

Civilization 321

Chapter 321 - Tarasco's Response_3

Jinjinni displayed helplessness. He fell silent for a moment, then advised in a low voice.

"Your Majesty, the autonomous tradition of the Chapala Lake Region has been long established. They have to guard against the Tekos rebels in the mountains, as well as the Guamal Canine Descendants from the north. This time, they were able to spare ten thousand Samurai and twenty thousand Militia to support us, showing great submission and respect for Your Majesty's prestigious campaign."

The Chief Minister watched the young King's expression and continued respectfully.

"I will negotiate with them. After the autumn harvest is complete, if all goes well, they should be able to provide an additional twenty thousand Militia. The northern battlefield is as stable as the towering mountains to the west, there's no need for Your Majesty to worry."

Upon hearing this, Su'angua pondered for a moment and finally nodded.

"Maintain communication with the Chapala Lake Region, send an elder of the Kingdom to persuade the local Great Nobility. How has the mountainous south side of the Tarsas River and the Weytamo region responded? They are very close to the southern battlefield, and five thousand Samurai could quickly join the battlefield."

Jinjinni hesitated for a moment but chose to be honest.

"Your Majesty, the Weytamo region has refused your summons. They replied that the spring plowing keeps them busy, Mexica people are raiding their borders, and they are unable to send troops northward."

Upon hearing this, Su'angua angrily tore off the copper bell in front of him and threw it onto the silver ritual vessel. The crisp sound of the wind bell, along with a deep thud, mimicked the King's troubled thoughts.

"Damn the southern City-States. Once this war is over, I'll squeeze those tribes back into my palm!"

The King muttered darkly, then turned his stern gaze to the Chief Minister.

"Jinjinni, have the subdued Tekos tribes responded to the call to arms?"

Jinjinni smiled and nodded.

"Your Majesty, the subdued Tekos tribes have responded to the Alliance, agreeing to dispatch ten thousand elite tribal Samurai. The condition is that the Kingdom provides provisions and quality equipment. They've just finished their spring plowing, and it's a long journey. They are expected to take two months to arrive."

Su'angua's mood settled down, and he sighed softly.

"The City-States of our Kingdom are even less loyal than these subdued foreign tribes!"

Then, the King commanded in a firm voice.

"Meet all their demands. There's no need for them to walk here, dispatch the southern Naval Forces to meet them, directing them straight to the Xitaqualo front. Also, negotiate more with their local Chieftains; the Kingdom is willing to provide exquisite feather garments and costly jewelry made of gold and silver in exchange for another mobilization of twenty thousand Militia, after the autumn harvest!"

Jinjinni bowed again and noted down the order on the wooden map to the west.

Su'angua paced back and forth, deep in thought.

"Jinjinni, how are the negotiations with the envoys sent to the major kingdoms? Are the surrounding tribes willing to send troops to aid us or to attack the Mexica people?"

Jinjinni gently shook his head.

"Your Majesty, we have always been distant from these tribes. All of them devoutly believe in false gods, unaware of the true divinities. The southern Mistec people and the Zapotecs are watching. The Mexica people loosened the tribute on them, so these tribes have no intention of rebelling temporarily. The northern Otomi people have contacted us several times. Although we maintain an unspoken truce, they are also unwilling to send troops at this time. Vastec people seem to be heavily exploited and quite

resentful. But they are suppressed by the Mexica Northern Commander and do not dare to rebel temporarily."

Having said this, the Chief Minister solemnly saluted.

"Now, our only hope is the Tlaxcala people from the East. They have harbored deep enmity towards the Mexica people, clashing fiercely for many decades. They are very keen on the idea of sending troops. However, the priests of the Holy City Cholula from the false Divine Church intervened, claiming that this is a holy war against followers of different religions. Unless we convert to their false religion... "

Su'angua frowned. The worship of the Sun Chief Divine, the Earth Mother Goddess, and the Moon Goddess had been deeply rooted in Mi'ken for a long time. Although the priests were suppressed by the Royal Family and accepted the assignments from the King, they would absolutely not agree to convert.

"Conversion is out of the question. Mexica people are like Jaguars devouring the forests, their ambition is the whole world. The Tlaxcala people must understand this. Only by uniting our two Kingdoms can we withstand the massive Alliance that dominates the Mexican Valley.

Select from the Royal Family, send noble Divine Descendants as envoys. Tell them I am willing to consider the leaders of Tlaxcala's Four States as elder brothers, with me as the younger brother, and sign a centuries-lasting alliance witnessed by the gods! Also, I am willing to establish marriage ties, taking the Princess of the Tlaxcala people as my chief wife and offering a princess from our former King to them!"

Hearing this, the Chief Minister's expression drastically changed.

"Your Majesty, your current chief wife is a daughter of the Kingdom's Great Nobility, how could she be lightly dismissed? As for the former King's Princess, the Tlaxcala people have always been cruel and brutal..."

Su'angua shook his head adamantly, his tone firm and decisive.

"This time, the Mexica people come fiercely, mobilizing the entire Kingdom with many advanced weapons. It seems, to me, that our Kingdom might face the danger of annihilation! What does the humiliation of the princesses matter at such a time? As for the current Queen, I naturally will explain carefully and soothe her family. Moreover, the actual marriage will wait until after this war. Now, our primary task is to find a way for the Tlaxcala people to send troops and reduce the pressure on the front line!"

The Chief Minister Jinjinni was left speechless. He remained silent for a long while, finally bowing deeply and accepting the command.

Chapter 322 - Various Parties

A strong breeze from the East blew across the sky, and the wind chimes on the high platform rang out once more, sounding like the intense prelude of a symphony.

King Su'angua stood on the platform, silently watching the sky to the east. The summer breeze of the rainy season was so oppressive, with moist water vapor hitting the face, indicating that another heavy rain was imminent.

After a while, the Tarasco King sighed lightly. He lowered his head, gazed at the longbow and copper arrows on the ground, and slowly, solemnly spoke.

"Jinjinni, how goes the study by the master craftsmen? When can we replicate these Mexica longbows?"

The Chief Minister showed a barely visible smile.

"Your Majesty, I have already gathered the master craftsmen of the Capital City and worked together for two days. According to the masters, the technology to make this kind of longbow is not complex. The craftsmen just need to copy the existing form closely. I have just issued a strict order before coming here, instructing the craftsmen to start production immediately; the first copy could be ready within two or three days!"

Su'angua nodded in satisfaction. He looked at the Chief Minister and asked seriously.

"Jinjinni, the Stone Fort in the south is on the verge of collapse, as dangerous as a pile of accumulating bird eggs! The samurai on the front line need this powerful new weapon. Can we produce a thousand longbows within two weeks?!"

The Chief Minister pondered for a moment, then replied frankly.

"Your Majesty, it can't be done. It's not possible!"

Hearing this, the King's eyes widened, waiting for the Chief Minister's explanation.

