

Civilization 971

Chapter 971: Southward, Divine Water Tribe!

"Boom boom boom!"

The deafening sound of war drums echoed through the wide northern mountain pass, startling the birds into flight. Large groups of rushing warriors, like a pack of wolves across the wilderness, passed through the undulating forest and appeared at the foot of the pass. Their wolf-like howls had already preceded them, echoing across the fields of the Divine Water Valley.

"Awooo!..."

It was September, harvest time approaching, the beans just ripening, corn already forming ears. A year's worth of food was right before everyone's eyes, awaiting alongside the birds in the mountains and crowds of people. Yet now, the footsteps of war suddenly arrived, stepping with the blood-red sunset, bringing the firelight at dusk!

"Ah! Almighty Rain Divine!..."

Behind the mountain pass village, over ten thousand Mistec Tribespeople were panicked and fearful. They had long heard of the northern slaughter, heard of the Mexica's might, yet never imagined that war would descend upon them so swiftly.

"滴!...滴!..."

The warning conch echoed through the narrow valley, signaling urgency and assembly. Three thousand able-bodied tribesmen, each holding short bows and stone spears, rushed from all over the Divine Water Valley.

The Divine Water Valley is located fifty miles south of Divine Stone City, less than two hundred miles from Cloud Mountain City further south. The valley itself is not large, only seven to eight miles east to west, and about ten miles north to south, surrounded by mountains, with only two passageways to the northeast and southeast. At the center of the valley lies a natural spring, irrigating the fertile soil, hence the name "Atzingo," meaning "Divine Water," "Revered Water." Naturally, the tribe settled within this valley was called the Divine Water Tribe.

Soon, the Divine Water Tribe leader, "Yun Shui" Aquingo, hurried up the fence and gazed north.

A strange black wolf banner first caught his eye. The black coyote, with its blood-red tongue, red eyes, crouched beneath the crimson rays of the sun, was particularly captivating. At this moment, this towering wolf banner was steadily carried on the back of an exceptionally strong young warrior leader.

Surrounding the wolf banner were three advancing warrior formations. The central formation had the fewest numbers, with a dense arrangement and the finest equipment. Each warrior wielded copper weapons, wearing green war clothes, and even some had platinum war armor. The other two formations were slightly larger, aligned on the left and right flanks. The left wing wore neat white war clothes, wielding war clubs of obsidian. The right wing was the largest, with a looser formation and disordered weapons.

"This... is the Mexica legion! It's... it's the brutal Black Wolf chieftain!..."

Seeing the black wolf banner, Aquingo's heart trembled, his voice quivering. He watched the fast-advancing enemy, counting silently as he moved his fingers.

"One spring, two springs, three... five... ten! Ten springs of warriors! There are even more behind..."

Counting up to here, Aquingo's pupils contracted, his body weakened, barely gripping the expensive copper spear in his hand. A "spring" is roughly three to four hundred people. The Divine Water Tribe's three to four thousand men stood together, just covering the area of nine to ten springs. Yet the Mexica legion in front of him had at least four to five thousand, already surpassing the number of able-bodied tribesmen!

"Revered Rain Divine! Please send down rain and save your divine descendants!..."

Aquingo looked up to pray, feeling a sense of despair. The Divine Water Tribe occupied this enclosed and fertile valley, the tribe's generations proliferating, its leaders claiming to be divine descendants, continuing for over ten generations.

Today, the entire Divine Water Tribe had more than ten thousand people, making it the most prominent tribe in the Teotihuacan Valley! Yet at this moment, facing the Mexica legion's offensive, the so-called strength within the valley seemed like the croaks of a frog in the rainforest, exposed to the jaws of the Mexican-furred snake.

"Quick... too quick! The Mexica moved southward in July, and now early September, they have already attacked here! Damn! Those cowardly warriors in Divine Stone City are really... really rain deities made from women's urine!"

Aquingo was both shocked and furious, muttering curses under his breath, his anger mixed with regret. The fierce Mexica invaded south, defeated the warriors of Divine Stone City, captured the Cloud Temple...he had heard this news days ago and had been worried all along.

However, with the autumn harvest imminent, the tribe was unwilling to abandon the soon-to-be-harvested corn, nor this lush valley. Plus, with fifty miles of rugged mountain roads between here and Divine Stone City, its location is hidden—easy to defend, hard to attack. The tribe has three thousand able-bodied men, not afraid of small groups of enemy harassment...thus he harbored a sliver of luck, unlike many other tribes that had hastily abandoned substantial resources, migrating south.

"Andiwei, is this the divine great tribe, the Teotihuacan Divine Water Tribe?"

"Yes, esteemed Black Wolf General. This is the strongest great tribe in the south of the Teotihuacan Valley, the Divine Water Tribe. The Divine Water Tribe has more than ten thousand tribespeople, nearly four thousand able-bodied men, firmly holding this fertile valley. According to legend, at the valley's center lies a Divine Spring, the tear of the Rain Divine, held by underground serpents, constantly bubbling to the surface...."

"Mountain Divine Spring? The Rain Divine's tear?"

The Black Wolf Torc had a contemplative glint in his eyes. Once they capture the valley, he can take a portion of the spring water to present to His Highness and the Princess. Carrying the banner, he climbed the hill of the mountain pass, and saw several simple wooden villages, and a fence barely enclosing the mountain pass, chuckling silently to himself.

"Red Monkey, look at this fence, it's not even as good as the ones in your Wilderness tribes!"

Red Monkey Ozoma squinted his eyes, carefully observing for a moment. He looked at the rough fence, then at the guarding tribal warriors, and let out a snort.

"Black Wolf Leader, these southern forest tribes, though many in number and rich, simply don't know how to fight!"

"Look, their warriors are all bunched up, with no distinct squads, no allocated bows and javelins, and certainly no coordinated order like a wolf pack. Their expressions are either panicked or angry, lacking the brutality and indifference of those who've seen bloodshed. They grip their weapons too tight, shouting and cursing, wasting their energy, clearly inexperienced in large-scale battles... A tribe like this, if placed in the Wilderness, wouldn't survive two autumns, and would feed five tribes!"

At this, Red Monkey Ozoma grinned. Here, 'feeding well' meant truly being well-fed. In the barren and hungry northern Wilderness, only tribes as ferocious as wild beasts can survive.

"Haha! Red Monkey, you're right, you've learned well!"

Hearing this, Black Wolf agreed wholeheartedly. After years of warfare, he could tell if an army was capable just by observing for a while. However, this was a kind of long-practiced experience and intuition, hard to articulate in words if you asked him to explain it.

"Torc, you have a wolf's combat instinct. If one day, you can organize this instinct into a coherent form, writing it down as a legacy, you'd be the true talent of the kingdom! And this is why I urge you to study!"

Recalling the prince's reminder, Black Wolf's eyes flashed. He longed for it for a moment and then sighed; learning to read was truly difficult, leading troops to battle was easier.

"Leader, I, Red Frog, am not good with these things, just leading the charge! Let me take five hundred tribal warriors as the vanguard to attack the camp for you!"

Red Frog Kaka widened his eyes and glared at the eloquent Red Monkey. Then, he forcefully patted his chest, producing a "clang" sound, and drew his hand axe from his waist.

"In two quarters, if I can't breach this camp, I'll present my head to you!"

"Haha! Red Frog, I like your character, it suits my taste!"

Black Wolf laughed heartily, seeing the thousands of enemies before him as nothing. Then, he shook his head, refusing Red Frog's request. At this moment, in the broad Teotihuacan Valley, the Guajili Legion was setting fires everywhere, spreading out to plunder and gather food and population. The troop strength of each camp was very limited.

This time, venturing south into deeper territories, he only had over six thousand troops. Among them, two thousand were elite Legion Warriors, more than a thousand were Tlaxcala defectors, and there were three thousand Mistec able-bodied men conscripted along the way. And two days ago, from the two thousand Legion Warriors, another thousand were split off to guard the army's retreat, preventing a sudden attack from Divine Stone City.

"The southern terrain is undulating, the mountain roads are difficult, unlike the unobstructed northern highlands, suitable for raids. If our retreat is cut off... the risk is somewhat big, it's better to divide some troops to stay as rear guards. Now, the entire army relies on the thousand elite legionnaires for suppression, can't be lightly sacrificed!"

Thinking of this, Black Wolf raised his hand, pointing at the fortified walls in the advantageous terrain.

"Assaulting the camp uphill, under the threat of arrows, javelins, and stones, casualties are inevitable. This kind of unnecessary loss shouldn't be borne by the legion warriors... Andywei, you mentioned, this southern Divine Water Tribe and the northern valley tribes aren't closely allied?"

"Yes, honorable General. The Divine Water Tribe occupies the Divine Water Valley, separated from other parts. Generations of leaders control the Divine Spring, calling themselves Divine Descendants, relying on tribal strength to frequently demand tributes from nearby smaller tribes..."

Priest Andywei respectfully bowed, elaborating on the relations among the Teotihuacan tribes.

The Mistec Alliance is decentralized, divided to this day. Not only are the highlands, lowlands, and coast split into three branches, but each branch is also subdivided into City-States. Within each City-State, there are also many independent Great Tribes, often not subordinate to each other. In short, although the Mistecs are called an alliance, it's actually a disorganized mess. They cling together through a shared belief in the Rain Divine, a similar Cloud culture, and generations of intermarriage among the Divine Descendants as connections among tribes.

"...Therefore, letting the eight hundred defector warriors from Divine Stone City, along with the two thousand captured able-bodied men from various tribes, attack the Divine Water Tribe will meet no resistance in morale! And once their hands are stained with blood, their faith will gradually erode, freeing the Black Serpent bound by the Rain Divine... From then on, they will have no turning back, just like me."

Andywei kept his head down, respectfully, with the mild tone unique to Mistec priests. Yet, his words were like the pit viper of the rainforest, causing Red Monkey Ozoma's eyelids to twitch, a chill in his heart.

"Haha, very good! Andywei, under the guidance of His Highness's Divine Revelation, the Chief Divine's glory will ultimately blanket the Xavi land! And your choice today will make you proud in the future!"

