

Perish 366

Chapter 366: Seeking Victory in Defeat

Fesaros immediately tensed up. Before he could speak, the staff department subordinate Marcus suggested, "Legion Commander, we must launch an attack immediately! Otherwise—"

Fesaros nodded and instructed the messenger, "Go tell Lufus right away—his First Battalion may begin their action!"

Lufus, a Roman veteran from Lukelia, was one of the six battalion captains when Maximus' rebellion army occupied Pompeii. Later, when the legion was established, he did not become Legion Commander due to seniority reasons but has always served as the First Battalion Captain of the First Legion. His battalion was the most formidable in the rebellion army, and now it remains the one with the most veterans within the First Legion.

By withdrawing the First Battalion as reserves, Fesaros hoped they would unleash their greatest power in a counterattack.

After the messenger departed, Fesaros shouted his order loudly, "Sound the attack horn!"

"Woo! Woo! Woo!..." The copper horn blared for a while as the First Legion formation advanced slowly. Some arrays didn't even budge.

Standing behind the formation, Fesaros quickly understood the reason. It wasn't because the enemy was stubbornly resisting but because many soldiers in the frontlines were busy cutting off the ears of slain enemies, disregarding orders.

"Blow it again! Harder!" Fesaros yelled furiously at the horn player. "I want to see how many times they need to hear it before obeying orders!"

Fesaros was anxious, and so were the team officers within the formation. They understood the consequences of violating military orders better than the soldiers. Amid the urgent horn blasts and the angry scoldings of team officers, the soldiers dared not delay any longer. Shield in hand and sword gripped tightly, they stormed toward the enemy before them.

When the First Legion's frontal attack once again drew all of the enemy's attention, the First Battalion, originally hidden at the rear tail-end of the formation, swiftly launched an assault on the enemy's flank under Lufus' command.

The frontline soldiers of the First Legion, eager for battle merit and rewards, attacked fiercely yet orderly, akin to a spiked iron wall forcing the enemy into a continual retreat.

The flank assault carried out by the First Battalion, however, was like a sharp dagger. Using the Centurion units as the core, with Ten-man Teams as limbs, they dispersed during the attack, weaving into the gaps in the enemy formation to slice and slaughter with short swords. They wreaked havoc and instilled panic among the enemy troops...

On the left wing, the Otarat tribal warriors, having been strategically arranged earlier, lacked the will for a desperate fight. Previously defeated, and now facing the brutal advance of the First Legion, they relied on their numerical advantage. While the middle and right sections of their line still held together, warriors at the end of their formation, attacked from both sides, began to break and flee shortly after...

The veterans of the First Battalion didn't seize the opportunity to chase the fleeing warriors but instead drove them eastward.

The terrified deserters not only disrupted their own forces' formation but quickly spread panic to their still-engaged comrades. As such, the left wing of the Otarat formation soon disintegrated from localized routing into total collapse...

"Report to the Legion Commander, our allied forces in the center have been defeated!" A cavalryman came galloping up.

"I've already seen it." Fesaros, gazing toward the left side, fought to maintain composure. Although he had accounted for this possibility during discussions with his subordinates beforehand—this was why he riskily assigned the First Battalion as a reserve in the hope of crushing the enemy's left wing promptly to then deal with subsequent complexities—the sight of his allies scattering wildly in the distance and hearing their cries for help still made him uneasy.

He turned his gaze forward. The First Legion soldiers were also chasing fleeing enemies, causing their previously tight formation to scatter completely due to the pursuit.

Last night, Fesaros had specifically emphasized to the team officers of the First Legion: after routing the enemy before them, do not pursue excessively; reform the array as quickly as possible.

But now it seemed they hadn't performed this task as well as expected, which was the main reason for Fesaros' anxiety.

"Horn player! Horn player! Blow the horn immediately, signal them to cease pursuit and reform the formation!" Fesaros shouted urgently.

"Woo woo woo woo!... Woo woo woo woo!..." The horn player blew fiercely, but amidst the dust-filled, deafening chaos of the battlefield, it had little effect on the soldiers of the First Legion who were fervently chasing fleeing enemies.

Fesaros was so anxious he was scratching his ears and pulling his hair.

"Legion Commander, I have an idea that might help regroup our soldiers, but it would be somewhat dangerous for you," Marcus spoke up.

"What's your idea? Quickly, tell me!"

"You take the large flag and, along with the horn player, each ride a horse to the front! Wave the flag while the horn player blows the horn; surely it will attract the soldiers' attention!"

"Good idea, let's do it!"

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Baka's mood at this moment felt like being on a roller coaster. He had deliberately provoked Alistacas, luring his reckless advance, allowing him to concentrate his forces and ultimately crush him

successfully—a sense of accomplishment that made him immensely satisfied. But then, he witnessed the left wing being defeated by the Aldean reinforcements, feeling both surprised and extremely angry.

What surprised him was that the Aldean reinforcements hadn't behaved as he had predicted, merely fulfilling their obligations under the alliance without going all out. On the contrary, according to tribal leaders who retreated, their assault had been remarkably fierce.

What angered him was that the tribal forces on the left wing had been so easily routed, proving entirely unworthy of full trust. In critical moments, they hadn't fought to their last breath. Had they held on a little longer, his army could have gained more initiative. Yet conveniently, Baka forgot that he himself had promised the left wing's role as merely a diversion in the pre-battle plans.