"The technical difficulty of Mexica longbows can be overcome. But its bow is long and wide, made from hard wood, which consumes a lot of labor in manufacturing. We lack skilled bowyers, so mass production would begin very slowly. Moreover, these longbows have great drawing force, the arrows used must be strong and well-shaped, making them equally difficult to produce! Additionally, the price for high-quality feathers is expensive, and there is a significant shortage of quality timber..."

Jinjinni patiently listed each point, regardless of Su'angua's increasingly grim expression. Finally, he spoke with a suddenly loud voice.

"The most crucial point, Your Majesty, is that the longbows and feathered arrows require a lot of manual labor. With the large-scale drafting for war in the Lake Region, we are quickly running out of manpower!"

Upon hearing this, Su'angua's expression hardened. He spoke in a serious tone.

"Explain in detail!"

The Chief Minister bowed respectfully, then extended his right hand, counting on his fingers one by one.

"The total population of the Patzcuaro Lake region is over nine hundred thousand, with more than two hundred thousand able-bodied adults. Currently, with wars erupting simultaneously in the south and the north, and smoke rising everywhere at the border. After two months of warfare, including the militia, we have already lost three to four ten thousand men. The Kingdom has already conscripted fifty thousand militia to enter the battlefield, and will summon another fifty thousand. Many of the remaining able-bodied are in the fiefs of various nobles, making them difficult to conscript forcefully. These people are also needed to maintain the most basic harvest in autumn... Your Majesty, purely in terms of national strength, we only have three-fifths of that of the Mexica Alliance."

Su'angua said nothing. He knew well that, including vassals paying tribute to the Mexica Alliance, the Kingdom's power was only half that of their enormous enemy. The King reflected for a moment, listening to the chanting of the priests in the wind, then slowly began to speak.

"The nobles are gathered together, awaiting the priests' sacrificial rituals. I will discuss the prophecy of the gods with the Elder Priests. The gods will surely say, 'The nobles large and small together offer manpower and material resources to resist the invasion of the followers of foreign gods, which will be a test of their devotion!'"

Jinjinni was startled for a moment, then after a brief reflection, his face changed dramatically. He spoke hastily.

"Your Majesty, the nobility are the foundation of the Kingdom..."

Su'angua gestured to stop him, his expression stern.

"Jinjinni, I have my own judgment! Can we divert some of the thousands of craftsmen in the Capital City to specialize in making longbows?"

The Chief Minister bowed his head and calculated for a moment before replying.

"If we stop maintenance on the palaces and temples and compulsorily recruit the craftsmen of the Royal Family, we should be able to gather two to three hundred people."

Upon hearing this, the King's brow furrowed slightly.

"That number is too small! Draw another three hundred from the bronze-working craftsmen, all to be reassigned to make longbows and arrows."

Jinjinni once again busied himself with calculations. Then, he answered hesitantly.

"If so, the daily output should reach over fifty longbows and more than a thousand arrows. Nearly a thousand laborers will be needed to cut timber and handle odd jobs... But what about the shortfall in bronze soldiers?"

Su'angua nodded, and with a decisive gesture said,

"Carry it out like this! The militia defending the fort don't need bronze soldiers. Allocate a batch of bronze tools to the craftsmen, let them improve their bow-making skills, and master the production quickly. Samurai should supervise intensively, working day and night. Also, urgently select samurai and militia who are good at archery, include them under the direct control of the Royal Family, and prioritize equipping them with longbows!"

The Chief Minister quickly sketched out abstract longbows and figures on a wooden board, marking with tally symbols, recording the King's orders.

Su'angua turned around and looked towards the five majestic and spectacular "House of Wind" Akatla, where the sacrificial ceremonies had already begun.

Below Akatla, the nobility stood in solemn silence, quietly watching the grand and solemn ceremony. In front of the Temple of the Three Gods, the Sacred Fire blazed fiercely, while the lower priests sang and chanted. They inhaled the smoke of the Divine Kingdom wafting from terracotta gourds, wildly dancing in a delirious intoxication.

The King sniffed the scent in the wind and frowned. Disgusted, he averted his gaze to look at the composed high-ranking priests. These aged priests, holding sharp blades, stood at the top of the temples, receiving one bound Mexica sacrifice after another. The number of sacrifices was not particularly large, but the sacrificial ceremony was very elaborate. Each deity had different preferences, corresponding to different parts of the sacrifices' bodies.

Su'angua's expression remained calm, as he watched blood bloom in splashes before the Temple. His thoughts suddenly became somewhat distant.

Chapter 323 - Each Side_2

"The Mexica are known for their proficiency in sacrifices, and all the parts of the world sing praises of their piety. I wonder if I'll ever have the chance to witness that magnificent sacrificial ceremony with my own eyes..."

At this thought, a chill suddenly struck the King's heart. He couldn't help but lift his head and gaze toward the southern sky.

From the "Palace of Wind," traveling southeast for four to five hundred li, one would reach the state of Xitaqualo. The undulating mountain forests hindered the movement of large-scale armies, with rivers flowing north to south serving as natural pathways for marching troops. Dense stone forts dotted the strategic points along the rivers.

The summer sun fell from the sky, illuminating the flags atop the stone forts. The breeze caused the flags to flutter, clearly displaying the patterns, a third of which were already the sun and the hummingbird.

Nobility scion Iskali, with a commander's long banner of three and a half meters on his back, stood on a hill, firmly watching ahead.

Two hundred meters in front lay a small stone fort made of greenstone. The fort was stained with traces of slaughter, with scattered corpses and broken arrows around. The highest point of the watchtower was adorned with the Eagle Banner of the Tarasco Royal Family. A Jaguar Warrior in yellow armor and beast helmet, his body soaked in blood, strode to the top of the watchtower and snapped the Eagle Banner. Behind him, a seasoned warrior in dark green war clothes presented a new banner solemnly, his head bowed.

Then, the Jaguar Warrior forcefully planted the new banner at the highest point. Facing the strong wind, he let out a mighty cry, calling upon the Chief Divine's name. The banner unfurled in the breeze, revealing the vivid emblems of the sun and the hummingbird. At that moment, thousands of Mexica warriors cheered loudly, praising the victory granted by the Chief Divine!

On the hill, Iskali too bowed his head, covered his prominent cheekbones with a hand, and prayed silently. Then, with a stern expression and cold light flickering in his eyes, he called for his trusted aide calmly.

"How many captives from this battle?"

"Two hundred Tarasco warriors, five hundred militia, most of them wounded."

"Leave none."

Iskali waved his hand coldly, his voice as indifferent as usual. This stone fort had resisted resolutely, maintaining its ground for a full five days in the face of enemies several times its number and despite the formidable longbows and the bombardment of stones. The Alliance warriors, while storming the fort, had also lost over two hundred men... The commander did not intend to give any prisoners the chance to convert.

The trusted aide bowed and left promptly. Shortly after, the accompanying priests erected a simple altar to pray to the highest Chief Divine and offered up the sacrifices. The priests' sacred chanting soon echoed inside and outside the fort, as thousands of warriors knelt before the Sacred Fire, finding solace for their souls and renewing their will to fight.

