

Perish 116

Chapter 116: Ports and Markets_2

Maximus teased, "Pigeris, you are my Commerce Officer, and you should have your own subordinates, but you've never mentioned it before. I thought you preferred working alone."

"Leader, you never told me that either!" Pigeris protested loudly.

The crowd burst into laughter.

After laughing heartily, Maximus said, "Alright, I'll formally inform you now: as the Commerce Officer, you're entitled to a team of five subordinates. Discuss with Volenus to figure out what kind of people you need, and once your choice is made, I will review and approve it."

Pigeris immediately objected, "Five subordinates are way too few. The port is huge, and there will clearly be lots to handle. It's impossible to manage it all."

Maximus' expression darkened slightly. "For now, that's the most I can allocate. If the port's workload genuinely proves overwhelming in the future, we'll add more. But considering you're about to start work immediately, new recruits may not adapt quickly. I'll assign a few Attendants to assist you temporarily."

Pigeris was overjoyed. "That's perfect! That's perfect!"

"Casius, take a few men and help Pigeris with his tasks."

Already eager, Casius promptly responded, "Yes, Leader!"

"Leader, our army has fully occupied Sarabia City. The soldiers are being directly supplied with materials. Do we really need to run businesses here?" Quintus asked, puzzled.

Maximus replied, "There are over a thousand Sarabians living in the city. If Pigeris successfully manages the port and more merchant ships arrive to trade in the future, there will be a significant influx of sailors. Won't they need places to stay, meals to eat, and daily necessities to purchase?"

"Leader, your idea is great. This way, we don't need to forcibly take from these civilians, and we can still collect their gold and silver!" Pigeris grinned from ear to ear.

"No, you've misunderstood," Maximus said seriously. "I'm not interested in their small amounts of money. My true aim is to reduce their resentment toward us. I want them to understand that we, Free Italy, are not ruthless plunderers who only burn, kill, and pillage, but capable managers of a city. If they cooperate properly, not only will their lives be spared, but they can live fairly well in this town.

Therefore, the prices of goods sold in the shops under your supervision must be slightly lower than before, so the Sarabians can truly feel that our occupation benefits them."

"Understood..." Pigeris nodded thoughtfully.

"Furthermore, since we have decided to establish Sarabia as our headquarters, we must manage it properly. We've learned plenty of lessons from Pompey. As our forces expand, there's an urgent need for military training. Yet, we still need people to load and unload goods at the port, clean the streets, dump waste, unclog sewers, fight fires, and drain water... All these tasks have drained significant energy from us.

This time, instead of driving the Sarabians out, we've chosen to keep them in the city precisely so they can handle these chores, leaving us free to focus on expanding our forces, training our soldiers, and conquering more territories... Volenus, you are the administrative officer, so managing this town and these Sarabians will be your responsibility."

"Ah?... Understood, Leader!" Volenus, who had served as a farm manager for many years, appeared nervous about managing an entire town for the first time, yet a trace of excitement was evident.

"But will these Sarabians willingly work for us?" Pigeris raised the question.

Maximus had already considered this issue. Calmly, he answered, "This time, we won't provide them with free food. However, if they choose to work, we can pay them a modest wage. With money, they can buy food at our shops and continue living in this town under our control."

"They're our captives, and we still have to pay them? Isn't that a bit—" Flanitnus expressed his confusion.

"We give them money, yes, but they'll spend that money buying our goods, essentially returning the money to us," Maximus chuckled. "This money merely circulates briefly through their hands. What we truly 'spend' are intercepted surplus resources. By doing so, we gain willing laborers, ensure the town operates properly, breathe life into it, and that, my friends, is worth it!"

Flanitnus, Quintus—as Roman veterans—had their doubts, Pigeris, once a small merchant, Volenus, merely a house-born slave, and Capito, a Roman citizen from a modest family, each possessed unique talents but lacked higher societal insight. Maximus' explanation introduced simple economic principles, leaving them deeply reflective.