Luckily, the collapse of the Aldean center had affected the morale of their left-wing warriors. The left wing, initially strained due to low numbers, started retreating as well...

Baka's excitement returned. Even if Aldean reinforcements had crushed his left wing, his main forces had secured victory and still outnumbered the enemy, maintaining a significant advantage on the battlefield. As long as he gathered his forces chasing the routed foes, he could crush the Aldean reinforcements. However...

Baka scanned the area: dust filled the battlefield, shouts of killing and pleading for help rang everywhere, and the Otarat warriors, scattered while chasing fleeing enemies, had run far and wide... He suspected the Aldean reinforcements were similarly spread out...

As someone seasoned in numerous battles, Baka knew it would be difficult to regroup scattered soldiers in short timeframes. Nevertheless, he still aimed to make some efforts, thus instructing his trusted aides: "Quickly go find my son Betta and tell him to gather the troops as fast as possible! Go!..."

Watching his aides dart toward the battlefield, Baka felt somewhat reassured.

But just then, he faintly heard the sound of copper horns coming from the distant left... The horn sound grew clearer and louder, piercing through the battlefield's din and reaching his ears, filling him with unease.

Despite his vision being hindered by flying dust, Baka kept peering toward the left. Soon, his eyes widened in disbelief: the Aldean reinforcements' impressive large flag came into view. Behind the towering banner were countless indistinct figures of soldiers, forming a long wall advancing steadily toward him...

It's over!... Baka was struck as though by lightning, trembling all over as he slumped to the ground.

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After his troops were routed, Alistacas, his mind a blank, fled across the Kolana River under the protection of his trusted aides. He continued running up a dirt hill before finally stopping to catch his breath.

It's over—all over!... With his mind slightly calmer, Alistacas looked back to see his tribesmen desperately fleeing while being slaughtered one by one by the pursuing enemies. The tragic sight plunged him into utter despair.

"No, Alistacas, we're not defeated! Look over there!" His ears caught Cleobrotas' excited shout.

Following Cleobrotas' pointing finger, Alistacas gazed toward the battlefield on the far right side across the river. There, countless soldiers converged toward a single direction. Though it was hard to see clearly, the dazzling brilliance rapidly expanding proved they weren't Otarlat warriors but their allies—armor-clad Nix Soldiers!

"Yes, we've won!" Alistacas shook off his earlier despondency and revitalized himself.

It was apparent to any observer that the regrouped and tightly packed Nix Army, forming a giant fist, and the scattered and disorganized Otarlat warriors running aimlessly across the hills, had unquestionably shifted the battlefield advantage.

"Alistacas, we must quickly gather our warriors and launch a counterattack!" Cleobrotas urged.

"You're right!" Alistacas, reignited with fighting spirit, began taking action.

At this time, Fesaros led the First Legion in a battlefield sweep, shattering the Otarlat warriors, who had become nothing more than stragglers...

The battle dragged on until the afternoon before concluding, with the Aldean Alliance Army ultimately claiming victory.

Previously, skirmishes between the two factions over the salt mines often resulted in minimal casualties, but this conflict inflicted significant losses on both sides.

Motivated by his ambition to seize the Aldean Territory, Baka's warriors pursued the fleeing enemies with ruthless aggression, showing no mercy. Meanwhile, the soldiers of the First Legion, eager for battle merit and promotion, prioritized killing and cutting off enemy ears.

The First Legion emerged as the true victor, with its soldiers clad in armor, wielding large shields, and being well-protected. Combined with the weak offensive capabilities of their opponents, only a dozen were killed and several dozen injured.

After the battle, auxiliary personnel of the First Legion got busy: treating the wounded, cleaning the battlefield, repairing equipment, verifying battle merits, registering honors... Staff Department subordinate Tasines and Civil Affairs Department subordinate Laklid, responsible for verifying and documenting achievements, were especially overwhelmed, working tirelessly into the night without rest.

Chapter 367: Marriage Alliance

At dusk, the Aldean leaders held a banquet to celebrate their victory and specially sent Budocaribas to invite Fesaros.

With Pigeris persuading him by his side, Fesaros did not refuse this time. After arranging camp affairs, he went to the Aldean army's station with Pigeris.

At the banquet, Alistacas was very active, with the strong support of the Aldean southern leaders led by Ambrosius. It was as if the victory of this battle owed much to his command, completely ignoring the fact that he had been provoked by Baka and recklessly led his army forward, causing the central part of the Alliance Army to be the first to be overwhelmed.

Of course, Fesaros also became a popular figure at the banquet. The Aldean leaders praised the important role the First Legion, led by him, played in the battle. Many also inquired about the situation of the Nix Tribe, to which he answered one by one, with Pigeris assisting at the side, responded appropriately.

This banquet saw both sides interacting harmoniously and returning jubilant.

Early the next morning, Alistacas sent a messenger to the Otarlat camp to see a depressed Baka, demanding he fulfill his pre-battle promise.

Baka reluctantly agreed but stubbornly stated: His army did not lose to the Aldeans but was defeated by the strong allies of the Aldeans—the Nix Army! He hoped the Aldeans would manage the salt mine well because in a few years, the Otarlat people would retake it.

