

Civilization 121

Chapter 121 Hunting and Standoff

Night fell from the clouds, shrouding the undulating forest and concealing the tracks of the predators.

In the continuous mountains, an Otomi warrior was strenuously trudging westward, heading towards a camp two days away. His pace was somewhat staggered, his quilted armor damaged, with a well-bandaged wound on his leg. A faint smell of blood emanated from the wound, drifting far into the night-filled, dangerous forest.

Twenty meters behind the warrior, a black beast stalked quietly. Its sleek, black fur and the streamlined perfection of its muscles identified it as a jungle jaguar about a meter and a half in length. It had been tracking, watching this bipedal beast for a long time.

Bipedal beasts were usually dangerous, possessing immense numbers and exceptionally sharp talons. Among the adults, there were some particularly strong individuals with a strong sense of vengeance. Hence, bipedal beasts usually did not fall within the hunting range of jaguars. But today was an exception, as it had been hungry for two days before it encountered this solitary bipedal beast that seemed vulnerable to a strike due to injury.

The jaguar inched closer, its black-spotted fur blending into the night, soft paw pads not making a sound. As it approached within ten meters of the prey, it slightly opened its mouth, revealing its strong, sharp premolars, its keen gaze already fixed on the prey's neck.

In the dim moonlight, the bipedal prey suddenly turned around. Years of combat had honed a sharp sense of impending danger.

Otomi warrior Oxina held his left arm horizontally, protecting his neck, while he drew the dagger from his waist with his right hand, alertly surveying the nearby woods. He meticulously scanned every inch, and being of noble birth, he had ingested enough animal liver to see in the dark.

The forest quieted for a moment as the jaguar crouched down, waiting silently. Under the weak moonlight, Oxina struggled to discern the faint shadows among the trees. He felt something was amiss until he noticed several small black figures not far away.

Oxina let out a massive roar, intentionally imitating the sound of a jaguar. The small black figures were startled and scampered out of the bushes in panic—it turned out they were several agoutis with 60-centimeter-long bodies, tiny tails, and three-toed hind feet that scurried away quickly.

Just as Oxina began to relax, he saw a black lightning flash swiftly past him. The black jaguar pounced on the nearest agouti at a speed of 80 kilometers per hour. With one bite, 560 kilograms of biting force was instantly delivered; the agouti managed only to let out half a scream before dying, and its rich blood scent quickly spread in the jaguar's mouth.

Holding its prey, the jaguar glanced elegantly and dangerously at the bipedal beast before swiftly turning and disappearing into the dark forest. It was off to enjoy its meal for the night. Since an easier target had presented itself, there was no need to risk injury by attacking a two-legged beast with sharp claws and teeth.

Oxina's back was instantly drenched with cold sweat. He tensely watched the jaguar depart and, ensuring the danger had gone, he quickly turned and stumbled towards the western camp. He had to report to Commander Jiowar that the Mexica legion was advancing west again.

This was the true law of the jungle, where predators always prioritized targets that could be easily defeated to ensure an eighty percent chance of success, preventing injury to themselves. In the dangerous jungle, even the fiercest beast becomes prey to others once injured.

Civilizations, nations, and armies follow the same jungle law.

Just like the Portuguese at the time, who brutally plundered the tribes on the Gold Coast yet treated the Songhai Kingdom and the Congo Kingdom with respect and courtesies, continuing to do so for a hundred and fifty years later.

And just as the Mexica Alliance's tribute wars across generations always avoided the troublesome Tarasco people to the west and the dangerous Tlaxcala people to the east, preferring to hunt the loose city-states to the north and south.

And further down the line was the mission for Xiulote's legion this time: to attempt hunting or negotiate peace.

Under the same night sky, beside the warm bonfire, Xiulote had just finished eating two pieces of cornbread and drunk some water spiked with tequila. He had just had a detailed conversation with Balamo, convinced that he was a man of talent.

Surrounded by the Otomi, Balamo took the initiative to restrain the warriors and keep the militia's food supply nearly the same. Then, with the warriors as the backbone, he organized a group of brave and robust elite militia, equipped with two hundred sets of spare quilted armor and war clubs, and defended the camp from several Otomi attacks.

"Good! An ordinary birth, yet able to win the hearts of the people, proficient in planning, and, yes, can also recite poetry."

Xiulote still wore his imposing helmet. He pondered for a moment and looked toward Balamo seated below him.

"Balamo, would you be willing to follow me?"

Balamo's melancholic eyes lit up instantly. He smiled brightly and performed an elegant bow.

"I swear to you, my Commander, I am prepared to offer everything that is perfect and flawless in this world as my loyal service to you."

Under his helmet, the young man couldn't help rolling his eyes. He waved his hand, deciding to assign Balamo to the jurisdiction of the quartermaster Begire. He'd first throw the poet warrior into the logistics camp to hone for a while, taking care of various miscellaneous affairs, and meanwhile allowing his three hundred warriors to rest and recuperate, strengthening the guard force of the logistics unit.

