

Perish 486

Chapter 486: Caesar Enters Politics

During the previous period when Sula served as Dictator, in order to consolidate his rule and suppress the Civilian Faction, Sula enacted an important decree: prohibiting the People's Guardian from entering the Senate after leaving office, and preventing those who have served as People's Guardian from holding other high-ranking positions. Additionally, he restricted the veto power of the People's Guardian over proposals passed by the Senate and citizen assemblies.

This decree greatly weakened the political prospects and advancement opportunities of the People's Guardian, making it no longer attractive to the Roman Nobles, and completely severed the opportunity for the commoners to enter the Senate through political means, significantly enhancing the interests of the Conservatives.

However, after Sula's death, the decrees he enacted gradually began to be removed, and this key decree that violated Roman tradition increasingly provoked the dissatisfaction of the Roman citizens and the disputes among the factions of the Senate.

The ever-glory-seeking Pompey, shortly after assuming the position of Governor, vigorously promoted a bill to lift the ban imposed by Sula on the People's Guardian position, restoring its various rights.

At this point, the cornerstone of Sula's legislation was completely removed, and Rome's ancient traditions returned to the political life of the republic.

The Roman citizens were jubilant, having awaited this day for nearly 10 years, and they shouted Pompey's name in response.

Meanwhile, Crassus, who offered a small assist in this process, also shared in the public's applause.

Pompey wrote a brilliant Chapter during his tenure as Governor, but soon thereafter, he found the Senators were not friendly to him.

The glorious battle achievements of Pompey, his irregular tenure as Governor (Pompey became Governor at thirty-six without having held any administrative office beforehand), made the Elders of the Senate, including Catullus, deeply resentful and wary.

Crassus, on the other hand, was their ally, and his position as Governor was entirely legitimate.

Crassus had long realized this and adopted a dual strategy: on one hand, he frequently funded large public feasts distributing free food to the poor to win their hearts; on the other hand, he constantly whispered to the Elders, slandering Pompey by saying "he is a demagogue," and did his best to thwart any proposals that could win Pompey more public favor.

Pompey soon found himself in a predicament. In the Senate, he could hardly get any proposal passed; in public debates, facing attacks from political foes, his speech was clumsy, drawing public ridicule.

Pompey knew full well who the culprit of all this was.

Soon, the relationship between Pompey and Crassus deteriorated, leading to mutual attacks in public settings.

This approach terrified the Roman citizens, as both men wielded great power, and a conflict could likely repeat the rivalry between Sulla and Marius.

Thus, when the term of the Roman Governors was nearing its end that year, the two of them hosted a public assembly in the square.

Suddenly, a citizen interrupted their speeches, requesting to share a dream he had just had.

The request was granted.

The citizen said: Jupiter appeared beside him, instructing him to announce in the square that the two Governors were not to leave their positions until they became friends.

The square was silent at once.

After a long while, Crassus walked towards Pompey, held his hand, and praised his opponent.

Thus, the two embraced, signaling reconciliation.

The citizens erupted in cheers.

The reconciliation performed by Pompey and Crassus at this public assembly could not dissolve the growing animosity between them. However, for the Roman citizens, this year began and ended with cheers, which was undoubtedly delightful.

When the public's gaze was focused on the radiant Pompey, few paid attention to one of the many Roman noble youths, Caesar, despite carrying the mark of being the son-in-law of the former Civilian Faction leader Qinna. Even the Dictator Sula was nearly forgotten by the public, let alone his vanquished general, so the Civilian Faction's halo associated with Caesar had dimmed, and any mention of him was more about his romantic escapades.

However, the year Pompey served as Roman Governor was also quite significant for Caesar because he was already 30 years old, exactly meeting the minimum age for candidacy for Financial Officer as stipulated by Roman political tradition.

The Financial Officer was the only position Roman citizens could undertake when first entering politics, although it was the lowest of all Roman administrative offices, it was the starting point towards becoming a Roman Governor. Without serving as a Financial Officer, it was almost impossible for a Roman citizen to eventually become a Governor, though Pompey was an exception.

Caesar didn't have the stroke of extraordinary luck like Pompey and could only follow Roman political traditions, starting his political journey obediently like many Roman citizens who had just turned 30.

