

## Perish 426

### Chapter 426: New Tribal Division

Maximus paused for a moment and said apologetically, "Let's follow Quintus's suggestion and use prisoners from other Pannonian tribes to exchange for our previous captives from the Aldeans. Gaius, you are right as well, but Capito cannot be blamed. In actuality, I've been too impatient and greedy, wanting both to quickly seize Segestica's territories and to retain enough labor to rapidly build roads and bridges and revive the vigor of this conquered land..."

But, in reality, our Nix Tribe is still quite weak and does not have the ability to do both at the same time; we must take things step by step, so—"

He then looked at Capito: "The primary task for the Public Works Department is still to quickly construct the bridge connecting the east and west camps. As for building the road to Snowdonia, you can set out the plans first, and once they are ready, construct it section by section according to the schematics, as materials needed for road construction must also be prepared."

"As you command, leader," Capito said. "Today, Spukala has already led the Public Works Department personnel to thoroughly survey the terrain and river conditions on both sides of the main camp. I have also dispatched a messenger to Snowdonia. I believe in two or three days, some experienced craftsmen from the tribe will arrive, and then we can start building the bridge."

"Very well." Maximus nodded in satisfaction and then said, "Pigeris, next you inform Alakosia to discuss the prisoner exchange with the Aldeans. Also, I remember the Alde iron mines are managed by Budocaribas and those northern Alde tribes, correct?"

"Including the Xisaites elder and other former eastern tribes," Pigeris explained. "In fact, the iron mine is located on the edge of the Alde western tribal territory. Based on its position, it should have been managed by the western mountain tribes of Alde, but it has remained unexploited for years until our need for iron reignited its operation. The former Great Chief of Alde had Budocaribas, Xisaites, and other tribal leaders jointly take over in consideration of the displaced northern and eastern tribal peoples..."

"Now that Budocaribas and Xisaites are relocating their tribes here, the iron mine has to be handed over to other Alde tribes. Well, have Alakosia relay to Budocaribas my request that a stable-operating tribe takes over the mine to ensure a steady supply of iron ore to our tribe."

"Yes, leader."

"Next, I want to discuss an issue." Maximus looked at the gathered people and said slowly, "Previously, due to our tribe's short settlement period and small landholding, the territories management was fairly simple. The central Political Affairs Hall directed affairs, and the town administrative chiefs followed its directives. We had only two camps, and Snowdonia's administrative role is still held by me. In reality, the Nix Tribe only has one town administrative chief—Sicropus.

But now, our territory has expanded, and the population has increased. It is insufficient to manage all this land with only town administrative chiefs. There are so many villages across the Sava River, and we need to relocate the foreign auxiliaries from each village, move in new tribesmen, and allocate land for them—a whole series of tasks that necessitate dedicated management. Therefore, I have decided to establish the role of village chief, who will manage their village and lead the villagers in executing various directives from higher authorities."

"Who will the village chiefs report to directly? Our Political Affairs Hall?" Vallerus asked.

"They will be directly managed by town administrative chiefs. We will demarcate the territories that each town should govern, and naturally, the villages within these territorial boundaries will fall under that town's jurisdiction. Snowdonia, Westeni, and the two camps we recently captured on the Kupa River side have not yet established villages due to their short establishment time. However, we will first delineate the land that each camp should govern, and when villages form in the future, village chiefs will be appointed. On the Sava River side, the villages will temporarily be governed by this camp."

"How will village chiefs be appointed? From the original tribesmen in the villages?" Karina asked, as this is the responsibility of the Civil Affairs Department.

"It's best to promote from our original tribesmen. They should meet several criteria: familiarity with our various decrees, a consistent adherence to laws and regulations, having considerable experience and knowledge, possessing some charisma, and being capable of speaking some Illyrian. The most crucial point is they should have never held any official position within the tribe nor served as soldiers, so they can remain in the village to govern the villagers."

After Maximus finished outlining the requirements for a village chief, everyone fell into thought.

A moment later, Karina first spoke: "In that case, only those elders from our Supply Camp who are still physically fit yet lack specialized skills are suitable as village chiefs."

"And those formerly soldiers who are now disabled due to injuries might also be suitable," Quintus interjected. "Though they might have mobility issues, they have ample energy and a commanding presence, ensuring they uphold decrees without ambiguity."

The others agreed in unison.

Seeing everyone reach a consensus, Maximus decisively said, "Alright, in a moment, let's select the village chief candidates from among our disabled but mobile and communicative veterans and the elders from the original Supply Camp. In a few days, we will migrate them and other tribesmen to the various villages here."

"Leader, will the newly appointed village chiefs also receive salaries from the tribe? Should they have subordinates?" Gaius asked with concern.

Maximus had considered this and replied, "Village chiefs are the lowest level of officials in our tribe and certainly deserve a salary. They can also appoint assistants, like patrol officers to maintain village order, agricultural advisors to supervise and guide farming, and enunciation officers to deliver and announce decrees. However, these personnel are considered temporary assistants appointed by the village chief and are not part of the tribe's formal cadre, so they do not receive salaries.

