

Civilization 147

Chapter 147 An Audience with the Unknown

In the morning sunlight, Lake Texcoco shimmered with bright light. And within that brightness was the reflection of countless flowers. This was the Great Botanical Garden of Tenochtitlan, a symbol of the royal family and nobility.

Under the sunlight and the unnamed shadows, amid the sea of flowers and trees, a beautiful Chinese lantern plant was blooming. Intertwined among the branches were dark gold edges, and the red flowers hung like lanterns, emitting a pleasant honey fragrance.

A young blue-green hummingbird, attracted by the sweet scent, danced swiftly among the flowers, stirring up the sound of flapping wings, like dazzling lightning. Then, it abruptly stopped and hovered in front of a flower, stretching out its slim pointed beak and joyfully sipping the sweet nectar.

However, just as the hummingbird ceased its flight and drank to its heart's content, the gold edges on the branches suddenly sprang to life, turning into a stream of golden light. The light passed by the flower in the blink of an eye, and the hummingbird disappeared, leaving only a golden javelin snake behind.

The javelin snake closed its bright red mouth as a bulge slowly slid down from its throat to its belly. Then its forked tongue slithered out, licking its mouth, satisfactorily exhaling the air from its stomach. Being full made it feel lazily comfortable. At that moment, a piercing sound of wind came from the sky, and the shadow above rapidly expanded until it engulfed the snake. It lifted its head in shock, ready to strike with its venomous red beak.

An old eagle swooped down from the heavens, pouncing with lightning speed, and pecked at the weak spot of the javelin snake. Its red beak then trembled, limply drooping along with its tongue. Next, the

eagle, with the golden snake in its beak, soared away, leaving no trace behind. Only the lantern flowers quivered slightly in the wind.

Murder was concealed within the beauty of the capital city, but who really knew their own identities?

When the sun slanted in the East, two thousand family samurai gathered outside Montezuma Palace. Then, Aweit bid farewell to his daughter, taking the reluctant Xiulote with him. Accompanied by the family samurai, they headed for the Chief Minister's palace.

The Chief Minister's palace was not far to the east of the Great Temple. Although the palace was not large in scale, it was exceedingly tall, nearly equal in height to the Great Temple. There was a dedicated passage between the temple and the palace for easy communication between the two.

In fact, during the decades of governance by the elders, the Chief Minister's palace was the true center of imperial politics. Envoys would traverse this passage to the Great Temple to convey orders to the priests at all levels. Similarly, the temple's warrior guard also followed the elders' commands.

Upon reaching the base of the Chief Palace, Xiulote immediately saw hundreds of elite warriors. These warriors wielded sharp and sturdy bronze weapons, wore leather armor, and donned masked Beast Helmets, standing motionless in the sunlight. They were the elder's guard, equivalent to the existence of the Royal Guard.

The family samurai stopped here. Aweit and Xiulote, with their important entourage, continued upwards. Climbing dozens of meters up the stone steps of the palace, they reached another highly secure hall. The envoy then proceeded to announce that the elder had summoned only Aweit and Xiulote. Intelligence Officer Gillim, trusted aide Stanley, and Head Warrior Bertade also had to stay back at this point.

The two left their weapons behind, removed their Leather Armor, and, dressed in noble attire, entered the corridor beyond the hall, followed by the elder's guard carrying gifts. On both sides of the corridor were huge murals depicting majestic deities, magnificent temples, tall kings, and simply drawn warriors, with various vanquished enemies at the bottom.

Xiulote observed the murals, which were all chapters of the Guardian God Huitzilopochtli. From His defeat of the gods on Snake Mountain to become War God to His ascent to the sky to replace the Sun God, then descending to the mortal realm to promise the Mexica forefathers the mantle of world leadership, to commanding the Toltecs and Tepanecs to submit, ending with the king's grandiose sacrificial conquest of the south. Further on, vast blank spaces awaited to be filled.

Xiulote nodded; these murals were like a thesis, discussing how the gods were created by people. It was the history of the Mexica's development, and also the most immortal achievement in the elder's life.

Then, at the end of the corridor, on one side was the flat top of the Great Temple facing west, opposite the red Temple of the Guardian God. And on the other side, level with the Temple, sat an elder who transcended centuries, seated quietly on the divine stone throne, casting his gaze upon the crowd stepping inside.

Xiulote swiftly took in the elder on the throne, who was extraordinarily old, reminiscent of an ancient Divine Tree. His face was calm, indifferent like the lightless depths of the ocean. His body was upright, exuding the presence of towering mountains. The weight of his gaze carried a heavy pressure, cold and devoid of any emotion. In his hands, he held a small bronze bell.

Behind the elder, stood a smiling Quetzal, and a chubby Uguel. Further back were the elder's guards, led by the sculpted warrior and his ceramic jar.

Upon seeing the elder, Aweit's expression turned solemn, and with Xiulote, he knelt respectfully to offer salutations.

"Great Xiwakowatle, the immortal sun of the Mexica, the supreme elder! Your most outstanding descendant, Aweit, offers the sincerest respect and blessing to you! May the Guardian God accompany us, and the sun never set!"

The elder nodded and waved his hand. The two then stood up and presented their gifts.

