

Perish 261

Chapter 261: The New Enemy of the Pannonian Tribe Alliance

As soon as he entered the room, a loud voice called out, "Ah! Our great warrior finally joins us! I thought this time the tribal meeting might be missing you!"

The speaker was the Brochi Leader, Bricks, a portly elder whose tone carried a hint of mockery. His relationship with Andres was rather delicate.

During Andres's father's leadership, the two major tribes maintained a strong rapport. However, since Andres assumed power, his aggressive expansionist policies had nearly doubled the territory of the Segestica Tribe within just a few years. His growing influence not only enhanced his prestige within his tribe but also began to overshadow the neighboring Brochi.

Andres had earned fame during prior wars against the Skodisqi people, and his continued victories now made him widely admired by young Pannonian warriors. By contrast, the younger generation of the Brochi Tribe grew increasingly disillusioned with their leader, whose life revolved around feasting and leisure, achieving nothing significant for years. In their disappointment, some Noble children even defected to Andres's side.

Reportedly, Bricks's invasion of the southern Aldeans was an attempt to restore his standing among his tribesmen.

Given their geographical proximity, Bricks had recently heard rumors of a setback for the Segestica Army in the south, and he now seemed to relish these tidbits of misfortune.

Andres, uninterested in sparring verbally, cut straight to the point, "Who called this meeting? What's under discussion?"

"This meeting was convened at the request of Antosy. I already sent a messenger to invite you, but you were personally leading troops out of the Main Camp. To avoid disrupting your campaign, we didn't insist on notifying you. Unexpectedly, you still managed to make it here."

The speaker was Temagis, the slender and refined Mazi Tribe Leader seated at the host's position. His distinctive demeanor set him apart from the other chiefs, not because the tribal alliance meetings

always took place in the Mazi Tribe, but simply due to the annual rotation among the seven chief tribes, with this year being Temagis's turn.

Temagis then added, "This meeting mainly concerns the Skodisqi people in the east. Sit down first, and let Antosy explain everything in detail."

Andres held back his impatience and took his designated seat.

Nearby, the Desitia Tribe Leader, Temagis, leaned in and softly asked with concern, "How did the campaign go this time?"

Temagis, a robust middle-aged man, had a good rapport with Andres. The northern Desitia Tribe had shared borders with the Segestica Tribe, and in the past, Temagis sought more horses to establish cavalry against the Boyi people, prompting Andres to gather steeds from his own tribe as aid.

At that moment, a shadow crossed Andres's face, and he was about to reply when the Andizeti Tribe Leader, Antosy, seated opposite, coughed heavily, drawing everyone's attention. Then, he spoke loudly, "Ladies and gentlemen, over ten years ago, our tribes rose in unison against the oppression of the Skodisqi people, ultimately reclaiming our ancestral lands.

This is something all tribes should celebrate, though there remains one regret: the Skodisqi tribe was never entirely eradicated. Their remnants retreated eastward, settling in the confluence of the Sava and Danube Rivers as their last bastion, where they resist tenaciously.

And yet! Because of consecutive victories, we have grown complacent, our fighting spirit waning. As a result, for years, we've failed to completely eliminate them. And now..." Antosy scanned the room, his words tinged with resentment, "This was supposed to be a battle for all our peoples, yet it has been left entirely to my Andizeti Tribe—"

"Antosy, your words are unfair! How can you say it's 'entirely your tribe's concern'? Haven't we all been providing you with resources and soldiers every year?" snapped Disone Tribe Leader, Demikas. The white-haired and bearded elder, exuding authority, appeared visibly displeased. As the northern neighbor of the Andizeti Tribe, his tribe had supplied the most in support over the years.

"You've indeed provided considerable support to my tribe each year, but—" Antosy, the haggard chief, did not waver in his grievances despite Demikas's interruption, "It's only **some** support. Yet my tribe's warriors fight endlessly year after year! My tribesmen's harvested grain is consumed more than half by war every single year! And for ten years, my tribe has borne this burden alone! None of you have tasted such agony!—"

The Perustai Tribe Leader, Pagiras, instantly retorted in displeasure, "Antosy, spare us these pointless complaints! The Skodisqi people are indeed our common enemy, but they've been severely weakened under our collective assault. They pose no real threat to us anymore.

