asked in a deep voice.

"Your Highness, when the wind meets the clouds at the right place, it turns into the spring rain we have now, bringing life to the earth!... What would a satisfactory answer be to you?"

"Hmm... The Holy City of Cholula is far from the Kingdom of the Lake, so I have no essential need to eradicate it. If you keep the valuable heritage of the Toltecs, you may contribute in many ways!"

Xiulote pondered carefully before responding. He did not know the specific situations of the city's elders but calculated based on the perspective of the Alliance and the Kingdom.

"...However, the prerequisite for all this is that you must surrender independent control over financial, military, and divine powers and comply with the arrangements of the Royal Family and the High Priesthood! You must integrate into the Alliance and serve the grand purpose of the Mexica conquering the world!"

"...Surrender independent power and comply with the arrangement of the Alliance?"

Upon hearing these words, Elder Wezil's expression turned somewhat bitter. He clenched his teeth and tentatively asked.

"Your Highness, do you not wish to dominate the world?... The city's elders are willing to support you, as long as you leave us a way of life. If in the future, there are changes in the Alliance..."

"Hmm?! Elder Wezil!"

Xiulote's face turned cold as he gazed sternly at the frail old man before him. All favorable feelings dissipated within that single statement.

"I absolutely do not wish to hear such a lowly jest again!"

"...Yes, Your Highness."

Facing His Highness's cold and stern gaze, Elder Wezil found himself unable to continue speaking. After a long pause, he sighed helplessly and resorted to delaying tactics.

"Your Highness, regarding the future of the Holy City and the Alliance, we have much sincerity... Besides this old man who came here, there are two elder priests who are visiting the Lake Capital City and the North to meet with the High Priesthood and the Kings among the Northern Route Army! I ask that you exercise patience for a bit longer and refrain from dispatching the legion to plunder outside Cholula City and terrorize its citizens..."

"Hmm? Have you already sent envoys to meet with the High Priesthood and the King?"

Hearing this, Xiulote reflected for a moment, remaining silent. The fate of the Holy City Cholula rightly should be decided by the High Priesthood or the King. In light of this, the strong measures he had planned were suddenly not quite suitable for immediate execution...

The young king stood up, looked towards the vast and towering glacier, and hardened his resolve. He cast a cursory glance at Wezil and spoke curtly.

"Elder Wezil, I have sufficient patience to wait. But the prerequisite is that Cholula City must not pose a threat to the Southern Army!"

"Ah? Your Highness, what do you mean?"

"Since the eastern expedition, many Tlaxcaltecs have fled to the Cholula state, near the Holy City. Among them are numerous Divine Descendant Nobility with warriors, many also accompanied by ordinary militiamen with their families!... These people are a threat to the Southern Army!"

"This..."

Elder Wezil's thoughts raced. Originally, Cholula state had a population of 200,000, half of which was controlled by the local Tlaxcalan nobility, and the other half by the twelve priestly family elders. Out of these, only those controlled by the priestly families, residing in Cholula City and its vicinity, were considered the descendants of the Toltecs.

However, since the Mexica began their eastward expansion, as many as forty or fifty thousand Tlaxcaltecs have fled into the state! Among them are no shortage of formidable warriors, capable of defending the city with able-bodied men. To surrender them would be akin to self-destructing the city...

The elder priest pursed his lips, pondering for a long time, yet delayed in responding.

"Hmm? You are unwilling?"

Xiulote raised an eyebrow and waved his hand dismissively. He turned around and, with hundreds of samurai in accompaniment, began heading down the mountain.

"Haha, then let us meet on the battlefield! The Southern Army will not permit any hidden dangers lurking nearby!"

"Ah, Your Highness!"

At this sight, Elder Wezil reached out his hand, hastily calling out.

"We will! We are willing to hand over all these Tlaxcaltecs to you!"

"Oh?"

Xiulote turned sideways, looking at the elder priest.

"How many of them are there?"

"Two... no, thirty thousand able-bodied and elderly..."

"Not enough, you can't fool me!"

Xiulote extended a finger, shook it, and left the final ultimatum.

"Within two months, hand over forty thousand able-bodied men and women, and forty thousand under thirty-five years old! Then I will spare you. Remember, the Southern Army is just forty li away; the Holy City Cholula has no option!"

The cold words drifted across the Divine Mountain, like falling snow, leaving Elder Wezil shivering all over. He knelt on the ground, tremblingly extended his hand, wanting to protest, yet he watched as the young king walked further into the woodland, his figure growing ever distant.

The bitter winds gusted through the thin clothing, penetrating the aged body, bringing an unbearable chill. A frigid era seemed to be shaped anew by the winds, reshaping everything.

After some time, Elder Wezil painfully stood up, gazing at the ancient Temple of Death. It was only then that he suddenly noticed that amid the bricks of the temple's black stone walls, there was dark red-stained blood. This stagnant blood was almost dry, hidden deep within the ancient crevices, utterly devoid of life. What use was there in keeping this dead blood?

Chapter 902: Priests of the Lake Capital City

May is the time for spring farming, and the earth is bursting with life. To the east of the Divine Mountain lies desolation and slaughter, while the west side is lush and peaceful. Hundreds of thousands of Mexica farmers are busy in the fields, sowing the seeds of hope for the year. Meanwhile, thousands of alliance militias are carrying food, struggling to transport supplies to the north and south to supply the armies.

Following the grain transport teams along the way, one can see the starting point of the south-north supply routes, which is the magnificent Lake Capital City! Hundreds of canoes are continuously busy, transporting food and military supplies to the shore, and under the watch of samurais, handing them over to the militias for transport.

Lake Texcoco glistens like a silver mirror fallen to the ground, illuminating the world's prosperity. At the end where the lake waters connect, the large market of North City is under strict control! All the food, copper, and obsidian have been requisitioned by the alliance, with no allowance for leakage during the eastern expedition!

The eastern campaign, albeit seemingly easy, is truly a national war. And the vast Lake Capital City at this moment has only four thousand royal warriors stationed, primarily guarding the central palace and temple district.

"We must trust our god Huitzilopochtli! He is supreme and omnipotent! May he protect the kingdom, make the eastern campaign go smoothly, and destroy the alliance's old foes!"

Entering the palace district, the pious prayers of women echo from every noble mansion, accompanied by burning pine incense and divine smoke. For this eastern campaign, every city noble family has dispatched their warriors, with even fathers and sons fighting together, signifying great prosperity for the country!

"Praise the Chief Divine! God bless the alliance! The priests have been divining for days, and the front line is marked with great prosperity!"

A dozen lower-ranking priests held up wooden tablets, running out from the temple district. Their faces were full of joy, continually announcing the good news of the successful divination, comforting the hearts of the nobles and commoners.

In the temple district, in front of a magnificent and spacious mansion, two priests dressed in luxurious clothes were patiently waiting. One, slightly older, had graying eyebrows and hair, while the other was younger, with delicate features.

It was already afternoon, and by the alliance's custom, the esteemed elder priests had long gone home to rest, no longer busy. However, after waiting for a long time, a lower-ranking priest finally emerged from the mansion, responding coldly.

"Priests from Cholula! Respected Divine Descendants, Elder Priest Uguel has no time. Please go back!"

"Ah?! Why is there no time again!"

The young priest raised his eyebrows, wanting to step forward to argue. He was the son of an elder priest, and had never faced such coldness in the holy city of Cholula.

"Bang!"

Several temple warriors guarding the elder priest's mansion drew their war clubs in unison. With cold expressions, they pointed their clubs, about to urge forward.

"Wezi, step back! Wait, don't get physical!"

Elder Priest Queo raised an eyebrow, hurriedly reaching out to drag the young Priest Wezi back. Then, he reached into his robe, fumbled for a moment, pulled out a small turquoise, and skillfully took quick steps forward, giving it a swift shake.

"This priest..."

"Bring them all to me..."

The lower-ranking Priest Xipili raised his eyebrows but before he could speak, something smooth and warm was placed in his hand. He glanced down, immediately silencing himself and discreetly pocketed the superior quality turquoise.

"Oh mighty Chief Divine! These priests from Cholula are truly wealthy!..."

"Ahem, this priest."

Elder Priest Queo suppressed his annoyance, trying hard to smile as he asked.

"Why has Elder Priest Uguel been so busy recently? The old friends from the holy city of Cholula have visited three times, yet he hasn't found a moment to spare?"

"Well..."

Priest Xipili hesitated a bit, possibly faking hesitation.

"Ahem."

Elder Priest Queo didn't hesitate, reaching out his hand once more.

"Ah!"

Priest Xipili maintained a calm expression but a smile appeared on his face.

"Honored Elder from Cholula, you have no idea. Elder Uguel is indeed extremely busy recently! Though he's at home, he has absolutely no energy for a meeting with you."

"Hmm..."

Upon hearing this, Elder Priest Queo furrowed his brows. He reached into his robe again, asking quietly.

"I wonder what exactly is keeping Elder Uguel so occupied?"

"..."

Upon hearing this question, Priest Xipili's expression immediately turned solemn. His face stiffened as if caught in a door frame. He waved his hand again, directly instructing the warriors.

"Use the side of the war club that has no edge to drive them away!"

The incident happened suddenly, and Elder Priest Queo was still stunned when a war club struck him. He grimaced in pain, almost unable to breathe. This time, it was Priest Wezi who hurriedly helped the elder out. Once they moved away from the entrance, the temple warriors guarding the mansion stopped their chase.

Both had been hit a few times, wincing in pain as they exchanged looks.