Maximus observed their contemplation with satisfaction. He understood that Sarabia was unlikely to remain under their control for long, but he insisted on carefully managing the town's populace—the goal being to provide his forces with practical experience in governing, preparing for the future.

Shortly after Flanitnus and Volenus left, Torrelugo entered the hall with several others.

"Leader, this is the Centurion Bubius, a brave man who infiltrated Sarabia and led the team capturing the city gate last night!" Torrelugo proclaimed loudly, proudly slapping the shoulder of a dark-skinned, muscular soldier in full armor beside him.

Maximus displayed surprise and warmly said, "Bubius, I know you! Half a year ago, during the army-wide assembly, you courageously exposed Chief Cross's soldiers harassing nurses from the Medical Team. And now, you've accomplished another Great Merit by securing this town with virtually no casualties. You're a hero beyond dispute!"

Maximus genuinely praised him. Despite both allied armies capturing Canosa in a single day, Maximus' forces had suffered nearly 500 casualties. If the stealth attack on Sarabia had failed, continuing with a

direct assault would have required reevaluating the plan entirely, making Bubius' achievement extraordinary and warranting a personal meeting.

The word "hero" carried special meaning for the Greeks and Romans. As soon as Maximus uttered it, the hall erupted in excitement, while Bubius stood dumbfounded, unsure how to respond.

"And you all!" Maximus raised his hand, pointing to the other soldiers who had infiltrated Sarabia City and joined the night raid. "You're also heroes of Free Italy—you are role models for all of our soldiers!"

Each soldier froze momentarily before breaking into excited smiles: We're heroes? We're heroes!...

Suddenly, someone blurted out, "Leader, since we're all heroes, do you think the women from the Medical Team will like us?"

The bizarre question silenced the hall instantly. Every soldier turned eager eyes toward Maximus.

Maximus looked at the young soldier who had asked the question and smiled. "What's your name?"

"Leader, I'm Stags, from Little Asia," the soldier respectfully replied.

"Stags, it's perfectly normal for men to like women. I feel the same way," Maximus winked, prompting a wave of laughter from the soldiers.

Chapter 117: Sarabia's Slaves

"However, I trust all of you are well aware that according to our military law, if you wish for a woman to be with you, it cannot be through coercion but must be voluntary. In fact, I will be publicizing your heroic deeds throughout the army to set an example, which will certainly draw the attention of many women in the military. That alone is already a significant help to you; the rest depends on your own efforts."

Maximus said seriously, "Actually, you don't need to focus solely on the nurses in the medical team. Broaden your view—there are many excellent single women in the kitchen and warehouse. Courting them might be more likely to succeed."

"The leader is right!"

"Thank you, leader!"

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The soldiers expressed their gratitude to Maximus eagerly, evidently taking his advice to heart. In their eyes, although their leader was young, his ability to lead them in repeatedly conquering cities, ensuring they were fed and clothed, and caring for their lives while bonding with them truly earned their respect and admiration.

Maximus looked at everyone with a benevolent expression but suddenly appeared slightly startled. He whispered to Bubius, "I remember sending a hundred of you to infiltrate here. Last night's battle caused injuries to twelve of you, and it seems now that even the injured brothers are here. But after counting carefully, there are only ninety-eight people. What's going on?"

"Report, leader." Bubius's eyes showed sadness as he responded solemnly, "Of the injured brothers, two of them didn't make it; they had passed away before we arrived..."

Maximus's face grew solemn. In a deep voice, he said, "I've already sent people to urge the medical team to arrive quickly so the other injured brothers can receive better treatment. I believe there will be no further deaths among the wounded brothers!"

Raising his voice, he asked, "Torrelugo, when will the bodies of these two deceased warriors be cremated?"

Tony Rugo replied with rare seriousness, "When I came, I happened to discuss with Flanitnus. We plan to wait until tomorrow, when the bodies of the brothers who died in the siege of Canosa arrive, and conduct the cremation together. At that time, as before, we'll gather the entire army to mourn and pray for them!"