Since your tribe's lands border theirs, it's naturally your responsibility to finish them off! If you want me to take charge of attacking them, sure—but I'd need to station twenty to thirty thousand warriors permanently in your Andizeti territory. Would you agree to that?

Besides, the Skodisqi aren't our only adversaries nowadays; the Boyi people to the north are our real threat. Yet have I, Demikas, or Temagis ever complained about it in the tribal alliance meetings?—"

"You've never complained?!" Antosy exclaimed in fury, "Who was it that said the Boyi cavalry was formidable and hoped we could supply more horses so you could form cavalry units to fight against them?"

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Pagiras, Temagis, and Demikas all changed their expressions simultaneously.

Pagiras was the first to shout angrily, "Antosy, you—"

"Enough, everyone!" Maitilis, the meeting host, knocked on the table and said sternly, "This is a sacred site where the tribes unite and assist one another, not a filthy place for arguments and whining. Don't forget the oath you all swore together here!"

The meeting hall immediately fell silent.

Maitilis turned to Antosy and said seriously, "This meeting was convened at your request. I hope you state your demands properly and don't treat the tribal alliance meeting like a child's game, just airing grievances. Otherwise, I will exercise my authority as host and revoke your right to speak further."

Antosy felt a chill in his heart, quickly calmed his emotions, and said, "Rest assured, Maitilis, I will abide by the meeting's rules. Everyone, do you remember what I said here years ago? The reason we've never been able to annihilate the Skodisqi people is because they have the support of the Dacians! And this year, the Dacians have shifted from covert support to direct involvement!

While our tribe was battling the Skodisqi people, large numbers of Dacian soldiers clad in scale armor and wielding hook scythes suddenly appeared on the battlefield. As a result, my army, completely unprepared, suffered a devastating defeat. Following their victory, the Skodisqi people, colluding with the Dacians, rapidly advanced westward and seized considerable territory. They've now begun to besiege Ekvedisi—"

"Ekvedisi?! You mean all the territory you've gained through years of attacks on the Skodisqi people is lost?!" Demikas asked in shock.

"Yes, all lost! The Dacians' sneak attack cost me many courageous warriors!" Antosy said with grief and indignation. "Were it not for Ekvedisi's role as our forward base in attacking the Skodisqi people for years, as well as the defensive structures I've meticulously built there while using it as a logistical hub, we wouldn't have been able to temporarily resist the joint assault of the Skodisqi and Dacians. That's why I've urgently come here for reinforcements, hoping you will send enough troops to help me repel them and reclaim our lost lands!"

"What Antosy says is of utmost importance! The survival of the Andizeti Tribe concerns the life and death of all the Pannonians! We must agree! We must offer the strongest support!" Though Pagiras had quarreled fiercely with Antosy earlier, he was the first to make a positive statement.

"Pagiras is right; I also support sending troops to aid the Andizeti Tribe! Regardless of whether Antosy's request is ultimately approved, I, Ditione, will dispatch at least ten thousand reinforcements!" Demikas followed.

"I, Brochi, will send at least ten thousand warriors to support the Andizeti as well!" Even Bricks, known for his preference for leisure and aversion to war, quickly voiced his commitment.

The overwhelming support wasn't solely due to their shared hardships and battles, or because of their united oath sworn on the Holy Land. More crucially, they could never allow the defeated Skodisqi people to revive, nor to let the nightmare of the past recur!

It must be remembered that aside from the Andizeti, the other six major tribes were home to many Skodisqi slaves. Every Pannonian leader and ordinary tribesman aware of the Skodisqi Tribe's existence to the east would swear to the Divine to keep this secret from the slaves!

Over the past decade, Skodisqi slaves in other major Pannonian tribes have lived under a web of lies woven by the Pannonians, believing their tribes had long been destroyed. Disheartened and resigned, they had accepted their fate.

