

Aztec Civilization: Destiny to Conquer America!

#Chapter 1 - 1 Capturing Prisoners –

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The setting sun cast its glow on the vast sea of trees, with clouds tinged in rosy twilight undulating like waves. The sky was as clean as a still lake, with a single wisp of cooking smoke rising faintly.

Beneath the smoke lay a rudimentary settlement, scattered with huts constructed of branches and tall grass. Dozens of tribespeople, clad in leather skirts, gathered around the central fire pit. They cooked, laughed, chatted, and played. The air soon carried the aroma of corn, wild vegetables, and the meat of some unidentifiable animal.

Twelve-year-old Xiulote stood deep in the forest, gazing somewhat bewilderedly at the distant settlement.

He had a handsome face, with black hair, black eyes, and yellow skin, and a clean little face. Atop his head he wore a conical cap, wrapped in an all-encompassing dark green cloak. Around his waist, he tied a brown loincloth that hung down just enough to cover his privates, and on his feet were soft deer leather shoes.

In his right hand, he held an obsidian dagger a foot long, and his left hand was bound with a small shield that was large enough to cover his diminutive body. The most eye-catching feature was a specially made obsidian necklace that dangled from his neck down to his chest, a symbol of important status.

Xiulote glanced ahead, seeing a group of fierce, strong warriors barely visible in the shadows of the trees.

The warriors wore green leather armor, outlining their muscular frames. The cuffs of their sleeves and pant legs were dyed red, and they were all in the same undergarments and pointed leather caps. Most were barefooted, with a rope tied around their waists, with a leather wooden shield in their left hand, about half a meter in size, engraved with fearsome patterns. In their right hands, they held obsidian-tipped wooden staves over a meter long, with their sharp inserts already removed.

At this moment, the warriors were crouched and silent, like beasts in the jungle, their eyes gleaming with danger and excitement.

Perhaps sensing Xiulote's gaze, two warriors stood up and walked over silently. The leading warrior was in his thirties or forties, exceptionally muscular. His face was painted with red and green stripes, and he wore a fearsome tiger helmet. Bright feathers hung from the back of his helmet, draping over a spotted yellow leather armor, making him resemble an upright walking beast.

This was the empire's elite, the leader of a 20-person squadron, a Jaguar nobility warrior.

The Jaguar warrior approached Xiulote, "Xiulote, we are about to attack. This is your first battle, so you don't need to follow us in the charge. You stand on the periphery, and if you see any wild people escaping, tell Ters. If you see a suitable opponent, you can also move in, but use your shield and dagger well."

"Remember, you don't need to capture prisoners, don't hold back!"

Having said this, he turned his head to instruct a young warrior beside him, "Ters, take good care of Xiulote, and don't let him face the wrong opponent. If he can handle it, don't intervene. Let him get a taste of blood for the first time. I will bring you two prisoners."

Finally, the Jaguar warrior nodded at Xiulote. He grinned, showing teeth glinting in the light, then silently left again.

The young warrior beside Xiulote was about twenty years old. He crouched down beside Xiulote with some dismay, "Xiulote, I will be right by your side. Later, you can pick out a lone little wild person or an old one..."

"Ters, why are we attacking these tribespeople? They haven't harmed us," Xiulote's eyes filled with confusion as the "past" memories still swirled in his mind. Though beginning to blur, values from centuries later stubbornly persisted in his heart, in this cruel jungle era.

"Why?" Ters scratched his head, "Because the new Tratuoani has just ascended to the throne, and we need more sacrifices for the coronation ceremony."

"Then why do we need to spend so many lives on a sacrificial rite?"

"Because it's the gods' preference..."

Just then, a clear eagle cry rang out, followed by dozens of figures rushing out of the dense jungle.

The warriors let out terrible howls as they surrounded the settlement from all directions. A "Jaguar" led the charge, its striped pelt dancing wildly, while the heavy obsidian stave moved like flashing lightning.

He deftly slapped and knocked a young savage unconscious to the ground. Then, with a backhand strike to another's waist, the man immediately fell to the ground, writhing in pain. The other Samurai were also continuously achieving victories. Even though the tribe's numbers were four to five times that of the Samurai, the battle was lopsided.

The short spears hastily raised by the tribal warriors were skillfully dodged by the Samurai, leaving shallow scratches on their leather armor. In contrast, the counterstrikes with clubs were powerful and forceful, knocking down the tribespeople in a single blow.

A few tribal hunters began to resist, shooting their crude hunting bows and sending homemade short arrows into the Samurai's leather armor. This was the last effective resistance—the hunters were quickly prioritized and taken down by the Samurai who were drawn to them.

What followed was a one-sided chase and capture; the tribespeople scattered in all directions, fleeing for their lives while the Samurai either pursued them or took out ropes to tie up the captives that satisfied them. A Samurai began to toss the fire from the hearth toward the thatched huts, and soon both the flames and cries filled the evening sky.

"Let's go," Ters urged from behind. Xiulote, however, was transfixed by the tribal fire, with shadows flickering before his eyes and cries and laughter seeming both distant and close. Suddenly, a slender figure darted towards him from the front, their running accompanied by heavy panting, heading straight for Xiulote.

"Be careful!" a worried shout came from behind. The figure in the front had also spotted Xiulote and thrust a sharp wooden spear directly at his small foe.