"Elder Queo, what did you say just now? How did that lower-ranking priest suddenly turn hostile?"

The young Wezi was somewhat puzzled. He looked at the hurriedly departing Xipili, who seemed to be carried by the wind as he quickly stepped into the courtyard and disappeared.

"I was just asking what Elder Uguel was doing."

Elder Queo clenched his teeth, enduring the pain. He thought hard for a long time but couldn't figure out what taboo had been breached.

"Elder Queo, the other party doesn't want to meet. What should we do now? We've been preparing for so long..."

Wezi lowered his voice again, feeling a bit anxious. The two had been plotting for a long time, bearing extremely precious divine objects and preparing persuasive words, yet they couldn't even meet the person, making their efforts futile!

"...Now, the north and south strongholds of the Tlaxcalans have completely fallen... The holy city of Cholula can't afford to delay any longer! Otherwise, should we go find the High Priest?"

"Hmm? Wezi, you fool!"

Elder Queo widened his eyes and raised his hand for a slap on Wezi's face, leaving him stunned.

"Even if we do nothing, we can't go to the High Priest! That would be seeking death! We are supposed to..."

"...Yes, I was being thoughtless!"

Wezi pursed his lips and respectfully bowed his head to admit his mistake.

"...Then, what should we do now?"

"What to do..."

Elder Queo bit his lip, thought for a while, and finally made a decision.

"Since Uguel's path doesn't work, the only option left now is just one last person!"

"Huh? There's still one person."

Wezi was a bit surprised.

"Elder Queo, who is he?"

"Hehe, who is he?"

Elder Queo chuckled, a smile appearing at the corner of his mouth, and softly murmured.

"Someone who also seeks divine authority and desires it!..."

Inside the residence of Elder Priests, Xipili walked forward silently, head lowered. Along the way were precious flowers, fragrant redwood, and pathways paved with bricks and stones. In the houses along the road, exquisite stone and jade carvings, and glittering gold and silver items were displayed, extremely wealthy.

Xipili's expression remained unchanged, having long been accustomed to such sights. No matter how opulent and captivating, these were the wealth of great people, irrelevant to someone like him.

Quickly, the small character came before the great one, respectfully bowing while standing, smiling and waiting.

"Ah! These days are truly agonizing!..."

The slightly plump Uguel lay on a cotton blanket, with his priestly robes opened, his face frowned in distress.

Two beautiful maidens were gently fanning him with large palm leaves. On his left on the redwood board were exquisite desserts and dried fruits, while on his right in the jade furnace burned expensive divine smoke. After quite a while, Uguel took a deep breath, inhaling the relaxing divine smoke, and asked absentmindedly.

"Those two from Cholula, have they been sent away?"

"Honorable Elder Priest, they've sensibly left."

Xipili saluted respectfully. He quietly touched the turquoise within his sleeve, his expression unchanged.

"Hmm, it's good that they've gone, it's good! At this moment, I have no interest in caring about the fate of their Cholula!"

Uguel reached out, picked up a piece of dried fruit, tossed it into his mouth, tasted it, but found it sour and bitter.

"Bah! Bah bah! Bah bah bah!"

Xipili's eyebrows twitched, quickly lowering his head. Upon seeing the Elder Priest's expression, he knew the anger was imminent.

Sure enough, moments later, Uguel erupted in anger, pointing at the fruit dregs on the ground, angrily scolding.

"You sour and bitter fruit dregs, without any taste, who would be foolish enough to eat you! ... Hmm?"

While scolding, Uguel suddenly paused his speech. His face suddenly showed joy, couldn't help but squat down, picking up the fruit dregs in his hand, caressing them carefully.

"No, no! I wronged you! Fruit dregs are good, fruit dregs are good! Since no one eats fruit dregs, they have time to learn! ... Haha!"

Upon hearing these words, Xipili's eyelids twitched violently, wishing to cover his ears and become truly deaf. At this moment, he was devoutly praying aloud in his heart.

"...Scorching sun, may you depart soon! Immortal sunset, please don't delay any longer! ... Chief Divine bless!"

Chapter 903: The Pulp is Not Sweet, The Rotten Wood Does Not Last

May marks the beginning of the rainy season, with unpredictable weather, elusive like the Divine Spirits. Moments ago, the sky was shrouded in clouds, and now it's suddenly clear and bright. The westward sun falls into view, making one's heart dizzy.

"Haha! Sweet fruits are eaten by people and birds, they won't have a good end eventually!... Sour fruits, birds don't eat. Even if they are made into dried fruits, no one wants to eat them. Even if they eat them, they will vomit them out, turning into sour and bitter fruit dregs!... These fruit dregs are good, I would rather be a fruit dreg!"

Uguel's robe was open, sweating profusely, sometimes angry, sometimes happy. He muttered incessantly, almost like a madman, not at all resembling the Elder Priest. Fortunately, although his emotions fluctuated, he kept his mouth secured, not letting out a word he shouldn't.

After a while, the slightly plump Elder Priest became breathless and collapsed onto the cotton blanket. After venting for a while, the pressure inside his heart finally eased, no longer pressing down like dark clouds. Afterward, he waved a hand, and a maid brought a warm cup of honey tea, delicately touching it and carefully feeding it to the Elder's mouth. The sweet taste lingered in his mouth, slowly sliding down his throat, carrying with it the floral tea's aroma, refreshing his spirit.

"Phew! The day is still young, there's no rush yet."

Uguel shook his head contentedly, gazing at the sky. The sun was nearing twilight, casting a magnificent sunset, which pulled out a majestic silhouette under the Great Temple. Fire red intertwined with deep hues across the sky and earth, stunningly beautiful, resembling an eternal stream of light.

Such a scene, in the eyes of the Elder Priest, left him in trance. Upon closer inspection, it felt like a dangerous omen. He murmured to himself, momentarily filled with grief.

"So beautiful! Like a burning flame, yet like an abyss! I stand between this celestial fire and earthly abyss; should I take a wrong step..."

"Ahem! Respected Elder Priest, the envoy from Cholula brought some valuable gifts this time during their visit."

Xipili lightly coughed, hurriedly speaking up. Letting the Elder Priest continue like this, who knows what words might burst forth. He hoped to safely endure a few years to earn his credentials, before escaping the Capital City's vortex and being posted outside, becoming a carefree regional High Priest.

"Elder, how should these precious gifts be handled?"

"Hmm? Precious gifts?"

Uguel's eyes brightened instantly, turning over to sit up. Hearing this, he was no longer tired.

"What are they?"

"An ancient jade artifact from the Toltec people, several sky-blue top-grade turquoises, and two bags of specially formulated top-grade Divine Smoke."

"Ah! Ancient jade artifact, top-grade turquoise, top-grade Divine Smoke!"

Uguel's eyes widened, face glowing with delight. These were things he fancied and couldn't be bought in the market.

"Phew! The Cholula Priests are indeed generous. This is just the doorstep gift, if they truly require my assistance, wouldn't it be..."

Thinking of this, Uguel felt a bit eager. Hesitant, he pondered whether he should meet them or not.

What could the envoy from Cholula want? Likely seeing the Eastern expedition unfolding, with the Alliance at their doorsteps, hoping to plead for Cholula's case. As the Elder Priest managing mundane affairs, couldn't he casually discuss a couple of words within the High Priesthood? Regardless if the matter would succeed, accepting the things was just accepting them, without returning.

"Hmm... Where are the Cholula Priests residing?"

"Ah? Respected Elder Priest, they reside in the southeastern corner of the palace area, an ordinary noble residence."

"Why live so far?"

Uguel raised his eyebrows. He stood up, took a couple of steps, and began to instruct.

"Send an envoy, let them..."

Suddenly, Uguel's feet halted, his open mouth tightly shut again. He lowered his head, slightly lifting a foot, staring at the fruit dregs crushed underfoot... The Elder Priest stood still in this posture, pondering silently. After a while, he took a deep breath and let it out gently.

"Fruit dregs, fruit dregs, bitter and sour define fruit dregs, unnoticed defines fruit dregs! At such a crucial moment, why protrude like a ripe fruit, stirring unnecessary attention?... No, I absolutely cannot get involved in Cholula's matters. For trivial wealth, it is not worth it!..."

Xipili waited for a while, observing Uguel as if struck by a Paralysis Technique. His mouth twitched as he cautiously inquired.

"Elder, should we send an envoy to request the Cholula Priests to meet?"

"No! Do not meet! Do not bother with them, if they return, drive them away entirely!"

Uguel paced two steps, shook his head, then turned and lay back on the carpet.

"Remember, store their gifts all in the warehouse. Secure them well, and do not report back to me!"

"...At your command, Elder."

"Phew!"

Uguel took a puff of Divine Smoke, exhaling a long stream of smoke. He knew his ears were soft, eyes shallow, if he truly met them, and they spoke some touching rhetoric, showed some hereditary Divine Objects, or proposed some minor request... So, it's better not to meet.

"The top priority now is still... Alas! Once this is over, I'll simply jump out of the Capital City, go to the General Parish, and be counted as a Supreme High Priest then!"

Uguel's thoughts continuously churned, contemplating for a while, then shook his head. At his level, suitable places in the region were indeed scarce.

The Mexica General Parish, directly governed by the High Priesthood, needs no mention. The Tarasco General Parish is administered by Xiulote, while the Otomi General Parish remains Olte's domain. Though Olte is dying, he has been holding on without death. The Vastec General Parish, though vacant, holds merely an empty title, with only a small city-state of Metztitlan. And regarding this Eastern expedition, once Tlaxcala's Four States are won, there would undoubtedly be a new General Parish to be established...