Black Wolf nodded in satisfaction. He gave a deep look at the noble priest who defected, much like a Coyote eyeing a Black Serpent. Then, with a sharp look, the Black Wolf General drew his Bronze Greatsword and pointed towards the camp,

"Sound the drums of war, raise the banners, convey the military order! Dispatch the Mistec camp on the left to battle!... Tell Woodpecker Lichi, if he captures the Divine Water Tribe, all wealth, able-bodied men, and women are his camp's reward! But if he fails to take it, I want his bird head!"

Chapter 972: Flower of Death, Blood of the People in the Rain

The mountains stretch verdantly, extending east and west, resembling the bivalve shells of a clam, leaving only a narrow valley entrance to the Northeast. At this moment, a hot wind comes from the South, passes over the bright red camp at the valley entrance, and drifts towards the vast mountains on both sides. On the mountains of the Mistec Highlands, towering Jacaranda trees grow, along with the cuetlaxochitl known as the red poinsettia, covering the hills.

"In spring, blue flowers fall from the clouds. In autumn, red flowers bloom on the ground. They are spirited, avoiding the scorching summer!"

The summer wind blows in bursts, bringing an intense scent akin to flowers. Bloody blossoms spread inside and outside the mountain pass. Woodpecker Lichi, covered in blood, stands on the bulwark at the valley entrance. His eyes flash red, yet seem somewhat lost, like a woodpecker about to fall asleep, or a coyote just opening its eyes.

"The Priest of the Rain Divine taught us, oh ancient people of the rain, not to fell a tree during the hot season, for the sap flows, tormenting the tree's spirit... I once followed the teachings of the Rain Divine, that was the divine me!"

The Mistek Land is called Nuu Dzahui, which means "Land of the Rain God." The Mistek people themselves are called Nuu Savi, "People of the Rain." Devoutly believing in the Divine, the people of the rain also see spirits in all things. In their daily prayers, they would place the "I" at the end of the prayer. This followed ancient teachings, expressing holiness and reverence.

"However, the blazing summer is a season of death. Spring flowers have fallen, and autumn flowers haven't yet opened. The boundless flower of death blooms in the valley blessed by the Rain Divine because the Divine has also died..."

Woodpecker Lichi murmurs, a flush on his face from combat. His right hand holds a blood-stained bronze axe, and his left hand carries the head of the Divine Water Tribe's Leader, "Yun Shui" Aquingo. Those eyes widen, filled with anger, unwillingness, and despair. At this moment, drops of fresh blood fall simultaneously from both Liqi's hands, landing on the bulwark beneath him and soaking the entire camp before him.

Looking around, the fence of the camp is split open by the bronze axe; onto the wooden bulwark, javelins and arrows are thrust, breaking holes in several places. Layers of bodies collapse at the bulwark's breaches. The corpses of samurai and militia intertwine chaotically, twisted into various forms, pressed into a mass by countless feet, no longer distinguishable from one another.

Over a hundred defectors from the Divine Stone City are now frantically searching through the piles of bodies throughout the camp. Whenever they find a Divine Water Tribe warrior who is not yet dead, they mercilessly stab their worn stone spears into the fragile necks. In the past two hours, the warriors of the Divine Water Tribe had been just as ruthless, stabbing their comrades to death.

The bloody odor grows increasingly intense, mingling with the floral scent of summer, even seeming a bit sweet. A faint blood pool flows from the camp's heights down towards the southern and northern lowlands. From a distance, the entire red camp resembles a blooming Mistek Safflower, the beautiful cuetlaxochitl.

North of the bulwark stands thousands of warriors of the Mexica army. In the army's center, the banner of the Black Wolf flies. In front of the formation, hundreds of long spears stand erected, adorned with the terrifying heads of the slain. Over a hundred headless corpses kneel at the base of the long spears, their warm blood tracing another flower of death.

South of the bulwark, over a thousand Mistek defectors pursue the fleeing warriors of the Divine Water Tribe to the south. The numbers of warriors on both sides are approximately equal; however, one side screams and howls, wielding long spears, like a wounded fierce pack of wolves, while the other cries and laments, dropping hunting bows, resembling a cowardly herd of fleeing deer.

It is hard to imagine that just an hour ago, these same two groups clashed within the camp, long spears stabbing each other, warriors falling one after another, corpses piling over the bulwark. Initially, the mighty "wolf pack" was on the verge of defeat, only to be driven by the even fiercer Jaguar, erupting with a desperate courage under the leadership of the Woodpecker chief, slaughtering the enemy leader.

And now, as the brutal entanglement settles its winner and loser, the "deer herd" collapses instantly, losing all resistance. The subsequent conflict turns into a one-sided massacre. Thus, intertwined warm red unfolds at the southern entrance of the valley, slowly spreading out into another patch of death flowers.

"This is the flower of death, and it is also the blood of the Mistek people... all of it!"

Woodpecker Lichi stands still, his misty eyes gazing at the fertile southern valley. The corn harvest is in sight, the aroma floats in the fields. People flee across the farmland, trampling the hope of harvest, and collapsing with the corn. The pursuing defectors run swiftly, their vigor even surpassing the samurai of Divine Stone City at times. And at this moment, they are no longer the devout, obedient people of the rain but the coyotes, armed and converted to the Mexica War God.

Soon after, as the sunset settles towards the western sky, sporadic flames rise from the villages of the Divine Water Tribe. Amid the warm summer wind, faint shouts and piercing cries of women can be heard.

Woodpecker Lichi lowers his eyes, remaining silent. He knows that after tonight, the Divine Water Tribe of Teotihuacan, claiming a lineage of a thousand years and a population of over ten thousand souls, will cease to exist. And this is all due to his actions and the acts of the defecting Mistek warriors!

Chapter 973: The Flower of Death, The Blood of the People in the Rain_2

"Woo~woo~Rain Divine... I beg you... save us... ah!"

Hearing the cries in the wind, the Samurai of Divine Stone City, with blood-red eyes from the slaughter, finally regained some sense. Samurai Captain Ñuu, holding a long spear, came in front of Camp Commander Rich. He glanced at the chieftain's head in Rich's hand, thought of the opponent's bravery in battle, and slightly restrained his murderous intent. Ñuu lowered his long spear and bowed his head.

"Leader Big Bird, the Mexica Legion Commander said that the spoils of the Divine Water Tribe belong to us!"

Samurai Captain Ñuu lifted his head, looked reverently at the Wolf Banner of the North. The powerful Mexica army in the North had indeed not moved at all, without any attempt to seize the spoils. Seeing this, a strong yearning welled up in his slightly red eyes, and he swallowed hard.

"Praise the Chief Divine! Praise the generous Mexica Legion Commander! The Divine Water Tribe, occupying the Divine Spring, has always been very wealthy. Their Divine Descendants are aloof and never glance at the ordinary tribespeople... Leader, the Vanguard warriors are having fun, let's hurry over too! Haha, I've never tasted the Guardian Saintess of the Spring before!..."

"Tears of the holy Rain Divine, revered Guardian Saintess of the Spring..."

Upon hearing this, Woodpecker Lichi suddenly opened his eyes. His expression was complex, locking gaze with Samurai Captain Ñuu's unabashed face for a long while.

There was a fierce look on Ñuu's face, with greed flickering in his eyes. When he mentioned the supreme Rain Divine, his former reverence and fear had disappeared. What remained was a wolf-like wildness, freshly broken from the shackles of the people of the rain, revealing a savagery like the Wilderness.

"Leader Big Bird?"

"Ñuu... Palm Trees in the Rain..."

Woodpecker Lichi softly called out. The meaning of Ñuu was "Rain Tree," a tree in the rain. From the plain name "Tree," it was evident that Ñuu was likely a samurai from a small tribe. The title "Rain" was likely granted for bravery, awarded by the tribe's Priest.

In the ancient traditions of Mistec society, a samurai of such humble origin, no matter how battle-hardened, achieving a "Rain" title and leading several dozen men was already the pinnacle. Throughout his life, he might at most marry into a family of minor nobility, barely squeezing into the upper echelons of the tribe. As for the lofty, naturally extraordinary divine-descendant women, such thoughts were beyond reach...

"Ñuu, today's battle saw the Mexicans pressing our camp, fighting desperately forward, retreating even a single step meant death. Out of three thousand in the camp, over a thousand were killed before finally breaking the Divine Water Tribe! ...With such fierce fighting, do you still wish to continue battling for the Mexicans?"

"Hmm?"

Upon hearing this, Samurai Captain Ñuu's pupils shrank, and he looked around warily. There were merely a dozen or so people in the vicinity, all trusted warriors. Ñuu slightly exhaled in relief and asked cautiously in a low voice.

"Leader Rich, you... what do you mean? Do you have any plans?"

"...Though the Divine Water Tribe is rebellious, it is also a great ancient tribe of the Valley. They have guarded the Divine Spring for generations, inheriting the teachings of the Rain Divine. Though we from

the rain often fought amongst ourselves, we would never, like the Mexicans, eradicate the divine legacy, sacrifice all divine descendants, or even massacre revered priests!..."

Woodpecker Lichi pursed his lips, his words somber. Coming from a tribal family of minor nobility, though not a divine descendant, he had received the Priest's teachings. With destiny bringing him to this point, the temple in his heart had gradually collapsed, but the tradition of Mistec nobility still lingered, comprising the recognition of the divine, of the tribes, and a subconscious acknowledgment and adherence to the order of hierarchy.

Samurai Captain Ñuu thought for a moment, not quite grasping Camp Commander Rich's meaning. He glanced at the fire in the south and suppressed the surge of desire within, cautiously asking.

"...Leader, do you still have contact with Divine Stone City?"

In Ñuu's view, no matter how strong and invincible the Mexica legion was, they would eventually leave. As for defectors like them, if there was a chance, a way to stay in their homeland would be an option. Of course, the premise was there should be a way, and no reckoning after the fact to settle the blood on their hands.

"...No." Woodpecker Lichi remained silent for a moment, then shook his head. The Family Head Blue Snake Koo was killed outside the city, Divine Stone City lost three thousand elite troops and the Cloud Temple. Recently, the chieftains within the city were likely scared witless, and their military strength was very limited. They were focused solely on holding out, waiting for reinforcements from other city-states, with no concern for the tribes outside the city, much less contacting defectors.

"Is it the Cloud Mountain City from the South that has given you promises?"