Xiulote's vision blurred momentarily; instinctively, his left hand raised the shield, and the wooden spear grazed against the thick hide and slid aside. Two years of rigorous training had ingrained the movements into his muscles like flowing clouds and water. Xiulote then stepped forward, and his right hand followed with a thrust, plunging the dagger deep into a soft object as a wet warmth quickly spread across his small palm.

The figure in front hesitated, the wooden spear weakly striking the shield again, and then a second time, with rapidly diminishing force.

Only then did Xiulote see the person before him—a disheveled teenager. He was extremely thin, clearly suffering from long-term malnutrition. Merely fifteen or sixteen, his eyes filled with hatred stared intently at Xiulote.

Soon, the teenager's pupils began to dilate, and his body went limp, sliding down from the dagger and collapsing helplessly in front of Xiulote. His lifeless eyes were still fixed on Xiulote.

Xiulote felt as if he had been struck. He staggered backward, the dagger slipping from his right hand to the ground as his knees suddenly buckled. At that moment, a pair of large hands reached from behind and steadily supported the young man's shoulders.

"Well done," Ters said with a smile, "The shield block and the thrust were very skilled. It seems the captain and the squad leader did a good job with the training."

"I've killed someone, an innocent person..." Xiulote trembled slightly, his eyes losing focus as he murmured softly. Reality had ripped through the peaceful past, as if awakening him from a deep dream. This was the first time in this life or the last that he had killed a person.

"What?"

"Why?..."

"What do you mean, why? Battle is the greatest honor, the greatest joy. Of course, sacrificial rites too. We'll capture more sacrifices, and then we can look forward to this year's coronation ceremony. I'm really looking forward to it." Ters smiled innocently, his eyes shining with joy.

"Blood... Death... Is it destined to be this way?..."

"Xiulote, what are you saying? Speak up, I can't hear you clearly." Ters scratched his head.

"Never mind, it's normal to feel a bit dizzy the first time. I felt the same way during my first time, although you're a bit younger. Oh, it looks like the captain has finished over there; let's hurry over." Ters picked up the dagger and tucked it into Xiulote's waist. Then, he half-dragged the young man towards Jaguar.

Behind them, the body of a young boy lay askew on the ground, his eyes lifelessly staring at the sky. As the sunset faded, darkness swiftly swallowed him in the savage and wild American woods.

Chapter 2: Chapter 2: Captive

"You fools, injuring yourselves against such a small settlement!" before Xiulote, Jaguar Olosh was explosive with fury, roaring at several warriors scratched by long spears and short arrows.

"Don't just stand there, treat your wounds; smear them with agave juice and apply the ink tree leaves. If chosen by the God of Death Xiulotel, you might just rot on your way back through the rainforest!"

Upon hearing this, the warriors took out their prepared small sacks of henequen cloth and began to treat one another's wounds with these natural remedies.

As a classic militaristic society with decades of warfare, the Aztec city-states had developed effective methods for dealing with injuries, utilizing antibacterial plants like agave and the ink tree.

"And you, why tie up these old men and children? Carrying them on your back through the rainforest for days? Release them, all the old men, children, and frail women. That way, next time there's a great sacrifice, we can capture more people."

"Captain Olosh, here's a hunter with an injured leg."

"Hmm?" Olosh glanced at the tribal hunter on the ground, and Xiulote finally regained some focus, looking toward the hunter.

The hunter, around thirty years old, had a weather-beaten face. He slightly lowered his eyes, his left leg twisted unnaturally, while a long spear and a single bow lay scattered beside his right leg. He curled up, silent, leaning near the fire pit.

Olosh walked closer, kicking the spear on the ground away. He then glanced at the man's slightly curled hand and calluses, his pupils dilating slightly as he reached for the Obsidian Club. "We can't keep this one! Marley, you've just been shot by an arrow from the hunters, deal with this hunter yourself."

"Yes, captain," a warrior with leaves on his right shoulder replied as he approached with a war club, his face wearing a cruel smile. He swung the club viciously down at the hunter on the ground.

As the war club swung down, the hunter's right leg suddenly kicked out, springing up from the ground like a hunting dog. His right arm extended, and at some point, he had obtained a bone arrowhead, which he drove straight toward Marley's neck.

Marley recoiled in horror, swinging his war club into empty air.

Just as the arrowhead was about to penetrate his neck, an Obsidian War Club beat first. First the club slapped down on the hunter's arm, instantly twisting it off target, and then the club spiked forward, striking the hunter's chin with a crack as a bone snapped.

Xiulote then saw the hunter's eyes widen suddenly, those familiar eyes of hatred. The war club broke the hunter's neck, and his head tilted as his body fell powerlessly to the mud.

Marley recovered, angrily beating the body on the ground, the body swaying like a tattered doll under the blows of the stone club.

Xiulote heard a stifled cry and saw nearby where the children were, a slender body twitching. An eleven or twelve-year-old girl was crying while looking at the hunter on the ground.

"Enough!" Xiulote, fluctuating in his emotions, finally could not hold back, "Stop, he is already dead! What honor is there in tormenting the body of a brave warrior?"

Marley whipped around, glaring at Xiulote with eyes that gleamed like a bloodthirsty wolf's.

"Stop, turkey!" Olosh frowned, "Be more alert next time. Go do something useful, tie up the young captives together."