"Hmm? Then resolving the matter of the Holy City Cholula is inevitable! Annoying, truly annoying!"

Thinking it through, Uguel couldn't find a suitable place. He chuckled self-deprecatingly and sighed.

"Alas! Power, oh power, upon reaching this position, where would I find vacant power? I might as well be a rotten wood, displayed in the Capital City's High Priesthood!..."

The Elder Priest raised his head, watching the gradually dimming sunset. Darkness was about to descend, could rotten wood become immortal? Unknowingly, he recalled figures he hadn't thought of for ages, along with a silent head.

"Rotten wood cannot be carved, poses no threat... Rotten wood still has time, may as well enjoy carefree days!..."

A long pile of memories surged within, causing Uguel's gaze to scatter. He pondered for a while, suddenly becoming complacent, regaining his strength.

"The time is about right! Xipili, prepare some clean towels, bring a small fan... Follow me!"

"Ah? Elder, still going..."

"Yes. Frequent visits, serving well, can't go wrong. As for Priesthood's duties, how could they compare to this importance!"

"Obey you."

Quickly, the two finished preparations. Uguel changed into a plain long robe, Xipili carried a small bamboo basket. Inside the basket were servants' tools, for whom it was prepared, unknown.

The sun slowly set, shadows covered the earth. The final glow shone upon the two walking, until they vanished into the towering dark palace.

And not far within the engulfing darkness, in another ancient Priest Mansion. Candlelight flickered on the walls, Divine Spirits danced on the murals. Beneath the candlelight and the murals, two sat facing each other, both adorned with Feather Crowns, silently watching one another.

The one seated higher wore Chinese Clothes, his face like jade, dignified and graceful. The one below donned a Black Robe, hair white, showing a worn expression.

After a while, the elder below sighed gently, calmly questioning.

"Acap Elder Priest, are you truly unable to mediate for us within the High Priesthood?"

Chapter 904: Tasting Fragrance and Giving Guidance

The great hall is wide, with curtains fluttering. Expensive candlelight burns in the corners, and the ancient murals tell tales of times long past. Beneath the murals at the upper end is a dark-colored ancient clay incense burner, already filled with spices.

Acap bowed his eyes and slowly stood up. He approached the incense burner and carefully drew fire from a rough clay fire jar to light the incense. Soon, a gentle and delicate fragrance rose from the incense burner, akin to the sweet smell of rosewood. Upon closer inspection, there seemed to be something hidden within this gentle aroma.

The young Elder Priest raised his head and gazed at the divine mural above the incense burner amidst the gentle fragrance. This mural was quite old; at its center stood the Chief Divine holding a javelin, while below were the led Mexica people. At the forefront of the people was an elderly, white-haired priest holding a Yellow Gemstone Scepter.

"Chief Divine Faction... Chief Priest..."

Acap closed his eyes, savoring the fragrance that blended into his lungs, while a multitude of thoughts rushed forth like a flood. This was his residence, and it once was the Chief Priest's residence too. Everything in the house was etched with the glory and power that once belonged to the Chief Divine Faction.

"Seven years have passed..."

The young priest murmured softly. He had lived in the Chief Priest's residence for seven years. These murals were all too familiar to his eyes. He was familiar with every detail of the paintings, every meaning

of the characters; he often admired them alone, indulging in his thoughts... What changes would seven years bring to a person?

The incense rose, and it was time to savor the fragrance. The elder sitting below also stopped talking. He inhaled the aroma gently, held his breath, and carefully experienced and tasted it, with a smile gradually appearing on his face. When he opened his eyes again, the young priest, with a jade-like complexion, was already sitting before him.

"Queo, my friend, how is this fragrance?"

Acap smiled slightly and asked calmly.

"Acap, my friend."

Elder Queo gave him a deep look, with a smile at the corner of his mouth.

Five years ago, during the Alliance's westward expedition, Acap served as an envoy of the High Priesthood to the Holy City of Cholula. There, the two met and became friends. In the art of fragrance savoring, Queo was considered Acap's mentor.

"This fragrance is considered gentle and beautiful, lightly lingering, initially smelling like well-processed agarwood. This type of incense is affordable and most friendly to the commoners... But if you taste it carefully, seeking even fainter scents within the light aroma, you then realize..."

"Oh? Realize what?"

The smile on Acap's face gradually spread, like meeting a true confidant.

"...The innermost ingredient is ground sandalwood, a premium wood, the king among trees."

Elder Queo finished with a smile. Then his smile vanished, and he gazed sharply into Acap's eyes.

"Friend, your intentions cannot be hidden from me!"

"Queo, you truly are a master of the art of fragrance. Back in those days, my initial inspiration was at the Holy City of Cholula, together with all the elders, sharing the world's marvels."

Acap looked toward the west, his demeanor becoming serene. Then, he reached out to pour Queo a cup of flower tea.

"How is the situation in Cholula now?"

"The situation in the Holy City... You in the High Priesthood can see the frontline intelligence, certainly clearer than I do."

Elder Queo looked serious and sighed.

"His Highness Xiulote raids around Cholula, the City-State army appears outside the Holy City. The urgency of the situation can no longer be delayed... Acap, the fate of the Holy City is in your hands!"

"Queo, though I am an Elder Priest, my position is humble. In the High Priesthood, I have little to say."

Acap smiled bitterly, shaking his head.

"Now, in the High Priesthood, it's the High Priest who decides, determining the alliance's church affairs! The other Elder Priests are no more than wooden statues, carrying out ordinary duties. And as for the High Priest's attitude toward Cholula City, you are not unaware. Before the eastward expedition, when I went to Cholula, the harsh conditions proposed were personally set by the High Priest!"

"...Honor the Mexica King, surrender land and population; honor the High Priesthood, with the War God as the Chief Divine; Cholula City demoted to General Parish, Priest Leader Petl as the Fifth Level Supreme High Priest, other elders demoted to Fourth Level Chief Priests..."

Queo recited in a low voice. These terms had been debated between him and Acap numerous times, deeply etched in his memory and resurfacing from time to time.

"...Ah! These conditions are not truly harsh. It was just that Cholula was then encircled within the Four States Alliance by the Tlaxcalans, making it difficult to lean towards the Mexica Alliance..."

"Queo, you don't need to explain to me."

Acap raised his hand. He spoke with profound meaning, quoting a saying from the Alliance, seemingly hinting at something.

"...There is only one fork leading to the Holy Mountain Temple. If you miss it, it's gone. To reach there again, you have to take a detour."

Upon hearing this, Queo lowered his eyes and sighed. After a while, he pursed his lips and asked in a low voice.

"In the High Priesthood, there are twelve elders. Isn't there anyone who can stand up to oppose the High Priest?"

"Haha. The High Priest is determined to reform, caring not about immediate safety, nor his reputation afterward. Dozens of Great Nobility in Tlacopan were executed without hesitation. Up to twenty thousand were uprooted, deemed as rebels, and exiled to the Kingdom of the Lake!"

Acap chuckled briefly, raising his clay cup to sip the flower tea.

"Under such circumstances, who dares to stand up? Who would be willing to stand up? Moreover..."

"Moreover, what?"

Elder Queo's expression was solemn as he listened to the Mexica Alliance's top-secret inner circle situation.

"Above the High Priest is him, and below the High Priest is His Highness Xiulote."

Acap extends his finger, pointing above, then below.

"A sun of the past, a sun of the future... Especially at this juncture, no one will speak for you! ...If you don't believe me, go find other elder priests; it's the same."

"Alas!"

Elder Queo helplessly sighs again.

"Acap, to be frank with you. Before coming here, I tried to find Elder Priest Uguel... But alas, I couldn't even see his face!"

"Elder Uguel... He's indeed been very busy recently. Even for the matters of the High Priesthood, he hasn't had time to attend to them..."

At this, Acap's eyes flicker, nodding meaningfully with a touch of envy.

"To be near the sun and not be dazzled by its light... that's truly rare indeed..."

"Hmm? The sun, dazzling?"

Elder Queo feels somewhat puzzled. His eyebrows rise, yet the other's enigmatic nature hasn't changed a bit. However, with the situation in the Holy City so pressing, he doesn't have the heart to deal with roundabout matters.

"Acap, my friend. The elder priests of Cholula have always enjoyed conversing with you, they hold you in high regard!"

Elder Queo straightens up and speaks candidly.

"Without butterflies, how can flowers bloom?... If the Holy City could join the Alliance, then all the elder priests could become your allies! With your foundation in the Alliance, if you wish to advance further... you would indeed need the assistance of Cholula City!"

Hearing such words, Acap purses his lips, his eyes flickering, not speaking for a long time. The incense in the burner gradually burns out, and the scent of sandalwood becomes even more pronounced. Until the last wisp of blue smoke disperses, Acap finally nods slowly, responding in a deep voice.

"My friend, you speak correctly... Given that, I have some advice for you and for all the elders of Cholula City."

"I am eager to hear!"

Upon hearing this, Elder Queo's spirit is greatly refreshed. He straightens up, gazing at the other's handsome face.

"Friend, Cholula is the Eastern Holy City, entrusted with the hopes of the world. Without an immense reason, the Alliance would not attack or destroy Cholula... And the marshal of the Southern Army is His Highness Xiulote. I grew up with him and know his character... As long as Cholula lowers its stance respectfully, he will naturally be moved with sympathy."

"Hmm? Lowering one's stance, speaking of ordinary people?"

Elder Queo pauses, thinking for a while, and silently notes it down.

