

Perish 136

Chapter 136: Struggle for Command_2

He thought for a moment and was about to speak when a stabbing pain came from his left foot — it was Hamilcar beside him who had stepped on it hard and shook his head at him with extreme seriousness.

Spartacus hesitated, and a brief silence fell in the room, followed by Cleonis breaking the silence.

"There was a slight conflict with Leader Maximus's group before, mainly my mistake! I was unfamiliar with the situation around Bari City and didn't know that it had already been conquered by Leader Maximus. As a result... here, I want to apologize to Leader Maximus." After Cleonis spoke, he stood up and bowed to Maximus.

Maximus quickly stood up too, and said apologetically, "I also made a mistake by not managing my men properly; they acted too impulsively. But this can be seen as a way for us to know each other through conflict. If you encounter any difficulties in the future, feel free to tell me. As long as I am able, I will do my best to help!"

"Thank you, Leader Maximus!" Cleonis expressed his gratitude and sat down, breathing a sigh of relief.

The previous conflict had led to the collapse of Cleonis's forces and damaged his prestige, creating resentment in his heart. However, Spartacus and Hamilcar had both come to speak with him about the matter, making him realize the importance these two leaders, who held sway over the rebel army, placed on Maximus. He also saw Attutmus closely following Maximus at the meeting, indicating Maximus's prominent position among the leaders. If Cleonis wanted to become a formal member of the Military Commander Conference of the rebel army in the future, he would need the recognition of the leaders. Furthermore, on the day of the battle with Maximus's troops, most of their soldiers were well-equipped and enviable... These various reasons convinced him to temporarily set aside his resentment and lower himself to build a good relationship with Maximus.

This action of Cleonis made Maximus regard him as a clever person who knew when to yield and when not to. After sitting down, he cast a friendly glance at him.

"Even though our ranks have expanded, we are all poor people resisting Rome and escaping oppression. Even if a small conflict arises between us, we can, like Leaders Maximus and Cleonis, quickly reach a reconciliation; it's not as severe as you think, Cross."

Hamilcar seized the moment and loudly said, "Moreover, Metapontum is not far from here, and if anything happens on this side, Spartacus can quickly return..."

Since everyone has agreed to Spartacus's suggestion of sending troops to Metapontum, as for who should lead this expedition, let's follow the usual practice and each propose suitable candidates, with the leader who gains the most support leading the forces."

Except for Cross, everyone unanimously agreed, and naturally, Spartacus won the vote again.

Cross's face was quite grim as he heavily knocked the pottery jar against the table, causing the porridge inside to spill out.

"My stomach feels uncomfortable; I need to relieve myself." Cross stormed out in a huff.

Spartacus's expression also changed, but he quickly restrained himself and asked in a gentle tone, "Does anyone else have any suggestions?"

Everyone's minds were still on the explosive scene just now, and they all shook their heads.

"Then let us discuss the matters related to dispatching the troops."

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Until the meeting concluded, Cross did not return.

Spartacus whispered with a bit of regret, "Hamilcar, actually, letting Cross lead the troops this time wouldn't have been a big deal——"

"Spartacus, you know Cross's character. He could upset Enomai, who has a good relationship with him. If we let him be the commander, wouldn't he abuse his power and offend other leaders——"

Hamilcar gravely reminded, "By that time, not only will we not be able to unite against the enemy, but we'll be at odds with each other, and it will be too late to regret!"

Spartacus was silent for a moment before sighing, "You're right, but this will make Cross resent us."

"Don't worry, Cross's hatred for the Romans is no less than ours," Hamilcar responded, then stood up and hurriedly walked out, calling out, "Maximus!"

Maximus, who was already in the courtyard, stopped and respectfully responded, "Teacher, do you need something?"

Hamilcar came up to him and straightforwardly said, "Although Metapontum City is small, it's not easy to attack. We need good siege weapons, and your army has a specialized engineering team that's much better at making siege engines than others. I hope you can deploy this engineering team to assist us in our attack. I know your army is not very large, so as long as this engineering team can come, we can allow you to send fewer soldiers."

