

Civilization 411

Chapter 411: Raid

The night wind traveled from the Capital City southward, sweeping across fifty li of open fields, before pausing briefly in Patzcuaro City. When dawn lit up the sky and earth, the envoy from the Capital City hurriedly set out on their journey, continuing southeast. Over a dozen samurai with the Hummingbird House crest guarded two cloaked envoys, quietly traversing the prairies past the large militia escorting provisions.

Avoiding the desolate villages and crossing the uninhabited knolls, they arrived at a sparse woodland. The shallow trees of the tropical highland blushed with cherry hues of tender new branches that had just sprouted in the spring breeze. Grass up to a meter high blanketed the wilds, swaying in the wind to create waves, the delicate tips adorned with slightly blue spindles, like an ocean of lavender.

Soft, verdant Rosy Maple Moth flowers intertwined among the branches, forming layer upon layer of pink buds waiting for the season of bloom. Their flowering season was long, beginning with April's first rain and lasting until the end of October's rainy season. The trumpet-shaped blossoms would flourish and fade in the stormy winds, accompanied by the songs of lakeside people busy with farm work—a beauty of the water region etched in the heart of every Tarasco.

"When the Rosy Maple Moth flowers blossom, and the Heavenly Divine's tears fall, the Mexica's supply routes will become treacherous. The Kingdom's fate lies with the flowers; can we endure until the end of the rainy season?"

Seeing the familiar flowers and smelling the fresh scent in the wind, the envoy slowed their pace momentarily, pausing in their stride. Heavy with a secret message, aware of the entire picture of the war, their expression carried shades of desolation.

Suddenly, amidst the distant woods, several reflections of light flickered. The envoy stiffened for a moment, then alarm bells sounded within—Obsidian!

"To arms!..."

Dozens of hidden Hunters rose swiftly, instantly surrounding the small party of messengers. Their clothing was plastered with long grass, appearing like spirits sprung from the flora, with only the tall leader dressed in green leather armor of a samurai. Without hesitation, the Hunters drew longbows, releasing a chorus of sustaining hums. "Swoosh, swoosh," a torrent of arrows came, penetrating the Tarasco samurai completely, felling them to the ground amidst cries that echoed instantly through the woods.

The samurai leader concentrated and aimed briefly before erupting with a roar.

"Aim for the legs!"

A feathered arrow flew like lightning, accompanied by the whistling wind, and fiercely lodged into the thigh of the central envoy. The envoy immediately became unsteady and fell under the vibrant shallow trees. The accompanying Envoy trembled and crouched before the fallen envoy, struggling to lift him up.

The Toltec leader roared and released four arrows in quick succession, felling all the standing enemy samurai. Then, he drew his War Club from his waist, giving it a powerful swing, and led the surrounding Militia Tribes towards the fallen envoys.

The envoy managed to sit up and surveyed the area. The samurai lay on the ground around him, some gravely injured, others dead. He turned to look at the young deputy beside him. Shaken by the sudden turn of events, the deputy trembled as he struggled to draw his Long Dagger but failed to steady his grip.

The envoy took another look at the approaching Mexica, and forcefully swallowed his saliva. He closed his eyes, and when he reopened them, they were filled with ferocity.

"Come closer."

The envoy reached for his waist with his right hand and with difficulty beckoned the deputy with his left.

Upon hearing the call, the young deputy shuddered yet again before hurriedly bending down to draw close.

"We cannot escape. For the sake of our most exalted King, the message must not leak. So..."

With a twisted expression and a face full of brutality, the envoy extended his left hand, grabbed the deputy, and then with his right hand wielding the Dagger, he made a swift, forceful slice across the deputy's neck, causing blood to spray instantly.

The deputy's eyes widened abruptly, his neck feeling the cold pain, and his mind flooded with the shock of impending death. He opened his mouth to utter an indistinct "uu-uu" sound, then slumped onto the envoy, weakly awaiting death's arrival.

Startled by this sudden act, Toltec bellowed in anger and charged forward, quickly closing the distance to within ten paces of the envoy.

The envoy gritted his teeth fiercely. His right hand suddenly exerted force, "pu-chi" went the Dagger as he plunged it into his own left chest, burying it to the hilt. Then, the severe pain caused his pupils to constrict rapidly, and the draining blood left him utterly drained of strength. He fell silently back, his eyes fixed on the unopened Rosy Maple Moth flowers overhead, his mouth opening and shutting for a moment before falling silent.

Toltec leaned over anxiously, checking the two Envoys lying on the ground, then stood up with frustration. He went to inspect the Samurai with the Hummingbird crest, pressing the wounded survivor for information, and found out they were Messengers from the Capital City, heading to the King's camp to the southeast.

"Damn it! What message could possibly make these Envoys so fiercely determined?"

Toltec furrowed his brows, searching the Messengers' bodies again, finding only wooden plaques painted with hummingbirds and a jade Token. He stood up, looked at them for a while, then waved his hand to call over a trusted Samurai.

"Did these Hummingbird Samurai reveal any useful information?"

"Boss, his Highness's grand army and the Chapala Legion have clashed on the western plains. Thirty thousand enemies wiped out in a day. Bless his Highness! A true great victory!"

The confidant exclaimed with a face full of joy.

Upon hearing this, Toltec's brows lifted, his eyes shone, and he swung his War Club, roaring loudly.

"Good, very good! Blessed by the Heavenly Divine, I, Toltec, am delighted! Gather the scattered squads, tonight we return to drink and celebrate, and drain all the looted wine! You, act as my Envoy, return to the Huayamo Fortress tomorrow, congratulate his Highness, and then report the latest military intelligence!"

"Thanks, Boss!" The confidant laughed out loud. Then, his face turned troubled as he counted on his fingers.

"What military intelligence should I report? Over the past month or two, we've attacked five, six, seven grain transport teams, intercepted two, three, four Messengers. Then we took down two patrolling Samurai squads, plundered over a dozen Nobility manors, and sacrificed hundreds of Nobles and Samurai... Can I say it like that?"

"Idiot, a real idiot!" Toltec knocked on the confidant's head, exasperatedly saying.

"What use is babbling all that! I told you to read more books, fight less, but you never took it to heart. Remember, tell his Highness: First, under the attacks of our Black Wolf corps, grain transportation from Patzcuaro has halved, and we have dispersed thousands of Militia. Second, recently, there are an increasing number of Messengers from the Capital City to the southeast, likely carrying urgent military intelligence, details unknown. Third..."

Toltec scratched his head, thought for a while, and asked the confidant.

"Have we discovered anything new these past few days?"

"New discoveries? Oh yes, the number of people in the Tarasco grain transport teams has been increasing, but the amount of grain clearly decreased."

"Grain decreased? With so many enemies in the southeast, their daily grain consumption is fixed. With our harassment, they should be transporting even more supplies to maintain an ample supply and compensate for losses along the way. Why would it decrease?"

Toltec mused, continuing to speak.

"Third, the enemy's grain transport to the frontline has decreased, which could mean they are running low on food, or there must be an imminent change on the southeast frontline. Please advise his Highness to dispatch the army, head south as quickly as possible."