"The real path for Cholula lies in watching King Aweit on the northern road! His ambition reaches the world; he seeks not only to pacify all factions but also to subdue all city-states, sitting high on the Throne of the Gods..."

Acap muses for a moment, not saying much. In reality, his foothold in the High Priesthood was heavily reliant on the King's support.

"Hmm..."

Elder Queo nods. The northern road has the priest leader, Petl, personally sent. He has enough confidence in this old fox.

"Cholula Holy City holds a special status; the King would not overlook it. Of course, the city's previous offenses will inevitably be punished. The terms of submission will also become harsher. But I urge all the elder priests not to act hastily and oppose the King!... The grand momentum of the Alliance has formed, growing like a Divine Wood. Yield and follow, endure through this period, and integrate into the Alliance..."

At this, Aweit extends his hand, pointing to the priest in the divine mural guiding the masses.

"...By then, you and I could be part of the painting!"

"Indeed! Indeed!"

Elder Queo nods heavily. He glances at Acap with a smile. Yet, after a moment, he becomes somewhat uneasy.

"Acap, then should I do nothing at the Lake Capital City? I have brought some divine objects... some elders of the royal family..."

"Divine objects?!"

Hearing this, Acap's eye twitches. Cholula City has been passed down for five hundred years, holding quite a few treasures. He suppresses the desire within him, shaking his head firmly.

"Do nothing. In my opinion, you shouldn't have come to the Capital City at all! In this perilous eyewall of the storm, at this critical juncture, at this sensitive moment!..."

"Hmm? Perilous, critical, sensitive?"

Elder Queo is shocked upon hearing this. He suddenly stretches out his arm, grabbing Acap's hand.

"What great event is going to happen in the Lake Capital City?!"

"...What kind of great event?... A heaven-like event."

Acap remains silent for a while before speaking in a low voice, almost inaudible.

"The immortal sun is about to set..."

"Ah!!!"

A sharp exclamation echoes from the ancient hall, even bringing the sound of wind. The flame in the corner flickers and then extinguishes, completely burning out.

Chapter 905: Elder in the Dark Sea

The night is deep, darkness enveloping everything like an ocean descending silently from the sky. Flickering bonfires illuminate the Lake Capital City, resembling stars scattered across the vast sea, shedding fleeting light. And the grandest island within this dark sea is naturally the towering Great Temple and the Chief Palace hidden behind.

At the top of the Chief Palace is the ancient and timeless hall, etched with the traces of the past. Fish oil candles burn among the divine murals. The faint fragrance from the incense burner wafts in, like secret currents of the sea, or the gentle caress of jellyfish. In this quiet solace, a frail, white-haired elder finally opens his eyes with difficulty from a slumber as deep as the ocean.

"It's dark..."

The elder gazes at the dome of the sky, his eyes filled with an unbreakable chaos and murkiness. He stares for a long while, gradually reclaiming a bit of clarity, making his gaze deep once more.

"It's dark again..."

Cevali, the shadow guard commander, purses his lips, standing like a statue behind the elder's bed. In his arms, he holds a clay pot he seems never to have put down, and at his waist is a sharp bronze axe. A few steps across from him stands Uguel, the tearful Elder Priest holding a towel.

The elder slowly opens his mouth, tasting the honey water inside. He softly exhales, weakly asking.

"Cevali, have I slept for one day or two days?"

"Elder, you have slept for one day."

Cevali bends down carefully, helping the elder sit up against the thick cotton backrest.

"Earlier, Elder Uguel fed you some honey water with added salt and treated avocado."

"Hmm."

The elder nods calmly. Then, he turns his head, gazing at the bonfires across the Capital City outside the windows. Lost in thought for a while, he finally looks at Uguel.

"Uguel, you have been thoughtful."

"Elder... boohoo!"

Uguel hangs his head, his voice quivering, tears continually flowing from his eyes. His face shows genuine grief as well as fear and confusion about the future.

Since last December when the King vowed to march eastward, the elder had been unable to leave his bed, incapable of moving. By March this year, with the expansion of the Great Temple completed, the elder fulfilled a long-held wish but often fell into a coma. He spent much more time asleep than awake during these days. By late May, the elder was already too weak to eat, relying on carefully prepared honey water to survive.

Seeing such a weakened elder and such a dim sun, even though Uguel had always been fearful, he could hardly conceal his inner sadness! After all, since his youth, he had followed the elder's orders, for nearly forty years now! During these forty years, he had grown from a young apprentice to the Elder Priest of the Capital City, while the immortal elder remained high above, embodying all his reverence and respect, and being his accustomed support...

"Don't cry... I'm not dead yet."

Watching the child-like crying Uguel, a faint smile flickers across the elder's face. Then, his expression turns serene once more as he looks out the window. Facing the hall is the completed, more imposing Great Temple.

"Uguel, how long has it been since the expansion of the Great Temple was completed?"

"Six... sixty-three days."

Uguel lifts his head to answer with tearful eyes. Ever since the Great Temple was completed, the elder often asked this question, inquiring about the passage of time. It seemed an important moment deeply etched in the elder's heart and marked in his life.

"Sixty-three days then..."

The elder gazes out the window for a while, the Great Temple looming in the darkness, outlining a faint silhouette. It resembles the Snake Mountain where the War God resides, or a stairway to the Divine Kingdom, gathering endless mortal beliefs. After a while, the elder slowly, softly lowers his eyes.

Uguel wipes his tears away with a towel and places it back into the bamboo basket, changing to a new one. He brought quite a few towels, mainly to serve the elder. Then, he looks at the elder, who is sunk in contemplation, dazedly waiting for two quarters, only to realize in surprise...

"Huh?"

"Shh, let the elder sleep a bit more."

Cevali extends his hand, asking the Elder Priest to wait patiently.

"Uh... alright."

Then, Uguel sits cross-legged on the ground, while Cevali stands like a sculpture, passing two hours in a blink. Until the night deepens, nearly dawn's arrival in darkness, the elder faintly awakens once more, opening his eyes again.

"Uguel..."

Uguel, head bowed, is already soundly asleep, even drooling. The elder's weak call couldn't wake him.

The elder doesn't call again. He merely calmly observes that slightly plump face, his eyes slightly flickering, unsure of what he's contemplating.

"Hmm?"

A night breeze blows in, brushing past everyone's clothes, slightly cold. Uguel suddenly shivers, opens his eyes abruptly, and sees the elder's expressionless face and deep-sea-like eyes!

"Ah! Ah!... Elder, you... you're awake!"

Uguel panics, scrambling to rise from the ground, standing by the bed, then awkwardly wiping away his drool.

The elder's mouth slightly curled up. He waited patiently until Uguel finished tidying up before asking indifferently.

"How is the situation on the eastern campaign?"

"Reporting to the elder, everything on the eastern campaign is going smoothly!"

Uguel's heart was pounding. He answered nervously and in a panic.

"The two armies have conquered key strongholds and penetrated deep into Tlaxcala! King Aweit has taken the Northern Divine Pass and Feathered Serpent City, and is about to besiege the three Snake Cities. His Highness Xiulote has conquered Water Valley City and Mountain Peak City in the south, and is currently handling the Holy City..."

"The Holy City?"

"Yes, the Holy City of Cholula. They even sent an envoy to give me gifts... uh!"

At this point, Uguel's words halted, and his face suddenly turned pale.

"Ah... but... that... I didn't accept! I really didn't accept this time!"

The elder remained expressionless, deeply contemplating while looking at Uguel. He did not ask further, nor did he pay attention to the frantic explanations of the Elder Priest, instead, he pondered silently.

"Holy City of Cholula... Holy City, Cholula!..."

The gentle ripples arose in the elder's heart, carrying with it the icy coldness of the deep sea and the hardness of seabed rocks. Then, a turbulent current surged from the abyss of the sea, silently rushing and swirling, sweeping all the lively fishes in the sea into the bottomless darkness!

"Hmm..."

Only after a long time did the elder lower his gaze and calmly speak to Uguel.

"Uguel, you may leave now. Starting tomorrow, don't return anymore."

"Ah? Elder! You... you... boohoo!"

Uguel's heart and mind were utterly shaken, a bone-chilling coldness instantly surged into his heart. He abruptly fell at the bedside, clutching the elder's old and frail arm, repenting with deep sorrow and regret.

"Boohoo! Elder, I'll never dare to accept bribes again... I really didn't take any!..."

The elder's mouth once again curled into a curve. He looked at Uguel without any emotion for a moment, then slowly said with a smile.

"Go back! Starting tomorrow, go to the High Priesthood, and manage various clerical matters properly... If there's anything you don't understand, ask the other elders to clarify... You still have time to learn well."

"Boohoo... Ah?..."

Hearing this, Uguel's crying suddenly paused. He looked up hesitantly at the elder.

"I... still have time?"

"Yes."

The elder slowly extended his hand, gently ruffling Uguel's head. That hand was old and gray, devoid of any strength, yet seemed to carry the weight of a thousand pounds.

"Go back. We can... meet again."

"Ah?!..."

Under the successive shocks, Uguel's brain was blank. Led by the shadow Cevali, he dazedly rose to his feet and walked out of the silent and profound hall. A fresh breeze blew from outside, and he felt like a plump dolphin leaping out of the deep sea.

"This is..."

"Elder Uguel. Please keep today's events secret."

The shadow Cevali slightly bowed and saluted Uguel. Then, he turned and returned, leaving the slightly chubby Elder Priest alone in the wind.

The long wind stirred the drapery of the Divine, like a dance at the gods' curtain call, revealing the Chief Divine's vague visage. The shadow treaded the heavy darkness, returning to the elder's side, like a long snake guarding the Chief Divine, quiet and silent.