"No problem, I'll call them over as soon as possible." Maximus replied readily.

Hamilcar seemed to have anticipated such an answer from Maximus; he didn't thank him and continued, "I heard that in Sarabia you have acquired a weapons workshop where you can make your own armaments. Do you know how many you can produce each month? Could you share some with us?"

You must know that in these two or three months, we've had an increase in soldiers, but very few weapons have been obtained. We have nearly cut down all the trees around Uriya, but some people don't even have handy wooden sticks..."

Maximus knew that Spartacus and Hamilcar had placed great importance on his managerial skills back in Campania, and they must be keeping a close eye on him after moving south. Nevertheless, his control over Sarabia City was quite strict, and even if Hamilcar knew something, he wouldn't be privy to all the details.

So, he responded with a half-truth, "I've been fortunate indeed to gain a weapons workshop in Sarabia City, but due to a lack of sufficient iron ore, we can currently produce only a little over a hundred shields, more than 200 short swords, and around 400 long spears. To conserve materials and time to manufacture more weapons, we have not made any armor. Since you need them urgently, I can... allocate half of the weapons to you each month."

"Thank you so much!" Hamilcar finally expressed his gratitude.

"Teacher, going by what Spartacus said, there is no need for thanks amongst allies within our rebel army; we should unite and help each other to defeat the Romans!" Maximus replied seriously.

"Since you put it that way, I have another request for you." Hamilcar seized the opportunity and continued, "I heard that your port in Sarabia trades with those merchants, could you do as you did in Pompeii and let your men use the money and resources we've gathered here to trade with those merchants for enough grain?"

"I've heard you have plenty of merchants here as well!" Maximus was somewhat surprised; Spartacus kept a close watch on him, and he did the same over here. It could be said that Spartacus's willingness to trade with merchants was influenced by him.

"There are indeed some merchants here," Hamilcar said with a wry smile and explained helplessly, "but no merchant is willing to transport food here to sell. The population here is too large, and the area they live in is too extensive to manage completely. Not only do the merchants who sell grain get robbed, but those selling other items do as well. Fewer and fewer merchants are coming here now!"

"It's no problem, leave it to us, it will be just like back in Pompeii." Maximus replied decisively.

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Maximus took his leave, and Hamilcar stood in place, staring dazedly at his departing figure.

Seeing this, Spartacus stepped forward and asked, "Did Maximus refuse our request?"

"No, he agreed to everything. I just feel a bit emotional. A year ago, Maximus was still a young man who needed our protection. Now, we have to rely on his help. He's grown so fast!"

"That's a good thing. The stronger our comrades are, the better our chances of defeating the Romans," Spartacus said with relief, but soon furrowed his brow. "What worries me now is Cross..."

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By the time Maximus returned to his temporary camp under the escort of the Spartacus Guard, it was already evening. Campfires were blazing in every camp, reflecting the countless stars hanging in the night sky.

During the meeting, the soldiers had already pitched tents, organized the camp, and even prepared dinner, awaiting his return.

Having already eaten, Maximus apologized sincerely to his subordinates and urged them to eat quickly.

A guard entered to report, "Leader, someone named Pequot wishes to see you."

Maximus's heart stirred. "Let him in."

Pequot lifted the curtain and entered the tent. Seeing the person he sought sitting inside, with two half-grown children bent over a wooden table eating their meal, he called out with a complicated expression, "Leader Maximus."

Maximus broke into a smile, gesturing toward a wooden chair nearby, and warmly said, "Pequot, long time no see! Please, take a seat. Have you eaten yet? I'll have someone prepare something for you."

"No need, I've already eaten," Pequot quickly waved his hand and solemnly said, "I just heard from Hamilcar that your meeting has concluded, so I hurried over. I have something important to discuss with you."

"Oh." Maximus reined in his smile but spoke with the same warmth, "No rush. Sit down first, and we'll take our time."

Pequot slowly sat down, but he didn't start speaking immediately. Instead, his gaze drifted toward the two half-grown boys, hesitating slightly.