Hearing this, Woodpecker Lichi fell silent again and shook his head. He knew that the reinforcements from Cloud Mountain City had arrived in the vicinity and had encountered their scouts in the mountains. However, they were few in number and dared not advance northward, and they were very wary and resentful of defectors.

"... No, it hasn't."

"Ha! Then what are you talking about?"

Warrior Captain Nu'u stomped his foot and raised his long spear again. He cast a cold glance at the Woodpecker leader and sneered disdainfully.

"Big Bird Leader! In the Divine Stone City of the Mexica legion, you were merely a Rain Divine Warrior leading a hundred men, and I was just a leader of twenty! But now, in the warrior-cherished Mexica legion, you are a Camp Captain of three thousand men, and I am a Warrior Captain of two hundred!"

"In the Divine Stone City, the Divine Descendants sat high on their palanquins, never sparing us a glance. But with the Mexica legion, we can trample the Divine Descendants underfoot and subjugate the noble ladies beneath us! And this is merely the beginning! Many Tlaxcala warriors joined the Mexica's regular army early because of their military achievements, rewarded with lands and titles!... "

"... Leader, we are like ants in the rain now, out of the nest, with no retreat! Live each day to the fullest! If we die in battle, and the Rain Divine does not accept us, we will go meet the War God!... Awoo!... "

After shouting these words, Captain Nu'u turned away, brandishing his bloodied long spear, and ran towards the village of the Divine Water Tribe. As he ran, he howled like a wolf, heading towards the red sunset, across the blood-stained fields, and into the scarlet flames.

Dozens of Divine Stone City warriors followed him, letting out excited and wild howls. They eagerly pounced on the villages of the Divine Water Great Tribe, like tigers and wolves attacking their prey.

Watching this scene, Woodpecker Lichi felt a bit dazed. He looked at the dimly lit mountains on either side, at the blood-red colors blossoming around him, and at the gradually boiling slaughter and flames.

"Where exactly am I? Is this the prosperous and orderly Mistec Highlands of three thousand years of heritage, or the legendary desolate, vast, and cruel Northern Wilderness?... "

The sunset slowly descended, and the afterglow spread across the sky. On the broken post-battle mountain pass camp, only a few dozen Mistec trusted aides remained. The other warriors and militia had vanished into the southern valley, joining the unrestrained plunder. The defector camp was newly established, and those truly loyal to Camp Commander Rich, who could suppress their desire for

slaughter, were these few dozen trusted aides only. The trusted aides glanced at each other and, after a long wait, finally someone spoke.

"Camp Commander? We?... "

"Hoo!~ Awoo!... "

Rich let out a long breath, then suddenly howled like a wolf. It seemed he wanted to shout out his spirit from his chest and inhale a new wolf soul. Then, pressing his lips together, he gritted his teeth and turned away.

"Let's go!"

"Ah? Commander, that's the North!"

"Yes. Let's go, to meet the Commander-in-Chief of the Mexica. I have some suggestions on military reformation that I want to propose. And in this army, the only one whose word truly matters is the Black Wolf Commander!... As for you, if you want to head south for plunder, you can go on your own."

"...

The trusted aides exchanged glances, hesitated in their steps, but eventually grasped their weapons and followed their distinguished, yet somewhat unconventional camp commander. Behind them, the sun sank into the horizon, its vivid red swallowed by darkness, concealing the Mistec people's slaughter, while the southern chaotic flames gradually vanished beyond the camp.

Soon, small campfires appeared before them. Patrolling warriors clad in armor, wielding copper weapons, exuded the unique grimness of the Mexica. A dark wolf banner fluttered in the night breeze.

The great black wolf stood alone, gazing at the bright moonlight in the sky, overlooking the burgeoning flames below. In the eyes of this black wolf, there were no remnants of northern resistance, nor the so-called southern slaughter. It simply followed the will of the western Sun, looking towards the rising Moon in the East.

Chapter 974: The Prisoners of Mistec

Mid-September, the rainy season is coming to an end. In the fertile fields of the Teotihuacan Valley, green and golden hues intertwine, signaling the harvest of corn. From north to south in the valley, life flourishes everywhere, yet no signs of bustling crowds.

Flocks of colorful buntings descend from the sky, boldly perching on the corn. They sway their vibrant head feathers, break open the lush green husks, pecking at the just-mature kernels, one by one. Ring-tailed raccoons also emerge from the mountain forest, with innocent yet worried faces, cautiously extending long arms to stealthily snatch ears of corn from the fields.

The boorish peccaries don't bother with all these details. They move in herds, rushing out from the muddy marsh, exuding a stench that won't dissipate. Central America's peccaries, also called "Leader West Wild Boar", "Skunk Pig", resemble the wild boars of the Old Continent in appearance but are slightly smaller in size, with sharper tusks and greater aggressiveness.

In fact, these skunk pigs, rather than being called "pigs," are more like "skunks." Their meat is so foul in taste that even tribespeople accustomed to eating insects and ants find it difficult to swallow. Nonetheless, they are numerous, very strong fighters, and without fearsome two-legged beasts, they hardly have predators in the southern mountain forests. At this moment, these peccaries storm into the cornfields, using their powerful hooves to uproot mature plants, then gorge themselves.

"Woo!...Woo!..."

The desolate sound of a horn suddenly echoes in the south valley, startling a flock of flying birds. Raccoons wag their long tails, clutching corn, and flee in panic. Peccaries cluster together, hiding in the cornfields. They squint their little eyes warily, gazing at the dirt road trampled by travelers not far away. Shortly after, a terrifying horde of two-legged beasts appear before their eyes.

"Ha! Glug-glug!"

Peccaries, flaunting their tusks, growl lowly to intimidate the approaching two-legged beasts. Yet the approaching beings increase in number, letting out terrifying sharp howls.

"Glug-glug!"

"Woo, Storm-controlling Rain Divine, please bring down the thunderbolt, slay the cruel Northern Barbarians, save your devout citizens! ~ Ugh!... Huff Huff..."

A shining copper spear swiftly thrusts out, startling the roadside peccaries. They know the terrifying nature of these two-legged beasts' tusks that can effortlessly slay many of their kind. A group of ten or so assembled peccaries turn to flee, leaving behind a crowd of crying Mistec tribespeople and the slowly falling body of a chieftain.

"Plop!"

The red-haired Canine Hunter, Chabo, glaring with eyes, withdraws the sharp copper spear from the chieftain's neck. Then, he wipes the blood-stained tip on the chieftain's hair, avoiding the opponent's clothing. Subsequently, he gazes at the bloodstained coarse cloth cotton robe on the chieftain's body, feeling slightly regretful.

"Such sturdy robes are rare in the wilderness. Even if stained with blood, a wash could still make them wearable..."

Red-haired Hunter Chabo thinks for a moment, glances at the captives being escorted. He randomly points out one bare and hunched tribesman.

"You, take off his clothes, wear them, carry them."

"Ah? What? Clothes? Carry?"

Upon hearing the Barbarian Samurai's words, Tribesman Didi stands frozen, perplexed. He doesn't understand the northern Navajo language and can barely comprehend a few common words: "clothes" and "carry."

"You!"

Hunter Chabo waves the long spear, glaring. The Southern Tribes' language, he barely comprehends either. He straightforwardly strips the chieftain's robe himself, then tosses it to Tribesman Didi, also making a wearing gesture.

"Ah, this! This is noble attire, I, I am a lowly ant citizens, how can I wear?..."

Didi understands the Barbarian Samurai's gesture but becomes increasingly fearful. In the Mistek Language, his name "didi" means ant on the ground. And within the Mistek tribes, he is the most humble of the low-status tribespeople, lacking even his own clothing.

"You! Wear it, carry on! Mine. If not, die!"

Hunter Chabo shows impatience, again raising the sharp copper spear at Tribesman Didi. Ant citizen Didi shivers all over, instantly donning the chieftain's robe over himself, stained with the noble's blood. Then, he bends down his hunched back, also carries the heavy basket behind the chieftain on his back.

The surrounding tribespeople look askance, gazing at the fierce red-haired barbarians, showing deep fear. Then, looking at Didi wearing the chieftain's clothing, they exhibit anger and hatred.

Ant citizen Didi, burdened with a bamboo basket, shudders again. But Hunter Chabo has already lost interest in him. He squints his eyes, watching the peccaries that scattered after a dozen steps and are now regrouping, his left hand already reaching for the greatbow behind him.

"These are Southern stinky pigs. Just like those in the wilderness, none are edible."

Another red-haired Hunter, Mique, shakes his head, restraining Chabo's hand. If you ask how he knows, well, he once tried it. That experience is truly one best forgotten.

"Fruit-tree Chabo, the loot from this raid is sufficient, no need to waste precious arrows!"

Mique speaks softly to Chabo, his eyes on the basket Didi is carrying.

"Southern stinky pigs? Bah!"

Upon hearing this, Hunter Chabo furrows his brow, spits distastefully. In the food-scarce wilderness, each time forced to eat stinky pig meat is a nauseating ordeal. The taste is akin to eating swamp mud rotted for many years.

And interestingly enough, Chabo's name originates from a fruit tree, Tzapoyo, while Mique's name comes from another tree, Mesquite, mesquite. Both are named after trees and actually hail from the same wilderness tribe, now part of the same flag team.

"Southern corn, good! Southern stinky pigs, bad! Southern tribes, wealthy, populous, can't fight, extremely good, are Earth Mother Goddess's blessings!... Uh, right, also must praise the Chief Divine!"

Hunter Chabo extends his rough, reddened hand, clasping the sun amulet around his neck, together with Hunter Mique, earnestly offering prayers. Over a hundred Canine Warriors surrounding them bow their heads, praising the divine heavens, celebrating the supreme Chief Divine.

"Praise Chief Divine, Huitzilopochtli! He is supreme and great, greater than Earth Mother Goddess! Awoo!..."

Looking at the praying, shouting Barbarian Samurai, thousands of captured young tribespeople lower their heads, feeling despondent, not making a sound. During these captive days, they've also prayed to the Rain Divine they believe in. Yet the Rain Divine's protection, like the vanishing storm, has been slow to arrive. Day by day, they are escorted by red-haired barbarians, leaving the fertile valley south, headed to unknown barbarian lands.