Cremating fallen soldiers with the collective mourning and prayers of the army was a new practice Maximus had implemented in his forces after occupying Pompeii City. Its purpose was to strengthen

their sense of belonging to the army, foster their pride as soldiers, and cultivate courage in facing death. Thus far, it had only been carried out twice.

"Understood." Maximus refrained from criticizing Flannitnus in front of the ordinary soldiers for failing to notify him of such an important matter promptly. With solemn dignity, he declared loudly, "At that time, I will bid them farewell with the finest eulogies, ensuring that the gods hear of their heroic deeds so their souls can rest in peace!"

I will also have Capito carefully preserve their ashes. One day, when we have a true homeland of our own, I will order the construction of a grand temple—one dedicated to honoring these warriors who died in battle. It will allow the living to remember them, and our descendants will forever honor their heroic deeds!..."

The soldiers listened, their eyes gradually lighting up with a glowing fervor filled with longing...

After sending off Torrelugo and the others, Maximus's smile faded. The request made earlier by the soldiers caused him to sink into deep thought: they wanted women. This was likely the shared desire of most soldiers. Perhaps the saying was true: "When fed and warm, desires arise." Or maybe the lenient discipline in other troops in the past had led to indulgent behavior, subtly influencing these lowly born men, awakening intense physical needs...

From another perspective, perhaps this was a good thing. If these soldiers, who owned nothing, could marry and have wives, establishing families would give them something to care about. They would likely fight more bravely to protect their women. More importantly, one day, when the army escapes Italy and is no longer pursued by the Roman Army, would these soldiers—having wives and possibly even children—easily leave the ranks?...

Thinking of this, Maximus turned and said, "Akegu, go to the wealthy district and find Volenus. Ask him how many women are in our army, how many are without husbands, and what their ages are... Get detailed information and report back."

"Yes, leader."

"Also, tell him, no female slave in this city is to be spared. They must all be integrated into our army!"

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Xie Pangbo, a house-born slave of a noble family in Sarabia, had received some basic education since childhood. Being skilled in arithmetic and fairly clever, he became responsible for purchasing goods for his master's mansion after reaching adulthood. This gave him relative freedom of movement and the opportunity to skim profits, making his life quite comfortable. However, all of this changed when the rebel army captured Sarabia City.

His master was killed, and the mistress and young masters were driven out of the city. Despite the soldiers wielding blood-dripping short swords constantly reassuring them that "Free Italy fights for slaves and the poor....," Xie Pangbo and the other slaves remained fearful, worrying that a single misstep would cost them their heads.

But in reality, this fierce-looking army kept its word, refraining from wholesale slaughter. Shortly afterward, plainclothes individuals arrived, gathered them together, asked about their origins, documented the information, and then announced that they had joined the Free Italy army.

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Faced with this, Xie Pangbo rejected it internally, but being a man who understood when to advance and when to retreat, he outwardly complied. Even though he sneered at the Free Italy people's way of leading newly joined slaves in lamenting their miseries, he still spoke publicly about the bad deeds of his former masters.

Perhaps because his performance won the trust of the rebel army, or maybe due to his own talents, a few days later, he was sent to the harbor marketplace, in charge of selling at a pottery shop. The transformation from a buyer to a seller was truly ironic.

On the first day of opening the shop, there were almost no customers; the whole world seemed deserted. He spent most of his time cleaning the shop and arranging the pottery.

During this process, he recognized that some of the pieces in the shop came from his former master's house, as he had once been responsible for their procurement. This filled him with emotion.

The slaves working at the harbor marketplace, including Xie Pangbo, were arranged to live in a famous merchant's mansion inside the city. The living conditions were much better than when they were slaves,

and the food was decent, even allowing them to eat some meat. This caused some people to no longer resist joining Free Italy.

However, Xie Pangbo was not moved by the improvement in living conditions. He resented the rebel army's control, treating him like a soldier, just like now, being gathered by a small squad of soldiers after breakfast to head to the harbor market together.

In early spring, Sarabia's mornings were still chilly despite warming up, and the sea breeze made everyone walking on the streets tighten their woolen blankets around themselves.

