

Perish 396

Chapter 396: Sethonos's Persuasion

The captives earlier were solely focused on eating, and having just suffered a crushing defeat, they had a shadow in their hearts about the ferocity of the Nix Soldiers, so they didn't dare to look at them closely. They thus didn't notice that among the Nix team coming to deliver food were their own people. Moreover, in Onosis' eyes, the Nix Soldier standing before him, although very similar looking to his fellow tribesman from memory, carried an entirely different heroic demeanor in full armor.

"It's me." Sethonos replied, squatting down and removing the helmet.

"Sethonos, it's really... really you!" Onosis eagerly reached out to touch Sethonos, but the cold armor made him instinctively withdraw his hand, and his expression became cautious once more: "It's great that you're still alive! But how did you become like this?"

"Uncle, do you remember, last year the Andres Chief summoned the army to attack the Nix, and I joined. You even saw me off..." Sethonos spoke in a gentle tone.

"Of course I remember, I even reminded you back then, that the Great Chief would surely win a great victory this time, and if you fought bravely, perhaps our leader would forget his grudge against your father and return the land they took from your family..."

Sethonos, reminiscing the past, sighed and said, "...No one expected the Great Chief to suffer such a defeat, alas, so many tribesmen didn't make it back... later the leader returned and some tribesmen were also ransomed back, but you were never among them... they all said you might have died in the swamp, for this, my wife and I even set up a grave for you in the wasteland east of the village... but unexpectedly, not only are you alive, but you have... joined the Nix..."

"It's not just me who joined the Nix, from last year to this year, thousands of captured Segestica Warriors have joined the Nix! Him! Him! Him! They are all our tribesmen!" Sethonos turned to point at several Nix Soldiers among the captives, instinctively defending himself.

"I don't know about the others, but you are a good kid! How could you... betray the tribe!" Onosis looked angry at Sethonos, his voice unconsciously rising.

"Uncle, how can you blame me! You should know that the youngest son of that Timileus forcibly took my father hunting, encountered two bears, and the others were all bitten to death, my father was also injured but managed to escape back to the village..."

But Timileus and a few other nobles, who lost their sons, insisted that my father had taken them to hunt in a dangerous place on his own accord, abandoned them to escape alone, took the land from our family, and forced my father to do hard labor. He was already injured and couldn't withstand such torture and soon fell ill and died...

"I've been looked down upon by the tribesmen since childhood, only you, Uncle, took care of me..." Onosis' words stirred up the long-buried resentment in Sethonos, and he accused emotionally, "As you said, I originally thought of following the Andres Chief to perform well, hoping to be recognized by him to change my life...but we lost, our seemingly invincible Andres Chief was easily defeated."

Sethonos' mouth twitched, showing a trace of sarcasm, "Many of us were captured, first sent to the Aldeans to mine, suffered a lot, and later the Nix people came and said, 'As long as we join the Nix Tribe, we won't have to endure these hardships again...'. "

Some people chose to join, many of them because their families were captured by the Nix and they had no choice but to yield. I am different; I only want to change my life, since there was no way out in the original tribe, why not try another path!"

"You...you..." Onosis looked at Sethonos' excited expression, remembered the things he went through in the village, sighed repeatedly, and finally could not help but quietly say, "But the Nix are outsiders after all, joining them cannot be better than staying in the tribe!"

"Says who!" Sethonos raised his eyebrows, saying loudly, "We Pannonians are actually Illyrians, just separated hundreds of years ago. The Nix Tribe was also primarily founded by Illyrians, Leader Maximus of the Nix Tribe sees us Pannonians as kin and very much welcomes us to join the Nix Tribe—"

"If the Nix people see us Segestica as one family, why are they so brutally killing us?!" Someone suddenly interjected loudly nearby, and unknowingly captives were crouched around Sethonos.

Sethonos glanced around, and in a louder voice, said, "How the Nix treated us, isn't it because we first invaded the Alde territory, killed and drove away their tribesmen, occupying this land, leading to their necessary counterattack!

Speaking of the several crushing defeats we suffered from last year to this year, which one was not us attacking the Nix first and then they counterattacked successfully! Don't talk about how harsh the Nix are to us, think about how we used to either kill the Aldeans and throw them into the Kupa River or sever their limbs and throw them in front of the Aldeans' village to intimidate them.

And the Nix people, after fighting us, would treat our injured tribesmen just like treating their own, see here—"

Sethonos lifted his left leg, showing a rather long scar, he gestured to the scar and said loudly, "This is from when Andreas Chief led us fighting against the Nix in the Validosi Swamp, I was stabbed by them, and fell on the ground, unable to move, it was the Nix who carried me to their camp. Thanks to the doctor and nurse's meticulous treatment, my leg healed quickly.

It wasn't just me, some tribesmen who were injured in battle recovered their health because of the good care from the Nix people—"

"Oh, I remember now, I saw some Nix Soldiers carrying some of our injured tribesmen into the camp earlier, are they going to treat their wounds?" Another captive interjected.

"Of course! During battle, we are enemies, after battle, we are all Illyrians, and the Nix will try their best to heal their kin!"

"So you joined them because you were grateful to the Nix people?" Another captive inquired.