Only then did Marley stop, glaring at Xiulote once more before turning to leave.

"Xiulote, how was today's hunt?" Olosh strode forward, patting the young man's shoulder fondly.

"Xiulote took down a prospective warrior today, his shield thrust was excellent," Ters stepped forward to answer.

"Good!" Olosh finally smiled, nodding, "Ters, go count the captives, those two over there are for you. Xiulote, what are you doing?"

Xiulote crouched down, gazed into the lifeless eyes for a moment, then slowly closed the hunter's eyes. The crying nearby seemed only to grow louder.

Olosh, observing Xiulote's actions, sighed lightly, "Alright, he was a warrior worthy of respect. Xiulote, do not waste time on the dead enemy."

Xiulote nodded silently, unsure whether he was responding to a particular sentence from Olosh or perhaps none at all.

"Captain, I've counted them, there are 'one palm of two palms minus one palm' of suitable captives," Ters ran back excitedly to report.

"5 times 10 minus 5, that's 45," Xiulote calculated silently in his mind.

This tribe had at most just over a hundred people, losing 45 young men and women at once, along with a few dead in battle, was almost a complete devastation.

The remaining fifty or so elderly, weak, sick, and disabled, how long could they survive in this fierce jungle? Even if they struggled on temporarily, within a decade or two, when their vitality was restored, they would again be targeted by capture squads, continuing this bloody cycle.

"In this era of brutal slaughter, what can I possibly do?" Xiulote thought silently as he watched the burning settlement.

"Great! Each of us has about two or three captives, we can prepare to head back," Olosh nodded vigorously, shouting loudly, "The battle is over! Now, you can find some amusement on your own. But remember, turkeys: do not kill any of the sacrifices we can take back!"

The samurai thunderously acknowledged the order, swiftly unfastened their shields from their left arms, and inserted their obsidian clubs behind their backs. They searched and then, with broad smiles, hoisted a captive each and walked toward the dark forest.

Xiulote suddenly noticed Marley, that cruel samurai, directly approaching the crying girl.

"Marley, what are you doing!" Seeing such a helpless girl and thinking about the fate she faced, Xiulote truly became angry. The youth rushed forward, vigorously raised his shield, and blocked Marley.

"That old hound almost stabbed me to death with an arrowhead!" Marley also roared back, "I want to get back at him through his daughter!"

"Scoundrel, you coward! A coward who picks on children!" Xiulote yelled furiously.

"What did you say!" Marley's eyes turned red in an instant, and he reached for his war club on his back. Being called a coward was the most despicable insult in the warrior-prizing Mexica society.

"Do not draw weapons against your own people!" A roaring voice came through. "Jaguar," like a wild beast, rushed over, held Xiulote back with his left hand, and yanked with his right hand so hard that Marley staggered back, nearly flung away.

"Xiulote, what's going on here?" Olosh separated them, looking displeased at Xiulote.

"Marley was about to harm that girl."

"That girl is that hound's..."

"Shut up!" Olosh turned his head and yelled. His face was angrier than ever before.

"Marley, I don't care what you want to do, but you do not raise your hand against your own people!"

"Xiulote is a warrior, and soon he will be a revered priest! War priests are sacred in the army; you must respect his will, especially over such trivial matters! Apologize to him."

"But Xiulote is only twelve years old..."

"Apologize to him, Makali!"

"I'm sorry, Xiulote, I was wrong," Makali mumbled with his head low, his expression hidden. He forced out the apologies word by word, then cast a fierce glance at the girl hiding in the corner, and turned to leave.

Olosh watched Makali leave with an angry look. He then turned, looked at Xiulote, and barely smiled.

"Well done, Xiulote. Challenging a stronger warrior is the path of a samurai. These warriors are all untamable wolves; only by becoming stronger than all can you become a Jaguar who commands them."

Then Olosh glanced at the girl shrinking in the corner, "This girl is too young and too frail to take back to the City-State. Whatever you want to do, just do it here."

After hearing this, Xiulote nodded, stepped forward, and the girl, frightened, shrank back.

The youth simply took a piece of cotton from his pocket, wiped the girl's face clean of tears and dirt, and saw an unexpectedly beautiful small face.

He was slightly surprised, then took off the food pouch from his waist and placed it in the girl's hands; it felt ice-cold. After a thought, he also took off his cape and draped it over the girl.

"Leave this place! Head north, the farther the better, and do not come back."

The beautiful girl seemed to forget to cry. She stared blankly at Xiulote, unsure if she understood.

The boy then nodded gently and smiled warmly at the girl.

"Thank you, sir." Xiulote turned back but saw no one; Olosh had already left. The other children had also hidden away sometime earlier.

Remnants of his past life's tenderness surfaced in the youth's heart. He took off the obsidian dagger from his waist, placed it on the ground, and gave one last look at the girl before silently turning and leaving.

"May I hide all my tenderness here, and then truly face this world! Everything can change, I can, and so can the world," the boy sighed softly. Then, he stood tall, his face set with determination.

As if he had gone through a kind of rite of passage, Xiulote strode forward. Behind him, the girl's crying sounded again.

This time, the boy did not look back. He, like a newly born juvenile tiger, walked towards the jungles of Central America, facing the destined bloody future!

