

Civilization 93

Chapter 93: Autumn Harvest, Grain and Surrender

October marked the end of the rainy season, with the sun finally generously spreading its light across the land, illuminating the path home.

October was also the season when the harvest was completed, a time of joy for the farmers as they gathered their food. At this moment, Xiulote stood on a hill, gazing southward.

There was the edge of the Mexican Valley, with fields full of dried, yellow cornstalks, and one could vaguely see farmers busy in the fields, collecting the remnants of the crop. The monsoon brought with it the distinct fragrance of grain, the scent of a bountiful harvest. It was the land of the Mexica.

On the Mexican Plateau, the corn harvest often began in mid-September and concluded by the end of September. This was the main sustenance for the farmers for the year, critical for their survival.

Yet when he turned to continue northward, all he saw were continuous empty fields, plains full of withered grass, and a village turned to ashes by the surprise attacks of the Otomi, with the vague white bones scattered among them.

These Otomi villages were destined to be destroyed in the flames of war. If they did not welcome the Otomi guerrillas, they would be destroyed as enemies. And once they did, the Mexicas' punishment would surely follow. Thus, this land, amidst the prolonged conflict, had turned into a ghostly realm devoid of people.

"Bones exposed in the field, a thousand li without the crowing of a cock. This is the land of the Otomi," the youth sighed softly.

Closer to the main force of the army, hundreds of emaciated, hunched fresh corpses lay scattered haphazardly. The vanguard samurais were in the process of replacing their worn obsidian blades.

Just moments ago, the army's vanguard had been suddenly attacked by an Otomi guerrilla squad.

Two or three hundred Otomi militiamen, barely clothed, wielding stone spears and wooden clubs, charged out of the woods in a wild, crazed roar. Driven by a few Otomi warriors, they slammed into the Jaguar warriors and the samurais at the forefront, only to be mercilessly beaten down by war clubs and turned into warm bodies upon the ground, causing not even a slight injury.

They were like harmless moths that had fallen into a campfire, creating a popping sound as they burst into flames, and then turned to ashes.

The militia had just engaged with the Mexica warriors. The warriors hiding at the rear did not hesitate, turning and fleeing into the forest. They had completed their task of leading the militia to their death.

The howling of wild dogs echoed through the woods. Their eyes red, they had long feasted on corpses, and now drawn by the large-scale army, they trailed far behind. According to their sparse life experience, these dangerous bipedal beasts would fight each other and then bring them new sustenance, just as in the battle that had just ended.

Xiulote wore a helmet that obscured his face, draped in the garb of a coyote priest, and grasping a yellow gemstone scepter. He stamped the ground ahead, feeling the earth had begun to dry and harden

under the sunlight. Compared to the soft, sinking mud of the rainy season, this ground was much more comfortable to walk on and better suited for the warriors to fight.

"Such an attack is utterly meaningless! With sparse trees and hard, dry ground, and clear skies without rain, the militia had no advantage in terrain; they were too few in number and couldn't possibly cause any harm to the Mexica warriors. The Otomi have lost their minds!"

The youth glanced at the militiamen, thin as reeds. These farmers couldn't even truly be called soldiers. They were just weak and powerless, driven to madness by starvation.

"The farmers must be having an extremely difficult time this year. With war drastically depleting the food supply, plus a whole year of famine, before the new year comes, at least three out of ten will have perished, with the rest hovering on the brink of death," Bertade reflected, the Head Warrior born of the common people empathized deeply with the plight of the farmers.

"Even so, for the sake of war, the Otomi nobility will still take the last of the farmers' food, causing even more to starve to death. They need to fill the empty granaries from the siege, as well as their own dining tables."

"So," Xiulote frowned slightly, "if we were to leave Xilotepec City, they wouldn't aid the local farmers but would instead desperately plunder to fill their own granaries?"

"Of course! Xilotepec City was also under our siege for four months, and subsequently forced to surrender tributes for thirty years. Because of the siege, they failed to complete last year's harvest.

This spring, they planted a little, and just two months ago, they harvested some pumpkins and soybeans, but it was a drop in the bucket. With the corn unharvested and the priests and nobility seizing the opportunity to rebel, fighting us once more. Now with both armies in stalemate, the fields are either barren or burned. Inside Xilotepec City, there's at most food for four more months!

Without confiscating the food from the farmers, what will they do if our legions surround them again? To ensure their own survival, the nobility will heartlessly send the farmers to their deaths!

Now is also the time they care least about casualties. The Otomi's crazed guerrilla warfare is a deliberate attempt to reduce the number of militia. Rather than having the militia consume food or die in vain, they'd prefer to cause some damage to us, which is better than having starving people causing unrest. This is the reasoning of the nobility!"