The towering Cloud Temple appears on the horizon, drawing nearer, and the towering Divine Stone City lies not far to the west. As they watch, they are about to leave Xavi Land, thus utterly losing the Rain Divine's protection... Thinking of this, some tribespeople lower their heads, silently crying.

Ant citizen Didi does not cry. Instead, he blinks, watches the Barbarian Samurai shouting to the sun. He listens to their words, trying hard to remember a repeated keyword, "Huitzilopochtli!"

The brief prayer quickly concludes, and the return journey is just ahead. Canine Warriors celebrate joyously, hollering in the Northern dialect, escorting a multitude of tenfold Mistec captives. The right hands of the captives are firmly bound together with agave ropes, with nothing metallic or stone on their bodies. Meanwhile, the armed Canine Warriors carry copper spears and bronze axes, with greatbows strapped to their backs.

The Mistec captives can only lower their heads, bearing bamboo baskets filled with food and treasures, trudging towards the uncertain northwest. The rumors of Aztec Alliance human sacrifices echo in their minds, rendering the path northward exceptionally arduous and hesitant.

But the Rain Divine's salvation never arrives. And the Rain Divine's warriors curl inside the sturdy Divine Stone City, witnessing the Mexica pillaging vast amounts, without daring any slightest harassment. Or perhaps they've long evaded the Rain Divine's notice, secretly reaching a pact of betrayal against the divine.

Chapter 975: The Weeping Journey North

The summer is scorching, and the autumn wind rises, marking a junction of death and harvest, like the withering yellow grass between mountains. Groups of Canine Warriors escorting hundreds of youthful Mistec men, laden with plundered wealth, embark on their return journey northward.

Similar scenes unfold in the northern region of the Teotihuacan Valley, territory conquered by the Mexica. The resistance of all tribes has turned into death and ashes.

Further south in the valley, large groups of Canine Warriors, donned in Leather Armor and wielding copper weapons, adorned with bone accessories, roam unpredictably. Howls akin to wolves echo between the Mountains and Valleys, accompanied occasionally by sounds of slaughter, followed by a moment's fierce cries and then an eerie silence.

Whenever this happens, the busy Mistec captives digging holes always pause slightly, showing uncontrollable fear. Then, the whips of the Defectors from Divine Stone City mercilessly lash out, urging the captives to continue. In every place where a valley tribe is destroyed, there's a bloodstained pit filled with soil. In the pit, the revered Cloud Priest, the noble Divine City Samurai, and the humble village Militia all have their bodies interwoven, gradually buried by the earth. After covering the bones with soil, the young male and female captives are chosen, laden with plundered food and wealth from the tribe, to begin their long march northward.

As for the remaining elderly and children, the Mexica Warriors show little concern, nor engage in unnecessary massacre. The Jaguars of the jungle never expend needless effort to capture food that can't be carried away. Moreover, the benevolent lord dislikes slaughter, so the warriors naturally restrain themselves.

Groups of youthful captives converge like a stream, like a docile herd of deer, gathering from all corners of the valley until reaching the northern Flower Grove Fort. Then, the herd forms into a flood numbering tens of thousands, stepping into the desolate Trascal Land, heading toward an even more distant north.

"What is the north? According to the high and mighty chieftain, that too is territory of the northern barbarians, filled with white-skinned Serpent People, similar to the green-skinned Jaguar Men, extracting hearts for sacrifices, extremely brutal. Ah, and the red-haired cannibal Werewolves too!"

Tribesman Didi kept his head down, cautiously glanced at the Canine Hunters. Then, he looked toward the North of the Highland, a place he's never been, like the deep Black Abyss beneath the anthill.

"The chieftain often says the north is Trascal Land, warriors wearing white War Clothes, claiming to be descendants of the great serpent in the clouds. Whereas the northwest is the land of the Aztec, warriors dressed in dark green War Clothes, identifying with the fierce Jaguar. Only the south is the ancient Land of the Rain God! Warriors wear blue War Clothes, claiming to be descendants of the Rain Divine, born from the Divine Tree in the clouds, and not really descendants of any beast..."

Thinking this, Didi shook his head in confusion. As a lowly tribesman, he can't distinguish much, nor understand divinity or beasts. In the tribe, he always listens to the chieftain, working hard bending low in the fields, and would never think wildly.

But now, he was captured by red-haired barbarians, walking for a long time. Along the way, many noble Divines and Priests, like turkeys from the village, were killed before his eyes by the barbarians, and buried by him personally. Right now, he's wearing the clothes of the chieftain, even stained with blood...

"No, the tribe's Priests also extract hearts for sacrifices. Isn't that the same, as brutal as the barbarians?"

Ant-Man Didi randomly thought, daring even to question the chieftain's words. Somehow, something seems to burgeon inside his heart, yet he can't grasp it fully. Nevertheless, the road ahead is still long, perhaps beyond his imagination, always giving him a chance to understand.

"Oh, ohhh... Rain Divine!... That's, that's... ohhh!"

As Didi walked with his head down, the cries within the captive group suddenly grew louder, even the swinging and striking of spear shafts by the Canine Warriors could not stop them.

"Ah!"

Fearful cries of terror echo throughout the entire group. Many elderly captives knelt on the ground, hopelessly bowing their heads forward and crying desperately. Didi, affected by them, also knelt on the ground, staring dumbly ahead.

Nearby in front, lay the sacred Cloud Temple, the legendary dwelling of the Rain Divine and Divine Servants. But at this moment, beside the stone statue at the Cloud Temple, a tall mound of heads was stacked.

Thousands of heads piled together, already rotting under the scorching summer sun. But at the highest point, large sections of heads still bear sacred vibrant Feather Crowns, symbolizing the Rain Priests, their revered, immortal identity!

In that moment, Didi's mind went blank. It wasn't fear of death, but some terror transcending death, reaching deep within the heart—fear of the death of Divinity. The humble Ant-Man lay down on the ground, trembling, unable to believe, unable to help himself, merely crying and murmuring.

"Ah! The priests of the Cloud Temple, grander than the heavens, have... all perished?... Ah! How can this be! Ah!..."

"Pah! Crying like this, no longer afraid of death. Such peculiar Southern Tribe!"

Hunter Chabo gritted his teeth fiercely, lowered his Long Spear, spat forcefully, and left the crying crowd. At this moment, these captives seem to have their souls enchanted, like walking corpses, endlessly crying in despair, wailing frantically. Even the threat of death before their eyes couldn't stop them. This very moment, such Mistek people, made the experienced Wilderness Hunter feel a deep unease.

"Don't worry! They just cry for a while, and once they're done, when they're exhausted, they'll start moving again. These Southern tribes, they see the gods as more important than their own lives!"

The hunter Mique watched for a while and then shook his head indifferently. However, he also held his long spear tightly, maintaining a hunter's vigilance.

"Hey! All this crying, it's really ominous."

The hunter Chabo sneered. He tilted his head, eyeing the not-so-scary pile of skulls, then looked at the distant temple and the Black Wolf guards stationed outside.

"Huh? Mique, do you think the mighty Black Wolf Great Chief is in some temple in this cloud or whatever?"

"Ah, I don't think so. The mighty Black Wolf Great Chief should be leading the army, plundering further south in the valley. I heard the Great Chief has gained several thousand more defectors under his command, conquering everything in his path, with the fires already reaching the other side of the mountains!"

"Hey, a few thousand defectors from the Southern tribes, what good are they? Just driving them forward when sieging a village. In a true field battle, two thousand elite troops would be enough to crush them!"

The hunter Chabo raised his head, showing some disdain for the combat strength of the Mistec defectors. Then he glanced again at the temple in the mountain, imagined the treasures inside, and couldn't help but lick his lips.

"Mique, if the Black Wolf Great Chief isn't here, then why is the Great Chief's guard at the entrance of the temple? These temples of the Southern tribes are certainly wealthy. If we could get inside and grab a few things..."

"What?! Chabo, you can't act recklessly! The Great Chief's military discipline is truly strict... If you don't want to live, don't drag me into it!"

Hearing this, the hunter Mique was startled. He quickly covered Chabo's mouth and pulled him back a few steps. The captives' cries continued unabated, drowning out all their subsequent conversation.

The hunter Mique, pulling Chabo aside, whispered a few words, then pointed to the basket of food on Didi's back. Chabo paused, lowered his voice, and hastily asked something. Mique nodded affirmatively, and both broke into broad, joyful smiles.

"Good, really good, Earth Mother Goddess is good! Mique, my good brother, when we return to the tribe's flag unit, we'll sell those goods and let the unit have a prosperous year!"

"Shh! Keep it down! Although the Great Chief turns a blind eye, if the War Priests with the army find out, they won't be lenient!"

"...Yes, you're right. But generally, the War Priests of the Chief Divine tend to let it go, they won't seriously investigate. What we seize with our skills, why should we give it to the corps?... Ah! Still, the Black Wolf Great Chief is good, and the Earth Mother Goddess is better than the priests of the Chief Divine!..."

The hunter Chabo spoke excitedly for a while, even saying things that were taboo. Then, scratching his head, he still felt something strange.

"So many of the Great Chief's guards, so many elite warriors... What exactly is in this Cloud Temple?"

"Who cares! Maybe it's something important for the sacrifices; the Great Chiefs value that the most."

The hunter Mique was indifferent. His gaze remained fixed on the back of the tribesman Didi until Didi finished crying and stood up absent-mindedly, with the heavy bamboo basket still steady as ever, not tipping at all.

"Hmm, this captive is not bad!"

Chabo and Mique exchanged a glance and nodded with a smile. Then, two piercing wolf howls erupted from their mouths, striking people's hearts and reaching the ears of the crying captives.

"Awoo, awoo! The Rain God is dead! The Chief Divine is supreme! Go, turkeys, keep moving north, go!"

Under the orders of the Canine Warriors, over a thousand Mistec captives staggered to their feet and walked numbly towards the north. At this moment, their eyes were full of deathly stillness, devoid of the Rain God's hope. And on the canvas of the death-streaked earth, new faith and new life were being nurtured with the bones of perished divinities.

Chapter 976: Cloud Temple, Wilderness Negotiations

"Haha! The Rain Divine is dead, the Chief Divine is supreme! Esteemed Elder Viko, you are named holy 'cloud' and the chief priest of Divine Stone City, above all elders. Now, you, famous for your piety, witnessing this scene, what are your thoughts?"