Chapter 3: Chapter 3 Return Trip

The samurais spent a sleepless night atop the ruins of the settlement.

It was still the latter part of the dry season in Mexico, which corresponds to early February, so there was no rain throughout the night. Early the next morning, Xiulote rose from beside the campfire and went with Ters to fetch water.

The most essential items in the rainforest were food and clean water. The semi-nomadic settlement could not have much food storage, so the warriors simply scavenged some smoked meat and cornmeal, showing no interest in the unknown wild vegetables, dried fruits, and insects.

Olosh used sturdy agave ropes to organize the captives into two parallel lines, then led Xiulote and Ters, with half their troop clearing a path upfront while Makali and the other half followed behind.

The paths in the rainforest were always rugged and difficult, with tall trees blocking the sky and colorful venomous snakes amidst the branches. Swamps and mud pits were scattered underfoot, and the waterweeds teemed with poisonous frogs and mosquitoes.

Here was a green desert, each still pond hiding parasites and venom.

Luckily, Olosh was not only a courageous jaguar warrior but also an expert in jungle survival. He applied a pungent ointment on everyone and quickly found a river. The group then followed the relatively clear riverbank, winding southward.

Walking along the muddy riverbank, Xiulote carefully kept a distance from the "dead wood" in the river to avoid encountering surprises like jaguars. Curiously, he asked Olosh, "Teacher, where does this river lead?"

"This river is called Tampen. If you follow it upstream, it takes you past two city-states of the alliance. In just over half a month, we could return to the Holy City of Teotihuacan. Three days south of there lies the great capital city of the alliance, the sun god's promised home for the Mexica people, the city in the lake, Tenochtitlan.

What a grand and beautiful city it is! There are a thousand canoes laden with goods, a thousand Chinampas planted with corn, a thousand communities full of Mexica warriors, and a thousand boulders piled up in the Great Temple! It is the greatest city-state of the alliance and the center of the world. Both your family and I come from there."

Xiulote nodded. Tenochtitlan was the capital of the Aztec city-state alliance and the wealthiest and most powerful of them all. This magnificent lake city ultimately fell to Spanish colonizers, signifying the demise of the Aztec civilization.

Above the ruins of Tenochtitlan now stood Mexico City, loyal to the Lord.

After pondering the prosperity and beauty of the capital city for a while, Xiulote again asked, "Teacher, have you ever been to the lower reaches of the Tampen River?"

This time, it was Olosh's turn to fall into reminiscence. After a long while, he answered, "Many years ago, I followed the great Montezuma I on a campaign against the Vastec city-states. From here down the Tampen River, after more than twenty days of travel crossing the mountains, you reach the plains. At the end of the plains and the forest lies the Vastec city-state of Cukuxicapan.

Behind the city-state lies a boundless great lake, which is the end of the world but also leads to every corner of the world.

The lake contains many distant islands. Tribesmen from those islands would arrive by boat to trade feathers, pottery, and cotton fabrics. Legend has it that to the north of the great lake lies an endless forestland, inhabited only by savages experiencing terrifying divine calamities annually that slay all life with white ash."

Xiulote paused, realizing that the Great Lake was the Caribbean Sea, the islands were the Caribbean archipelago, and the forested and snowy continent was North America. There was no mountain range running east-west across North America, and during winter, a dreadful cold wave from the Arctic swept down, destroying all settlements, repeatedly devastating emerging civilizations.

For the Aztecs of the Stone and early Bronze Ages, the city-states of warm Central America were their entire world. In the rainforest, without roads and carriages, a three or four-month walk, covering at most five to six hundred kilometers, was the limit of their known world.

In their world, the city-states of the Maya on the southeastern Yucatan Peninsula were difficult to reach as foreign lands, the islands in the Caribbean Sea of the Eastern Lake were tales told by the elders, the Indian tribes of North America and the Inca Empire of South America were unknown legends, not to mention the distant Spanish conquerors yet to arrive from across the ocean.

Contemplating the unknown world and future, Xiulote fell silent and simply followed Olosh. The paths of the rainforest also greatly drained his strength.

During the march, the troop paused once upon discovering a wild deer drinking by the river.

Olosh ordered everyone to be quiet. He advanced alone, taking a two-meter-long wooden javelin and fitting the feathered end onto a one-meter-long javelin thrower. Grasping the javelin thrower in his right hand and using the trees for cover, he crouched and stealthily approached the target.

The jaguar warrior seemed to blend into the woodland. He stealthily approached to within thirty meters of the target when suddenly, the deer stopped drinking and lifted its head to look around, seemingly sensing something. At that moment, a shrill whistling sound met the air, and then the deer collapsed heavily, instantaneously lifeless.

The warriors all cheered together, chanting the name "Jaguar." Even the distant captives couldn't help but show fear on their faces.

Xiulote stepped forward to examine it and saw the javelin deeply embedded in the deer's heart, its force so great that it passed right through the body.

The youth was astonished by the precision and power of this long-range weapon. With a mix of admiration and envy, he said, "Teacher, this javelin is incredible, can I learn to use it?"

Olosh's face showed a hint of pride as he nodded and then shook his head.

"I will teach you, but it takes more than a year or two to master the javelin. Soon you will enter the Temple to begin your Priest training. The Alliance never lacks Jaguar nobility warriors, but every Priest is sacred and important."