Though the position of Financial Officer was low, it was still subject to election, with only 20 selected each year among countless applicants, making it not easy to get elected. Thus, if a Roman citizen could be elected in the year they just reached the minimum age for candidacy, it would be a special honor.

The election for Financial Officer occurred in the autumn, elected by a tribal assembly (a council of Rome's 35 tribes).

The meeting place was in War God Square, located in an open area outside the formal boundary in the northwest of Rome City District, once a tidal flat of the Tiber River Bay, now turned into gardens and training grounds. The area was flat and wide, accommodating more voters.

On the day of the election, Roman citizens gathered at War God Square, and the candidates on the platform at the front of the square seized the time to address the voters present.

Once the administrative officer presiding over the election gave the order: citizens, take your places.

Then the members of each tribe gathered in their temporary enclosures.

After voting began, each member of each tribe would, in sequence, leave their tribe's enclosure, walk along a narrow elevated passageway, and place their handwritten ballot into a basket in front of the person supervising the voting of each tribe.

Officers known as "Guardians" would oversee the voters, and then be responsible for counting the votes and reporting the result to the administrative officer in charge of the election.

Among Rome's thirty-five tribes, only four tribes were located in Rome City District. Members of these tribes, no matter how poor, could easily participate in the election without much hindrance.

However, members of tribes far from Rome City, only the wealthiest had the capability, or were willing to make the trip to Rome to vote, thus their votes were very significant, of course, the votes of those who currently lived in Rome City but still belonged to rural tribes were important too.

This led to a large difference in the number of voters able to attend each tribe, but the weight of votes for each tribe was the same. Therefore, for candidates, winning support in their own tribe first was crucial, and they would strive to endear themselves to their fellow tribe members, who typically would tend to vote for candidates from their own tribe before considering others.

Under these circumstances, the reputation of candidates played an important role; voters were more likely to vote for those they had heard of (as long as they weren't notoriously infamous) rather than completely unknown candidates.

Caesar's odds were very high.

Since returning to Italy, he had worked part-time as a lawyer and performed admirably in the courtroom. He had previously accomplished military achievements in the Eastern region, with the Warrior Crown as evidence. Additionally, rumors of his scandal with Nicomedes IV, other romantic escapades, and his penchant for wearing exotic clothes...all contributed to his widespread fame among Roman citizens.

In the eyes of the noble voters, although the Ulysses Caesar family did not belong to the inner circle of the Senate's noble circles, in recent years they had produced some administrative officers, ensuring the Caesar family name remained in the Roman noble's view. More importantly, Caesar's maternal relatives were enjoying political success, having produced two Governors in the past five years.

Therefore, even though after the Italians were granted citizenship, many scions of Italian City States flocked to Rome, hoping to enter politics and participating in the annual competition for the twenty Financial Officer positions, Caesar, as a sturdy member of a Roman noble family, was not at all afraid of such competition; a candidate only needed the support of eighteen tribes to be elected Financial Officer, and he was successfully elected with unanimous votes.

For Caesar, this was a significant moment because, according to the decrees Sula enacted, all Financial Officers automatically obtained Elder status, although this was the lowest rank of Elder, serving only to make up the numbers in Senate meetings.

Likewise, in this year, Cicero reached his most critical moment.

Six years ago, when he was thirty, like Caesar, he was elected Financial Officer at the statutory minimum age and then posted to Sicily as the Financial Officer of the province. During his term, he acted justly and did not overly exploit the province's people, earning the respect of the Sicilians. He also efficiently organized shipments of Sicilian grain to Rome, easing Rome's grain shortage problem.

He had initially thought that his distinguished political achievements in Sicily would spread among the Roman citizens; however, he discovered that Roman citizens had never paid attention to him and were not even aware that he had left Rome to take office in Sicily.

This left Cicero deeply frustrated. Coupled with witnessing the pomp of Pompey of the same age at the Triumph the previous year, this further solidified his determination to surpass the benchmark of low-level administrative officers and enter the inner circle commonly dominated by the Nobles.

The opportunity came soon.

At the beginning of this year, a group of Sicilians came to Rome, found Cicero, and earnestly requested him to take on the role of Plaintiff to prosecute Gaius Valerius, the former Governor of Sicily.