The sacred Cloud Temple towers among the mountains. Andiwei, dressed in the ritual robe of the Chief Divine, stands before the window of the great hall. He slightly tilts his head, looks beside him at the low-key old man in a black robe. His face is full of pride, carrying an inexplicable delight as he speaks fluently in Navajo.

"My esteemed chief, all Mistec captives, before heading north, must be brought here to Cloud Temple, to see the Rain Divine Priest leading to the Divine Kingdom, and also to see the sacrificial noble chieftain! ... They will thoroughly witness how the noble figures who resemble divines die humbly, and how they decay like fruit! And their beliefs will die before the sacred temple, just like the dead nobles!"

"Haha, this is my suggestion as Chief God Priest Andiwei to the Mexica Commander-in-Chief. The wise and brave Black Wolf General has also praised and adopted it!"

Upon hearing this, Chief Priest Viko's eyes twinkle. His heart burns with boiling anger, wishing to incinerate the traitor before him into ashes. However, his face reveals no displeasure, only a serene and indifferent smile.

"Andiwei, you truly are the wisest Elder Priest in Cloud Temple!"

Chief Viko smiles without moving a muscle. He observes the barbaric warriors who howl like wolves and act fiercely wild, his pupils slightly contract. Then, he glances at the wailing and despairing Mistec tribespeople, only slightly lowering his eyes.

After a while, Chief Viko glances at the nearby Mexica warrior, then looks at the red-haired barbarian on the other side, smiling amicably. Next, he deliberately speaks using the Mistec priest's divine words, with the gentle tone of the Rain Divine's envoy, kindly.

"Andiwei, you are a descendant of the Tiger Claw King, carrying divine blood. Although you were coerced by the Mexicas to kill Elder Priest Ita, forced to serve them, and did things you shouldn't have done. But I know you did all this under duress. I saw clearly upon arriving here that the sacred Cloud Temple has not suffered severe damage."

"Hmm?!"

Upon hearing this, Andiwei is somewhat surprised. He looks at the chief beside him, his tone changes.

"Esteemed Chief Priest, are you saying?..."

"Andi, this is your outstanding contribution! It's because of your devout heart for the Rain Divine that you endured under the ruthless Mexicas and preserved the Holy Land of the Rain People! ... Witnessed by the Rain Divine! Your achievements are enough to offset the errors made on a lost path and even an indelible merit! The elders of Divine Stone City will forgive you, admire your contributions to the tribes. Your honorable ancestors, wife, and family, knowing what you have done, will be consoled and cry with joy!"

"Eh?... I, I, preserved the Cloud Temple, accomplished great deeds?"

Hearing this, Andiwei's expression freezes, his pupils slightly dilate. This is a path he had never envisioned, leaving him a bit stunned. He follows Chief Viko's gentle words, thinking of his relatives in Divine Stone City, recalling the esteemed life among divines. The young priest's eyes gradually soften a bit. He lowers his head, murmuring in the dialect of the Mistec people.

"This, I...I've done so much... Could I still turn back?"

"Of course you can! Andi, trust me. With me in charge of the City-State, you certainly can turn back!"

Chief Viko smiles kindly, his tone persuasive, yet his words are firm. He cautiously glances at the nearby Mexica warrior, seeing the puzzled expressions of the barbarians, ensuring they don't understand the language, before smiling again.

"Andi, you understand, although the Mexicas are powerful, they can't conquer Divine Stone City. They are merely a side force and won't linger here for long. Once they head north, what will you do?... Will you go with them, abandon your homeland and family, to Aztec Alliance far away? But leaving the familiar Land of the Rain God, as a surrendered foreign priest, what value do you hold for the Aztecs?"

At this moment, Viko pauses slightly. Then, as if realizing something, he adds with a smile.

"Oh, yes, you still have value! You carry the esteemed bloodline of the Tiger Claw King, one of the noblest divine descendants among the Mistec tribes. And the ruthless Aztecs enjoy extracting the hearts of divine descendants to sacrifice them to their Chief Divine!"

"..."

Upon hearing this, Andiwei presses his lips tight, remaining silent. He is hit by the fear hidden inside, his fingers slightly tremble, even his face turns pale.

"Andi, as chief of Divine Stone City, I believe in you, your devotion to the Rain Divine. You still have a chance, to return to your birth tribe, become the high and mighty Elder Priest again! ... But, you also need to trust me, for the sake of protecting our Divine, and for your own future, do something more..."

Chief Viko smiles kindly, like a gentle old man. He uses a soothing tone, speaking in cryptic priestly divine words, thus, in front of Mexica warriors, asks boldly yet kindly.

"The Rain Divine witnesses all, granting forgiveness and protection! Come, Andi, my child, tell me: where is the regiment of Black Wolf of the Mexica legion now? How many troops does he have? ... The resistance of the Tlaxcalans continues, this elite barbarian legion won't stay here forever. How much longer until they retreat?"

"...I, this... I... he..."

Andiwei looks outside the window, his gaze growing increasingly confused. He doesn't know what he's saying, only in the guidance of the chief, like dozing off, uncontrollably whispers an answer.

"The Black Wolf commander, he, he should be leading his legion, a hundred miles south. I told him all the locations of the great tribes in the southern valley. With his temperament, he'll likely wipe them out one by one..."

Upon hearing Andiwei's answer, Chief Viko's eyes flicker, murder intent briefly flashes by. Then, the expression on his face grows even kinder, his smile ever more radiant.

Priests of the northern tribes use various potent potions, only employing crude methods to cloud minds. Whereas Mistec tribes in the south have a long heritage, their priests not only can mix potions, but also possess the ability to manipulate with words. This is why their tones are always gentle and kind.

"Hmm? What are those two guys saying?..."

Red Monkey Ozoma squints his eyes, watching the two at the window, listening to the incomprehensible words, his brows gradually furrowing. With keen intuition like a monkey, he observes Chief Viko's smiles, notices Andiwei's vacant eyes, immediately senses something amiss. As a chieftain grown up in the wilderness, once sensing anything amiss, he acts immediately!

"Hey! You old white-haired fox, what nonsense are you babbling here!"

Red Monkey Ozoma drew out his hand axe, turned the handle, and strode over to Chief Viko. Then, in the incredulous and shocked gaze of the Chief Elder Priest, he directly raised the axe handle, as if wielding a sturdy short stick, and fiercely smashed it on Viko's forehead.

"Bang!"

"Ah!"

The stick landed, right on the forehead. Chief Viko let out a sudden scream, unable to maintain his gentle expression any longer. He trembled as he extended his finger, cursing aloud in clear Navajo.

"You!... I am the Chief Priest of the Rain Divine! You, you... you dare to offend the divine envoy!"

"Bang!"

"Ah!... You, you uncouth barbarian, Chichimec!"

"Bang!"

"Ah!... You short-lived child of the wilderness, who only knows their mother, but doesn't know their father—a mongrel dog!"

"Bang!... Bang!"

"Ah! It hurts... hurts!... I'm begging you, please, stop hitting!"

Red Monkey Ozoma struck five consecutive blows, directly knocking the esteemed Chief Priest Viko to the ground. The old priest hunched over, clutching his head, rolling in pain on the ground, no longer able to utter a single confounding word.

"Haha! What a damn Chief Priest, nothing but a talking white-haired fox! I thought he was so formidable, but he couldn't even handle my five blows!... Our priests of the wilderness can fight coyotes with their bare hands!"

Red Monkey Ozoma looked disdainfully. He stretched out a foot and stomped forcefully on the Chief Priest of Divine Stone City, shouting fiercely.

"You are the envoy of the Divine Stone Tribe, here to show submission to Black Wolf Great Chief, to express obedience! What you should do is bow your head obediently, offer your tribute to the Great

Chief, redeem your so-called Holy Land! What you shouldn't ask, what you shouldn't say, all swallow them, don't let a fart escape!... "

"Ah! Yes, yes!... Please don't hit anymore!..."

"This... This... Honorable Chief Priest, distinguished Elder Viko..."

Andiwei stared dumbfounded at all of this, only feeling something shattering in his mind. But Red Monkey Chieftain Ozoma didn't give him any time to zone out. Moments later, a loud slap landed on his face.

"Smack!"

"Uh!"

"Ha! You foolish colorful bunting, with a face thinking it's all clever! You're nothing more than a turkey!"

Red Monkey Ozoma grabbed Andiwei's ritual robe, stretching out his coarse hand, with rage consuming him, "Smack smack" went two more slaps.

"Truly dumb and stupid! Think carefully, what have you done, how much blood are your hands stained with! Since you're a wolf, don't be indecisive, looking back at the doghouse. You've already tasted the wild, followed other lead wolves, your whole body reeks of the wild! How would a domesticated doghouse ever take you back?... Remember, a wolf in the wild that enters the wrong den will only be overwhelmed and bitten to death, shared out!"

"This... I..."

Hearing this, Andiwei finally snapped back to reality. In that instant, he felt shame and disgrace, clutching his red-swollen face, wishing to hide away in the earth. He had always prided himself on his cleverness, looking down on the barbarians of the northern wilderness, yet here, he was taught a good lesson by the barbarian leader. Afterwards, he lowered his head, looking at the struggling Chief Priest Vika on the ground, losing all respect and only filled with complete hostility and hatred.

"Go! Talk properly with this old fox! If you can't agree, use your fists."

Ozoma withdrew his foot and returned the axe to his waist. He was nothing like the self-proclaimed clever Andiwei. He always remembered the instructions of Black Wolf Great Chief, not forgetting a single bit.

"Tell this old fox! Divine Stone City must submit to the Great Chief, offer worthy hostages, worship the powerful War God, and provide sufficient food!... Not a single one of these four conditions can be missing!"

"As long as these four things are met, the legion will head north, return the Holy Land to them, and the captured divine descendants can be returned as well! If they refuse, the entire Teotihuacan Valley will be burned to bare land! And all the captured divine descendants and nobility will be sent to the sacrificial altar, offered to the War God!"

Subsequently, Ozoma puffed up his chest, shouting the final words, reverberating like thunder.

"This is the negotiation of the wilderness!"