These blankets were given to every new member of the rebel army not long after they joined. Some slaves, who had always worn ragged clothes, donned these woolen blankets to ward off the cold for the first time and couldn't help but praise the rebel army.

Xie Pangbo remained silent about this because his former master operated in this business, buying large amounts of fine wool from Galgano in northern Apulia, having hired housewives spin it into yarn, and then weaving it into woolen cloth for sale. He was certain that most of the blankets they were wearing were likely stock from his former master's warehouse.

Though wearing it was indeed warmer than linen clothes! But the color was truly ugly! ... Xie Pangbo looked down at the black blanket on him: Most Galgano sheep are black, and this must have been undyed. How great it would be if it could be dyed purple or red! ...

He daydreamed for a while, suddenly hearing someone shout, "Hey, isn't that Casaridaoa?!"

"It really is Casaridaoa! What is he doing?"

"Is he sweeping the floor?! Casaridaoa is actually sweeping the floor!"

"Shh, keep it down, or he might hear you and beat you up!"

"I... I'm not scared, I'm now a member of Free Italy, he wouldn't dare!"

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As his companions buzzed with gossip, Xie Pangbo also looked in awe at the stout figure bent over, sweeping the streets not far ahead.

Casaridaoa was a commoner from Sarabia. Fatherless from a young age and with a frail mother unable to discipline him, he became a notorious hooligan in Sarabia City. Tall and strong, he liked to extort others for money. Later, he offended a nobleman and was beaten by the nobleman's men, nearly losing his life. Learning his lesson, he then specialized in extorting slaves.

Most Sarabians were merchants, often buying skilled slaves to work for them. To encourage their enthusiasm, small amounts of money would often be given as a monthly wage.

Casaridaoa specifically targeted these slaves. Intimidated by his reputation and constrained by their low status, the slaves would hand over their money and dared not speak out afterward. Even if their masters found out, they wouldn't bother dealing with such a scoundrel.

Having been extorted by him multiple times during procurement trips, Xie Pangbo naturally harbored deep resentment towards him. Seeing Casaridaoa now timidly sweeping in the morning breeze brought Xie Pangbo great satisfaction, making him unable to stop laughing.

Casaridaoa heard the laughter behind him, turned around, and glared, only to see a fully armed squad of soldiers beside the chatting group. He immediately bent down and continued sweeping.

At this moment, Xie Pangbo suddenly felt that having this group of soldiers escort them daily was not a restriction, but rather a blessing.

As they continued walking east, every couple of streets, there were people sweeping, clearing drains, and even collecting sewage... In the past, these dirty jobs were handled by Sarabia's public slaves, but today it was Sarabia's citizens doing them.

Just as everyone was very surprised, the man said to have been sent by the Maximus Army to manage the harbor market spoke, "This is nothing strange. We, Free Italy, have long informed these Sarabians that if they work diligently for us, they can earn wages to buy necessities and continue living in this city.

Hmph, but these Sarabians, thinking themselves lofty, hid indoors and refused to cooperate. Now, finally, some have run out of food at home and are hungry with no money, prompting them to work for us. Just wait and see; more Sarabians will soon be doing the hard work once done by our slaves!"

His words gave everyone a sense of relief.

The man, named Alakosia, emphasized again, "But starting today, you'll likely become busier. Some Sarabians who still have money but have run out of food will likely come to the market to buy things, and some foreign merchants with whom we have agreements should also begin arriving by ship today. So, perform well today, and I'll be watching all of you.

Our Leader Maximus once said, 'In our ranks, as long as you have the ability, no matter your background or race, you will certainly be utilized!"

Many were exhilarated by these words, and some even cheered.

Yet, Xie Pangbo still sneered inside: Just a rebel army; once the Roman army arrives, it will be crushed instantly. Being utilized by them now might actually cause trouble later!

Treading the descending stone-paved road to the harbor, his eardrums filled with the "rumbling" roar of waves crashing against the shore. Yet, it couldn't drown out the sound of united slogans...

Xie Pangbo knew it was a rebel army unit stationed at the harbor training in the morning. In fact, new camps set up in the wealthy district they lived in were doing the same thing at this time.

