

Civilization 421

Chapter 421 - Map, Story, and Decision_2

The surrendered general Ezpan had remained silent until now, when he finally spoke up in a cold voice.

"Your Highness, the common people worship the three gods and follow the guidance of the priests. The influence of the Royal Family primarily lies among the nobility across the land. If we could subsume the three gods as subordinate gods to the Chief Divine, and then incorporate the low-level priests into our fold, we would be able to stabilize the rural situation. Next..."

At this point, a cold glint flashed in Ezpan's eyes, revealing a fierce intent to kill, as he slowly made a gesture of slashing a throat.

"Eliminate all Divine Descendants! Completely annihilate all the nobility, and the lands around the lake will be entirely yours!"

Hearing Ezpan's words, Bertade showed a look of surprise, while the Toltec laughed heartily with satisfaction.

"Excellent, very excellent! The hunting of a wolf pack requires skill. First, exile all the nobility, and relocate them elsewhere. If anyone dares to disobey, then execute them harshly. And once they have left their ancestral lands, their life and death would be but a thought away for Your Highness!"

Bertade gently shook his head. He looked towards the young king, returning to the topic at hand.

"The nobility control the samurai, militia, and manors, so we must handle this delicately... Your Highness, if Su'angua abandons his stronghold and moves to the southwest, could he establish a foothold in the Colima Mountains?"

Xiulote pondered for a while, then nodded affirmatively.

"The Tarasco Kingdom has long been operating among the various Tekos tribes to the south. During this western campaign, we encountered a large number of Tekos warriors on both the northern and southern routes. Captured tribal leaders also made it clear, the tribes on the periphery of Colima have already been subdued by the kingdom. The Tarasco Royal Family is also intertwined by marriage with leaders from various regions, becoming relatives and forming alliances, which gives them significant latent influence."

"If Su'angua were to lead his legion southwest, he could fully inherit the kingdom's management. Most tribes would not resist, and they would hardly be able to oppose him. Although the Colima Mountains are sparsely populated, they could provide ten thousand samurai and twenty thousand militia. As for the food supply for the legion, he could obtain provisions from the affluent Chapala Lake Region to the north, or covertly align with the Great Nobility of the Tarasco to the south. The mountainside fields could also be planted with coarse grains. As for weapons..."

Xiulote paused, his smile deep with meaning.

"With the right will, Colima can produce the finest weapons."

After listening to His Highness's analysis, the three great generals fell silent for a moment. Then, it was Toltec who spoke first again.

"Your Highness, would Su'angua truly choose to give up the capital city? The ancestral tombs of the Tarasco, the Royal Palace, the legacy of the Divine Descendants, is all here!"

"That depends on what kind of man Su'angua is, and how far-sighted he is."

Xiulote smiled, suddenly in high spirits. He patted the shoulders of the three commoner generals intimately, and then began to recount the secret past of the Alliance.

"Bertade, Toltec, Ezpan, you are all my right-hand men. There are some hidden histories of the Alliance I can share with you, in the hope you'll contemplate them. You must certainly know that among the early heroes of the Three-city Alliance, one of them was the predecessor monarch of Texcoco, the great poet King Coyote Nesaval. The poet King's reputation was outstanding throughout his life, brave and good at fighting, recognized by the Alliance as 'Poet,' 'Wise Man,' and 'Devotee.'

"In fact, within the secret traditions of the Royal Family, the poet King, after Itzcoatl, Montezuma I, and Asayacatl, was the most feared ally, minister, and prince by three generations of Mexica monarchs. He was restrained and patient; he could always wait patiently for the right time. His methods were flexible, yet he could decisively execute cruel decisions at critical moments, with a vision that never regarded short-term losses or gains."

Xiulote's gaze seemed somewhat distant. The pitiless purges of the elders had eliminated the succession of Texcoco princes; the Nesaval lineage was thus extinct. In the near future, Coyote would also completely vanish from epics, erased of all traces.

"In the secret annals of the Royal Family, the early history of the Three-city Alliance is recorded. Over sixty years ago, the Tepanec people firmly ruled over the Mexican Valley. They controlled many city-states and their military might peaked, deploying tens of thousands of samurai to conquer the prosperous City of Texcoco. Coyote barely escaped with his life at the age of fifteen, fleeing to the southeast to Weisoqinke. He stayed in exile for four years while rebuilding his army. Then, at nineteen, the poet King ventured alone to the Lake Capital City, secretly met with predecessor monarch Itzcoatl, and organized the alliance against the Tepanec people. At that time, the other two among the three heroes, the great King Montezuma and the immortal elder, were both nephews of the predecessor monarch and young leaders of the city-states."

"Coyote endured another five years of stoic wanderings. He visited many city-states to expand the anti-Tepanec Alliance, and several times returned to Texcoco to increase the resistance's strength. Five years later, predecessor Itzcoatl took up arms first, with the poet King joining according to the alliance pact, to fight against the Tepanec's capital at Askapozhaleike on the west shore of Lake Texcoco."

"In the following months, over a dozen surrounding city-states responded to the Alliance; three armies comprising of a hundred thousand warriors were assembled to punish the iniquitous Tepanec. Many vassals of the Tepanec remained neutral. In less than a year, the once supreme ruler, Tepanec Alliance, was extinguished. The Three-city Alliance declared its establishment, inheriting the rule of the Mexican Valley and embarked on the path of ascent promised by the Chief Divine. And Coyote, the poet King in exile, at last returned in glory after ten years. He recovered the City-State of Texcoco, restored the glory of his ancestors, and even became one of the three monarchs who ruled side by side in the early days of the Three-city Alliance."

Having finished the story, Xiulote broke into a gentle smile. He looked at the astonished crowd and pronounced each word distinctly.

"Although the Alliance is militarily glorious, it has only been established for just over fifty years. The nation's foundation is not yet stable, and hidden worries are everywhere. Before this western campaign, the Council of Elders met with Aweit and me, leaving behind the sole decree: to avoid future troubles, the Tarasco Royal Family must be extinguished, all male heirs must be executed!"

The generals exchanged glances, then nodded in understanding. The Tarasco Royal Family was primarily concentrated in the Capital City, hence Qinchongcan had to conquer it. The Noble families, always intermarried with the Royal Family, demanded cleanup of the Great Nobility's manors from all states as well. Next was the assault led by the King, Su'angua.

Xiulote closed his eyes to ponder for a few breaths before abruptly opening them. He stretched out his finger and pressed hard onto the southern heartlands of Tarasco, the furthest southern point of the Lake Patzcuaro area, the prosperous and wealthy copper mining city of Ivachi, also a trade city without walls.

"I've decided to temporarily bypass the Capital City, and the legion will move further south! Call together the samurai from all armies and prepare a month's provisions. The main force of the army will move south immediately, bypassing the fortified Patzcuaro and strike at wealthy Ivachi! This place is located fifty li south of Qinchongcan and has extremely convenient transportation. The army must take control here and then continue advancing, blocking Su'angua's retreat to the southwest!"

Xiulote made his firm decision. His eyes shone brightly as he looked at the generals in the tent, issuing his command loud and clear.

"Bertade, you go to rally the commanders of all divisions and convey the orders to move south. Toltec, I'm giving you three thousand samurai to serve as the vanguard of the army! Remember, march quickly, stay alert and cautious, and do not stop to plunder! Ezpan, you will coordinate a group of surrendered soldiers familiar with the terrain, and I'm giving you two hundred of the Jaguar Warrior Brigade and five hundred of our most elite scouts to form a reconnaissance camp. Dozens of scouting squads will scatter in all directions for a hundred li, searching for the whereabouts of the Royal Legion!"

The young commander looked stern, confirming the army's movements. The generals bowed respectfully and accepted the orders. In the end, Xiulote held out his palm and with strength, he made a chopping gesture forward and uttered thunderously.

"Once the Southern Army arrives and we strike from both sides, the Tarasco Kingdom will face its end! If Su'angua dares to fight us head-on, we shall settle the fate of the world in one battle!"

The generals looked at each other for a few breaths before resoundingly affirming the command. The next day, sixteen thousand Mexica legionnaires quickly set off, transforming into a torrential flood, surging towards the southwest. The expanded scouts spread like a celestial net, seeking the Tarasco's majestic eagles. And the nascent sun took its place high in the sky, awaiting the exalted Sacrifices to soar."

Chapter 422 - The Only Way

The April breeze embarked from the ocean, traveling a thousand miles to arrive at the land of the lakes in Michoacán. Under the warm sunshine, a faint mist rose by the shores of Lake Patzcuaro, the air carrying a moist breath. Pines and cypresses by the water danced lightly in the wind, morning dew gathered on the tips of leaves, cascading down their elongated branches. The serene moments of early spring were silently soaked in the morning sun.

Xiulote stood quietly by the lakeside, gazing into the deep blue sky. The fresh wind blew by, carrying the scent of unnamed flowers and unraveling the clouds. Sunshine fell upon his face and all around him, leaving behind radiant tranquility.

Yet, peace and calm were merely temporary illusions; war and bloodshed were the true realities of this world. The breeze from the southwest carried with it the scent of gunpowder, and even the faint smell of blood could be detected.

With a soft sigh, Xiulote abruptly turned around, his pupils reflecting flickering flames.

"The long rainy season is coming, and the consumption of food will double. The horn for spring plowing will sound at the end of the month, and the mobilization of manpower is becoming tense. The war must be swift!"

Some hundred paces away, hundreds of trusted aides in armor stood in silence with bows, solemnly behind their lord, like statues, waiting for the Commander-in-Chief's orders.

