

Aztec Civilization: Destiny to Conquer America!

#Chapter 21 - 20 Loyalty - Read Aztec Civilization: Destiny to Conquer America! Chapter 21 - 20 Loyalty

Chapter 21: Chapter 20 Loyalty

The sun shone upon the earth once more. The earth was not much different from yesterday, except for a few extinguished campfires and shallow mounds. Traces of death had been buried underground, and the living continued their conquest.

After consuming a breakfast of corn cakes and black beans, the samurai shouldered their shields and war clubs.

The belongings of the warriors from both sides were collected. Many Otomi samurai had perished, leaving behind much of their gear on the battlefield.

The surplus weapons were carried by the samurai. Then the extra leather armor was given to the one hundred-plus Otomi militia to carry. These fortunate ones were promised their freedom as long as they delivered the equipment back to the Mexica camp.

By their side marched the escorting Jaguar warriors, gripping their throwing spears, ever vigilant of the captives' movements,

In an era of extremely scarce productivity, every piece of leather armor, every obsidian club, was precious. Damaged equipment was not carelessly discarded but was taken back to camp for repair.

The legion had captured a total of three thousand Otomi prisoners, a thousand warriors, and two thousand militia. The Mexica warriors brought out the prepared sisal ropes and tied the prisoners' hands together, forming chains of twenty, and escorted them in the middle of the troop.

The captives had to endure a long journey, crossing mountains, forests, rivers, and lakes, until finally reaching the capital city of the empire, waiting for everything to end.

The army packed up, ready to set out soon,

At this moment, over a hundred samurai spontaneously gathered in front of Xiulote. They knelt on one knee, bowing their heads in respect to Xiulote. These were the men he had seen before, who had offered up their hair at the end of yesterday's sacrificial rites.

Leading them was a middle-aged man, his face bearing the marks of time, his expression serene. He wore yellow-patterned war armor and a feathered beast helmet, his broad frame, thick fingers, and arms adorned with red-patterned armlets. He was, in fact, a seasoned Fourth Level warrior, qualified to join the ranks of the Eagle and Jaguar Warrior Brigades, merely a step away from becoming a First Level military noble.

The man approached Xiulote, knelt again on one knee, and deeply bowed his head. Xiulote, acting on instinct, mimicked his grandfather's gestures, and placed his hand on the warrior's head.

"Under the witness of our Guardian God Huitzilopochtli, the sacred, victorious, merciful coyote priest. I, Bertade, a warrior from Tenochtitlan, am willing to protect you, to fight for you, until my last drop of blood is shed."

The sudden pledge left the young man somewhat at a loss.

Xiulote stood for a while, gathering his thoughts, before asking, "Bertade, may I ask you a question?"

"I am at your will, to speak without reserve."

"We've only known each other for two days; why would you pledge loyalty to me? Is it because of last night's sacrificial rite?"

"I am grateful for your merciful guidance of my brother's spirit to the land of the dead."

"I see... Is there any other reason?"

"Under your leadership, we achieved victory yesterday."

"Hmm... is that so," Xiulote was unsure how to respond; yesterday, he had merely stood on the mountaintop as an observer, a priest watching the beginning, progression, intensity, climax, and end of the battle.

"Furthermore, you are born sacred, coming into this world shortly after the great Montezuma I passed away." Bertade then lifted his head, his calm face showing a hint of excitement, his voice deepening, and in the end so low that only the two could hear. "I remember that night, late stars illuminating the sky, death bringing rebirth."

Xiulote was startled. He remembered the discussion in Teotihuacan with the king and his grandfather about Montezuma I and the late stars, confirming that his birth was blessed by the Tengu Xiulotel. Then he had been bestowed with Tengu Ritual Attire and taken away by the king. Not long ago, the king had also inquired about his understanding of the sun and earth.

All these moments flashed through his mind like lightning, culminating in Aweit's meaningful smile: "You have passed the test."

Xiulote fell silent for a moment, his body tensing. Within the youth's body was not truly a youth. For the first time, his face carried a depth of seriousness.

So, in a low voice, he replied: "Then, Bertade, are you willing to walk the path with the reborn sun?"

Watching the changes in the youth's expression, excitement spread across Bertade's face. "I am willing."

"Regardless of what lies ahead?"

"No matter what lies ahead!"

"Until when?"

"Until the days of old fall away and the reborn sun reigns the sky!" Bertade's face was fervent, "And Montezuma reclaims the throne!"

The intense exchange was both secretive and swift. After completing the pledge of loyalty, Bertade regained his composure, stood up quietly, and retreated.

Next, over a hundred samurai paid their respects to Xiulote in turn, pledging their loyalty and vowing to follow him.

Most of the samurai were friends and relatives of those who had died in battle, and they expressed their gratitude to him for yesterday's funeral. Another part believed that as a priest, he was blessed by the gods, which had brought victory in the war. No one mentioned his astrological birth conditions anymore.

Perhaps they didn't know, or perhaps, it was just buried in their hearts.

Soon the army set out, embarking on the journey back to the siege camp of Xilotepec City. The road home would take several days, as the large force had to traverse mountains and forests, and it was destined to be more difficult than the journey there. Especially for the captives.

The samurai escorted the captives, forming a long line through the mountains. Aweit was always at the front of the column, discussing the transport of the captives and the handling of the spoils with the commanders.

Xiulote walked in the back, chatting idly with the first group of samurai who had followed him.