Having said this, Olosh set up camp by the river, lit a fire, and had Ters prepare the deer carcass, skinning and smoking the meat. He sent half the warriors into the woods to hunt, to replenish their food supplies. He himself took out a small obsidian knife, reshaping the tip of the javelin by the campfire and baking it dry over the fire.

In terms of sharpness, wood and stone weapons could perhaps compare with early bronze weapons, but their durability was worlds apart.

Thus, they trekked for two or three days, the altitude gradually increasing, the trees thinning out, opening up their view.

From a distance, Xiulote finally saw a wisp of cooking smoke rising, sparse corn growing in the vast fields. The fields were crudely marked, a sizable village slowly coming into view at the end of their sight.

As the group of warriors approached, a sharp whistle suddenly pierced the air in the village.

Xiulote saw chaotic figures gathering in the village, while Olosh led his troops to stop about a hundred meters away in an open field; twenty warriors stood silently, shields and clubs at the ready.

After a while, a bustling crowd surged out of the village, over two hundred strong men wielding various wooden clubs and stone spears, and about ten hunters clutching crude, easily broken bows and slings. At the forefront, they were clustered around an old man adorned with feathers and silver decorations.

The elder, seeing the "Jaguar" attire, wore an unmistakable look of anxiety.

He rushed forward with several villagers, bowed deeply, and said, "Esteemed Jaguar warrior, I am the village Elder, what brings you to our village?"

Our Vastec people have been submissive to the great Alliance for many rainy seasons; we have always made our tributes on time. The tribute for the beginning of this year was even paid early. The harvest season hasn't arrived yet, and our storage contains neither grain nor hides."

"The great Asayacatl has returned to the Heavenly Divine's realm, and his brother Tizoc has ascended as the new Tratuoani. A grand coronation ceremony will be held this year!" As he mentioned the coronation ceremony, Olosh glanced at the village Elder.

Fear appeared on the Elder's face, and he immediately fell to his knees, "We Vastec people have never wavered in our loyalty to the Alliance; we are willing to offer more tributes to celebrate our great King's ascension."

"Very well. As long as you remain loyal to the Alliance, you will not become sacrifices at the ritual. We have just returned from capturing Sacrifices in the northern jungles." As he spoke, Olosh pointed to some captives in the distance. "We now need food for a hundred people for ten days, mainly cornbread and the rest in black beans."

"Of course, we won't take without giving." After observing the Elder's rather unpleasant expression and looking over at the two hundred armed men nearby, Olosh thought for a moment and pulled out a small, bulging cotton bag, handing it to the Elder. "This is two palm-sized pieces of cotton and two handfuls of cocoa beans. We just captured them and are in a hurry to return to the city, so we will not linger in your village."

This statement acted like the final weight tipping the scale, and the village Elder reluctantly nodded.

The Elder went back among the villagers and loudly gave a few orders. A small commotion ensued among them, which was quickly subdued under the Elder's scolding. Then two villagers went to the largest building in the village and carried out two large bundles of cornbread, each holding a large pottery jar.

Xiulote saw them bowing their heads, fearfully handing over the cornbread and pottery jars to the warriors. Once back among the villagers, however, their expressions turned resentful.

Olosh weighed the cornbread, opened the pottery jars, tasted the black bean paste inside, and then nodded satisfactorily to the village Elder before gesturing for his men to follow. The warriors then tucked their obsidian clubs behind their backs, taking the food and captives with them as they departed.

After walking for a while, Xiulote looked back at the distant village, where the villagers seemed to still be holding their crude weapons, watching as the warriors left. Cooking smoke still rose slowly from the village, flames seemingly flickering quietly beneath it.

Chapter 4: Chapter 4 City-State

After leaving the Vastec village, the team hurried southward for another two days.

The rainforest had long since disappeared, replaced by sparse mountain forests. The sky became clear and open, and the traces of human activity grew increasingly dense along the journey. The land became fertile and easy to farm, with roughly cultivated fields spreading out along the banks of rivers.

It was not until midday that Xiulote saw a small lake with a floating island-like field in the middle, at a tributary of the Tampen River.

The edges of the floating field were supported and fixed by a fence, half of which was submerged in water. The center of the floating island was neatly intersected by canals, dividing the island into uniform plots. Atop the fields of the floating island, corn, pumpkins, and beans—the three main crops—were densely planted, along with chili peppers, sunflowers, and precious herbs.

"This is the first Chinampa on the way back," said Olosh, finally showing a smile as he looked at the field in the lake. "We've finally returned to the land of the Mexica city-states. We can have a good night's sleep tonight. Mestitlan City-State is not far ahead. Xiulote, you and Ters can go for a stroll in the central market and buy some small items you like."

Indeed, not long after Xiulote set off, a city in the Middle American style appeared near the river.

A ring of earth and stone walls about four or five meters high could also be called a strong city in the Middle Ancient Times, decorated with dark red patterns. Beyond the walls, one could immediately see the unique twin pyramids of the Aztecs, towering dozens of meters high, dedicated to Tlaloc, the deity of agriculture, and Huitzilopochtli, the Guardian God.

It was still the afternoon, and the city gates were wide open. Villagers began to return from the city, mostly bare-chested with only a long cloth tied around their waists, carrying newly bought stone and pottery. Very few tightly held a length of cotton cloth and hurried away with care.