Iskali also knelt to pray. While his lips muttered prayers, his mind drifted with the breeze toward the Capital City.

"It is already past mid-July, and only a third of the Xitaqualo state has been conquered. The resistance of the Tarascan people grows ever more tenacious, and the losses among the warriors ever greater. Esteemed King, when will you arrive with the main army?"

The wind continued on its way. Behind the southern route commander, a series of wooden forts extended until the beginning of the supply route at the state of Raziko. Among the forests surrounding the camps lay many bodies of Tarasco soldiers, staining the soil beneath red. Meanwhile, the Mexica warriors and militia were buried in shallow mounds around the camps, resting in eternal peace after a moment's cry and struggle, regardless of friend or foe.

The warm sunlight fell equally upon miles of land, yet the ground below had changed. In the Mexican Valley at this time, the land was lush and green. Wildflowers bloomed beside the roads, and young shoots in the fields grew vigorous and strong.

The farmers carefully weeded their fields, tending to the corn, soy, and pumpkins. Occasionally, they would pause in their toil to observe the large troops of militia passing by, noting their sharp stone spears and the tall bamboo baskets on their backs—these were the militia transporting food to the front lines in the south.

As the vanguard of warriors passed, the bold farmer would quietly ask a few questions, inquiring about what the Tarasco people in the west were like. The clash two hundred li away took place on enemy territory, and the Alliance's spring farming went on as always. For the civilians of the Alliance, war seemed as distant as a thousand li away, at the very edge of the world.

The residents of the Lake Capital City were clearly more knowledgeable and experienced. They gathered in the bustling market of Tlatelolco in the North City, discussing the latest, albeit inaccurate, news brought by busy caravans. Guided by community priests, the Capital City's inhabitants talked loudly, imagining the situation of war sweeping through like a broken bamboo, discussing the victory that was sure to be achieved.

Inside the King's Palace, Aweit was seated high on his throne, draped in a majestic and authoritative robe. He held the latest parchment reports, reviewing the mobilization reports from the Texcoco Lake District. By the King's side, Gillim stood with his hands tied, holding pen and paper, his expression solemn, uttering not a sound.

The King held all military movements firmly in his hands. Looking at the tally marks on the parchment, he performed rapid and accurate mental calculations without needing others to report or assist him. After a while, Aweit nodded in satisfaction.

"The vassals from each region seem to be quite obedient thus far. The Vastec, the Mistec, and the Zapotecs have all sent the second tribute of the summer. The distant Zapotecs have been underhanded, delivering only two-thirds of what the Alliance demanded. Given the Alliance's preoccupation with farming and warfare, it is indeed not feasible to send troops against them. However, this appears more like a test from the vassals, not to be indulged at will!"

After pondering for a moment, Aweit made a firm decision.

Chapter 324 - Various Parties_3

"Gillim, dispatch three thousand elite Samurai and five hundred Jaguar nobility. Let them make a round through the southern Mistec, showing off the Alliance's military power, before joining the ranks of the Southern Army in the west. At the same time, send an Envoy to reprimand the Zapotecs and have them compensate the shortfall in their tribute after the autumn harvest!"

Gillim nodded, accepting the command and jotting down the decree. He asked quietly,

"My King, you will campaign after the autumn harvest. If there is still a shortfall in the third tribute from the south, how shall it be handled?"

The King smiled slightly.

"Then note down the shortfall and compensate it in the New Year's tribute. If there is still a shortfall... the Alliance will not wage war now, but will remember it firmly, all accounts to be settled later!"

Gillim nodded solemnly.

"My King, once the war starts, resources will vanish as if the forest is burning, disappearing one after another. The manpower and resources of the Alliance are all stretched thin. Without the tributes from the vassal lands, it would be difficult to sustain. The people of Tarasco will only find it harder than us."

Aweit nodded in agreement.

"According to recent reports, the Southern Route Army led by Iskali is progressing well, having captured the outermost ring of Stone Forts. Once Xitaqualo is captured, the Tarascans will have no defensible position left! Xiulote's Northern Route Army has also successfully established a foothold at the Lerma River, holding off a large number of northern enemies. How the battle proceeds from here will depend on his own performance."

Gillim bowed his head in salute.

"The Southern Army is the main force of the western campaign, and the Northern Route Army is ultimately just a diversion. As long as your Highness can attract the reinforcements from the Chapala Lake Region and continuously maintain pressure on the Akanbaro State, it would be a great feat!"

Upon hearing this, Aweit smiled gently. He did not say much, but calmly gave further orders.

"Gillim, continue sending Envoys to the various City-States of the Alliance, urging them to mobilize the Samurai who do not need to farm to hurry to the north-south front lines. Before the autumn harvest, we need to launch another wave of attacks! Similarly, send Envoys and Scouts to the major forces to test their attitudes towards the Alliance and observe military mobilization. Tell Acap he's doing well in the Holy City of Cholula! Let him continue discussing theology with the Elder Priests there and send him another batch of special tobacco and Holy Water!"

Upon hearing the name 'Holy Water,' Gillim's hand paused, his expression finally changing slightly. After a moment, the Intelligence Officer regained his composure and continued recording in his hand.

Afterward, Aweit stood up, looked through the broad windows to the northwest mountains, pondering silently.

"Xiulote, you better not disappoint me..."

At that moment, in the distant Holy City of Cholula, within the towering pyramid sanctuary, Acap suddenly shuddered. He was dressed in an exquisite robe, his face fair, and he moved like the messenger of the gods, laughing and talking with a group of white-haired elders.

Thick divine smoke wafted through the sanctuary, spreading a pleasant and intoxicating strange scent.

"Elder Acap, the supreme view of the divinity you were just discussing was excellent, why did you suddenly stop?" a seemingly benevolent dignified elder asked with a smile, sitting cross-legged straight ahead.

Acap pondered briefly, finding everything normal, and similarly responded with a gentle smile,

"Respected High Priest, the divine smoke you burn is too precious, bewitching me so wholly that I lost myself."

The High Priest laughed heartily and then waved his hand. Several graceful maids promptly approached, adding even more precious herbs and flowers to the beautifully crafted bronze censer.

"Then please, Elder Acap, continue to lose yourself and meet with the supreme divinity in dreams!"

Chapter 325 - The Treaty Battle of Cholula City

Mysterious divine smoke wafted out from the sanctuary, gently rising up to the gathering clouds. Looking down from the sky, beneath the towering sanctuaries of the gods stood the magnificent and grand Cholula Great Pyramid, the "man-made mountain" Tlachihualtepetl!

This ancient pyramid, over sixty meters in height and four hundred fifty meters in length and width, was the largest pyramid in the world by volume. It had been expanded six times from the inside out, primarily using mud bricks mixed with granite. On the outermost layer of the pyramid, many areas were covered with soil, planted with various colorful flowers and plants.

At this time, during the summer, artificially planted flowers blossomed on the surface of the towering pyramid, attracting brightly colored butterflies that fluttered among the dark gray bricks. The imposing ancient marvel had transformed into the beautiful "Flower Holy Mountain"!