Furthermore, village disputes and minor conflicts cannot be solely decided by the village chief. They must be adjudicated jointly by the village chief, the priest of the village altar, and the tribesmen with a knight's rank or higher, with consensus reached to be valid.

Of course, matters involving deaths or serious violations of decrees must be referred to the town court for trial, and villagers can appeal judgments in the town court if dissatisfied.

Moreover, tribesmen with a knight's rank or higher have the right to supervise and propose suggestions within their village. If issues are found, they can directly report to the Civil Affairs Department, which must take it seriously..."

The group started to murmur among themselves, as they realized for the first time the difference in status within the tribe between renowned tribesmen with titles and ordinary tribesmen.

"Leader, with what you just mentioned, I am not worried that these village chiefs will mismanage the villages," Volenus shifted the topic. "But even after granting promotions based on contributions in this war, our tribe still has very few villagers with a knight's rank, likely not enough for one per village. Additionally, we haven't even completed the first temple yet, so building an altar in each village may be a long way off."

"You are correct. These are long-term plans that can be formally written into tribal decrees," Maximus calmly replied. "For now, if there are no knights in a village, a first-class tribesman with sufficient seniority can temporarily substitute for a knight's role. As for village priests, it will likely be a longer time before they can be realized, to be addressed in the future."

"Leader, I was thinking, from what you said about village chiefs, temporary assistants, knights, and village priests... With these people, managing a village with thousands of residents should be feasible," Capito raised his query. "But if a village's population grows to several thousand, this number of people might be insufficient, and perhaps the village should be upgraded to a town?"

"If a village's population grows, we will relocate some of the people to other places and allocate new lands to them. Randomly elevating a village to town status is not advisable because establishing a town means we must allocate officials, consuming tribal resources.

Furthermore, a town needs a sufficient population and land to sustain itself. If towns are too close, they may hinder each other's development due to inadequate sustenance."

Maximus pondered thoughtfully, "...Given the current state of our tribe, Snowdonia, Westeni by the Kupa River bank, and the recently conquered third camp can exist as towns within our tribe.

The fourth camp, however, is not feasible. Its narrow terrain and limited population make it insufficient to become a town, though it borders Brochi's territory and can serve as a defensive camp, with soldiers regularly stationed there.

Lin Kou Village also lacks the conditions to become a town, but its location is crucial and could be turned into a checkpoint. This camp—"

Maximus pointed to the ground, speaking emphatically, "Surrounded by many villages, fertile and vast lands, and convenient river transport... It will inevitably develop into a large town in the future, making it suitable as our tribal center, allowing us to concentrate manpower and resources to rapidly grow and strengthen the tribe."

After Maximus finished speaking, Gaius chimed in, "Leader, you are right. The tribe is currently quite poor and indeed should not establish too many towns; four bequeathed is sufficient."

"Leader, since the number of towns has been determined, shouldn't we give the new town names so we can refer to them more conveniently and to demonstrate to the Segestica people that things are entirely different now?" Kefisofon suggested.

#### Chapter 427: Servitude to Labor Decree

"You're right," Maximus gladly agreed and quickly responded, "The third settlement by the Kupa River shall be called Todleduo."

Everyone exchanged looks, revealing a hint of resignation on their faces. They had been here for over a year and had picked up some Illyrian language, understanding the meaning behind the name Maximus chose. "Todleduo" in Illyrian means "third."

Snowdonia (the first), Westeni (the second), Todleduo (the third)—the leader's way of naming settlements was overly simplistic! Each person shared a similar sentiment in their hearts.

"As for the fourth settlement by the Kupa River, let's name it Kupa Castle," Maximus continued.

Once again, everyone exchanged glances, blinking at each other: sure enough, the names remained exceedingly simple.

"Now, regarding this particular settlement—" Maximus paused mid-sentence, pondering.

Everyone immediately grew tense: this was to be the center of the tribe moving forward; it must have a pleasing and meaningful name!

Maximus noticed their thoughts and smiled as he spoke, "Last year when we first arrived here, Snowdonia, Westeni, and Todleduo represented the footprints of our initial settlement. Whenever our tribesmen call out the names of these towns, they will surely remember the challenges we overcame during those times. As for this settlement—"

Maximus accentuated his tone, speaking deliberately, "It should be called Aphidilia. Yes, it means 'Starting Point.' We've settled here, survived wars, and established ourselves. Now we shall use this as our starting point to dominate the Great River Plain!"

"Aphidilia, what a beautiful name!" Pigeris and Gaius practically shouted in unison.

The others were also roused by Maximus's words, their faces lit with varying degrees of enthusiasm. At the same time, they felt a slight sense of shame, realizing that the leader's choice in naming towns reflected a profound significance beyond simple labels.

Karina cleared her throat and said, "Leader, now that we've named the new settlements in the tribe, shouldn't we also appoint the administrative chiefs for these towns next?"

"Agreed. Let's finalize the village chiefs' selections later and also appoint chiefs for these towns, including Snowdonia. Additionally, I won't continue serving as Aphidilia's administrative chief. This place is too densely populated and complex, requiring someone to manage it specifically."