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Cleobrotas quietly walked into the bedroom, where a foul stench of decay permeated, causing him to sniff involuntarily.

"Who is it?" the old man lying on the bed asked.

"It's me, Great Chief," Cleobrotas hurriedly approached the bed.

Acoupaigos laboriously turned his head to the left, his wrinkled eyelids slowly opened a slit, and after surveying the visitor with murky eyes, he weakly said, "Judging by your look, we have won?"

"We achieved a great victory! We've reclaimed the salt mine!" Cleobrotas said with some excitement.

"Good, good, we finally won." Acoupaigos closed his eyes, seemingly savoring the surge of joy in his heart. After a moment, he asked, "How did we win?"

Cleobrotas hesitated briefly before simply recounting the course of the battle, omitting the incident where Alistacas was provoked and launched a reckless attack.

Acoupaigos fell silent for a moment before lightly sighing, "The Nix are indeed powerful. This time Alistacas and they have all seen it firsthand. I believe they won't hold grudges against the decisions we made before... By the way, how are Alistacas and the Nix getting along?"

"He gets along well with them and respects the Nix more after the battle," Cleobrotas stated, truthfully.

"That's good, that's good, that's really good." Acoupaigos said three times contentedly, then added, "Please call that youngster for me, I have something to tell him."

"Great Chief, he's still on the road with his team; I hurried back first to report this good news to you."

Acoupaigos paused for a moment, then suddenly understands: "You still care the most about my condition... I'm fine, I can live a few more days."

Cleobrotas's expression dimmed at these words, he opened his mouth but didn't know what to say for a moment.

"Brotas, you do have an eye for things. I never really saw the young chief of the Nix to be much like the great Alexander, it's more about using them as a shield for our tribe..."

At this moment, Acoupaigos weakly voiced his thoughts: "But I never expected the Nix to repeatedly repel the Pannonians' attacks and truly gain a foothold here... I heard that over this year, they have developed well along the Kupa River, and are continuously strengthening. Even some of our tribes have been drawn to them, keeping close ties..."

Acoupaigos struggled to open his eye slit wider, trying to focus better on his confidant's face: "Even if we must chase the sun, we shouldn't get too close, to avoid being devoured by it..."

Cleobrotas felt a sinking feeling, and he softly reminded, "But Great Chief, we need the Nix people more now than they need us. Take this battle for instance, the Otarlat people gathered such a large army to fight us, perhaps it wasn't just to hold onto the salt mine!"

"Ah... since the kingdom was destroyed by the Romans, it's been difficult for the Illyrian tribes to unite, rather they often have internal conflicts... Baka, that greedy wolf, takes advantage of our defense against the Pannonians, repeatedly hitting us when we're down, I understand his intentions clearly..."

Acoupaigos sighed with a troubled expression, "Nevertheless, the Nix people have become our biggest support now, but how can we maintain the current good situation long-term, ensuring our tribe gains safety, benefits from the Nix Tribe's development, while letting the ambitious young chief fully trust us without harboring other thoughts?"

Cleobrotas fell into contemplation, and after a while, his eyes brightened, though he then slightly shook his head.

"It seems you've got an idea; marriage alliance is the best way to further our relationship with the Nix Tribe. If Maximus and I become in-laws, tribal matters become family matters, easily solved behind closed doors."

Acoupaigos's voice carried a slight fluctuation as he spoke: "However, Alistacas does not have a daughter, but you have an age-appropriate granddaughter, who is also my grandchild. Marrying Geniandafra to the Nix Tribe Chief Maximus would bring the two tribes closer together. What... do you think?"

Cleobrotas remained silent.

"Since Maximus already has a wife, is that why you disagree?" Acoupaigos rarely showed eagerness: "Given you consider Maximus as akin to Alexander, you should know that the great Alexander had several wives, cough, cough, cough..."

Seeing Acoupaigos coughing repeatedly until his face flushed, Cleobrotas quickly said, "I don't mind Maximus having a wife, you know Geniandafra is rather headstrong. I'm worried that after marrying Maximus, she might not get along well and instead create some opinions he might have against us."

"Geniandafra being headstrong? That's with you guys. Every time she comes to me, she appears very obedient. This little girl is clever, just watch, she will do her utmost there to help us, help her uncle." Alistacas smiled a little.

"In that case—" Cleobrotas hesitated briefly before solemnly saying, "I agree to marry my granddaughter to Maximus!"

"This matter is entrusted to you. I hope to see my granddaughter integrate into the Nix Tribe before I leave..." Acoupaigos's eyes carried hope: "Moreover, this way, Alistacas will be dependent on you, and I can leave without worry."

Hearing this, Cleobrotas felt immense emotion, his eyes began to moisten.

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Valerius, a Sulla veteran, once a Lukaiya person, joined the rebel army with Quintus and served as a guide in the raid on Pompey, earning some merits. However, due to his old age, he couldn't partake in intense battles and didn't join the combat units as a team officer like Oluus and Lufus, nor did he wish to engage intellectually, declining to be part of the staff, thus staying in the rebel army's Supply Camp doing odd jobs.

After the rebel army entered the Illyria Mountain and established the Nix Tribe, settling down, Valerius, being old and unnoticed, didn't attract any woman, thus after being allocated sixty acres of land, he first squeezed in with other single tribesmen in Snowdonia's mansion, later moving into a new house built by the public works team.