He found that the samurai who followed him were dressed and adorned simply, most coming from ordinary civilian families. It wasn't easy for them to be promoted. Although they were skilled in martial arts and excel at combat, they could at most reach the fourth level as seasoned warriors.

To advance to the next level and become a first-level military noble, with land privileges in the city-state, was extremely difficult. Luck, strength, and background were indispensable.

In other words, the samurai's spontaneous decision to follow him was partially due to faith and emotion. On the other hand, it was a longing in their hearts for a better future.

Xiulote had a new understanding: that faith and reality, parallel and equally important, were the foundation of loyalty.

And talking with experienced warriors was actually quite interesting.

Xiulote listened to the samurai talk about life in the city-state, such as the popular ball game that swept through the city-state. Players scrambled for a rubber ball in a rectangular and flat field and then tried to throw it into the high goal on the wall, similar to playing squash. Usually, the losers became slaves, while the winners gained wealth and honor.

On sacrificial days, the losers of the game would become sacrifices in the ceremonies. This was the infamous "human sacrifice ball court."

There were also mirrors ground out of obsidian, which were as reflective as a water surface to show one's face and were expensively priced, especially popular among the nobility.

And there was the cochineal, a tiny red insect that parasitized on cacti, secreting white hairs as fine as dust, surviving by sucking the juice of cacti, and growing into a plump round shape.

If the adult insects were ground into a paste, it resulted in the most beautiful rouge color. This top-grade dye was exceptionally precious and used on the most exquisite robes.

Xiulote also heard about the Capital of Tarasco, Qinchongcan, a city built atop a copper mine. Qinchongcan tightly restricted the outflow of copper mines within the city-state and controlled the sale of copper ware as well.

The people there not only made sturdy copper daggers, long spears, and axes, but they also made copper helmets and shin guards. It seemed that the Tarasco had mastered the method of making bronze and had begun to make copper armor.

"Actually, copper mines exist not only in Qinchongcan, where the Tarasco strictly control them." Bertade, who had been quiet, suddenly interjected, "As a scout, I once followed the Balsas River settled by the Qiongtar people downstream, passed through the highland forests, and traveled west for a month, deep into the southern lands of the Tarasco, in the Weytamo region."

Xiulote perked up, hearing new information about metal mines.

"There, the mountains rise and fall, and the forests are lush, with many Tarasco city-states that have a strong sense of autonomy. These city-states also use copper ware, and the copper blocks mostly come from the mountains. There are many bare rock hills where no grass grows. The rock surfaces have golden streaks, some resembling gold threads that twinkle and shine in the sunlight."

"Large porphyry copper mines can be mined in the open air. And they are not tightly controlled by the Tarasco people," Xiulote quickly grabbed the three key points.

"Respected priest," Bertade suddenly said very formally, saluting Xiulote for the first time, "Copper equipment is hard and durable and will be of great help to your future. With copper long spears, even a militiaman could threaten a warrior."

"Once this war is over, I am willing to infiltrate the southern Tarasco for you and purchase this important ore from local village domains."

Xiulote, watching Bertade's serious and thoughtful expression as he explained the importance of copper ware, initially wanted to smile. But as he heard him willing to risk great dangers to infiltrate Tarasco territory for the source of the ore, he was somewhat moved.

He then nodded vigorously, stood on tiptoe, and patted Bertade's shoulder.

The samurai continued to march forward, chatting and laughing, until the sun was faintly setting, and a cloud of darkness came from the distance.

It was then that Aweit appeared. He came with a smile and then paused for a moment. His eyes narrowed as he carefully regarded Bertade, guarding Xiulote's side, who seemed calm and worldly.

Then he looked at the hundred or more samurai crowding behind Xiulote.

Finally, he looked at Xiulote, who was also smiling, and said with a grin, "It seems that on this expedition, you've gained quite a lot."

Chapter 22: Chapter 21: Human Heart

Xiulote and Aweit stood side by side on the hilltop. Neither spoke, simply watching the sun fully set and night slowly descend. Even though they had been apart for only a day, they suddenly felt much more distant from each other.

There was no moon tonight. Dark clouds had already obscured the sky.

"It's going to rain," Xiulote said.

"Yes. Tomorrow's journey won't be easy," Aweit replied with a smile.

"Yesterday's battle was a great victory," Xiulote stated, "What do you think the king will reward you with when we return?"

"Fighting with the Otomi people, where's the great victory in that?" Aweit chuckled. "Besides, the main credit for the battle belongs to Casal's decisive attack, followed by Balda's support. I was just watching from the hilltop."

Xiulote paused, then hesitantly asked, "But wasn't your steadfast defense the most arduous task? And don't you want to claim any military merit?"

Seeing the simple, puzzled expression on the young man's face, Aweit finally burst out laughing. "Xiulote, what use is military merit?"

"To receive the king's reward? To attain a higher position?" Xiulote guessed after a moment's thought.

"What meaning do these hold for me?" Aweit countered.

Xiulote thought for a moment. Aweit was the king's brother, and until recently had been in charge of the royal family's intelligence and security. In TV shows, such characters seemed to always bide their time.

"Then what is meaningful?" Xiulote asked.

Aweit did not answer directly but instead asked, "Why did over a hundred samurai follow you today?"

"They seem to be relatives of the deceased, and last night I presided over the funeral to guide the souls of the dead," Xiulote answered cautiously.

"Hmm, did you earn any military merit yesterday?"

"No." After a moment's hesitation, Xiulote faced the truth.

"So, what is power?" Aweit continued to ask.

"What is power," Xiulote mulled over the question. As someone with memories of the past, he did not believe in bloodline or theocracy.