These rebels were diligent in training, whereas our City Guard only indulged in eating and drinking every day, no wonder they easily captured this town! ... Xie Pangbo cursed in his heart.

When the damp, fishy sea breeze brushed his face, his brow relaxed.

In the distance lay the boundless sea, with a red sun floating above, dyeing the waters and clouds red... Nearby, countless seagulls circled and called in midair. Below them was a white pier stretching like a

giant arm from the land into the shallow sea, and that towering lighthouse, as a merchant ship slowly sailed into the harbor, workers quickly rushed to the docks...

After entering the marketplace, Alakosia again encouraged everyone before allowing them to disperse.

Inside the pottery shop, Xie Pangbo, though dismissive of the rebel army, was conscientious in his work. He carefully wiped each piece of pottery with a slightly damp cloth and then cautiously arranged them one by one on the shelves.

Chapter 119: Market Fun

To be honest, the pottery sold in this shop is quite different from what you'd usually find in a pottery store. There are very few everyday pottery items, while most are exquisitely crafted, high-quality luxury pottery pieces intended for indoor display, and some of them are even damaged.

Xie Pangbo knew these pottery items were looted by the rebel army from the wealthy district; these people from poor backgrounds truly wouldn't let a single coin slip by!

Xie Pangbo looked idly at the bronze shop across the street, which used to be a jewelry shop. He estimated that all the gold and silver jewelry was taken by those soldiers and turned into a bronze shop. But inside, there were hardly any practical bronze items—mostly decorative pieces, like bronze statues.

Xie Pangbo couldn't help but grumble inwardly; he didn't think these items could sell under the current circumstances.

After some casual chat with a neighboring shop companion, Xie Pangbo noticed figures moving at the market entrance: The one called Alakosia was right; people really have come today!

The pottery shop was located near the market entrance, giving him a clear view. The incoming people were Sarabia citizens; they looked around at the entrance for a moment before rushing down the street. Some who were calmer came to the pottery shop first to ask, "Where are the flour, vegetable, and meat vendors?"

"Moved to the very back." Xie Pangbo pointed with his hand, thinking that these rebels were cunning to place the food shops at the far end of the market, forcing Sarabia civilians to pass all the shops. But if they're not interested in buying, no matter how clever they are, it won't work.

Despite his thoughts, he couldn't help but start shouting, "Selling pottery, finest pottery! Collins' black pottery, Athens' red pottery! And paintings by famous artists! These pottery items could be found in the homes of wealthy nobles in the past, but now you have the opportunity to own them! Come buy them, don't miss out on this great opportunity!..."

Xie Pangbo shouted until his mouth was dry, and then paused to take a sip of water from a wooden cup.

At this moment, a short, chubby figure cautiously approached.

Xie Pangbo's eyes lit up, and he immediately put on a smiling face, nodding and bowing as he said, "Soricles, good morning! Are you here to buy pottery?"

Soricles, a Sarabia merchant and town councilman, was wealthy yet frugal and preferred to live in a common area rather than build a residence in the wealthy district. Precisely because of this, he luckily escaped the rebel army's purging. This man lived simply but had a hobby—collecting fine pottery.

Having dealt with Soricles before, Xie Pangbo felt business was coming and acted very courteously.

Soricles also recognized Xie Pangbo and, surprisingly, asked in a low voice, "Did you also join those rebe... uh, Free Italy?"

"I didn't! They just forced me to work for them; dare I disobey?" Xie Pangbo quickly defended himself in a low voice.

Soricles didn't pay much attention to what he said and leaned closer to anxiously ask, "What on earth does Free Italy plan to do with us?! You work for them; do you know?!"

Xie Pangbo did know, as Alakosia had mentioned it several times, hoping that when Sarabia citizens inquired, they could be informed and thus relieved of their doubts and worries.

"Soricles, I heard from a steward of theirs that as long as you don't violate the decrees they've issued in the city and continue living orderly, they won't harm you or seize your property. Even if they leave in the future, they will still ensure your safety and the integrity of your property, leaving this town intact..."