In Bertade's eyes was a calm but intense anger.

After decades of campaigning, he had become accustomed to seeing the life and death of warriors but could not forgive the cruelty of the nobility or the hardships of the commoners. He yearned for change. Thinking of hope, the Head Warrior cast a silent glance at Xiulote and then fell silent.

The youth furrowed his brows in deep thought. He remembered the temple calculations before the decisive battle, where Aweit had taught him what it meant to have the perspective of a commander. To a commander's mind, life was just a number for calculations.

According to the original plan he and Aweit had devised, the army would negotiate with the Otomi people to rescue Casal and the three thousand warriors tasked with covering the rear, then exchange prisoners for food with the Otomi. After the negotiations, they would head south with the entire army, leaving Otomi lands and rapidly entering the capital city to officially assume the throne.

Lastly, they would take control of the capital's food supply and win over Atotoztli's army of thirty thousand.

But now, it seemed he needed to give some more thought to how to deal with Xilotepec City. The city-state had fallen into its most vulnerable state and was succumbing to its last bout of madness.

The two hurried along their way, walking past the already cold bodies of the militia. The warriors hadn't bothered to spend time burying their enemies, nor had they showed any interest in the meager possessions that might be on the militia.

The pack of wild dogs surged forward as soon as the troop of warriors had passed. They had been impatiently waiting. But this time, they didn't need to dig the bodies out of the ground with much effort.

After silently pondering for a long time, the youth finally posed another question.

"Given the food shortage, why would the nobility of Xilotepec City be so eager to instigate a rebellion? Are they really willing to sacrifice themselves for Otapan City?"

Bertade looked toward the western mountains, where Otapan City lay. He thought about the intelligence they had so far.

"The primary reason is hatred. The priests harbor a deep-rooted hatred for the Mexica legions, as do the nobility and the warriors," he said.

The youth recalled the ritual plates being dragged away, the priests who swore oaths with cut faces, and the large pile of confiscated sacrifices, many of which bore the family crests of the nobility. Finally, there were the three thousand men offered as sacrifices and the relatives who wailed and followed after them.

"In addition, Otapan City must have given them some promises, such as a supply of food or military support. If the Mexica army were to withdraw, they would also be able to plunder three to four months' worth of food from the nearby farmers and tribes, without leaving any survivors."

The youth remembered the countless burning villages and fields below Otapan City, and the cruel night when tens of thousands of civilians were sent to their deaths. These were experiences he could not forget.

"Otapan City still has surplus food? They were almost out of supplies," the youth expressed his disbelief.

"What promises can a city-state make? When Otapan City was desperate, of course, they would resort to deceit and false promises. Now, they must also be vigorously scavenging from their own farmers, exhausting their own militia, and preparing for an attack from either the Mexica or the Tarascans."

"As for the Tlaxcalans, setting aside whether or not they are willing to help, it is impossible for them to transport food to the Otomi before the way through Atotoztli is cleared," Bertade explained.

The youth nodded in agreement. Although the prolonged siege had worn down the Mexica, the vast disparity in national power and the complete destruction of agriculture also left the Otomi out of resources. Xilotepec City could not count on the support that was promised.

"Since Otapan City and Xilotepec City are not united, there is much to be gained. Let's handle them separately!"

The civil war in Mexica had just ended, yet the external war with the Otomi continued. As the situations in the world change, so must everything else, and it all depends on how those who adapt to the circumstances act.

After three days of rushed marching, the camps in the mountains once again came into view of Xiulote. Under the grand evening sun, the youth's command banner was proudly raised, along with the body of the king and the divine staff, as the army of four thousand marched with high spirits.

In the distance, the scale of the mountain camps had once again expanded. A dense array of camps spread out, with the banners of different city-states waving among them.

Tens of thousands of city-state warriors were stationed in the outer perimeter. They looked gaunt and weary from the journey yet still had the sharpness of warriors. They were now full of hope, lighting fires and cooking. The smoke rose from among the camps, reflecting the evening glow and foretelling a clear tomorrow.

"It seems that the twenty thousand city-state warriors in the outer ring have already surrendered. Food is the lifeblood of an army; whoever controls food, controls the force of war!" the youth couldn't help smiling to himself.

As the returning army approached, the warriors along the way came forward to greet them. They paid their respects to the coyote priest and the legion commander, and stole awed glances at the body of the king and the shining yellow gemstone scepter in the youth's hand.

Xiluote, with the self-assured smile of a victor, nodded in response to each one.

"Now our strength has grown! The warriors of Mexica will once again be united under the royal banner, making all enemies tremble with fear."