And in the far south, massive fires rose in Ivachi. Flames leaped, joining the sunrise in the sky, painting the thriving town red. The wind carried distant sounds, letting the shouts of slaughter echo to the heavens. The Temple of Priests, the Manor of Nobility, the houses of great merchants – wherever there was resistance, it was met with the ruthless killing of the Mexica legion, even the fires of destruction, until all was silent.

After a quarter of an hour, the sounds of battle gradually ceased. Toltec, bathed in sunlight, approached from the burning town. His War Clothes were stained with blood, his eyes flushed with red, his face full of icy intent to kill. It wasn't until he was near his lord that he knelt down on one knee, respectfully reporting.

"Your Highness, our army launched a surprise attack at dawn, and now Ivachi has been conquered by the legion! The resistant Temple has been burned down, and all the Priests of the false gods have been sent to the Abyss. Most of the Tarasco Nobility died in battle, the rest have become captives. The town's merchants put up a brief resistance before they surrendered. They have sent their representatives to negotiate with you, saying that as long as their Wealth is preserved, they will defect to you and further discuss some kind of fee for the troops. How ludicrous!"

As he finished, Toltec grasped his War Club and let out a cold sneer. In the Samurai's eyes, victors claimed everything. Those conquered merchants were now Sacrifices for the Alliance's captives, with no right to negotiate.

Xiulote's face remained calm. He lifted his gaze toward the southern sky. The Royal Legion of Su'angua was hidden somewhere within a hundred miles to the south, a great battle could erupt at any moment. So, he shook his head and decided the fate of the captives.

"Toltec, I don't have much time to waste here. I need miners to extract copper, Craftsmen to produce copperware, food to supply the legion, military supplies for the battlefield, and the latest military intelligence from the south! As for the entire town's Wealth, award it all to the legion's Samurai! You have half a day to resolve everything, and then advance to scout!"

"By your will, my gratitude for your generosity!"

Upon hearing this, Toltec's face brightened, and he prostrated in thanks. He then stood up and returned, walking briskly like a Black Wolf chasing its prey, pouncing on the spoils promised by their leader.

Soon, cheers erupted among the town's Samurai, praising their lord's generosity. They then busied themselves - sorting captives, scavenging supplies, and, by camp, equally dividing looted Feathers, Gold and Silver, gemstones, and slaves. After a while, a ghastly series of screams arose, quickly followed by silence. The accompanying priests chanted hymns to the Sun God, returning with their bloody Obsidian Daggers, all the Nobility captives offered as Sacrifices.

Xiulote remained expressionless, continuing his contemplation. After a moment, Ezpan approached with a rotund captive before him.

"Your Highness, I have interrogated the recently arrived merchant. This wealthy businessman comes from Tlapanec, reporting an urgent piece of military intelligence. He saw a large legion movement in the south!"

Ezpan made his respectful report, then kicked the captive hard, who cried out in panic, tumbling forward onto the grass, pleading loudly for mercy.

On hearing of the military situation, Xiulote was slightly moved. He gestured for the captive to be quiet. Ezpan kneeled on one knee, pressing the merchant's head into the grass to silence him.

"You've discovered traces of a large enemy force? When, where, under what banners, and how many men?"

The prince inquired. Ezpan repeated the question in the southern dialect of the Kingdom. On hearing this, the merchant stopped his cries. His eyes flickered and he put on a practiced smile.

"Respected Mexica Highness. I am a merchant from the Tlapanec tribe. We Tlapanecs have always been submissive to the mighty Mexica Alliance, paying tributes on time. In the war between the Alliance and the Kingdom, we also steadfastly support the Alliance, believers of the Sun and Rain Divines... I am willing to exchange the latest intelligence for your protection of my Wealth, as well as a modest reward."

Xiulote's eyes narrowed slightly, speaking in a low voice.

"Military intelligence is urgent and must be accurate."

Ezpan nodded, his expression turning cold. Then, he suddenly brought up his knee, knocking the merchant down completely. He pressed the man's left hand to the ground and drew a sharp Dagger. Under the captive's terrified gaze, he did not hesitate to cut down with the blade.

Chapter 423 - The Only Way_2

"Ah, ah!..."

Fear mixed with pain, the slightly plump merchant let out two short howls, before being pushed back into the grass again. Like Ezpan, he had lost the little finger of his left hand forever.

"Where are the enemies? What banner? How many people? Speak the truth, one lie, one finger!"

Ezpan released his grip and repeated the question, while once again raising his dagger.

"Your Highness, spare...my life! I'll speak, I'll speak!..." In terror, the merchant's eyes widened, and he begged loudly through his pain.

"Nine heavens, no, ten days ago, I passed through the state of Apachigan from the south, and encountered fleeing local merchants... A Mexica legion had landed at the ferry crossing on the north bank of the Tarsas River, and had immediately defeated the towns nearby. They executed a group of the nobility and merchants, levied enough supplies from the towns, and then began marching north. I quickly fled here before they arrived, only to still be caught in this plight..."

"What, are you certain that it was the Mexica legion that appeared in the south?"

Xiulote looked surprised. He thought he would hear of Tarasco Kingdom's army movements, but to his surprise, he received information about allied forces.

"Definitely the Mexica legion! As witnessed with my own eyes by a local merchant familiar to me, they were holding high the banner of the Sun God, along with the flag of the falling moon."

The falling evil moon... there was only one Mexica Commander-in-Chief who bore this emblem, and that was...

"The Moon of Apocalypse, Iskali, it's the Southern Army!"

Xiulote murmured to himself, his face lighting up with excitement. The emergence of such a fresh force in the nearby south would bring a more favorable turn to the situation. If this information was true, Su'angua wouldn't be able to take a detour from the south. The only path of retreat to the west would thus be completely cut off!

"How many people are in the Southern Army? Where was their last known location? What about the local merchant you knew?"

Xiulote asked solemnly and earnestly.

The merchant from Tlapanec's eyes flickered again. He answered haltingly.

"The army in the south... thousands... just north of Apachigan... with the army's arrival, it was chaos everywhere, I got separated from the local merchant in the escape..."

Xiulote looked down again, shaking his head slightly. With a stern shout, Ezpan chopped down with his dagger once more, then spoke indifferently.

"One lie, one finger. Three lies, and you die!"

The plump merchant cried out miserably, tears welling up in his eyes from the pain. He wept softly, speaking in fear.

"Ah, ah! I...I don't know! A large army appeared in the south, we merchants were too late to escape, how could we have approached to look closely. As for the local merchant... he fled in a hurry, didn't hire any samurai for escort, just a few servants, and he was loaded with gemstones and precious goods... I encountered him out in the wild, and in this time of confusion when no one would know... I, naturally, killed him and gladly took his wealth, the servants too were sent to the Divine Kingdom... Your Highness, every word I've said is true, I haven't lied!"

Xiulote watched for a moment, then nodded his head.

In this era, merchants were not always good Samaritans. Great merchants kept samurai, colluded with tribal chiefs or nobility, and often engaged in smuggling and private trading. In strict towns, merchants could be law-abiding gentlemen. But in desolate wilderness and weak villages, if they had the upper hand, they would reveal their ferocious fangs, abiding by the law of the jungle.

"Bandage his wounds and lock him up. Send out elite scouts, take this merchant's servants, and head south to establish contact with Iskali's army!"

"Inform Iskali to lead his troops north with haste and rendezvous with my Northern Army. Be wary, as Su'angua's legion is somewhere not far to the south. Should the enemy's trace appear, notify each other promptly and then strike together in a pincer move!"

"At your command! Your Highness, may your radiance shine upon heaven and earth!"

Ezpan paid his respects and then, dragging the captive merchant, quickly left without looking back.

Suddenly, more than a dozen Scout teams hurriedly headed south. They carried different military orders, the most important of which was to search for the Tarasco Kingdom's Royal Army.

From afar, Xiulote gazed into the distance. The sun rose high, its light shining brightly across the land, leaving no shadow with a place to hide. The Young Commander muttered to himself.

"Su'angua, with your legion blocking the paths to the southwest, where can you go now?"

The sun rose and set in an instant, and the day was gone. The brilliant sunlight shone for a hundred miles to the southeast, casting a glow over the lush mountaintops. In a valley amid undulating forests where streams flowed in tranquility and passed through several noble Manors nearby, this land was where Nobility demonstrated their valor during autumn hunts. It was strictly off-limits to commoners, desolate during spring and summer.

However, now, if one could evade the hidden sentries and enter the seemingly peaceful forested Manor, they would discover thousands of robust Samurai holding Bronze Axes and Greatbows, donned in Copper Helmets and Leather Armor, maintaining strict military discipline. The most elite soldiers of the Tarasco Royal Army were currently encamped in the hidden valley, awaiting the King's decision.

King Su'angua, clad in War Clothes with hands clasped behind his back, stood atop the Manor's high ground. He stared silently at the northwestern sky, finally letting out a deep sigh after a long while.

"When the great Fire blazes, the wind must keep its distance. Let the wildfire sweep through, burning the grass outside the city, the corn, and even the cocoa, for as long as the sacred wind persists, it will always sow new seeds!"

The King of Tarasco quietly recited this metaphorical verse. These were the cryptic words of Jinjinni, the Chief Minister, from a secret letter months ago, now deeply memorized by him.

"O Hummingbird Chief, could it be that you foresaw today's situation months ago? Within a single year, the two-hundred-year-old Kingdom perilously teeters. Where lies my path forward, and where is the turning point for the Kingdom?"

The young King's expression was heavy. Since the retreat from the southern line, the Royal Legion had been secretly moving south along secluded paths, swiftly heading west along the rivers through the forests. Leveraging his identity as King, he used the nobles' Manors as strongholds and obtained supplies from the Great Nobility of the south. For safety, he kept their offspring close, feigning deep trust to win them over, while actually holding them as hostages to prevent the marching news from leaking.