After saying this, Xie Pangbo added an emphasis, "Of course, this is just what I've heard from them. Whether they can truly carry it out, we'll have to see..."

Perpetually anxious these past days, Soricles completely ignored Xie Pangbo's final caution, only hearing what he wanted, and sighed with relief, "If only this could be true! That would be wonderful! Oh dear!"

With a cry of pain, Soricles dropped the sack he carried on his shoulder to the ground, ignoring his sprained back to first check if any wheat spilled out of the bag.

Xie Pangbo couldn't help but ask, "Why do you come out alone to buy things? Aren't you bringing your slaves?"

"Cannot bring! Cannot bring!" Soricles shook his head repeatedly: "What if once out, they run off to join the rebe... Free Italy?"

Xie Pangbo was silent. He indeed heard that the rebel army had so far not demanded slaves from the civilians, but if a slave voluntarily fled to join them, they would certainly accept them. However, given Soricles' status, he only had five or six slaves in his household. If one or two really ran away, he would be heartbroken!

Soricles' overly cautious demeanor unconsciously made Xie Pangbo's attitude shift, finding himself daring to mentally mock this Sarabia councilman, something previously unimaginable.

"Say no more." Soricles gathered himself and looked at the pottery displayed in the shop with an envious expression, "Can these pottery items really be bought?"

Xie Pangbo immediately perked up and said, "Soricles, you're an expert. You could surely tell that most of this pottery came from the residences of those noblemen. They're all top-quality, exquisite pottery. There are connoisseurs within Free Italy too, but they think these pottery items aren't as practical as

ordinary pots and are inconvenient to transport, so they are selling them instead. The base prices offered aren't too high, either.

Chapter 120: Market Fun_2

"This is such a rare chance to own these treasures! When I came to the market today, I saw merchant ships arriving at the port. I heard from the overseers that foreign merchants are also here to make purchases. If you're too late in securing them, you might never see these exquisite pieces of pottery again!"

Soricles remained silent, his eyes fixated on the pottery in the shop as if he wanted to devour them. Yet, apprehension lingered in his heart. He was all too aware of the rebel army's hatred for the wealthy—after all, they had wiped out the entire affluent district and seized their amassed riches. These days, he lived in a constant state of fear, and stepping outside was a calculated risk. He had only brought enough money to buy a single bag of wheat. If he were to recklessly purchase multiple pieces of pottery, it might alert those rebels to his wealth and provoke malicious intentions. That would be disastrous...

Xie Pangbo noticed Soricles' hesitation and turned to retrieve something from the shelf behind him. Placing it in front of Soricles, he said, "Take a look at this."

Soricles fixed his gaze and his eyes widened immediately. "This... Is this not from the Kadesos estate—?"

"Precisely! It's a prized possession from the Kadesos estate—the slender-necked amphora crafted by the renowned Athenian potter Nierqiao and painted by the artist Panphiles himself. This is a treasure of Sarabia City! Previously, most people didn't even get the chance to lay eyes on it. But now, you have the opportunity to take it home as part of your family's collection!"

Soricles couldn't help but reach out, gently caressing the smooth, delicate surface of the pottery. Despite the dimming of the red-painted imagery due to its age, the piece was remarkably well-preserved—a flawless body, unmarred by any defects, depicting the vivid story of Athena's birth. Touching it felt like a connection to Athens' golden age.

Suddenly, Soricles' gaze focused on the mouth of the amphora, and he questioned sharply, "Why is there a chip here?!"

"The crude rebels don't understand the value of such artifacts. When they took it from the Kadesos estate, it got nicked," Xie Pangbo explained in a hushed tone.

"Such barbaric waste!" Soricles clenched his chest in anguish, denouncing their actions.

"For an expert like you, it should be easy to repair this. And because of this small imperfection, the price is only ten Ore."

"Ten Ore?! That's 250 Dinars! Oh, that's outrageous!" Soricles exclaimed loudly.

"Only ten Ore to bring home this treasure of Sarabia City! Everyone in Sarabia would envy you!"