"It's not only because of this." Sethonos once again looked at Onosis, proudly saying, "Uncle, can you imagine? I had no land in the tribe before, I relied on herding for Timileus for some food, if not for the goodies you often gave me, I probably wouldn't have grown this tall or strong...

But when I joined the Nix, after winning this war, I can be allocated at least 60 acres of land, and my captain is considering promoting me to centurion for my good performance in the battle! I'm doing much better in the Nix compared to the original tribe!"

"Just 60 acres of land and it made you betray the tribe, betray the Divine we worship, and you're still boasting so grandly before us, you really have thick skin!"

A mocking voice came, changing Sethonos' face, he looked over to see a middle-aged man sitting outside the circle around him, fair and plump, looking at him with disdain.

Sethonos suppressed his anger and asked, "How much land does your family have?"

"I've never counted, but it's much more than 60 acres." The man dismissively shrugged.

Sethonos suddenly laughed, "Then you must be a noble?"

Before the man could speak, someone said, "He is an elder of our tribe!"

Immediately someone else added, "He is my Clan Leader Alpas!"

"Noble" is actually a foreign word for the Segestica people, "elder" and "Clan Leader" are the formal terms. A Segestica Tribe is a large group formed by the reproduction of a related bloodline over decades or centuries, which consists of smaller groups formed through family division.

Generally, the leader of the largest and strongest small group is the leader, other small group leaders are elders of the tribe, and to the tribe members, he is the Clan Leader because he has more or less kinship relations with ordinary tribe members.

After the two spoke, Alpas tried to thrust his chest out, wanting to show an arrogant demeanor.

Sethonos, however, didn't show any respect, instead asked directly, "Elder Alpas, do you know about how much land we, ordinary Segestica tribe members, have?"

Alpas loved enjoyment and almost all territorial affairs were entrusted to his subordinates, naturally, he couldn't answer Sethonos' question. After a pause, he slightly lost his composure and scolded, "What qualification does an ordinary tribesman like you have to question me!"

Sethonos didn't clash with him but seriously said, "In my original Segestica tribe, ordinary tribe members had around 30 acres of land, right, Uncle?"

Onosis hesitated for a moment but eventually nodded, "About that."

The other captives began to chatter: "Our tribe has a little more land per household, but near the mountains, not as fertile."

"We don't have that much land, having 25 acres is good enough."

"You claimed to get 60 acres in the Nix is boasting, some clan leaders in our tribe only have about 60 acres."

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"Everyone, please quiet down!" Sethonos said loudly, "Regardless of 20 acres, 30 acres, or 40 acres, we, ordinary tribe members, toil hard on the fields every year and still have to submit a significant portion of the grain to the tribe elders, leaving just enough leftovers to barely feed our families—"

Chapter 397: Sethonos's Persuasion (Continued)

"The food that has been handed over isn't something I use for my personal enjoyment. It's meant to be submitted to the leader, who then submits it to the Great Chief to supply the army for expeditions against enemies..." Alpas, realizing something, quickly defended himself, "Our Segestica Tribe is in a precarious situation. Since we began resisting the Skodisqi people, we've hardly had a year without battles. Without enough food to mobilize the tribesmen for war, how can we ensure the safety of the tribe?—"

"But we've suffered repeated defeats. Not only is the tribe unsafe, it's become even more dangerous!" someone suddenly retorted, leaving Alpas speechless.

Sethonos seized the moment to continue reprimanding Alpas loudly, "Listening to your argument, it seems the hardship of ordinary tribe members is supposed to be expected. But what about you?! You tribal leaders, elders, and clan leaders own far more land than we ordinary tribe members, far more slaves, and have brave warriors guarding your residences and property. A portion of the food we hand over is taken for your own consumption, and you can also confiscate tribesmen's land to increase your own holdings—"

"Rubbish! Utter rubbish!" Alpas shouted in exasperation, "You traitor! You're slandering the noble bloodlines of our leaders and elders! Slandering the sacred traditions of our Pannonia!—"

"Slandering?!" Sethonos sneered, turning to the crowd and loudly proclaiming, "Among you are his tribesmen. You tell me, has he ever labored in the fields like us, or herded sheep tirelessly like us?!"

"No... never, not once..." one captive mustered the courage to reply.

"Then have you ever seen him charge fearlessly at the front lines of every battle, bearing scars like us?!" Sethonos asked again. In truth, most Segestica tribal leaders and nobles excelled in combat, but a few, like Alpas, rarely stepped onto the battlefield. Sethonos could tell just by his physique, which is why he posed the question.

"No!" This time, the captive's response was louder.

"When the fields yield poorly and we can't fill our bellies, has he ever provided us with enough food to help us endure the tough times?" Sethonos asked once more.

"No!!" The captives responded even more loudly this time.

"Brothers, have you seen it now? This is what our tribe's leaders and clan heads are like! They've long abandoned the traditions of our tribe—caring for tribesmen as family—and instead focus on fattening themselves, leaving us to suffer!"

Sethonos wasn't just assigned labor in the Nix Tribe; Maximus also arranged for eloquent senior warriors to chat with these reserve tribe members during their free time, listening to their grievances. Much of what Sethonos said today was influenced by these warriors' guidance.

At that moment, the more Sethonos spoke, the more impassioned he became. The advice from the warriors flowed naturally from his lips, his mind becoming increasingly clear, as if he had reached enlightenment: "When fighting, we charge at the frontlines; when it's time for the harvest, we hand over the most food. Yet we receive the least, and even a minor mistake results in harsh punishment...