He didn't enjoy managing fields, and after discovering that Aldean hirelings were not only diligent but far better at farming than him, he readily paid a high share of the field income and hired three Aldeans to work for him, while he either helped artisans in the Public Works Department or assisted with soldier training at the Military Department training ground... Life was fulfilling and pleasant until a recent announcement posted by the Military Department prompted him to make a decision.

He got up early this morning but found someone had risen even earlier, already baking bread and simmering fish soup, placing them on the dining table.

This was done by Salia, an Illyrian woman he hired, who also told him: To eat more for sufficient strength to pass today's test.

While eating the steaming breakfast, listening to her caring words, and thinking about the careful attention she had given him over the period, Valerius began to waver on the decision to grow old alone.

He spent quite some time absent-mindedly finishing his breakfast and finally made up his mind.

He walked to the busy Salia by the hearth and coughed heavily a few times.

When Salia turned to look at him, he began to feel nervous, stumbling over his Illyrian words, "... The breakfast... breakfast is delicious... if you're willing, you could... could move in with me... with your two children... I'd be willing to raise them together with you..."

Chapter 368: Selecting Crossbow Soldiers

"I am willing!" Sally replied quite promptly.

How could she not be willing!

A few years ago, her husband and brothers died in the war against the Segestica people. She was left alone with two children, following the surviving tribesmen to escape into the mountains, living quite a difficult life. Especially when the two children often couldn't sleep due to hunger, she was tormented to the point of having suicidal thoughts...

Luckily, the Nix people came. When the news that "Nix wants to hire people to work and will give a lot of food as payment" spread through the mountain tribes, she was one of the first Aldean tribesmen to bravely come to the Nix Territory, and then she accepted Valerius's employment...

Although this man was a bit older and somewhat lazy at work, he was very kind, often allowing her to take food back for the children. After the harvest, he even gave her more food... Many widows in these tribes that escaped into the mountains wanted to marry a Nix person who owned fertile land, so such a good opportunity shouldn't be missed!

Sally's affirmative answer made Valerius breathe a big sigh of relief, then joy filled his chest, and even after leaving, he still walked lightly on his feet.

Arriving at the entrance of the training ground of the Military Department, the guards were familiar with him and let him in without any questions.

Valerius thought he came very early, but once inside, he found that many were already there. The instructors of the Military Department were shouting continuously inside: "Everyone line up! No testing without queueing!..."

Valerius sensibly lined up at the very edge of a queue and, upon closer inspection, found acquaintances in front and behind him.

"Pro, why are you here too?!" Valerius was very surprised because the old man standing behind him, about the same age as him, had an unusual status. He was one of the earliest slaves to join the rebel army, always working with Volenus. It's said that if it weren't for his illiteracy, he might have become a deputy officer of the Agricultural Department, and during the recent harvest celebration, he became one of the three tribesmen awarded for their exceptional personal grain production, earning everybody's respect, for he taught many tribespeople how to farm better.

"I'm not here to enlist as a crossbow soldier; I'm here to test if I can use the new weapon invented by the leader. If possible, in the future, when our tribe lacks troops, we old guys can also go to war and defend our homes!" Pro said candidly.

He was no longer the scrawny, timid figure he was when he first joined the rebel army. Over three years of battle experience and ample food had reduced his wrinkles, made his body stronger, and he seemed several years younger, exuding an air of calmness and grandeur.

"Uncle Pro, from what you're saying, are we going to war again?!" A young man standing in front of Valerius turned around and asked somewhat excitedly.

The young man's name was Leonidas. He joined the troops after the rebel army entered the Apulia Region. He was injured in the Battle of the Womans River and returned to the team after recovering, only to be injured again in the fight against the Segestica army. Although he was healed through the careful treatment of the Medical Camp, his body could no longer withstand intense battles, forcing him

to leave the legion and become an unserviceable young tribesman, which he always regretted. Now, it seemed he had a chance to make up for it, so he arrived early.

"I haven't heard any news from the top about going to war, but since we've settled here, will we lack battles?" Pro said candidly.

"Uncle, you're right, we never run out of battles." Leonidas agreed and then said, "I heard that this time the First Legion helped our allies fight in the south and won a great victory. Many soldiers will probably get promoted because of this, which is really enviable!"

"You don't need to envy them. If you pass the test later and become a crossbow soldier, you can continue to fight and earn merits like them!" Valerius patted his shoulder, encouraging him: "Of course, if I also pass the test, we can fight side by side from then on!"

"Yes, let's work hard together!" Leonidas nodded vigorously.

The training ground of the Military Department had already filled with quite a few tribesmen, but most were middle-aged, elderly, or young men who had been injured or disabled, and even a few strong women, yet there were no fully-limbed, healthy young tribesmen because they were already soldiers in various legions or reserve units.

Most of the tribesmen present originally did miscellaneous work in the Supply Camp. After the Twenty Peerage System was promulgated, they were full of envy for not being able to go to war and earn merits. Now, with the announcement of recruitment for crossbow soldiers relaxing restrictions, they were given a chance, so many people came to apply for the test. However, due to unfamiliarity with the new weapon crossbow, many were anxious, and they encouraged each other everywhere.