Understanding his concern, Maximus said, "Akegu, Casius, you two head over to Oluus's tent to eat."

"Yes, Leader." The two quickly left.

Only then did Pequot begin to speak. "I just asked Hamilcar, and the Military Commander Conference has decided that this army will not appoint a new leader. Instead, according to everyone's wishes, we'll merge into other armies..."

Pequot fixed his eyes on Maximus, then emphasized, "I want to lead my brothers and join your army!"

Maximus, who had expected this, remained calm. He asked, "Why choose me? Spartacus, Cross, and even Antonix all have armies stronger than mine and better relationships with your group. Why not join them?"

Pequot hesitated for a moment before candidly explaining, "Leader Maximus, let me be honest with you. Cross is definitely out of the question for us. Everyone believes it's his fault that Leader Enomai died in battle, leaving us in this state. Many of my brothers see him as an enemy.

As for Spartacus and Antonix... it's true that quite a few of my brothers wanted to join them, but in the end, I convinced them to turn to you."

"Oh? Why?" Maximus asked with interest.

"I asked my brothers a few questions," Pequot said emotionally. "Among all the armies of Free Italy, which one is the most well-provisioned, where hunger and shortages are not a concern? Which army has the fewest casualties, yet provides excellent care for its soldiers? Which army, despite fighting fewer battles, has achieved astonishing victories multiple times? The answer is your army.

Under Leader Enomai's command, we've had enough of the hardships of lacking food and clothing, and of suffering casualties without any gain. That's why we all decided to join your ranks!"

"But my army has strict decrees, and the demands on soldiers are the most rigorous. Anyone violating these decrees will face severe punishment, even death! To my knowledge, the army under Enomai's leadership had the most lenient rules. Can you adapt to this? If anyone breaks the rules, will they willingly accept the punishment? Have you made this clear to your men?" Maximus sternly reminded him.

"During the time in Campania, your army's discipline was already well-known. Of course I'm aware of this, and I've told my brothers about it. Most of them said they can accept it. Compared to starvation and death, these are small matters," Pequot replied solemnly.

"How many people want to join?" Maximus asked again.

"Nearly 2,000, most of them my men."

"What are their backgrounds and origins?"

"More than half are Illyrian and Epirus slaves and sailors. Some are gladiators, predominantly Germanic, and another group consists of impoverished mountain peasants from Lucania," Pequot replied.

The soldiers under Pequot's command were mostly Illyrians and people from Epirus, which wasn't surprising, given that Pequot himself was Illyrian. In fact, the leaders and captains of the rebel army often had such preferences—they liked recruiting their own kin as subordinates, finding it easier to command them. This, in turn, aligned well with Maximus's needs.

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But he did not immediately agree. Instead, he asked, "Two thousand men is no small number. If you join my forces, they will need to be reorganized and restructured. Can you accept that?"

Faced with Maximus's piercing gaze, Pequot hesitated.

Maximus noticed his hesitation and continued, "Pequot, you are a capable person, but you're not yet familiar with my army. So once you join, you'll first serve as a Great Captain. Once you've settled in and made your mark, I'll give you command of more soldiers. Even Fesaros rose to become a Legion Commander—you won't be any less than him."

Pequot was somewhat shocked. "Fesaros became a Legion Commander?! Commanding six thousand men?!"

"Exactly! You must have heard about the recent conflict we had with Cleonis. It was Fesaros leading his legion that repelled their forces."

The astonishment on Pequot's face quickly faded, and he replied resolutely, "Since my brothers and I have already decided to join your forces, accepting reorganization and restructuring is only to be expected."

Maximus smiled and extended his right hand. "Welcome to the team!"

Pequot also extended his right hand and gripped his firmly.

Pequot walked out of the camp but couldn't help pausing to look back at the tent glowing faintly with candlelight, his emotions complex. He had known Maximus for several years. Although Maximus had half Illyrian blood flowing in his veins, Pequot never felt close to him and even looked down on him.

During their escape from Capua, he noticed Maximus wanted to recruit him as an ally, but he dismissed the idea with scorn.