"An esteemed position?" Xiulote thought of King Tizoc.

Aweit just smiled and said nothing.

Xiulote continued to wrack his brain, thinking of memories from different eras. Suddenly, a phrase he had learned in class flashed into his mind: "Power comes from the people!"

Aweit was taken aback and stared at Xiulote for a while before slowly nodding, "You are right, power comes from the hearts of the people. You indeed possess inherent wisdom."

"What is the heart of the people?" Aweit asked seriously, looking at Xiulote.

"The actions that make people revere," Xiulote recalled this era's daily rituals performed by his grandfather and the king, the funeral held for the deceased warriors yesterday, and the ceremonies held in the name of the gods. He finally thought of the "rites and music" of the Zhou Dynasty.

"The actions that bring benefits to people." Xiulote recalled the cheer of the samurai during yesterday's great victory, remembered the importance of productivity, and thought of the power of wealth from his memories.

"Long-lasting customs." Xiulote thought of the historical inertia, the long theocratic era in Central America, extending to the Warring States Zhou Dynasty, and the millennia-old religion.

"Anything else?"

There must be something more. Xiulote pondered all his memories. The heart of the people, which is rule, the legitimacy of rule, the source of legitimacy. However, an inexplicable force had blurred his past memories, preventing him from thinking further.

Perhaps, time would tell him everything.

"I don't know." Xiulote ceased struggling and instead waited expectantly for Aweit's response.

However, Aweit did not continue the earlier conversation, nor did he suddenly pick up a wooden stick to hit Xiulote's head hard and ask, "Have you realized it yet?"

He was just quietly observing the night sky.

Xiulote also gazed at the night sky, filled with countless stars. On a summer night in Central America, amidst a Middle Ages' bonfire, the Milky Way was so brilliant, and the universe so vast.

A thousand years is but an instant to the starry sky. Could the rise and fall of human affairs truly influence the changes in the heavens?

Xiulote was watching the Ziwei Star in the north, which resided at the center of the northern sky, so bright and eye-catching, as if it carried innate authority. He seemed to hear a voice saying, "Grasp the hearts of the people, and you will grasp this nation."

A gust of wind blew, bringing a light rain that dampened both their Feather Crowns.

"It's starting to rain, let's go back."

Aweit turned and walked towards the camp.

The night passed without words.

In the days that quickly passed, the rainy season of June began to heat up. The relentless rain made the forest even more difficult to navigate. A new path emerged in the forest, lined with fallen Otomi captives' bodies, stretching to the gates of Xilotepec City. Soon, the vegetation would cover the path and along with it, the lives returning to the earth.

The Mexica Samurai were initially excited by their victory, but their spirits were soon dampened by the endless rain and dense forest. Thankfully, the road was not long. Soon, Xilotepec City appeared before them.

If they had to march to Otapan afterwards, such a journey would extend over half a month. Xiulote frowned at the thought, considering it a disaster.

Casal led the procession. Today, he wore his official Sun Stone cloak and a splendidly crafted Feather Crown. Behind him marched flag bearers with various banners, followed by the Nobility of the Jaguar, escorting over two thousand five hundred Otomi captives.

Casal's usually stoic face bore a smile, and alongside him, Balda wore the formal attire of the Eagle Nobility, striding with proud satisfaction.

As the victorious procession approached the western gate of Xilotepec City with the captives, idle warriors from various states also passionately cheered and howled.

Xiulote finally saw the troops from Teotihuacan, his father looking vigorous, accompanied by Olosh and a familiar group of samurai coming to watch the spectacle.

After nearly two months, father and son were reunited at last. Xiuxoke strode forward and embraced Xiulote tightly in his arms. It seemed they had a thousand words to share, yet neither knew how to start.

Olosh came over, happily slapping Xiulote hard on the shoulder, "Hey, Xiulote, haven't seen you for a while, kid. You seem much matured."

Seeing Olosh's casual gesture, Bertade, who had been following Xiulote closely, frowned and stepped forward, slightly shielding Xiulote. The two Jaguar-ranked Samurai exchanged glances, sizing each other up, their eyes gleaming with a fiery combat spirit.

Xiulote quickly introduced the two parties. Upon hearing that Olosh was his Martial Arts teacher, Bertade stepped back and slightly bowed to the Jaguar in apology.

And upon hearing that Bertade was Xiulote's follower, Xiuxoke and Olosh exchanged surprised glances, their astonishment evident.

Subsequently, father and son eagerly shared their experiences. They hadn't talked long before Xiulote saw Aweit standing not far away, smiling warmly at them.

Xiulote hurriedly introduced, "This is Ahuizotl Zotl, the King's brother, my best friend."

Upon hearing this, a satisfied curve appeared on Aweit's handsome face, then he looked at Xiuxoke with a smirk-like smile.

Xiuxoke's expression tensed, a hint of unresolved concern crossing his resolute face. Clearly, he had already heard of Aweit.

The two exchanged greetings.

"Respected Commander Xiuxoke, you indeed have sired a son of natural intelligence," Aweit sincerely exclaimed with a smile.

"Not at all. Xiulote has always been slow, ignorant of common affairs. Natural intelligence is just a rumor; at best, he is somewhat proficient with numbers," Xiuxoke explained somewhat nervously.

"The King is already waiting for the victorious corps. We must be going now," Aweit said with another smile, then turned to leave.

Xiulote could only follow.

Before leaving, his father tightly grasped his hand and mouthed, "Be careful!"