The main hall of the sanctuary had its wide doors and windows open, and the intoxicating fragrance dispersed with the wind. Acap sat on a soft bear skin mat, inhaling the pleasant and dazzling aroma, looking down at the sprawling sea of flowers beneath his feet. He laughed heartily, his spirit lifted as if he were a deity high in the clouds, contentedly overlooking the mortal world.

After a while, not until the divine smoke in the hearth had burnt out did the young Elder Priest recover from his genuine joy. Stimulated by the divine smoke, his face flushed and his heart raced as he loudly praised.

"This is indeed the finest divine smoke! Momentarily transported to the Divine Kingdom, I felt immense joy, akin to the purest Holy Water. Thank you, messenger of the deities, Priest Leader Petl! What precious Divine Grass have you added to this divine smoke?"

The kindly noble old man laughed heartily, his complexion normal amid the divine smoke.

"Indeed, many precious Divine Grasses have been added, a unique tradition passed down through generations of Cholula Priests! Each portion of this prepared divine smoke is worth a chest of gold and is priceless. This formula for the divine smoke has been passed down from the Toltec Empire era, enduring for six hundred years now!"

Upon hearing this, Acap exclaimed in awe and showed his respect.

Petl smiled complacently, his smile tinged with pride.

"Cholula City has been established for one thousand eight hundred years. Since the decline of the First Holy City Teotihuacan, this place has gradually prospered as the Second Holy City. There are towering pyramid-temples here, numerous smaller temples, tens of thousands of civilians in service, and over a thousand noble priests! Although the two holy cities have similar layouts, their prosperity is as different as heaven and earth. Teotihuacan is where the deities departed, while Cholula is where the deities return, the true holy capital!"

Acap nodded repeatedly, praising with a laugh. Then he shifted his words, his gaze sincere.

"Cholula Holy City, a hub for north-south trade, is famously wealthy, only slightly less so than the Lake Capital City. Cholula's Flower Holy Mountain is majestic and beautiful, worthy of being ranked among the finest in the world alongside the Great Temple of the Lake Capital City and the Sun and Moon Pyramids of Teotihuacan!"

Hearing this, Priest Leader Petl's smile faltered.

Cholula Holy City had always been revered, away from the ravages of war. The many priestly families in the city had a heritage of four to five hundred years without interruption, truly the remnants of the Toltec, the "civilized people within the city". In contrast, the Aztec people had come from the distant northwest, from Aztlán, enduring a long migration and countless battles. Like the people of Tlaxcala outside the city, they were also blood-stained wilderness people, the "barbarians outside the city".

For over a hundred years, the Aztec people had settled in the Lake Capital City, claiming to be descendants of the Toltec, the divine-favored Mexica. Thereafter, they waged wars far and wide, intimidating the whole world, forcing other states to change their stance. But the true history, of course, was clearly recorded in Cholula Holy City.

"Acap speaking such words before me is not to demean himself but to broach an alliance. In these two months, the Mexica have tested the waters several times, showing a strong intention to form an alliance."

Petl's mind whirled rapidly, his smile returning to normal. After weighing his words for a while, he finally spoke with a smile,

"The Mexica Alliance is the successor to the great Toltec Empire, and the Mexica are the chosen Divine Tribe. Cholula Holy City has always respected the will of the deities, and we have long been as one with the Alliance. It is well known that we are all of Toltec blood, what more is there to say..."

As he spoke, Petl shifted the topic back to the divine smoke.

"Elder Acap, although the divine smoke of the Holy Land is exquisite, the Holy Water of the Lake Capital City is equally extraordinary, transcending the mundane. The Mexica's Pharmacists are uniquely distinguished, renowned across the land. The High Priest Quetzal was an expert among them! Half a year ago, when I heard of his demise, I lamented for several days, wondering when I could taste the Holy Water again and feel the blessings of the deities?"

Acap pondered for a moment, sighing inwardly. The leaders of Cholula were very cordial toward the Alliance, yet they consistently refused to officially form an alliance, leading to no progress once again. His face always smiling, warmly serene, he continued speaking.

"While the High Priest has returned to the Divine Kingdom, the tradition of Alchemy continues. As this visit was hasty...I have already dispatched envoys, bringing them the latest Holy Water, and I invite all the Elder Priests to share in the divine grace when the time comes."

Petl nodded approvingly, genuinely looking forward to it. He continued to extend the topic.

"That sounds wonderful! I hear the great Alliance is reforming religion, increasing the number of priests, participating in managing the nobility's fiefs. Has the Council of Twelve Priests established religious laws to manage the world on behalf of the deities?"

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Acap's mind turned and then he understood. He admitted with a smile,

"Indeed, your Highness of the Alliance has received a Divine Revelation; the benevolent spirits have bestowed detailed scripts. The Alliance has embraced the sacred mandate to spread the glory of the gods throughout the world, reaching every heart!"

Petl frowned slightly. He was naturally wary of the newly created scripts.

However, outside the Holy City of Cholula were the various nobility of Tlaxcala, effectively controlling the entire state of Cholula. Although the priests were sacred, their power was limited to inside the Holy City, and they had been scheming to expand outward for a long time.

The leader of the priests then smiled and said,

"Very well! Elder Acap's words are reasonable. It is the responsibility bestowed by the gods for the priests to participate in the management of the nobles' fiefs and educate the people. Please elaborate!"

Acap nodded, smiling as he began to speak,

"Each state of Tlaxcala should indeed revere the will of the Holy City... In this expedition against the heretics, the people of Tarasco have received Divine Punishment... The Alliance will always support the Holy City of Cholula... The new holy orders are divided into five levels, and priest leaders shepherd their regions... Of course, the Elder Priests of the Holy City should naturally occupy high positions, their holy orders equivalent to the twelve Priesthoods..."

In the lavishly decorated Great Temple, the sacred smoke was lit again. The envoys of the gods spoke jovially, discussing the rise and fall of the mortal world.

Meanwhile, in a secluded mountain camp, a blazing bonfire was lit. "Black Wolf" Toltec, with brows stern as a sword, stood atop the tall Wooden Fort, watching the training of the Longbow Militia.

Organized by tribe, dozens of Longbow Militia teams moved in coordinated strikes, spreading and advancing like the wind, standing firm to shoot like rain. Although the formations of the advancing Militia looked rough, they already possessed the agility of a pack of wolves, able to roughly execute the Commander-in-Chief's military orders and tactically adjust on their own. In constant movement, the tribal Hunters still maintained a certain level of organization, resembling wolves on a collective hunt.

After a brief training pause, Toltec summoned the Chieftains, rebuking them loudly for their tactical deficiencies. His expression was fierce, his voice like Thunderbolt. Chilled to the core, the Chieftains bowed their heads to take orders, scattering in all directions to drill. Only then did "Black Wolf," the Commander-in-Chief, turn around, with a hint of satisfaction on his face, to head towards the large tent. Moments later, the majestic Commander-in-Chief entered the tent, took out a brand-new paper book, and his face fell—it was time for reading and writing again.