Even the rare few slaves who accidentally uncovered this secret were unable to share it with their fellow kin due to the Pannonians' rigorous watch. Ultimately, they were discovered and executed...

But if the Skodisqi reinforcements broke Antosy's blockade and even continued advancing west, the slaves would eventually learn their tribe still existed. Even if they didn't seize the chance to start a rebellion, could the Pannonians continue to trust and control them? Abandoning them wasn't feasible either, as many regions heavily depended on slave labor. If the Pannonians abandoned them, their lives would immediately fall into chaos. Transitioning would take time, but the threat of the Skodisqi loomed right before their eyes...

All the Great Chiefs expressed unanimous agreement without hesitation, including Andres, though he had his reservations. "I also support Antosy's request. However, I cannot send troops or provide resources, as my Segestica Tribe has been weakened by a formidable enemy, suffering repeated defeats. I came here seeking aid myself."

"Ah, what enemy?! They've actually managed to defeat you!" Temagis asked in great surprise.

Andres sighed, his face darkening as he replied, "It's like this—"

"Andres, please hold on," Maitilis interrupted, reminding him, "We're currently discussing Antosy's request. We'll address your matter later."

Though displeased, Andres softened his tone since he needed help. "Alright," he responded.

Maitilis continued, "Antosy, everyone agrees to send reinforcements to assist you. Now I need to know how many enemies are attacking your territory."

"The Skodisqi people have fewer than ten thousand, while the Dacians have over ten thousand," Antosy answered.

Bricks breathed a sigh of relief, jesting, "So there are just over twenty thousand people. Antosy, your demeanor earlier scared me; I thought the Skodisqi people had joined forces with the Dacians and were leading a massive army to counterattack us!"

"I already said that I didn't anticipate the Dacians' involvement. Their ambush caused significant casualties among my warriors, leaving me without the necessary forces to repel their advance." Antosy raised his voice anxiously, "The real issue isn't the enemy's numbers, but the fact that the Dacians have sent troops! In the past, the Dacians merely supported the Skodisqi people from behind. We've sent envoys on multiple occasions to question them, yet they've evaded admitting any wrongdoing, clearly avoiding direct conflict with us. But now they're openly deploying soldiers. This demands our utmost attention!"

Maitilis asked gravely, "What do you think is the reason for this?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Antosy gritted his teeth, "but there must be a reason for the Dacians' sudden change in approach. I'll send people to investigate. For now, the urgent task is not only to drive the enemy away but also to inflict heavy losses on them. Only then can we demonstrate our strength and shatter any ambitions or fantasies the Dacians might have!"

"Antosy is right!" Pagiras agreed enthusiastically. "The black panther must bare its claws to deter others from stealing its prey. Let's unite our tribes and dispatch fifty to sixty thousand troops in one go, delivering a severe blow to the Dacians and exterminating the Skodisqi people at the same time. Otherwise, they'll remain a constant threat!"

"Agreed!"

"Agreed."

"Agreed!"

Several Great Chiefs expressed their agreement. When it was Demikas's turn, he said solemnly, "I also agree. Additionally, I'd like to mention something about the Dacians. Everyone knows they occupy vast territories across the river—referring to the Danube River—with numerous tribes and larger landholdings than ours. However, they lack unity, and infighting is common among them. This makes it difficult for them to threaten other races on the Great River Plain. Instead, it's the Boyi people and Taurisci who often attack the Dacian tribes, seizing considerable land...

Yet, last year, I heard rumors about a king emerging among the Dacian tribes. This king came from the East, seeking to unite the Dacians and end their internal conflicts... As it's a mere rumor, I'm not sure of the current situation.

Chapter 263: Andres' Reinforcements

Demikas paused for a moment and then said emphatically, "But last month, I heard that one of the Taurisci tribes across the river was fiercely attacked by the Dacians. Although there have been numerous skirmishes between the Taurisci and the Dacians over the years, none of them were on such a massive scale as this one.