This man was notorious for greed and treachery, initially siding with the Civilian Faction but later defecting to Sula, which allowed him to thrive, securing one lucrative overseas position after another.

During his term, he plundered and oppressed the province's people, committing numerous atrocities, but he used the enormous wealth he amassed to form connections with the Roman Nobles, creating a vast network of relations, with several high-ranked Elders backing him. Therefore, for many years, no one had been able to prosecute him successfully, instead making him increasingly arrogant.

Chapter 487: Rampant Pirates

Cicero agreed to the request of the Sicilians, not just because Sicily was where he started his career, and the Sicilians saw him as their patron, but more importantly, he needed this opportunity to make a name for himself and establish his authority in the Roman legal world, so his name would be on the lips of the Roman populace.

Coincidentally, the defense lawyer hired by Valerius was the Roman Elder Hotenius, who had been the most famous lawyer in Rome for the past decade. He was known for his graceful demeanor and eloquent speech and had close ties with Sula. He even delivered the eulogy at Sula's funeral, maintaining an important position within the Senate.

The difficulty of winning this lawsuit was obvious, but it only fueled Cicero's determination.

Through his relentless efforts, he gathered substantial evidence of Valerius' crimes.

On the day of the trial, he skillfully avoided engaging in a verbal spar with Hotenius, thus avoiding dragging the case into a prolonged battle, and instead presented all the evidence upfront.

This sudden move disrupted Hotenius' plans and focused the attention of the judges and the public entirely on the criminal evidence.

Hotenius relinquished his right to defend, and the trial concluded swiftly.

Before the verdict was announced, Valerius fled hurriedly with his family to Massilia.

The news spread throughout Rome: Hotenius' domination over the legal field was over; Cicero wore the crown.

From then on, Cicero became a celebrity in Rome.

In the blink of an eye, it was a new year (69 BC, the fourth year of Nix), and Caesar, who was elected as a financial officer, was sent by the Senate to Outer Spain to serve as an assistant to the provincial governor Antistius Vetus.

Just before his departure, he suffered two unexpected blows: his aunt Julia and his wife Cornelia passed away successively, for which he held two grand funerals.

At Julia's funeral, Caesar gave a speech, talking about her illustrious ancestors (the Ulysses clan was descended from the goddess Venus) and her mother's family's connection to the ancient kings of Rome, but did not mention his controversial uncle, Marius. However, he included symbols of Marius' victories in the funeral procession and allowed an actor to play Marius, and remarkably, no one present protested.

It was traditional for elderly noblewomen of Roman aristocratic families to receive a grand public funeral upon their death, but Caesar accorded his wife Cornelia the same honor.

He was the first Roman to publicly hold such a grand funeral for such a young woman.

This gesture greatly resonated with the people, as many saw it as an expression of grief from a kind-hearted man. After all, in his youth, Caesar had rejected Sula's pardon for the sake of his wife, forcing him into years of wandering. Despite his numerous romantic affairs, the public was convinced through this funeral that he truly loved his wife.

Romans valued funerals, and Caesar used the funerals for his aunt and wife as a successful self-promotion.

Sula, although he won the civil war, did not gain much public favor, and Roman citizens did not accept all of his decisions at face value. Therefore, after his death, many of his decrees were overturned one after another.

In this era, aristocrats held sway, and the common people's lives became increasingly difficult. Thus, the Roman people began to miss the days when the Civilian Faction was in power, especially since, in many minds, Marius was still a great hero; he restored the pride of the Romans after their setbacks in Africa and saved Italy from the northern barbarian threat.

The Civilian Faction's two leaders, however, had long passed away, and the faction itself had been obliterated by Sula and his followers' continuous suppression. Yet, after these two funerals, many Romans suddenly realized that Caesar, as Marius' nephew and Cinna's son-in-law, was not merely an unconventional, romantic Roman youth, but likely the best successor to the Civilian Faction.

While the Romans were still abuzz about the funerals, Caesar set off for Outer Spain to manage the province's finances, while also representing governor Vetulus in various local activities.

Vetulus, who greatly trusted Caesar, sent him to various places to handle judicial affairs, which he accomplished successfully, earning praise from the local populace.

In late autumn of that year, Caesar arrived in the city of Cadiz, Spain, to handle court affairs.