Chapter 23: Chapter 22 Knocking

The team transporting the captives swaggered past the west gate of Xilotepec City, then circled half around the city from the south gate, finally heading to the camp of the direct legion outside the east gate.

Along the way, the cheers of the Mexico City-State warriors startled the entire Xilotepec City. Xiulote saw many priests in feather crowns and capes and elegantly dressed nobility climb onto the city walls, hastily observing the captives among the Mexica troops.

Casal had the flags of the Otapan City-State reinforcements thrown at each city gate, then had the nobles captured from the Otomi people shout from below the walls, recounting the failure of the reinforcements.

The noise of the defending army on the city walls grew restless, and the number of guards on the walls increased. Xiulote could clearly feel that the morale of Xilotepec City was rapidly decreasing after the hope for reinforcements was lost.

As Casal displayed the prisoners of war while proceeding slowly, he had already sent messengers to inform the king of the victorious return. Arriving at the east gate camp in full regalia, amidst light rain, he did not meet the king's eagerly welcoming envoy; even more absent was the highly anticipated welcome of the king himself.

In that moment, Xiulote saw a flash of anger pass over Casal's face. The Mexica military nobility accompanying him also seemed somewhat dissatisfied.

The king disregards the warriors, thus the hearts of the warriors waver. Xiulote thought.

Casal handed over the captives and then dissolved the expeditionary legion. After a great battle, the warriors needed to repair their damaged leather armor and replace the obsidian shards on their war clubs. Afterwards, Xiulote followed the group of officers led by Casal into the king's great tent.

The king was sitting on a high platform, wearing an official obsidian feather crown, draped in a gold-embroidered sun garment, with a carmine cape behind him, carefully pondering an ancient wood tablet in his hands. Xiulote couldn't see the drawings on the tablet, but such tablets were usually used to record mythological stories.

Next to the king was a man dressed in military attire, with a stern countenance and cropped hair—the supreme commander Totec.

Totec swept a similarly stern gaze over them, and the officers all bowed their heads, paying their respects to the king and the supreme commander on the platform. Xiulote followed suit in the greeting, avoiding eye contact with Totec.

Tizoc raised his head, put down the wood tablet, and looked at the returning officers, nodding with satisfaction.

"This battle was well fought. Many prisoners were captured," Tizoc said without inquiring about the details of the battle and casualties, but instead turned to Totec and said, "Arrange for the prisoners to be sent back to the capital as soon as possible, and hand them over to the Chief Priest of the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan."

Then, Tizoc added a few words to the officers, acknowledging everyone's fearless fight under divine protection. Then he shifted the conversation, asking, "Now let's determine the order of merit for this ambush."

Upon hearing this, Casal was about to step forward to reply but was stopped by Tizoc with a gentle wave of his hand. Then Tizoc beckoned slightly towards Xiulote.

"Come, Xiulote, you speak. Those watching from the sidelines always have a clearer view."

"Me?" Xiulote expressed surprise, then felt an immense pressure as all the officers in front of him turned to look at him. Casal and Balda watched him menacingly, Aweit smiled naturally, and Totec's gaze was as sharp as a knife. Then there was the king's expressionless face.

After a moment's thought, recalling the conversation with Aweit from the day before, Xiulote stammered his reply, "The greatest merit lies in Casal's decisive attack, followed by Balda's support. I was only watching the battle from the mountaintop; I did not make any significant contributions."

Casal and Balda showed satisfied smiles on their faces, and Aweit blinked rapidly to express approval. Tizoc first raised his eyebrows slightly, seemingly surprised, and only after hearing the end did he chuckle, "The last sentence is unnecessary; everyone knows you were only there to watch."

After speaking, the generals laughed heartily, and the atmosphere became harmonious again. Tizoc then asked Casal, "Casal, do you have anything to say?"

Casal stood proudly and declared, "Blessed by the Sun God, we won this battle because I led the Jaguar warriors in a decisive assault that instantly crushed the Otomi warrior troop. Of course, Balda's assault was also strong and effective; the Otomi fell like turkeys, unable to resist. Finally, there was Aweit's steadfast defense, which drew the enemy's front-line attention, providing conditions for our assault."

Balda also patted his robust chest vigorously in agreement.

"Good," Tizoc looked at Aweit, who still smiled as usual, and said, "Then, according to this order, rewards of Chinampa, feathered garments, cotton cloth, and slaves will be given to the three commanders. The Jaguar warriors will also receive their rewards. Common warriors are promoted."

The details of the rewards were then discussed.

Afterward, Tizoc looked at Aweit's face and said with a smile, "My dear brother, your steadfastness in this battle has been meritorious. And for over a month now, you have done well in teaching Xiulote. What additional reward would you like? Would you like to continue with intelligence and guard duties?"

Aweit's expression turned serious as he sincerely advised, "The work of intelligence and guards concerns the safety of the Sun God's descendants, traditionally determined by the king himself. Whomever you use reflects your will, unrelated to gains or losses, so how can it be considered a reward? In this battle, I merely stood on the hilltop; in the end, I didn't achieve much. As for Xiulote, I am not his teacher; I simply treat him as a friend and junior, sharing with him some life experiences."

Hearing Aweit's advice, the Chief Commander Totec nodded in agreement.

Tizoc smiled and nodded noncommittally. Xiulote faintly sensed a hint of danger; he was now gaining a deeper understanding of politics.

In Central America, where there was no strict system of genealogical succession, sometimes it was brothers who inherited the throne, other times it was the offspring, and significant priests from the royal family also possessed the right to succession.