"It's your turn!" The instructor waved to Leonidas.

Leonidas gathered his spirits and walked briskly to the wooden table, where the new weapon everyone was talking about—the crossbow—was placed.

As he was inspecting it carefully, the instructor beside him asked, "Do you know how to use it?"

"I watched the people in front of me use it earlier, so I have a rough idea."

"Then let's begin."

Leonidas took a deep breath, picked up the crossbow grip with his right hand, positioned the butt against his abdomen, then grabbed the bowstring with both hands and pulled it back with effort. Although it was quite strenuous, he had maintained training while in the legion and had been plowing fields every day after recovering from his injury, so he was not lacking in strength. He steadily secured the bowstring.

At this time, the instructor came over, providing guidance while saying, "Now hold up the crossbow with both hands level with your shoulder, close your left eye, aim with your right eye along this iron sight, then align with the target... Very good, just like that, hold steady, keep it up for a while... a bit longer... now pull the trigger."

Leonidas watched as the bowstring snapped back, puzzled, "Don't I need to load a crossbow arrow in it?"

Yes, he had some knowledge of this new weapon because one of his neighbors was a craftsman in the Iron Workshop, and he specifically asked him about it.

"Once you pass the test and become a crossbow soldier, crossbow arrows will be issued to you. Now, follow the previous steps and do it three more times."

Leonidas obeyed and repeated it three times, showing no change in his expression. His originally injured lung didn't cough violently because it wasn't a continuous high-intensity confrontation, just a little effort in pulling the string.

The instructor checked his complexion, then took him to the registration area nearby.

At the wooden table, the Military Department subordinate asked, "What's your name?"

"Leonidas."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Where are you from?"

"The Puqieti people of the Apulia Region, Italy."

"Do you speak Illyrian?"

"Just a little."

"Do you have any military experience?"

"I was with our First Legion before, and I even served as a centurion until I got injured..."

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The Military Department subordinate asked questions while carefully recording the answers, finally raising his head to look at the instructor, "It's all good."

"Have I passed?" Leonidas asked excitedly.

"You've only passed halfway. There's still another test." The instructor gestured to a soldier maintaining order on the sidelines.

"Take him over there for the next test," the instructor said to the soldier.

"Follow me."

Leonidas glanced at the four other tribesmen nearby who were stringing and holding crossbows, then turned back to Valerius and Pro, smiling, "Uncles, don't worry, this test is very simple, you guys can easily pass it." He said, waving his fist as encouragement.

Leonidas followed the soldier to the other side of the training ground, where a group had already gathered. The instructor there did not immediately start the test, waiting for more first-round test passers, including Pro and Valerius, to arrive.

"Now, follow me and run. I won't stop, and neither can you. If you can't keep running, you may voluntarily exit the lineup!..." The instructor finished loudly and started jogging forward.

Seeing this, Leonidas nearly laughed out loud. This was too easy.

Thus, under the supervision of over a dozen soldiers on both sides, everyone rushed to follow the instructor's jogging pace. They ran about a hundred meters, then the instructor turned back, and so did they...

Not knowing how many round-trips they had completed, Leonidas began to feel discomfort in his left lung, yet he persevered.

When he almost couldn't hold back a cough, a loud voice came from the instructor in front: "Alright, the test is over. Everyone who is still in the field has passed the test!"

The crowd cheered, but Leonidas didn't join in the shout to avoid coughing; he did, however, see Valerius and Pro among the cheering tribesmen.

After everyone quieted down, the instructor spoke to the dejected tribesmen on the sidelines: "You don't need to be disheartened. You can strengthen your running training back home. At the beginning of every month, you can still apply for testing here. Once you pass, you'll still have the opportunity to become crossbow soldiers. Those who passed the test, follow me for registration."

This time the registration was much more formal. Leonidas and others went to the Military Department—Military Affairs Department office, where a subordinate used a newly devised crossbow soldier registration book to record everyone's details, instructing them to report here and undergo training every day during the next half-month of agricultural off-season.

Upon exiting the Military Department, Valerius and Leonidas found Pro still waiting for them outside: "How did it go?"

"Everything went smoothly. Now, this kid and I can serve in the military again!" Valerius excitedly patted Leonidas on the shoulder.

"That's great!" Pro said joyfully, "We haven't seen each other for several months. Come to my place tonight, I'll have my wife make something nice, and we'll have a good celebration!"

Chapter 369: War Planning

Although Pro is also old, he was quite well-known in the past Supply Camp as Volenus' capable subordinate, so naturally, there were women interested in him. Therefore, after the tribe was established, he got married.

"No, no, come to my place for dinner tonight!" Valerius urgently objected loudly.

"Eat at your place? What good food can you make?" Pro disdainfully objected.

"Don't think only your house has women. I just found one myself, and the food she makes is quite good!" Valerius boasted.

"Alright, Valerius, quietly got yourself a woman, we'll have to come to your place tonight to celebrate properly." Pro said with a smile.

"Leonidas, how about you now? Still single?" Valerius smugly asked the youngest of the three.

"Uh..." Leonidas lowered his head a bit embarrassed.

"It's okay, it's okay." Valerius comforted: "Come to my place tonight; I'll have my woman introduce someone to you. There are plenty of women in the Alde Tribe she belongs to, all wanting to marry us Nix people. You can pick a good one."