As they traveled, military reports from various locations kept coming in, and the King's plans were continually changing. When leaving the southern line, he planned to lead his troops back to the Capital

City, fortify and hold out, awaiting reinforcements from Tlaxcala. Soon after, he encountered a vast number of Mexica Scouts and learned that the area around the Capital City was already under the control of the Mexica Northern Army.

With the safest Northern route ending in defeat after defeat, Su'angua, despite cursing Ospe and Pengguari, dared not underestimate the young Mexica prince any longer. The Royal Legion held no advantage, and if they were to encounter the enemy in the open field, the outcome would be unpredictable. In response, he turned southwest, planning to take a detour to the south, towards the heartland, Ihuatzio City. On one hand, he would obtain supplies there, and on the other, he would coordinate with the Capital City to the north.

The young King steeled his heart and made preparations on two fronts. If the Capital City was surrounded and beyond relief, or if morale was too scattered to hold, he would command the Royal Family and Chief families to retreat to the southwest, into the Colima Mountain Region. The Tarasco Kingdom had campaigned through the mountainous tribes for many years and was well aware of the terrain's advantage. Defending from strategic points and waging guerrilla warfare were appropriate strategies when facing a stronger foe, biding time for an opportune moment.

However, the southern Scouts quickly brought back intelligence; a Mexica legion of around five thousand had landed in Apachigan, only a little over a hundred miles from the Royal Army.

"What's more fatal is..."

Su'angua turned around to look at the kneeling Scout. The loyal Scout had traveled a hundred miles in a single day and brought the latest terrible news.

"The Mexica Northern Army is rapidly moving south, having taken Ihuatzio City and blocked the passage westward. The enemy's Scouts have advanced nearly a hundred miles, closing in on the Royal Legion!"

The young King calmly waved his hand, telling the Scout to stand down and rest. Then, with a resolute expression, he looked towards the re-erected Eagle Banner of the Royal Family.

"Now, there is only one path left!"

Chapter 424 - The Day of the Decisive Battle

The sunlight held a warmth, bestowing vitality upon the earth. As spring plowing approached, wild fires of burning fields raged in the mountains and forests, sending up layers of thick smoke. Smoke transformed and drifted afar in the sky, like a passage to the Divine Kingdom, foretelling the samurai's destined return.

Hundreds of samurai, scouts, and envoys, clad in war clothes of different colors, marched through the smoke-shrouded southern hinterlands. Bearing different missions, they startled towns and villages along the way, shattering the last peace in the southern parts of the Kingdom. Three legions, from north to south, sought each other out in the fog of war, drawing nearer, preparing for a spirited slaughter.

Intelligence from all directions converged, with King Su'angua holding the home-ground advantage, being the first to discern the battlefield's entirety.

The northern Mexica legion, centered around Ihuatzio City, numbered between ten and twenty thousand, half of which were armored samurai with sticks, and the other half comprised longbow-armed militia. The southern Mexica vanguard, after pillaging in the state of Apachigan, began moving north with about five thousand elite samurai. It seemed the two legions had established contact, drawing closer to each other. They were merely over two hundred li apart, and given a week, they could unite into an army difficult to defeat.

Su'angua had ten thousand elites at hand, seven thousand of which were loyal direct-subordinate samurai, and three thousand were reliable longbow militia. The two enemy forces were no more than a hundred li away; the moment the Royal Army moved, it would be impossible to conceal its tracks, and the enemy would soon pursue.

"There's not much time left, defeating the enemies in the south won't aid our overall situation. The only path is to crush the northern Mexica main force before they converge! I trust in the loyal and brave Imperial Guard Legion! Defeat the enemy in the north, and the Great Army can return to the Capital, to support the Royal Family and House of Hummingbird, and to regroup the Kingdom's strength. Then, the road to retreat to the Colima Mountain Region will be open again, and there still exists hope!"

After pondering for a moment, Su'angua lowered his head, standing solemnly before the inherited Eagle Banner, silently praying to the sacred flag.

"Holy winds envelop the Divine Descendant of the eagle, the light of the three gods bestows upon the War God's legion. May the ancestors bless us, victory or defeat hinges on this one move!"

The young King then summoned his confidant, asking in a grave voice.

"Has the Envoy sent to the Capital arrived?"

"Your Highness, the accompanying scouts have confirmed, the Envoy has entered the Capital City. A response from the chief of the Hummingbird is surely on its way."

"Good! Dispatch a squad of scouts around to the East, harass the northern enemy, and create an illusion of the Royal Army's presence. The rest of the samurai will feast for a day, prepared to march at any moment!"

The long wind swept through, the fluttering Eagle Banner billowing. The golden sun turned to blood red, descending in the western sky. As night deepened, an Envoy finally arrived from the Northern Capital in haste, bringing the anticipated response. The young King no longer hesitated. At dawn the next day, ten thousand warriors from the Tarasco Kingdom emerged from their concealed forest manor. They were well-rested and high-spirited, surging towards the Ihuatzio City over a hundred li north.

The tender sunlight twinkled on the tips of the long grass, these were pure morning dewdrops. Upon spying the enemy's traces, Black Wolf Toltec suddenly stood up from his hiding spot in the grass. He raised his longbow, three consecutive arrows felling three Tarasco scouts in a hurry. His Hunter squad behind him loosed a flurry of arrows, slaying the remaining seven enemies, staining the dewdrops a glaring red.

Toltec nodded, contented, and climbed atop a mound. He looked towards the southern horizon, then his eyes widened in shock.

"By the Chief Divine above, this... this is the Tarasco's most elite Royal Army!"

On the southern fields, tens of thousands of Tarasco samurai were arrayed in tight marching formation, moving silently and swiftly. Eight hundred strong per battalion, neatly organized into twelve columns, they advanced without pause. Below the battalions, four squads of two hundred samurai each, each led by a Warrior Captain. The leading captain wore an Eagle Helmet adorned with two blue feathers, with a bright small flag fluttering behind him.

At the army's vanguard flanks, hundreds of elite scouts spread out, each holding a longbow and dressed in the Royal Family's yellow War Clothes. And in the very center of the legion, Imperial Guards with copper helmets and bronze axes, carrying longbows on their backs, surrounded by a large flag. The flag, held high at four to five meters, with its nearly two-meter banner rippling in the wind, showed an eagle poised for flight, facing the northward direction to pounce!

"The Tarasco Royal Family's inherited Eagle Banner! That's the Tarasco King! Su'angua is there!"

Toltec shouted in surprise. He scrutinized the warriors beneath the Royal Banner, ultimately his gaze settled on a conspicuous young king. Clad in gemstone-inlaid Gilded Armor, wielding a golden Bronze Divine Staff, emitting myriad brilliant rays in the morning sun, he was dazzling to behold.

"This glare is blinding and throbbing to the eyes, impossible to see clearly what it looks like!"

The golden light was so dazzling that the Toltec turned his head, only able to sneak glances with the corner of his eye. He saw the young king looking up, then raising his divine staff, pointing directly at him!

The scattered scouts momentarily hesitated. Then, like yellow jackets commanded to attack, they fiercely pounced on the small Mexica scouting party ahead. The elite warriors, once within a hundred steps, drew their longbows in unison, emitting a buzzing akin to a swarm of bees.

"Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!"

"Winds are fierce, pull back!"

Seeing disaster loom, the Black Wolf Toltec turned on his heel and ran, shouting the secret scout code taught by His Highness as he went. Hundreds of arrows fell like lightning, blanketing the hillocks and instantly killing over a dozen militia hunters. The remaining dozens immediately turned and fled northward too.

The Tarasco scout warriors relentlessly pursued them. They were prepared to annihilate the enemy and keep the royal army's movements secret as much as possible. These royal elite had formidable strength and experience, maintaining an effortless, steady jog, chasing for over twenty li. If the militia hunters showed even a hint of flagging or paused to catch their breath, they would instantly be overwhelmed by the "swarm," their final screams filling the air.

Toltec ran wildly, with the "swoosh" of arrows raining behind him. It was only after more and more Mexica scouting teams were drawn to the fracas, engaging in combat with the kingdom's scout warriors, that the hunted Black Wolf finally saw a sliver of survival. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his war clothes and cursed softly under his breath.

"Blessings of the Chief Divine! Chasing the tail of an elk in the forest, only to have it turn into a leopard on me! The royal army of Tarasco is indeed fierce! Their formations are neat, their marches tens of li without disorder; their commands are strict, their assaults as swift as the wind. No, I must hasten back to Ihuatzio and report to His Highness. Victory or defeat hinges on this battle; we must prepare thoroughly and gather all our strength for the fight!"

The fleet-footed Toltec took a brief rest before continuing his sprint northward. He ran through fields of burning wild grass, crossed shallow streams of the spring season, climbed over gently sloping hillocks, and finally arrived outside the smokeless city of Ihuatzio under the deep night sky. The profound darkness was pierced by continuous campfires flickering like starlight, resembling a vast Milky Way sprawled upon the ground.

As a trusted commander of His Highness, Toltec passed through unobstructed. Led by Bertade, he was once again in front of His Highness' tent, where he knelt on one knee and reported the urgent military intelligence.

Xiulote sat cross-legged in front of the campfire, the bright firelight reflecting his resolute face. The young commander, dressed in a black war outfit and holding a finely crafted longbow, had been ready for battle for a long time. Upon hearing the intelligence on the royal army, he rose to his full height and laughed heartily.

"Chasing the deer under heaven, finally the white deer appears! Victory or defeat in this single move. The grand trend of the world will be decided in this battle!"

Afterward, Xiulote's expression became serious, and he gave forth the order.