The human heart does not have a fixed bias and can easily compromise with the victors of political struggles. Every transfer of the throne was accompanied by a brutal storm of blood and violence.

Tizoc had recently ascended the throne, and his prestige was not yet fully established. One of his eyes was on the control of hearts through divine power, while the other closely watched all potential threats. Even his own brother, or even just a boy.

Xiulote was still trying hard to think when, unexpectedly, his eyes were already on him.

"Xiulote, what are you thinking," he asked, "do you want Aweit to continue teaching you?"

"Uh? Yes. Aweit is a good person and kind to me," Xiulote honestly replied.

"Oh. Since that's the case, then Aweit, you can continue to teach Xiulote."

Seeing Xiulote's naive reaction, Tizoc smiled faintly, then seemingly inadvertently asked, "Xiulote, I heard that after this battle, more than a hundred warriors have decided to follow you?"

Instant alarm bells went off in Xiulote's heart. He nodded, "Yes."

"And why do these warriors want to follow you?"

"It must be because I presided over the post-battle funerals and helped guide the spirits of those who died in battle. Some also believe that the victory in the battle had something to do with me."

"Hmm. Teotihuacan is the Tomb of the Gods, a bridge between life and death, and it's also your birthplace. So, Xiulote, tell me, can you really communicate between life and death, connect with the souls of the departed?" Tizoc's piercing gaze rested on Xiulote's face.

As a theologian, Tizoc should not doubt a priest's ability to communicate with the gods. Xiulote quickly weighed his options; if he answered "no," then the prior funeral would only be seen as a meaningless formality. That answer would undoubtedly be spread, and the newly gained support from the warriors would immediately dissipate.

If he answered "yes," he would likely face further questioning by the king and possibly increase the king's suspicion and apprehension. If this were to be linked to astronomy...

Xiulote glanced out of the corner of his eye at Totec, tall, stern, with shoulders broad and hair cropped, who also fixed a daunting gaze on him.

Since neither "yes" nor "no" was good, Xiulote could only respond helplessly, "I do not know."

"You do not know?" Tizoc's eyebrows knitted together, his tone one of surprise and seriousness.

"Yes. When the funerals were held, I could not directly see the Sun God or the realm of the dead, nor communicate with them," Xiulote said with a puzzled expression, then strived to recall the contents of supernatural stories he had read before.

"But I could feel a hazy white light, seemingly distant and boundless. It wasn't with my eyes, but with some consciousness beyond the senses, like dreaming when asleep. I could feel ethereal white light, smoke-like, rising from the bodies of the dead, then merging into the expanse of white light. Afterwards, the white light departed, flying far into the sky, and when I awoke, I could no longer see any trace of it."

"White light? White smoke?" Tizoc's brows deeply furrowed, "When did you see this white light?"

"During the ritual to summon the gods. It's just that I can't interact with the white light or smoke, maybe because I'm only an Assistant Priest, and my priestly abilities are far from sufficient," Xiulote replied with shame.

The theologian king fell into deep thought, gently tapping his fingers on his throne. Xiulote's words clearly disrupted some of his prior plans. The boy's seemingly genuine demeanor made him truly wonder about the existence of the white light and smoke.

Many commanders in the tent looked at Xiulote with surprise, but Aweit's smile became even more genuine.

Tizoc returned to his senses, and spoke as usual, "Xiulote, you still have much to learn about theology. Tengu Priests are also a type of Fifth Level Coyote Priests, belonging to the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan. Since you were given the Tengu Ritual Attire in Teotihuacan, you are now a Coyote Priest of Tenochtitlan."

"After this expedition is over, you will come back with me to Tenochtitlan. The Chief Priest Quetzal of the Great Temple there will be very happy to teach the heir of the Holy City Teotihuacan. Perhaps the High Priesthoods of the nation can unite into one under your leadership."

Upon hearing the mention of uniting the two High Priesthoods, many officers exclaimed in surprise, looking at Xiulote with envy. That was the pinnacle of divine authority, where two groups with the highest mythological interpretative power could merge.

Tizoc casually knocked Xiulote off balance and painted an enigmatic vision of the future. Then, without waiting for Xiulote to respond, the king waved his hand, signaling everyone to leave.

"When will the fledgling eagle be able to break free of its shackles and soar freely in the sky?" As he left the tent and looked at the endless sky, Xiulote yearned quietly.

Chapter 24: Chapter 23 Catapult

The following month had a sense of calm stillness.

The rain continued to drizzle, with few clear days. Time flew by, and in the blink of an eye, it was mid-July, the height of summer when all things flourished.

Xilotepec City still had not surrendered. Their food supplies could last for at least another ten months. Outside the Mexica camp, a constant stream of food was transported from the lakeside. Samurai stayed in their tents, practicing martial arts with each other and teaching the new soldiers combat skills.

Xiulote and the carpenters were continuously struggling to cut through the tough sandalwood. They were making the catapult's frame and polishing the long boom. Of course, the most difficult part to produce was the rotating boom axis. At the junction of the boom axis and the frame, the craftsmen spent a long time dealing with it. Bertade and some following samurai helped as assistants.

Then, different parts were finally assembled, and the military carpenters reinforced the frame. Next came the first test firing. The rope connecting the boom and the boom axis quickly broke apart, and the boom fell from four meters high, deeply embedding into the soil, startling everyone with a cold sweat.

Xiulote had no choice but to seek out Aweit. Aweit provided the adhesive used in pyramid construction for Xiulote's grand invention and also summoned a few experienced craftsmen from the Mexica City-State in the East.