"May flowers always accompany you, elder immortal!"

Aweit first offered fresh flowers, which he had picked early from the Royal Botanical Garden.

The elder's gaze remained calm.

"This is the flag of an Otomi legion Commander, a trophy from the war."

Then, Aweit presented a three-meter-long Commander flag. Apart from the Xilotepec Ritual Plate, this was the highest grade war trophy of the entire Otomi war. In Mexica's vast wars over decades, such high-grade trophies were actually quite common.

"This is the gear of a senior Tarasco warrior, from a rousing victory!"

Finally, Aweit offered a bronze helmet, a pair of bronze shoulder guards, and a bronze battle-axe.

The elder's gaze finally wavered. He watched the bronze helmet and shoulder guards and nodded slightly. These were Tarasco's newest creations in the recent decade or so.

It was then Xiulote's turn to present his offering.

"This is the trebuchet I invented, which can hurl a forty-pound stone projectile up to three hundred meters and a hundred-pound projectile up to one hundred and fifty meters," he began, first presenting a small model of the trebuchet.

After a series of structural optimizations, the trebuchet's range and power had been enhanced. Xiulote had already dispatched people to the market to acquire bronze nails and commission bronze connectors in an effort to further refine and strengthen the trebuchet.

The elder nodded. A hundred-pound projectile could not effectively destroy solid stone walls several meters high, but it could damage the rudimentary wooden and stone walls of the city-states to the south.

"This is the longbow I invented. Within a range of one hundred and sixty paces, it can injure unarmored militia. Within a range of one hundred and twenty paces, it can injure low-level samurai wearing padded armor. At a flat trajectory up to ninety paces, it can injure elite samurai wearing leather armor."

Xiulote presented a gold-gilded longbow, then confidently proclaimed its power.

The elder's eyes sharpened. He observed the longbow and Xiulote for a moment, assessing him in his Teotihuacan attire. He then gestured with his hand, and two samurai came forward and set up leather armor to test the longbow's might.

The great hall, combined with the corridor, was nearly a hundred paces long. The testing warrior in his prime had a slightly curved spine and calloused hands—he was an expert skilled with the Tlaxcalan bow. After test firing twice to gauge the strength of the bow, he was quite surprised. Then, drawing the bow to seventy percent, he shot an arrow fast as lightning, piercing the leather armor seventy paces away, pinning it to the wall, the arrow still quivering.

The elder's gaze lingered on the piece of leather armor. He watched the two arrow holes, front and back of the chest, and pondered in silence.

Seizing this opportunity, Quetzal approached with a smile, bowed, and whispered softly, "Elder, the longbow's power is indeed extraordinary. King Tizoc died by a longbow's arrow."

The elder's gaze dropped slightly. He said nothing, simply waving his hand.

The samurai then took the longbow and bowed as they withdrew.

"This is the paper I invented, which can be used to record all sorts of information. It only requires cheap materials such as tree bark, jute, bamboo, and reeds to produce tens of thousands of sheets of paper. These three loads of paper only took ten craftsmen two weeks, and we can produce them even faster in the future!"

Xiulote offered three loads of paper and a scroll with Chinese characters from the Thousand Character Text. He unrolled the scroll to show the writing, then tugged at it to demonstrate the durability of the bast paper.

The elder motioned for Xiulote to come closer. He took the papers and flipped through them, then inspected the paper with Chinese characters written on it. This time, he did not nod but seemed lost in thought.

"This is the script I invented, with clear definitions, standard writing rules, and formation combinations. Nobles, priests, samurai, and even residents from distant city-states—if they master this script—can clearly understand the regulations, mythological histories, and major affairs of the Alliance written on paper!"

Xiulote finally presented a set of ideograms and the corresponding wooden blocks for regular script Chinese characters. He pointed proudly to the paper in the elder's hands, declaring the greatness of the script. This was the real foundation that would hold the empire together; everything would change from this point!

The elder lowered his eyes, sinking into deep contemplation, and the great hall was filled with solemn silence.

Quetzal watched the characters in front of him intently. His thoughts raced, and then his gaze became stern and serious, the smile vanishing from his face for the first time. When he looked at Xiulote again, he also intentionally lowered his eyelids, concealing the deep chill within.

Uguel, on the other hand, was completely oblivious. He simply touched the soft paper, thinking that if it was cheap, it could be convenient for some daily uses. Indeed, it was certainly better than leaves and twigs!

After a moment, the elder finally waved his hand. Xiulote respectfully withdrew, heart bursting with grand aspirations, confident in pioneering a bright cultural future!

Suddenly a bell rang out. Xiulote turned toward the sound, only to see the elder shaking a small bell in his hand. As Xiulote was still puzzled, the samurai, who had been like statues in the great hall, instantly gathered around the two men as if they had heard a spell.

"Arrest them!" the elder spoke for the first time, his voice like ancient rocks, old and devoid of any emotion.

The elder's guards swarmed in and subdued Aweit and Xiulote. Then, a side door opened, leading to the depths of the inner palace. Xiulote was taken into the unknown depths, a mix of bafflement and shock on his face.

Just before entering, Aweit glanced at the expressionless elder and was confident yet serene.