The city-state warriors wore white or yellow vests as regular uniforms, with loincloths or leather skirts tied at the waist, carrying small shields and war clubs on their backs. They gathered in groups of three or five, discussing something. The sound carried on the wind, and the young man faintly heard words like "legion", "war", "Otomi people".

A little further away, several nobility and priests sat calmly on palanquins carried by slaves, slowly approaching as peasants and warriors made way for them.

Xiulote glanced at their colorful shawls and feathered headdresses, then at the flowers and herbs on the palanquins, guessing they had just returned from a walk in the noble's gardens.

The youth smiled, the Aztec social hierarchy was indeed clearly visible at a glance. In short, the more you wore, the higher your status, the more splendid the colors, the more veneration you received.

The team set up camp outside the north gate, and Olosh left a few warriors to guard the captives, exchanging a few words with the gate guards. The Jaguar warriors then led the team into the city, and it didn't take long for the warriors to disperse to find their own amusement.

The moment he entered, the city gate guard caught a glimpse of the Obsidian Necklace around Xiulote's neck, his face showing a mix of surprise and reverence.

The first thing Xiulote saw upon entering the city was the Pyramid Temple. The temple was the center of the city, with divine authority ruling over the city-state.

Below the temple was the central square of the city-state, spanning thousands of square meters. On festival days, it served as a sacrificial site and was also a market for everyday trade, reminding Xiulote of the farmers' markets in his "past hometown".

Around the farmers' market were small stalls of villagers and city-dwellers, with a variety of goods. Peasants brought turkeys, dogs, rabbits, corn cakes, black bean paste, pumpkins, chili, sunflower seeds, and last year's avocados.

The city's potters, on the other hand, sold various daily use pottery, some also offering stone farming tools.

At one booth, Xiulote spent two cacao beans for a handful of sunflower seeds. He cracked them as he wandered around aimlessly, followed by Ters who was also looking around curiously.

A turkey was worth eighty cacao beans, a corn cake about three cacao beans, and the price of black beans and pumpkins was roughly the same. A pottery soup pot was around one hundred cacao beans.

The young man then saw a farmer shove a turkey, several corn cakes, and a jumble of avocados and cactus tubers all at once to a potter, taking away a large pottery jar and leaving happily. Neither farmers nor potters were likely to have enough cacao bean currency. In fact, most transactions in the market were barter trades.

Moving further inside were the craftsmen with their myriad Obsidian products dazzling the young man, with shapes of warriors, animals, divine symbols, various small statues catching his eye.

Xiulote looked around, wanting to pick a warrior statue for his father in this life, but feeling something wasn't quite right with the various "expressive", primitive faces. He then continued further into the market with Ters.

Walking deeper in, there was a sense of a more formal market. Xiulote passed the boundary where several warriors stood and was surprised by the bustling inner market.

The lead warrior, wearing a pointed hat, looked stern and unyielding. He first stared fiercely at Xiulote, then was drawn by the Obsidian Necklace on the young man's neck. The warrior's gaze lingered on the necklace for a moment, then without a word, he turned his head back to watch the outside.

A gleam of precious metals filled the inner market. The youth saw simple and elaborate stalls alike, each displaying an array of silver and gold ornaments.

The streets were bustling with nobility clad in colorful robes and adorned with gold and silver. There were also priests with necklaces and long feathered headdresses.

Xiulote turned the corner of the street and was immediately astonished to see Olosh. The imposing Jaguar Warrior was lounging in front of a fancy fabric tent, contentedly puffing away with a lit cigarette clasped between his fingers. The group of people around him also looked satisfied as they shared this relaxing ambiance.

The youth approached to take a closer look. The cigarette was wrapped in leaves, filled with dried tobacco leaves, mixed with unknown herbs and spices.

Turning his head to look at the shopkeeper, he was shocked again to see a head fully twice the length of his own, which "elegantly" curved backward from the forehead, extending into a long, crest-like skull cap adorned with tall feathers and hanging silver ornaments, as if an alien had descended.

Xiulote stepped back in surprise, finally seeing the shopkeeper's chubby face with a sincerely warm smile radiating from it.

"Greetings, young priest," the round-faced alien quickly glanced at Xiulote's Obsidian Necklace and smiled even more sincerely.

"As you see, I have newly acquired Divine Smoke from the distant eastern Rainforest Holy Land, the sighs of the gods left among mortals. Just a tiny one allows you to connect with the gods for a quarter of an hour, to feel the wonders of the Divine Kingdom."

With that, the "alien" took out a small cloth bag the size of a palm. "As a gift for our first meeting, this bag will only cost you a small gold ornament, or cloth enough for two people, or five hundred cacao beans."

"Cunning Maya!" Xiulote had not replied when he heard Olosh's signature roar. "I'll flatten that misshapen head of yours with an Obsidian War Club! This is my student Xiulote, how dare you try to cheat him! Cloth for two people is enough to buy five bags of your low-quality cigarettes!"

"Oh, Olosh, it's your student," The alien was neither scared nor angry, just chuckled softly.

"Well then, let me introduce myself. I am Tikalo, a Pochteca who specializes in long-distance trade, from the distant eastern Rainforest City-State of Tutulxiu. A long skull is a symbol of our divinity. We Maya nobility are descendants of the gods, inherently graceful and kind, and forever friends of you Aztec people."

