

Perish 361

Chapter 361: Recent Situation in Aldean Territory

Pigeris spoke with pride about the enthusiastic Ardii people, gesturing excitedly: "The market our Commerce Department carefully established has attracted some Ardii people in the past two or three months. We don't tax them and even provide them with conveniences. They can exchange their goods for our tribe's wheat, our exquisite pottery, better iron tools, and more practical furniture... Because of our market, they've improved their lives. How could they not welcome us with such enthusiasm?!"

To this, Fesaros really had nothing to say.

When the First Legion left the camp, Fesaros was surprised to find the road outside the camp was also crowded with people. However, these people were holding long spears, some with wooden sticks, and only a few wore armor...

Seeing Fesaros's confusion, Pigeris whispered, "Last night, Budocaribas and other tribal leaders were too enthusiastic. I returned late, and you were all asleep, so I didn't have the chance to tell you. These warriors are from the Ardii tribes who are friendly with us. They gathered here hoping to join our forces on the battlefield... Well, I agreed on your behalf."

"Why?" Fesaros still felt puzzled.

"Last night at the banquet, I raised this question. They didn't answer directly, but with some intentional persuasion while drinking, I managed to extract some secrets from them."

Pigeris, somewhat proud, spoke in a lower voice: "These Ardii tribes, who are friendly with us and have agreements, either lost their land in wars with the Segestica people or have territories too close to the Segestica people. Out of fear of attack, they had to migrate west into the mountains...

For various reasons, they've had some conflicts with the southern Ardii tribes over the past two or three years. However, due to efforts by their Great Chief, there's been no major conflict between them...

But this time, the Ardii Tribes are mobilizing militarily to summon warriors southward. Unfortunately, their Great Chief Acoupaigos has fallen ill, and his eldest son has taken command.

But this eldest son... As they say, he's always protected the southern tribes and holds grievances against them, especially after learning they signed agreements with us privately without consulting the elders. They fear this chief's son might seek revenge in battle, so they want to band together with us for courage!

Fesaros, being Illyrian and familiar with Illyrian customs, furrowed his brows upon hearing this: "Shouldn't we avoid interfering in the internal affairs of the Aldeans?"

Pigeris, with an undertone, said, "Before I left, our leader specifically instructed me to maintain good relations with the friendly Ardii tribes. I couldn't possibly refuse such a small request from them."

Hearing this about the leader, Fesaros fell silent. He vaguely sensed that Maximus was plotting something behind the scenes, but as a military officer, he instinctively shied away from complex politics.

At this moment, Budocaribas, accompanied by other leaders, approached. After an exchange of pleasantries, they finally decided: The First Legion would lead, and the other tribal groups would follow, proceeding together to the battlefield.

The force grew larger, but the marching speed slowed considerably.

The new recruits of the First Legion, having undergone several months of training with the Nix Tribe, already perceived a significant difference compared to the Pannonian Army's training. Now that the Ardii Tribes' army was mingling with the First Legion, this difference became even more apparent.

The soldiers of the First Legion marched in formation, and anyone wanting to stop for rest or wander off faced reprimands from the team officers. The Ardii tribal armies, though led by leaders, had no formation and moved in a chaotic mass without a fixed pace, stopping and going intermittently. Occasionally, some tribal warriors would dash out to catch wild rabbits or deer spotted by the roadside. Their leaders couldn't restrain them...

As a result, after a while, the First Legion left the Ardii tribe's forces far behind. Pigeris suggested slowing down to wait for their allies, but Fesaros disagreed.

Thus, the new recruits of the First Legion witnessed a strange sight: Ardii warriors, panting heavily, caught up with their troops only to fall behind until they disappeared from view again, only to sweep back after a while...

Watching the Ardii warriors, drenched in sweat and in disarray, the Scodisiqui new soldiers, who had similar customs and had lived there for generations, couldn't help but feel a surge of pride. This pride grew stronger as the First Legion, after taking a big bend along the Murenica River, turned south.

Because the First Legion entered a small plain beside the Murenica River, no longer desolate, it was filled with wheat fields, crisscrossing paths, and densely populated areas, with the sounds of chickens and dogs heard, villages extended one after another along the river southward...

The people here had already been notified that "the ally of the tribe—the Nix army will pass through here." Although they hadn't seen Nix people before, they'd heard that it was these very Nix people who defeated the Pannonian army they feared, so they crowded along the roadside, curious. Soon, this curiosity turned into amazement.

"No wonder these Nix people could defeat those detested Pannonians. Look, each of them wears armor!"

"Not only do they all have armor, but they also look so spirited. I don't dare to approach them."

"You don't understand, the most impressive thing about these Nix people is their discipline. Look at their neat formation, then look at our messy group behind... Sigh, the reason we lost to the Pannonians back then was because they were more disciplined than us, and clearly, these Nix are more disciplined than the Pannonians, which is how they managed to defeat them!"

"Those messy troops behind are from the north, not us. Our troops are better than theirs!"

...

Upon hearing the praises from the roadside, the new recruits of the First Legion stood with even straighter backs.

"That's our tribe's main camp!" As dusk approached, Budocaribas, acting as the guide, suddenly pointed to a village across the river.