In his free time, he visited the local Hercules temple and saw a statue of Alexander the Great, bursting into tears because the Macedonian King had already conquered half of the world at the same age, while he himself had yet to achieve anything remarkable.

Additionally unsettling him was a dream he had shortly after; he dreamt of raping his mother, Aurelia.

Anxious and uneasy, he consulted a prophet.

The prophet interpreted his dream: he was destined to rule the world because the mother he raped represented Mother Earth, the mother of all things.

These two events finally prompted him to decide to leave the province early and return to Rome's political arena to pursue his ambitions.

His friend, provincial governor Vetus, approved his early departure and properly managed the financial affairs after his departure to avoid any accusations against Caesar.

Upon returning to Rome, one of the first important things Caesar did was to remarry. His new bride was Pompeia, the granddaughter of Sula, and the granddaughter of Quintus Pompey (who was co-consul with Sula in 88 BC).

Having been trained in provincial administration, Caesar had become more tactful in his actions; on one hand, he made a big show of his kinship with Marius, while on the other, he used this marriage to ease the conservatism-entrenched old senator's hostility towards him.

Despite being distant relatives, Pompeia and the great Pompey were not closely connected, so Caesar's second marriage seemed not to directly associate him with Rome's most celebrated and beloved general of the time.

During his time as consul, Pompey was frequently ridiculed by Crassus. After leaving office, he learned his lesson, maintaining a constantly humble posture and thus showed an average performance in the Senate.

This did not mean that Pompey began settling for the status quo. On the contrary, trapped in Rome's political scene, characterized by intertwining power, interests, intrigues, and ambition, he increasingly longed for the resounding acclaim victory on the battlefield once brought him. He began patiently waiting for an opportunity to obtain a new military command post.

At this time, all the provinces and territories under Roman rule were at peace, except for Little Asia.

There, under Lucullus's leadership, the Roman army had completely conquered Pontus. King Mithradates fled to neighboring Armenia, where he was protected by King Tigranes.

Lucullus sent an envoy to demand Armenia's king hand over Mithradates, but Tigranes refused.

So, without Roman authorization, Lucullus declared war on Armenia.

Soon, he destroyed Armenia's army and captured its important city, Tiglanocerta.

The most powerful nation in the Two River Valley crumbled before Lucullus, and therefore his position as military commander became unshakeable.

On land, Pompey had temporarily no opportunity to command troops, but opportunities always existed for naval command, due to rampant Mediterranean piracy.

The issue of Mediterranean piracy had long existed; however, after Rome started invading and ruling the Eastern regions, pirates became rampant. The main reason was that Rome established hegemony over the whole Mediterranean, dissolving all local authorities to prevent them from threatening Roman interests but refused to assume direct management responsibilities. The result was that Rome cleared the battlefield for pirates, providing them fertile ground.

In disorderly regions stripped of authoritative rule, pirates at least offered local residents some order, so some towns paid pirates protection fees, while others offered ports. As a result, the pirate ranks swelled, and their presence could be seen throughout the Mediterranean.

Eventually, pirates began to threaten Roman citizens themselves; Caesar's kidnapping by pirates was not an isolated event. In the past decade, being captured by pirates had become a part of the career hazard for young Roman noblemen.

However, Roman nobles needed a large number of slaves, especially high-quality ones, and pirates were the most reliable suppliers. In several major southern ports of Italy, such as Tarentum, up to ten thousand slaves could be traded daily. This vast scale of trade brought enormous income, fattening pirate chiefs and Rome's major financial oligarchs.

Some Roman aristocrats even maintained pirates, reaping huge profits while also harming their opponents.

The support and indulgence of Roman nobility allowed pirate ranks to grow ever larger, increasingly capable of occasionally severing Mediterranean trade routes.

The essentials requested by Rome, from slaves to grain, began to face pirate threats.

The Senate hesitated, but the public clamor grew ever louder. Hence, the Senate had to respond to public demands by dispatching Marcus Antonius a year before the Spartacus uprising to assume command, tasked with maintaining maritime security and exterminating pirates.

Marcus Antonius was a great lawyer before Cicero, once serving as Roman Governor and leading a fleet to destroy Cilicia, a primary pirate stronghold.

But the Marcus Antonius the Senate dispatched this time was the great lawyer's son; the saying "Like father, like son" did not apply to him.