However, since then, this young man, whom he had once despised, seemed to transform completely, achieving miracles time and again and rising rapidly to become one of the key leaders of the rebel army. Now, his forces had grown into the wealthiest and most organized unit within the movement!

Pequot had always prided himself on having sharp instincts. As a pirate, he was adept at distinguishing between captives: who was wealthy enough to extort, who had significant status and should be handled

carefully, who was lying and needed a lesson... Yet, with Maximus, he admitted he had misjudged. Seeing this young man again now filled him with a sense of pressure.

Pequot was a pragmatic man. With Maximus's current strength far surpassing his own and seeming to hold great potential, joining his forces and becoming his subordinate—just like Fesaros, whom he had once looked out for—would not only dramatically improve his circumstances but could also brighten his future!

Thinking this, Pequot strode briskly toward his own camp.

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"Boss, there's no sign of Roman warships around the port!" shouted a sailor atop the mast, scanning the horizon ahead.

"Keep your eyes wide open and watch closely! Diocles, lower the sails and have the men start rowing. We'll follow Karsipengpas's ship into port," Onomabatis commanded, his expression still tense as he kept his gaze fixed on the swift ship ahead. If anything seemed off, he'd immediately order the vessel to turn around and flee.

The port's water gate had already opened, and Karsipengpas's ship sailed through. Onomabatis stared at the towering watchtowers along the piers for a moment before signaling his own ship to follow.

Inside the port, only a few vessels were moored, and the people onshore appeared scarce, giving off a desolate impression.

Karsipengpas's ship had docked at the pier, and Onomabatis directed his vessel to a nearby berth.

When the ship reached the shore, several laborers came forward, catching the ropes thrown by the sailors and tying them to the wooden posts of the dock.

"Do you have cargo to unload?" one laborer asked.

"No."

Hearing this, the laborers didn't appear disheartened. Instead, their expressions relaxed as they casually walked away.

Onomabatis observed this, puzzled, and turned to his crew. "Disembark."

"Boss, should we bring weapons?"

"Hmm... yes, bring them."

A dozen thinly clad sailors donned coarse linen garments, grabbing swords and long spears from the ship before jumping ashore one after another. Onomabatis strapped on a tattered leather armor, a short sword hanging from his waist, and led the group.

They resembled a gang of marauding robbers.

The laborers neither shouted in alarm nor showed fear, merely watching from afar.

Onomabatis led his men to another dock. Karsipengpas stood on the jetty, supervising the laborers unloading cargo from the ship. At the sight of their armed appearance, he immediately rebuked, "Onomabatis, what do you think you're doing?! Put those weapons back on your ship!"

"Brother, I thought—" Onomabatis attempted to explain but was cut off by Karsipengpas's impatient retort. "I've told you multiple times already: This place welcomes us Illyrian Pirates. There's no danger here. Why won't you trust me?"

"Brother, I trust you! Of course, I trust you!" Onomabatis replied while unstrapping his short sword and handing it to a nearby crew member. "Put your weapons back on the ship. Hurry up!"

The reluctant sailors started marching back toward the vessel.

At that moment, a man in a white robe standing by the ship's edge spoke up: "Karsipengpas, this time you've only brought 14 baskets of iron ore, which is six baskets less than last time."

Karsipengpas hastily explained, "Of course I'd like to carry more iron ore to earn extra money, but you're aware that Roman warships have increased patrols outside this port recently. To ensure we can escape quickly if we encounter them, I've carried less cargo to lighten the ship's load."

The man, understanding the port's current situation, nodded in agreement. "As usual, follow me to the warehouse. Once I've inspected the quality and weighed this batch of iron ore, I'll settle accounts with you."

"Alright." Karsipengpas grinned and turned to his crew. "Go reserve rooms at the port's inn and order some good food. When I return, we'll have a proper celebration."

One sailor interjected, "Boss, we'd like to browse the market first."

"Go ahead, but don't stir up trouble."

"Who'd dare? We don't want to end up like that fool Nikaradas and get locked up." A sailor's remark triggered a wave of laughter.