"...Dawn is coming..."

At an unnoticeable moment, the elder lay back on the bed. He stared at the expansive ceiling, smelling the faintly sweet fragrance. An uncontrollable drowsiness overwhelmed his heart once again, carrying the scent of death. Before falling asleep, he left a final, deep, and emotionless remark.

"Invite the High Priest this evening."

"As you command, elder."

The shadow responded quietly. He faded into the background behind the elder, watching as the fragile old man slowly closed his eyes. The candles were then extinguished, and the deep dark sea surged once more, engulfing the last vestige of life in the darkness before dawn~

Chapter 906: The Family's Divine Tree

The sun rises and sets, and in the blink of an eye, it is dusk again. It's a clear evening, the glow of the sunset coming from the western horizon. It dyes the clouds as if set on fire, illuminating the majestic Great Temple, and radiating brilliance across the sky.

At a glance, the sky is crimson, the sunset is golden-red, and the top of the Great Temple is blood red. This red kingdom reflects in the eyes, like the arrival of the Divine Kingdom!

The High Priest Xutel wore black ceremonial dress, a feathered stone crown on his head, an obsidian necklace around his neck, jaguar skin boots on his feet, and an emerald Divine Staff in his hand. His expression was solemn, he silently gazed at the sunset on the horizon for a while, then step by step, walked down the towering Great Pyramid.

After the Great Pyramid was expanded, it reached nearly seventy meters high, with six layers inside and out. The new sixth layer was built with green bricks, reinforced with mortar, and the foundation was additionally expanded. It took five years just to build this extra layer, consuming more than ten thousand captives in total.

The sunset shone on his face, bringing a departing warmth. The High Priest meticulously, step by step, slowly descended the Divine Platform. Then he slightly turned, still walking with steady steps, into the not far away Chief Palace. The fiery sunset disappeared behind him, enveloping black shadows in his front. He passed through the corridor of shadows, ascended the rising stairs, walked through the Divine corridor, and finally arrived at the topmost Chief Great Hall.

The Elder was clad in ceremonial robes, holding a Divine Staff, sitting quietly on the cold stone seat. He calmly watched the doorway, the sunset appearing once again behind him, dyeing his silver hair with a faint blush.

The High Priest paused slightly, startled in his heart. It had been a long time since he had seen the Elder rise. An inexplicable foreboding rose in his heart, turning into a shadow of inauspiciousness. However, his expression did not change, he merely lowered his head, knelt on one knee, and saluted the Elder.

"Honorable Elder, descendant of Acamapichtli, Xutel, greets you!"

"Hmm, Xutel, there is no need for such formality."

The Elder's face remained expressionless, nodding lightly. He slightly raised his hand and said calmly in a low voice.

"Come, sit by my side."

Upon hearing this, the High Priest raised his eyebrows. He stood up, paused for a few moments, and then slowly walked forward. Shadow Cevali had already moved a stone chair to the opposite side of the Elder. The High Priest nodded slightly, then sat down gracefully. The two then sat facing each other, no more than two steps apart.

"Since the eastern campaign, how are the logistics on the northern and southern routes?"

"Honorable Elder, the northern and southern logistics routes are still sustainable."

The High Priest pondered slightly, then answered in a deep voice.

"Over a hundred thousand troops on the eastern campaign, the logistics mainly come from the Capital City. Three years after the western campaign ended, there was no flooding in the Alliance, with continuous tributes from various states, and the warehouses slightly stocked... The northern logistics route totals over two hundred miles, with a loss rate of one or two out of ten when reaching the frontline. The southern logistics route totals four hundred miles, with a loss rate of two or three out of ten when reaching the frontline. The Alliance's city-states all support the effort, with grain supplies from the Vastec Alliance and the Kingdom of the Lake... Holding on until the October harvest should not be a problem."

"And after the harvest?"

"After the harvest, we will need to reduce the army, withdraw half of the corps, lessening the burden on the frontline. As for whether the southern vassals will pay tribute after this year's harvest, it is still unknown."

"Hmm."

The Elder slightly nodded, pondering for a moment. Then he continued to ask.

"Since the eastern campaign began, how is the situation in the Lake Capital City?"

"Honorable Elder, the Lake Capital City is as stable as the mountains."

The High Priest appeared confident, responding calmly.

"The Capital City has four thousand Royal Warriors, plus two thousand Temple Guards and a thousand Elder Guards. The Capital City's nobility, priests, and commoners all support the eastern campaign, praying day and night without negligence. After the completion of the Great Temple, there is no need for external timber and stone supplies. The High Priesthood has issued religious laws, controlling the trading groups in the Capital City, capturing dozens of spies, and confiscating the merchants' properties... Since the eastern campaign began, everything on the northern and southern routes has gone smoothly, and the city is as stable as the mountains."

"Hmm. Very good!"

The Elder rarely smiled. He extended his withered old hand, gently patting the High Priest's shoulder. Then he lowered his eyes, saying without any emotional fluctuation.

"Xutel, last night, I suddenly had a dream."

"Elder?"

The High Priest was startled, looking at the Elder's face, but all he saw was a placid surface.

"... What kind of dream?"

The Mexica people highly value omens, believing that they can reveal destiny. And dreams are the most common form of omen.

"... It was a very dark night, I heard my brother's call, and walked into a very deep forest."

The Elder's expression was calm, carrying a hint of nostalgia, as he described his dream. A smile gradually appeared on his lips.

"In the depths of the forest, there was a towering Divine Tree. I came beneath the Divine Tree, looking up in the direction of the voice... and saw my brother's body standing on the high branches. He was smiling, calling to me."

The Elder's brother... the predecessor monarch Montezuma...

The High Priest pursed his lips, patiently listening. The shadow in his heart was gradually growing, devouring the light of life.

"He said... 'Trakel Er, Trakel Er!'"

The Elder's full name was Trakel Er. And 'Telelel' was his nickname. Since the predecessor monarch Montezuma's death, this name had never been called again.

At this moment, the smile on the Elder's face was more pronounced, even somewhat strange. His eyes appeared a bit cloudy, his expression somewhat dazed, like an aged child softly whispering his nickname. A burst of inexplicable warmth surged in his heart. And such an emotion, he had not felt for many years.

Chapter 907: The Family's Divine Tree_2

"...I was surprised, looking at my brother. He smiled at me and said, 'Trakel Er, come up quickly! I've been waiting for you on this tree for twenty years now! They're all waiting for you!...'

So, I lifted my head and looked carefully up the tree..."

Speaking of this, the elder lowered his head, squinted his eyes, as if recalling an extremely special and profound scene. The main hall was silent, even the wind stopped. After a long while, the elder raised his head, smiling gently and kindly.

"Little Xutel, guess what I saw?"

"..."

The High Priest pursed his lips, remaining silent. His expression became weathered, and his gaze dimmed. After a while, he finally replied in a low voice.

"You saw the bodies of the past predecessor monarchs, all smiling at you from the tree."

"Oh?"

Surprise appeared on the elder's face. He nodded slowly, smiling as he asked.

"Little Xutel, how did you know?"

"Respected Elder, I've had the same dream."

The High Priest took off his Feather Crown, bowed slightly, revealing the same silvery hair.

"In the priestly lineage it is said, 'The vivid bodies of the spirits stand on the family's high Divine Tree, smiling at the new arrivals... This is a death omen!' "

"Indeed, a death omen... our shared omen..."

The elder nodded, his expression unchanged, continuing with a gentle smile.

"...That Divine Tree has many branches, divided into multiple layers, each layer with people standing. There are stairs on the tree, I reached the first layer, and saw Tizoc with his throat pierced. He greeted me with a salute, calling 'Grandfather!'..."

"...Next was Asayacatl, who died of illness, lowered his head and also called 'Grandfather!'..."

Asayacatl was the elder brother of Tizoc and Aweit, the third predecessor monarch of the Mexica Alliance.

"...I said nothing and continued upward to the second layer. First, there was your father, Xitlal, killed in battle. He asked me, 'Brother, is little Xutel well?'"

At this point, the elder's eyes deepened, his demeanor returned to calm. He gazed at High Priest Xutel, who gazed back. Then, the elder seemingly transformed, gently repeated.

"Little Xutel, are you well?"

The High Priest remained silent for a moment, bowed his head, and responded calmly.

"...Father, I'll be there soon."

"...Hmm, good... In front of Xitlal was Texosoxomoc, who also died in battle. Seeing me, he smiled slightly and asked, 'Cousin, is my little son, Aweit, well? His brothers are all waiting here for him.'..."

I smiled and told him, 'Aweit is very well. He's an outstanding child. But it will be a long time before he comes over.'..."

Texosoxomoc was Aweit's father, an early general of the alliance. He was the cousin of Montezuma and the elder, but married Montezuma's eldest daughter, Princess Atototztli.

"Beside Texosoxomoc was little Atototztli. She held a dagger of Obsidian, still as valiant. Further ahead was my brother, Chimalpopoca, who was assassinated. I greeted him, and he greeted back..."

Chimalpopoca was the third predecessor monarch of the Lake Capital City, the elder's brother. He died at the age of 29, killed in assassination.

"I continued forward and saw an empty spot, then I saw my brother, Montezuma. He was joyous, gazing at me, extending his hand and pulling my arm... He said, 'Come, Trakel Er, stand by my side!'

The elder's expression became a little distracted. Everything in the dream was so real, so tangible, leading to a deep immersion. Darkness surged like tides, seemingly ready to engulf someone... The elder bit his lip hard, feeling a slight pain, breaking free from the whirlpool of the dream. He breathed for a while, speeding up his speech, and continued to narrate.