Maximus paused and lightly tapped on the back of his chair, scanning the room before speaking slowly, "There is another pressing issue that needs all our input. Capito just brought it up earlier—it's about how the tribe currently lacks sufficient resources to manage and support a large number of foreign auxiliary members. Yet many of our major public projects—building roads and strengthening river embankments—need considerable labor. So, what shall we do?...

My proposal is to enact a new decree mandating that all tribesmen, except for tribal officials and those holding noble titles, must perform forced labor once every year."

"Forced labor? What does that mean?" They were intrigued by this unfamiliar concept.

Maximus explained, "It means the tribe will summon tribesmen based on this decree to help construct public facilities. Such summons are mandatory; anyone refusing would be violating the decree and subjected to punishment. Furthermore, tribesmen performing this labor wouldn't receive pay and would need to provide their own food."

As Maximus finished explaining, the mood in the room turned solemn.

From Rome came Quintus, Sidonius, Horace, and Capito; from other townships in Italy came Volenus and Gaonius; from the Greek City-States came Kefisofon... None of them had heard of such a concept as "forced labor" before, as public facilities in city-states were typically constructed by slaves or by army forces handling it alongside their tasks.

Similarly, Karina from the Gaul tribes was unfamiliar with the practice, as Gaul tribes didn't prioritize infrastructure construction.

The first to raise objections was Karina: "Leader, forcing tribesmen to do... this kind of forced labor doesn't sit right. It feels like the detestable Roman nobles treating tribesmen like slaves, compelling them to work."

"It's entirely different," Maximus patiently explained, "We're asking tribesmen to do forced labor not for personal gain but for the benefit of the entire tribe and all its people!"

If we build roads, it helps tribesmen travel and transport goods; if we strengthen river embankments, we protect farmland and prevent flooding; if we construct bridges, tribesmen can easily cross between banks...

Everyone recognizes the advantages of public infrastructure construction—some enthusiastic tribesmen even volunteer to help. But we can't let kind-hearted individuals bear all the work while others stand idly by, only to later enjoy the benefits...

Therefore, institutionalizing forced labor as an obligation ensures fairness. Our collective efforts yield collective benefits. Isn't that just?"

Carillana subconsciously nodded but soon expressed doubt: "Leader, you mentioned this decree is fair, but you also said tribal officials and noble tribesmen are exempt from forced labor. I understand why officials are exempt—they must stay committed to their roles. But why are noble tribesmen exempt?"

Maximus smiled, replying, "This is because they have already made substantial contributions to the tribe and thus earned specific privileges. As I've mentioned before, nobles who are not officials can co-manage village disputes alongside village chiefs and oversee village affairs...

In essence, they are the Nix Tribe's nobles, distinguished not only by wealth but also by their rank and status, setting them apart from ordinary tribesmen.

As the tribe grows stronger and more populous, decrees will evolve further, granting even greater privileges to tribesmen of knightly rank and above. This incentivizes ordinary tribesmen to work harder for the tribe in hopes of joining the ranks of nobility. That's the true allure of the Twenty Peerage System!"

Everyone instinctively exchanged glances, then quickly looked away, fearful of revealing the burning ambition in their eyes.

After a brief silence in the hall, Volenus voiced a concern, "Leader, wouldn't summoning tribesmen for yearly forced labor to construct public facilities interfere with their farming activities?"

"It wouldn't. Farming is the backbone of our tribe, and we wouldn't disrupt them during busy agricultural periods. Forced labor summons would only occur during idle seasons."

Volenus looked reassured.

Quintus then raised another question, "Leader, doesn't our tribe already have a decree mandating tribesmen's military training during idle seasons? Will this new forced labor initiative negate that?"

"Of course not," Maximus explained patiently, "Our tribal territories have expanded multiple times over, and our population has multiplied. During idle months, the Public Works Department wouldn't summon

the entire tribe's population for forced labor—only about two to three thousand individuals from seven or eight villages. Other tribesmen would still participate in military training.

Additionally, I suggest the Public Works Department prioritize summoning tribesmen from villages and towns closest to the planned construction sites. This arrangement facilitates their labor, rest, and meal preparation, while saving the tribe unnecessary trouble. Naturally, the Public Works Department must develop comprehensive plans in advance and coordinate with the Military Department to prevent schedule conflicts."

Capito nodded in understanding.

"Does anyone else have differing views?" Maximus asked, his gaze resting on Karina.

"As long as it's ensured that the forced labor contributes solely to building public facilities for the tribe, I have no objections," Karina replied.

"Certainly. During the detailed discussions of the decree's stipulations later, we can specify stricter limitations. Once finalized, we must ensure every tribesman understands it, explicitly prohibiting tribal officials or town administrators from misusing the decree for personal gain, lest it diminish tribal trust!" Maximus's tone turned stern.

Karina nodded immediately, "I support enacting this decree."

"I do as well," Capito eagerly agreed.

Others soon followed suit, recognizing the decree's potential benefits for the tribe without hindering their respective departmental work.

As everyone began delving into the decree's specifics, an attendant entered swiftly and whispered a few words to Maximus.