Leonidas didn't speak, but his eyes were full of anticipation as he looked at Valerius.

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"Leader, our Military Department selected 500 tribesmen yesterday who can easily perform four reloadings, hold the crossbow steadily to shoot, and can jog long distances without much effort. They fully meet our requirements for crossbow soldiers and will start training today. Additionally, we selected over 600 more as reserves, so once the crossbow troop expands, we'll have enough backup personnel," Flanitnus reported.

"Good, the training for crossbow soldiers is relatively easy. I believe the unit will take shape in less than a month." Maximus looked at Capito: "The key issue now is whether the Iron Workshop can produce enough crossbows in a short time?"

This wasn't a regular meeting of the Political Affairs Hall but rather Maximus calling in three chief officers from the Military Department, the chief officer of the Finance Department, and the chief officer of the Public Works Department to discuss related military affairs.

"Leader, ten days ago, after the Iron Workshop received our order to speed up the production of crossbows, they have manufactured forty crossbows and more than five hundred arrows by yesterday..."

Capito faithfully reported: "Currently, the issue is the lack of materials, mainly linen, and also insufficient manpower... If these conditions can be met, Kadesos promised me that 'within two months, a five hundred-man crossbow unit can be fully equipped.'

"For the linen problem, Pigeris has already negotiated with the Alde Tribe, and the linen will arrive in a few days. As for insufficient manpower..."

Maximus stroked his chin and said, "We can have the Iron Workshop stop making other iron goods and focus all manpower on making crossbows! If that's still not enough, your Public Works Department can also divert some manpower from other workshops to prioritize crossbow production."

"With your permission, leader, the Iron Workshop will definitely complete equipping the crossbow unit within two months." Capito said with relieved expressions.

"Leader, what's the current situation with the Pannonians? When will they launch an attack on us? About how many enemies will there be?" Flantillus asked eagerly.

Maximus observed everyone with a serious expression, saying solemnly: "From the intelligence we have received, both Segestica and Brochi territories of the major Pannonian Tribes have started to collect large amounts of grain, call up tribal members for military training, and the blacksmiths in the tribes are also urgently crafting armor and weapons..."

The most important thing is that the Segestica village neighboring us has not only increased border patrols but also occasionally has convoys carrying materials into the village... All these indicate that the Pannonians will have major military actions, and these actions are aimed at us!"

"From this, it seems certain that the Pannonians intend to attack us." Quintus pondered, "Last year, several Pannonian tribes united to attack our temporary camp. At that time, their troops numbered about 30,000 and were eventually repelled by us. This time, they will only gather more forces to attack us."

"Even if the Pannonian army comes with more troops than last time, our strength now is far superior to when we just arrived here last year. The First Legion easily defeated an Otarat army far outnumbering them, proving our army's superiority over these local tribal forces that lack rigorous training." Flantillus said confidently: "Our concern now is not knowing when the Pannonians will launch their attack or how they will attack. If we could find out in advance, we could prepare and reduce our losses."

"Emmerich once told me, like other ethnic groups here, the Pannonians worship Divine beings and keep promises made before them. If the new Great Chief of Segestica breaks the truce agreement made under sacred ritual and launches a war against us, won't he fear the Divine's wrath and the discontent of his tribesmen?"

Maximus slowly stated his considered thoughts: "Additionally, gathering tens of thousands of troops to jointly attack us, given the Pannonian Tribe Alliance's military mobilization and organization capabilities, cannot be done in a short time... If it drags into winter, cold weather will complicate their march, combat, and food transport. Therefore, I believe that once Segestica's truce agreement with us ends, the Pannonians will be eager to attack us."

"Leader, I think what you said makes sense. The Pannonians should launch an attack once the truce ends," Flanitnus nodded in agreement.

"That being the case, we have almost two months, and the Iron Workshop can certainly complete the task you assigned, leader," Capito interjected.

"Last time, the Pannonian tribal army gathered in Segestica Territory and then marched along the south bank of the Kupa River, finally besieging our temporary camp..."

As the chief officer of the Staff Department, Quintus had evidently considered this aspect. He pointed to a rough map of the areas surrounding the Nix Tribe on the wooden table, saying, "This time, with Pannonian troops attacking us, the south bank of the Kupa River is likely to be their main attack route again—"

Flanitnus interjected: "In that case, we can concentrate our troops in Westeni. Once the enemy arrives, we can block them there, forcing them to engage us north of Westeni. The terrain there is not very wide, and the Pannonian army, with numbers certainly much larger than ours, would have difficulty deploying formations, reducing their damage to our territory if we repel them there."

Quintus knocked on the map on the table, saying in a deep voice, "But we must not ignore another route of advance—from the western side of the Brochi Tribe's territory to the east bank of the Kolana River. This distance is not long and mainly consists of hilly terrain with rivers, also suitable for large troop movements.

Previously, a Pequot force once marched through in the opposite direction, causing significant losses for Brochi due to troop shortages. If Brochi's Great Chief is worried about similar events occurring again, he might lead his army along this route—"

Quintus traced his fingers on the map, emphasizing: "If the Pannonian army reaches the east bank of the Kolana River and moves north along the river, bypassing the Validosi Swamp, they could invade our Snowdonia Territory!"