"Damn it, call me a Mexica, don't use the general term Aztec!" Olosh said discontentedly.

"Alright, respected Mexica Jaguar Warrior. When are you going to pay back the cotton and cacao beans you owe me?" Upon hearing this, the youth's teacher suddenly fell silent.

"By the way," Maya merchant Tikalo winked at Xiulote again, "Now you can buy five exquisite bags of cigarettes from me with five hundred cacao beans. Trust me, the priests love this flavor."

Xiulote was curious about what the original Maya cigarettes tasted like. Olosh, however, was strongly against it. "Trying Divine Smoke too early can drain vitality, sapped by the gods, and is detrimental to a warrior's strength."

Then, the Jaguar Warrior almost carried Xiulote away under his arm, leaving the Maya shop behind.

"Those Maya nobles are all no good," Olosh grumbled as he walked, "Sly as monkeys in their thoughts, weak as squirrels in their bodies, dressed like buntings, yet with silver

tongues and unfailingly accurate with numbers! Somehow you always end up owing them money. If we were on the battlefield, I could take on ten of them!"...

Xiulote couldn't help but want to laugh, yet dared not make a sound. He simply looked back at the Maya merchant who stood out from the crowd.

In his past life, he had visited Cancun, watched so-called "Maya" performances in a large theme park, and driven around the marvel that was the Chichen Itza pyramids. What had been mere hours of flying and driving now seemed like a mighty chasm.

The arduous half-a-year journey through the rainforest and the treacherous solo canoe trip on the sea made a return to Chichen Itza seem like a wish for a lifetime.

"What is the present splendor and beauty of the Maya City-States like now? Possessing Yucatan, I could soon reach the Caribbean island tribes and maybe even the European landing points." The youth's mind wandered as was its habit.

"Perhaps, when I return to Chichen Itza again, it will not be alone." Following Olosh, he looked at the majestically fierce Tiger Helmet of the Jaguar Warrior, against the backdrop of the imposing Aztec pyramids.

Unaccountably, a new, conquering desire began to smolder within the Mexica boy's chest, the heart of a warrior.

"Mexica warriors will always face the known world with their own weapons! To conquer the unknown future!"

Chapter 5: Chapter 5 Empire

Perhaps it was because they were taking captives, or perhaps it was encountering a creditor, or maybe some news had been overheard from the military nobility of the city-states. The next morning, Olosh's roaring voice hurried everyone to rise and set off southward along the smooth riverside dirt road.

Ever since entering the Mexican Plateau, the road southward had been comfortable and safe.

The end of the dry season in Mexico was still cool and dry, with the sky high and the clouds sparse, and without the bothersome rain of the lowland jungles, the roads were sufficiently flat. Villages along the way were populous, with fruit trees providing shade, and cactus and agave were crops unique to the highlands.

Alongside the rivers were countless productive floating gardens, chinampas, and single log canoes shuttled on the rivers, with merchants and travelers coming and going incessantly.

This was the actual controlled area of the Aztec city-state alliance, the core of the empire consisting of a dozen Mexica city-states, encompassing the essence of the Mexican Valley. After entering here, Olosh's mood visibly improved. Whenever he had the chance, he would talk to Xiulote about the "great city-state alliance."

According to Xiulote's understanding, Lake Texcoco was "the heart of the alliance," rapidly connecting the city-states along the lake.

At the imperial center were the sacred three cities, with Tenochtitlan in the middle of Lake Texcoco, Texcoco on the eastern side of the lake, and Tlacopan to the west of the lake. The leaders of the three city-states were also the joint sovereigns of the alliance; in the words of Xiulote's homeland, they were the great, second, and third chieftains. Of course, their status depended on the military power each city could mobilize.

For the sake of easy recollection, Xiulote internally tagged the three cities according to their geographical position and current state: Tenochtitlan, 'the heart of the empire, an unparalleled city of stone. Texcoco, 'a flourishing cultural center with an independent heritage. Tlacopan, 'a firmly controlled strategic location, close to the former capital of the Tepanec people.

Beyond the three cities and within two weeks' communication from Tenochtitlan were a dozen or twenty Mexica city-states, which constituted the core of the empire, the areas that could actually be controlled.

According to Olosh, to the northeast, marked roughly by the recently passed Mestitlan City, lay the "loyal vassals" of the Vastec people who had been subjugated for over a decade, with a moderate population. The empire collected a substantial amount of grain, leather, and feathers from there every year.

Xiulote drew a circle in his mind and took note, "Similar to the state of Yan, location northeast, military medium, diplomacy tribute."

Toward the west-northwest were the "hyenas and coyotes," the Otomi people, who were constantly being conquered and driven away.

Over these hundred years, the Otomi people were expelled from the fertile Mexican Valley by the Mexica and Nava people, scattered to the north, yet they repeatedly managed to establish new city-states on the frontiers. Their population was numerous; their direct military might was not too strong, but they were sufficiently resilient and enduring. Xiulote drew another circle in the northwest and remembered, "Similar to the Xiongnu, position north, military medium, diplomacy hostile."

To the southwest, with Razico City as the boundary, further to the west lay the tough adversaries the "hard stones" Tarasco people, who possessed "unbelievably hard" bronze weapons and were the only known copper mine location in the world.