Fesaros looked up to see a narrow footbridge leading to the opposite bank. The village on the other side was significantly larger than any they had passed and was surrounded by tall wooden walls, hiding the houses inside, with only the smoke from cooking visible in the sky above the camp...

Fesaros mentally compared it to Snowdonia, feeling his camp was larger, more vibrant, and more prosperous. He stopped looking and turned to ask, "Chief Budocaribas, it's getting late. Where should we camp?"

"We'll camp over there." Budocaribas hesitated not a bit, pointing westward as if he had already made arrangements.

"Going there will bring us closer to the mountains!" Pigeris interjected: "We'd have to pull grass and clear the land just to walk over. It'd be exhausting! Look at these freshly harvested fields, so clean. Why not camp right here?"

Budocaribas looked embarrassed and stuttered in reply: "Although the wheat here has been harvested... They're planning to plant something else soon. With so many people... It's easy to trample the fields beyond repair..."

The two exchanged a glance, and Pigeris said seriously: "Fields are precious; we can't just trample them. We'll follow your arrangements and camp over there."

Budocaribas sighed in relief, before hearing Pigeris continue: "Since we are here, I should visit Great Chief Acoupaigos as it's customary. Fesaros, you lead the soldiers to camp. I will return soon."

Fesaros nodded in agreement.

The First Legion quickly left the road to a barren land far from the riverbank and fields, began clearing the area, and pitched tents.

The Ardii tribal forces were not so particular. Upon reaching the grassy wilds, each tribe grouped in one area without pulling grass or setting up tents. The warriors simply lay down on the ground to rest.

Fortunately, even though the tribe forbade camping on the fields, enough food was prepared and promptly delivered to them.

On the second morning, as the First Legion packed up its tents and resumed marching south along the river, the Ardii followed behind.

Along the way, Fesaros asked Pigeris what he said when he met with the Ardii Great Chief.

Pigeris only replied, "Great Chief Acoupaigos is indeed very ill," saying no more.

The entire force marched continuously along the river for three days, reaching the upper reaches of the Murenica River. Here, the land remained flat and fertile but was sparsely populated. The soldiers had to rely on their rations during camping.

Then, the entire army waded across the now-shallow river into the hilly terrain, continuing south until they reached the upper reaches of the Kolana River. On its northern plains, tents covered the land, with countless Ardii warriors frolicking and playing between them...

Hearing Budocaribas's words, Fesaros sighed in relief: they had finally reached their destination!

He turned to a messenger and said, "Inform the brothers to gather their spirits and display the prowess of the Nix warriors to our allies!"

"Yes, Legion Commander!"

Soon, the marching soldiers of the First Legion let out a deafening cheer, startling the resting Ardii warriors and their leaders who were in a meeting.

Chapter 362: Undercurrents

They stood up, looking north at this unique and unfamiliar army: at the forefront, a white banner was held high, painted with a bizarre creature that inspired fear;

Behind the large banner was another flag raised high, the smaller brown flag bore only a strange symbol (in fact, it was the Arabic numeral of the First Legion);

Moreover, at regular intervals, this troop had smaller brown flags raised high, also painted with strange symbols (these were the flags of the First Legion's six battalions), adding a solemn and imposing aura to the entire troop;

The formation was four people in a row, arranged like a long dragon; no one broke away from the line during the march, and no one wandered randomly within it, showing great order;

Although the soldiers in the troop bore not insignificant burdens, each held their heads high, spirits aflame, marching in neat steps, shouting loudly, demonstrating a vigorous fighting spirit...

"Is this the army that our allies, the Nix, have sent?" asked an old man of tall and thin stature with a hooked nose and an ominous gaze in a deep voice.

His name was Ambrosius, the father-in-law of the Great Chief Acoupaigos and the leader of a powerful Aldean Tribe.

He snorted, discontentedly saying, "Are they shouting so loudly as a demonstration against us!"

"Without our help, how could these outsiders establish a foothold at the Kupa River? And now, they dare to bark senselessly at their masters, like insolent dogs!" complained another burly Aldean leader.

Instantly, others chimed in: "Exactly, these outsiders are like ungrateful wolves!—"

"Everyone, stop talking nonsense!" Cleobrotas turned around, sternly scanning the leaders: "Don't forget, if not for the Nix people's several victories over the Segestica's army last year, the Segestica people might have already invaded our Murenica River area!"

Now, the Nix have again sent their troops, traveling long distances to come here. The strength of their army clearly indicates that they value our requests and sincerely wish to help us reclaim the salt mine!

Everyone, we should warmly welcome their arrival, not start quarrels within our family even before the battle!"

Over the years, Cleobrotas had aided Great Chief Acoupaigos in managing tribal affairs, amassing considerable prestige; after he spoke, the surroundings fell silent.

Cleobrotas said no more, taking the lead eagerly to welcome the Nix army, and others gradually followed.

Alistacas stood still, with an unpleasant expression, hesitantly glancing at his father-in-law.

"Cleobrotas is right, we need the help of the Nix army. If you lead the army to defeat the Otarlat people this time, no one will oppose your succession to your father's position as Great Chief."

Ambrosius, with a serious demeanor as if it wasn't he who had initially expressed dissatisfaction with the Nix, then added emphatically, "Just don't always let Cleobrotas single-handedly win the Nix's favor!"