Flanitus said nothing, bending over to concentrate on the map in thought.

"I remember there are many Alde Tribes along the Kolana River. Surely the Pannonian army wouldn't find passing through the north bank of the Kolana River to reach us that easily?" Gaius, chief officer of the Finance Department, couldn't help but ask.

Capito scornfully commented: "Last time, when the Pannonian army besieged our camp, the Aldeans didn't even send troops to harass them from behind. After fighting the Otarat people this time, the Aldeans reportedly suffered significant losses. They wouldn't dare intercept the Pannonian army, which has repeatedly beaten them. I'm afraid the Pannonian army won't even reach the Kolana River before the Aldeans residing there hastily retreat."

Gaius was momentarily stunned and did not retort, realizing this could indeed be the situation. So he suggested, "We could also concentrate our troops in Snowdonia. If the Pannonians attack from that direction, we would fight them there."

"What if the Pannonian army splits into two, attacking both Snowdonia and Westeni simultaneously?" Quintus asked.

Gaius's complexion changed, and he stammered, "Then our troops... can also split into two groups, blocking them at both ends of the Kupa River... and then combat."

"If the Pannonian invading army is numerous, splitting into two forces would favor their march and encampment, and also their combat. But for us, if we equally split our forces to block them at both ends and engage in combat, with our already limited troops, we may not hold any advantage..."

Flantillus sighed, first glancing at Quintus and then at Maximus, and candidly said, "I hadn't considered the southern route of advance earlier. Thanks to Quintus's reminder. If the Pannonian army has enough numbers and a wise commander, they might indeed attack from two sides!"

If that happens... it would be best to first station small forces at Westeni and Snowdonia, concentrating our main forces to first defeat the enemy on one side, and then engage the enemy on the other side for a decisive battle."

Quintus picked up the conversation, solemnly saying, "Leader, if the Pannonians attack from both sides, I agree with Flanitnus's proposal. This is the best approach, though our territory might suffer considerable damage as a result."

Chapter 370: Disadvantages of the 20 Noble System

Hearing these words, Gaius's expression changed.

Capito exclaimed, "Leader, if we can't intercept the Pannonian Army in time and they break into our territory, and then roam to the north bank of the Kupa River, destroying the workshops we've painstakingly established, especially the Iron Workshop, all our previous efforts would be ruined!"

Maximus remained calm and did not respond immediately. He paced around the wooden table, pondering as he walked back and forth, and suddenly said, "We cannot just wait for the Pannonians to attack; we should take the initiative and disrupt their attack plans!"

Flanitnus frowned and asked, "Leader, do you mean we should attack the Segestica Territory first without waiting for the truce agreement to expire?"

"Our Nix Tribe must keep promises to gain the trust of other tribes here!" Maximus shook his head, looking keenly at Flanitnus, and said in a deep voice, "What I mean is... Even if Segestica and Brochi plan to attack us from both sides after the truce agreement expires, their main camp is far from our territory and can't immediately invade us.

On the contrary, we can immediately attack the Segestica Village adjacent to Westeni, forcing the Segestica people from the north to quickly come and engage us.

It's estimated that by the time we've dealt with them, the southern enemy may not have reached the Kolana River yet. As we are on internal lines, our marching speed will definitely be faster than theirs, and we can completely block them before they enter our territory, and then defeat them!"

Internal lines... Quintus muttered the unfamiliar term Maximus used and quickly grasped its general meaning, praising, "Leader, this is a brilliant way to counter the enemy's two-pronged attack!"

"This plan is indeed better than what I just mentioned," Flanitnus said sincerely, "But implementing it well won't be so easy either."

Maximus smiled slightly and said seriously, "I'm just providing an idea. Since you both agree with it, spend time turning this idea into a feasible military plan. Also, consider the possibility that the Pannonians might concentrate their forces on one side or send part of their army through the southern mountains to invade our territory..."

In short, you have to consider all possibilities of Pannonian invasion and devise countermeasures, and conduct targeted training for the tribesmen, as this is your Military Department's responsibility! Only in this way can we be truly prepared when the Pannonians launch an attack!"

"Yes, Leader," Flanitnus and Quintus responded in unison.

Maximus continued, "Although this time it's the Pannonians who are attacking, and we might mostly be fighting on our own land, consuming not much grain, it's still best to prepare enough grain for 20,000 people to fight for a month... So if any surprise extends the war, we won't panic. Gaius, after this autumn harvest, is our tribe's grain reserve sufficient?"

Gaius did not immediately respond. He counted on his fingers for a while and then said, "If these 20,000 soldiers can each bring five days' worth of rations, our grain will definitely last for a month."

Maximus turned to the only person in the room who hadn't spoken yet: "Lebilus, can your Arms Department ensure the weaponry and food supply for 20,000 soldiers?"

Having held back a bellyful of words, Lebilus eagerly replied, "Leader, when we were in Italy, we had more than two legions, almost all equipped with armor and weapons. Later, after three times destroying the Roman Army, we obtained additional weapons and equipment."

Even though there were quite a few casualties among the soldiers on the way here, thanks to the Supply Camp's help, all these weapons and armor were brought here intact. In the past few months, the Iron Workshop has repaired damaged armor and weapons and also crafted some new weapons...