The confidant nodded, committing all this to memory. Then, with a cheeky smile, he joked.

"Boss, with all that you've said, it's hard for me to remember it all. Why not take out pen and paper, write it down for me?"

"Scram!!"

Toltec barked angrily, knocking the confidant's head forcefully. Then he turned and strode away without looking back. Laughter echoed into the distance, leaving behind only the blood-stained grass and the soon-to-blossom red cicada flowers.

Chapter 412 - The End of the Southern Line

A gentle breeze blew across the green fields, reaching the rolling mountains. Tall trees spread their branches, concealing the traces of fighting in the forest. The bushes, nourished by life, became even lusher and more verdant. The setting sun lit up the towering stone forts, creating a patchwork of colorful oils painting—the brown-green of the bricks, the black-gray of the smoke, and the dark red of bloodstains.

By evening, the battlefield had fallen silent. Hurling stone projectiles lay scattered among the stone forts, and broken feathered arrows were deeply embedded in the soil. In front of the stone forts, on the battlefield, both the Alliance and the Kingdom's militiamen wore numb expressions and were busily engaged. They collected the relics of fallen samurai and buried the bodies of their respective militias right there. The ground was filled with deep red marks, which not even the rain could wash away. Only the lush green grass could eventually cover the cruel battlefield.

Slender plumes of cooking smoke rose from within the clusters of stone forts, visible from across the forested mountains. The smoke drifted past the stationed samurai, circled the banners on the watchtowers, and rose into the profound sky. Priests accompanying the army began to chant an ancient funeral song, praying for the Heavenly Divine to descend and guide the departed souls.

The song dispersed in the wind, and flags fluttered. At the top of the clusters of stone forts, different flags fluttered. Over two-thirds had already been replaced with the Mexica Alliance's Royal Banner, but the remaining third were still the Tarasco Kingdom's Eagle Banners. The Eagle Banner forts surrounded Apachigan to the northwest, at the heart of which lay the core of Tarasco's defenses, an impregnable High Mountain Fortress undulating two hundred li across the mountainous area.

Golden sunlight bathed the fortress atop the mountain, where the King's flags fluttered proudly on the watchtower. The Royal Family's eagle spread its wings, soaring toward the western sky. King Su'angua, expressionless, stood at the top of the stone fort. He stared at the hereditary Royal Banner, like a statue

carved from stone, letting the setting sun cast long shadows. A few steps away, the King's Copper-axe Guards, clad in copper helmets and leather armor, wielding copper axes and longbows, solemnly guarded the surroundings.

As the daylight gradually faded, the dying sun stained the earth red. The young King lowered his eyes and slowly spoke,

"Is the replacement Royal Banner ready?"

"Respected King, the replicated new banner is prepared. When night deepens, we will change the hereditary banner," the trusted aide behind him replied, bending forward, his voice low and firm.

"Summon Southern Route Commander Quiyus. Have him come discreetly, without any followers."

The King retained his calm tone. He turned around and looked toward the southeastern woodlands. In the last light of the sun, the Mexica people's Royal Banner stood out in the distance. The blood-red sun soared on the banners, the deep blue War God bloomed with plumes, the yellow-green gemstone glittered brightly, stinging Su'angua's eyes.

The King slightly tilted his head back, suppressing the moisture in his eyes. The sky was vast, the mountains majestic, and the fortress beneath his feet was so invincible. The hereditary Royal Banner stood tall at the highest point of the fortress, forever witnessing the glory belonging to the Royal Family.

From the spring plowing last year to the spring breeze this year, it had been over nine months of fighting. The main force of the Mexica Alliance was firmly blocked within the two hundred li of forests of

Apachigan, never able to break through. Tens of thousands of Alliance samurai halted at the last, highest, and most solid defense line, battering themselves bloody, unable to advance even an inch.

Su'angua quietly reminisced, countless memories of days and nights flooding his thoughts. The shouts of the battle echoed in the sky, and flowing blood submerged the earth. This prolonged southeastern campaign was also about to come to an end, ending bleakly in a way he had not anticipated.

On this lines of complicated battle, the Kingdom and the Alliance had been entangled for years, already thoroughly familiar with each other's situations. The Tarasco Kingdom had rallied twenty-three thousand samurai, ten thousand elite militiamen, and fifty thousand regular militiamen, while the Mexica Alliance had mobilized forty-five thousand samurai and over forty thousand militiamen. The colossal battle involving nearly two hundred thousand from both sides was an epic unprecedented in the world!

The entire campaign was roughly divided into two phases. The first phase saw the Kingdom retract while the Alliance advanced. From last June to October, the Mexica people launched a surprise attack during the spring planting season. Using longbows, stones, fire arrows, and paper fireballs, enhanced by new weapons, they advanced unstoppably. Only when Su'angua led the Royal Legion to arrive, and the Lake Region's militiamen and Tekos warriors joined in support, was the enemy's advance gradually withstood. In these four months, the Kingdom lost five thousand samurai and fifteen thousand militiamen, losing about half of their fort clusters. However, the Alliance also suffered six thousand samurai and eight thousand militiamen casualties, holding the advantage in casualties and advances.

The second phase consisted of both sides holding their lines, forming defenses. From last October to this March, the Mexica people's advance slowed and eventually halted completely. Facing the mountain-supported High Mountain Fortress, longbows and stone-throwing lost their effectiveness. Mexica samurai hurled ceramic globes, unleashing thunderous explosions, briefly shaking the troops' morale. Yet, under the sacred Royal Banner, the courage of the Imperial Guards never wavered. The Copper-axe Guards swung their battle axes, killing nearly a hundred Nobility Battle Groups, repelling the fierce attacks of the Mexica samurai.

When the Kingdom's archers concentrated their shooting, the exploding clays had no opportunity to reach the castle again. The Capital City's craftsmen worked tirelessly, supplying five thousand replicated longbows to the front within six months. Thousands of longbowmen spread across the front line's fort clusters, keeping the Mexica samurai from raising their heads. The Alliance lost the advantage of archery, and the Kingdom's defenses became extremely solid again. The stone fort clusters held the geographical advantage, making them difficult to conquer. Samurai from both sides fell in swathes between the forts, cautiously contracting afterwards, shifting the focus of attrition to the more vulnerable militiamen. Stone projectiles and arrow storms alternated across the sky, relentlessly striking down the militiamen.

Chapter 413 - The End of the Southern Line_2

In the past six months, the Kingdom had lost five thousand Samurai, five thousand elite Militia, and thirteen thousand from the Lake Region Militia. The people of Tarasco had steadfastly held the last third of their fortress clusters, with four thousand of the fallen warriors being reinforcements from Tekos. The Alliance, on the other hand, had suffered casualties of seven thousand Mexica Samurai and twelve thousand Militia. The losses on both sides had started to even out, and the offensive push of the Alliance had been exhausted.