Immediately, a cold light flashed in Alistacas's eyes as he gazed at the back, an anxiety rising within him. He hurriedly stepped forward, quickly surpassing Cleobrotas to walk at the forefront.

"Welcome to our esteemed allies!" said Alistacas, putting on a smile, opening his arms to the Nix army, loudly speaking.

Fesaros hurriedly raised his arms to signal, and the troop behind him soon halted their advance.

This scene struck a chord within the Aldean leaders, shaking their hearts.

Pigeris immediately guessed the speaker's identity, but looked at the person following closely and asked, feigning ignorance: "Elder Cleobrotas, who might this be?"

"Elder Pigeris (since the Aldean Tribe did not have a governance structure like the Nix, fearing they wouldn't understand, every time Pigeris was dispatched, he declared himself as an elder of the Nix Tribe), this is the eldest son of our Great Chief, Alistacas, also an elder of our tribe.

The previous few times you visited the main camp, he had other matters to attend to and could not meet you, which was unfortunate. However, this time, he is serving as the commander of our Alliance Army, so I believe our two peoples can cooperate well to defeat the Otarat people together!"

Pigeris feigned enlightenment with a warm expression, saying enthusiastically, "I have long heard of Elder Alistacas's great name. It is an honor to meet today! Please rest assured, our Nix army will certainly follow your command to assist you in winning this battle!"

Hearing these words, Alistacas felt much better as he gripped Pigeris's extended hand firmly, saying, "You are right, let's join forces to defeat the Otarat people!"

Subsequently, after exchanging pleasantries for a while, another group approached from the front, led by someone who loudly shouted, "Elder Pigeris! Elder Fesaros! Welcome to your arrival!"

Fesaros looked closely and, somewhat surprised, stepped forward: "Elder Karsipempas, I didn't expect you to come as well!"

Karsipempas laughed heartily, "I am also a leader of the Aldean Tribe. With the entire tribe mobilized for war with the Otarat people, this is the most important tribal business; how could I be absent?"

Since I returned from your place, I have not gone back to sea and have remained in the tribe to prepare for this battle. By the way, let me introduce you to my eldest son—Kobrunbodus."

As Karsipempas spoke, he pulled forward a dark-skinned, robust, and honest-looking young man from behind, "Son, these two are elders of the Nix Tribe and friends of your father, also considered your elders; show them the proper respect!"

Kobrunbodus followed instructions, bowing respectfully.

Pigeris and Fesaros returned the gesture hurriedly, not daring to be negligent because they both knew a fact: Since Karsipempas had been long at sea, his tribe had been in the hands of his eldest son Kobrunbodus, who was not an ordinary young man.

Karsipempas continued introducing the individuals who had accompanied him, also leaders of the Aldean Tribe but from the mountains to the west of the Aldean Territory.

The two sides exchanged courtesies once again.

"Look, Karsipempas has a good relationship with these Nix people too!" Ambrosius whispered to his son-in-law.

Alistacas, with a somber face, watched Karsipempas engage in close and laughing conversation with the Nix, unable to hold back and exclaimed, "Karsipempas, our allies have come a long way and must be very tired! Don't disturb them any longer; let them rest well, recover their strength for tomorrow's better fight!"

Karsipempas's laughter abruptly stopped.

Fesaros was surprised: why is there a battle with the Otarat people already tomorrow?!

Alistacas then loudly instructed his father-in-law, "Elder Ambrosius, you are responsible for taking our allies to the camp and doing everything possible to settle them in!"

"Yes." Ambrosius stepped quickly to the two, "Elder Pigeris, Elder Fesaros, please lead the troop and follow me!"

"Alright." Fesaros responded, nodding farewell to Karsipempas before raising his right hand in a gesture, leading the army to follow Ambrosius away.

Pigeris, however, did not move immediately, only catching up after a while.

On their way to the camp, upon Fesaros's inquiry, Ambrosius revealed the reason why the two tribes were fighting the next day.

When entire tribes mobilize for military action, each gathering tens of thousands of warriors to fight abroad, the consumption of grain is enormous; both sides cannot bear it for long. Therefore, despite being enemies, the Aldean Tribe and the Otarlat Tribe had already reached an agreement during their first encounter:

Once one party wishes to change the status of the salt mine, it can issue a challenge to the other, which must accept, or else one party could attack the salt mine directly, potentially damaging the facilities in battle, which would be counterproductive. Once both parties agree to engage in a decisive battle, they would each gather their warriors, lead their troops here, and select a day to decide the outcome with one battle; the winner takes what he wants, while the loser can only retreat temporarily to gather strength.

"This method is quite effective, as it temporarily resolves their conflict without too much damage to the tribes," praised Pigeris.

As a small merchant from the Kingdom of Pontus, he had witnessed the brutal warfare among Eastern kingdoms firsthand, where fields were littered with corpses and rivers of blood flowed.

"After all, our tribe and the Otarlat Tribe are both Illyrians; we were once part of the same kingdom, and such dueling came from our ancient racial traditions."

Ambrosius said with a tone of hatred, "Previously, our Aldean Tribe was stronger than the Otarlat and did not monopolize the salt mine. Later, the war with the Pannonians greatly weakened us, and the Otarlat people, instead of lending a helping hand as compatriots, seized the entire salt mine and threatened the lives of our tribal members."