"... My brother extended his hand to me, but I shook my head in refusal. I said 'Wait a little longer, there's something I haven't done yet... Moreover, I've lived longer, done more, I should stand in front of you!'"

"My brother smiled, shook his head, then nodded. He released his hand, pointed to the layer above, smiled and said 'Alright then, continue upward, and meet uncle, father, and grandfather!'

"So, I continued upward to the third layer, first seeing uncle Itzcoatl. He held a Scepter, still as composed. We exchanged greetings... I remember, when he died of illness, I was forty-four."

Itzcoatl was the fourth predecessor monarch of the Lake Capital City and the first Great Tlatoani of the Three States alliance. He, along with Montezuma and Trakel Er, established the Mexica Three States Alliance.

"Further ahead was my father, Huitzilíhuitl. Holding the feather of a Hummingbird, his face carried a faint smile. Did he die of illness or was he poisoned by the Tepanec people? There's still no answer. I only know he died when I was twenty."

Huitzilíhuitl was the second predecessor monarch of the Lake Capital City. During his reign, Tloquiditlan submitted to the Teopanek Alliance as a vassal city-state, yet its power was rapidly growing.

"I continued upward, reaching the last layer, where I saw my grandfather, Acamapichtli, whom I never met. I couldn't see his face, nor hear his voice, only a wooden drawing depicting a tree. But I knew he was our common ancestor, the origin of the Mexican Royal Family, and the initial source of the family's Divine Tree!"

Acamapichtli was the first predecessor monarch of the Lake Capital City, founder of Tloquiditlan. He established the city-state and built the innermost layer of the six-layer Great Temple. From then on, the War God Huitzilopochtli entered the Temple, becoming the guardian god of the Mexica people.

The lengthy story finally reached its end, the grand hall returned to silence, with not a sound to be heard.

The elder closed his eyes, breathing slightly to recover consumed energy and calming fluctuating emotions. The High Priest watched silently, his thoughts drifting, pondering unknown matters. The Divine Tree of the Mexican Royal Family lay hidden in their bloodlines.

Time gradually passed, the sunset sank into the mountains. The last rays of light slowly vanished from the horizon. The elder sensed the change in daylight, finally opened his eyes, looking towards the High Priest who equally gazed back.

"Xutel, have you heard the call of the Divine Tree?"

"Elder, I have."

The High Priest's expression was solemn, nodding composedly. His heart was completely shrouded by black shadows, calmly welcoming fate.

"Hmm, very well!"

Looking at the calm High Priest, the elder's face revealed a contented and kindly smile. He began to speak slowly, warmly, word by word.

"Then good, my child... Could you help me, by going to the family's Divine Tree first and saying a few words?... I'll be there soon."

The elder's words fell lightly, without a hint of emotion. The sunset finally completely hidden, taking away the last spark of vitality. And deep darkness surged from the horizon, like an endless dark sea, completely engulfing the main hall!

Chapter 908: The Pact of Death

Darkness extends in the grand hall, bringing a silence akin to death. Shadows creep over the heart and fall upon the face, rendering it hazy. Only a pair of deep, aged eyes remain, meeting in silence.

"Clang, clang..."

Soon, two Elder Guards entered with short weapons. They took out firestones and lit the candles beneath the fresco, bowed respectfully, and silently retreated. The candlelight illuminated their bodies, casting long, profound shadows over the two white-haired elders. The true shadow, Cevali, stood beside them, holding a pottery jar in one hand and pressing down a Bronze Axe with the other.

Silence spread and quietness was soundless. The elder lowered his gaze, his expression unchanging, patiently waiting. There was no killing intent on his face, nor was there any urgency. He simply smiled calmly, as if reminiscing about a long and real dream.

The High Priest closed his eyes; myriad memories surged to his heart. There were ancestors who passed, a deceased wife, children who died prematurely, alongside continuing hope. Timeless moments flowed in his heart, like a serene river, rendering death bland.

He remembered his youth, during the era of predecessor monarch Itzcoatl, when the Three States Alliance was newly established, and the Lake Capital City showed early prominence. He recalled his middle-aged years, during the era of predecessor monarch Montezuma, weathered Teotihuacan,

gradually recovering as the ancient Holy City. Then, he thought of his old age, remembered the growing hope, from precocious hatchlings in the Holy City, to young feathers growing in the Capital City, until an eagle with expanded wings in the West!... Gradually, a grin appeared on his lips, brazenly blossoming.

After a long while, the High Priest straightened his spine. For the first time, he faced the elder with equal majesty and slowly nodded.

"Yes!"

Upon hearing, the elder opened his eyes. He gazed at his nephew, observing his tranquility in confronting death, and smiled with satisfaction.

"Good! Xutel, you haven't disappointed me."

The High Priest remained calm, nodded, and said nothing. He looked toward Cevali beside him, observing the small pottery jar, awaiting death calmly. He had long known what lay within the jar.

The elder's lips curled into a smile. He looked at the High Priest's expression and murmured softly.

"Not now, my child, not here."

"Hmm? Elder?..."

At the words, the High Priest hesitated slightly. His calmness was finally broken, revealing a trace of surprise.

"Xutel, I won't live much longer, but I can hold out for two more days."

The elder smiled serenely, candidly speaking of life and death.

"Your body won't last two years, but you can still journey far."

"Hmm."

The High Priest silently awaited an answer, an answer about death.

"Before returning to the Divine Tree, don't you wish to see that child again?"

The elder smiled benevolently, asking peacefully.

The High Priest's expression changed suddenly, with a glimmer of light igniting in his heart.

"You mean?..."

"It's just the two of us on the road, and it would be lonely. Too many old fellows reluctant to leave occupy too many positions in the world..."

The elder smiled gently, a serene and peaceful expression. At this moment, he seemed like a kindly elder holding a broom named death, hoping to tidy the dwelling.

"The Holy City Cholula, twelve Priestly Families, have lasted too long... take them along!"

"Take them all?"

Upon hearing, the High Priest suddenly laughed. His laughter was pure and clean, like a diligent child eager to clean the home.

"Indeed. The Holy City Cholula is the heart of the world, without a compelling reason, the children wouldn't easily act."

The elder nodded with a smile, his lips curling. He thought of familiar old friends in Cholula, indeed with some nostalgia.

"Just right, there's still a few days to make a pact in death. I will let you leave, go see that child first, and then visit Cholula City to catch up with those old fellows... their Divine Smoke is good, incense is pleasant, potion is worthy of enjoyment... then, you depart from there!"

"Depart from there?"

The High Priest squinted, thought for a while, and nodded in agreement.

"I see... indeed, it's good!"

"Yes. I'll let the shadow Cevali depart with you, leaving the Lake Capital City."

The elder calmly instructed. It was a layer of assurance, a contract in form rather than substance.

"...You leave for two days first, when the shadow returns, I will come."

"Ah, a pact of death!..."

The High Priest's corners of the mouth lifted. He looked at the elder's face and asked with a smile.

"Elder, you're letting me go, aren't you worried?"

"Xutel, my child, I trust you."

The elder's eyes were profound, with a calm smile.

"After I go, the balance of power within the Alliance will be disrupted. If you don't wish to see the children make mistakes, you will make a choice."

"Indeed. When the warm sun sets, the cold darkness inevitably descends. Some things cannot be avoided..."

The High Priest pondered for a moment, nodding slowly. With the elder's foresight, it wouldn't leave countermeasures unplanned. The Southern Army's supply lines were all within the control of the Lake Capital City. But if he left this city, the extent of his influence would shrink significantly... it wasn't time for Xiulote to ascend yet.

"So be it! With the state of my health, there's really no need to cling to surviving another year or two."

The High Priest smiled relievedly, reaching out to wear the revered Feather Crown, covering his silver hair.

"Elder, then we shall agree, meeting at the Divine Tree!"

"Haha! Good!"

The elder laughed heartily. It was the first time in many years, and it would be his last. He reached out, grasped the High Priest's arm, similarly frail and aged.

"For the Alliance."

Upon hearing, the High Priest shook his head, replied solemnly.

"No, for my grandson."

"No matter. Your grandson is the future of the Alliance."

The elder promised placidly.

"I'll leave a will, handing it to his care."

Hearing this, the High Priest paused and nodded earnestly.

"Good! Chief Divine bless!"

At this moment, the face of High Priest Xutel showed rare devotion. He seldom prayed like this, but now was filled with hope.

The elder mildly hesitated. He was silent for a while and responded softly, for the first time sincerely praying to the Divine he personally crafted.

"Chief Divine bless!"

Both elders lowered their eyes, praying for several breaths together. Then, the High Priest stood up, looked deeply at the elder for a moment, posed one last question.

"Elder, after I leave, who will succeed as the High Priest?"

"Uguel."

"Uguel?..."

"Indeed. In recent years, the pace of religious reform has gone too far. The power of the priests has also grown too vast. After we depart, no need for strong changes, nor need to continue forward... take a rest, wait for a generation."

"...Fine!"

The High Priest was silent for a moment, then bowed solemnly.

The elder smiled, nodded slightly as a return gesture.

Then, the High Priest turned to leave, no longer lingering. Behind him, a silent shadow followed, vanishing together into the dark corridor.

The elder watched for a moment, smiled peacefully, and closed his eyes. The deep Dark Sea swept in again, engulfing his soul and bringing the dream he could scarcely escape. Then, a faint light emerged on the Divine Tree within the dream, slowly guiding him into the eternal end.