Hearing the news, Maximus's face brightened with delight. He stood up abruptly and announced excitedly, "Everyone, I have wonderful news! Florist Lusia is pregnant!"

Those present burst into wide smiles and spoke in unison, "Congratulations, Leader! Congratulations! This is truly a blessing for our tribe!"

Indeed, it was a grand occasion! First, it confirmed Maximus's health was in prime condition. Secondly, it alleviated lingering concerns about the tribal leader's succession, giving the Nix Tribe's future newfound security and hope!

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Early in the morning, after finishing breakfast, Siris arrived at the village's main house.

"Up so early today, Siris." Starks, still chewing on bread inside, greeted him indistinctly.

"Woke up early, cooked early, and so I came early," Siris answered casually. In truth, he had endured years of monotonous living; the past two days as temporary overseer had been eventful and fulfilling, spurring his eagerness to immerse himself in work whenever possible.

#### Chapter 428: Temporary Supervisor of the Village

"You came at the right time. I just received notification and was about to send someone to find you."

"Is there something you need me to do?" Siris asked anxiously.

"Today, the Agricultural Department will be sending a team to measure the fields around the village. You need to inform all the villagers not to interfere with their work. Also, they will require a lot of wooden stakes for the measurements, but they didn't bring enough. We hope you can lead the villagers to help make some, as helping them measure the fields sooner will also allow you to receive the land sooner."

Siris became excited and eagerly asked, "What kind of wooden stakes are needed?"

"Any type of wood will do, as long as it's sturdy," Stags gestured with his hands, "At least this long and this thick."

"How many are needed?"

"The more, the better."

"I'll go inform the tribesmen right away. Rest assured, once they know of this, they'll surely help," said Siris, turning to leave.

"Don't rush, there's more," Starks called out to Siris. He stuffed the last bit of bread into his mouth, took a sip of water, and then said, "The Medical Department is also sending a Medical Team, which will arrive soon... for a medical check-up, to help treat afflicted tribesmen in the village. When they arrive, gather those who need help so they can be examined. And remember your right leg, make sure they take a good look at it too. Maybe they can heal it."

"Alright, I'll remember. I'll notify the ailing tribesmen to come over," Siris promised, although he didn't hold much hope in his heart. He had been injured for over a year, even seeking treatment from the Priest in the Main Camp without a permanent cure, long giving up hope.

"Just now, my subordinate informed me that, so far, no one has come to register. You know, people were already queuing up the past two days. Do you think those remaining seventy-five households have decided not to join our Nix Tribe?" Stags asked.

Siris thought for a moment before responding, "It's possible. Each of those seventy-five households has a man. When I tried persuading them yesterday, most of them wouldn't relent."

Not only did they refuse, but some even insulted Siris as a traitor and wanted to fight him... Siris didn't mention this, fearing it would anger the Nix people and put them at a disadvantage, especially after living together as tribesmen for over a decade.

Stags looked at him, asking in a deep voice, "What do you think makes them so adamant?"

"I think it's possible they find it hard to accept joining the... enemy of their not completely extinct tribe," replied Siris with a calm expression.

He hadn't fully disclosed the truth. According to his persuasion visits yesterday, most people shared the same beliefs as the previously injured young tribesman - except the young one used this notion as a cover for joining the Nix, while they firmly believed the Pannonian Tribe Alliance's reinforcements would quickly return to drive out the Nix people.

"Oh, so that's it," Stags couldn't help but mock, "These people think too much and will live a very stressful life."

"Should I try persuading them again today?" Siris asked proactively.

"No need. If they don't join, they don't join. By the end of today, they will be Foreign Auxiliary of the tribe, freeing up space for newly relocated tribesmen," Stags remarked indifferently, "They will regret it after a while, but joining the tribe then won't be easy."

Siris sighed inwardly.

He then busied himself mobilizing tribesmen who had already joined the Nix Tribe to manufacture wooden stakes.

The progress was very smooth, not only because Siris had prestige and influence but also because the tribesmen knew that making stakes was for measuring land, which would lead to their land allocation. Thus, everyone was very enthusiastic, even dismantling the wooden fences outside their courtyards due to insufficient materials.

In the morning, the team dispatched by the Agricultural Department arrived. More than forty people, after meeting with Stags, quickly went to the outskirts of the village to begin measurement work, guarded by dozens of soldiers sent by Stags.

Although many in this team were young, they worked systematically, with each child assigned specific tasks, all focused and attentive.

Villagers also gathered near the working team. Remembering Siris's instructions, they didn't interfere but watching the field measurements filled them with excitement, prompting them to manufacture stakes nearby, which increased the efficiency of the team considerably.

These Segestica citizens had previously seen two teenagers registering them at the main house, and now saw many young people measuring, calculating, and recording in the fields, giving them a huge shock.

In their old belief, only Priests with high status and vast knowledge could do such tasks, but it seemed all Nix youths were literate and numerate, which made them more hopeful about their future life in the Nix Tribe. They also nurtured a strong desire: to send their children to that school and become as remarkable as Priests!