Then, Kuluka came back to report again. He had interrogated the captured Otomi warriors and learned that to the west, outside the first encampment, the Otomi had gathered a force of a staggering seven thousand warriors and at least ten thousand militia.

Xiulote did the math in his mind. Even if he included the reinforcements from Guamare and Pamus, the number of warriors in Otapan City was just over ten thousand. With seven thousand in the first encampment and two thousand in the second, this campaign seemed to be an all-out effort, presumably

with the intention to exhaust manpower. The groundhogs had finally emerged from their burrow, but unfortunately, the hunter had to hurry home.

Xiulote ordered the Mexica warriors to treat the nine hundred captured warriors well, to attend to the lightly wounded and keep them since they could still be useful. Then he went over to see the several hundred captured militia. The militiamen were thin and sallow, starving to the point of being as thin as sticks. These militia prisoners were of little use, as the Otomi nobility wouldn't care about their lives or deaths.

Xiulote thought for a moment, then allowed the militia to have a full meal before directly releasing them. He didn't like meaningless killing. Watching the militiamen leave with gratitude, hesitating as they went, the young man knew that without food, actually, less than thirty percent of them would make it out of these mountains and back to their hometowns.

In the warm night breeze, the young man mockingly said to himself, "Let me find comfort for my soul in hypocrisy."

Early the next morning, Bertade hurried over with the rear force of three thousand men and the first batch of provisions supplied by the quartermaster. After half a day's preparation, Xiulote left Balamo and the militia to continue garrisoning the camp. Then the vanguard of four thousand, the center army of three thousand, and the rear army of three thousand—a grand total of ten thousand Mexica warriors—converged and surged towards the first encampment.

Facing a large number of Otomi, the ten thousand-strong Mexica army no longer split up, and their movements couldn't be hidden. The Jaguar scouts at the front soon clashed with Otomi sentries, and to protect the precious Jaguar warriors, Xiulote dispersed a thousand warriors from the vanguard, completely controlling the scouting battlefield twenty miles ahead.

After marching westward for two days in grand fashion, the Otomi legions regrouped and retreated cautiously, maintaining a full day's distance from the Mexica army, and finally, Balda made contact with Casal at the camp.

A day later, within the scarred first mountain encampment, Xiulote finally saw Casal, the camp commander, once again.

Since they had parted at the Lerma Riverbank in May, it had been half a year. Now that they met again, they were momentarily at a loss for words.

Casal appeared gaunt and pale. He had aged considerably, his body slightly hunched, completely lacking the vitality of a warrior. Clearly, the difficult siege and the death of Tizoc had dealt a great blow to him both physically and mentally.

Xiulote found it difficult to associate the aged and downcast middle-aged man in front of him with the confident and proud legion commander he had met last year. After a moment's gaze, Xiulote took off his helmet, revealing his youthful and gentle face to the eyes of the familiar figure.

Casal's expression instantly became animated. His throat bobbed a few times and he opened his mouth as if to shout, but only inarticulate sounds came out, which then turned into a long sigh. He looked desolate as he took out the token from his chest and threw it on Xiulote, then left the camp in silence.

Xiulote shook his head. Casal, after all, was a high-ranking commander born of great nobility. With Tizoc dead, there was now room for compromise with Aweit. The young man sent a hundred city-state warriors who were strangers to Casal, to both escort and guard him towards Xilotepec City.

Watching the departing senior officer Casal, Balda felt somewhat at a loss. He stood still for a moment before approaching Xiulote.

"Respected Priest Commander-in-Chief, there are now two thousand three hundred direct warriors and over six thousand militia in the camp, with enough provisions for ten thousand men for a week," he said.

Xiulote once again donned his face-covering helmet. He pondered briefly, then made a swift decision.

"All two thousand three hundred warriors are now under your command; rest them in the camp first. You'll take charge of the thousand vanguard warriors in your hands over to Kuluka, staying back to properly bring order among the commanders at various levels in the camp. You must take full control of this army! Start retreating the over six thousand militia towards the East," he instructed.

Balda bowed his head and loudly acknowledged the order before going to gather the camp commanders and team leaders within the camp.

After resting for a day and replenishing the camp's provisions, Xiulote received the latest intelligence: the Otapan army had encamped one day away, and together with organized remnants, they had gathered eight thousand warriors and twelve thousand militia. The twenty thousand-strong army showed a stance ready for decisive battle. Meanwhile, at the second encampment to the rear, Otomi raiders had once again been harassing it relentlessly.

Xiulote nodded; this was the Otomi's usual tactic: concentrating their main forces to attract the bulk of the Mexica army, while the raiders in the mountains repeatedly attacked the supply lines. Once the Mexica army advanced westward, the Otomi main force would surely continue to retreat until inside Otapan City. The stretched supply lines through the mountains would then become the assailant's fatal weakness.

Xiulote first dispatched envoys for negotiations to the Otomi, allowing the militia to start their journey home to the East. The army rested for another day, and then twelve thousand warriors also began to dismantle the encampment in succession, ready to retreat to the East.

The Otomi's response eventually came slowly. Both sides agreed that each army's commander would lead five hundred men to have formal negotiations within a half-day's distance from the forces.