In the new camp to the north of the Capital City, hundreds of Spear Militia let out a thundering cry, engaging in real-standing Formations under the leadership of the squad leaders. The front row of Militia held wood Spears without tips, striving to jab forward, hitting against dense Rattan Shields. The back row pushed against the shields, trying to keep their formation tight, pushing their phalanx forward. The two opposing phalanxes continued until one gradually dispersed, forced apart and completely losing formation.

"Monkey" Kuluka then blew the conch, signaling the outcome of the battle. He smiled slightly, warmly patting the shoulders of the two team leaders, sincerely praising the victorious Guzman. Then, the newly

appointed Legion Commander sternly gathered the squadron leaders to explain the problems they had faced and highlighted the areas where training needed to be strengthened. From time to time, he would turn and ask for the opinion of Adjutant Ezpan.

The Surrendered General from Tarasco wore a respectful expression, providing detailed suggestions for improvement. The new Legion Commander was very approachable, quickly getting along well with the Militia, and showed great respect for his Adjutant. He promoted many outstanding members, with the gold miner Guzman being one. The more personable the Legion Commander appeared, the more Ezpan dared not underestimate him. For unbeknownst to him, the Legion had already been firmly controlled by the Commander.

And whenever night fell, Kuluka would always take paper and pen to the Adjutant's quarters, eagerly learning the tactical formations of the Spear troops. Although he looked as primitive as a monkey, his mind was exceptionally sharp and unfettered, quickly grasping the new tactics. After a few days, Ezpan was impressed.

Soon, the clash between the two Spear Formations started once again. The other numerous phalanxes, surrounding the center of the battlefield, engaged in simulated marches and deployments. Watching the Spear phalanxes take shape, "Monkey" Kuluka finally nodded in satisfaction, contemplating more complex tactics.

"After half a lifetime of twists and turns, now, I finally command an army on my own. A broad path lies open before me, and I must not fail the high expectations of your Highness!"

Not far away, Ezpan looked at the resolute Legion Commander and then at the Spear phalanxes beginning to take form, his gaze envious, deeply moved. It was a good while before he turned away to look southward at Lake Texcoco. The glistening lake surface was never without boats, continuously transporting grain and supplies from the Lake Region, also bringing the latest news of the war.

Next to the Long Bridge of White Stone, Commander-in-Chief Annatri waved the three-meter Spear Flag, and the grand fleet of Naval Forces slowly set sail, moving downstream towards the north. The fleet carried three thousand elite Samurai, holds full of dry military rations, and special weapons sealed in wooden crates, wrapped with waterproof tarpaulins.

Tepopolo, with high brow bones and a kind smile, stood behind Annatri, closely observing the martial bearing of the female Samurai, pondering the significance of the Naval Forces to the Fief, silently calculating in his heart.

After giving her commands, the sharp instincts of the Samurai made Annatri sense something. She turned briskly and, upon seeing Tepopolo's brazen gaze, her eyebrows rose.

"Tepopolo, the 'Destroyer' of Tlatelolco, you insisted on boarding my flagship, claiming important matters to discuss. Considering your current expression, could it be that this so-called important matter is a challenge to compete with me?"

Chapter 327 - The Treaty Battle of Cholula City_3

Hearing this unapologetic query, Tepopolo's expression stiffened, and anger flared in his heart. As a seasoned Commander-in-Chief who was also a valiant Samurai in his youth, he was confident that he was second to none. Later, inheriting the honored position amongst the Nobility, waited upon with great care, he had always been revered. No one had dared to speak to him with that tone for a long time, apart from the King.

Tepopolo was discontent for only a moment before he remembered the purpose of his trip. Then he puffed out his chest and laughed boldly and heartily. Following traditional customs, he thumped his strapping right arm against his solid chest, showing off his robust body.

"'Source of Water' Annatri, I hear that you have not yet married, and my wife has passed away some years ago. Now, the mighty mountains have no rivers, the spacious house lacks a mistress. The tall corn

has no beans to intertwine with, the strong body needs soothing! In the presence of the god of love, Sochiketzal, I declare my pursuit of you, to make you part of my palace!"

Annatri's almond eyes widened, and her willow eyebrows arched.

"You must first prove your Martial Arts before I allow your pursuit! Whether the mountains are mighty, that is not said with words. Whether the corn is strong, that is not apparent merely by looks. Whether you are indeed the ferocious roaring Jaguar, or just a barking cackling dog, let's see the truth with our own hands!"

Tepopolo's face darkened. A flurry of thoughts raced through his mind—the control of the Naval Forces was hereditary and relatively independent. Gaining Annatri would indirectly secure the support of the Naval Forces, and with that support came dominance over the river. As the conversation had reached this point, and as a renowned Samurai, he certainly had no reason to retreat. After pondering for a moment, he took out his War Club confidently and smirked fiercely.

"Fine! Annatri, in the presence of the gods, let's have a duel right here! According to traditional custom, the victor shall take from the loser the most valuable treasure they possess!"

Without hesitation, Annatri stamped her Long Spear aboard ship, resounding with a thunderous bang. She laughed out loud, her voice ringing like a clear silver bell.

"Good, that's how a Samurai should act. In the sight of the gods, let us begin now!"

Having said that, Annatri lifted her head and gave Tepopolo a sidelong glance. Then, she made a hand gesture, signaling for him to strike first.

Seeing this action, Tepopolo's anger rekindled, his desire for combat burning in his chest. His years of battle experience had taught him to keep his movements cautious and steady. He raised his left hand's shield to protect his vital areas, and his War Club pointed diagonally, ready to strike with ease, as he quickly pressed forward.

Annatri's gaze was eagle-like, both hands gripped the long spear, held horizontally in front of her. Her knees bent slightly, the spear shaft retracted behind, its point aimed at the opponent, ready to burst forth at any moment.

On the slightly swaying boat, Tepopolo took small steps, advancing toward the female warrior. Suddenly, he lunged forward, his left hand's shield raised to strike her head and simultaneously block the route of the spear. Then, he bent low, his right hand swinging the War Club down at her waist. It was an extremely skilled combination of shield and club, the strikes of both hands powerful and flawless!

The dual attacks arrived simultaneously; Annatri's eyes lit up as she let out a clear battle cry, and nimbly took a small step back. She was like a fish in water, sensing the flow of the assault, deftly avoiding the Shield Strike. Next, she swiftly stepped aside, moving to the right like a swift in the wind, avoiding the club blow with keen agility.

One advance, one retreat, one turn, one shift—all in the blink of an eye. Tepopolo's swing hit air, startling him; he quickly pulled back and used his shield to cover his core.

The female warrior didn't pause; her movements were smooth like flowing water. She let out a fierce shout, surged forward, first with a long-prepared thrust, piercing precisely at Tepopolo's helmet, penetrating it just enough. Then, pushing down on the spear shaft, she gave a powerful flick, and the helmet spun off, landing in the lake.

Tepopolo's forehead ached, followed by a sudden chill on his head. Had it been the battlefield, he would have been dead by now. His eyes reddened, and as he was about to raise his shield and swing his club again, a heavy blow landed on top of his head, dizzying him.