On the fourth morning, Starks led his 70 soldiers, escorting over a hundred Foreign Auxiliary to the eastern end of the village.

"Maiotias, no need to see us off any further, head back," Stags instructed his subordinate sternly, "Even though I've taken these people away, leaving only tribesmen who joined the tribe in the village, do not let your guard down. Until you receive orders to leave, maintain order in the village, so our efforts these days won't be in vain!"

"Rest assured, captain, I will keep watch here," Maiangtias solemnly promised, also reminded, "But captain, please send someone to inform us as soon as possible."

Stags nodded, then instructed two other centurions to obey Maiangtias's arrangements.

Finally, he genuinely said to the temporary village manager who came to see him off, "Siris, I'm glad to have met you in this village, you've helped us tremendously! Thank you!"

"I'm also glad to have met you. It makes me feel that joining the Nix isn't such a... bad thing," Siris said reservedly.

Stags laughed heartily, "It's not just not bad, for you, it's an extremely good thing! Because you are capable, and capable people won't be overlooked in our tribe. But you need to continue taking care of

your tribesmen, assist Maiangtias in maintaining village order, and keep demonstrating your abilities to the tribe. I believe you won't just be a temporary village manager."

Stags's words hit home for Siris, though he didn't show it directly, just slightly nodding before turning to look at the tribesmen being forced out of the village by Nix Soldiers, and asked worriedly, "Will they... be okay?"

"Although they didn't want to join the tribe, by decree, they have become Foreign Auxiliary of the tribe. We will send them to your Main Camp, and as long as they don't cause trouble and work diligently, they will live well. Perhaps in half a year or a year, they will join the tribe and all come back."

"I hope so."

"We must set off now, see you later," Stags said, extending his right hand.

"Goodbye!" Siris also extended his hand, the two shaking firmly.

Watching Stags's group go far away, a sense of loss rose in Siris's heart. Although he only worked with Stags for three days, perhaps due to a congenial bond, he felt somewhat empty.

He stood with Maiangtias and the three centurions at the spot until the entire team disappeared from view, then turned to walk back.

As they approached the main house, Maimai Angelias's voice came from behind, "Siris, I feel your leg is better, isn't it?"

Instinctively reaching for the injury, Siris felt the thick layer of linen and remembered the Nix doctors that Stags insisted on having examine him yesterday, reluctantly agreeing.

The Nix doctor, after examining him, suggested thoroughly removing the skin around his repeatedly festering wounds, applying herbs, and he should heal.

With Stags's strong insistence, he reluctantly agreed to try. He could endure the pain of cutting, bear with the post-treatment burning sensation, but the intermittent itchiness at night made it hard to sleep well. In the morning, focused on seeing off Stags, he forgot about his leg, only now, reminded by Maiangtias, he realized the wound wasn't itchy and stepping on his right leg wasn't as painful, even making it easier to exert some strength.

Siris felt immediately better, thought in his heart: The Nix people's medical skills are indeed great! When the doctors come for rounds tomorrow, I must seek them out and have the medicine reapplied.

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Pulikas, with Andres's son, Ankasus, boarded a prepared boat, fleeing the already breached Segestica East Camp. The group sat on the boat, drifting southward along the winding Sava River.

His men, out of danger, several times suggested stopping the boat and finding a nearby tribe, to fill their stomachs before discussing what to do next.

All suggestions were refused.

In the afternoon, the river ahead suddenly widened. On the right bank, large expanses of reed beds stretched out of sight, concealing narrow channels danced by the river breeze. Occasionally, a fisherman could be seen paddling between them... The gentle sunlight shone on the golden reeds, with pairs of egrets soaring in the sky, flocks of wild ducks frolicking in the river...

#### Chapter 429: Tribal Leader of Gonami Lake

Pulikas had no mind to admire such a beautiful scene. It was only at this moment that he led his men to row with all their might, steering the boat into a river port on the left bank.

Many boats were already in the port, and it took Pulikas quite some effort to dock his boat at the pier.

The young Ankasus had already fallen asleep, and Pulikas carried him ashore.

Not far away was a village where some Segestica citizens who had fled by boat were gathering at the entrance. At the entrance, a dozen or so strong youths holding wooden clubs blocked their path.

The leader shouted loudly, "Our leader said no outsiders are allowed in the village, or else the sticks in our hands won't recognize people! But considering we are all tribesmen, we'll provide you with some food. Take the food and leave as soon as you can; don't stay here for long, understand?..."

The refugees began to curse discontentedly. These young people were quite able to keep calm and did not retort, but if anyone dared to rush forward, they would indeed beat them with their clubs.

"It's Chief Pulikas!"

"Chief Pulikas is here!"

"Chief Pulikas, they are treating us like enemies, this is really too much!"

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Everyone eagerly complained to Pulikas while making way for him.

Pulikas, with a livid face, walked up to the group and said in a deep voice, "I am Pulikas, I want to see your tribal leader Iberus!"

The youths, of course, knew who Pulikas was. The leader immediately said, "Chief Pulikas, please wait a moment, I will report to our leader!" With that, he quickly ran into the fort.