The senior craftsmen devotedly offered their wisdom to the Hunter Priest. After several days of study, they improved the overall connection of the catapult using tenon-and-mortise techniques. Finally, after a month of effort, a real catapult was completed.

The afternoon sun was warm and comfortable, marking a rare clear day.

Aweit stood on the edge of the parade ground, watching the four- to five-meter high catapult not far away, where craftsmen and laborers were busy below. He smiled and said, "Rushing me over here in such haste, so, can your grand toy be played with now?"

Xiulote, with a face full of excitement, replied, "Aweit, this will be a revolutionary weapon, forever changing the way we attack city-states. I shall call it the Human-Powered Catapult Type One, no, without wheels, it should be the Human-Powered Catapult Machine Type One."

Then, Xiulote watched the craftsmen complete the loading and shouted loudly, "Fire!"

At the command, over twenty laborers strenuously pulled the ropes connected to the short axis of the boom, and then the boom and boom axis rotated. As the boom's long axis approached its highest point of rotation, about ten meters above the ground, a stone weighing more than ten pounds suddenly flew from the top of the long axis in a parabola, landing far away at the end of the parade ground and raising a cloud of dust on impact.

Aweit's mouth dropped open in awe as he watched the scene unfold, astonishment freezing on his face. The head-sized stone was thrown over two hundred steps, its massive kinetic energy capable of instantaneously killing any warrior in its landing spot, regardless of their martial arts skills or armor.

Xiulote "admired" Aweit's expression. It was the first time he had seen Aweit lose composure to such sheer astonishment. He was thrilled, feeling a tremendous sense of accomplishment. This was the first product he had completed that surpassed the era, a first surpassing of history too.

At the same time, he had an epiphany: for the geniuses of this era, he did not possess formidable martial force, nor extraordinary intelligence, and he was still learning how to grasp human hearts and the times. What he truly could rely on were his emphasis on

science and technology, his predictions about future development directions, and his memories of historical trends.

"Well," he chuckled self-mockingly, "a priest who's part-time a scientist, craftsman, and prophet."

Aweit's shock lasted for a full six seconds, which was already the longest time he had ever lost control of his facial expressions.

Immediately afterward, he walked over to the catapult with a serious face, meticulously examining its mechanical structure to confirm the weapon could be fired repeatedly. Then he walked to the firing end, measuring the firing distance.

"Fourteen pounds, two hundred twenty steps," Xiulote heard Aweit calculating studiously.

Then Aweit called over a skilled hunter to measure the effective killing range of a sling on a five-meter-high platform. "The sling's range from atop the wall near a hundred twenty ste

ps, barely inflicts any damage on leather armor, hit rate extremely low."

It was then that Aweit, with excitement now on his face, said to Xiulote, "Test out, at a distance of one hundred twenty steps, how heavy a stone the machine can fire."

The two then began testing different weights of stones, eventually finding that the firing weight at one hundred twenty steps was about forty pounds, roughly equivalent to nine liters, the size of three human heads.

Subsequently, the two tested the destructive power of throwing stones from this distance, the potential energy from nearly ten meters combined with the kinetic energy of the stone's initial speed. The force was powerful enough to leave clear marks on earthen and stone walls, but it was incapable of causing structural damage to walls ten paceswide.

In other words, to demolish the walls completely, the manpower-driven stone thrower model one was still inadequate.

However, for the wooden structures on and inside the walls, this force was devastating.

After obtaining detailed weapon data, Aweit hurriedly left.

Soon after, Supreme Commander Totec was forcibly brought over by Aweit. This tall, stern Mexica ace warrior gazed unchangingly at the "giant toy" being loaded with a forty-kilogram stone bullet, then, following a tremendous roar, his stoic face instantly turned to one of dumbfounded shock, lasting for more than ten seconds.

"Heavenly Divine bless." Totec watched the stone's landing point, which had sunk deep enough to fit a palm. "Is this a weapon of the gods? Did the giants from the legendary first era use such weapons to kill the sun?"

Xiulote watched Totec, who was almost worshiping next to the trebuchet, with a helpless expression. He estimated that the trebuchet's power was akin to the Thunderbolt Chariots used in the Battle of Guandu, far from the large-caliber short-barreled cannons used by the Spanish during their siege of the Moors in this era.

"It's all because they lack knowledge," Xiulote thought. Hence, decades later, the Aztec warriors would similarly mistake the Spanish colonizers' cannons and matchlock guns for divine punishment, plunging them into a panicked delusion.

In fact, these weapons inflicted far less direct damage on people than brutal close combat, but their impact on morale and perception was inversely significant.

"Thankfully, now they have me!"

No matter what, this was Central America's first large-scale siege weapon, possessing epoch-making power.

Totec immediately mobilized village warriors and craftsmen, then compulsorily conscripted excellent carpenters from nearby city-states. Under the strict supervision of the Eagle Warrior squad, they started massively producing the manpower-driven stone throwers.

The nearby teak trees soon faced a catastrophic fate. To increase the efficiency of cutting, Totec also conscripted all the bronze axes from the Imperial Guards. Following that, the clinking and clanging of construction echoed throughout the camp.

Xiulote's giant toy quickly became famous throughout the army. Officers from various levels came to watch the trebuchet launch, leaving behind various shocked expressions. Even King Tizoc visited once, and like Aweit, was struck with amazement for six seconds, leading Xiulote to remark, "Truly worthy of being brothers."