Ambrosius pointed around: "Originally, this area was all part of our Aldean's territory, home to several tribes, which have since been forced to migrate north due to Otarlat harassment.

This time, the Great Chief challenged the Otarlat Tribe. Originally, everyone worried they would not accept the challenge, but to our surprise, they agreed. This morning, we received news that over twenty

thousand Otarlat people have arrived on the other side of the river, clearly not underestimating us despite our weak power, and hoping to end our hopes once and for all in this battle..."

Chapter 363: Friction Amongst the Various Tribes of Alde

Fesaros listened to Ambrosius speak while gazing at the distant tents densely scattered across the opposite riverbank. In a deep voice, he said, "Elder Ambrosius, rest assured. In this battle, we Nix Warriors will go all out to strike the Otarlat people and help you reclaim the Salt Mine!"

"Thank you, Elder Fesaros!" said Ambrosius, full of gratitude.

Ultimately, Ambrosius led the First Legion to a patch of wasteland near the Kolana River bank, warmly saying, "Elder Fesaros, Elder Pigeris, this is the campsite chosen for you by Elder Alistacas. The terrain is flat, there are fewer mosquitoes, and it is close to the battlefield. I hope you will be satisfied."

Fesaros carefully surveyed the surroundings before nodding in agreement, "It's a good place. We will camp here."

Ambrosius continued, "Elder Alistacas has also prepared food for you. Once you have set up camp, it will be delivered to you."

"Thank you!"

Ambrosius, with a solemn expression, added, "Elder Alistacas is the eldest son of our Great Chief and the future Great Chief of Alde!

The Great Chief's illness is severe, and perhaps by next year, Alistacas will ascend the position. He greatly values the alliance with your Nix Tribe and hopes to develop better friendly relations with you, allowing the alliance to last forever!"

"This is also what our Leader sincerely hopes for!" Pigeris interjected with a smile.

After Ambrosius left, Pigeris mysteriously whispered to Fesaros, "Do you know why I didn't immediately follow you just now?"

"Why?"

"After you left with your team, that Alistacas publicly scolded Budocaribas, essentially questioning why his and the northern Alde Tribe army's arrival was so delayed, causing them to consume two more days of grain here..." The tribal leaders of the Alde also chimed in alongside him.

Budocaribas and the Alde leaders accompanying him were not convinced, and they got into an argument...

Karsipengpas and Cleobrotas busied themselves mediating, making for a rather lively scene, which is regrettably one you missed."

Pigeris's words bore a hint of schadenfreude.

Fesaros was a little surprised and defended, "I remember Budocaribas coming to our tribe to notify us of the sortie; we didn't delay. We gathered the troops and set off the next day.

Besides, our tribe and Budocaribas's tribe are indeed farther from the battlefield, making our later arrival quite normal and undeserving of blame."

Pigeris chuckled, "Fesaros, you must understand that when a family has deep internal conflicts, even a small issue can trigger a major argument."

Fesaros quickly caught on and asked urgently, "Are you saying there are considerable disputes between the tribes led by Budocaribas and those led by Alistacas?"

"It's not just that." Pigeris replied seriously in a low voice, "Based on previous intelligence and observations over these past few days, the whole Alde tribe is actually divided into four parts.

Budocaribas's tribes are part of the northern group that originally lived along the Kupa River and its surrounding region. The fertile land made these tribes quite wealthy, with a significant population and considerable strength, granting them notable influence within the larger Alde tribe. Yet they suffered

great losses and lost their land in the war against the Segestica people, forcing them to relocate to the western mountains, where life turned extremely difficult...

Then there are the eastern Alde tribes. Their population is not large, and their strength is relatively weak. They are neighbors to the Brochi Tribe of the Pannonians. A few years ago, the Brochi people launched an attack against them and even defeated them in battle, also forcing them to move to the western mountains...

Many times, these two parts of the Alde people sought help from the Great Chief Aco, who reportedly wanted to aid them. However, the southern tribes, who occupy the fertile lands between the Murenica and Kolana Rivers, are not keen on helping and instead complain about the northern kin encroaching on their territory and often stealing their food... Therefore, disputes are frequent during the council meetings of the chiefs and elders..."

"So that's the case..." Fesaros remarked in sudden understanding.

"And that's not all," Pigeris continued, "don't forget about the western tribes of Karsipengpas, whose situation is even more complex! It's said that a hundred years ago, these tribes had their own ports and towns along the Adriatic Coast. Through piracy, they accumulated considerable wealth, but in doing so, they angered the Romans.

Rome sent troops, defeated the Illyria Kingdom, and seized the land along the Adriatic Sea, forcing these tribes to retreat to the mountains. We climbed those mountains, realizing how unfavorable the conditions are. It's said they didn't wish to move to the plains on this side of the mountains, but they met with unanimous opposition from the other Alde tribes.

Especially the southern tribes, who resent these western tribes for enriching only themselves and seldom sharing the wealth gained from piracy, while also attracting powerful enemies. Thus, they refused to cede land to them.

As a result, these tribes could only reside in the mountains, where over time, their population dwindled, their strength weakened, and they were even deprived of a voice in the council of Alde elders.

It wasn't until Karsipengpas led the people of these mountainous tribes back to piracy that the tribes began to overcome their difficulties. In recent years, they've repeatedly aided other tribes, especially

those from the west, earning a high reputation among many tribes, but in the council of Alde elders, they've been marginalized, causing great dissatisfaction among the western mountainous tribes..."