With one move to flick the helmet away, Annatri pressed down on her spear again and smashed the butt of it onto her opponent's head. Then she quickly advanced, navigating the shaking boat with ease, and closed in to about a meter. Lastly, the female warrior shouted angrily, seizing the moment of Tepopolo's daze with a side kick from the back leg, fiercely kicking his shield.

The boat shook violently; Tepopolo stifled, losing his balance in his daze. In a split second, a furiously shouted command and an irresistible Force from the shield sent him flying two meters backward. The illustrious noble suddenly floundered in the air, splashing into the water with a thud. The slightly salty water of the rainy season lake continuously poured through his nose and mouth, thoroughly drenching his hair and armor.

The noble finally came to his senses. He screamed aloud while wildly treading water. The circle of small boats around him quickly came to his aid. But the Commander-in-Chief's large boat had already sailed away, disappearing into the distance in moments.

Annatri stood alone at the prow of her boat, proudly slinging her Long Spear across her back. The lake wind blew through her long hair as she looked heavenward with a resounding laugh, leaving behind an echoing statement.

"Tepopolo, you possess no treasure that catches my eye! Only a man who can defeat me is the mountain worthy of the flowing water's reliance!"

Afterward, with a sweep of her Long Spear, she sharply commanded her awestruck trusted aides and sailors.

"Raise the flag, hasten the march! Next, we head to Lake Haltocan to meet the Samurai armies from Teotihuacan!"

Chapter 328 - Reinforcements

August was the peak of the rainy season. The deities had opened the passage between the Heavenly River and the human world, and the heavy rain poured down from the sky.

From the Great Temple at Lake Texcoco to the House of Wind by Lake Patzcuaro, the vast lands were engulfed in continuous wind and rain. The soft mud was filled with rainwater, and the blue stone walls were slick with wetness, making all fighting difficult, hence it gradually ceased.

With the sky full of wind and rain, Xiulote, dressed in a plain robe, stood on the watchtower of the wooden fort, looking east towards the Lerma River, waiting for the returning fleet. As far as he could see, the curtain of rain was continuous, the nearby river water rose incessantly, and the river surface widened. The river then surged westward, tumultuous with waves.

The heavy rain limited visibility. The Young Commander did not know how long he had stood until the first vague black spot appeared before his eyes, followed by a second, a third... Hundreds of boats came downstream, with Samurais braving the rain at the prows. He finally showed a smile and hurried down from the watchtower.

Soon, preparations were made on the riverbank pier, and the huge fleet slowly docked, allowing the samurais to disembark one after another.

Xiulote had already changed into a dignified commander's war clothes and, flanked by guards, greeted the arriving legions.

Annatri, carrying a long spear, leaped down from the ornate great boat. She strode up to the Young Commander, bowed her head, and greeted him earnestly.

"Your Highness, a thousand Temple Guards, three thousand Royal Warriors, four thousand Holy City Legion members, and food for twenty thousand people for three months have arrived on time as scheduled!"

Xiulote solemnly reciprocated the greeting.

"Annatri, the rain is so heavy, you have had a tough journey! It has also been very difficult for the warriors to march in the rain for several days. The wooden fort has prepared a banquet, dry clothes, and barracks. The reinforcements can now go and rest, and the sailors can also take turns ashore!"

Next, Xiulote stepped forward two paces towards the commanders of the various reinforcements. He first exchanged greetings with the honored nobility, Tepopolo. The Young Commander glanced curiously at Tepopolo. Despite the hot and moist weather, the other party still wore a wet leather hat tightly covering his forehead.

"Your Highness, I sustained a minor injury on my forehead, please forgive me for not taking-off my hat to greet you."

Tepopolo awkwardly explained.

The Young Commander nodded his head and didn't inquire in detail in front of everyone. Tepopolo breathed a sigh of relief.

Then, Xiulote looked towards his father, Xiuxoke, who had a smile on his face and a gentle gaze. The smile was out of joy from not seeing each other for a long time, and his gaze deeply concealed care.

They looked at each other for a moment, suppressing their excited emotions, and bowed their heads in greeting at the same time. Then, Xiulote also exchanged a greeting with his teacher, Olosh. Viewing the dignified young man, Olosh grinned, his expression full of immense joy and relief.

The welcome banquet was formal yet simple. There were no grand dances or music at the banquet, and the generals did not indulge in excessive drinking. The camp prepared roasted deer meat, roasted rabbit meat, corn cakes, black bean paste, a few cups of freshly made cocoa drinks, and finally, delicious fish soup made from freshly caught fish.

Xiulote covertly supervised. The fresh fish was boiled in water, then clean fine salt and Mexican Sichuan pepper were added to expel the cold. Then, the fish soup simmered in a ceramic pot for a long time until the clear broth turned creamy white, with the meat separated from the bones, giving off an enticing aroma.

Everyone finished a bowl of fish soup, feeling its exceptional freshness and breaking into a sweat. The group praised the chef's skills and then moved on to the main topic. The various reinforcements reported the detailed situation of their troops, Bertade described the situation at the northern wooden fort and an estimate of Tarasco's military strength in the south. Eventually, Xiulote set the strategy, ordered the various units to scatter and garrison, to tightly hold their positions, and patiently await the opportunity for battle.

As dusk fell, the banquet ended, and the commanders went back to their camps. As the Naval Commander, Annatri needed to return to the great boat to rest. She followed her ancestors' traditions, seldom leaving the fleet, and did not interact with the nobility of the Alliance.

Xiulote thought for a moment, a smile spreading across his face. He ordered Bertade to see the Naval Commander off. During the banquet, he had heard Annatri's bold words and also learned about the origin of the scar on Tepopolo's forehead, and at this moment, a subtle idea had formed in his mind.

Having received the Commander's military order, the weathered Head Warrior silently watched the young man for a moment before bowing his head to accept the command.

As he stepped out of the tent, the wind and rain came at them. Annatri stood tall and slightly tilted her head, looking at the Head Warrior with interest. After a moment, she simply greeted him and then asked loudly.

"Bertade, it's been a month since we met. I just heard that you killed forty Tarasco warriors in battle, and His Highness named you the Chief Eagle Warrior and even caused the Sun God to manifest a divine celestial phenomenon. Now, rumors in the army say you are the bravest warrior of the Northern Route Army. I wonder when you are free, could we have a match?"

The Head Warrior calmly looked at Annatri. He did not speak, only returned the greeting.

Annatri frowned slightly. After thinking for a moment, she headed towards the river and the fleet, striding forward. The Head Warrior lagged one step behind, also steadily following her. The female warrior covertly observed his footsteps and listened to the rhythm of his breathing. Then, she accelerated, running like a cheetah on the soft mud, quickly leaving the wooden fort behind.

Bertade still walked with a steady pace, his breathing not disturbed, always maintaining a one-step distance.

After observing for a moment, Annatri abruptly stopped and stood firmly.