Half a month later, outside the eastern gate of Xilotepec City, at a distance of one or two hundred paces from the wall, more than fifty trebuchets were lined up. At Xiulote's command, the drums sounded, and one thousand strong men forcefully pulled the ropes on their backs, the wooden arms of the trebuchets surged upward, sending more than fifty huge stones soaring through the air. They flew towards the city, leaving the defending army's eyes widened in terror, and landed with thunderous crashes, shaking the ground, destroying buildings, and kicking up dust.

"Stone-throwing Commander" Xiulote stood on the earthen platform two hundred paces away, observing the results of the bombardment. He had requested this position from Tizoc, arguing that it would enable him to maximize the effect of the trebuchets. In

reality, he just wanted to closely assess the power of his creation and indulge in a little pride.

"The launch angle is 60 degrees to the front. Yes, that can only guarantee the stones fly within a 60-degree arc directly ahead. That's acceptable, acceptable," Xiulote wiped his forehead where no sweat existed. "Perhaps rounding the stones would be better, but that would wear down the tools too much. Never mind, precision isn't what we're aiming for anyway."

Xiulote then turned his attention to the casualties: "Many buildings destroyed, about three or four hits on the wall? Wall hit rate 5%, estimated four or five enemy casualties. I guess as the shooting continues, the enemy will quickly adapt, and casualties will be negligible."

"As expected, small trebuchets mainly impact morale and suppress long-range weapons," Xiulote thought. "Technical advancements must continue."

The merciless bombardment continued, the giant stones landing with thunderous roars, city-state warriors on the walls were pale, their robust bodies trembling with fear. Many militia crawled on the ground, praying toward the roaring "beast" at the forefront, and even their own warriors and militia were no exception.

For the "beast's" inventor and commander, Xiulote, the warriors and militia developed an odd, god-like emotional respect. This emotion would gradually fade, but the seeds of respect had been planted, adding recognition and obedience to their hearts.

The continuous bombardment lasted for three days. During this period, nobility and priests from the Otomi kept coming up to the city walls, their faces filled with terror as they hastily retreated.

Three days later, the gates of Xilotepec City opened again, and a group of envoys hurried out. This time, the envoys brought boxes of gifts and tributes.

Chapter 25: Chapter 24 Surrender

The rainy season in August was intense, with sudden showers accompanied by strong winds, and dark clouds obscuring the sun and daylight. The darkness enveloped everything, including the faces of the envoys from Xilotepec City.

Xiulote, accustomed to standing at the edge of the large tent, was forcefully pulled back by Totec's strong arm. The supreme commander with a shaven head and tattooed face gave Xiulote a smile he thought was benign. Xiulote shuddered and had to stand beside him.

This time, the leader of the envoy was a nobleman. He wore a blue pointed leather hat and a green striped cape over a white robe embroidered with the Sun, carefully avoiding all colors associated with the gods of day and night.

The nobleman's posture was naturally much more flexible and agile than that of the priests. He first paid his respects to the "Divine Descendant, as sacred as the morning sun, as grand as the mountains, as brave as the flames, as wise as the Great Lake." Then, he sung praises to the great hummingbird from the south, the Aztec mythology's War God Huitzilopochtli, the successor of the Sun God.

Following that, the nobleman began lavishing wholesale honorary titles and compliments on the commanders and priests present like they cost him nothing.

Xiulote glanced involuntarily at Aweit's sincere smile, then widened his eyes in dismay. He too had received a complimentary title: "Beast Breeder," a name that sounded utterly fantastical.

He found it hard to forget the look of shocked confusion and awe on the envoy's face when they learned that the creator of the "beast" trebuchets was him, as if he shouldn't be just a youth but rather a giant from the mythological First Sun Era.

Too much mythological thinking still lingered in the hearts of people across Mexico, the flames of civilization had just begun to kindle.

And the growth of those flames required the accumulation of civilization. Xiulote reflected, "Perhaps, I should invent a script soon."

In the tent, the noble's words might change many things, but at the moment, they couldn't alter the essence of the war between the two sides.

When the envoy from Xilotepec City cautiously expressed their intent to surrender, the elderly priest with the Sun Cape stepped forward once again.

Thirty years' worth of tributes, six thousand men as sacrifices, severance of the Otomi alliance, handover of the Ritual Plate, handover of the Divine Descendant as a hostage, converting to the great Sun God" — with the Mexica army holding a significant advantage, their terms became even harsher.

"Merciful Mexica King," pleaded the envoy to the expressionless Tizoc on the throne, "the City-State has decided to break the alliance and convert, and hand over the Ritual Plate. As for the tributes and sacrifices, may we discuss them further? I also need to report back to the City-State about the hostage matter."

The king finally nodded, "Immediately hand over the Ritual Plate that records all mythology. The tributes and sacrifices can be reduced by half. This is your last chance!"

The noble envoy immediately bowed in gratitude and then hurried to leave. Suddenly, he hesitated and said to Xiulote, "Dreaded Beast Breeder, during the negotiations of the City-State, could you stop the beasts' attacks?"

Xiulote looked at the king. Tizoc nodded, and Xiulote said, "It can be done!"

The noble sighed in relief, "I will bring you a satisfactory gift!" Then he left somberly.

Once the envoy had gone, everyone in the tent looked pleased, Xilotepec City was finally about to capitulate.

Xiulote too breathed a sigh of relief; the continuous three days of bombardment had severely worn down the trebuchets' axles, especially at the connections to the slingshots, where the force was greatest and most fragile.