Over the course of nine months, the forests of Apachigan had devoured nearly eighty thousand warriors and Militia from both sides. Whether they were noble Nobility, fierce Samurai, or ordinary Militia, they all became cold remains, buried long in the mounds amidst the mountains. The only trace they left was an insignificant number in the heart of the Supreme Commander. Such tragic losses caused turmoil among the Nobility on both sides, and the Samurai found it difficult to press on with the attack. Over the past month, the Mexica had completely ceased large-scale Samurai sieges, and had only conducted harassment operations led by the Militia to maintain pressure on the front lines.

"The Kingdom still has forty thousand warriors left, half of whom are the battle-hardened Samurai and elite Militia groups. The Alliance, probably has over fifty thousand, of which thirty thousand are Samurai. The frontline of Apachigan has now been stabilized, with both sides equally matched, everyone pushed to their limit. The Mexica can't sustain any more Samurai casualties... so, I've held this place!"

The young King gazed at the dimming sky, screaming in silence. Although he was on the dangerous front lines, he had never betrayed the glory of the Royal Family, proving his worth to his ancestors!

The Envoys sent to various states had all brought back favorable news. The Holy City Cholula had accepted the treaty of conversion, shifting to a neutral stance. The leaders from Tlaxcala in the East had married into the Royal Family and had already gathered tens of thousands of warriors, invading the border of the Mexica Alliance. The people of Mistec and Zapotecs in the south had also shown a warming attitude. These "people of the clouds" had interrupted their New Year tribute to the Alliance and formed a covert Alliance with the Kingdom, promising to extend help when the situation changed. The Otomi people in the north were embroiled in controversy, divided into two factions with differing opinions. People from Vastec in the northeast, unsatisfied with the oppressive tribute, were also restless. Only the distant Totonac from further east had yet to respond.

"A significant shift is imminent. Just hold on for another half a year, and the entire situation of this war will change dramatically!"

Su'angua closed his reddened eyes, tears streaming down silently. He stepped into the shadows of the Watchtower, reached out to touch the banner of his ancestors, and then quietly wiped his face with his sleeve. Then, the young King turned around, gazed towards the Capital City in the northwest, issuing a long sigh and an angry shout.

"Foolish Ospe... Cowardly Pengguari... Mexica's 'God of Death' Xiulote!"

The young King muttered the three names, his emotions of resentment decreasing in turn, his unwilling desires rising continuously, darkness swallowing his spirit. But no matter how much resentment he held, no matter how unwilling he was, the outcome of this battle could no longer be changed. The reinforcement forces had been completely crushed, supply lines were nearly cut off, and the Capital City was under the enemy's blades! The only option left before him was the inevitable third phase, a rapid retreat.

Su'angua gazed towards the west, watching the setting sun slowly fall, seeing the shadows encroach upon earth and sky. It was not until his loyal guard lit a bonfire that Quiyus, the Southern Route Commander, donned in War Clothes, hurried over.

"Respected King, I have just returned from the front-line fortress, please forgive my tardiness!"

Quiyus knelt on one knee, performing a solemn salute. The Southern Route Commander was about forty years old, with a rugged face. His eyes revealed the vicissitudes of a life well-lived, the visage bore the dignity of the Royal Family, and his bearing was filled with the murderous intent of the battlefield.

"Uncle Quiyus, no need for such formality. You are the Royal Family's mighty eagle, flowing with the bloodline of the Tariguri ancestors. You are also the Marshal in the Southern Army that I trust the most!"

Su'angua walked forward and lifted Quiyus to his feet. Then he grasped the other man's arm, gazing into the eyes of the Southern Route Commander.

"Uncle, do you still remember the glory of our ancestors?"

Hearing the word "Uncle" and seeing the eyes of the King, Quiyus paused briefly. Then, with a resolute nod, he answered loudly.

"Under the banner of the eagle, I shall shed my blood until death takes me!"

The King watched silently for a moment. Then, he let go, stepped back two paces, and disappeared into the shadows of the Watchtower.

"Uncle, the Mexica have defeated Pengguari's reinforcements. They are about to surround the Capital City, cutting off Patzcuaro City's supply lines."

Quiyus was struck by shock. He widened his eyes and asked in a low, angry voice.

"The thirty-thousand-strong army from Chapala, so easily defeated?! Your Majesty, has this news been confirmed?"

Su'angua nodded slowly. His voice came softly, but his changing visage was obscured.

"It's a secret message from the chief of Jinjinni. Outside the Capital City, there are no more reinforcements. The food supply in Apachigan can last a little over a month. The news of the shortage can't be hidden for much longer... This defensive line, it can no longer be held."

Quiyus stood speechless. He displayed an incredulous expression, then suddenly turned, looking towards the western lands. At that moment, the sun had completely set, the plains were shrouded in shadows, and all that lay before him was profound darkness.

"This defensive line, it can't be held any longer..." the Southern Route Commander repeated unconsciously. Then, he suddenly started, looking up at the King.

"Your Majesty, have you summoned me, for...?"

Su'angua fell silent for a moment before speaking calmly.

"The Capital City is in grave danger, I must quickly return with my troops, preserving the last hope. The Tlaxcalans have already sent out their forces, as long as the Capital does not fall, the glory of our ancestors can continue... Uncle, you are the Royal Family's mighty eagle, and the person I trust the most! Only you can take charge of the situation in the southeast!"

Chapter 414 - The End of the Southern Line_3

Quiyus looked past the King, gazing towards the flag on the watchtower. The Tarasco eagle soared in the wind, enveloped by the cloak of nightfall. After a moment, he knelt again on one knee, bowing deeply to the King.

"Beneath the banner of the eagle, my blood shall flow, ceaselessly until death," he avowed.

Su'angua emerged from the shadows, his expression solemn, lifting his respected uncle to his feet.

"Uncle, I must depart before dawn tomorrow, taking with me two thousand Imperial Guards, three thousand spear Militia, and five thousand Samurai of the Kingdom. The road back to the Capital City spans over four hundred miles, and to guard against Mexica raids, the march cannot proceed too swiftly. I need you to hold here, for another fifteen days!"

Quiyus nodded silently. He closed his eyes and pondered for a moment before quietly suggesting.

"Your Majesty, you might take more troops, to preserve more of the Kingdom's vitality. I can hold out here!"

Su'angua shook his head calmly, having already fully considered it and now not a moment's hesitation.

"I have already taken all the disciplined and loyal Samurai capable of fighting. I'm entrusting to you the two thousand foreign Mercenaries, to keep the six thousand Tekos Samurai at bay. These vassal Samurai scattered across the front-line fortresses, once they retreat, will surely be noticed by the Mexica. They are also not fit to be brought into the Capital City. And the remaining twenty-two thousand Militia, unable to operate at night and unable to keep secrets, I'll leave them all to you, along with two thousand Longbows!"

"The Capital City is in peril, the Chief Minister, though of eminent prestige, is unable to unify the Nobility and High Priest. If the situation becomes dire, there may well be unforeseen events. This time I'm returning with the troops to replant the Royal Banner atop the 'Palace of Wind' to stabilize the military morale in the Capital City. The retreat must be swift! I can only take ten thousand elite men. And as long as these ten thousand return to Qinchongcan, the Capital City will be as firm as the Divine Mountain in the west!"