Karsipengpas remembered something and told Onomabatis, "Have your men go with them. You come to the warehouse with me, and afterward, I'll take you to meet the overseer here."

Since they had already arrived, Onomabatis set aside his suspicions and replied straightforwardly, "Alright, brother, I'll do as you say."

Karsipengpas issued some instructions to his crew and grabbed a handful of silver coins from his pouch to distribute among them.

The sailors cheered as they left the dock, accompanied by Onomabatis's men, and headed toward the port district.

Karsipengpas led Onomabatis, along with the laborers unloading cargo, toward the port's central warehouse.

On the way, Onomabatis couldn't contain his curiosity and asked, "Brother, didn't you say that after they captured this city, they barred all but a few authorized ships from entering or leaving the town? So how is there still an open market here?"

"They haven't reopened the market just for us. The main reason is to serve the town's residents—the original Sarabians who lived here."

"What?" Onomabatis was taken aback.

"Strange, isn't it? When I first came, I found it odd too. The Free Italians haven't looted all the Sarabians' possessions and turned them into slaves for sale. Instead, they confined them within the city and made them purchase goods at the market with their own money. If they don't have money, they simply have to work obediently for the Free Italians—"

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Karsipengpas pointed to the laborers ahead who were straining to transport the iron ore and said in a low voice, "See, these poor fellows used to be the high and mighty Sarabians, always shouting to kill us."

Onomabatis suddenly realized and said, "No wonder these guys are so clumsy at handling goods, so that's why!"

"There are many good things in that marketplace, all looted from the homes of wealthy Sarabians, but they're sold very cheaply. The new clothes your sister-in-law is wearing and that beautiful set of drinkware we used last time we drank were bought here. Once we're done with our tasks, you can browse the marketplace; maybe you'll find something nice you want."

Though what Karsipengpas said intrigued Onomabatis, he cautiously replied, "If things go smoothly, I'll consider it."

"Trust me, it will go smoothly!" Karsipengpas responded confidently.

Once inside the warehouse, Onomabatis saw heaps of grain stacked on one side and countless bundles of wool on the other, as several elegantly dressed merchants were counting and directing laborers to carry them.

"Are those Sicilian merchants?" asked Karsipengpas.

"Yes." The accountant from earlier at the dock didn't hide anything and sighed, "This time they came to sell grain and buy wool, but they encountered a Roman patrol ship on their way, almost got caught, scared them terribly. Not sure if they'll come again next time."

"Right now, Roman warships are acting tyrannically in the Adriatic Sea, it's really infuriating! Besides us, no one dares provoke them!" Karsipengpas took the opportunity to promote himself.

"Indeed, we'll have to rely on you more in the future." The clerk echoed.

The inspection and weighing of the iron ore were completed quickly. The clerk looked at Karsipengpas and said seriously, "The iron ore you brought this time totals 5530 pounds. According to the price we previously agreed on, each pound is 10 Asi, which totals to... hmm, you should be paid 55300 Asi, right?"

Karsipengpas counted on his fingers for a good while but still wasn't too clear. However, he answered without hesitation, "That's correct!"

Beside him, Onomabatis stood with his mouth slightly open, dazed.

He remembered clearly that Karsipengpas had pretended to be a merchant ship for his trip, entered the port outside the city on the Istria Peninsula, spent less than 30,000 Asi, and in just over a day brought a ship of Noric iron ore here, doubling the money. This money was too easy to earn!

"Then come with me, let's go see the overseer of Alakosia."

"Onomabatis, come with me to meet our fellow countryman." Karsipengpas called Onomabatis, and together with the accountant, the three left the warehouse and entered an adjacent building, heading up to the second floor.

While walking along the hallway, Onomabatis took the chance to glance outside and happened to see several hundred soldiers in armor, wielding weapons, doing formation training in the open space not far behind the warehouse. He trembled a bit inside: No wonder the people at the port weren't afraid of them; they had a military presence nearby for protection. Luckily, Karsipengpas had warned them to put back their weapons, otherwise, if they misunderstood... that would have been—"

Onomabatis was a bit scared, but a tug from Karsipengpas brought him back to the present: "Why are you dazing off, hurry up and get inside!"