Xiulote had already told Totec that if the bombardment continued for another day, the trebuchets would break, and it would likely take a week of repairs before they could be used again. Meanwhile, these three days of bombardments had caused only hundreds of casualties among the Otomi, and as the city's soldiers adapted, this number rapidly decreased.

Now, every time the trebuchets fired, the samurai and militia would lie down at the corners of the walls, lowering their heads and praying to the beasts, because the clever ones had realized that doing so, the beasts wouldn't harm them.

The king was very clear about the current situation, having already left room for retreat in the terms of negotiation. Fortunately, the morale of Xilotepec had already crumbled before its walls did.

Tizoc nodded at Xiulote with satisfaction, then stepped off the throne and stroked the youth's hair—an indication of swearing loyalty?

"The trebuchets are good, continue developing them," the king said with a smile, "What reward would you like?"

Xiulote was oblivious to the hint. He thought for a moment and replied, "I want some bronze axes and bronze tools, along with some skilled craftsmen."

"Apart from those building pyramids, you can choose any twenty craftsmen," the king withdrew his hand, expressionless as he pondered for a moment. "There are not many in the Copper-axe Guards either, I can only give you five sets along with the tools. I will grant you a batch of cotton, which you can use to purchase from merchants."

"The priesthood of Tenochtitlan will always reserve a high seat for you," Tizoc left with one final hint.

The young man had finally transformed from "a person who poses a slight threat to the throne" to "a person of some use to the throne."

The sudden downpour had just ceased, yet the sky was still densely covered with dark clouds. Early the next morning, Xiulote was awoken by the chaos and shouting coming from a distant city-state inside his tent.

He donned the Sun Cape newly bestowed by the King, and under the protection of Bertade the Imperial Guard and several Samurai, he ascended a nearby platform, looking towards the eastern gate of Xilotepec City.

He saw roughly a hundred laborers struggling to walk out of the city-state. They were forcefully pulling on the ropes on their backs, slowly dragging something.

Behind the laborers was a group of Otomi nobility Samurai dressed in magnificent attire. Some of the Samurai were blocking, while others were embracing to shield the Priests draped in black and white capes, their expressions fervent.

The Priests of Xilotepec watched helplessly as the laborers dragged a giant stone out of the city, heading towards the Mexica encampment. They eventually knelt on the ground outside the city, allowing their capes to get covered in mud, just staring in the direction of the giant stone.

Some Priests were crying bitterly, others whispered confessions, yet others swore oaths to the sky, and even more drew out small Obsidian knives, slicing their own cheeks to let the fresh blood stain red stripes.

Xiulote stepped forward and finally saw the giant stone clearly: it was circular, about two meters in diameter and over half a meter thick, roughly estimating, it weighed close to ten tons. At the center of the giant stone was the face of a dual-natured deity, possessing both male and female features, likely symbolizing the Primordial God Ometeotl.

Beneath the Primordial God was a monster that had the head of a Crocodile, the body of a fish, and the legs of a frog, symbolizing Xipactli, a primordial sea creature sealed by Ometeotl, believed to be an entity that devoured the world.

Encircling the Primordial God were four suns, symbolizing the four bygone Eras, similar to the Sun Stone in the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan, in order they were "Four Jaguars," "Four Winds," "Four Rains," "Four Waters," confirming the shared origin of the Mexican regions.

On the outermost edge of the giant stone, densely packed images were carved, featuring various animals, little people, and abstract deities, interspersed with villages, cities, and vast pyramids.

These images were the script of Central America, akin to the epic of a tribe, recording the developmental history of a city-state from a village to a city, along with famous warriors or godly miracles. Except for the hereditary Priests, no one could clarify the meaning of these images.

In these pictorial scripts, different images had different meanings, the same image also had different meanings, and different images could also have the same meaning.

This design was clearly not for the circulation of knowledge and culture but rather resembled the teachings of esoteric traditions.

This was the core power held by the Priests: the right to interpret mythology and pictorial scripts. Losing this Ritual Plate meant that the Priests of Xilotepec City had lost the most important foundation of the Temple within the city-state.

The Priests cried for their faith and harbored hatred for the power they lost.

"It's easy to create a script, but unifying the script has to be cautious; this is a struggle for core power with the Priests," Xiulote shuddered with alarm. "Without the mighty force of the First Emperor, how could one unify the script?"

After obtaining the Ritual Plate, the theologian King was extremely delighted, no longer paying attention to other trivial matters, only assembling the Priests in the military to study together.

Xiulote visited once, then sneakily slipped away; at that moment, Tizoc's eyes had only the Ritual Plate, truly the first time he showed no concern for Xiulote's actions.

Over the next three days, countless feathered garments, herbs, gold and silver ornaments, and gemstone treasures were continuously transported from Xilotepec City. Xiulote also received the promised gifts from the Envoy, giving him the illusion of becoming opulently wealthy.

Apart from tributes, the army also demanded ordinary clothing, fish meat, staple foods, and other daily consumables.

The Mexica Samurai were delighted with the spoils of war, but in the eyes of the Otomi nobility and Samurai, the flames of growing anger burned stronger.

On the evening of the last day, the gates of the city-state swung wide open. Three thousand designated sacrifices were finally escorted to the Mexica camp amid the cries of their loved ones.

Dark clouds once again enveloped the wilderness, and the August wind and rain were relentless.

By then, Xiulote clearly understood: from Priests to nobility, to Samurai, and then to commoners, every person in this city-state had become the absolute enemy of the Mexica army.

And how could a mere few nobility hostages suppress such deeply buried flames?