We aren't tribe members of Segestica at all! We're actually slaves to the leaders and clan heads! Only slightly better off than the Skodisqi slaves!—"

"You—" Alpas, enraged, was about to curse harshly when a cold, sharp object suddenly pressed against the tender flesh of his neck—a short sword wielded by a Nix Soldier. He wisely shut his mouth.

"It was only after joining the Nix Tribe that I learned what fairness truly means!" Sethonos exclaimed passionately, "Your efforts should be rewarded accordingly! I spent half a year cultivating farmland for the Nix Tribe, joined the main force in an incredibly intense battle two days ago, and secured victory. Then I worked tirelessly to rush here and capture all of you...

Because of my efforts, I became a formal tribe member of the Nix Tribe and acquired at least 60 acres of land! If I continue to achieve merits in battle, I will earn rewards from the tribe—more land, and might even rise into the ranks of Nix nobles! Unlike in the Segestica Tribe, where I would always remain a bullied ordinary member!"

Sethonos's words caused an immediate uproar among the captives. Even the steady Onosis couldn't help but ask, "Sethonos, is it true that you could acquire even more than 60 acres of land in the Nix Tribe? And obtain a status as privileged as Alpas's?!"

"Of course, it's true!" Sethonos replied confidently, "The Nix Tribe has specialized decrees regarding this matter—every tribe member is aware of it! Plus, some Nix members have already earned over 100 acres of land through outstanding achievements!"

"100 acres?!" The crowd became even more agitated, with some gasping in astonishment.

The surrounding captives grew increasingly curious and asked loudly, "If I join the Nix Tribe, will I get 60 acres of land?!"

"You've just joined the Nix Tribe, and haven't done anything for the tribe yet. The Nix Tribe doesn't know if you're genuinely committed, so how could they immediately give you land!—"

Sethonos noticed some captives showing disappointment after hearing this and immediately emphasized, "Think about the Segestica Tribe—when other tribe members wanted to join, they had to work for the leaders and clan heads for a long time before being accepted by the tribe. As for acquiring land, it's an exceedingly rare opportunity..."

But in the Nix Tribe, as long as you work diligently for the tribe for three years, you'll become a formal member and receive 50 acres of land. If during these three years you participate in battles and achieve merits, the time needed to become a formal member will shorten, and you could potentially receive more land—just like me. Understand now?!"

"Got it, got it. Three years isn't that long—it's just working hard, and I'm good at that," one captive immediately nodded.

"I'm not good at farming, but I love fighting. Can I join the Nix Tribe and become a warrior, specializing in fighting for the tribe and earning land quickly?" A burly captive asked loudly.

"That... should also be possible." Sethonos hesitated briefly before replying, "But first, you'd have to pass the Nix Army's test."

"Someone as strong as me wouldn't fail their test!" The burly captive raised his thick arm confidently.

"Odetas is one of the renowned warriors of our tribe!" Another captive nearby proudly boasted.

"You heartless bunch! Have you no shame?!" An elderly captive cursed furiously, "The Nix people are our enemies! They've slain so many of our tribesmen, and you dare to consider defecting to them? You'll surely face divine punishment and die miserable deaths!"

"No! Joining the Nix Tribe won't bring divine punishment. It will bring blessings instead!" Sethonos declared confidently, "Because Nix Leader Maximus is a Divine Descendant of the Danu Goddess, blessed by her. That's why he led his people here and has been able to repeatedly defeat enemies far stronger than Nix, often overcoming immense odds. That's also why the Kupa River, which used to flood uncontrollably every rainy season, has been calm this year... Thus, when the Nix Tribe settled here, they immediately began constructing a Danu Goddess Temple. Furthermore, Nix Leader Maximus being a Divine Descendant of the Danu Goddess was verified by the Emmerich Sage.

"Is this true?! The Nix Leader is actually a Divine Descendant of the Danu Goddess?!"

"It must be true, didn't you just hear him say that there's a Danu Goddess Temple in the Nix Tribe? Plus, this was verified by Emmerich Sage! Emmerich Sage is the only Skodisqi Druid in our Segestica Tribe. He's favored by the divine, and any patient he treats recovers. He wouldn't lie!"

"No wonder our brave Andres Chief and Great Chief Cabdes suddenly died! They recklessly attacked the Nix Tribe, which is blessed by the Danu Goddess, and angered her. They were undoubtedly struck down by divine punishment! The Danu Goddess is the Mother of All Things and Goddess of the Earth!"

"Oh! What should we do?! We've fought against the Nix people and offended the Goddess—that's why we've been captured!"

"Hey, can I join the Nix Tribe right now?!"

"Me too! I want to join as well!"

...

For a time, many captives around expressed a fervent desire to Sethonos to "join the Nix Tribe."

Scenes like this repeatedly unfolded in every captive camp.

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Late at night, Maximus was awakened from his deep sleep: "Leader, just as you anticipated, the Segestica people in the fort attempted to escape during the night!"

Maximus rubbed his drowsy eyes and asked casually, "What's the situation now?"

"Three battalions from the First Legion and two battalions from the Fourth Legion moved in swiftly as planned to intercept them. Not a single one will get away!" The attendant replied excitedly.