Onomabatis stumbled into the room, where sat a man in his thirties, with blue eyes, gray hair, a flat forehead, robust body — a typical Illyrian Mountain People appearance.

Seeing the three of them enter, his face immediately broke into a smile as he stood up to greet them, complaining, "Karsipengpas, it's been so many days without seeing you, I thought you were caught by the Romans."

"Alakosia, shut your crow's mouth, I only left 5 days ago, how's that many days? Looks like your memory isn't that great anymore." The two bantered while shaking hands tightly.

Onomabatis was a bit dazed. He remembered Karsipengpas saying he met this fellow countryman from the Free Italy army on his first trip to Sarabia Port two months ago, but the two seemed like close friends at the moment.

"Let me introduce you, this is my little brother Onomabatis, also an Illyrian, used to work under me for a while, now he's saved for a ship, becoming a captain and working on his own." Karsipengpas pointed to Onomabatis and introduced.

Onomabatis immediately leaned slightly and said, "Hello, Alakosia, I've heard Karsipengpas speak of you many times, meeting you today is my honor!"

"We're all compatriots, no need to be so formal." Alakosia said warmly, "We're very welcome for you to come here!" After saying this, he shook hands with Onomabatis and invited both to sit.

The accountant whispered a few words to Alakosia and handed him a wax tablet with the quantity and total price of iron ore loaded on Karsipengpas's ship.

After reading it, Alakosia picked up an iron pen and signed his name.

The accountant took back the wax tablet and walked out quickly.

"There are rules for taking money here. I am specifically responsible for trade on our Illyrian side. After I sign the trade slip to confirm, my superior, Commerce Officer Pigeris, also needs to sign, then you can go to the city's Financial Officer to get the money, so you two will need to wait here a while longer." Alakosia explained.

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This was mainly said for Onomabatis alone to hear. Karsipengpas had been here many times and was well aware, so he joked, "Isn't it just withdrawing some money? You guys make it more complicated than the Romans."

Alakosia replied seriously, "I used to find it troublesome too, but Leader Maximus once said, 'Although we are just a hastily assembled force against the Romans, we must have grand goals. If everyone can follow the rules and fulfill their responsibilities, then the whole team will be orderly and full of vitality. If we can manage one port, one town well, then in the future, we might be able to manage an entire region, a kingdom...'"

Originally, in the eyes of Karsipengpas and Onomabatis, the Free Italy team wasn't much different from them, the Illyrian Pirates, just larger in number, bolder, and stronger.

But Alakosia's words gave the two a great shock. They exchanged astonished glances, each thinking: Free Italy is quite ambitious!

Seeing them a bit lost, Alakosia changed the topic, "Onomabatis, did you also intend to help us transport iron ore on this trip to Sarabia?"

"Yes! Yes!" Onomabatis nodded repeatedly. Karsipengpas made quite a fortune on just one sea trip, how could he not be tempted?

Alakosia nodded and slowly said, "Let me first brief you on the situation. There is a weapons workshop in this city that can manufacture gear for our soldiers but lacks iron ore. Here, the iron ore is purchased from the Noric people.

Fortunately, on the day the city fell, a Noric merchant happened to be trapped in the port. We found him and negotiated with him. At first, he refused because they had an agreement with the Romans, and we are enemies of Rome. Later, we offered to buy iron ore at five Asi per pound, and he finally agreed to go back and discuss it because the Romans purchase Noric iron ore at one Asi per pound—"

"Greedy Noric," Onomabatis muttered.

"No, it should be the Romans who are greedy. The quality of the Noric iron ore is quite good, and the Romans offer too low a price," said Karsipengpas, who had dealings with Noric merchants recently and understood this well.

"In the end, the Noric agreed to sell us a small amount of iron ore at this price, but since they feared being intercepted by Roman warships, they do not handle transportation. Instead, we have to go to the port on the Istria Peninsula, to their trading post to purchase and handle the transportation ourselves.