At that, the King looked at Quiyus, his eyes ablaze with what seemed like flames. He opened his arms and embraced his uncle in farewell.

"Uncle Quiyus! For the sake of the Kingdom's continuation, for the glory of the Royal Family, I entrust this place to you! Fifteen days, just hold for fifteen days! Then, whether you fall back to the hinterlands or surrender to the Mexica, the choice is yours to make!"

The Southern Route Commander slowly nodded, like a frozen sculpture in the wind. Once again, he vowed with a solemn voice.

"Beneath the banner of the eagle, my blood will flow..."

Upon hearing the familiar oath, the young King finally smiled. He lowered his head, for the first time solemnly saluting his uncle, then silently entered the fortress. The intricacies of the retreat demanded his personal decisions, secret preparations, and arrangements. The King's guard arrayed into two columns, wielding Bronze Axes and Greatbows, followed with equally somber faces.

On the deserted expanse of the fortress, only Quiyus remained alone. He watched the fluttering Royal Banner in silence, memories of ancestral glory flickering in his mind, blooming into a smile on his lips. Until the night grew deeper, a squad of guards hurried over, replacing the inherited Royal Banner with a new one. It was then that the Southern Route Commander found himself devoid of strength. He staggered forward a few steps and fell beneath the flag. The towering fortress fell silent once more, save for the drifting funeral songs of the Priests, mourning the fate that was soon to come.

His fate was sealed, and with it, tens of thousands of soldiers in his command were destined to plunge into boundless darkness. The old Royal Banner fell without a sound, the new banner rose gently, just as the Kingdom's downfall, an omen sung in the nocturnal lament.

Chapter 415 - Auspicious Day

The vast night was always busy, and the scattered daytime was hurried too. Amidst the interchange of night and day, the warriors of the Tarasco Kingdom moved quietly, startling the birds in the mountains and leaving nothing but the faint rustling of the wind. The auspicious day of the Sun God was approaching, and the reconnaissance of the Mexica Alliance noticeably withdrew. Legions prepared for a grand ceremony, bringing a brief peace to the frontline.

Late into the night the next day, the wooden doors of the High Mountain Fortress swung silently open. Under the protection of the Copper-axe Guards, the royal banner led the way. The Eagle Warrior, shaking its black wings, disappeared into the forests of the West. Ten thousand elite soldiers gradually

gathered from several fortresses behind, forming a retreating flood. The warriors, holding sporadic torches, raced silently towards the Capital City of the West.

The morning star illuminated the eastern sky, heralding the arrival of dawn. In the flowing morning light, Su'angua climbed the small hill beside the creek, looking back at the High Mountain Fortress.

The mountain path was winding and long; the Eagle Banner at the top of the fortress turned into a tiny dot, with only the bright gold sparkling under the morning light. Beside the dot, a figure slender as a pine needle stood quietly. Across the great distance, the two most venerated Divine Descendants of Tarasco gazed at each other. Before the sunrise, they exchanged their final looks and then silently bid farewell, heading towards an unknown yet unchangeable path.

The morning light gradually brightened, and the sun slowly rose. In the same mountain range, King Aweit, clad in red royal attire, his head adorned with a slender Feather Crown and draped in Jade belts, gleamed like the embodiment of a deity. He stood solemnly atop the fortress, looking towards the bright East. The clouds on either side unfurled and dispersed, like waves rolling out, revealing the gates of the Divine Kingdom. A huge red sun was slowly rising from the horizon. It shone upon the lush green Apachigan forests and also illuminated thousands of Mexica warriors below the great fortress.

Aweit raised his head, lifted the Yellow Gemstone Divine Staff, and paid homage to the rising Sun God. As the King made his gesture, the War Priests began to sing ancient songs, ignited fervent flames, and prayed for the arrival of the Chief Divine.

This was a grand funeral on the auspicious day of the Sun God. A huge Sacred Fire burned in the center surrounded by the warriors. All the damaged Cotton Armor, worn War Clubs, and broken shields were piled into clearly layered small hills around the fire, harboring the souls of departed warriors.

Under the Priest's ritual, the Sun God cast down His radiant gaze. His eyes watched over the earth; the valley's stream scattered like a Jade belt, and the undulating mountains concealed the extension toward the distance. The malefic moon persisted in the western horizon, chased away by the Chief Divine's mighty power, fleeing toward the lair of the Royal City of Tarasco. As cloud lights ascended and the sky blazed with color, the glorious Chief Divine finally descended upon the human world, transforming into a dazzling golden yellow, showering the entire world!

"...The Divine has arrived! He guides the souls of the deceased, towards the red Kingdom! He promises to the world: warriors who die for the divine will reopen their eyes. They will welcome the red dawn under the red sky!"

King Aweit spread his arms and called out with all his might. His loud voice echoed throughout the fortress, like a divine promise. Then, the Priests shouted in unison, praising the highest Chief Divine.

"Praise the Chief Divine Huitzilopochtli! He saves the devoutly praying believers and guides the sacrificed souls for the divine!"

Fierce drums beat, melodious flute music played. Amidst the Priests' chant, hundreds of nobles and thousands of warriors faced the rising sun in the East, devoutly praising the deity. The initial rise of the sun hit their eyes, the brilliance momentarily dazzling everyone. The warriors then prostrated, clutching the Chief Divine's Amulet. Following the Priests' guidance, they closed their eyes, envisioned the splendor of the Divine Kingdom, and together shouted the Divine's name thrice.

"Trust in Chief Divine Huitzilopochtli! Praise the Sun God Huitzilopochtli! Devote to the War God Huitzilopochtli!"

By the time everyone opened their eyes again, the sun was too bright to look at directly. The Priests once more leapt into their celebratory dance and sang praises. The warriors murmured quietly, making

wishes to the Chief Divine, and sent messages to the deceased. The nobles took turns coming forward, throwing the garments of the fallen into the fire, sending them to the red Kingdom.

Moments later, King Aweit once again waved the Divine Staff, reverently sending off the Chief Divine. Outside the fortress, the Eagle Warriors also sheathed their vibrant Obsidian Daggers and cleared the traces of the sacrifices. When the grand ceremony concluded, Aweit descended from the highest point of the fortress amid the cheers of thousands, his gaze briefly lingering outside the fortress before calmly departing. There, a new undulating mound of earth had appeared. All the Tarasco wounded who could no longer work had been sacrificed and buried here.

The close confidants and guards immediately stepped forward, following the supreme King back to the main hall of the fortress. Aweit washed the sweat from his face, removed his heavy royal attire, and changed into a light cotton robe. Then, with a smile and in a relaxed tone, he asked.

"Gillim, did all the high and hereditary nobles of the Legion come today?"

"Your Majesty, today is the auspicious day of the Sun God. Except for the chiefs stationed at various fortresses, all the honored and hereditary nobles have arrived. The Jaguar and the Eagle Warrior Battalion have also gathered here at this fortress, taking charge of the surrounding vigilance."