"Good, good..." Maximus yawned and replied weakly, "I'll sleep a bit more. When everything's settled, call Legion Commanders Fesaros and Oluus over to see me."

"Yes, Leader!"

About two hours later, Fesaros and Oluus stood in the military tent.

"Leader, the Segestica people in the fort have all been captured. We've also occupied the entire fort and seized all the Pannonian Army's stored food and supplies there!..." Fesaros reported cheerfully, then added, "Leader, you're truly brilliant, foreseeing their escape attempt so early!"

Chapter 398: Marching into the Segestica Territory

"Roar! Roar! Roar!..." the soldiers shouted in unison.

Maximus turned his head to ask Casinos, "In which direction is the Segestica Main Camp?"

Casinos hesitated for a moment, and under Maximus's sharp gaze, he raised his hand with a complex expression and said softly, "Over there..."

Maximus immediately waved his hand forcefully in the direction he pointed: "Advance!"

The soldiers stepped forward, and as they moved quickly, their formation gradually opened. Since the fields had already been harvested, the flat land had no obstacles except for villages, so the First Legion, consisting of nearly six thousand soldiers, advanced in a formation more than a mile wide...

"Clang! Clang! Clang!..." The soldiers of Lin Kou Village frantically struck the alarm bell.

The Segestica citizens, who were closer to the Nix Army, quickly noticed the anomaly to the southwest and shouted in panic, "The enemy is coming! The enemy is coming!!..."

Thus, the peaceful scene was shattered. Shepherds hurriedly ran with their flocks, farmers whipped oxen to run desperately, and pedestrians, some holding children, others driving carriages, shouted while men cried, women screamed, children wailed, and cattle and sheep bellowed... one carrying ten, ten carrying a hundred, a hundred carrying a thousand... like a snowball, continuously, Segestica citizens from various villages ran out with bundles, joining the flow of refugees.

No tribe or village urgently gathered warriors for resistance.

On one hand, this was because the wide-front formation of the Nix Army advanced like a long iron wall, imposing great psychological pressure on the Segestica people. The Segestica Tribe, after suffering repeated defeats, was unable to gather enough young and strong tribesmen for defense in a short time;

On the other hand, these villages on the plain had no wooden walls.

During the rule of the Skodisqi people, to facilitate control and prevent Pannonian resistance, they ordered that no Pannonian village should build walls. Decades passed, and after gaining independence, the Pannonians, like the Segestica Tribe, faced no external threats, instead attacking Alde and holding a distinct advantage. There was no danger in the villages, and the tribesmen naturally didn't want to waste resources and energy to build village walls.

Although later the army suffered a disastrous defeat and Andres died of illness, causing panic among the tribesmen, a ceasefire agreement was soon reached. Under the inertia of decades, the Segestica Tribe still didn't build wooden walls, leaving each village exposed to the Nix's soldiers' spearheads.

The Segestica villagers had neither the courage nor the capability to resist the invading enemy, with the only option being to flee.

Moreover, most people fled in the same direction — the Segestica Main Camp.

As the power center of the Segestica Tribe and the Great Chief's seat, the Segestica Main Camp naturally had walls, as it was built by the Skodisqi as the military center for ruling this area and suppressing Segestica rebellions. Its defensive facilities were fairly good. After the Segestica people occupied it, they merely maintained it over the past decade, without making major changes.

When Segestica tribes faced trouble, they usually went to the Main Camp for Great Chief's assistance, and now, facing life-and-death danger, the tribesmen naturally wanted to flee into the Main Camp for protection.

Thus, as they escaped, the Segestica citizens gradually formed a massive stream of people, rushing towards the Segestica Main Camp.

The Nix Army maintained a steady marching pace, neither frantically pursuing the nearby Segestica citizens nor grabbing the lost cattle and sheep that didn't know to hide, nor did they raid villages to ransack Segestica citizens' valuables...

Under Maximus's strict orders and led by Legion Commander Camillus, they closely followed the crowd ahead, advancing, advancing, never stopping...

As the sunset hung over the mountain peaks and the evening glow appeared at the horizon, a shimmering large river in the distance caught Maximus's eye.

"The Sava River is near..." Casinos's reminder beside him revitalized Maximus, whose expression soon turned grave as he saw numerous sails heading to the opposite bank...

"Camillus, immediately dispatch two large units to rush to the riverbanks on either side of the forward village and confiscate all the visible boats along the riverbanks. Hurry, go quickly!"

"Yes, Chief!" Camillus turned to execute the order.

"Hagux, your cavalry is fast; send them all out to seize as many boats as possible!" Maximus immediately issued orders to the Cavalry Captain.

Originally, Hagux's cavalry team, due to a lack of horses, had only about ten men, but in the previous battle on the Kolana Riverbank, they captured over 20 intact horses. After gaining Maximus's approval, horses were quickly distributed among his old subordinates, suddenly increasing the cavalry team to 30 men (actually, there were horses captured in the Kupa River encirclement battle too, but they hadn't been assigned to the cavalry yet). Excluding cavalry serving as messengers for various units and villages, 20 cavalrymen followed Maximus into the Sava River Plain.

Following Maximus's command, Hagux left behind two cavalrymen as messengers and led the others rushing towards the riverbank.