"With so many conflicts within the Alde tribe, can their army unite against the enemy in tomorrow's battle?" Fesaros frowned deeply, feeling concerned.

Pigeris couldn't offer any help on this matter, so after saying a few words to Fesaros, he limped toward the campsite of the Karsipengpas tribes.

Fesaros had no choice but to rally his spirits, gather the six Great Captains and the engineering team, and arrange the encampment tasks.

The engineering team selected the campsite and sketched out a plan. The team officer led the soldiers to pull out grass, level the ground, and even dig trenches, as this was already the frontline of the battlefield, necessitating such actions according to Nix Military Law.

The extensive efforts by the First Legion to construct their camp attracted the curious gazes of the Aldean Warriors, even catching the attention of Alistacas and other Aldean leaders.

Alistacas and his group noticed the First Legion soldiers busily constructing such a complex camp, further recognizing the uniqueness of the Nix Army.

When the soldiers began retrieving tents from the Carriages and preparing to set them up, the transport team drove the now-empty Carriages northward. They intended to reach the upper reaches of the Murenica River, unload grain from the docked fleet, and then transport it back to camp.

By dusk, the Aldean Alliance Army held a military meeting, which Fesaros attended. He initially thought many would attend the military meeting, as most of the Aldean tribal leaders had gathered here.

But in reality, there were only seven attendees: the Alliance Army's commander Alistacas, the Great Chief's trusted assistant Cleobrotas, the southern tribal leaders' representative Ambrosius, the western tribal leaders' representative Karsipengpas, the northern tribal leaders' representative Budocaribas, the eastern tribe's representative Xisaites, and the Nix Army leader Fesaros.

Through Alistacas's brief introduction, Fesaros learned that this time the Aldean tribes deployed over 9,100 warriors, with about 5,200 from the southern tribes, approximately 1,800 from the northern tribes, around 1,400 from the western tribes, and only about 700 from the northern tribes, with the strength of the southern tribes surpassing the combined strength of the other three parts.

Though called a military meeting, it actually involved no elaborate tactical planning or discussions, just a simple arrangement: after the sun rises tomorrow and the warriors finish their breakfast, the entire army will cross the Kolana River and form ranks. The Nix Army led by Fesaros will be on the right wing, the Aldean southern tribal armies in the center, and the remaining Aldean tribal armies on the left wing. Upon hearing the horn, the armies on the left, center, and right will collectively advance to attack the enemy.

Originally, the Nix Army was the largest and strongest, and from a practical standpoint, it should be the central force connecting the two wings. However, as the Nix Army is ultimately a guest army and Alistacas, from the Aldean southern tribes, is the Commander of the Alliance Army, such an arrangement makes sense.

Fesaros had no objections to this.

After the military arrangements concluded, Alistacas unexpectedly proposed a suggestion. He felt that the left-wing soldiers were few in number and poorly equipped, worrying they couldn't withstand the enemy's assault. And since the Nix Army boasted the largest numbers and best equipment... thus he inquired if Fesaros could allocate some forces to bolster the left wing?

Fesaros felt troubled because before departure, Leader Maximus specifically emphasized not to disperse the forces and to keep all soldiers under his command.

Personally, he also didn't wish for his soldiers' lives to be controlled by others.

Fesaros hesitated for a moment, just as he was about to refuse, Karsipengpas interjected on his behalf, claiming: though the number of warriors under his command might be fewer, they had been hunting in the mountains for years and were bolder, with a select few even having followed him in maritime plundering, making their weaponry not inferior, and they were richer in combat experience. Thus, even if the enemy had numbers, they couldn't easily break them, negating the need for Fesaros's reinforcements.

Chapter 364: Signs of War

Immediately after, both Budocaribas and Xisaites expressed their support for Karsipengpas's words, affirming: They would undoubtedly repel the enemy's attack!

Seeing this, Fesaros also declared: He would ensure that the Nix Army swiftly defeated the adversaries right in front of them, alleviating pressure on the left flank.

Upon seeing this, Alistacas said no more, and the military meeting concluded.

Fesaros exhaled a long breath. Even with his slow wit, he could sense the undercurrents among these Aldean Leaders during the military meeting. This time, he had narrowly avoided being drawn into their strife.

Returning to the camp, he recounted the events of the military meeting to Pigeris.

After listening, Pigeris offered him a few words of comfort before hobbling off toward the camps of Karsipengpas and Budocaribas.

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While the soldiers of the First Legion lay down to rest in the military tents, the bonfires of the Nix Tribe had just been extinguished. The crowd dispersed, and the clamor subsided as Maximus returned to the main house.

A bright moon hung in the night sky, its soft silvery glow gentle as water.

Maximus felt a mixture of nervousness and excitement because today Florist Lusia had moved into the main house.

This time, when he wed Florist Lusia, Maximus did not hold a grand ceremony. Previously, his marriage to Nexia had been exceedingly modest. Out of consideration for Nexia's feelings, he merely mentioned the matter during a Political Affairs Hall meeting.