The empire's only disgraceful defeat occurred in the war with Tarasco two years ago, with numerous bloody battles and at least three legions of eight thousand soldiers killed in action.

Tenochtitlan had at one point issued a city-state mobilization order, one able-bodied man per household, forming an army corps of one hundred thousand troops. Intimidated by the empire's terrifying war capacity, the Tarasco city-state alliance withdrew from the empire's territory, turning to the west and north, attacking the small city-states of the Tekos instead.

Between the two nations, a tacit and stable peace was maintained. Xiulote drew a large circle to the west and noted, "Similar to Chu, position west, plentiful military, diplomacy neutral."

Slightly further south lay the "weed-like" people of Jontal, scattered along the Balsas River, with a sparse population, who had been subjected to the empire for many years; some small Mexica immigrant cities were already beginning to rise in this region.

Xiulote tagged them, "Similar to the Rongdi, position south, less military, diplomacy submission."

Farther south, until reaching the Pacific coast, lay the "weak and powerless" southern city-states: from west to east were the Tlapanecs, the Mixtecs, and the Zapotecs. These city-states, closely related by blood, were forced to submit to the Empire's tributes under the "great Montezuma I" and yet they, too, formed alliances with one another to jointly resist the pressures of the Empire,

The tag noted by the young man read "similar to Songweizhongshan, located in the south, with moderate military force and tributary diplomacy."

Beyond the mountains east of the Mexican Valley, and farther east, were the Empire's "fierce adversaries," the Tlaxcalans, with whom war had raged for decades.

The Tlaxcalans and the Aztecs both descended from the Chichimec-Nahuas, speaking similar languages, sharing cultural bonds, and intertwining blood, yet they harbored deep-rooted hatred after countless wars. Similar to the Aztec Alliance, the Tlaxcalans also formed a city-state alliance centered around the four cities of Tlaxcala, Ocotelolco, Tepeticpac, and Quiahuiztlan.

Tlaxcala possessed a similar military system and was capable of mobilizing armies of over one hundred thousand at their limit, making them the most dangerous enemy of the Empire.

In fact, it was ultimately the Tlaxcalans who introduced the Spaniards landing in Mexico, provided them with a foothold, detailed information, ample food, and even tens of thousands of servant cannon fodder. Eventually, taking advantage of the Aztec's

internal turmoil, the Tlaxcalans and Spaniards were proactively invited into the capital city by Montezuma II, and the smallpox, deliberately spread by the colonizers, destroyed the city of Tenochtitlan in the lake and led to the demise of both the Aztec civilization and the Tlaxcalans themselves amidst the epidemic.

For ten years of blood and fire, the Tlaxcalans stained the throne of the New Spain Governor with the blood of themselves and the peoples of Central America!

Thinking of the future in history, Xiulote felt a chill in his heart. Drawing a circle in the east, he noted "similar to Zhao State, located east, large military force, unceasing warfare," and after some thought, he added four words "greatest threat."

To the east of the Tlaxcalan Alliance lay the "highly esteemed" religious city-state of Cholula. Cholula was the center of Nawatl religion, a city of temples, beautiful and affluent. With few warriors, it nonetheless enjoyed a special status among the city-states. Hearing this, Xiulote attached a tag "similar to Eastern Zhou, located east, few military forces, exalted status."

From Tlaxcala and Cholula, continuing east to the Gulf Coast of Mexico, lived another relative of the Mexicas, the "most Maya-like" Nahuatl-Totonac people.

The Nahuatl-Totonac people, having driven out the Otomis with the Mexicas, then settled by the coast, almost exclusively enjoying trade with the Maya, before selling these goods into the interior. Their boats were said to have reached the "great islands of the faraway Great Lake."

Geographical environment influenced political direction; decades of coastal trade and flourishing population made the Nahuatl city-states wealthy, also shedding the combative characteristics of their kinsfolk. They traded salt, feathers, leather, and other strategic materials with the Tlaxcalans for peace, staying aloof from the disputes in Central America.

Xiulote just so happened to have a matching label "similar to Qi State, located east, moderate military force, diplomatic neutrality."

As for the more distant Maya city-states, they seemed far-off and elusive. Olosh had only vaguely heard the names of significant city-states such as "Mayapan," "Chichen Itza," and "Chactemal," reluctantly recalled from the mouth of some Maya merchant he preferred not to think of.

The temperament of the Maya city-states was more peaceful than that of the various Mexicas factions, with wars and sacrificial rites on a smaller scale, tucked away in the rainforests of the remote southeast. Xiulote casually picked a label "similar to Yue, located southeast, specifics unknown."

Days passed in idle chatter. Having listened to the stories all along the way and memorized a circle of tags, Xiulote almost exhausted all of Olosh's ink, finally feeling satisfied to slowly digest the information. Joyful journeys are always fleeting, and he saw that in just one more day, he would return to his home in this life, to the ancient city of Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico.

The journey was real and vivid; for Xiulote, this world was finally not entirely unknown and shrouded in mystery, nor would it be a cold set of numbers and outcomes. His memories now contained real emotions—a hint of softness, some persistence, a bit of curiosity, and a longing for pursuit and yearning.

"Maybe there is also a dose of optimism," he thought, drawing a circle at the center of the Valley of Mexico and noting the last label: "Majestic, indeed, Da Qin!"