Maximus turned his gaze directly ahead, where a wooden fortress stood on the riverside, the Segestica Main Camp.

The Segestica Main Camp differed somewhat from Alde's Main Camp. Although both were built along riverbanks, it straddled both sides of the river, with the east bank being the primary side and the west bank secondary, connected by a floating bridge.

At this moment, the west bank of the village was already boiling over, as escaping people not only tightly blocked the north, west, and south entrances but also heavily surrounded the entire West Village.

The warriors inside had just learned of "the enemy's coming," and the tribal leader responsible for guarding the West Village was at a loss after the initial shock. However, with the influx of fleeing civilians, the warriors couldn't possibly refuse entry to their own tribesmen. As more and more refugees crowded in, blocking all entrances and exits and making it impossible to close the gates, it was too late for the warriors to regret.

"Camillus, the task of capturing this fort rests with you," Maximus said calmly.

"Yes, Chief!" Camillus, thrilled, saluted, yet he didn't immediately issue an attack order but carefully observed before deploying for the attack: splitting into three groups of 500 each to assault the north, west, and south gates, and over 2000 soldiers besieging the north, west, and south walls...

Though the Third Legion had arrived in haste without bringing siege weapons or even the simplest ladders, Camillus observed that the fort ahead had no ditches dug or caltrops set up, and the walls were

at most three meters high. The attackers could approach directly to the walls, seizing the moment while the defenders were distracted by their own fleeing people, allowing soldiers under the covering fire of crossbow units to form human walls and climb over the wooden walls...

Once the attack order was given, the originally long "iron wall" quickly divided into six columns, charging directly towards the Segestica Western Village from all directions...

The already tightly packed and terrified Segestica citizens before the village were now completely in chaos...

In fact, yesterday, Pequot, leading his team hidden in the dense forest, subsequently ambushed the Segestica Army wading across the river, causing their defeat. Some of the routed soldiers escaped the pursuit of Nix Soldiers, and since the enemy was blocking the way, they didn't dare return to the battlefield and fled back home, thus spreading the news of the "Segestica Army's defeat" throughout the territory, causing the populace to panic.

Fortunately, the tribal leaders and clan chiefs remaining on the territory provided reassurance, telling them that the Segestica Army was just auxiliary, and that the troops from the Brochi, Mazi, Disone, and Perustai—the four major tribes—were the main forces of the attack. The coalition army they formed couldn't be stopped by the Nix people.

The populace, thus reassured, was no longer panicked, only worried whether their relatives were among the Segestica Warriors killed or injured in the Nix people's raid.

Most of the Segestica nobles left behind believed that the powerful Pannonian tribal coalition would ultimately prevail and could calmly handle the defeat of their tribal army. However, another piece of news returned by the routed soldiers stirred their hearts: that Cabdes might have perished at the Kupa River!

The happiest about this was Pulikas. He realized that the opportunity had come for Andres's son to reclaim the position of Great Chief, simultaneously raising his alertness towards the southern battles, knowing well how formidable the Nix people were from participating in the marsh battle.

He sent his trusted aides to keep a close watch on movements to the west, thus in the Segestica Main Camp, he was the first tribal leader to learn of the Nix Army's invasion. Feeling the urgency of the

situation, he immediately gathered some trustworthy hands in the main camp and, under the guise of a "highly important matter requiring discussion," sought to meet with the tribal elder responsible for the Segestica Main Camp, appointed by Cabdes before leading the army away, taking advantage of the unpreparedness to knock him unconscious and imprison him.

However, the cautious Cabdes had made some arrangements in the main camp to prevent accidents after his departure. To eliminate these backups and gain complete control over the entire East Village, Pulikas, amidst the chaos caused by the news of the Nix Army's invasion, took actions one after another to arrest and confine Cabdes's confidants, finally gaining control over the entire East Village.

But at this time, the cries for help and wailing from the West Village became clearer and more desperate as the fleeing populace rushed onto the floating bridge, frantically pushing and shoving each other, completely disregarding their compatriots in distress, with people constantly falling into the river... The order in the West Village was entirely lost because the Nix had breached the city.

Chapter 399: Pacification

Pulikas furrowed his brow and gazed towards the opposite bank, spotting a dazzling light behind the mass of people. He knew well that it was the reflection of the sunset gleaming off armor. The bitter memory of the swamp defeat surged back, stoking his panic. He realized that the enemy had already taken over the Western Village, and if they crossed the floating bridge with the crowd, the Eastern Village would...

He finally made his decision and shouted loudly, "Cut down the floating bridge! Hurry, cut it down!"

The warrior at the bridgehead hesitated. "Elder Pulikas, but there are many of our tribesmen still on the bridge! And on the other bank, there are also—"

"Cut it down immediately! Otherwise, once the enemy crosses the floating bridge, all of us will perish!" Pulikas roared. Seeing the warrior still hesitate, he grabbed the longsword from his hand and viciously hacked at the mooring ropes tied to the bridge's pilings. His subordinates followed suit, drawing their swords and hacking at the ropes on the other side...

The crowd on the bridge, seeing the scene unfold, pushed and shoved even more frantically. More people tumbled into the water with loud splashes, while others surged forward in waves. The air was filled with curses, cries, and pleas as the floating bridge descended into utter chaos...