The officers of each department had no objections. Thus, Ritual Officer Kefisofon, following Maximus's instructions, arranged a simple ceremony to bring Florist Luscia into the main house. This allowed the tribespeople—especially the Skodisqi Reserve Tribes—to be informed that the daughter of the former Skodisqi Great Leader had become the Nix Tribe Chief's wife.

"Chief, you're back!" Chief of Internal Affairs, Acronis, greeted him warmly and asked with concern, "Have you eaten dinner yet?"

"I ate plenty at the bonfire gathering. I'm full now." Maximus coughed lightly and asked, "How... how is Florist Luscia doing?"

"Florist Luscia is waiting for you in the bridal room. Nexia is inside, chatting with her. Are you heading over now?"

Maximus was about to nod but, after some thought, said, "I'll wash up first."

"Understood." Acronis immediately ordered her subordinates to heat water, prepare a wooden tub, towels, and clean clothes... Then, she had someone inform Florist Luscia in the bridal room.

After Maximus finished washing, Acronis personally led him to the bridal room.

Though the moonlight illuminated the night, the main house was lit with numerous torches, brightening the entire courtyard.

The bridal room where Florist Luscia stayed was close to Maximus's residence. It had once been the quarters of Wallis, the most trusted aide of the Segestica Tribe leader. After confirming the marriage, Acronis had ordered a refurbishment of the room.

Maximus pushed open the slightly ajar door. In the flickering candlelight, he saw that only one person was inside. Nexia had left, leaving Florist Luscia sitting alone on the bed, her delicate frame trembling slightly.

Maximus stepped in gently, and Acronis softly closed the door behind him.

Acronis left the bridal room and instinctively walked toward Nexia's residence. Midway, she saw Nexia from a distance, standing quietly under the eaves, gazing at the night sky with a forlorn figure.

Acronis walked over softly, stood beside her, and, like her, silently gazed at the bright full moon in the night sky.

After a long while, Nexia said in a faint voice, "Don't worry about me; I'm fine."

"I wasn't worried about you. I was just..." Acronis feigned a lighthearted tone, "I used to be so busy surviving that I never had time to appreciate the moon. Now that we're settled, taking the time to look at it, I realize it's truly beautiful!"

"Alright, you just want to say how hard-earned our current life is and that we must do everything to protect it..." Nexia turned to look at Acronis and said in a firm tone, "I understand this better than you. Don't think that I only accepted Florist Luscia as my sister and the chief's bride today. If, in the future, the chief must marry a complete stranger for the sake of the tribe, I will accept it too!"

Acronis was at a loss for words.

Nexia studied her for a moment and then suddenly broke into a faint smile. "Acronis, thank you for keeping me company tonight, no matter what! I owe you another favor!"

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The next morning, after having breakfast with Nexia and Florist Luscia, Maximus headed to the Political Affairs Hall. Since the tribe's establishment, it was rare for him to be late to work. Exhausted from the night before, he had overslept that morning. Unlike Nexia, the delicate Florist Luscia aroused an intense protectiveness in him. Always taking the initiative, he exhibited his gentle prowess throughout the night.

Though still somewhat fatigued, Maximus was in high spirits, humming an unfamiliar tune. Suddenly, he ran into the hurriedly approaching Casius.

"Casius, what's the rush? You're no longer a child. You're now an official of the Nix Tribe. You must learn to handle everything calmly," Maximus said with an unchanged smile and a calm tone.

"Yes, Chief." Casius steadied himself and saluted before saying, "I just received news from Segestica. Their new Great Chief, Cabdes, issued an order the day before yesterday, demanding that each tribe hand over 30% of their harvest. Additionally, he instructed all tribes to intensify military training during the upcoming idle farming period."

Maximus's expression turned sharp. "Did Cabdes provide a reason for this?"

"No. However, our spies reported that the tribal leaders under his control and neighboring tribes began implementing the order immediately, unlike in the past when they hesitated or sent someone to the main camp to seek clarification first."

"This means they've already communicated in advance and reached an agreement."

"Yes."

Maximus pondered for a moment and said, "Gathering resources and strengthening training... The Segestica people are preparing for war! And the only enemy around the Segestica Territory is—"

Maximus tapped his chest and uttered one word: "Us!"

"Chief, our ceasefire agreement with the Segestica people will expire in just over a month!" Casius reminded him.

"The Segestica people have been defeated by us multiple times and fear us greatly. Otherwise, they wouldn't have voluntarily signed a ceasefire agreement with us—unless..." Maximus's mind raced.

"Have the Brochi people sent any news yet?"

"Not yet."

"Urge them to investigate whether the Brochi people are also displaying unusual activity!" Maximus ordered with a firmer tone.

"Chief, are you saying... this time the Pannonians might unite again to attack us?" Casius asked nervously, catching on.

"Very likely. Otherwise, the Segestica people wouldn't be so bold." Maximus reassured him with a smile. "But don't be overly concerned. We were already planning to declare war on the Segestica people once the agreement expired. If they attack first, it saves us the effort... By the way, what's the situation with the First Legion?"

"We heard yesterday that the First Legion is nearing the upper reaches of the Murenica River. They've likely already arrived at the battlefield by now." Casius replied uncertainly.

"Send your best men with my written orders to instruct Fesaros to return promptly after concluding the battle!" Maximus commanded decisively.

"Understood!"

After ending the conversation with Casius, Maximus quickened his steps toward the Political Affairs Hall.