Considering the armor and weapons owned by veterans and stored in the warehouse, it's enough to equip three full legions, with enough left to provide shields and short swords for a thousand more people, although armor is slightly insufficient. Plus, regarding the 500 crossbow soldiers you just mentioned, Leader, our Arms Department can just meet the needs for 20,000 soldiers' weapons and equipment.

As for the food supply, since the Finance Department has ample grain, transporting grain for the army poses no difficulty for the Arms Department. Our army's stationing and operations should both be near the two ends of our territory, making short-distance transport inherently easy, and being along the Kupa River and Kolana River, water transportation is even more convenient and labor-saving.

This time, during the First Legion's southward operation, following the fleet to transport grain, I deeply recognized the advantages of water transport. When the fleet returned to the tribe, there was even a small portion of grain left uneaten, and although our tribe currently has few ships, transporting multiple times should not affect our army operations.

Regarding food preparation for the soldiers, before engaging, we in the Military Department would like to seek your approval, Leader, to enlist some civilians for this task."

"That's certainly no problem."

"I also wish to temporarily borrow someone from you, Leader, at the time."

"Acronis?"

"Yes, Acronis was always the head of our team's kitchen before, and this time, our Arms Department could learn some experience from her."

"That's also no problem. Anything else?"

"No more."

"Excellent!" Maximus praised, "Although the Arms Department was established late, Lebilus, this is your first time shouldering such a heavy responsibility. You've considered the issues very thoroughly, and I believe you will lead the Arms Department to meet the needs of this operation well."

Hearing Maximus's encouragement, Lebilus was visibly excited.

Maximus looked at the others, "Does anyone else have questions about the upcoming war with the Pannonians?"

"Leader, I have a question regarding soldiers earning battle merits—" Flanitnus coughed lightly and said in a solemn voice, "I think there are some issues with the current Twenty Peerage System that might need reevaluation?"

"Oh?" Maximus raised his eyebrows and looked directly at Flanitnus, "Let's hear it."

Flanitnus earnestly said, "During the Aldeans' battle against the Otarat people, some issues surfaced with the First Legion. After repelling the enemy's left-wing charge, Fesaros ordered a counterattack, but the soldiers at the front did not immediately obey orders and were busy cutting off the enemy's ears. The copper horn kept blowing, the officers kept urging, then they began acting.

After completely routing the enemy's left wing, according to the original plan, the First Legion was supposed to quickly reorganize and continue advancing to attack the enemy's center and right wing to win the entire battle. But the soldiers were preoccupied with killing routed soldiers to earn merits and completely ignored previous orders.

The officers couldn't control them, and the First Legion scattered. If Fesaros hadn't reacted quickly by daringly riding into the battlefield center, waving the flag, and reassembling the troops first... It's uncertain who would have won or lost that battle.

After the battle, the Military Affairs Department's subordinates found it troublesome to tally battle merits.

Firstly, it's challenging to verify if the ears handed in by soldiers were obtained from direct combat or from killing routed enemies; secondly, numerous disputes arose among the soldiers over this, such as one soldier killing an enemy but not yet cutting off the ear, only for another soldier to do so...

The subordinates in charge of recording merits found it challenging to make accurate judgments on this, and soldiers fought over it, leading to disunity in the ranks...

The First Legion returned two days ago, but our Military Affairs Department hasn't finished the commendation yet, and the subordinates are still troubled by this back in the office—"

Flanitnus hesitated, then emphasized, "Leader, the Twenty Peerage System you implemented indeed motivated the soldiers' fighting spirit, allowing the First Legion to bravely fight when surrounded by numerous Otarlat troops and to achieve victory. However, it also caused soldiers to overly focus on earning merit for promotion, neglecting the officers' orders, and even leading to disunity in the ranks. If we face powerful enemies in the future, these issues might cause us significant problems!"

Maximus listened impassively and asked, "Since you've noticed these problems, how do you think they should be solved?"

Flanitnus gathered his thoughts and stated ideas he had considered for a long time: "Leader, I think revisions should be made to the Twenty Peerage System concerning some merit evaluation criteria for the army and soldiers!

We could stop having individual soldiers cut enemies' ears for merit, and instead award merits to entire teams. For instance, if a larger company encounters an enemy of roughly equal number and defeats them, the entire company could earn a medium merit, some soldiers in the company could each earn a small merit, and those soldiers in the front line engaging directly with the enemy could earn double small merits...

The promotion standards for tribesmen should also be revised accordingly, such as requiring two small merits to advance from ordinary tribe members to Second-class Tribe Members. This way, the soldiers in the aforementioned company would need to engage in one more victorious battle to merit a promotion, while those in the front who truly fought could be directly promoted...

If the company encounters a significantly weaker enemy, even if victorious, it would only count as a small merit; distributed among each soldier, it would only be half a small merit... If the company encounters a stronger enemy and still wins after a fierce battle, it would count as a great merit, and each soldier should earn a medium merit...

With these evaluation criteria, soldiers would focus on obeying orders and defeating enemies rather than busying themselves with cutting ears, and the whole team would become more united. For our Military Department, recording their merits would also be easier and less prone to errors.

Of course, for those brave soldiers who are the first to breach the enemy's camp or kill the enemy leader, we would also record a great merit separately for them..."