Now, the Dacian army has appeared in the territory of the Andizeti Tribe... I believe there must be upheaval within the Dacians. It's likely related to rumors about the Dacian king!"

Demikas's words immediately drew everyone's attention. Maitilis said solemnly, "Demikas, your tribe is situated across the river from the Dacians. You must do everything you can to figure out what changes have taken place within the Dacians. This will directly affect the safety of our entire community!"

Demikas nodded solemnly, "I understand. I'll focus all my efforts on handling this matter as soon as I return!"

Maitilis looked around at the people. "Everyone, regardless of what changes may have occurred within the Dacians, the fact that they've declared war on the Andizeti Tribe means they are declaring war on all of Pannonia!

Antosy is right: we need to strike the Dacians hard, to make them realize our strength. Only then will they cease their greedy ambitions toward us. This time, we'd better send out a sufficient number of reinforcements!"

Chorus of agreement resounded once again, and the group began discussing the details of mobilizing troops. Only Andres abstained from participating.

He felt anxious internally but refused to show it, not wanting others to look down on him. Instead, he leaned back against the chair, closing his eyes as if to rest.

Gradually, the weariness from the long journey crept over him, and his consciousness began to drift. In the haze, he vaguely heard someone calling his name, but he didn't even bother to respond.

Suddenly, he was shoved hard, and then came the voice of Temagis: "Andres, wake up! They're about to discuss your issues now!"

Startled, Andres jerked up, shaking his head vigorously to clear his mind.

Then he heard Bricks laughing. "Andres can still manage to fall asleep now—it seems his business isn't all that urgent after all."

Infuriated, Andres was about to curse out Bricks, but Maitilis stopped him. "Andres, didn't you come here to seek aid as well? Quickly tell us what happened!"

Andres steadied himself and hurriedly recounted the ordeal his tribe had been facing over the past few days.

"Andres, did I hear you correctly? You're telling me you were utterly defeated by a mercenary force of fewer than ten thousand men and now barely have the strength left to defend your tribe's territory?" Temagis exclaimed, shocked.

"Indeed, I'm equally stunned. Andres is supposed to be one of the renowned warriors of the Pannonians!" Bricks chimed in, though the mocking curve of his lips betrayed his schadenfreude over Andres's plight.

"That can't have been an ordinary mercenary force!" Maitilis said grimly, his tone weighty. "Based on Antosy's account of the situation, this mercenary army sounds remarkably like the Roman Army!"

"Yes, like the Roman Army!" Demikas took over, speaking with lingering fear. "I still remember the battle over ten years ago between the Skodisqi people and the Roman Army. The Roman forces were also small in number then but formed dense battle arrays, like a thick wall. No matter how tens of thousands of Skodisqi attacked, they couldn't break through.

Once the Skodisqi warriors were exhausted from fighting, Roman cavalry suddenly emerged from the rear while their infantry launched a counterattack. The Skodisqi suffered a crushing defeat. If I hadn't fled quickly that day, I would have died on the battlefield along with everyone else..."

"But they might not necessarily be Romans. I've never heard of Romans serving as mercenaries. On the other hand, Greeks often take mercenary roles. They also tend to wear heavy armor, carry large shields, and form compact phalanxes..." Antosy suggested.

"Regardless of whether they are Romans or Greeks, they've already killed many warriors from the Segestica Tribe. This makes them enemies of our Pannonian Alliance, and we must assist Andres in wiping them out!" Temagis declared loudly.

"But why did they slaughter the warriors of the Segestica Tribe?" Pagiras asked bitterly. "Is it not because Andres kept encroaching on the territory of the Alde Tribe, provoking them to the point of desperation where they had to hire mercenaries? Several years ago, I warned against antagonizing the Illyrians in the south. We've always coexisted peacefully with them, but you wouldn't listen!"

The Dacians are enemies because they are determined to help us eliminate the Skodisqi people. The Boyi people oppose us because we occupied lands north of the Delaware River that the Skodisqi once held, which were originally disputed with the Boyi people.