Gillim solemnly paid his respects, replying without a hint of humor.

"Excellent! Let them all stay. Prepare wine and meat; tonight we shall hold a feast and everyone will drink merrily!"

Chapter 416 - Auspicious Day_2

Aweit laughed aloud. After half a year of campaigning, battered by wind and sun, his complexion was slightly reddened, his features defined and rugged, and his expression even more resolute. In his casual banter, he seemed more unrestrained and bold than before, with an added undercurrent of merciless severity.

"Your Majesty, should some stimulating herbs be added to the drinks?"

"Hmm, follow the priests' tradition, the first through the third rounds of drinks should be mixed with different herbs. Begin with the enlightening Ebony Jade, continue with the hallucinogenic Bare-Capped Mushroom, and conclude with the tranquilizing Rat Tail Sage. Remember, use only a third of what the priests would, don't add more."

Aweit paused thoughtfully, then answered with a smile. For his beloved daughter Alisa, he had picked up herbology again, a subject he had learned in his youth, and his expertise even exceeded many high priests.

Gillim nodded respectfully. After a moment, he asked softly,

"Your Majesty, should some women be arranged to serve the generals?"

Aweit lowered his gaze and shook his head.

"The samurai's tents should not be tainted with worldly distractions. At most, bring some musicians and dancers. As for the girls who sing and entertain, send them directly to the nobility's private tents."

Gillim bowed to take the order. Soon after, he raised his head again and asked calmly,

"Your Majesty, a few months ago, the samurais intercepted some of the Tarasco envoys, capturing two princesses of the Tarasco royal family. After two months of indoctrination by the priestesses accompanying the army, can we ensure they pose no threat... Should we let them wait upon you?"

Upon hearing this, Aweit was momentarily stunned. He recalled briefly, then cast a commanding gaze.

"The Tarasco royal princesses? Are they from the envoy group to Tlaxcala?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, the ones the Jaguar Warrior Brigade ambushed. After your western campaign, marrying a Tarasco royal princess would help you better control the people of the Lake Capital City. And if the royal families of both nations could produce a lineage, that would be an even better selection for a prince. Your descendants could rule the vast region of Michkenque for the great alliance."

Gillim bowed again, his expression open and unswayed by personal feelings.

Aweit's demeanor grew serious. He pondered for a long time before he affirmed,

"The Tarasco princesses... there's no need to rush. We'll discuss that after conquering Qinchongcan. As for the Patzcuaro Lake region, the prince designated is Xiulote; that won't change!"

"Your Majesty, His Highness Xiulote is the heir to the royal family, and in the end, he must return to the Capital City. The Patzcuaro Lake region in front lies six to seven hundred miles from the Capital City, and messengers take a month to travel between them. And the further Chapala Lake Region is over a thousand miles away, a journey even an eagle would need ten days to complete. These frontier lands can only be guarded by a royal prince. In these unpredictable times, it's beneficial to the royal family and the alliance to prepare early."

Aweit smiled, noncommittal. He turned to the Intelligence Officer, inquiring about the intel he cared for,

"The barbaric people of Tlaxcala have invaded the alliance's border. What are the current troop strengths, and how is the battle going?"

"The Four States of Tlaxcala have currently mobilized thirty thousand samurais and thirty thousand militia, invading the Xochipeople state in the southeast. The local city-state nobility has abandoned the fields and villages, holding onto the fortresses and cities, and has requested reinforcements from the Lake Capital City!"

The king frowned. The supply line for the southern army passed through the southwestern Lasico state, just two hundred miles from Xochipeople state. If the Tlaxcala army broke through there, the enemy's vanguard could reach the Mexican Valley and threaten the rear of the grand army.

"How did the religious elders in the Holy City of Cholula react?"

"The religious elders have tacitly approved the mobilization of the Four States' leaders. The Tarascans have pledged to convert, which is an offer the elders cannot refuse."

"What about the religious leader Petl? Acap has a good relationship with him, can he be persuaded again?"

"Your Majesty, that cunning old fox cannot be bought with sweet honey. His Highness Xiulote's capture of Huayamo and the advance on the gates of Qinchongcan City have deeply shaken the elders. While they are outwardly friendly to the alliance, they have started to be wary in secret. They fear the alliance's growth!"

"Hmm, well. The Telask people are our hereditary enemies; a battle with them is inevitable. Send more Holy Water to Acap, let the religious elders have more visions of the divine!"

Gillim nodded in understanding, showing a faint smile. He continued,

"The southeastern city-states have maintained their defenses for a long time and can hold out for at least three months. The issue now is that the southeastern city-states have a small population and can't sustain enough samurais. Without enough warriors in the defense lines, they lack the ability to conduct harassment attacks!"

After some thought, Aweit asked,

"Is there an enemy thrust in the northeastern city-states?"

"The Vastec people in the northeast have had secret meetings with Tarasco envoys, and there are signs of unrest. The great nobles of the two northeastern states need to watch out for Tlaxcalan incursions. Actually, they are unwilling to head south to support the southeastern state nobles."

"These city-state nobles... Xiulote is right, centralization of power is the future for the alliance! Then, withdraw five thousand Royal Warriors from the southern route to form a support battle group. Command them to advance east along the Tarsas River, intimidating the Mistec people on the southern shore. These 'Cloud People' have interrupted their New Year tribute, so it's high time to send a messenger to reprimand them! Besides, let the northern General Osellor be vigilant, and if necessary, he may take the offensive to suppress the Vastec factions first!"

Gillim pulled out a charcoal pencil and began recording everything on rough paper. Extremely disciplined and intelligent, he had learned to write proficiently within a year. Afterward, the Intelligence Officer raised his head, revealing his deep eyes.

Chapter 417 - Auspicious Day_3

""Your Majesty, in the past nine months, the Royal Warriors have lost nine thousand men, and the southern City-States have lost four thousand Samurai. Even with the addition of two thousand from the Nobility Battle Groups, our total number of Samurai stands only at thirty-two thousand. A little over a month ago, Marshal Iskali led five thousand of the Battle Group westward, and now we've drawn another five thousand Samurai to help in the east, which leaves our southern forces somewhat stretched thin... With Texcoco Lake District now in the slack farming season, should we continue to mobilize the Militia?"

Upon hearing this, Aweit turned around and walked to the window of the great hall. He slightly lifted his head to look towards the northwestern forest and the daunting fortress atop the high mountains. The base of the fortress was dyed dark red with blood, and the walls of green stone were covered with smoke and scorch skid marks. And at the very top of the fortress, the Royal Banner of Tarasco stood erect on the highest point of Apachigan, waving gallantly in the wind.

The King watched for a long while, with a sigh of helplessness escaping his lips.

"The terrain is too steep for catapults to be of any use, and the people of Tarasco have replicated a large number of Longbows. Such High Mountain Fortresses are no longer something that human Force can overcome. The Tarascans can't mount a counterattack and we can't break through. Given that, amassing more troops on the southern front would be just a wasteful use of supplies! Mobilize ten thousand Militia from the Lake Region, ready to assist the southeastern City-States at any moment. As for Apachigan here, we just need to maintain the pressure on the front line, no additional reinforcements are necessary."