Shortly after, he ran back, "Chief Pulikas, our leader invites you in!"

The youths made way for a narrow passage. Pulikas looked back at his followers, cradled Ankasus, and led the way into the village, with his followers close behind. The other citizens also wanted to follow, but the youths firmly blocked them again.

"Chief Pulikas!..." the fleeing citizens cried out to Pulikas for help.

"Let them in as well," Pulikas said.

The youths looked at the one who delivered the message earlier, but he shook his head.

So they remained unmoved.

Pulikas had no choice, his face growing darker, as he walked on sulkily. He suddenly stopped in his tracks when he reached the square in front of the main lodge because quite a few tents were set up on the square. People were living in the tents, and some were sitting between them, most looking haggard and expressionless. Even when they saw Pulikas and his entourage arriving, no one approached him to greet.

In front of the main lodge stood a man with grey hair and beard, but his figure was still agile, and his complexion was rosy, making it difficult to determine his real age. This man was the village leader Iberus.

Seeing Pulikas, he greeted him with a heavy expression and said in a low voice, "I really didn't want to see you here, so the East Village is gone too?"

Pulikas nodded slightly.

Iberus glanced at Ankasus on his back, then at his followers, and said, "Let's go inside and talk."

"Is there any food? We're all starving," Pulikas said in a low voice.

"I'll arrange it right away."

The group entered the main lodge, found a place for Ankasus to sleep, and Pulikas followed Iberus to the living room to briefly recount the fall of the East Village.

"Has the Segestica Tribe been cursed?!" Iberus sighed long and hard after hearing it, "Since last year, Andres fought with those Nix people, suffering multiple defeats, and ended up losing his life... This year, the tribal alliance assembled a large army, and I originally thought the Nix were done for. Unexpectedly, such a grand allied army suffered a disastrous defeat in no time, and the Nix took this opportunity to invade our territory, capturing the entire main camp in just two days. Ah! Segestica—our tribe seems to be doomed!"

Pulikas immediately felt displeased and reprimanded, "What kind of talk is that? Our tribe now is just temporarily facing difficulties, but as long as we can rally ourselves and call on the tribal alliance for reinforcements, we can surely reclaim our lost territory soon!"

"Cabdes used to think the same, but now?!" Iberus spread his hands with a wry smile.

"Cabdes was a coward, a deserter! If not for him, we wouldn't have suffered such a miserable defeat!" At the mention of Cabdes, Pulikas immediately flared up.

"But even Andres, who was good at fighting, met a pitiful defeat! Cabdes, for all his faults, managed to tidy up the mess Andres left behind and brought a year of stability to everyone." Iberus said regretfully, "But he also died in battle... At this critical moment, there might be no one to rally the remaining tribes, to inspire courage among the fleeing tribesmen to fight against the powerful Nix!"

"Who said no!" Pulikas immediately retorted, "Ankasus, the son of the great Andres, bears the noblest bloodline of the Segestica Tribe! As soon as he assumes the position of the new Great Chief, he can gather the tribesmen again!"

Iberus dismissively curled his lip, "What influence can a child who hasn't even grown up have? Last year, people didn't choose him as the Great Chief, and in this special time, it's even more impossible. Stop tossing him around. Letting him grow up safely is the best thing."

"What do you mean, Iberus!" Pulikas changed his expression, angrily said, "Andres, the Great Chief, always trusted you, gave your tribe so many benefits, making you the most powerful leader around Gonami Lake, and this is how you repay him!"

Iberus not only showed no guilt but instead responded angrily, "Andres did give my tribe a lot of benefits in the past, but that was just because he wanted me to lead the other tribes around Gonami Lake to submit to him. Do you know what the tribesmen here call me privately? —Traitor!"

Iberus chuckled bitterly twice, self-mockingly said, "I really am a traitor. Last year, I cooperated actively when Andres twice summoned warriors to fight against the Nix people, sending many tribesmen from here, but... very few returned!

This year, I was damn fooled again and convinced by Cabdes to provide a lot of food for his army, but... Ha ha, the tribesmen of Gonami Lake scold me, and they are absolutely right!"

Seeing the other in pain, Pulikas's anger subsided by half, instead of advising, "Iberus, these past two years have been tough for all Segestica tribes, not just you in Gonami Lake. Compared with the east and west bank areas of the main camp, your situation here is much better. At least this time you didn't send your tribesmen to fight with the foolish Cabdes, and you retained some strength.

The reason I chose to come here is that I hope to get your support, using Gonami Lake as a base, backed by the Brochi, to gather the fleeing tribesmen—"

"Shut up! Stop it!" Iberus interrupted Pulikas harshly refused, "There's not much farmland around Gonami Lake, and this year we paid a lot of grain to the main camp. Now, every tribe is in tight stop, and depending on fishing to subsist.

But yesterday, many tribesmen fled from the north, and for the sake of kinship, we took them in, as you should have seen when you passed the square earlier, but that leaves our already inadequate food even scarcer, and the tribesmen have many complaints about it. Hence, from today, we will not take in any other tribe's people!