We already face two formidable enemies, and now Andres has stirred up yet another one. If this continues, we'll be beset on all sides. Even if we are united, we may still succumb to constant warfare

and annihilation! By then, Andres, you—this so-called Pannonian hero—could very well become the traitor of our tribe!"

Andres's eyes immediately burned red. He stood up abruptly, about to retort angrily, but someone spoke ahead of him: "Pagiras, your words are overly harsh. Back then, Andres's declaration of war against the Aldeans was ultimately approved by the tribal alliance council. Furthermore, in the years that Segestica has fought the Illyrians, the tribe has indeed grown stronger.

Chapter 264: Andres's Reinforcements_2

"But no one would have expected the Aldeans to act out of desperation and lead the mercenaries here. Whether we regret it now or complain, the fact is that these mercenaries are not only here but also planning to settle down. If we don't take advantage of their current small numbers and send troops to eliminate them, more outsiders will likely come over the mountain in the future. By then, it will be a significant problem for us!"

The one speaking was Bricks, which surprised Andres.

Actually, there was nothing strange about it. Although Bricks held personal grievances against Andres, he had also benefited from the war against the Illyrians, aligning their interests. Moreover, the rebel army currently controlled the midstream banks of the Kupa River. However, instead of flowing directly into the Dawa River within the Segestica Territory downstream, the Kupa River detoured southward into Brochi's land, raising concerns for Bricks about a potential threat to his territory from this enemy force.

"Mercenaries only work for money," Demikas said sternly. "The Aldeans hired them to resist Andres' attacks and even reclaim their lost land, but they would never allow them to attack our various tribal territories. What you're saying is mere speculation. Even if we were to eliminate this group of enemies, we should at least wait until the situation with Antosy is resolved. Fighting on two fronts simultaneously is by no means a wise strategy!"

Maitilis, seeing Andres standing there with a grim expression, quickly interjected, "Alright, everyone has expressed their views. Let's vote on this matter."

"I agree," Temagis was the first to speak.

Bricks followed up, "I agree as well."

Then, Demikas and Pagiras both expressed their opposition.

Andres naturally supported his own proposal.

Antosy hesitated for a moment. Wary of impacting the aid from other tribes, he also voted against it.

That made the vote tied at 3:3.

"I support sending reinforcements," Maitilis' final declaration of support brought a sigh of relief to Andres.

"How many warriors do you need?" Maitilis asked and quickly added a reminder, "Since we also need to support Antosy, we can't send too many people to you."

"All I need is 25,000 reinforcements. I just hope they're not all ordinary tribesmen. I'll deploy 5,000 of my own warriors, making it a total of 30,000. We'll surely be able to destroy this enemy and rescue my people!" Although Andres came to ask for aid, his tone remained firm.

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The Murenica River flowed silently, as graceful as a demure maiden. The evening sun's golden glow draped over its surface like a shimmering veil, mesmerizing those resting by its banks with its beauty.

However, the river's tranquility was soon broken by countless soldiers plunging into its waters. Their frolicking and splashing imbued the river with a lively energy.

On the riverside near the inner camp of the temporary encampment, a group of women stood watching.

"Anfel, staring at your lover again?" A teasing voice came from behind. Anfel showed no trace of bashfulness from being exposed; instead, she retorted, "Isn't everyone looking at their lover?"

"You cheeky little thing. You've grown bolder," a slightly older woman walking up to Anfel scolded playfully.

The older woman was Minnie, a former vineyard slave back in Campania responsible for grape cultivation and harvesting. Now, she served as a group head chef in Maximus' rebellion army's Supply Camp.

A group head chef managed 20 to 30 members, overseeing 3 to 4 stoves and providing meals for a large battalion of soldiers. This system was conceived by Acronis, under Maximus' guidance, after much experimentation. Responsibilities were assigned individually to prevent slacking off among the ranks.

There were 30 such cooking groups in the rebellion army. Acronis further encouraged competition by having these groups evaluated monthly, recognizing the best-performing group with public praise and material rewards. This greatly boosted morale among the cooks and ensured the entire army was well-fed.