Soon, the ropes tethering the boats were severed. Pulikas led his men to cut down the wooden stakes securing the floating platform nearest the shore.

The floating bridge lost its anchorage on the northern bank and began to slowly drift southward with the current...

Maximus rode his warhorse into the open gates of the Western Village, surrounded by Guards and attendants.

His gaze swept over the road flanked with fallen bodies and groaning injured, his expression cold and indifferent.

Just as he entered the village, Camillus approached him. "Leader, we've occupied this village! But the enemy has severed the floating bridge, and we were unable to cross into the village on the opposite bank..."

Maximus spoke with a calm tone: "The Third Legion has marched long and hard through the day. Capturing this village was already a significant accomplishment. Since nightfall is near and the soldiers are exhausted, let them rest well. We'll deal with attacking Segestica's Eastern Camp tomorrow."

"Understood." Camillus added, "Leader, there are large numbers of Segestica people surrounded near the floating bridge. I've sent some Segestica recruits to calm them, but there are too many of them. I'm worried that if this drags on, something unforeseen might happen. Do you have a good solution for this?"

Maximus paused to contemplate and replied, "Take me there."

He turned to look behind him at Casinos. "You come along as well."

"Yes..." Casinos bowed deeply in deference. Such submission stemmed from witnessing the Nix Army's swift conquest of Segestica's Western Village within a single day, shattering any lingering hope in his heart.

Once they arrived at the floating bridge, countless torches illuminated the area brightly.

The Segestica people crowded the shore, taking up a vast space, while soldiers from the Fourth Legion formed a thin cordon around them.

Both sides faced off against each other in an eerie silence; even the cries of children were muffled as parents covered their mouths tightly. Amid this, the voices of Segestica recruits comforting their compatriots could be faintly heard.

Maximus ascended the watchtower at the junction between the bridgehead and the street. From his vantage point on the observatory, the bugler behind him blew the copper horn. The crisp, resonant sound immediately drew the attention of everyone gathered at the shore.

Maximus looked down at the densely packed, swaying crowd below, then exhaled deeply and raised his voice, which boomed like a massive bell: "I, Maximus, the leader of the Nix Tribe! I am the one who led my people last year to defeat your Great Chief Andres, leaving him gravely injured and dead! Four days ago, I led my people to crush the Pannonian Tribe Alliance's army on the eastern bank of the Kolana River, capturing over 6,000 soldiers! Yesterday, I led my people to annihilate your forces and those of Desitia at the Kupa River, where your Great Chief Cabdes perished in the waters! And today, I have brought my people to breach your settlements and stand before you!—"

The Segestica citizens were in an uproar. The young man towering above them, clad in gleaming armor and standing imposing beneath the flickering firelight, appeared as a nightmarish figure, exuding an aura of dread.

"Greed will doom the greedy, and tribes that habitually invade others will inevitably be invaded in return! The Nix Tribe originally had no hostility towards Segestica, but after suffering repeated attacks from your army, we were compelled to strike back. Therefore, I led my army here. The Segestica Chief and nobles responsible for starting this war must face punishment! But as for you—"

Maximus's tone softened, tinged with sympathy. He extended his right hand forward. "You were coerced! Under the threat of your chief and nobles, you had no choice but to send the strongest men in your homes to battle, constantly fearing for their safety! You were also forced to surrender additional grain to support the army, leaving your families to starve!

But for all the sacrifices you made, did you ever receive any benefits? No! Andres once seized vast fertile lands along the Kupa River from the Aldeans, but none of you ever saw a share. Yet, year after year, you provided men and grain, watched loved ones return injured or slain, while enduring hunger yourselves..."

Maximus sighed softly, before raising his voice abruptly: "But from now on, such misery will no longer exist, for the Nix Tribe will become the new rulers of this land! If you join our Nix Tribe and become part of our people, you will all be treated well by our tribe!

Whether farming tirelessly or fighting bravely alongside the army, every ounce of your contribution will be remembered by the tribe. Based on what you contribute, each family will be allotted no less than 50 acres of land.

The more you contribute to the Nix Tribe, the more land you will receive, and your status within the tribe will rise—eventually, you could even become nobles of the Nix Tribe, enjoying privileges that ordinary tribesmen cannot have!

I am not boasting; there are already over 1,000 former Segestica citizens in the Nix Tribe. I trust some of you have seen them. When I finish speaking, you can go and ask them yourselves—ask them if everything I've said is true!

Moreover, I have someone familiar to you here, and he wishes to say a few words to you!"

Maximus stepped aside and spoke softly, "Casinos, it's your turn to demonstrate."

Casinos's heart jolted. Although he deeply loathed facing so many of his fellow tribesmen, under Maximus's silent yet oppressive gaze, he involuntarily stepped forward one step, then another... until he reached the railing.

The formerly silent Segestica crowd suddenly grew restless. "Is that Casinos?!"

"Look at the lump on his forehead; it's definitely him!"

"Wasn't he killed in battle?"

"You're mistaken. Cabdes drowned; Casinos is standing right there unharmed!"

"He's the son of the Great Chief—our Segestica tribal elder! How could he betray us by siding with the enemy?"

"Maybe he was forced by the Nix people."

"If the Nix Tribe is truly as good as their leader claims, maybe Casinos willingly joined them..."

"Shut your mouth!..."