"Gather all the warriors in the city, tomorrow the entire army will head south to confront the Tarasco royal army! Call together all commanders, mobilize every camp officer, and prepare for the decisive battle! Lastly, gather the priests accompanying the army. I want to personally conduct the pre-battle sacrificial rite and pray to the War God for victory!"

Early the next morning, the grand ceremony was swiftly carried out. With the Chief Divine as witness, the priests chanted and danced beside the Sacred Fire. Using gleaming obsidians and sturdy seashells for divination, they extracted from their cracks the prophecy of certain victory in this battle!

Subsequently, Xiulote stood on the divine altar, loudly reciting the divine prophecy of victory, informing every warrior. Then, to the warriors, he announced, "If this battle is won, he will grant ranks and rewards according to military merits. Prominent militia will be elevated to samurai, exceptional samurai will advance to veterans, and a hundred veterans will be promoted to become nobility of the Alliance, awarded fertile land in the Lake Region of Tarasco!"

Under His Highness' generous promises, tens of thousands of warriors and militia let out fervent cheers that shook the earth and heavens of the Patzcuaro Lake region. Thereafter, the entire Mexica northern army assembled and left the unwallled city of Ihuatzio, marching southward to face the suddenly emergent Tarasco royal army.

The two great armies approached each other, with scouts on the perimeter engaging in fierce combat, each side's movements fully exposed to the opponent. Two days later, on the southern plains of the Patzcuaro Lake region, the two elite legions finally stood face to face, visible in each other's sight. The dust from the march rose into the sky and was dispersed by the mighty northerly winds, revealing the somber traces of the warriors.

Xiulote, dressed in lavish war clothes and wearing a tall feather crown, with the Commander-in-Chief's banner behind him, strode up the hill and gazed at the Tarasco royal banner in the southern fields. The legions were vast, warriors stood opposed, flags fluttered in the wind, the eagle soared northward, and the Black Wolf pounced southward. The two armies were within a stone's throw of each other, ready for the decisive battle of today!

Chapter 425 - A King's Regards

The gentle spring breeze flowed over the tender earth, casting a warm aura across the vast wilderness. Yellow wildflowers bloomed across the plains of the Lake Region, red sparrows chased each other in low flight. Intertwining streams sang a murmuring melody, while the towering mountains undulated along the distant horizon. 'Twas a time of tranquil peace amidst the lush grass beneath the clear spring sky.

Yet beneath the splendid spring light, the air was thick with the ominous presence of boundless killing intent! Xiulote ascended a hillock, gazing into the distance, as the mighty legions emerged from the ends of his view. Tarasco's Royal Army, countless in number, arranged in a stern formation, came pouring forth like a great flood. The Samurai's steps showed no mercy as they crushed the blooming wildflowers underfoot and lowered their weapons, startling flocks of birds into the sky.

Xiulote watched intently for a moment, his pupils narrowing slightly. The enemy troops moved in clusters, yet their ranks were without the slightest disarray. Afterward, several li away, the Royal Legion halted their march, gradually spreading to the flanks. The inherited Eagle Banner then became visible, standing tall at the center of the army's formation. The gaze of the Young Commander lingered on the ancient flag; the golden eagle, wings outspread as if ready to take flight, always stirred distant memories and thoughts profound.

Shortly after, Xiulote's gaze drifted downward to the formation beneath the banner, his brow quickly furrowing. He observed for a moment, then turned his head towards the Head Warrior by his side.

"Is that Tarasco's Copper-axe Guards?"

Bertade's Eagle Eye stared ahead, solemnly nodding in affirmation.

"Yes, Your Highness. That is the core of Tarasco's Royal Family which commands the world, the most elite Copper-axe Guards. They were specially selected and formed by successive Tarasco Kings to counter the Alliance's most revered Eagle Warrior Battalion. Unlike the Nobility Battle Groups of the Alliance, the Copper-axe Guards are purely elite Samurai. They are entirely loyal to the Royal Family, do not own independent fiefs, and thus can sustain higher casualties in battle. Four years ago, they ambushed Aweit's Personal Army in the Apachigan Valley, defeating two thousand from the Jaguar Warrior Brigade and forcing King Aweit to flee eastward. The Alliance's grand army subsequently collapsed, and the first western campaign thus ended in failure."

Xiulote gave a slight nod, falling into a contemplative silence. It was after that battle that Aweit had lost his military command, as well as his priority to the throne. The Lake Capital City underwent a tumult of changes, and afterwards, with the support of the Priesthood, Tizoc succeeded the kingship.

Bertade retracted his sharp gaze, looking at Xiulote with grave seriousness.

"Your Highness, a Mexica King cannot afford to lose in war... This Guard bears Copper Helmets and Copper Axes at their waists, and they also carry new Longbows on their backs. We must be especially vigilant."

Upon hearing this, Xiulote's grip tightened slightly, though his face was filled with confidence. He laughed heartily.

"Two years ago, on the North Coast of Lerma River, I saw this guard once. But it was across the great river, and there was no real combat. Today is a good day! Come, with my loyal warriors, let us personally break through this world-famous Imperial Guard and capture the Tarasco King alive!"

Upon hearing the Lord's spirited words, the surrounding Personal Army also burst into shouting and cheering. The Black Wolf Commander's Flag stood majestically atop the hillock, with three thousand of the archer battalions subsequently stationed beneath the flag. Longbow Warriors occupied the high ground, with arrows planted in the mud before them. The vast melee battalions crossed over the hillock, forming up in front of the Commander's Flag. The center army consisted of seven thousand Spear Militia, the left wing was three thousand Religious Knights, and the right wing was the three thousand Holy City Legion. Around the perimeter of the warrior formations, there were two thousand patrolling Longbow Militia and a thousand elite Scouts from the Northern Army.

As for the City-State legions, they could not keep up with the rapid march of the battalions and had suffered great losses in the battle on the Takuro Plains. The noble private militias were fickle in their loyalties, difficult to rely upon. For this decisive battle, Xiulote only summoned several hundred elite warriors from the City-State Nobility to replenish the Northern Army's Scout Team. The main force of the City-State Legion was stationed at the Huayamo Fortress, maintaining the supply lines while keeping pressure on Qinchongcan City.

The grand army was in formation, with the Commander-in-Chief at its center. Xiulote stood on high ground, his gaze fixated upon the nearly twenty thousand assembled soldiers, as a fiery passion surged within him. He looked up to the vast blue sky. Fleeting clouds shaped like palaces in the heavens, while the Sun God ascended to the Throne of the Gods. Beneath the gaze of the Chief Divine, a grand ritual was about to commence!

"Tens of thousands of Samurai warriors, two Divine Descendant Commanders, are but sacrifices to the Sun God. The rise and fall of the Kingdom rests on this one battle!"

Across the miles, beneath the Eagle Banner, Su'angua's countenance was filled with fervor as he surveyed his trusted followers, stirring the morale of his generals. Today, upon seeing the formation of the Northern Mexico Army, his heart sank. The opposing ranks were disciplined, their numbers far surpassing his own; this battle would be anything but easy.

Thus, the young King gathered his trustworthy generals for one final, majestic promise.

"The temples of the Three Gods, ancestral tombs, and your lands and manors, your relations and children, all depend on the weapons in our hands for protection! Go, tell the warriors under your command: Cazonci Su'angua swears here that if we win this battle, upon our return to the Capital City, I will share all the Royal Family's lands and wealth with them! If we win this battle, no matter how few survivors there are, all Militia will be promoted to Samurai, all Samurai will be promoted to Nobility!"

Upon hearing the King's promise, the various camp officers showed surprise, silently exchanging looks. In the loyal Royal Army, the King's authority was beyond question. After a moment, those who had reacted bowed deeply, thanked the King for his generosity, and returned to their camps. Soon after, a chorus of cheers rang out across the ranks.

Chapter 426 - A King's Regards_2

Su'angua remained silent. He watched the Black Wolf Banner across from him, pondering deeply for a while, when a strange brilliance suddenly flashed in his eyes.

"I hear the Mexica Commander-in-Chief is called Xiulote, quite young, not yet twenty?"

A trusted aide beside him promptly stepped forward, bowing to reply.

"Your Majesty is wise. According to the intelligence, the Marshal and Deputy Marshal on the northern route are descendants of the Mexica Royal Family, offspring of Itzcoatl. The Deputy Marshal is the father Xiuxoke, and the Marshal is his son Xiulote, both adopting names from the legacy of the God of Death. Moreover, Xiulote is the nominal heir to the current Alliance King, Aweit. It is said that he is only fifteen, rumored to be a reincarnation of a Sage, possessed of divine wisdom from previous lives."

Su'angua shook his head slightly. Even with innate intelligence, commanding an army to achieve such results at fifteen seemed improbable – this was likely an exaggeration by the Mexica. But even if he were twenty, that was still very young, and his experience in certain areas must necessarily be lacking.

"Born from a branch family, victorious in battles, youthful vigor..."

The young King pondered for a while, his thoughts becoming clearer. He summoned his trusted aide.

"In the name of the Tarasco Royal Family, as my Envoy, invite Mexica His Highness to a meeting on the battlefield."

Afterward, Su'angua gestured for his trusted aide to draw closer, whispering into his ear.

"Hint in your words, that the King of Tarasco intends to surrender to His Highness Mexica. The King is willing to give up the great Capital City and the fertile southern territories, asking only to be given a fief in the desolate southwestern mountains, preserving the continuity of the Royal Family. Specific terms can be discussed face-to-face, but His Highness's personal promise must be obtained."

The trusted aide opened his eyes in disbelief, looking towards the majestic ruler.

"Your Majesty, this, this..."

"I have made up my mind, go quickly and pass the message!"

Su'angua's face was as still as water, his voice stern as he watched his trusted aide bow his head and silently make his way to the front line. Only then did he slightly turn his head, summoning the Great General of the Personal Guard.