"Minnie, stop laughing at me. The only reason you're not standing here watching is that your lover isn't on that side but over there," Anfel teased, pointing toward the direction of the inner camp's large tent.

Minnie, unshaken, responded curiously, "How did you know?"

"One time, the head was chatting with someone, and I happened to overhear," Anfel answered casually.

"Acronis and his big mouth!" Minnie muttered in slight annoyance, though not truly upset. Those women who had joined the rebellion army early on shared deep bonds, forged through countless hardships.

"Lanlan, Volenus is old and seems so dull. How did you end up liking him?" The flames of Anfel's gossip burned brightly.

Minnie shot her a disapproving glance. "Volenus isn't dull! He can read and calculate. He handles the little things in the camp effortlessly. Don't be fooled by his age—he's always running around the camp and has plenty of energy!"

"So, Minnie, you like knowledgeable, capable men!" Anfel leaned closer and lowered her voice. "Then why not go for the leader?"

"You foolish girl, don't say such nonsense!" Minnie was startled, scolding in a hushed voice. "The leader is like a Divine to us. He's beyond our reach! Nexia has liked him for so long, and yet nothing has come of it."

"Nexia? The head nurse of the Medical Camp likes the leader?!" Anfel's eyes widened, nearly exclaiming in disbelief.

Minnie instinctively smacked her lightly, nervously glancing around before scolding, "What are you shouting about? I'm warning you, keep this to yourself! If Nexia finds out, what would happen if you ever need to visit the Medical Camp? She might just make things difficult for you!"

"No way," Anfel replied with skepticism. "It's just liking someone. Everyone here has someone they fancy. No one keeps secrets about it or makes a fuss when it's discovered..."

"Hmph, but Nexia's affection is for the leader! The leader's been tirelessly focused on leading us to safety out of Italy, building a new home, and making the army strong. No one dared disrupt him! Nexia could only quietly show her best side to him. A year has passed, and it seems she hasn't made any progress. If you expose this, imagine her frustration!"

"The Supply Camp wasn't even established yet when Nexia and I joined. I know her well. Don't underestimate her delicate appearance; underneath, she has a fierce tenacity! You'd better remember to keep this secret buried, got it?!"

"Got it, Minnie. Don't worry!" Anfel grumbled impatiently, "You call the head a big mouth, but I think you have a big mouth too."

"What did you say?!"

"Nothing."

Minnie couldn't do much about Anfel and switched to discussing serious matters. "The soldiers will be done bathing soon. Is dinner ready?"

"Everything's set. We've prepared five barrels of onion and lamb stew. A thousand flatbreads have been baked. The fava bean and wheat porridge is ready but will need the stew barrels to be emptied before we serve it. Each soldier also gets a small piece of smoked pork..."

Anfel lowered her voice. "During the day, I led my team to the mountains to gather some herbs and re-smoked the pork we got from the Segestica people's settlement. The aroma is much better now. The soldiers will love it, and our group's ratings will definitely receive this—" She proudly gave a thumbs-up.

"Well done!" Minnie praised her generously, feeling a bit sentimental.

Chapter 265: Blind Date

Anfel used to be the personal maid of a noblewoman in Sarabia City. Her living conditions weren't as harsh as those of farm slaves, so she initially refused to cooperate with Acronis's arrangements after being forced to join the rebel army. She was reluctant to contribute to the cause and carried some bad habits she had picked up in the noble household, making her a troublemaker that was difficult to manage in the kitchen crew.

However, with Acronis's patience and care, over time, Anfel gradually integrated into the larger community of the rebel army and began to showcase her talents. After all, compared to farm slaves, she—once a noble servant—was far more knowledgeable and capable.

"Anfel, we've recently taken in many newcomers. The original cooking team is no longer enough, and we'll definitely form new groups soon. When that happens, Acronis is bound to promote you to head chef. Honestly, I'm really reluctant to see you go!" Minnie said with deep emotion.