Chapter 909: The High Priest Goes East, My Grandson Has the Bearing of a Great Emperor

The end of May brought the continuous spring rain and the joy of all things growing. Along the banks of the Lake Capital City, verdant cypress trees grew in abundance. Under the Great Pyramid of the Temple District, splendid and extraordinary blue jacarandas bloomed. In this late spring brilliance, the eye was filled with lush vitality, with not a trace of decay to be found.

The following day, the High Priest appeared as usual, donned in ceremonial dress, once again presiding over the towering Priest Grand Hall. More than ten Elder Priests, dozens of High Priests, nearly two hundred lower-grade priests and apprentices, all bowed their heads in obedience!

The High Priest first issued a decree ordering the final chosen eight thousand people to immediately set out from the Capital Region and migrate to the Kingdom of the Lake. By this time, the seventy thousand Mexica immigrants promised to Xiulote last July had all migrated; five thousand more than planned. Then, he dispatched ten thousand militia and allocated a batch of stored food to support the Southern Army.

Regarding these actions, War God Elder Azar felt some dissent. Migrating during the spring planting season, delaying the farm work... the High Priest, in his care for his grandson, was indeed a bit biased.

Determined, the High Priest moved without stopping. He issued another decree, recruiting over two hundred priest apprentices who were about to complete their studies from the Capital City's University

of Priests, sending them to the Kingdom of the Lake. Accompanying them were several dozen mid-to-low grade priests affiliated with the High Priest.

All the Elder Priests were somewhat surprised. The destination of the priest apprentices was not a big concern, but the several dozen mid-to-low grade priests, who all held real power within various ranks of the Alliance's Priesthood groups—it seemed the High Priest was willing to yield these positions to assist the Kingdom of the Lake?

Acap sensed something unusual. He lowered his eyelids, refrained from speaking within the High Priesthood, and immediately severed communication with the envoy from the Holy City.

"At such a juncture, under such circumstances... it seems something significant may occur..."

Next, the High Priest again issued a decree, summoning the envoy from the Holy City Cholula, Elder Priest Queo. After talking with Elder Queo for half a day, he resolutely announced his intention to personally travel east to negotiate "peace and submission" with the Elder Priests of Cholula City!

Hearing this, the Elders of the High Priesthood were all taken aback.

The Holy City of Cholula was actively in conflict with the Mexica Alliance. Going east recklessly, numerous risks were inevitable. Additionally, within the Capital City, the immortal elder was critically ill, uncertain how long he would last. At such a critical juncture, the supreme leader of the Alliance's Divine Authority was to leave the vital Lake Capital City and venture into the dangerous core of the Telascallan people, enroute to the mysteriously postured Cholula City?

However, the High Priest's will was as firm as jade, unshakable. In less than two days, he temporarily transferred the highest ecclesiastical duties to Elder Priest Uguel, and with the envoy of Cholula City, started his eastward journey!

His entourage moved quickly, without pause, covering sixty to seventy li in a day.

Elder Queo, who was not yet fifty years old, found it challenging to keep up. He had lived in luxury in Cholula for many years, never having rushed like this before. Yet the High Priest, as the leader of the Alliance's Divine Authority, was already in his sixties, but continued to stride vigorously and consistently.

He walked faster and pushed further with each stride, as if a burning candle, eyes seemingly shining with light!

In early June, the group finally covered four hundred li, arriving at the Southern Army camp beneath Water Valley City. Xiulote received the message, astonished. Barefoot, he ran out of the camp, utterly incredulous, encountering his radiant grandfather. His grandfather stood tall, holding the scepter, smiling at him with authority.

"Honorable High Priest, Southern Route Commander, Xiulote salutes you!"

"Hmm! No need for formalities. I come from the Capital City, heading to Cholula to meet with the Elder Priests."

The High Priest smiled and nodded. He waved the scepter in his hand and calmly ordered the crowd.

"It's been a tiring journey, let's rest here for a day. Xiulote, no need for a feast, just a simple reception will do!"

"At your service!..."

Nightfall arrived swiftly; after a simple dinner, all retired to their tents. Outside the main commander's tent was peaceful, with only several trusted aides patrolling on guard duty. At this moment, no one would dare disturb the rare reunion of grandfather and grandson.

Xiulote, dressed casually, sat below, attentively observing his grandfather seated above.

In half a year without meeting, his grandfather seemed to have aged significantly. He had taken off the divine robes of a priest, revealing a thin, dry stature and a head full of silvery hair. His back was slightly hunched, with aged spots appearing on the skin of his hands, only his eyes gleamed with spirit and radiance, dazzling to others.

"Grandfather... why did you come so quickly, without even a word? You must know, the four states of Tlaxcala are still in conflict, with many hostile tribes scattering about..."

Xiulote glanced at his aged grandfather, feeling some resentment and full of concern. His grandfather was over sixty, yet did not rest well in the Capital City, instead coming to the dangerous battlefield!

"For the negotiations with the Holy City Cholula, sending a young Elder Priest would suffice. Here my large army surrounds them; they can't stir up much trouble!"

"No worries. When I came, I brought a large unit of Temple Warriors. Everywhere along the route was well cleared by the Southern Army, meeting no hostile tribes."

The High Priest Xutel appeared relaxed, smiling. He looked at his heroic grandson, his gaze full of tenderness.

"On my way here, I saw nearby fields; corn had sprouted new shoots, it seems the spring plowing has already begun?"

"Exactly!"

Upon hearing this, Xiulote's eyes shone with divine light, feeling somewhat pleased. He took a scepter from the rack in the tent, embedded with an ancient skull, and handed it to his grandfather.

"Look, this is the 'Grim Reaper's Skull' I obtained from the Temple of the Death God on the Divine Mountain! With this awe-inspiring divine object, combined with the guidance and teachings of the priests, the rebellion among the southern Tlaxcala captives has greatly diminished. They can now be employed by the Prepecha Warriors for cultivation and farming..."

"The legendary Grim Reaper's Skull?"

The High Priest reached out to stroke the skull as black as jade, his expression somewhat astonished.

The Temple of the Death God and the Grim Reaper's Skull, hidden in the Smoke Peak Divine Mountain, have left behind hundreds of years of continuous myths. They are revered miracles and divine objects by

both the western Mexica and the eastern Tlaxcala people. The old priest of the temple is also rumored to see through life and death and know the future.

"Yes. I went with Bertade and Nashu, climbed the Divine Mountain, found the Temple of the Death God, and retrieved this skull. I don't know if this is the legendary divine object. Unfortunately, the old priest inside had already been killed by the Tlaxcala Warriors, leaving only a few obscure prophecies, whose truth is yet unknown..."

At this, Xiulote's expression showed some regret. However, he had already arranged for priests traveling with the army to process these prophecies and then propagate them among the troops and captives. Naturally, the processed prophecy content was "The Death God has received divine favor and is destined to rule over all Tlaxcala people..."

"Xiulote, tell me the prophecy, let me hear it."

The High Priest's expression turned solemn, instructing in a deep voice. Then, he listened intently to Xiulote's recitation, pondering the meaning behind it.

"...Death is at hand, the brightest Morning Star is about to fall.

The immortal gods will consecutively die in their sacred dwelling places!..."

The young man's recitation was deep and clear, like the cry of a night hawk. The High Priest listened to the cryptic prophecy, stroking the "Grim Reaper's Skull," his eyes gradually changing.

"...The Death God closes his eyes, touches invisible death, and nurtures life in the midst of death!

Then, He too will die, in the places of the moon and the high mountains..."

Soon, Xiulote finished his recitation and looked at his grandfather with concern. His grandfather fell into long contemplation, and only after a while did his expression return to calm, nodding solemnly.

"Xiulote, my child, you are graced with divine revelation... Do not mention these prophecies to others again. Remember well, do not forget!"

"...Yes, grandfather!"

Xiulote replied earnestly. Then, the two talked about the history of the Temple of the Death God and turned to the current war situation.

"In the past month, I have temporarily halted the legion's offensives, focused on solidifying the rear, clearing the occupied two southern states, and collecting captured prisoners. Now, the Southern Army has captured 120,000 Tlaxcala people and transported more than 30,000 southwards by water! Among them, Cholula City has handed over 30,000 Tlaxcala people and a year's worth of food for these people. According to the previous agreement, they still need to hand over 50,000 more!..."

"Oh? Are the old foxes of Cholula willing to hand over eighty thousand people to you?"

Upon hearing this, the High Priest's eyes flickered, seemingly thoughtful.

"Ha! Grandfather, tens of thousands of the southern army have Cholula partly surrounded in the center, occasionally raiding. The area of Cholula is not large but exceedingly prosperous. It has only about forty miles surrounding the Holy City of Cholula, yet it houses a population of 200,000 from various tribes! Adding in tens of thousands of escaped Tlaxcala tribes, it can be said that the population is at an extreme peak..."

"Now, the City State Army has captured 20,000 prisoners, Cholula City has handed over 30,000, reducing the population by only 50,000. Around the Holy City, it is still crowded, with over a dozen wealthy villages and towns. The warriors and militia of the Holy City barely number over 10,000 and it doesn't even have an outer wall... it's just the identity of the Holy City that makes it tricky to attack rashly. Therefore, I've encircled it without attacking, intending to harvest enough fruit from Holy Cholula!"

Saying this, Xiulote stood up, his expression confident and sharp.