"Yuku, my loyal hunting dog, you have always been brave and skilled in archery, have you become accustomed to the new Longbow?"

In the Prepetcha language, Yuku signifies hunting dog and Coyote. In the Tarasco Kingdom, this was a noble family with a century of heritage, always serving as the Personal Guard of the Kingdom. Hearing the King's inquiry, a middle-aged warrior with an earnest face stepped forward silently. He knelt on one knee like a statue, bowing his head solemnly.

"Your Majesty, with the new Longbow, a bird in flight within sixty steps."

"And if the bird is still, how far can you assure a hit?"

Yuku slightly raised his head, revealing his profound eyes. He followed the King's gaze, pondering for a moment, and answered cautiously.

"Within one hundred and twenty steps, I could attempt it. Within one hundred steps, I would surely hit the Black Wolf."

Su'angua nodded slightly and then gave an order.

"Yuku, quickly gather ten of the best archers among the Imperial Guards. Later, accompany me to meet the Mexica Commander-in-Chief."

Then, he gestured for Yuku to come closer, whispering two sentences. The other party respectfully bowed with a serious demeanor and strode away.

The young King thought for a moment, then spoke out loud again.

"Summon the Priests to start the Sacred Fire, perform the pre-battle ritual, and pray to the trinity of gods! Bring forth the copper armor gifted by the Ivachio Coppersmiths, as well as the sturdy copper helmets!"

The solemn ranks of the army unfolded with a clink, the burning flames crackled to life. The Priests of Tarasco built the divine altar, sparing no expense in casting baskets of spices into the fire, igniting pleasing divine smoke. Amidst the twining blue smoke, Su'angua narrowed his eyes. His gaze shifted to his trusted Envoy, watching as the Envoy walked out of their formation, approached the enemy lines, then climbed a small hill, until he stood before the Black Wolf's Commander's Flag.

Symbolizing the God of Death, the Black Wolf flew high on the flag, howling up at the newly risen sun. Beneath the flag, the Young Commander showed a look of surprise as he saw the enemy Envoy kneel before him.

"The King of Tarasco, Cazonci of the Prepetcha, the eagle of the lands amidst the lake, His Majesty Su'angua, extends his solemn regards to Your Highness of Mexica, Divine Revelator of the Tenochtitlán people, the Black Wolf of the City of the Gods, Marshal Xiulote... For the glory of the gods, two great Alliances fight a deadly battle, sacred blood flows wantonly... At this moment, the earth is submerged in crimson, the world has reached the end of the divine war... Kings meet under the watchful eyes of the gods, leaving their immortal declarations..."

"As the Supreme Sun God ascends into the sky, the moon falls behind the mountains. The eagle of the lake is willing to land on the Cactus, allowing its spines to pierce its wings... It bows its head and cries softly to the mighty Black Wolf, offering up the fattest fish from Lake Patzcuaro... From this moment on, the eagle shall enter the caverns of the southwest, guarding the frontier there for the sun..."

Xiulote skipped the ritualistic preamble, mulled over the metaphorical phrases, then asked in surprise.

"Are you saying, in the face of the two armies, Su'angua is willing to surrender to the Alliance, offering up the Patzcuaro Lake region? The southwest, guarding... is he requesting a fief in the southwest?"

The Envoy pursed his lips, solemnly nodded his head without a word. His expression carried a hint of despair along with a final stubborn resistance.

"No, the esteemed Majesty did not say this. He simply wishes for Your Highness of Mexica to meet him before the formation. Following the noble protocol of the Tula people, the royal families of two divine descendants should meet and greet each other before the formal battle commences. This battle is destined to be immortalized by poets, becoming an eternal chapter in their works. The two Kings should meet before the battle, to leave their names in the annals of epics!"

Observing the Envoy's demeanor, Xiulote showed a slight smile.

"You are a fine Envoy; you may step back and wait for now!"

Two Personal Guard Warriors then stepped forward and led the enemy Envoy away. Xiulote looked towards the distant enemy's Royal Banner, falling into deep thought. After a while, he turned his attention to his Head Warrior.

"Bertade, a battle between our forces is imminent that will decide the fate of the world. At this time, Su'angua is inviting me to meet before the formation, what could be his intention?"

Bertade pondered for a moment, then replied calmly.

"Your Highness, Su'angua is either truly surrendering or harboring ill intentions. He might hope to persuade Your Highness, seeking an opportunity; or perhaps he is merely stalling for time, waiting for reinforcements. But his thoughts are not important. What matters is what Your Highness intends. Do you wish for Su'angua to surrender?"

Hearing the Head Warrior's question, Xiulote laughed heartily.

"Of course! The outcome of this battle is still unknown. Although our forces hold a numerical advantage, the enemy is entirely composed of elite troops."

The Young Commander gazed at the opposing side. Tens of thousands of Tarasco Royal Army troops arrayed in a formidable formation, well-equipped, lining up steadily in front of the Mexica legion. A warm breeze carried the distant sounds of the enemy's faint cheers and the aroma of spices. The Priests of Tarasco danced wildly around the Sacred Fire on the divine altar, lifting the morale of the great army.

"The Royal Legion is different from the Chapala Legion; they are unified, determined to fight to the death. The Northern Army is composed entirely of my loyal direct line, and even if we emerge victorious from a bloody battle, who knows how many warriors will be lost. If just by meeting once, I can receive the surrender of the Tarasco army, it would be like a generous gift from the Chief Divine! Qinchongcan would fall without a fight, and even this year's spring plowing in the Lake Region could be on time!"

A smile appeared on Xiulote's face. He hoped to preserve the vitality of the lands around the lake, whether they be civilians or warriors. Because in his heart, he harbored vast future plans, too many grand schemes.

Bertade looked at the Young Commander, observing the bright light in his eyes. The Head Warrior fell silent for a moment before speaking implacably.

"Then, my Prince, can you accept Su'angua's surrender?"

Chapter 427 - Duel

Wisps of blue smoke rose, carrying the Priest's song to the deities above. Xiulote stood silently under the banner of the deities, gazing up at the sky. After a long moment, he responded slowly but firmly.

"Bertade, you're right. I cannot accept Su'angua's surrender."

Xiulote's eyes briefly lowered; when he opened them again, they were ablaze with the flames of war.

"The Tarasco Royal Family cannot be spared! This is not only the will of the elders but also a necessity for ruling over the lands of the lake. The Mexica Alliance does not seek nominal submission from the Tarascans but direct control over each conquered City-State, to truly put down roots in this fertile land."

"My conflict with Su'angua is irreconcilable. The Patzcuaro Lake region must become my foundation to lay the groundwork for future endeavors, and the southwest mountain area offers great opportunities for societal development! Annihilating the Royal Family, relocating the Nobility, reforming the Priesthood, developing iron mines... my plans cannot change. Only a blank slate can yield a magnificent tapestry!"

Listening to the declaration of the young King, Bertade bowed his head in respect, offering his suggestion reverently.

"Your Highness, if this is the case, there is no need for you to meet with Su'angua. The Tarasco Nobility is like the Crocodiles in the Tarsus River, ferocious, barbaric, and cunning. The great Teotihuacan Empire has vanished for a thousand years, and the noble Tula Kingdom has also been reduced to mounds. Ancient courtesies hold no real significance for an emerging Alliance."

The Head Warrior paused, the arrow wound on his back seemingly still causing him dull pain. His face was calm like still water, showing the perseverance characteristic of a commoner Samurai.

"Your Highness, you are the future Sun God, and you should not meet privately with the enemy's Royal Family, nor can you afford to lose the most important trust of a King! You hope for Su'angua's genuine surrender to swiftly end the war; yet, you cannot truly accept his surrender and swear allegiance before the entire army."

As he spoke, Bertade's eyes flashed with the fierceness of a seasoned warrior, treating life and death as commonplace.

"Then let a distinguished member of the Royal Army take your place and meet with the King of Tarasco! If the King of Tarasco truly wishes to lay down his weapons, let this person accept all terms and swear an oath to the deities against Su'angua!"

Xiulote was startled briefly, looking at his trusted Head Warrior.

"A distinguished member of the Royal Family? Who would that be?"

"The honored Nobility from Tlatelolco, 'The Destroyer' Tepopolo. The Tlatelolco lineage has been intermarrying with the Royal Family for generations; Tepopolo's mother and grandmother were both

princesses of the Mexica Royal Family. And within the Legion, he often claims to represent the Royal Family."

"Anna has mentioned this to me. Rumor has it among the Capital City Nobility that Tepopolo intends to give up his family lands, seeking a suitable fief within the vast expanse of the Tarasco Kingdom. He has deep roots, and is the first honored Nobility to actively offer up his lands. Neither King Aweit nor the immortal elders will treat him unfairly."

"Although he cannot be compared to Your Highness and has no chance at the fertile Patzcuaro Lake region, he will inevitably establish a foothold in the lands of Michoacán. This makes him a potential competitor to Your Highness. Since he is unaware of the elder's will, let him go to persuade Su'angua to surrender!"

At this point, Bertade stopped speaking. Whether Tepopolo succeeded in inducing surrender, broke his promise and lost credibility, or failed to persuade and was attacked and killed, the outcome would be to the advantage and no harm of Your Highness.

Xiulote's gaze became profound. After a moment, he nodded slightly.

"Let it be as you say."

Then, the Young Commander ordered loudly.

"Notify Su'angua's Envoy. Tell him that, following ancient tradition, the Mexica Royal Family will meet with the Tarasco Royal Family in front of both armies!"

"Summon the honored Nobility Tepopolo. I want to instruct him personally!"