Gillim nodded his head and continued to write feverishly. Aweit shifted his gaze. His eyes were bright and he looked to the western sky.

"Fortunately, Xiulote has already captured the Huayamo Fortress, breaking the stalemate in the north! The detachment from Tepopolo has also penetrated deeply along the downstream of Tarsas River, landing in the heartland south of Tarasco and pressing northward! As long as one of these two Battle Groups can continue their advance and cut off the enemy's supply routes, victory in this western campaign will be ours!"

Soon, Gillim finished recording. He bowed deeply in solemnity to the King.

"Your Majesty, according to intelligence gathered from across the lands, Tarasco's national power is already spent. They can't hold on any longer. The Alliance will surely win, and You will become the greatest leader in epic sagas, forging a name in jade and stone that will never perish!"

Aweit laughed heartily. He patted Gillim on the shoulder.

"Though this western campaign has been tough, it's just the beginning of a long journey! As the leader of the Mexica, one must emulate the great Montezuma I and spend a lifetime amidst the campaigns of war. Gillim, you may go now. Relay the orders to the troops, prepare for the banquet!"

Gillim bowed once more and retreated from the great hall, moving through the shadows of the buildings without making a sound. Only when he stepped out of the main fortress did he call over a Retainer and relayed the military orders with precision, not missing a single detail, until at last, the Intelligence Officer paused. After a moment of contemplation, he spoke in a solemn voice,

"Summon the Priestess accompanying the army. Have her ready to bring the Tarasco princesses tonight."

The Retainers went off to obey the command. Gillim stood silently in the shadow of the houses, his gaze fixed on the green stone walls. The walls, with their crude Tarasco patterns, told of centuries of time, but they also made one think of a not so distant future. After a long while, he suddenly turned, his eyes bright and captivating, yet devoid of emotion.

In the great hall, Aweit was still standing by the window, admiring the undulating Mountains and observing the fortress on the high Mountains. Then his gaze sharpened as he stared fixedly. Near the distant Eagle Banner was a tiny figure. The figure's garments glittered, though its face couldn't be discerned.

Aweit closed his eyes, scenes from the past appearing before him, memories so deep-rooted they surged in his heart. He gripped the Divine Staff in his hand tightly and murmured to himself,

"Xiulote, my pupil, you will not disappoint me. Su'angua, my old friend, I look forward to the day we reunite!"

Chapter 418 - Search

The sun fell quietly, and the brook flowed soundlessly. The rolling hills gently subsided, and the barren wilderness gradually opened up. The forests of Apachigan turned into a black silhouette against the sky, and the lake region of Patzcuaro lay not far to the north.

King Su'angua walked in silence, dressed in an ordinary Samurai's attire, followed by a trusted aide carrying the Royal Banner. The hereditary Eagle Banner had been rolled up and put away, with only the divine flags of the three gods held aloft by the flag bearers. From a distance, it was hard to discern the legion's allegiance.

However, once one got closer, the identity of the Royal Legion could not be concealed. Longbows, bronze axes, leather armor, copper helmets—along with the silent marching and the impeccably maintained military bearing—all symbolized the elite Samurai. The commanders of the army's encampments all wore the bifurcated feather crowns of Nobility and brightly striped war clothes adorned with yellow Divine Eagles and symbols of the three gods.

The ten thousand elite troops of the Tarasco Royal Family were divided into two armies: five thousand in front and five thousand behind, with Scouts sent out for tens of miles. Su'angua personally led the Copper-axe Guards at the very front. Over the past few days, under the golden sunlight, he had traversed familiar mountain roads and unfamiliar desolate villages, thus remaining silent and taciturn.

Suddenly, the front ranks of the marching army stirred slightly. The periphery Scouts shook flags of warning, and hundreds of elite Samurai quickly advanced, starting to run at high speed. Su'angua halted the troops and climbed to the nearest hill. He saw several green dots retreating quickly a few miles ahead, while the Kingdom's Scouts chased and encircled them from both sides. The pursuit continued until they vanished from sight.

The young King frowned with irritation as he waited, and it wasn't long before a trusted aide approached with a swift stride. He carried several bloody heads and a few longbows and bowed his head in respect as he reported.

"Respected King, our Scouts encountered a small Mexica Samurai squad and have killed them all."

Su'angua glanced at the hairstyles on the heads and then at the captured longbows, feeling irritated once more. These were not Samurai, but tribesmen from the mountains. Even these Militia were equipped with longbows... The young King said nothing further but inquired.

"Well done. Have the Scouts detected any traces of the enemy's main force?"

"There's no trace of the enemy force within twenty miles, and no sight of marching dust at the horizon. This Scout team carried ample provisions, and they had little strength to run during the chase, indicating they might have ventured quite far out."

The King nodded, gesturing for his trusted aide to step back. He looked towards the distant horizon; the Capital City lay three hundred miles to the northwest, normally taking about seven or eight days to reach by marching, or five days if marched hurriedly.

"Encountering enemy Scouts here... the Capital City has already lost control over the surrounding area! The enemy's situation is unclear, and hurrying could be too risky... No, the enemy forces must be numerous, now is not the time to be entangled!"

After a moment's thought, Su'angua made a rapid decision.

"Man! Relay the order, let the Vanguard Scouts disperse, keep the army quiet, and turn southwest. Also send out two teams of a hundred to wander in the northeast and attack the Mexica Scouts as diversions!"

Following the King's military command, tens of thousands of elite troops quickly changed formation, turning toward the southwest hills and valleys. This last elite force of Tarasco continued toward the heart of the Kingdom, awaiting the inevitable battle.

The wilderness of the forest returned to peace, with the drooping vegetation concealing traces of the skirmish. It wasn't until a day later that several Mexica reconnaissance squads hurried forth. They spread out, carefully searching for bloodstains and bodies in the woods before quickly regrouping. The team leaders had grave expressions as they quietly conferred for a moment and then split into three groups. One tracked the human shadows northeast, one followed footprints southwest, and another headed back at a forced march, day and night.

Days passed with the rising and setting sun. The high sun lit up the land, and the shallow brook flowed through the valley. Toltec, sitting on a large stone by the streamside with his legs crossed, frowned thoughtfully like a pondering large dog. Beside him lay his longbow and war club, and in front of him were rows of bamboo baskets full of slender, tender pepper-grasses.

This was a temporary riverside encampment about one hundred and fifty miles from Su'angua to the west and just over a hundred miles from Patzcuaro City to the southwest. Thousands of longbow Militia were scattered around on patrol in units of a hundred. Additionally, hundreds of tribal Hunters were busy on the plains, gathering fresh herbs. Soon, a Chieftain bearing a bamboo basket approached, respectfully handing over the gathered harvest to the brave and 'learned' Chieftain Black Wolf.