Of course, if you and your people want to stay, we'll eke out a bit of food for you, however bitterly, but regarding others, hmm—"

Iberus snorted coldly, "We do not wish for them to linger around Gonami Lake, who knows if they would destroy our fields or plunder our wealth once starving!"

"Iberus!" Pulikas yelled angrily, "The ones outside the village are not robbers! Not enemies! They are Segestica people! Your kin! Your tribesmen!"

"Sorry, I seem to recall that I am a Brochi member; the area around Gonami Lake originally belonged to Brochi territory." A single statement from Iberus instantly blocked Pulikas's fury.

The jurisdiction of the Gonami Lake region is rather complex to discuss. It indeed once belonged to Brochi territory, but after the Pannonians were conquered by the Skodisqi, the Skodisqi ruling the Segestica branch included the Gonami Lake in their jurisdiction. However, as time went on, the Skodisqi realized the Pannonians at Gonami Lake were hard to manage. They often didn't pay tribute on time, and even dared to harbor some Pannonians who resisted the Skodisqi. Whenever the Skodisqi sent armies to punish them, they would escape by boat into the reeds...

Due to the special geography of Gonami Lake, to fully subdue the people there would require substantial effort and resources. The Skodisqi Great Leader didn't want to muster forces, so he simply detached it as a separate entity for one of his sons to govern... Later on, as the various Pannonian tribes successively rose in defiance, it was the Segestica Tribe that first defeated the Skodisqi entrenched at Gonami Lake, hence the Pannonian Tribes there naturally integrated into Segestica.

But this was in name only, as due to years of separation, the people here did not have a strong sense of belonging to Segestica. They were ambivalent about the grain tributes to the main camp and the instructions from the Great Chief. The semi-autonomous situation of the Gonami Lake region lasted several years until things began to change after Andres ascended to leadership. He, on one hand, severely punished the disobedient Gonami Lake Tribes and, on the other hand, supported the willing and obedient Iberus Tribe, eventually making the tribes of the Gonami Lake bow to his authority.

#### Chapter 430: The Thoughts of Iberus

But now, the people here are starting to become restless again... The waves of anger surged within Chief Pulikas, and once again, his fury was ignited. He blurted out, "It seems you really want to be a traitor!"

"If being a traitor would allow the people here to survive, then it might be worth considering," Iberus calmly responded.

Pulikas angrily stood up, kicked over the wooden chair beside him, and strode out of the living room.

Iberus watched him leave, his expression rather complex.

Although Pulikas wanted to leave the village in anger, considering it was already late and Ankasus needed rest, he could only endure for the time being. Consequently, he did not meet Iberus again.

Early the next morning, the young man who had shown Pulikas the way yesterday hurried into the main house and found Iberus: "Father, Chief Pulikas and his men have already taken the boat and headed south."

"Finally gone!" Iberus breathed a sigh of relief. Although Pulikas had only stayed for one night, it still made him feel some pressure.

This young man was none other than Iberus's eldest son, Adatis. He said worriedly, "Father, we've offended Pulikas this time. Will we be targeted by other tribes in the Segestica Tribe in the future—"

Iberus glanced at his son: "Don't worry, they can hardly manage to drive away the Nix people. They have no time to deal with us! Besides, if I get too close with the northern tribes, the tribes around Gonami Lake might exclude us!"

Son, now that Segestica is finished, and we no longer have the support of the main camp, to maintain our position as the decision-maker of Lake Gonami, we must act according to the will of the people by the lake, understand!"

"But..." Adatis was still worried: "What if those Nix people attack us?"

Iberus had already considered this issue repeatedly over the past two days and confidently said: "I heard that the Nix Tribe doesn't have many people. They could seize the main camp within a day or two because it's nearby, but we are much farther away.

If they just want to plunder, this poor place isn't worth their trouble. If they intend to occupy the territory of Segestica, with just their few numbers, it's uncertain if they can even stabilize the main camp, let alone the numerous tribes surrounding it. It's still a long way before they can acquire the land of Gonami Lake!

If the Nix people recklessly come to attack, we'll take the food and hide among the reeds by the boat; without food, how many days can they stay here!"

Adatis listened and still had a trace of concern: "Pulikas must have gone to seek assistance from the tribal alliance. What if they dispatch reinforcements to help him drive away the Nix people, and Pulikas seeks revenge on us for today's offense?"

Iberus laughed heartily: "If the tribal alliance is willing to send reinforcements, that's a good thing. Then we don't have to worry about the Nix people attacking Gonami Lake. If it ends up as you say, we'll declare joining Brochi. This land originally belonged to Brochi, and the Brochi Leader would certainly be happy to take us in. And Segestica, having just received Brochi's significant aid, would also be embarrassed to oppose us, right!"

"Ah?" Adatis did not expect his father to give such an answer and was momentarily at a loss for words.

"However, these are merely our beautiful fantasies." Iberus's face became somber: "The more likely scenario is that the other major tribes, having just suffered a crushing defeat, are incapable of sending reinforcements, or even if they can, they won't be able to defeat the Nix people..."