In the afternoon, the iron workshop received orders from Capito: The command was to manufacture as many crossbows and crossbow arrows as possible within the next two months.

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Otarlat was a formidable Illyrian tribe that once lived solely in the mountains. However, its barren lands couldn't sustain a large population, forcing it to expand outward. After conquering the Tribe of Tribali and several smaller Illyrian tribes, its territory grew severalfold, bringing it to the northern border of the Alde Tribe.

At the time, the Aldeans were strong, and Otarat dared not provoke them. Meanwhile, the Aldeans had little interest in the poorer southern lands. Thus, peace prevailed for many years—until the discovery of the salt fields disrupted this balance.

In the valley where the two tribes' territories met, multiple streams flowed. It was discovered that letting the water from these streams settle and evaporate yielded salt crystals. This area was subsequently developed into salt fields.

The two tribes initially agreed to share the profits from these salt fields. But the allure of wealth made conflict inevitable, turning disputes into full-fledged wars.

Initially, the Aldeans held the upper hand, gaining a larger share of the salt fields. But the invasion by the Segestica people shifted the power balance. The Otarat people seized the opportunity to deal a heavy blow to the Aldeans and took full control of the salt fields.

However, they didn't anticipate that the severely weakened Aldeans would launch another challenge. Otarat Great Chief Baka convinced the tribal leaders to gather the majority of their warriors not only to thwart the Aldeans' claims on the salt fields but also to pursue a grander ambition.

Baka coveted the fertile lands along the rivers controlled by the Aldeans. He intended to use this victory to commence an invasion of Aldean Territory.

On this particular morning, the weather was cool, windless, and cloudless.

The Aldean Alliance Army and the Otarat Army faced off on the flat, desolate land north of the Kolana River.

Chapter 365: Clash

Baka and his son Betta led the Guard to the front line and gazed at the Aldean Alliance Army's formation. The dazzling reflection of armor on the left flank made him squint his eyes, "Is that the Aldeans' reinforcements, from a tribe called the Nix Army?!"

"Yes, father," Betta replied solemnly. "According to the intelligence we obtained, this Nix Tribe is located north of the Aldeans and was only established last year. Most of their tribesmen are Illyrians, but they

used to be mercenaries fighting outside the mountains for many years. They returned to the mountains last year and allied with the Aldeans...

Yesterday, they arrived here, numbering over 5,000. Our spies mentioned they all wear armor, but I never expected their iron armor to be this thick! Father, should we revise the plan we made earlier?"

Baka pondered for a moment and said, "Send word to Elida immediately, instructing him to lead his tribe's warriors to reinforce the left flank (formerly the Tribe of Tribali). I don't demand a death battle from him; I only need him to hold off those Ni... Nix people..."

While Nix and the Aldeans are allies, they only joined last year, and logically wouldn't have deep bonds with the Aldeans yet. This time, they're merely fulfilling their alliance obligations, so they likely won't risk everything to fight us. Once we settle the score with the Aldeans, I believe they'll retreat wisely."

"Understood, father!" Betta's determination reignited. He grabbed the Guard Captain and whispered orders to him, and the Guard Captain darted off toward the rear formation.

"Father, look, Alistacas has arrived. It's time for us to go," Betta pointed toward the front and prompted.

"Don't rush," Baka said leisurely. "Wait until Elida's troops arrive at the left flank and position themselves properly. Then we'll head over. We can let that little Aldean brat stew for a while and stir up his anger."

Betta immediately understood his father's intent.

Alistacas was already standing at the center of both formations, glaring at Baka. Despite seeing him already present, Baka remained stationary, which only fueled Alistacas' growing fury with each passing moment of waiting. Finally, unable to hold back, Alistacas shouted, "Baka Great Chief! Are you afraid?! Afraid to come and face me?! Baka Great Chief..."

Alistacas shouted several times, his voice becoming hoarse, before Baka finally strolled over slowly, his head held high with a sneering look that reeked of disdain. "Boy, aren't you tired of screeching like a ghost for so long? Let me tell you the truth: if your father were here, I'd be willing to come earlier. But you... I honestly have no interest in moving."

Alistacas' fury boiled over, and he blurted out, "You vile old bastard—"

Baka burst into laughter, "Ah, that's right! You've hit the nail on the head. I'm old, and yet I'm doing quite well, thanks to Ares' protection! Your father and I aren't far in age, but last I heard, he's gravely ill. He probably doesn't have much time left."

Alistacas was livid, his face flushed red. He lunged forward, intending to land a heavy punch on the despicable old man's face, but Cleobrotas, beside him, yanked him back firmly, issuing a stern reminder, "Alistacas, don't forget your purpose here! You're the Commander of the entire army. You must remain composed!"

Cleobrotas then turned toward Baka, speaking righteously, "Baka Great Chief, in such a sacred moment, your disrespect toward your opponent is shameful! Do you not fear incurring Ares' wrath? And if word spreads, won't it make all the Illyrian tribes mock you?!"

Baka gave Cleobrotas a cold glance, reined in his laughter, and raised his long spear obliquely. "Enough talking! Hurry and finish the ceremony so I can lead my army to defeat you!"

Alistacas snorted before suppressing his anger and positioning his long spear.

Both sides chanted Ares' name, swearing to abide by prior agreements.