Chapter 977: End of the First Campaign in the Land of the Rain God

The Chief Priest Viko departed, just as quietly as he arrived, cloaked in a low-key black robe and a simple black cloak. However, the esteemed Chief of Divine Stone City left with bruises and a heavy sense of humiliation, alongside an indelible hatred.

Standing in front of the window of the Grand Hall of the Temple, Andiwei watched the cloaked chief, disappearing into the western mountain forests under the escort of samurai. Beyond those forests was the sturdy Divine Stone City, like a hedgehog curled up, stuck behind the Mexica legion.

"Ha! Stop staring. If you truly hate that old fox, wait for him to return for negotiations next time and slaughter him yourself!"

Red Monkey Ozoma smirked and approached the young priest, also gazing at the distant Divine Stone City.

Today's negotiation, though it had not reached a final outcome, had led the Mistec people to be aware of the conditions and express a certain degree of submission. For secret negotiations of such great significance, the envoy from the other side must return a few times. At the very least, Chief Viko needs to share the responsibility of the peace talks with the priests and nobility within Divine Stone City, rather than shoulder everything himself.

"I... myself... kill the Chief?"

At these words, Andiwei froze, hands stiff. He did not doubt the red-haired barbarian's resolve and once again realized the power of the Aztec Alliance. Even a common tribal chief dared to casually speak of killing the Mistec Chief Priest.

"...uh, next negotiation, Chief Viko, may not come...uh, the negotiation was requested by Black Wolf, killing their envoy might ruin the Great Chief's plans..."

"Haha!"

Upon hearing this, Red Monkey Ozoma burst into laughter. He reached out, patted the young priest's tense shoulder, and mocked him.

"A little wolf indeed, afraid even to bite a fox! The Mistec people are powerless on the battlefield; even if a Chief Priest dies, they still come crawling to beg for peace! Besides, these dogs may not fight outsiders well, but their internal struggles are fierce. Even within their dens, they bite each other. If you kill the chief, the rest might even be secretly delighted!"

"..."

Andiwei was again silent, his face a shifting hue, feeling like he'd just been verbally attacked. The red-haired barbarian spoke crudely, but it was indeed the reality of the Southern City States. The Priest Elder Council was known for its intense and brutal infighting...

"Ah! Chief Divine! May you bless me, grant me the light in my heart!"

"Ha! Blessing of the Chief Divine!"

Seeing Andiwei's prayer, Red Monkey Ozoma pursed his lips and also closed his eyes, murmuring a prayer for a moment. Then, Ozoma opened his eyes, gazed at the distant line of captive troops, and seriously asked.

"Little wolf, you're good at counting. How many able-bodied captives have been migrating north these days?"

"Let me see."

Andiwei retrieved a roll of hard paper from his bosom for records. It was Mexica paper, much more useful than wooden boards.

"Up till today, twelve groups have migrated north, each group ranging from five hundred to more than a thousand captives... plus the group that just went past... about ten thousand able-bodied men and women!"

"And according to the message from Black Wolf Commander-in-Chief, there are approximately the same number of able-bodied captives in the valley to be sent over!"

"Hmm, ten thousand plus ten thousand, that's over twenty thousand able-bodied men and women? No, there are also three to four thousand defectors, making it over twenty thousand... five thousand mouths to feed."

Red Monkey Ozoma counted on his fingers for a while. Then, he painstakingly calculated the remaining stockpile, his expression serious.

"With these extra twenty-five thousand people, the legion's food supply will only last a month! Despite much plundering while on campaign, consumption remains high! It seems we must fiercely extract a batch of provisions from Divine Stone City!"

At this time, dispersed plundering by armies typically leads to significant losses. Unless they conquer large grain stores or particularly prosperous areas, surplus is rarely achieved.

"Yes. Chief Divine witnesses! I will severely intimidate Divine Stone City for Black Wolf Great Chief, for the legion! I know their weakness, which is the power of the city-state! If delayed too long, if Teotihuacan Valley is scorched into a barren land, the strength of various groups greatly reduced, Mountain River City's Yun Chen Leader might find the opportunity to invade Divine Stone City! Lowland Mistec and Highland Mistec do not share one heart!..."

Their voices gradually sank, scattered in the late summer breeze. Their gaze drifted towards the west. The west was lush with mountain forests, the highland Divine Stone City, while the lowland Mountain River City Huajuapán lay two hundred li away!

September steadily passed, as the rainy season came to an end. The black-cloaked envoy from Divine Stone City came and went, while migrating captive troops meandered northwards. Mountain River City's Yun Chen Leader had finally gathered over ten thousand Mistec warriors, over ten thousand militia, stationed at the southwestern mountain pass of the valley.

These Mistec armies hailed from lowland and coastal city-states, led by different military leaders, merely united under the banner of Yun Chen Leader. They set camps, occupied strategic positions, withheld action, continuously threatening the southward-moving Mexica legion.

Black Wolf consolidated the troops, bringing six thousand Guajili legion, four thousand Tlaxcala defectors, and four thousand Mistec defectors, standing off against the Mistec people's reinforcements. He wished for a decisive field battle to crush the Mistec forces entirely. However, the opposing leader did not grant him such an opportunity.

Yun Chen Leader's main forces remained entrenched, repeatedly dispatching small units to engage in skirmishes with Mexica scouts in the familiar mountainous forests.

Chapter 978: End of the First Campaign in the Land of the Rain God_2

The sun rises and the moon falls, hundreds of scouts and militia hunt, attack, entangle, and then die like withered grass in the undulating mountain forest. Every day, dozens are killed or wounded,

continuously. For the Mistec people familiar with the terrain, this kind of small-scale mountain forest battle is the best way to level the gap between them and the Mexica warriors.

"Damn it! These boars in the mountain forest just hide in the mud, using their stench to insult us!"

Facing such a battle, Black Wolf felt a bit irritated. Although the Guajili warriors could fight mountainous battles, consuming resources against the Mistec in this way was a real waste and couldn't determine the bigger picture. He felt a strong urge to lead the legion directly to storm the mountain camp of the Yun Chen Leader and personally kill the opponent!

However, moments later, Black Wolf took a deep breath and shook his head. In his heart, the instinct of a commander outweighed the impulse of a warrior.

"The two thousand people of Cloud Mountain City also appeared in the southeastern mountain forest. Divine Stone City still hides thousands of warriors and militia. The Mistec people have a long-standing heritage, can build strong camps and cities, and control key points in the mountains. After all, they are the ancient people of the rain, different from the Tekos people of the wilderness."

"Having come south to this point, plundered over twenty thousand population, and sacked the Teotihuacan Valley... it's time to embark on the journey north! The last message from His Highness said the king urged us urgently, to lead the Imperial Guard Legion north. We don't know if we'll depart yet..."

Thinking of this, Black Wolf looked north with a solemn expression. The high, distant sky was vast and the highland land expansive and empty. That would be the land where American Jaguars ran freely, and eagles soared. As for the verdant mountain forest of the south, it would have to wait until later to be properly dealt with!

"Order! Accept the latest terms from Divine Stone City! Give them five days to hand over food for twenty thousand people for one month! As long as the food is sufficient, we'll release the priests and nobility of the captured tribes and return the Cloud Temple to them!"

At the end of September, outside of Divine Stone City, the Guajili Legion received the last batch of food and withdrew from the Cloud Temple, officially returning north. Twenty thousand strong Mistec prisoners were escorted away from the Teotihuacan Valley. Meanwhile, five thousand defectors from various tribes were also herded by the legion towards the Mountain Peak City of Tlaxcala.

As the sunset fell, birds flew in the mountain forest. Black Wolf Tecolt stood atop a hill north of Divine Stone City with the rear guard of two thousand warriors, gazing silently.

Before him, Divine Stone City impatiently sent out a squad of warriors to reclaim the Cloud Temple. In the further south, thousands of lowland Mistec militia followed the army from afar, like an escort seeing them off the border, yet also akin to grass mice following the Jaguars. As for the main force of the Yun Chen Leader...

Black Wolf squinted, looking towards the opposite mountain range. At the horizon's edge, a blurred cluster of dots and indistinct battle flags could vaguely be seen.

"Commander Black Wolf, that is the battle flag of Yun Chen Leader. A white cloud above a golden sand below. This 'Yun Chen' signifies the revered descendants of the clouds, occupying the bountiful land of Gold Dust, Mountain River City!"

Andiwei explained softly, his expression complex. As the Elder Priest of the Cloud Temple, he had naturally seen the Great Leader of Mountain River City. He was an ambitious Divine Descendant, and equally carried the bloodline of the Tiger Claw King...

"Yun Chen Leader... Land of Gold Dust!"

Black Wolf pronounced each word slowly and steadily, contemplating deeply before solemnly declaring.

"Let's go, no need to look anymore! With the Chief Divine's protection and His Highness's revelation, the Alliance's legion is destined to sweep across the world!... Andiwei, we will return!"

Saying these words, Black Wolf turned his head high, carrying the tall Commander's Flag with him, leading the elite warriors, stepping towards the conquest in the north.

At the same time, a robust middle-aged leader dressed in a luxurious golden robe also stood under the Commander's Flag. His appearance was handsome, teeth white, hands and feet adorned with exquisite silver ornaments, and his face painted with mysterious patterns. These were blue waves, traces of clouds, and the divine rune directly communicating with the Rain Divine and ancestors.

"Honorable Yun Chen Leader, the Aztec barbarians have finally left!"

A scout warrior hurriedly arrived, kneeling on the ground, reporting to the esteemed Great Leader.

"Yes."

Yun Chen Leader nodded slightly, maintaining his dignified divinity. Indeed, he was not only the military leader of Mountain River City but also its Elder Priest. In other words, he had already firmly controlled the entire City-State!

"The Aztecs... Divine Stone City... Cloud Temple..."

The gaze of Yun Chen Leader did not linger long on the receding Wolf Banner. He looked again at Divine Stone City, pondering deeply, then once more towards the Cloud Temple not far away. Atop the towering temple, the Rain Divine's flag had just been hoisted, announcing the return of the divine.

"Great Leader, Divine Stone City has already sent a team of warriors to be the first to reclaim the Cloud Temple!"

"Ha! These old fellows of Divine Stone City, abandoning the Holy Land, allowing plunder, and still secretly making peace with the Aztec barbarians... they truly disgrace the Rain Divine and humiliate the tribes!"