Temptation laced Xie Pangbo's words as Soricles' face twitched involuntarily, though he still hesitated.

Seeing this, Xie Pangbo decided to stoke the flames further: "You are a well-known figure in Sarabia; everyone here recognizes you. These rebels also surely know that you are wealthy. Although they've stated 'no killing randomly,' if you buy this pottery, it's as if you're giving them your money. Doesn't that make you even safer?"

And once the rebels leave and Sarabia returns to normal, the value of these pieces will certainly skyrocket. You could resell them later, not just recouping your original expense but earning quite a bit more..."

Soricles was moved. The constant anxiety these past days had driven him nearly insane. Gritting his teeth, he declared, "Keep these exquisite pottery pieces for me. Don't sell them—I'll go home and bring the money!"

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Pigeris studied the man before him with interest: a lanky frame, fair complexion, wavy short hair, a high and narrow nose, and quick-moving gray-brown eyes that betrayed an untrustworthy nature.

"You must be Xie Pangbo, the man credited with selling half the pottery shop's inventory in just a single afternoon?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"You're Greek?"

"I-I'm Illyrian, sir. To be precise, my father was Illyrian." That afternoon, Alakonia had dragged Xie Pangbo to the port's administrative office without explanation, leaving him visibly nervous.

That meets the leader's standards for new recruits... Pigeris thought to himself, then asked, "I've heard that Soricles, who bought the pottery, has significant wealth, most likely earned by exploiting unfortunate slaves. For such a man, what do you think our treatment should be?"

Pigeris spoke in a calm tone, yet Xie Pangbo felt his chest tighten. Gathering his courage, he stammered, "S-sir, Soricles was wealthy in the past, but he handed over the money earned from selling pottery to... to us in Free Italy. Since we've stated that 'as long as they adhere to our laws in Sarabia City, they won't face punishment,' I think... I think—"

"You've told Soricles these words, haven't you?" Pigeris interrupted.

In that moment, Xie Pangbo felt his heart skip a beat. He opened his mouth but couldn't form words.

Instead, Pigeris smiled. "I've heard that Soricles is a miser, someone who even hesitates over buying a single fish. You managed to persuade him to part with his entire life's savings to buy pottery. This speaks volumes about your abilities. Leaving you to sell goods in the market would be a waste. Would you be willing to work for me?"

I don't want to be too involved with them... Xie Pangbo thought inwardly. But somehow, his mouth betrayed his thoughts, asking, "What would I need to do?"

"You'll serve as my assistant, representing our army in negotiations with foreign merchants at the port. Your goal will be to strike trade deals—selling our goods at the highest possible price and acquiring the resources we need at the lowest price," Pigeris explained earnestly.

After the last military meeting, through Volenus, he had finally selected five subordinates who were proficient in writing and calculations. However, while working with them, he found they lacked the charisma or tact needed to excel in merchant negotiations. This prompted him to look toward those new additions selling goods in the market.

"If you perform well, I'll petition Leader Maximus to officially integrate you into my team, where you'll exclusively manage matters related to trade and commerce."

Xie Pangbo left the office feeling dispirited. Faced with Pigeris, a Free Italy leader, his ingrained habit of obeying superiors had prevented him from refusing outright, but unease still lingered in his heart.

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"Master, we've arrived at Sarabia Port!"

"Sail straight in!" Tegcharles, standing at the bow, decisively commanded the captain without hesitation.

Thus, their merchant ship surged forward, bypassing several others lingering outside the port. Tegcharles cast a quick glance at them, sneering inwardly: You've made it here and yet you're still hesitating!

The merchant ship passed through the wide-open water gate and entered the port.

Sarabia Port was spacious but sparsely populated, with few docked vessels. The pier appeared somewhat desolate.

Upon seeing this, Tegcharles felt a thrill of excitement.

Just then, a swift boat approached, its single mast flying a flag depicting a "man beating a wolf with a stick."

Tegcharles' confidence grew. After exchanging words with the crew aboard the approaching boat, he followed its lead and docked at an empty pier.