"You must have a match with me, otherwise, I will just stand here and not leave!"

Chapter 329 - Reinforcements_2

In the storm, Bertade stood silently. He calmly waited for a long time as the heavy rain soaked both of their clothes. It wasn't until nightfall that the Head Warrior, looking at the Samurai's resolute expression, finally opened his mouth with reluctance.

"Fine!"

As darkness fell, a bonfire was lit inside the Commander's wooden hut. By the flickering firelight, Xiulote crossed his legs and sat opposite his father, engaging in an earnest conversation.

"Father, have your injuries healed?"

Xiuxoke smiled and nodded, patting his chest.

"They've been healed for a while now. I am ready to charge into battle and fight for half a day at any moment. Over the past six months, hearing that you encountered danger in the Capital City several times, I often thought of going there to find you. But your grandfather wouldn't allow it. He wanted me to take control of the Brigade and make any necessary preparations..."

Xiuxoke briefly touched on the subject without going into details about the preparations. Then, looking at the handsome and resolute young man, he smiled contentedly and patted his son on the shoulder.

"I heard that you have done many great things, and I was somewhat skeptical at first. But seeing you today and observing your behavior, I truly believe it. Within these past six months, you really have grown a lot! You are now capable of commanding a large army, facing the slaughter of blood and fire... The heavy responsibility and future of our family now rest on your shoulders!"

On the final note, Xiuxoke felt a wave of emotion, inexplicably. He was very pleased to see his son's rapid growth, but always couldn't help wondering if he was getting old.

Xiulote listened quietly, a genuine smile on his face. After a long pause, he spoke softly.

"Father, I don't have experience in commanding large-scale battles. For this western expedition, I am planning to appoint you as the Marshal of the Northern Route Army, to exert control over the divisions and handle the specifics of military affairs."

Xiuxoke was taken aback. Stirred slightly, he thought for a moment but then shook his head firmly.

"Xiulote, I will definitely assist you in this western expedition. Being the Marshal would help to establish prestige and win the hearts of the troops. Still, it is better for you to take up this position yourself! I can

act as the Deputy Marshal, if the expedition is successful, the honor will be yours, and if, by any chance, we fail, I will bear the responsibility... My son, my future is already set, but yours has limitless possibilities!"

Hearing his father's sincere words, the young man fell silent for a moment, then slowly nodded.

Having established the hierarchy of command, the two of them discussed the specifics of military deployment and the arrangement of the various camps.

After adjustments, the trusted central army was positioned in the main fortress. The central army consisted of four thousand Holy City Warriors, two thousand Temple Guards, as well as the Longbow trusted aide camp and the Jaguar Warrior Brigade, totaling about seven thousand men. Next, both the left and right armies were comprised of three thousand Royal Family's direct Samurai and an additional thousand Longbow Warriors, led respectively by Balda and Tepopolo, stationed in the left and right fortresses. The rear army consisted of three thousand City-State Warriors from the west, spread out in outer camps, also responsible for surveillance patrols. As for logistics and provisions, the majority were stored in the main fortress, with each smaller fortress only distributing a month's worth of supplies.

Xiulote pulled out a wooden map, bringing up the latest military information.

"Father, I plan to bypass the fortress defense line along the southern shore. I've learned from captives of the previous ambush that the southern fortresses have been well-established over the years; their defenses are strong, terrain complicated, and they support each other. Stone Forts and Wooden Forts house local Nobility and Militia."

"Determined to protect their property, their will to fight is very strong; they even took the initiative to fight once, driving off raiding Samurai squads. Now, they have chosen to defend their positions and are

mobilizing able-bodied men into the city. To break through so many fortresses one by one is unwise, and we do not have the manpower."

Xiuxoke looked at the pattern on the map, mentally constructing the situation in the southern front. After a while, he nodded in agreement.

"So, you are preparing to head south from Lake Cuitzeo? Then the Rivermouth Fortress in the south will be the biggest obstacle to your journey south."

Xiulote smiled confidently.

"Indeed, I already have a general plan for the siege. According to the latest intelligence, the main force of the Tarasco Naval Forces has moved downstream to the west, going to meet reinforcements from the Chapala Lake Region. This round trip will span hundreds, even thousands of miles, plus troop assembly, and there will be nearly a month's time when the Rivermouth Fortress will be in a relatively weakened state."

At that point, Xiulote hesitated a bit.

"Father, our reinforcements have already arrived, and we temporarily have the advantage in numbers. I am now hesitant over whether to seize this opportunity to send troops southward and quickly take the Rivermouth Fortress by storm. If we can capture the Rivermouth Fortress before the autumn harvest mobilization, the situation will turn sharply, and the path ahead will suddenly become wide open!"

Xiuxoke looked surprised, incredulously staring at the young man.

"How can such a solid fortress be breached by an army in a month? How confident are you?"

Xiulote smiled, answering cautiously.

"I invented a new type of weapon, very powerful... About a fifty percent chance, if the enemy is unprepared, that it can blast open wooden doors and allow the samurai to pour in!"

Xiuxoke thought for a while. He then examined the map and the troop deployments in detail and asked,

"Xiulote, have you ever actually used this weapon in previous wars?"

Xiulote fell silent momentarily, then shook his head.

Xiuxoke understood. He patted his son on the shoulder again, advising him,

"My son, in real warfare, a commander must always consider the worst case scenario and leave room for all possibilities. Various unexpected coincidences always happen, and they often bring about the worst results. When you have an advantage, you should further expand your advantage, suppressing the enemy from the front. Taking a risky gamble usually is only the last resort when at a disadvantage and desperate."

"Venturing south with our main force before dealing with the Tarasco fleet, getting involved in an uncertain siege, is a reckless choice. Once the enemy forces converge and reinforcements arrive, and the naval forces threaten the rear, the army might face destruction."

Hearing his father's teachings, Xiulote thought for a moment and nodded.

"A truly skilled great general always plans before a battle, not seeking an epic victory of coming back from the brink of death. They always manage the situation, defeating an enemy already destined to lose with a position ensured to win."

At those words, Xiuxoke savored the moment and then laughed in approval.

"Where did my son hear such profound principles of commanding troops? Indeed, those are brilliant words."

After that, Xiuxoke continued pointing at the map, gesturing towards the north,

"Xiulote, the first priority of the army is to manage the situation and take the initiative. Your original plan was actually quite good. Seizing the opportunity while the Tarasco fleet is absent, we must first remove the unstable elements behind us, dragging the Otomi into the water! Once the army heads south, we can't leave our weak rear to the untrustworthy Otomi."

Xiulote nodded in agreement, smiling slightly.

"Father, great minds think alike! Our forces finally have the advantage. As soon as the heavy rains let up, I'll lead troops north, forcing the Otomi to make a choice, to fight alongside us against the Tarascans!"

Xiuxoke nodded with a smile. Then, remembering his own experiences and that critical strike during the battle of the two kings, he reminded his son with a serious expression,

"Xiulote, if the Otomi agree to send troops, just to be safe, don't integrate their forces with the Northern Route Army!"