"As long as the Kingdom of the Lake absorbs over 200,000 southern Tlaxcala people and digests them for two years... the strength of the kingdom will further rise, and I can establish two more legions! After

that, I will conquer the Chapala Lake Region, pacify all Tekos tribes, explore and settle along the coast... The future of the kingdom will soon shine brilliantly in the West!"

"Hmm!..."

Looking at his ambitious grandson, the High Priest's heart surged with complex emotions. He silently experienced a sense of comfort, three parts worry, two parts reluctance... and one part heartfelt sorrow.

"...My grandson truly has the demeanor of a great emperor!... Alas, I won't see that day..."

Chapter 910: High Priest Heads East, Li's Farewell

In the humble tent, a bonfire burned, reflecting on the faces of the grandfather and grandson, bringing with it a trace of warmth. The clear moonlight descended from the sky, landing on their rather similar brows, leaving a gentle glow.

After a moment, the High Priest composed himself, smiling as he asked.

"Xiulote, my child. With so many people gathered, is the food supply sufficient?"

Upon hearing this question, Xiulote's expression faltered. However, in front of his grandfather, he found no need to conceal the truth. He pursed his lips and spoke honestly.

"Grandfather, the army's food supply is indeed a bit tight. Fortunately, when conquering Water Valley City, we acquired a large amount of food. The Cholula domain is rich, and we have subsequently looted several more batches. Added to the demands from Cholula City, it should roughly support us until the autumn harvest. The Kingdom in the South is hastening the construction of twin-hulled canoes to increase waterway transport. In another two or three months, once the captives are transported back in batches and the Kingdom continuously sends food, there will be enough surplus..."

Currently, the food transported via the southern waterways barely suffices for the consumption along the route when tens of thousands of captives are being transferred. Meanwhile, the military towns along the Tarsus River are all cultivating land, and after the autumn harvest, the situation should slightly improve.

"Hmm, before I came here, I just issued a decree to send a batch of food to the Southern Army. It's enough for twenty thousand people for a year."

Hearing this, Xiulote's face showed joy. The High Priest smiled slightly and carefully instructed.

"Xiulote, my child. The Southern Army reaching here has completely swept through the South of Tlaxcala, fulfilling the requirements for the eastern expedition! Next, slowly accumulate grain and fodder, properly transport the population, manage Cholula City, and also be wary of the allied forces of the Mistec and the Zapotek people... do not advance recklessly northward anymore!"

"Grandfather?..."

Upon hearing this, Xiulote opened his mouth, wanting to say something, but was halted by the High Priest's gesture.

"The King to the north has an army of eighty thousand, sufficient to fully suppress the Telascallan to the north, encircling the remaining three Snake Cities. The three Snake Cities are connected as one, occupying natural defenses, easy to defend and hard to attack. Especially the Cloud Serpent City in the mountains, which resides on hills one to two hundred meters high, is an almost impregnable fortress, even more perilous than the Ototpan Mountain City!..."

"...They are the ancestral land of the Telascallan, equivalent to the capital of the Mexica Alliance. The defending army in the city has a resolute will without retreat, and cannot be easily conquered. As for how long to besiege these three cities, and how to capture them, that is the King's decision!"

"Cloud Serpent City, one to two hundred meters high, is more perilous than Ototpan Mountain City?!"

Hearing this, Xiulote furrowed his brows, pondering silently. He had not seen the Cloud Serpent City but had been to Ototpan Mountain City. With the siege capabilities of this era, taking such a mountain city, even with the bombardment of two-pound bronze cannons, might still be beyond reach. Perhaps, it would still rely on a prolonged siege to find an opportunity.

In fact, later Montezuma II was trapped under the formidable cities of the Telascallan for years without success. Subsequently, a premeditated rebellion erupted within the alliance's city-states and vassals, forcing him to recall his troops to quell the rebellion, leading to a failed endeavor. From then on, his prestige plummeted to the bottom, rendering him unable to command the various legionaries of the lands, struggling even to control his direct Royal Legion. In such a situation of lost loyalty and defection of allies, he chose to welcome the Eastern fair-skinned "Feathered Serpent Divine," into the grand Lake Capital City, hoping to restore his prestige in the name of the divine...

The High Priest observed the contemplative Xiulote with a warm smile. He pondered and asked again.

"Xiulote, my child, food is the foundation of everything, always keep an eye on the army's grain reserves... how is the acreage of farmland outside Water Valley City?"

"Grandfather, the Southern Army has always maintained a three-month grain reserve. I still have ninety thousand young and strong captives, not yet transferred. They have gathered in this area, collectively cultivating five hundred thousand mu of arable land!... It is now June, and it is too late to plant corn, but pumpkins are right on time. The army will continue to employ the captives to plant more pumpkins for sustenance. By waiting for the harvest in September and October, the Southern Army's food supply will be greatly alleviated!"

Ninety thousand young strongmen cultivating five hundred thousand mu, averaging five or six mu per person. As labor for captives, to manage this extent is quite commendable.

The Mexica Legion's ability to utilize captives for farming outside Water Valley City, without worrying about attacks from hostile tribes, indicates that the army's control over this area is very stable. And Xiulote, as the Commander-in-Chief, being able to let go of the enmity with his old foes, allowing the Mexica Legion to accept the Telascallan, further showcases his kingly prestige and magnanimity!

"Xiulote, you are a natural general, and an outstanding king."

The High Priest's face showed genuine comfort. He extended his withered hand and, after many years, once again patted his eldest grandson's head.

At this moment, he looked at the valiant young man, with many emotions surging in his heart, wanting to pour out many heartfelt words... but the words reached the tip of his tongue, he paused for a long moment, leaving only a few earnest exhortations, his eyes filled with tenderness.

"...My child, your path is still far and long. Walk steadily, do not rush, for rushing leads to detours... I know there's an unknown mission hidden in your heart. But you are still young, with plenty of time to achieve it. Do not bear too much alone, there will always be people to share the burden and willing to give for you... in the future, you must go on well, go on well..."

The High Priest's voice gradually lowered, almost becoming inaudible. In the end, he just kindly rubbed his eldest grandson's head, as he often did when the grandson was young.

Feeling the grandfather's touch, Xiulote lingered for a long time, a softness rising in his heart.

He vaguely remembered the last time his grandfather patted his head was before the westward expedition to Tarasco. And before that, at the Great Sacrifice in the Lake Capital City, he was released by the elders, and his grandfather hurried over from the Holy City, Teotihuacan. Going further back, upon returning with Olosh from capturing captives, he had sat by his grandfather's side, listening to his hopes and plans alongside his father...

Time flowed like water, turning youth into maturity, and maturity into old age. The middle-aged priest who had once joyously lifted the infant at his birth and named him, had now become old. His hair white, his back slightly hunched, he used his frail hand to caress, while an aged face showed a smile...

He's old... Only those eyes remain as deep as ever, filled with profound love and heart-wrenching longing.

Xiulote stared blankly at his grandfather, an inexplicable shadow rising in his heart. Unknowingly, his eyes became moist, and he called out softly with some fear.

"Grandfather?... You... will always be here, right?"

"Mm. My child, I will be by your side... always."

Having said this, the High Priest slightly bowed his head and turned his body. His face fell into the shadow of the campfire, making it unclear.

"Xiulote, after such a long journey, I'm a bit tired... Let me sleep in your tent."

"Okay, okay!"

Xiulote nodded repeatedly. He pressed his lips together and said softly.

"Grandfather, I'll sleep with you..."

"No need. You're grown now, a commander of an army, you must always maintain your dignity."

The High Priest raised his head, his eyes shining, his face already with a gentle smile.

"Besides, I need to think about how to negotiate with the priests of Cholula tomorrow."

"...Alright."

Xiulote hesitated for a moment, seeing that his grandfather's smile showed no signs of unusualness, he nodded. He stood up, glanced at his grandfather again, and then turned to leave the tent.

The campfire inside the tent had never been extinguished, casting the shadow of a hunched figure on the thick fabric of the tent. The figure sat alone facing the fire for a long time, and no one knew what he was thinking.

Xiulote returned to the side tent and slept for a while, but thinking of his grandfather's eyes, he couldn't fall asleep. Finally, he simply got up again and went to the main tent. The campfire within still burned, but that shadow had already lain down to sleep.

"Mm, grandfather has grown old. Probably it's because he's afraid to sleep alone in the dark."

Through the fabric of the tent, Xiulote gazed at the campfire, seeing approximately where his grandfather lay. Then, he went to the other side outside the tent, and just lying down with his clothes on, he remained there outside the tent. The late spring night wasn't cold, and the clear moonlight fell on his face like a guiding light, or another world's projection.

Separated from his grandfather by a layer of tent fabric, Xiulote faintly heard his grandfather's breathing. Only then did he feel at ease and, under the gentle moonlight, quickly fell into a deep sleep. That night, he slept peacefully, without any dreams. Because, his grandfather was right there beside him, at arm's length...

The next morning, the High Priest was already dressed neatly, divine staff in hand, stepping onto the path to Cholula.

"High Priest, the Southern Army, fifty thousand troops, are right outside Cholula City!"

Xiulote straightened his back, confident and high-spirited. He stood in front of his grandfather, holding his aged hand, and said with concern.

"...Rest assured and talk with them! Cholula City has no choice. And with me here, they would not dare to offend you!"

Hearing his grandson's words, the High Priest's eyes arched into a smile, his face showing genuine joy.

"Good!"

"...Grandfather, go swiftly and return soon, come back early..."

"...Alright!"

The High Priest nodded slowly, as if making a vow to his ancestors. Then, he looked deeply at his grandson, before turning with a smile to leave. And beside him, several dozen Temple Warriors guarded closely, like his shadow.