A loud blast from the copper horn silenced the commotion momentarily along the riverside.

"Fellow... tribesmen... I am..." Casinos lowered his head and stammered. Just as he uttered a few words, Maximus's dissatisfied voice sounded near his ear: "Speak louder! Stand straight, lift your head, and address them with confidence!"

Casinos was forced to obey the order, straightening his stance and raising his voice: "Fellow tribesmen—"

"Still too quiet!" Maximus scoffed coldly.

Gritting his teeth, Casinos yelled, "Fellow tribesmen!—"

The shout seemed to clear the heaviness in his chest, easing much of his shame and discomfort. Without hesitation, Casinos pressed forward: "I am Casinos! The army of the Pannonian Tribe Alliance has been completely defeated—this is true! Our forces and Desitia's army have also been crushed!"

Thousands of our warriors have been captured, and the Segestica Tribe no longer has enough warriors to defend you! The other major Pannonian tribes who suffered disastrous defeats cannot provide assistance! Today, all of you have seen it—the Nix Army effortlessly entered our territory and occupied our village without much resistance... Segestica is finished!... Truly... finished!"

At this point, Casinos choked up, pausing briefly to regain his composure, then continued shouting: "Now is the time for you to consider carefully, for yourselves, for your families! Will you follow the Segestica Tribe into oblivion?! Or will you join the Nix Tribe?!...

I can swear before the Holy Forest that every word I have said is true! If you join the Nix Tribe, you will not be treated as outsiders, nor will you face discrimination. As long as you follow their arrangements... work hard and fight bravely, you will be granted vast tracts of land! You might even... yes, become nobles of the Nix Tribe!

There are already some of our tribesmen among the Nix Army. These are people who were captured in previous battles. Initially, they were just as worried as you, but now, look at them—they pride themselves on being Nix! If you still have doubts, go ahead and ask them yourselves. Not long ago, they were your neighbors, friends, even relatives. Would they lie to you?

If you flee to tribes like Brochi or Mazi within Pannonia, you will still be outsiders. You'll be forced to work just as hard, and it will take years before you are accepted, if at all—and receiving land is far from guaranteed... This is a shared tradition among all Pannonian tribes, and you know it well. Compared to that, joining the Nix Tribe would be far more promising!

My fellow tribesmen, Segestica is truly finished! For yourselves, for your family, for your children—think carefully about what to do next!... Joining the Nix Tribe is your best option!"

Chapter 400: Marching Towards Segestica Territory (Part 1)

"Leader, we have captured all the Segestica people in the village and occupied the entire village, gaining all the food and supplies stored by the Pannonian army in the village!..." Fesaros excitedly reported, adding: "Leader, you're truly impressive, having anticipated their escape plans so early on!"

The Segestica people in the village, having witnessed the tragic defeat of their reinforcements and the capture of many comrades, and later learning of the major defeat of the main Alliance forces, naturally realized there was no hope in continuing to hold the village. Hence, their leader proactively proposed for the tribe to surrender to the Nix, but after I refused, he nervously asked for more time to discuss,

clearly looking for an opportunity to escape—which anyone with some intellect could figure out... Maximus glanced at the silly grin on Fesaros' face: Your flattery skills are lacking!

He cleared his throat and asked, "How are our casualties?"

"When those Segestica people saw us charging from the darkness, they fled in all directions, without any resistance, so we have minimal casualties," Fesaros replied with a smile.

Maximus' expression suddenly turned solemn as he asked sternly, "Are you sure all Segestica people in the village have been captured? None escaped?"

"We can—" Fesaros had just started speaking when Oluus interrupted loudly, "Leader, amidst the darkness, blocking off tens of thousands of enemies, we did our utmost to capture every visible enemy. As we rushed to report the battle's progress to you, we haven't yet been able to count all the captives, but we've stationed enough soldiers at the river's fording points and hidden forest paths. Thus, even if a very few enemies managed to hide and escape ultimately, they wouldn't return to their territory in time."

Maximus pondered for a moment and nodded.

"Oh, right." Fesaros remembered something and said loudly: "Leader, these Segestica people didn't entirely not resist; their tribal leader and some nobles fought fiercely with weapons, attempting to break through our encirclement, and were killed by the soldiers..."

"What a pity." Maximus calmly responded.

This marked the first time the Nix had captured the entire Segestica tribe completely. To ensure these captives would better follow orders and integrate into the new tribe quickly, Maximus secretly instructed Fesaros beforehand "to find an opportunity to eliminate those tribal leaders and nobles who could be an obstacle during the chaos," and Fesaros succeeded.

Maximus looked at the two men and solemnly said, "Fesaros, tomorrow morning, take part of the First Legion and head east along the Kupa River to capture the remaining Segestica village. According to captives' accounts, that village has less than 5000 people, with only about four to five hundred warriors.

It was initially established by their Andres Chief after defeating the Aldeans to prevent Brochi from taking advantage through the Kupa River. I believe you should capture it easily."

"Leader, rest assured, the First Legion will certainly complete the task assigned by you!" Fesaros asked with a grin, "Should we advance further along the river into the Brochi territory after capturing that village?"

"No!" Maximus sternly warned, "The tribe needs to concentrate its strength on attacking Segestica now; we must not provoke the Brochi! Instead, after the First Legion captures the village ahead, you must hold it properly to prevent the Brochi from invading our newly occupied land!"