The sun climbed atop the sky, sitting majestically upon the clouds, patiently observing humanity. The vast military formations fully spread out across the plains. Two enormous armies, separated by a distance of miles, waited for the decisive battle of fate. Seasoned warriors sat on the ground, placing their weapons before them. Their expressions were calm as they conserved their strength for battle, occasionally chatting and laughing with one another, having long become accustomed to facing death in war. The Militia, though lower in status and under strict discipline, continued to maintain the integrity of their formation, loosening their legs on the spot, silently waiting for the deities' verdict.

Before long, two groups of nearly a hundred men each slowly emerged from both armies' formations. The banners of the Mexica and Tarasco Royal Families waved in front of the troops, with elite warriors surrounding their leaders.

"The Destroyer" Tepopolo, adorned in a majestic Nobility's War Clothes and wearing a battle Feather Crown that hung down his back, strode confidently at the front.

Since leading three thousand warriors in the western expedition, Tepopolo's journey had been full of setbacks, with most of his anticipated power and glory coming to naught. First, his proposal to the Naval Commander Annatri failed, depriving him of a role in the Alliance's Naval Forces. Then, he was stationed at the North Coast fortress for months where he endured the dampness of the rainy season, practicing the inglorious art of the Longbow alongside Royal Warriors. Next was a significant battle on Lake Yuriria, where he nearly lost half his men in front-line combat. The memory of the ordeal still made him shudder.

Following a lengthy recuperation, it wasn't until after the capture of the Rivermouth fortress that his Legion was transferred there, taking control of a critical logistical hub. Just as he was becoming strategically engaged, entertaining Tarasco Nobility who had surrendered, the shrewd Xiuxoke used the

opportunity of taking Huayamo to leave his troops at the Rivermouth fortress and send him personally to the front-line Legion to participate in the "glorious campaign to besiege the Capital City."

As reinforcements sent by the King, Tepopolo understood the misgivings of the Holy City lineage. He had neither the chance nor the intent to vie for military command on the northern route. As the western conquest seemed assured, he had already set his sights on the future. Envoys sent last month had returned with definitive promises from the King, communicated through the Intelligence Officer.

"Though not the best, it was acceptable."

Tepopolo smiled as he thought.

"Whether His Highness Xiulote, the Marshal, is being prudent and cautious or avoiding suspicion, the opportunity for a meeting has ultimately fallen upon me! The singing of epics is a thing of the after. If I can persuade the Royal Army of Tarasco to surrender, I can truly establish a foundation in the land of Michoacán and build connections with the Tarasco nobility. As a valiant samurai, how could I be hesitant? For such an honor, what does it matter if I have to risk a little!"

Tepopolo walked proudly, lifting his gaze to the front—the Royal Banner of Tarasco was now less than a hundred steps away. Surrounded by the Copper-axe Guards, a tall King dressed in golden copper armor and wearing a purple copper helmet majestically lifted a godly staff adorned with a blue gemstone, greeting him from afar.

Tepopolo's expression turned serious. He raised the family scepter in his hand, returning the Tarasco king's respectful salute with solemnity. At the same time, he called out to the approaching troop with a voice both confident and loud.

"Member of the Mexican Royal Family, the noble of Tlatelolco, 'Destroyer' Tepopolo, pays his respects to the ancient Tarasco Royal Family! This is the noble greeting of the Divine Descendants, and also a meeting witnessed by the gods above!"

Thereafter, the noble Tepopolo lowered his scepter, nodding slightly towards the opposing side. When he lifted his head again, the king opposite had not yet replied, still holding the Divine Staff aloft. Tepopolo pondered for a moment, thinking this might be an ancient ritual of waiting practiced by the Tula people, and so he once again lifted his scepter, shouting loudly.

"Under the witness of the Chief Divine, the great divine war will soon come to an end! The Sun God has received enough Holy Blood to continue burning and illuminating the world of men! The supreme Alliance takes on the duty of commanding the world, saving all tribes and the masses!"

It took a long while before the answer from the Tarasco people finally came, after both troops had come within sixty steps of each other.

"The King of Tarasco, Cazonci of the Prepecha, the mighty eagle of the lake-lands, His Majesty Su'angua himself is here to pay respects to the emerging Mexican Royal Family!"

"The Sun God watches over us, guiding the fate of all things. The sacred blood flows in the bodies of the Divine Descendants, determining the destiny of the world. Only the future sovereign can converse with the supreme King. May I ask if His Highness Xiulote of Mexico is among the troops ahead?"

Tepopolo's face darkened, and he felt a slight anger in his heart, he gritted his teeth, and shouted loudly.

"According to the traditions of the Alliance, His Highness Xiulote bears the banner of the Commander-in-Chief, carrying the glory of the War God. Once he takes his position in the legion, he will not move a single step until the battle ends! The Tlatelolco line has been passed down for a century and is one of Mexico's oldest families. As a noble of Tenochtitlan, I will fully represent the Alliance and the Royal Family!"

Again, there was a long wait with no answer. Tepopolo's heart sunk. With a last hope, he made a promise.

"I swear on my family's name, in the land of cacti and rock, a place of rest shall surely be provided for the eagle of the lake!"

Across the sixty steps, Su'angua came to a halt. He did not respond to the calls from the other side, but with the last hope of his own, he carefully observed the Mexican leader. Through the feathered helmet, he saw the middle-aged features of the man. Then, he scrutinized the Mexican samurai behind, judging their sizes and statures. After searching for a few moments, he finally sighed in disappointment.

Several steps behind Su'angua, the "Hound" samurai Yuku clutched his longbow tightly, staring intently at the Mexican leader, while also using his peripheral vision to watch the Divine Staff indicated by the King. He understood the importance of his mission, and all along the way, he had been mentally rehearsing, estimating the precise distance. For a seasoned hunter, the chance to hunt flying birds is always fleeting; drawing the bow and shooting rapidly had become his battle instinct. Steady hand, sharp eye, and perfect coordination—half-drawn bow, and the prey would drop at the sound of release.

However, Yuku waited in silence and tension for a long time, but the Divine Staff never descended. He hesitated for a moment, then made a waiting gesture to the Divine Archers behind him. Afterward, he stepped forward a few paces and asked softly.

"Your Majesty, it seems the Marshal of Mexico has not appeared. This member of their Royal Family, do you need me to take action and retain him?"

Su'angua shook his head with a trace of helplessness, finally letting his Divine Staff fall.

"The proud eagle cannot catch the noble Gelchar bird; what use is there grasping a chattering red sparrow?"

Then, Su'angua's expression turned stern, as he called out authoritatively to the other side.

"The glory of the King is inviolable! If the Black Wolf of Mexico is unwilling to meet, then the Divine Eagle of Tarasco will certainly not land on the ground! If so, let the sacred battle decide our fate!"

Su'angua paused for a moment, turned to his confidant beside him, and asked in a low voice.

"You've come all this way for nothing. When can we expect reinforcement from the Capital City?"

The confidant, touched with gratitude, bowed respectfully and replied in a low voice as well.

"The scouts have made contact with the Capital City. The Chief has dispatched three thousand warriors on their way to assist us. These past two days, the reinforcements have maintained stealth, and they are now more than twenty leagues away."

"Three thousand warriors, more than twenty leagues... In that case, let's challenge the Mexicans to a duel!"

Su'angua nodded, the doubt in his eyes disappearing in a flash. It was then that the thought crossed his mind; how could the Capital City still muster three thousand warriors at this time? After marching tens of leagues, how much fighting strength would they have left? He forced himself to clear his thoughts, putting on a confident smile once again, and called out loud to the opposite side.

"Mexicans value brave warriors, and Tarascans are no different. In accordance with ancient rites, fearless Tarasco warriors challenge the valiant Mexican samurai to a duel! Under the gaze of the War God, let the most courageous samurai clash in combat, offering the highest salute!"

Chapter 428 - To the Master - Part 1

The sun sat high, encircled by thousands of clouds, the profound sky reflecting the grandeur of the earth below. And at the king's call, a hundred people repeated, their booming voices echoing in front of the army lines. Hearing Su'angua's challenge for a duel, the warriors of both armies were instantly exhilarated. They tightened their grips on their weapons and murmured amongst themselves in low voices.

In this era, most believed that the fate of mortals was already determined by the deities, and earthly wars pleased the gods above. Death was always visible, unavoidable, and could come at any time. Only a glorious death could ascend to the Divine Kingdom, offering the soul its most beautiful resting place. And a sacred duel represented the most honorable death and victory!

Not far away, in the ranks of the Mexica envoy, Black Wolf Torc, wearing a subdued wolf helmet, stared unblinkingly at the King of Tarasco. He gripped his longbow in hand; despite the sixty paces between them, he never found a chance to shoot. Copper-axe Guards, holding great shields, tightly shielded the king in front of him, whose body and head were adorned with glittering metal armor.

Torc slightly tilted his head; the bright glare of the armor once again blinded his eyes. He clicked his tongue in regret and envy, then embarked on his next mission as ordered by his lord, committing to memory Su'angua's appearance and stature to prepare for a potential pursuit. Soon, a middle-aged warrior with precise steps approached Su'angua and whispered a few words. The King of Tarasco then put down his Divine Staff and shouted loudly, challenging the Mexica army to a duel!

Stirred by the sacred duel, Black Wolf Torc's spirit soared. He bared his teeth, a wolfish grin spreading across his face, his eyes alight with immense fighting spirit, sweeping over the elite warriors beside the king. At that moment, the middle-aged warrior also looked over, his face showing a rustic and firm expression. In that instant, as their eyes met, each saw in the other a similar confidence and yearning!

The call for a duel echoed in front of the lines. Under the flag of the Black Wolf, Xiulote paused thoughtfully, then looked toward the Head Warrior.

