

Civilization 42

Chapter 42 Ambush

Dawn split the early morning light, and the still night retreated before the rising sun—another day had begun.

When the first ray of sunlight touched Xiulote's face, it seemed to resonate with his body, and the youth opened his eyes.

In an age without clocks, the rhythm of the body was the most accurate timekeeper. The samurai also woke up one after another, slowly bringing life to the village. After a simple wash and some cold food, Xiulote bid farewell to the village elder and set off with two hundred warriors on the return journey.

The homeward mountain path was winding and rugged, barely wide enough for four or five people to walk abreast; it was a trail blazed by supply teams. The army advanced along the edges of the hills. Rolling hillsides on either side were complemented by dense trees, among which the red birds sang cheerfully.

Xiulote walked in the center of the troupe, dressed in a brown coyote priest's Ceremonial Dress, with a sturdy Cotton Armor underneath. He wore the priest's Feather Crown, and though it was the simplest type, it still stood out "tall" and conspicuous amongst the crowd. Occasionally, birds were attracted by the bright Feathers on his head, circling overhead before flying off with their calls.

After half a day's walk, as they were about to enter Otapan's patrolling range, everyone relaxed a little. Perhaps because the sun was high, the birdsong around them seemed much quieter.

At this moment, a swift dot flew from the treetops, arrived in an instant and then hovered out of thin air, staying in front of Xiulote's Feather Crown, curiously examining the "object" before it.

It was only slightly larger than a bee, with green body Feathers, bright red Feathers on its head, a long beak, and a pair of rapidly flapping wings. Xiulote focused and realized it was a Hummingbird.

"The Hummingbird is the messenger of the War God Huitzilopochtli, the guardian bird of us Mexica people," Bertade said with some joy. "Priest, you have been favored by the gods."

Xiulote smiled. The avatar of Huitzilopochtli was the Hummingbird from the south, which had an extraordinary significance for the Mexica people. However, the Hummingbird in front of them was clearly attracted by the colorful Feathers.

Perhaps feeling shy under the gaze of the crowd, or realizing that what was before it was neither a flower nor a mate, the Hummingbird changed the angle of its wingbeats, spun around on the spot, and then shot forward swiftly like a red meteor. After traveling forty or fifty meters ahead, the Hummingbird seemed startled, suddenly changed direction, and shot up into the sky.

Xiulote watched, slightly stunned, and had yet to react when he saw Bertade's expression suddenly change drastically. Bertade glanced quickly at the terrain around him and shouted harshly, "Prepare for battle! Be careful!"

Bertade's call acted like a switch, and before his voice fell, over a hundred warriors with short hair and twisted beards rushed out of the woods fifty meters ahead. The warriors, wild-haired, bare-chested revealing tattooed fronts, wearing only loincloths, held simple Wooden Shields in one hand and short Javelins gleaming coldly in the other. With wild beast-like roars, they attacked ferociously under the lead of a few samurai clad in green Leather Armor.

Bertade immediately raised his shield with his left hand, guarding in front of Xiulote, and with his right hand, he took a Javelin from behind, focusing intently on the onslaught. The Mexica warriors ahead also took War Clubs from behind, shields held high, bravely charging to meet the enemy.

At that moment, a cry of alarm suddenly came from behind Xiulote, "There are people behind us!" It sounded like the voice of the young warrior Kunava.

Xiulote turned sharply, only to see six or seven scattered warriors appearing from the woods to their flank. They stood up from their ambush spots, drawing their massive one and a half-meter Wooden Bows, their arrowheads glinting coldly in the sunlight. Aiming at a distance of thirty paces toward Xiulote, they paused briefly to aim, then released without hesitation.

"Swoosh, swoosh, swoosh." The sound of arrows cutting through the air joined in a line, and in these fractions of a second, one couldn't trace their path—only the empty bowstrings of the ambushers were visible. Xiulote's mind went blank, incapable of any response. At that moment, he had one last thought: "I wonder if, in this place far from the golden pyramids of the moon, I can be reincarnated?"

In that moment of distraction, Xiulote felt a sudden weight on his back, as something pounced on him. He stumbled forward, unsteady on his feet, and then a series of forceful blows knocked him down to the ground, causing his Ceremonial Dress and Feather Crown to fall into the mud.

He struggled to turn over, propping up the body behind him, only to face Kunava's blood-streaked profile. Kunava had fallen onto him, blood pouring from his neck like a fountain. He was powerless to move or even make a clear expression.

In the moment he spotted the archers, he lunged forward to shield Xiulote, barely intercepting six Feathered Arrows, with one going astray.

Most of the Feathered Arrows buried deep into his Leather-Armored back. A fatal Feathered Arrow had pierced through the back of his neck, severing his left carotid artery. Losing blood nearly at one hundred milliliters per second, he would die within ten seconds.

The final moment came quickly, and Kunava simply gazed deeply into Xiulote's eyes, murmuring an indiscernible name: "Nava..." Then his eyes shifted slightly to the left, filled with infinite longing for the home in the south, and in the hallucinations before death, his lips curled up slightly, his gaze scattered, never to breathe again.

Xiulote lay there dazedly, as if turned to sculpture, staring at the now dead young warrior. He remembered the happiness on Kunava's face from the previous day as he talked about his family, the joy that brimmed over his face, the longing in his eyes for a beautiful future. Xiulote knew that "Nava" was his son's name, taken from a valiant warrior among the Mexica ancestors. It was also Kunava's last hope.