When the ritual concluded, Baka shot Alistacas a mocking look, shook his head dismissively, and then turned on his heel to walk away.

Alistacas trembled with rage, but Cleobrotas again reminded him to stay calm. With a furious wave, Alistacas stormed back to his formation.

While the two commanders were performing the ritual, Fesaros was moving between the formations of the First Legion, accompanied by a few staff members. As he walked, he proclaimed loudly, "Brothers, behind me are Staff Department assistant Tasines and Civil Affairs Department assistant Laklid. Their responsibility is to record and verify the merits you earn in battle!"

Remember, the more enemies you kill, the more merits you earn—the more land you'll receive, the higher you'll be promoted! This is the leader's grand opportunity for our First Legion, so don't miss it!..."

Fesaros tirelessly repeated his words, eliciting clenched fists holding sword and shield, heavy breaths, and widened eyes from the soldiers, as their fighting spirit surged higher...

Upon returning to the rear formation, a seething Alistacas immediately ordered his men to sound the horn.

The Aldean warriors in the center and left flank began advancing slowly, while the Nix First Legion on the right flank remained stationary. Moments later, copper horns sounded from their rear, banners pointed forward across battalions, and team officers' shouts drove the soldiers to begin moving.

Horn calls followed on the opposing side as the Otarlat Army advanced as well.

As the two armies approached, closing the fifty-meter distance, both sides' warriors simultaneously let loose deafening war cries, accelerating toward each other like two crashing waves. In an instant, battle cries and screams of agony filled the skies.

When the Aldean warriors charged, the First Legion surprisingly halted their advance instead of following suit.

"Brothers, don't panic! Move closer to me! Half-crouch, put your right foot forward, left foot back, and brace your shield firmly against the back of the comrade before you. Plant your stance solidly!..." Casaridaoa shouted loudly to his troops, just as other team officers did. His squad, consisting mostly of new recruits, was positioned in the middle of the formation and didn't have to face direct enemy assaults for now, but they still needed to contribute to the defense.

Just as the First Legion raised their shield formation, the Otarlat fighters crashed into their ranks with incredible force.

At that moment, Fesaros felt his heart leap to his throat.

Because the Otarlat ranks were considerably longer than those of the Alliance Army, Fesaros extended their formation to prevent the enemy from flanking the sides. He also followed Staff Department assistant Marcus' suggestion and pulled one battalion into reserve, leaving the formation thinner and down to just four columns. Whether they could withstand the overwhelming Otarlat charge was his greatest concern.

Soon, Fesaros relaxed, as the Otarlat's charge initially bent, and even ruptured parts of the First Legion's shield formation. But as their advance waned, the First Legion gradually restored their lines.

This was largely thanks to the soldiers in the front ranks, who were mostly seasoned veterans with extensive combat experience from campaigns in Italy. During the Otarlat's assault, they skillfully used their square shields to protect themselves, retreating slightly to absorb the impact. They seized the momentary openings exposed during the collision, swiftly thrusting their short swords from behind their shields into the enemy's ribs...

Born and raised in mountainous terrain, the Otarlat fighters were accustomed to long-spear battles, usually against their own kin. Facing a completely different opponent now threw them off, and this adaptation came at a price—injury or even death.

The Nix fighters wielded large shields and short swords, requiring them to engage in close-quarters combat to kill. This demanded exceptional courage and swordsmanship from the soldiers.

The Otarlat ranks were vast, arranged loosely during formation but tightly clustered after charging. The rear ranks pushed forward relentlessly, driving those in the front into the compact defenses of the First Legion. Ironically, this made it harder for their front-line warriors to evade the stabbing short swords. Most of them lacked armor, which led to rising casualties and rapidly diminished momentum. Eventually, their advance even halted, and they began a slow retreat.

Fesaros, observing this from the rear, breathed a sigh of relief but also felt a twinge of confusion. He didn't realize that the forces they were confronting consisted of subjugated tribes previously conquered by the Otarlat. For these combatants, Baka's orders were clear: "Entangle the Nix Army; there's no need for a desperate fight." However, once the horns sounded and the warriors charged, their bloodlust flared, causing them to forget the pre-battle instructions. It wasn't until their comrades' anguished cries rang out that they regained clarity, prompting their leaders' shouts to initiate a retreat, aiming to distance themselves from the First Legion and reduce casualties.

At that moment, the cavalry sent to scout the enemy began returning.

The rebel army had expanded its numbers significantly within just a year, but its cavalry forces had diminished due to a lack of horses. On this campaign, the Military Department had allocated only four cavalymen to the First Legion for reconnaissance purposes.

At the onset of the battle, Fesaros had dispatched them all to scout the enemy situation. Since the Auguriate lacked cavalry, he wasn't concerned about losing any of his horsemen.

"Report, Legion Commander! The enemy has deployed all their troops. No reserve forces were detected."

This was good news! Fesaros felt a sense of relief and turned his attention to the cavalry reporting on friendly forces.

"Legion Commander, our left flank is being encircled from the enemy's side flanks but continues to engage in fierce combat without showing obvious signs of faltering."

Fesaros grew slightly tense.

"Legion Commander, our center advanced too far during its charge, exposing its flanks. The enemy appears to be concentrating forces on the center, and it has already begun to retreat."