"Bertade, where is Iskali's southern detachment now?"

"Your Highness, the last report was from the day before yesterday. By then, he had already obeyed the order to lead his troops northward, rapidly marching from over a hundred miles south to Ihuatzio City. In the past two days, the Tarasco Royal Army has expanded in the south, obscuring the surrounding battlefield and temporarily severing communication between the envoys and scouts. However, Su'angua's army has already been revealed. If Iskali has the heart for battle, he must be on his way here!"

Xiulote nodded, smiling as he spoke.

"The month of the final end has long brought him fame; he has never feared battle. Therefore, let us accept Su'angua's challenge!"

The Young Commander then raised his right hand, responding to the front, with hundreds of his trusted aides echoing loudly beside him.

"War God Huitzilopochtli protects us! The Alliance's warriors fear no challenge! Su'angua, if you want battle, then battle it shall be!"

The bold response echoed between heaven and earth, the brief shout ringing like a war drum. Su'angua looked surprised, thoughtful. He paused for a moment, touching the extraordinarily sturdy bronze armor he wore, then hardened his expression and continued to respond loudly.

"The Sun God watches over us! The sacred duel is supreme! In the name of the deities, I, King of Tarasco, Cazonci of the Prepetcha people, Divine Descendant Su'angua, challenge the prince of Tenochtitlan, Divine Revelator, Divine Descendant Xiulote, to a relentless battle of honor that will not cease until death!"

"What?!"

This time it was Xiulote's turn to look surprised. A duel between two commanders, even in the ancient era of Teotihuacan, was exceedingly rare. A one-on-one duel between two kings was utterly unprecedented in the epics. Such a confrontation had too many uncertainties, with neither side fully confident of victory.

Bertade stepped forward anxiously, whispering advice.

"Your Highness, you are a brilliant sun, there's no need to compete with the eagle for height! Besides, you are still young, and your martial skills will certainly surpass mine in time!"

At these words, Xiulote's face flushed slightly. He smiled and spoke.

"Don't worry, Bertade, I'm aware of my current level. This is mere bravado, and I focus on the world, so it won't weigh on my mind. Su'angua's imposition of such an impossible demand likely reflects his disadvantage and desperation, but it is also designed to strike at our army's morale. Now, I feel even more confident about our victory in the upcoming battle!"

With that, Xiulote's demeanor turned solemn, and he shouted again toward the front.

"True kings never enter the fray lightly, relying on their martial prowess to seek victory. For kings are meant to rule, and warriors are meant to fight! Why should the Wolf King personally hunt the white deer? Go forth, my loyal and brave warriors, and prove your glory to your king!"

The intense battle drums resounded immediately, and the Temple Guards blew the harrowing Death Whistle while veteran warriors issued thrilling roars that shook the heavens. Following that, the Commander-in-Chief's pennant was waved. A hundred brave Mexica warriors, renowned for their valor, then stepped out from the elite scout team. They strode up to the front lines of the two armies, bellowing angrily at the Tarasco legion.

Witnessing the sacred duel, Izel of the Tlalocan State was passionately excited—it was the quickest way to fame! He gripped his war club, ready to step forward out of line. At the crucial moment, the aged Head Warrior grabbed his shoulder, delivering a swift side throw that toppled him to the ground.

"Who?... You!... Head Warrior, why did you attack me?"

The aged Head Warrior gave Izel a sidelong glance and then spoke with a calm demeanor.

"Izel, you represent the Family Head in warfare, and I must preserve your life. Although His Highness has praised your bravery in person, you need to have a clear understanding of yourself. I followed the great predecessor monarch Montezuma and participated in ritual combat at the frontline against the Mistec people."

At this, the aged Head Warrior lifted his war clothes to reveal a long, narrow scar across his chest, nearly splitting him in two.

"Ritual combat, fighting to the death, is not something the likes of you can partake in now! Just watch carefully. Only when your martial arts surpass mine might you stand a chance to survive the melee when luck is on your side!"

Izel clenched his teeth in resentment as he got up from the ground. He sullenly raised his head and looked towards the front lines, his expression soon growing solemn. After a while, sweat began to seep out from his brow.

The Tarasco King's troops had already returned to their formation. Over a hundred Tarasco warriors holding copper axes, war clubs, or copper spears, stepped into the battlefield at the front of the formations. Warriors from both sides held up their weapons and shields, boasting of their bravery to the War God. The warriors in the formations also shouted loudly at the opposing side. The War Priests sung

gloriously, calling for the descent of the War God. Following that, along with a piercing chant, the abrupt battle drums suddenly struck!

The warriors from both sides immediately erupted into a cry of do-or-die, gripping their weapons and charging towards each other. In merely a dozen breaths, two hundred warriors were completely entangled with each other.

Izel watched, overwhelmed with amazement. The battle skills of these veteran warriors were so proficient that almost every fight drew admiration! Their sweeping strikes, forward thrusts, downward slashes, shield lifts, side shifts, shield counterstrikes, quick advances, small leaps backward, and diagonal steps—each movement was meticulously honed, swift, and concise, captured perfectly. It was the dance of life and death!

The elite Samurai always treated their shields as their lives, and frontal combat rarely ended quickly. A Mexica Samurai smashed down with his war club twice, then delivered a powerful kick, pushing back the shield-bearing enemy in front of him. He took a deep breath, without a pause, and suddenly twisted diagonally. With a sharp sweep of his war club, he struck another enemy engaged in battle. The Tarasco Samurai heard the sound of the wind and struggled to shift his shield to the side. Another opponent showed no mercy, stepping forward to press down on his shield with his weapon. The sweeping war club came abruptly, howling with immense force. The Tarasco Samurai only had time for a look of horror to cross his face before his neck snapped with a "crack," and his face was smashed beyond recognition.

It was a lethal strike, precise and concise in its carnage. The Mexica Samurai who made the first kill flashed a brilliant smile and nodded to his fellow warrior in acknowledgment. However, within a mere two breaths, his smile froze forever, and his head drooped eternally. With a "splat" and a "hiss," a sharp spear tip emerged from his chest and retracted abruptly. Blood spurted from the pierced heart, spraying several meters in a fan shape and covering another Samurai. Immediately after, the dead body fell forward with a "thump," and the sharp Copper Spear thrust violently from behind the corpse. The blood-soaked Mexica Samurai gritted his teeth and roared angrily, raising his shield in prepared defense. A new round of intense fighting broke out!

Calm standoffs were always brief, and fierce fighting escalated quickly. Under the eyes of tens of thousands of warriors, two hundred brave men roared, screamed, and bled. In just a few breaths, the ground before them was stained with the first layer of bright red.

"Shriek," skilled Scout Necali made a savage sneak attack, slashing obliquely through the cotton War Clothes and slicing open the enemy's flank. "Hiss," blood and guts suddenly poured out from the huge cut. Necali flashed a cruel smile. He didn't bother with the doomed enemy but immediately stepped back, quickly crouching and raising his shield to avoid any potential attacks. He then swept his gaze around, constantly moving, looking for the next opportunity to fight.

"Crack," "thump," another successful ambush. Necali smiled smugly once again. Then he curiously smacked his lips. The feeling of his last slash seemed a bit off? The experienced Scout quickly stepped back, distancing himself from the frontline, and looked around. The brutal battlefield was already filled with blood and dying moans. In less than a quarter of an hour, more than half of the duelists had died!

The Mexica Samurai now had the advantage in numbers. The elite warriors howled, gradually encircling the Tarascan from both sides. The frontal fighting grew even more intense and wild, with bloodshot Tarasco warriors occasionally discarding their shields, abandoning defense. They charged with Copper Spears in both hands, dying themselves while killing the enemy, joining their opponents in the Divine Kingdom!

Seeing this, Necali shook his head. This was the final frenzy of a dying beast. Then, he finally dared to lower his head to examine his war club. Blood flowed slowly from the club's slot, absorbed by the cotton wrapped around the handle. The obsidian blades fixed in the slot were completely dulled, their brilliant red glinting in the sunlight.

"Pah, damn these hard-skulled Tarascans!" Necali muttered a curse, then again crouched and raised his shield. He quietly moved forward on the advancing battlefield, searching for a suitable weapon.

In just a moment, his eyes lit up as he spotted a shiny Bronze Axe a few steps away. He fiercely kicked aside the body of a high-ranking Tarasco warrior and swiftly picked up the axe from the ground. The smooth blade was exceptionally sharp, the metal surface gleaming coldly, reflecting his young, fierce face. Facing himself in the Bronze Axe, Necali paused briefly. Moments later, amidst the loud cries of the battlefield, he couldn't hold back and again broke into a brilliant grin, like that of a hunter before the hunt!

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"Goddess Haratana, receive my spirit!"

A piercing cry echoed at the forefront between the two armies, as the last dueling Tarasco samurai violently hurled his shield forward. Then, surrounded by more than ten Mexica samurai, he swung his bronze axe desperately with both hands at the nearest foe.

"Bang!"

The Mexica samurai in front quickly ducked and raised his shield. The sharp axe harshly chopped into the shield, embedding itself a full quarter into the wood.

"Pfft!" Before the Tarasco samurai could pull out his bronze axe, Necali on the side stepped forward, crouched, and chopped at the opponent's thigh, slicing through a vital artery, as warm liquid suddenly spurted out. The Tarasco samurai immediately lost strength and became unsteady. The surrounding Mexica samurai then rushed forward, violently swinging their war clubs, and instantly killed the opponent.

Necali let his blood-dripping bronze axe hang down and stood up proudly. He looked around; the vast battlefield was blood-red, with corpses scattered across the fields. A gentle breeze caressed his face, like the War God's benevolent hands, carrying a rich scent of blood. The veteran scout closed his eyes, took

a deep breath of the faintly sweet and bloody air. The glory of battle, the joy of victory, resonated in his chest. Then, he and the other samurai spread their arms and shouted towards the sky.