Toltec reached out, took a small handful of pepper-grass, and stuffed it into his mouth to chew. The succulent stems released a unique spicy fragrance, with the refreshing heat spreading in his mouth, tinged with a hint of bitterness. Toltec chewed for a while before nodding expressionlessly and gesturing for the Chieftain to leave. He then grabbed another handful of "snacks" and slowly chewed them to refresh himself.

The army had temporarily set up an Encampment, and collecting pepper-grass was certainly not for eating. This pepper-grass was actually tansy, which would be an excellent hot pot vegetable in later times, but at that time, it was the most readily available hemostatic medicine. Its stems could stop bleeding and reduce inflammation, both externally on the wounds and internally to alleviate internal inflammation.

Toltec chewed on his snacks while patiently waiting. Shortly before, during a raid, he had sensed a shift in the situation. He made a swift decision, leading the Militia forward over a hundred miles and dispatching dozens of reconnaissance squads to search toward Apachigan in the southeast.

"The Envoy of congratulations must have met with His Highness and conveyed my suggestion. What is His Highness's reply? Facing the threat of a shortage of provisions, what is the Tarasco main force to the southeast doing? If I can capture the enemy King, I, Toltec, could become the foremost man in the western campaign! What a sight that would be!"

Chapter 419 - Search_2

Toltec was indulging in thoughts about the future when a reconnaissance team emerged from the far end of the wilderness. Their war clothes were stained with blood, their faces smeared with dirt, and they looked utterly worn out from running for two days straight, bringing back an important message!

"What! A reconnaissance team has gone missing. Afterward, you discovered traces of a large enemy movement, but are unsure of the specific direction? You also suffered an attack by an enemy squad!"

The Scout Captain nodded repeatedly. Toltec then questioned him extensively before finally letting him rest.

The Mexica's Black Wolf pondered deeply. Although the scouts had not seen the enemy's flags and were unclear about the number of the enemy, his intuition told him that anyone who could deal with the scouts so neatly, march swiftly, and leave behind so few traces must be a formidable opponent. At this moment, only one army in Tarasco matched this description: the King's Legion!

"The key now is to expand the search and to communicate this message to His Highness in a timely manner!"

Considering this, Toltec finally made up his mind. He stood up and quickly gathered his trusted aides and the Chieftains.

"Form units of fifty men each and divide into dozens of teams. Expand the search toward the East, Northeast, South, and Southwest! As soon as you confirm the enemy's large squad, quickly retreat to the old camp several dozen miles away from Patzcuaro City and report back, do not engage in battle! The first person to report back will be promoted to Senior Warrior. He will be rewarded with a hundred baskets of food, a hundred bolts of cotton cloth, and a hundred slaves! I will personally report his name to His Highness!"

Hearing about the high rewards, the Chieftains' eyes flickered. They looked at each other like wolves sniffing out their prey, their low, excited howls filling the air.

Then, without further delay, Toltec vigorously waved his hand.

"The rest of the hundred trusted aides, follow me, we return to the old camp immediately!"

The "Black Wolf" strode forth, eventually grabbing a handful of spicy herbs and chewing vigorously. The spicy flavor invigorated his spirit and the thirst for battle made his blood boil. Immediately, he began to run at a steady pace, followed closely by his trusted aides. The hunters by the river valley dispersed, leaving behind a row of baskets filled with fresh, spicy herbs.

Toltec ran continuously for half a day. Only when dusk fell did he stop for dinner, finding a highland where he rested with his trusted aides. As soon as it was barely light, he shouted for them to march, leading the run. By the next day's noon, the old camp was finally in sight. A hundred miles of marching in one day, nearly reaching the limits of this era.

Upon reaching the old camp deep in the woods, Toltec slowed briefly. Unbeknownst to him, the camp was now filled with many more guards. The patrolling squads were tightly organized and marked by the elite's deadly seriousness. The "Black Wolf" watched for a moment, then strode forward, his face lit with joy. He bowed down to the Head Warrior of His Highness,

"Holy Eagle Head Warrior, your wounds have finally healed? I've been worried about you! Well, seeing your rosy complexion and spirited demeanor, the Naval Commander must have taken good care of you."

Bertade was slightly embarrassed by these words, but then a smile spread across his weathered face.

"Anna is cold on the outside but warm on the inside; a good woman. I am completely recovered now. After lying down for several months, I can finally return to the battlefield, just in time for the tail end of this western conquest! If I don't put in more effort, all the merits would have been earned by you youngsters. Toltec, I heard you captured Ospai, that's like avenging me with one arrow!"

Bertade outstretched his hand and gave Toltec's shoulder a hearty slap.

Toltec was born from His Highness's followers, a young leader personally trained and promoted by him. Close in age, he was responsible for recruiting tribal hunters before the campaign, a task that came from his recommendation. Their relationship was very close, both regarded as part of His Highness's followers.

Hearing this, Toltec's spirits soared, and he spoke loudly with a smile.

"Holy Eagle Head Warrior, Ospai is but a spineless fish, not even capable of honor killing properly. Now, I, Toltec, have found a truly big fish, likely the King of Tarasco! Is His Highness in the tent now?"

"Big fish... King..." Bertade pondered briefly, then nodded seriously.

"His Highness is in the tent, dealing with military affairs. Military matters are urgent, let's go meet His Highness together!"

Since it was a serious matter, they wasted no more words. In just a short time, both men walked to His Highness's tent.

Xiulote, dressed in a black robe, held a simple map and was discussing closely with the bending Ezpan. Hearing the noise at the tent entrance, the Young Commander looked up.

Bertade entered first, bowing his head respectfully.

"Your Highness, Toltec has urgent military intelligence to report."

Xiulote nodded with a smile.

"Let my Black Wolf come in!"

"Your Highness, Black Wolf Torc sends his greetings and congratulates you on your victory in the great battle of the north! I also bring you new good news!"

Torc stepped into the tent, his eyes sparkling as he knelt on one knee and greeted loudly.

Xiulote looked at his beloved general with a smile.

"Torc, what good news do you bring?"

"Your Highness, I have discovered the traces of the King of Tarasco!"

"What!" Xiulote suddenly stood up. His expression turned solemn as he stared at the young general.

"When and where? What are the specifics? Tell me everything in detail!"

Facing His Highness's gaze, Torc shrank his neck and carefully explained all the intelligence he knew.

Xiulote pondered for a moment before speaking slowly.

"So, the Scout did not actually see the enemy's army?"

"Your Highness, in the East of Qinchongcan, the only ones who can march in large numbers without leaving too many traces are the troops of the King of Tarasco!"

Torc continued to explain.

"The scouts I dispatched are experienced hunters! Only the enemy's Royal Army could have made them disappear silently."

Xiulote nodded silently. He thought for a while and then scrutinized his trusted aide, Ezpan.

"If the Royal Army of Tarasco is in our East, what places could hide them?"

Ezpan thought for a moment, took the map from His Highness, and pointed on it one by one.

"Your Highness, there are many places in the East that can conceal their tracks, starting with the forest boundaries of Apachigan. Moving north from there, the southern side of Xitaqualo also has many hilly areas, along with sporadic fortresses. However, these places lack sufficient food supplies, and it would also be difficult to avoid our scouts when marching further into the interior."