Xiulote was slightly startled and asked,

"What does Father think we should do?"

Xiuxoke moved his finger forward, pointing to the west side of the Lerma River, to the Sakapu State of Tarasco,

"Right here. If the Otomi sincerely cooperate with the Alliance, they're also unlikely to go to the southern defenses and bang their heads against a rock, losing precious warriors. Sakapu State is directly across from the Otomi Guamare State, situated between the Chapala Lake Region and the southern defense line. There shouldn't be many Tarasco defending forces here, and the towns are also rather prosperous. Deploying a contingent here would not only draw troops from the southern line but also attract the attention of Chapala reinforcements."

Looking at the map, Xiulote's eyes lit up,

"Excellent! The Tarasco's Otomi mercenaries come from here. In the southern forests, there are small Otomi tribes as well, which have ties to the Otomi in the north. Emphasizing an attack here as a condition for negotiations makes it easier for the Otomi to agree!"

With that, the two men looked at each other and laughed heartily, in full agreement.

The campfire flickered, and a warm breeze brought relaxation to the body and mind. Father and son conversed long into the night, with many old memories surfacing. Unbeknownst to them, outside, the first light of dawn was already breaking.

Early the next day, a team of envoys hastened from the main fortress, bringing the Commander-in-Chief's latest demands to the Capital City in the north.

The rain continued, and another week passed in the blink of an eye. The Otomi, at last, sent an envoy in response. The parties agreed that their leaders would meet in person, formally setting negotiations in the woods between the Capital City of Otapan and the north coast's Wooden Fort.

Chapter 330 - Alliance Under the City

Heavy rains fell in August, dark clouds shrouded the fields, turning the world into a swamp. It was not a season for waging war; thus, the battles briefly halted. The Mexica Alliance and the Tarasco Kingdom were both mobilizing troops, preparing for a more brutal conflict.

The rainy season persisted, and the new batch of gunpowder weapons had to be stored in the innermost parts of the warehouse, unusable. They were wrapped layer by layer, placed in sealed pottery jars, and carefully stored. The saltpeter in the gunpowder had hygroscopic properties, absorbing

moisture from the humid air, reducing the effectiveness of the gunpowder; thus, it needed frequent airing. Moreover, saltpeter was soluble in water—if washed away by heavy rain, it would lose potency.

Xiulote stood atop the watchtower of the wooden fort, bidding farewell once again to the departing naval forces. In this rainy season, when gunpowder weapons were hard to use, the Alliance's naval forces had no clear advantage to decisively battle the Tarasco naval forces. The young commander thus sent Annatri back toward the east again to bring more reinforcements from the capital city.

Annatri still stood tall and steadfast on the grand vessel amidst the rain. She was vibrant, saluting the commander-in-chief's flag as a farewell. Then, her gaze shifted, landing on Bertade, standing behind the young commander, her eyes blazing with a fierce combat spirit, her expression unabashedly admiring.

As wind and rain mingled together, the naval fleet, having only rested for a few days, set sail once again toward the east. Xiulote watched the vast fleet sailing upstream against the current, as the warrior women on the big ships slowly faded from view. He then turned around, smiling at the Head Warrior.

"Bertade, I heard that last time during the send-off, you and Annatri had a match. Who won in the end? You seemed to return quite late that day."

The serene Head Warrior lifted his head, gazing silently at His Highness for a moment, before answering in a deep voice.

"We had two bouts, with no winner or loser... Your Highness, we should set off to the north, to negotiate with the Otomi people."

Xiulote smiled faintly, nodding his head.

"Let the new reinforcements guard the fort. Take the ten thousand forces that have rested and prepare, and we shall march north tomorrow!"

At early dawn the next day, as the rain eased slightly, ten thousand Mexica warriors gathered at the main fortress, equipped with forests of war clubs and longbows. Fully armed and long-prepared, they were ready to engage in battle at any moment. The prolonged stationing had made the warriors crave combat.

Xiulote entrusted the defense of the main fortress to his father. Then, he shouldered the battle flag, waved a large hand, and as the march flute sounded, the large army slowly set out.

The Mexica army surged forth, scouts spread ten miles ahead, and the spearhead pointed north. The ten thousand warriors traversed dense, undulating forests, passing through sparsely populated villages in the mountains, until they reached the vast fields a few dozen miles south of Otapan City. Here, the Milpa fields began to crowd, the lands brimming with vibrant new sprouts, representing the Otomi people's hope for the new year.

The farmers in the fields, intimidated by the massive army, fled north in terror, abandoning the fields they had labored over for months. Memories of Mexica's aggression from a year ago were still vivid and unforgettable. The Otomi scouts kept a distant watch, continuously passing unsettling news.

Xiulote ordered the warriors to avoid the fields, choosing suitable terrain to set up camp, and prepared for war. As the heavy rain fell again, the young commander calmly awaited inside the newly erected encampment.

Two days later, the Otomi negotiation team hastily arrived, accompanied by only a few hundred warriors.

Xiulote did not leave the camp to meet them. Dressed in the solemn attire of a commander-in-chief, wearing a high, vibrant feather crown, and with a gold sun amulet around his neck, he sat high in the large tent of the encampment. On Otomi land, he welcomed the guests who lived there with the demeanor of a host.

Xiulote, expressionless, looked at the envoys entering the large tent.

The Otomi envoy was an old acquaintance. Nearly a year had passed, and the young commander once again saw the old Priest Olte. The latter was pale and withered, his formidable presence diminished.

The priest lifted his all-white head, scrutinizing the young commander seated above, his pupils contracting slightly. Xiulote watched him calmly, noting his unusually aged face and still clear eyes.

Jiowar's robust frame stood erect, his narrow, sharp eyes glaring like a defiant coyote, staring fixedly at the young commander in the center. His hands were empty, his large knuckles clenched, still projecting a powerful aura. Bertade frowned, feeling the intense hostility, and immediately gripped his war club tighter.

After a moment of silent confrontation, Xiulote was the first to speak.

"In the name of Huitzilopochtli, the Chief Divine! I come with the warrior's war club and feathers of peace. Otomi people, my patience is limited, I cannot wait too long. Do not let the feathers fall from my hands!"

Hearing the clear threat, fire rose in Jiowar's eyes, he clenched his fists audibly, yet remained silent.

The old Priest Olte nodded, took a deep breath, and called out loudly.

"In the name of Ometeotl, the Primordial God! I come bearing the greetings of a friend. Mexica people, our sides have long ceased fire and established a divine-witnessed treaty. Now, in this busy and beautiful season, you come with a great army, do you intend to break the sacred treaty?!"

Xiulote answered unflinchingly.

"Otomi people, the sacred treaty remains in effect. The violators of the treaty are you! You accepted the conditions of the Alliance, received the last batch of food, and promised to launch an attack on the Tarasco people in the south. However, you did not keep your word; you only pretended to comply! As the great army came from the west, I witnessed with my own eyes that the Tarasco people's spring farming was all in order, undisturbed. Now, I need an explanation, and more importantly, a compensation!"