"War God Huitzilopochtli protects us! The sacred victory belongs to the Alliance! Glorious Mexica samurai, invincible in battle!"

"Invincible in battle!!"

Having witnessed the victory in the first duel, the Mexica ranks erupted in earth-shattering cheers. The samurai shouted in unison, praying to the heavenly deities, praising the glory of the warriors! The priests once again began their ritual dance, chanting poems praising the War God. Meanwhile, the Tarasco ranks were silent; the Royal Army's samurai appeared somber, their morale visibly dropping.

"What an exceptionally splendid duel! I will richly reward the victorious samurai, elevating them to combat nobility!"

Atop a small hill, Xiulote smiled, unable to resist clapping in admiration. His gaze swept over the survivors, quietly counting the number of people to be honored, then his heart sank.

Of the hundred Mexica samurai who participated in the duel, fewer than twenty could now stand on the battlefield. This was an attrition rate of over eighty percent, a blood-soaked offering to the deities! And for the Tarasco samurai, the attrition rate was even one hundred percent. The surviving Mexica samurai showed no mercy. They pulled out their obsidian daggers and checked each body on the ground. If they found an enemy still alive, they delivered a final stab to a vital spot; if they found a wounded comrade who could still be treated, they carefully carried him to the rear.

The Royal Army of Tarasco silently watched all this and no one stepped out to intervene. The sacred duel was just like this: witnessed by the deities, contending at the forefront, fighting to the death!

"Skilled in battle techniques, fiercely experienced, devout believers in the deities, regarding death as life itself. So many veteran Mexica samurai indeed!"

Su'angua's eyes sparkled as he pondered the details of the duel. In this duel bound to mutually exhaust both sides, he had not used his most elite Copper-axe Guards, nor had the opposing commander used his Personal Army; all those who participated were regular experienced samurai. And from the details, one could see the bigger picture; the elite Mexica samurai, promoted based on military merit, clearly excelled in martial arts.

"So, in the decisive battle, we must avoid close combat as much as possible. Rely more on the Royal Army's discipline, depend on the sharpness of the copper troops, form spear formations to support each other... If group fighting at the front is disadvantageous, proceed with single combats of the warriors!"

The young King nodded slightly, then waved the Divine Staff. Once again, war drums sounded in the Tarasco ranks. A strong Copper Axe Warrior then stepped out from the Imperial Guards and approached the front lines between the two armies.

"Sun God Curicaveri bless! I, a warrior from Apachigan, 'Crocodile Catcher' Xitlalama, challenge the bravest Mexica samurai!"

Having returned, the Toltec stood just behind His Highness in the guard squad. Hearing the Tarasco challenge, the battle-hungry Black Wolf immediately stepped forward, his eyes glowing, he exclaimed.

"Your Highness, I, the Toltec, wish to enter the battle!"

Upon hearing this, Xiulote paused to think for a moment, then smiled and nodded.

"Good! My Black Wolf, go and capture some prey for me, showcasing your skills in front of the two army formations!"

The Toltec excitedly bowed in salute. Javelins or arrows, deemed dishonorable, were not allowed in front-line duels. Black Wolf thus set down his longbow and copper arrows, carrying only his handy war club and shield, and boldly stepped out from the ranks.

"War God Huitzilopochtli protects! I, a warrior from Tepanecapan, 'Black Wolf' Toltec, challenge the Tarasco samurai!"

Toltec flashed a brilliant smile, his face brimming with tremendous confidence. The opposing warrior nodded slightly in acknowledgment, then drew the copper axe from his waist. The two stood on the blood-stained battlefield, positioned about a dozen paces from each other.

Black Wolf's smile faded as he gripped his war club and shield tightly. His eyes intently focused on his opponent's figure, his gaze sharp as a blade sweeping over the fatal spots—head, neck, side waist, and groin.

Momentarily silent, the sound of the war drums suddenly erupted. Both warriors half-raised their shields, moved forward a few steps, and quickly closed the distance to where their weapons could clash. Then, their footsteps began to rapidly shift, both trying to move to the opponent's difficult-to-guard

side, like circling wild wolves. Their weapons also lightly swayed, making it hard to predict who would launch the attack first.

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The tense standoff and shifting movements continued for a good dozen breaths. Xitlalama kept catching glimpses of Toltec with his peripheral vision, and then his expression tensed as he realized the opponent's agility surpassed his own. He halted his hesitation, let out a ferocious yell, and suddenly lunged forward. His left arm swung the massive shield outward, disrupting his adversary's line of sight, while his right arm drew slightly back, his gaze locked onto the side of the opponent's waist—it was a swift, chopping strike!

In this life-and-death moment, Toltec's eyes lit up. He sidestepped, darting diagonally forward two steps, pressing against the opponent's left shield arm and avoiding the right hand's chop. Following that, Black Wolf's left shield pushed forward, disrupting the turn attempt of his opponent, as his right hand swung upward from a lower angle.

"A hit to the head!!"

"Bang, crack," a crisp collision followed by the sound of breaking bones. The Obsidian Club traced a cruel arc, slamming viciously into the back of the Tarasco warrior's head.

"Uh! Hmph..." The broken neck constrained the throat, cutting Xitlalama's scream short, turning it into a deep nasal groan. He whimpered twice like a dying wild rabbit, blood flowing from his nostrils, his head shook and then tilted to the side, falling.

"Bang!" Toltec, without any restraint, struck the Tarasco warrior's head again. The foe "thudded" heavily to the ground, letting go of the Battle Axe in his hands, his limbs twitched violently twice, and then he fell silent.

Swift speed, immense strength, precise timing! A true warrior's duel—never a missed attack, victory or defeat manifested with a single motion, life and death but a moment's transition!

Toltec looked at his fallen opponent, then cracked a smile once again, showing pure joy. He took deep breaths to steady his rapid breathing from the exertion. Next, Black Wolf raised his arms high, shouting loudly toward the forward lines.

"Blessed by War God Huitzilopochtli! I, Black Wolf Toltec, have defeated my opponent!! I am his Highness's Black Wolf, the hunter of Tarasco's white deer!!!"

The bold shouting spread far and wide. Seeing the warrior who boasted victory, Su'angua's face darkened. He turned his head to look at his trusted aide, the Great General Yuku.

"Yuku, my loyal hound. If it were you in the arena, what would be the probability of victory?"

Yuku, as if carved from stone, watched Toltec's flushed face and spoke in a deep voice.

"Skilled in battle technique, quick in movement. His breathing is a bit erratic, but his strength remains. Your Majesty, I am sixty percent confident."

Su'angua shook his head slightly and waved the Divine Staff again. Another fierce-looking Copper Axe Warrior saluted the King, silently stepping out from among the Imperial Guards. He carried an exceptionally large shield and, looking at Toltec standing in the field, shouted loudly.

"Blessed by the Sun God! I, the warrior from Saka, 'Graceful Deer' Aesli, challenge 'Black Wolf' Toltec to a duel!"

Toltec nodded solemnly, sinking into a combat-ready stance. Shortly, the resounding drums of decisive battle struck up again!

Amidst the thunderous battle drums, Toltec advanced a few steps and once again began the standoff with his adversary. Aesli lived up to the name 'Graceful Deer.' He moved rapidly and with great speed. For a dozen breaths, neither could gain the upper hand in positioning. The confident Black Wolf didn't wait longer. He pressed forward with swift steps, closing within two paces of his foe, then delivered a powerful and abrupt overhead club swing for a short, blasting strike.

"Bang!" Aesli took a step back, raising his shield with stability to receive the attack. He shifted again, his right-hand wielding the Copper Axe subtly, maintaining a strong deterrent stance. The fierce exchange was touch-and-go, and the adversary kept a steady defense without revealing any openings. Toltec was forced to widen the gap, re-engaging with Aesli.

Such exchanges continued to unfold. The duel lasted an astonishing three to four minutes before Toltec finally seized an opportunity, slicing Aesli's left leg and then cutting the right arm. Finally, he advanced a step, swung down fiercely, knocking away the shield, and for the first time broke through his opponent's defense from the front, then counterattacked to slay Aesli!

The Copper Axe in Aesli's hand slipped away powerlessly. Even in his dying moments, the stout Tarasco warrior had not really taken a swing.

"Damn it! What 'Graceful Deer' from Saka? More like a turtle from Lerma River!"

Toltec's face flushed red, panting heavily. The intense movement and engagement had drained a great deal of his strength. After a while, he once again raised both arms, shouting in front of the two armies.

"Under the protection of the War God! I, Black Wolf Toltec, have defeated my adversary!! No one from Tarasco can stand against me!!!"

Upon hearing this, Su'angua remained calm. He looked at his trusted aide, the Great General, once again.

"How about now?"

"His breathing is ragged, he's out of strength. Losing caution, succumbing to arrogance. Your Majesty, I shall kill this man!"

Yuku's affirmation was certain and final. Su'angua smiled and nodded. The statue-like warrior held a sleek Copper Spear in hand, with a sharp Copper Axe at his waist, and with remarkably accurate steps, he marched out of the ranks.

"The brave warrior Qinchongcan, 'Hound' Yuku, challenges 'Black Wolf' Toltec to a duel!"

Yuku, stony-faced, called out the challenge briefly and calmly, his eyes alone blazing with fiery combativeness.

Toltec paused, slightly taken aback. This was the middle-aged warrior from the King's side; he had just been watching him carefully. Then, a similarly intense will to fight flared in his eyes. Once more, their gaze locked, and even the air began to heat up between them. Black Wolf took a deep breath and once again assumed a fighting stance.