So in this complicated situation, we mustn't foolishly be driven by others and waste our people's lives. Instead, we should watch the development quietly and make decisions beneficial to the tribe in the end, understand?!"

Adatis nodded thoughtfully.

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Pulikas and his group left Iberus's tribe by boat and continued sailing southward. Since they were going downstream, the speed was quite fast, and they reached the end of Gonami Lake before noon, where the Sava River and Kupa River converge.

Not far from the confluence of the two rivers was the military camp built by the Brochi Leader Bricks for the Alliance Army's main force.

A few days ago, this place was bustling with voices and the neighing of warhorses. Now, more than half of the area had emptied out, becoming desolate, but there were still many tents, and warriors wandered among them, though their expressions and attire seemed even poorer than the Segestica refugees encountered by Pulikas along the way.

Pulikas originally planned to sail directly to Brochi's main camp, but seeing the scene before him, he decided to disembark and inquire.

Only after inquiring did he learn that not only was Bricks in the camp, but also the Mazi Leader Maitilis and the Desitia Leader Temagis.

Pulikas and his group immediately rushed to the camp to see Bricks.

Just as they arrived in front of the military tent, they heard Bricks's roar from inside: "Still haven't found them? Then why are you back! Keep searching for me, even if they are dead, bring the bodies back to me! Take all the warriors from the camp to search; I want to know their situation by tonight! If you can't find them, don't come back!..."

The tent flap was lifted, and a Brochi warrior walked out with a dark expression, without glancing at Pulikas's group, and quickly ran toward a nearby tent.

Pulikas signaled with his eyes to their guide, who stood still, waiting for a moment before calling out: "Great Chief, Chief Pulikas of Segestica requests an audience!"

"Pulikas?!..." Bricks's voice came from within the tent: "Let him in."

Pulikas entered the military tent with Ankasus.

Inside the tent, there were three people: the Brochi Leader Bricks, the Mazi Leader Maitilis, and the Desitia Leader Temagis.

Regarding Temagis, there was nothing more to say, as he was a good friend of Andres, and Pulikas was familiar with him. Pulikas had also attended tribal alliance meetings several times with Andres and had met the other two leaders.

He first saluted the three and greeted them, then had Ankasus do the same.

"Pulikas, I already know that your Segestica Army, like us, suffered a devastating defeat. What brings you here at this time?!" Bricks tried hard to suppress his growing frustration. He knew very well that a Segestica Chief of Pulikas's stature not being in his territory to stabilize the situation but instead bringing Andres's son here could hardly be for good.

"The Nix people have launched a massive invasion of our territory and have occupied our main camp. We have come to seek assistance!" Pulikas said in a solemn tone.

"Segestica's main camp was lost so quickly?!" The three leaders were utterly shocked.

The possibility of the Nix people invading Segestica was within Bricks's expectations. Several days ago, after Temagis and the remaining few dozen cavalry escaped along the banks of the Kupa River to the Brochi Territory, they had arrived at this camp. Bricks, having just escaped back himself, had a premonition of the dire situation when he learned that the alliance between Desitia and Segestica had also suffered a crushing defeat. If the Nix people were to take advantage of the situation for revenge, Segestica and Brochi, both near the Nix Tribe, would suffer first.

Hence, Bricks immediately withdrew more than half of the over 2000 Brochi warriors he had brought back to guard the Brochi Tribe adjacent to the abandoned Segestica camp along the banks of the Kupa River, to prevent the Nix people, after seizing the remaining Segestica camps on the riverbank, from easily following the river downstream.

Upon hearing Pulikas's words, Bricks actually felt a sense of relief as the Nix people chose to invade Segestica instead of Brochi.

But he was also shocked, for during discussions with Temagis and Maitilis, they believed that despite the Nix people's victories in both battles against the tribal alliance army, they must have also suffered significant losses and needed time to regroup. Moreover, capturing Chief Anrotas's camp wouldn't be easy.

Therefore, the three leaders judged that the Nix people couldn't launch a counterattack in a short time.

But unexpectedly, after defeating the northern Pannonia Alliance Army, the Nix Army not only launched a counterattack but also seized Segestica's main camp — it took them just two days! Two days, and the Nix people not only excelled in field battles but also demonstrated such formidable fortress assault capabilities?!

Bricks, Temagis, and Maitilis exchanged glances, their hearts filled with trepidation.

Pulikas hurriedly defended himself: "The Nix people came too quickly, and because we didn't anticipate the Alliance losing, nor did we receive timely information, we were caught off guard by the Nix people's surprise attack and thus lost our main camp!"

He spoke unwittingly, but Bricks noted his intention: so you're saying losing your main camp is partly our fault!

Feeling displeased, Bricks maintained a solemn appearance: "The Nix people's invasion of Segestica is a significant matter for the tribal alliance. We, the three great leaders, need to urgently discuss this. Chief Pulikas, please take Ankasus and wait outside."

Pulikas courteously replied: "Great Leaders, you intend to discuss reinforcing Segestica. As a chief of Segestica, I am familiar with the situation and can assist you in formulating the rescue plan."

Pulikas's implication was that he wished to remain in the military tent to join the three leaders' discussions.