"Understood!" Fesaros repressed his smile and replied earnestly.

"Oluus, tomorrow morning, you lead the Fourth Legion and part of the First Legion to oversee the camp and all prisoners in the village. These are over ten thousand captives, so no mistakes are allowed!" Maximus solemnly instructed.

"Yes, leader," Oluus couldn't help asking, "Leader, how long do we, the Fourth Legion, stay here?"

"Until Volenus and Capito arrive with the Second Legion. Fesaros, you leave the defense of that eastern village to Torrelugo and then take the First Legion to join me in the Segestica territory."

Maximus said, "The Fourth Legion will remain here, together with the Second Legion, obeying the Political Affairs Hall's arrangements, taking care of the captives from these two major battles and upcoming ones in the Segestica territory—"

As Maximus saw Oluus wanting to speak, he gestured to stop him: "Through these two battles, we have decisively crushed the Pannonian Alliance Army. Our next attack on the Segestica territory should not encounter major battles, leaving little opportunity for the soldiers to earn merit.

In the previous battles, the Fourth Legion suffered significant casualties. As you guard the captives, the soldiers should take this time to rest well. Due to the great merit established by the Fourth Legion this time, I can allow you to prioritize selecting soldiers from the captives so that the Fourth Legion can

quickly reach full complement after the war; you will have plenty of time to choose carefully while guarding captives, unless you are unwilling—"

"Leader, we, the Fourth Legion, are willing to stay and guard the captives well!" Oluus responded loudly.

Maximus smiled, "Alright, both of you hurry to the village to wrap up the remaining matters. I need to get some rest, recover more energy, and lead the Third Legion to the Segestica territory early tomorrow.

.....

At dawn the next day, light fog gently covered the river, while distant mountains remained shrouded in darkness.

After a hurried breakfast, Maximus, accompanied by Fesaros and Oluus and surrounded by the Guard, inspected various prisoner camps in the military camp and then toured the village.

He did not speak with any prisoners, but seeing him, many captives peered anxiously, guessing that he was the Nix Leader.

Thus, they all saw Casinos, following closely behind Maximus, respond very deferentially to every inquiry, presenting the image of a faithful Nix Leader follower, shocked to receive any praise from Maximus.

This caused great turmoil among the captives: this son favored by Cabdes, heir of the Segestica Great Leader, previously vowed to crush the Nix Tribe—how could he suddenly become one of the Nix?

As Maximus finished his inspection, the Third Legion was fully assembled, with each soldier carrying 2 to 3 days' worth of dry rations (supplied by the remainder provided by First Legion soldiers).

Maximus led them to set off immediately. Without the supply team, marching proceeded quickly, crossing the Kupa River on foot, through forest paths, reaching Lin Kou Village by afternoon.

The forest path was created centuries ago when the Pannonians migrated northward, while Lin Kou Village was established much later.

During the decades when the Skodisqi people conquered the Pannonians, the Aldeans, out of kinship, occasionally sent troops north through forest paths to assist. To counter this, the Skodisqi people built a village at the forest path's exit as a thorn, rather than a blockade, preventing the Aldeans from confidently entering the Sava River Plain, threatening their supply routes. When the Skodisqi rallied their forces to counterattack, Lin Kou Village's forces would cut off their retreat and launch a front-and-back assault... After suffering several setbacks, the Aldeans ceased aiding their kin.

In subsequent decades when the Skodisqi occupied the Sava River plain, Lin Kou Village merely served as a scout post monitoring the Aldeans to the west. A decade after the Pannonians overthrew Skodisqi rule, the Segestica Great Leader Andres made it an offensive outpost against the Alde and later, after capturing the mid-Kupa River plain, made it an important logistics hub.

However, after Andres passed, though Lin Kou Village did not border the Nix territory, it was still reinforced by Cabdes for caution, bolstering its defenses.

"When we led the army away, there were 300 warriors in the village, and Leader Milucus has a good relationship with me. Perhaps—" Casinos quietly requested Maximus: "Perhaps I should go in and persuade him to surrender?"

"No need." Maximus merely glanced at the wooden village ahead, turning to Camillus and saying, "Have the soldiers loop around on both flanks."

"Yes, Leader."

Although Lin Kou Village blocked the forest path's exit, a forest is not a mountain range. Despite the many trees, the terrain is relatively flat, allowing passage.

Thus, the Segestica sentinel atop the wooden walls suddenly saw two steel currents quickly bypass the village's sides, converging at the rear, composed of over 5000 armored, large-shield-armed soldiers...

The sentinel's heart sank, and he screamed in terror: "Enemies have come! Enemies have come!"...

Maximus emerged from the forest and felt a broad expanse before him: beneath the azure sky lay vast flatlands dotted with villages, crisscrossed by fields and roads, teeming with livestock, fields in neat rows, children playing, adults working, and travelers passing—a scenic and prosperous plain.

Maximus felt invigorated, the fatigue of the march dissipating as he surveyed the equally excited soldiers. Pointing ahead, he loudly proclaimed, "Nix soldiers, behold! This land is larger and better than where we live! Now, I need you to overcome your fatigue and push forward at a faster pace to make this land our Nix homeland!"

"Ho!!! Ho!!! Ho!!!..." the soldiers roared in unison.