Yun Chen Leader's face turned slightly cold, and in front of numerous chieftains, he solemnly reprimanded with righteous indignation. Yet, the corners of his mouth subtly curled up, as he had already made a decision in his heart!

"The various tribes of Mistec can't continue like this! Facing the increasingly powerful Mexicans, only the scattered tribes united together could have hope of resistance! And to unite the whole alliance, who else but me?"

"The Teotihuacan Valley has been plundered, and Divine Stone City's strength severely injured. Yet in my hand, there's a legion of twenty thousand from the lowlands and coast, and I hold the righteous cause of rescuing the Holy Land... The rulership of Divine Stone City, even the divine authority of the entire Highland Mistec, must all be discussed anew!"

Thinking of this, Yun Chen Leader lowered his eyes slightly, prayed for a second for the Tlaxcala Alliance in the north. Then, opening his eyes, he was filled with a fighting spirit.

"Go! Army march north to defend the revered Cloud Temple!"

Yun Chen Leader ordered in a deep voice. His face was full of genuine devotion, like an envoy of the divine, inspiring reverence in one glance.

"With the Rain Divine's protection, I led the army to drive out the brutal Aztecs!... In gratitude to the Rain Divine, five days later, I will hold a sacred ceremony in the Cloud Temple! Send envoys, invite the various chieftains of Divine Stone City, and several other Elder Priests to jointly participate in the festival!"

The drizzle fell from the gloomy sky, as if dust falling from the clouds. The balance of power had been broken, and the sound of wind before the coming storm of rain howled in the Land of the Rain Divine, turning into the last rain before the end of the rainy season.

The conflicts among the Mistec tribes would soon arise, and as for the fate of the Telascallan... that would be up to the Cloud Serpent to protect!

Chapter 979: Bountiful Farmlands, the Northward King

The sunrise, with its canopy of clouds, marks the autumn glow of September. The mountain winds howl, and the long Wolf Banner shines brilliantly. Cooking smoke curls, gently brushing against the soaring Eagle Feather. Outside the flat Water Valley City, the vast Mexica camp bathes in the bright morning light, gradually buzzing with human voices.

The horn sounds, and tens of thousands of Legion Warriors awaken from their slumber. They organize their armor and maintain their weapons while also preparing their breakfast.

"呜~! 呜~!"

The desolate horn resounded across the vast valley, awakening the dozens of militia encampments stretched over twenty miles. At the command of the Militia Captain, thousands of Telascallan civilians emerged from makeshift hovels and pits. Following that, everyone, regardless of age or gender, gathered before the main emblem of the Chief Divine in the center of the camp.

Soon, under the guidance of the Chief God Priest, more than a hundred thousand people raised their heads in unison, facing the morning light of the East, praying to the Supreme Chief God!

"Praise our God Huitzilopochtli! He is supreme and omnipotent! He grants us sunshine and rain, harvest and food!..."

A chorus of chaotic prayers echo through the vast valley, like a sudden storm in the rainy season, merging into orderly thunder. Every time such a collective prayer is held, it's unforgettable, deeply engraved in the hearts of both villagers and warriors!

At this moment, many newly converted Telascallan cannot hold back their tears. It seems as though a beam of light falls upon their barren and parched hearts, dispelling the darkness of death and bringing hope for new life! Everything is like the nearly ripening farmlands around the militia encampments, heralding perhaps a peaceful future.

"...Praise our God! He shields me, writing new Chapters across the world with spears and plows!"

Xiulote, dressed in ceremonial dress, raised his hands high towards the red sun in the sky, uttering the ruler's prayer. Standing atop the Water Valley City wall, he cast his gaze around, and boundless cornfields entered his sight.

In the fields, the corn thrives, with most stalks bearing one or two ears, and only a few sprawling and lodging. With the rainy season past, the sunny weather is also ideal for harvest. This year's situation around the Water Valley City is evidently a rare bumper harvest!

"The land after the carnage always turns more fertile... The use of compost helped somewhat..."

With bright eyes, Xiulote straightened his spine. Observing the endless, lush green and golden fields before him, a satisfied smile spread across his face, like a sincere child whose voice turned clear.

"Five hundred thousand mu! Five hundred thousand mu of bountiful land! I've stayed here for nearly half a year with the Imperial Guard Legion, personally managing each camp to guide over a hundred thousand Telascallans for this scene!"

Staring at the ruler's star-like eyes and listening to the ruler's proud proclamation, Nashu's heart began to beat rapidly. She struggled to clutch her chest, her eyes gradually turning misty, like dew under the sunlight, rushing unhesitatingly towards the sun's rays.

"Congratulations, Your Highness! You are the true king!"

Bertade bowed his head in admiration, sincerely praising.

"The bountiful fields are the will of the people, and they are the essence of divinity! You are the immortal Xiulotel, the master of new life and death, bringing pure and bright vitality after destroying decaying death!"

"Haha!"

Upon hearing this, Xiulote laughed heartily, a sense of comfort spreading across his entire being, even his pores relaxed. Building and creating always bring long-lasting happiness. At this moment, the joy and satisfaction in his heart surpassed even leading tens of thousands on the battlefield!

The sun rose slowly, the birds circled in the sky, farmers busied in the fields, while warriors drilled in the camps, everything running smoothly.

Xiulote descended from the city wall, changing into a light white robe, entering the grand hall within the city. Seated cross-legged in the grand hall, with Nashu carrying a short dagger behind him, Bertade with a brass sword on his left, and on his right—a resolute and calm middle-aged warrior. The warrior's face bore slight aging, yet his eyes were as sharp as a hawk's.

"Bertade, September will come to an end, the rainy season is past, and autumn harvests should pose no problem. King Aweit has again sent a Messenger, urging us eagerly... In two days, I will lead the four thousand Imperial Guard Legion north to meet the king in Tree Snake City!"

Saying this, Xiulote glanced at the calm-headed Head Warrior, then looked at the other middle-aged warrior with a gentle smile.

"This northern journey, besides the four thousand Imperial Guards, will include eight thousand Yu Yan Legion, eight thousand Huashu Legion, and an additional thousand elite Fire Warriors gathered from various groups, replenishing the king's newly formed Tonsured Guard... totaling over twenty thousand. The army only needs to prepare twenty days of food, as supply will naturally be provided once with the Northern Route Army."

"Your Highness, you... only bring four thousand guards?"

Hearing this, Bertade pursed his lips, inquiring in a deep voice.

The journey from Water Valley City to Tree Snake City is only one hundred fifty li. Large Telascallan strongholds along the way have all been cleared by the Northern and Southern Armies. Even marching the slow-moving Artillery Camp north takes no more than ten days. Yet, beyond those hundred li lies the two regions controlled by the Northern Route Army, where the king's legion possesses overwhelming advantage...

"Hmm. Four thousand Imperial Guards, including three thousand in heavy armor and one thousand from the artillery camp, are more than sufficient!"

Xiulote smiled confidently and made his decision.

"As for the remaining three thousand Imperial Guards... Bertade, I leave them all to you! Black Wolf has already sent word that the Divine Stone City has dispatched an envoy indicating submission, and the Mistec people are withdrawing completely. His Guajili Legion will return any day now. Scouts in the South have also confirmed the movements of the Mistec people."

"... Since the threat from the rear has been relieved, we can pull out half of the Royal Legion and Militia from the Mountain Pass Fortresses and Blade Road City to replenish the camp at Water Valley City. That amounts to three thousand Mexica Warriors and three thousand Lake Region Militias, totaling six thousand men. Although the Coiled Python Legion is mainly composed of militia, it can still be used to maintain the local farming camps. Plus, Black Wolf has fifteen thousand men..."

"Bertade, my loyal Head Warrior, oversee the South in my stead! When I leave, the thirty thousand warriors in the South will all be under your command!"

"Take good care of the camp at Water Valley City, complete this year's autumn harvest, and appease the over one hundred thousand Telascallan villagers! Also, Black Wolf mentioned that he would bring back more than twenty thousand Mistec youths. You must help me transport these precious people back to the Kingdom of the Lake!"

Upon hearing about overseeing the South, Bertade was taken aback. He opened his mouth in surprise and asked with concern.

"Your Highness, what about your escort on this journey north?"

"Haha! No worries. Guard Commander Ecatl is skilled in martial arts and has guarded my grandfather for many years. This time heading north, he will accompany me, advising on military matters and participating in the defense. Yes, this was also a suggestion you had given me earlier."

After speaking, Xiulote affectionately reached out his hand and patted the shoulder of the middle-aged warrior beside him. This person was a trusted aide to his grandfather and a family warrior he had known since childhood.

"Ecatl, this time on our northern journey, the task is entrusted to you!"

The former High Priest's Guard Commander, the middle-aged family warrior Ecatl, immediately knelt on the ground, bowing deeply in reverence.

"Your esteemed Highness, you are the heir of the Holy City's Royal Family! I will pledge my life to guard by your side, like my forefathers and brothers before me! I will stand before you, be it thunderbolts, arrows, spears, or poison!"

Seeing Ecatl bowing toward the King, Bertade pursed his lips, feeling a torrent of complex emotions within. However, he knew that His Highness had already chosen a new path for him. In the end, all of this was unavoidable.

After several moments, the calm Head Warrior knelt on one knee, also offering a deep bow.

"Your Highness, I adhere to your commands, my one and only sun!"

"Very well!"

Xiulote nodded slightly, his expression calm yet bearing increasingly mature authority. He hesitated briefly, calculating the food supply in the camp, and then asked seriously,

"Bertade, how is the transportation of the Telascallan youth proceeding?"

"Your Highness, since the eastward campaign began, the Southern Army of the Kingdom has prioritized acquiring population as its primary mission. Before attacking the Holy City in June, the Southern Army captured 120,000 people from various Telascallan tribes, killed 30,000, and transported 30,000, all of whom were young and old under 35."

Bertade paused slightly, glancing at His Highness's calm face before speaking cautiously.

"After the pacification of the Holy City Cholula... another 90,000 were captured, and 30,000 were killed. Over the past three months, the Kingdom has launched a large number of newly constructed canoes, speeding up transportation, and a total of 60,000 have been relocated! In total, the Southern Army has captured 210,000, and 90,000 have already been relocated. Approximately 120,000 remain stationed around the Water Valley City region, responsible for harvesting 500,000 mu of farmland!"