But we have no ship! Everyone was troubled by this, fortunately, Karsipengpas brought his ship to our port at this time—" Alakosia looked at the pirate captain gratefully and said, "Willing to risk transporting iron ore for us, solving this big problem for us!"

"Alakosia, you overpraise me." Karsipengpas laughed heartily and candidly said, "I heard you had taken Sarabia and wanted to sneak in and see if there was anything to gain, but unexpectedly got discovered. At that moment, I thought I was done for. But I didn't expect you to be very courteous to me and my brothers, and Leader Maximus even personally hosted a banquet for me...

We Illyrian Pirates are treated as outcasts, hunted in any Italian port town we go to, never have we enjoyed such hospitality, how could I refuse?" The more Karsipengpas spoke, the more excited he became.

"Leader Maximus is one of us Illyrians too. I once heard him say that when he sees you, he feels like he's seeing his own family!" Alakosia looked at Onomabatis emotionally and said, "Although you rely on the Adriatic Sea for your livelihood, are familiar with sea conditions, and your ships are nimble, making it difficult for Roman warships to intercept you, Leader Maximus believes that you are taking great risks to work for us, so he insisted on paying you double the price, despite the financial officer's objection."

At this moment, Onomabatis was also greatly moved.

"Onomabatis, you were recommended by Karsipengpas. I believe you are fully capable of helping us transport the iron ore," said Alakosia, handing him a square cloth. "This is the receipt for purchasing iron ore from the Noric. Take it to the Noricum Trading Post on the Istria Peninsula, show it to them, and you can buy iron ore at 5 Asi per pound... By the way, do you have enough money? If not, we can lend you some first."

"Thank you for your kindness. I have enough money to buy a dozen baskets of iron ore." Having come with Karsipengpas, Onomabatis was naturally prepared.

He unfolded the square cloth in his hand, which bore an indigo painting of a slave holding a stick striking a wolf—vividly depicted, lifelike. Below was a line of letters, but unfortunately, Onomabatis was illiterate, unable to recognize what was written.

He had never seen such a realistic painting before, and his eyes were deeply attracted to it.

"This was drawn by Leader Maximus himself. Isn't it like the real thing? I think no one could forge it!" Alakosia proudly said.

Onomabatis couldn't help but nod.

Karsipengpas cleared his throat and spoke, "Alakosia, can I ask for your help on something?"

Seeing him speak so courteously all of a sudden, Alakosia quickly straightened his expression and responded, "Please go ahead."

"My tribe lives in the mountains and mainly relies on sheep farming. For the past two or three years, huge snowfalls have been occurring in winter, exceptionally cold weather, causing a large number of cattle and sheep to die in the tribe, leaving the people short of food, suffering from cold and hunger... Not just my tribe, but other tribes in the mountains face the same issue. I've been using my earned money to buy food for them, but now food purchases are becoming more and more difficult..."

Karsipengpas, with an expectant face and a pleading tone, softly said, "I see you have a lot of food here. Can you sell me some so that the mountain tribesmen can get through these tough times?"

Alakosia hadn't expected such a request, and he frowned immediately, but he quickly replied seriously, "Fellow countrymen facing disaster, I want to help too. I'm just not authorized to sell food, but I can ask my superior Pigeris for you. Uh, you two sit here for a while. I'll go find Pigeris."

With that said, he stood up and walked out.

Karsipengpas didn't expect his immediate action, catching him off guard.

"Big brother, do you really intend to buy food from here?" Onomabatis curiously asked.

"We have to try." Sighed Karsipengpas, "This year, the food from those port towns we frequent is either too expensive or not for sale. And you just saw they have a lot of food in their warehouses, perhaps we can buy it at a cheaper price."

With that said, Onomabatis also perked up because buying food for the tribe was not something only Karsipengpas's pirate crew was doing.

The Illyrian region is mountainous with little arable land, the soil is poor, plus after the Romans destroyed the Illyria Kingdom a century ago and incorporated its coastal lands into Rome's control, they have ignored the livelihood of its people. Illyrians have had a hard life, becoming pirates to plunder merchant ships, earn money, buy food, and sustain their families and tribes became their best option.