"Sister Minnie, I don't think that's likely," Anfel whispered in response. "Didn't the leader quietly mention a few days ago that soon the soldiers will have their own homes and land? When that happens, they won't need our team in the supply camp to cook for them anymore."

"I almost forgot about that... You're right. When the time comes, our cooking team will likely disband!" Minnie wasn't happy about this realization and instead seemed a bit melancholy. After all, this team was one they had worked hard together as a part of for over a year.

Seeing her mood, Anfel was about to offer a few comforting words.

"Beep! Beep! Beep!..." A sharp whistle rang out.

The women by the riverbank immediately returned to their respective cooking groups and began cautiously loading their prepared food onto donkey and ox carts. At this moment, women who didn't belong to the kitchen crew but were part of the supply camp would temporarily join the kitchen groups. Under the guidance of the head chef, they would follow the transport convoy, pass through the central road of the inner camp, enter the outer camp, and reach the area corresponding to their respective battalions, where they would distribute meals to the soldiers.

This was a very lively process.

It wasn't just the excitement of the hungry soldiers at the sight of food; it was also the daily close interactions between them and the women from the supply camp. Many men and women ended up pairing off during these encounters.

The kitchen crew wasn't composed solely of women. There were men too, but every time the food was transported to various legions and battalions, it was always the women who handled the task, with at least half of them being single. These women didn't simply distribute food—they would also dine with the soldiers.

This was an arrangement deliberately set up by Acronis, based on Maximus's advice, with the explicit purpose of matchmaking.

This plan had been implemented ever since the rebel army retreated into the mountains and was greatly welcomed by the soldiers. It significantly boosted morale, which had been flagging due to the prolonged difficulties of mountain operations, allowing the rebel forces to present themselves with vigor on the lands of Illyria.

But as the rebel army grew, resources began to dwindle. Once most of the women had secured partners, the remaining soldiers refrained from flirting. This was partly due to the constraints of military law and partly because of the camaraderie among comrades-in-arms. Eventually, the matchmaking activities evolved into couple dinners, which left the single soldiers feeling unduly frustrated.

Nonetheless, after a brief lull, the matchmaking activities had returned to their former vibrancy in recent days, thanks to the appearance of new faces among the food delivery women—newly joined Skodisqi women and unmarried Segestica female captives.

Just as they were about to reach the rest area of the First Battalion of the Second Legion, Great Captain Lufus, accompanied by the team officers, came out to greet them.

Head chef Minnie lightly nudged Anfel at her side and teased, "Your lover's here—go on, say hello!"

Anfel didn't step forward; instead, she stood still and replied, "Sister Minnie, at times like this, women must remain reserved. Men treasure what's hard to obtain, don't you think?"

"You're awfully young to know so much about these things. Who taught you?"

"My former mistress. She was something else—she had her noble husband wrapped tightly around her finger."

"You better not imitate those damned nobles!" Minnie frowned slightly as she warned her, then smiled and stepped forward to greet, "Great Captain Lufus, we've brought you food; I hope we're not late."

"You've come just in time. The brothers have just returned to camp—they could smell the food, and it's driving them wild. I bet you've outdone yourselves with another delicious dinner!" Lufus responded with a rare smile.

"The sisters indeed put their hearts into making this meal, so I'm certain you won't be disappointed," Minnie confidently replied.

"What are you waiting for? This is your chance to shine."

With a wave of his hand, Lufus's team officers stepped forward, each attending to their tasks: Ten centurions led nearly a hundred women into the battalion's rest area and assigned the soldiers seating for their meal. Fifty centurions unloaded food from the carts and distributed meals to the soldiers according to numbered orders.

Tini Bazus approached Minnie first, but before he could speak, Minnie winked at him and said, "Today's meal arrangements are entirely Anfel's responsibility; you'll have to find her instead."

Tini Bazus paused for a moment, then broke into a full smile and turned to Anfel.

But Anfel didn't even look at him. Instead, she turned away and shouted, "Sisters, we're very familiar with this place—we don't need anyone to guide us, do we?"