"Good! Good! More than 200,000 people, with nearly half already relocated! If these 200,000 tribes are settled in the southern part of the Kingdom, the Kingdom of the Lake's strength will dramatically transform!"

The young royal was extremely satisfied. He turned to look southeast, waiting for Black Wolf's Guajili Legion to return, bringing another 20,000 youths. These relocated tribes and youth had been stripped of their original nobility and chieftains, making them entirely under the Kingdom's control! And once these more than 200,000 people were stabilized, they could support another non-producing army!

"In this turbulent world of Central America, ultimately, it's the army in hand that holds sway!"

Xiulote lowered his gaze, thoughts flashing through his mind, determination welling up in his chest. After a long pause, he beckoned Bertade closer to discuss another critical task, the final arrangement.

The campfire flickered, swaying without wind. As the moon set and the sun rose, another two days flowed like water. Flowing southward, against the Tarsas River northward lies the river's original source. And towering White Snake Hill City and Cloud Serpent Mountain City lay to the north of the river's source, sixty to seventy miles away.

By the end of September, Black Wolf's Royal Banner stood tall, marching northward under the escort of four thousand Imperial Guard Warriors. Heavy copper cannons were dragged by civilians, containing the power of destruction. The large Kingdom Legion had already taken the lead, heading to the King's camp outside Tree Snake City.

The King followed the mountain road, walking from the bountiful southern fields to the overgrown northern lands. However, this time, behind him, there was no high-raised Wolf Banner, only a seemingly cold yet warming silver box.

Chapter 980: Wooden Boat Goes West, Longship Comes East

The Long River rolls on, heading southwest. It's the second largest river in the world, and the Alliance's longest river in the south, known as the Tarsas River. The Tarsas River runs from east to west, winding for two thousand Li, serving as the only path connecting the eastern and western regions.

At the westernmost end of the Long River, it flows out to the sea at Trout Fish Village, merging into the vast Eastern Pacific Ocean, right by the emerging Black Rock Mountain iron ore mine. This marks the

southernmost border of the Kingdom of the Lake and is also the starting and ending point of the kingdom's first sea exploration.

Three Crocodile God oar-sail ships, laden with the spoils of exploration, returned to the kingdom from here. Afterwards, they sailed upstream northward, reaching the vast and flourishing Atoyac Lake, where they lingered for several months at the Southern Shipbuilding Department outside Zicao City.

The Prepecha shipwrights carefully inspected and repaired damaged planks and sewed up the scattered sails. And when the first double-hulled canoe, full of Telascallan youths, arrived at Atoyac Lake, a new Royal Decree, accompanied by the rainy season's dark clouds, rolled in.

When the Mexica Warriors, carrying the prince's Royal Decree, found Chiwaco in a small village outside the shipyard, he was lying on a pile of straw, wearing a large straw hat, leisurely basking in... well, there wasn't any sun in the sky, just dark clouds and mountain wind. The old militia was enjoying himself in the breeze, holding a bag of sunflower seeds, leisurely cracking them.

This time at sea, the fleet exchanged low-cost for a lot of gold and silver ore. After returning to the kingdom and refining it, everyone divided the gold and silver ingots.

Most of the extra earnings, Chiwaco had someone take to his daughter Luwei and son-in-law Weizti in the Capital Region. As for the remainder, the old militia used it to set up a house near the shipyard, improving his accommodation and food. Having spent too much time at sea, rowing in battle, dealing with wind and dampness, his old back ached terribly, unable to withstand exertion like before, feeling most comfortable lying on straw.

"Royal Decree: The exploration fleet must set out immediately, and within one month, arrive at the Water Valley City's camp to receive new divine instructions!"

The prince's Royal Decree allows no defiance. The warriors left the seal and Jade Talisman, then turned and left. Chiwaco was left standing there, staring blankly at the rainy season's dark clouds. Not until the first clap of thunder struck from the sky did the old militia suddenly awaken. He glared, gritting his teeth, and angrily threw the bag of seeds in his hand to the ground, cursing.

"Ah, what a blind old heaven! Why can't the thunder falling from the sky strike that detestable prince!"

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

The thunder roared, and the rain came down suddenly. The old militia stomped his feet, cursing a few more times in the rain, then spat a few times at the sky before hurriedly crouching in the mud, picking up the scattered sunflower seeds one by one and placing them back into the bag.

"Chief Divine! Rain Divine! Three Gods! And all the other gods, please spare this old bag of bones!..."

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

The stormy winds and thunder of the rainy season came from the East, unceasing, just like the king's decree. Four brand new Crocodile God oar-sail ships set sail from the Southern Shipbuilding Department, carrying a hundred and forty sailors and sixty warriors, joining the existing fleet. The entire kingdom's exploration team expanded slightly over three hundred people, with seven oar-sailed longships, and the Prepecha Warriors commanded by Huitu Puapu also reached a hundred men. Thereafter, the Kingdom of the Lake's exploration team stayed for several months, and during the peak of the rainy season, set sail once again.

Traveling by boat during the rainy season was full of hardships. The further upstream, the more turbulent the Tarsas River's waters became. The fleet passed the Two Hundred Li Town, Four Hundred Li Town, reaching Six Hundred Li Town, Tal Town, to repair the ships again. The entire Long River lacked maintenance work, often encountering floating logs and underwater reefs. Fortunately, both the oar-sail ships and canoes had very shallow drafts, unaffected by the reefs during this high-water season.

Since the Eastern Conquest, Tal Town, as a node for east-west communication along the river, had become increasingly prosperous. Elder General Etalik, following the prince's orders, deployed two hundred warriors and a thousand militia to build a simple wooden fort, the Sikkim Fortress. The so-called "Sikkim" naturally contained both tin ore and gold mines. The Telascallan captives transported here amounted to three thousand people. Among them, two thousand young men and women were stationed here to cultivate the riverbank lands; the remaining one thousand sturdy men served as laborers, constructing simple docks and working in the surrounding mountain tin mines. As for the scattered small gold mines, the stationed militia secretly mined them, although they were not yet sizable.

The exploration fleet stayed for ten days, avoiding the peak of the rainy season. Chiwaco often stood at the dock, watching the canoes sailing in the wind and rain, adventuring westward, silent and unspeaking.

These small boats were still loaded with Telascallan captives, regardless of day or raining, sped westward with the swift river currents towards the western kingdom. They went with wind and water, speeding westward, able to travel eight hundred Li in just ten days! From the Eight Hundred Town of the alliance's south to the south of the kingdom at Atoyac Lake. Of course, when these canoes returned upstream, it took more than a month.

"Phew! Sailing at this time, with strong winds and swift waters, if someone falls into the water, how could they be saved?"

"Ha! Old Chiwaco, what are you worried about? They're just Telascallan captives, not our Prepecha people! I've heard from Prepecha warriors stationed at Sikkim Fortress; for every fleet transporting captives, the prince sets a military law: on this thousand-plus-Li journey from Water Valley City to Atoyac Lake, each batch of returned captives shall have no more than twenty percent deaths. Exceeding this number means the leader will be beheaded! Delays beyond half a month also mean beheading! And if more than twenty percent of the captives escape, it's still beheading!"

Speaking of this, Puapu smacked his lips with admiration.

"Tsk tsk, the prince's military law is truly formidable! By the way, I've also heard the prince's grandfather, the Alliance's High Priest, previously died in the Holy City of Cholula. To avenge, the prince set the entire Holy City of Cholula ablaze, sacrificing all twelve priestly families! Those were twelve divine descendant priestly families, with legacies spanning hundreds or even thousands of years, storing untold divine objects and treasures..."

"What?! Burned down the Holy City of Cholula with a single fire?"

Upon hearing this, Chiwaco couldn't help but shiver. A thunderous roar arrived, startling Chiwaco into a panic jump. He cautiously looked at the dark clouds and touched his head, then lowered his voice.

"What's that? The High Priest Great Master's death? How many people will lose their heads?"

"I guess... a total of at least several thousand or even tens of thousands? This Eastern Conquest, said to be a divine war of archrivals, the Mexica legion fought fiercely, terrifyingly fierce! Seeing these

boatloads of captives, tens of thousands cannot be stopped. With so many captives captured, how could the dead be few?..."

"...Sigh! The Telascallans, it seems, are finished! The prince even set deadlines for us, but it's hard to sail against the current, with the heavy rain and turbulent waters, it's certain we will miss the deadline. Could they... behead us too?"

"Uh... this... shouldn't be, right? If they behead us, who will go to the sea for the prince?..."

Hearing this, Puapu shuddered all over. He looked at the gloomy sky, hesitated for a moment, gritted his teeth, and advised in a deep voice.

"Old Chiwaco, I think we shouldn't wait any longer. The peak of the rainy season has passed. Even if it involves some risk, the fleet should head north as soon as possible!"

"Hmm!"

The two exchanged glances and nodded resolutely. The long wind blew from the horizon with a vast sound, the deafening thunder roared, and dense raindrops poured down, all coming from the East.

The next day, the seven oar-sailed longships set sail again. They ascended the river, traveling two hundred Li to reach another node along the eastward river, the Eight Hundred Town. Upon reaching this point, it marked the mid-upper course of the Tarsas River. Beyond here, the river steeply ascends, making upstream navigation impossible, requiring the summoning of hundreds of towpath workers by the warrior leader of the town for upward towing.

Chiwaco pursed his lips, standing on the bow, watching the roaring river, lost in thought.

Mountain Bird Cavado from the Yaolem tribe stood beside him, curiously looking around. As a hunter from the Northern Tribe named after the mountain bird, he had excellent vision, so the old militia appointed him as the ship's lookout.

As they traveled, Mountain Bird saw countless trees, uncountable people, saw unknown heights of temples, and experienced torrential rains he had never encountered on the northern wilderness. To him, everything along the way was fascinating, like a wild bird that had ventured into a city-state, never seeing enough.

"Such a long, long river! As long as the tail of the mythical fire-bringing divine mouse!..."

Mountain Bird widened his eyes, looking at the long river ahead. A protruding "turtle" caught his attention. He squinted his eyes, watched closely for a moment, and suddenly pointed in the turtle's direction, shouting harshly in broken Prepecha.

"Man! There's a man!"