Xiulote gave a slight nod. He then continued to inquire.

"If the enemy is in the South, where could they go?"

"Your Highness, the hinterland to the south of Tarasco is still intact. The nearest is the southernmost part of the Patzcuaro Lake region, the thriving city of Ihuatzio, rich in copper mines. By raiding the major merchants there, they could obtain plenty of supplies. Next are the river valleys on the north coast of the Tarsas River, which house many manors of the Great Nobility. There are also numerous military pathways with water sources between Lake Patzcuaro and the Tarsas River. If the Royal Army passes through here, they could avoid our scouts, and head south or even southwest, entering the Lake Patzcuaro region!"

The Young Commander hummed in agreement, then frowned, staring at a corner of the map, deep in thought.

"Your Highness, you have already led the main force of the army southward, and at this time, no one can resist!"

Torc showed excitement. He pointed at the center of the lake region, Qinchongcan City.

"Let us encircle Qinchongcan directly, wait for the enemy's Royal Army to arrive, and then defeat them in one fell swoop! I, Torc, volunteer to be your vanguard! By capturing the enemy's king, the people of Tarasco will be dispersed into individually fighting factions, no longer subordinate to each other. The victory of the western campaign will inevitably follow. You will become the greatest Commander-in-Chief in the history of the Alliance!"

Xiulote smiled and nodded, then shook his head.

"Torc, I am not worried about Su'angua escaping into the Capital City. Though Qinchongcan is strong, it is a city in a cage. If he enters the Capital City, the King of Tarasco will be a bird in a cage, unable to escape."

Then, he stretched out his hand and pressed it hard on the corner of the map.

"What I am worried about is Su'angua retreating here!"

Chapter 420 - Map, Story, and Decision

The tent's canvas door was tightly closed, and a skylight opened on the top of the large tent. At noon, golden sunlight fell from the zenith, illuminating the yellowed scroll of the map, much like an ancient scroll passed down over centuries.

In fact, this map had only recently been drawn on bark paper newly produced in the Lake Capital City. The bark paper was durable, but due to its high lignin content, it always turned yellow upon oxidation. Even after bleaching, under the sunlight, the whiteness of the paper could not be maintained for long.

Upon hearing His Highness's words, three confidants immediately gathered around and looked at the slightly yellow map, falling into deep thought.

The map, spread out, was quite large. It centered around two rivers, sketching out the territory of the Lake Region of Mexico. The map was densely covered with symbols and meticulously marked in different colors. Brown represented the layered mountains, symbolizing the terrain; blue portrayed the lengthy rivers, representing waterways; green depicted the dense forests, indicating vegetation. And black marked the towns of Tarasco, representing settlements.

Around the settlements, symbols in four different colors represented different political and military forces. To the East and due north was blue, symbolizing the friendly Mexica Alliance and the Otapan City-State. To the southeast was green, symbolizing the neutral Mistec and Zapotecs. To the northwest and far west was yellow, symbolizing the unknown Guamal Canine Descendants and northern Tekos Tribe. And at the center of the map, to the extreme east and southwest, was a glaring red, symbolizing the hostile Tarasco Kingdom, Tlaxcala Alliance, and southern Tekos Tribe.

At that moment, His Highness's palm was firmly pressed on the southwest corner of the map—the red area of the southern Tarsus Tribe, the mountainous land of Colima! By the conspicuous blood-red mark was a prominently drawn black triangle, but its meaning was unknown.

Xiulote smiled and looked around the tent. He memorized the expressions of the generals and then patiently waited.

This was a military map of Mexica he had created over several months, modeled after military maps he remembered. Since gaining surrendered troops from various parts of Tarasco, he had handpicked individuals to collect large amounts of scout intelligence and establish a map-compiling team. In addition to geographical information and military intelligence, estimates of local populations, agricultural production, and mineral development were all recorded on the map.

In Xiulote's plan, this map would expand from Mexica to encompass the entire world, evolving from a single map into a comprehensive atlas. Later, it would extend to the entirety of America and even the entire world, becoming a military and national tool for Mexica monarchs through the ages to govern the nation, expand territory, form alliances, and conquer disloyal subjects!

Toltec examined the map intently for a long while, only to feel that the dense annotations were like wriggling tadpoles, making his head spin. Thus, he was the first to inquire.

"Your Highness, is this the southwestern mountainous region, the land of Colima?"

Xiulote nodded slightly.

"Exactly! My only concern is Su'angua fleeing to the southwestern mountains; other directions pose no great difficulty."

"Your Highness, why is that? I've heard from merchants that the southwestern mountainous region is sparsely populated and remote, harboring layers upon layers of mountains, with steaming mouths of demons everywhere. Hundreds of Tekos Tribe settlements cultivate and hunt in the mountains, living in poverty. For a bit of arable land and a few water sources, they fight each other relentlessly. Further west lies nothing but the vast Great Lake."

Hearing this, Toltec scratched his head and continued with his puzzled inquiry.

"In such a barren and desolate area, if Su'angua leads his troops there, without cotton or food, without weapons or soldiers, and has to fight with the local tribes, he'd likely starve or impoverish to death within a few months! Wouldn't it pose a greater threat to the Alliance if he fled to the powerful Tlaxcala in the east, or the prosperous Mistec in the south?"

Xiulote looked admiringly at his beloved general and said with a smile.

"Toltec, I haven't seen you in two months, and it seems I need to take another look at you with fresh eyes. Very well, you speak with reason, showing much diligence recently!... Su'angua leads an unknown number of the Royal Legion, possibly thousands, and there are very few places he could go. The most likely scenario is of course heading back to save the Capital City, avoiding our entry or actively engaging us in battle!"

"The other directions, the east towards Tlaxcala is too distant, not bordering Tarasco. To the south, Mistec is nominally a subject of the Alliance. The Mistec leader might secretly communicate with Tarasco, but will surely not openly accept the enemy's King, let alone allow their legions to cross the border. More importantly, these areas are under the might of the Alliance's armies, ready to face military action at any moment!"

"Only the southwestern mountainous region of Colima! That area is the southwestern frontier of the Tarasco Kingdom, more than thirteen hundred miles from the Lake Capital City and several hundred miles from Qinchongcan City. The complex mountains are difficult to conquer, and guerrilla enemies are hard to locate, doubling the advantage for those who defend. The Alliance cannot reach such distances, nor maintain such extended supply lines. If Su'angua decides to abandon the Capital City and head directly there, he turns into a wolf entering the mountains, becoming a significant threat to the Alliance!"

Bertade pondered for a moment and then slowly began to speak.

"The topography of the Colima mountains is rugged, easily defended and difficult to attack. Going north through the Lerma River connects to the Chapala Lake Region. Eastward along the tributaries of the Tarsas River communicates with the southern regions of the kingdom. The Tarasco Royal Family has had branches in all states for two hundred years, with immense influence. If Su'angua seeks refuge there, and reorganizes the Tarasco Kingdom, rebellions around the lake area will erupt one after another, and cannot be quelled in just a few years!"