

The Challenge

During the waning years of Toltec dominion over Mesoamerica, the aging king of Teotihuacan called his two sons before him. Sitting on his feathered mat upon his jade throne, he addressed them with solemn ceremony.

“You have both concluded your studies well, though it is clear that you, my elder son, have the keener reflexes, grasp of history, and mind for strategy; while you, his younger brother, show great aptitude for philosophy, music, and the oratory required of a true statesman.

“You have both furthermore demonstrated your valor in battle, slaying enemies and taking captives without fear. It is true, my younger son, that your style is more foolhardy and fluid; your elder brother instead commands the respect of his colleagues and unerringly transforms disparate warriors into a seamless fighting body, devastating to its foes.

“Hear me, my sons. I am proud of you both. I believe that under the right circumstances, either of you could rule this kingdom. But you know our ways. Each prince must prove himself worthy of the mat of authority. So today, you shall both leave my palace, set out with nothing but your breechclouts, your flesh, your minds—and you will work a mighty victory in the name of your father the king.”

With a bow, the brothers quit the throne room and disappeared into the haze of a distant horizon while the city looked on in sober silence.

Months passed. The royal spies brought back fleeting rumors, but the king waited in quiet, tortured suspense for the return of his sons, praying to the twin gods of chaos and creation for their success.

An entire ceremonial year passed before heralds trumpeted on their golden conches the arrival of both princes. Their father stood in the portico of his palace and watched as from the north a phalanx of warriors approached, his elder son at their head in the regalia of a general.

Circling around the palace from the south came the younger prince, skin a darker burnished bronze but wearing the same simple breechclout as when he had left. Slung across his chest was a bag woven from reeds.

After embracing them on the steps, the king took his place upon his throne and bade them speak of their triumphs before a gathered group of courtiers, counselors and generals.

“I traveled to the north, Your Majesty,” the elder explained, “to barbarian lands. There I came across a band of Chichimec mercenaries who sought to enslave me. After I bested a dozen of their number with my bare hands, however, they allowed me to join their ranks. We fought in several battles, contracted by one desert kingdom or another, and my superior training and prowess soon garnered me a command.

“Then came the day that a client tribe refused to pay the accorded fee, and I rallied the barbarian warriors to follow me in seizing control of their lands. That people fell easily beneath our obsidian-tipped lances and mighty clubs, and I was declared leader of the hybrid nation. A fortnight ago, we began marching south toward Your Majesty’s realm, and along the way we have conquered two more city-states, which I now lay at

your feet, Father, as vassal nations, along with the 10,000 men in the army I now command.”

The king’s normal dour expression was broken by the hint of a smile. “My son, you have more than demonstrated your worth. I accept your gift with pride and recognize you as a general of the Toltec domain.”

The prince bowed low and went to stand among the other military leaders. The aging sovereign then turned his gaze upon his younger son, who came forward, forehead high, eyes gleaming with what seemed inhuman surety and peace.

“Lord Father,” he began, “knowing the likely path to victory of my brother, I elected to travel south, into the highlands. There I found shamans who counseled me and bequeathed me the six holy sacraments of the Flowery God—peyote, mushrooms, morning glory seeds, tobacco leaves, moonflowers, sun-openers.

“I scaled the divine peaks of the White Mountain, struggling against the cold and snow. When I reached the summit, I prepared the narcotic concoction the ancients called *gods’ gall*. Ready myself through prayer and bloodletting, I took a deep draught. A whirlwind of cosmic energy unmoored my soul from my flesh, and I found myself rising toward the sun.

“That fiery god was surprised to find me in his orbit, and he reached out to bat me away. But I seized his flaming limbs and began to grapple with him, striving to pin him to the earth or sky. Locked thus in combat, the sun and I wheeled through the heavens for many months of thirteen days, plunging each evening into the bowels of the earth, where the shades of my ancestors beheld our titanic struggle.

“Over time, I robbed the god of rest. His charring heart began to cool. And one morning, as we emerged at the horizon from the Land of the Dead, I tumbled the sun to his distant, watery kingdom. He bowed and acknowledged defeat.”

An outraged rumor rippled through the throne room. The elder son shook his head, irate and embarrassed. The nobles of the realm stiffened, anticipating judgment.

“My son,” the king rasped. “Surely you know how difficult this story is to credit.”

“Indeed, Your Majesty. Such was my thought when the blazing god prepared to return me to my flesh. No one will believe me.”

The prince ascended the first few steps of the dais. His brother moved forward, spear in hand, ready to intercept.

“Yet hear me well, Father,” the younger prince whispered. “I strove with the sun himself, and in the end, I won. As proof and tribute, I bring you a blossom, plucked from the fields of paradise that skirt the Holy House of Dawn.”

He drew from his reed bag an unearthly, achingly beautiful flower and laid it at the feet of the king, its petals still glowing with ineffable light.