Antonius II had no military skill, known to all in the Senate. His selection showed that some interest groups in Rome did not want the pirates cleared out.

Upon his appointment, Antonius II completed two significant accomplishments, as some senators desired: first, he engaged in profitable pirate activities around Sicily; second, the fleet he deployed suffered a major defeat at the hands of genuine pirates near Crete.

Chapter 488: Karsipengpas Changes Profession

The Roman captives were shackled with the leg irons originally intended for the pirates, and the pirates fastened them to the ends of the ship's yards, sailing around the waters surrounding Italy, flaunting their might.

The Senators closed their eyes and pretended to be deaf and mute, even when Antonius II, the Governor in office, died in battle as a result, they did not take fierce retaliatory action against the pirates who humiliated Rome.

This greatly fueled the pirates' arrogance.

In the second year after Pompey stepped down as Governor (68 BC), the pirates invaded Ostia Port, not only plundering a large amount of goods from the port but also burning the flagship of the Roman Governor in the dock.

Ostia Port is located at the mouth of the Tiber River, just forty-five miles from Rome. All goods transported to Rome by sea had to be unloaded at this port. The pirates set the port ablaze, burning countless grains transported from overseas provinces that fed Roman citizens, causing a famine to break out in Rome.

Starving Roman citizens furiously rushed into the square, demanding the Senate take action and appoint a Commander—not a paper tiger like Antonius II, but someone who could truly solve the problem.

Who was the ideal candidate in the people's hearts? ... Catullus and Hotenius knew fully well, but that person had already been covered in glory at a young age. Allowing him to continue to hold military power might threaten the security of the Republic, so the Conservative Senators continued to feign ignorance, trying every way to delay the matter.

However, Pompey's actions in lifting Sula's ban and restoring the powers of the People's Guardian during his tenure as Governor paid off at this time.

The newly appointed People's Guardian, Oluus Gabinius, proposed a bill in the Citizens' Assembly: granting Rome's hero Pompey full authority to fight the pirates.

Due to Chief Elder Catullus' vehement plea not to appoint "a de facto Emperor (referring to Pompey)," Caesar was among the few Senators who publicly supported this bill in the Senate. He even personally went to the square to help the People's Guardian rally the people, using his own experiences to tell them how severe the threat posed by the pirates to the Roman citizens was!

Caesar's decisive and fervent support for Pompey made the Senators realize that this newcomer to the Senate, who acted reckless and exaggerated, had already latched onto Pompey without anyone noticing.

At the beginning of 67 BC (the eighth year of Nix's establishment), after the Roman citizens gathered again in the form of a tribal assembly, they enthusiastically passed this bill.

Pompey attained unprecedented military power, with five hundred ships and one hundred and twenty thousand men; he could also recruit more if necessary.

His command operations covered the entire Mediterranean, including all its islands, and extended inland for one hundred and fifty miles...

Rome's military resources had never been so concentrated in one person's hands, marking a sign of despair towards eradicating the pirates. Even Pompey's supporters were a bit pessimistic, thinking that it would take him at least three years to achieve this goal.

But after setting his sights on the pirates, Pompey, after long contemplation, had a clear strategic plan: he divided the entire Mediterranean into thirteen regions, assigning a fleet to each region to attack and expel any pirate ships found in that area. At the same time, he dispatched troops to wait nearby the pirates' strongholds on land, launching attacks once the pirates retreated to their lairs after losing at sea, completely wiping them out...

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In early August, the sun was scorching like flames, mercilessly baking the earth.

Roman warships patrolled back and forth on the Adriatic Sea. Once a pirate ship was discovered, they would descend upon it from all directions like a pack of wolves, stopping only until the ship and its crew were completely destroyed.

Even if the pirates quickly perceived the danger and managed to escape to the East Bank, the narrow east coast belonged to Rome's Illyria Province. The Governor had long received orders from Pompey to have provincial troops conduct patrols along the coast by area. Even pirates who had made it ashore found it hard to escape Roman pursuit.

However, the Aldean tribespeople living across the Dinar Mountains, on the other side of the mountains, apparently were not yet aware of the bloody storms unleashed at sea and on the coast. In the low hills at the eastern foothills of the mountains lay a massive mine pit, permeated with dust and the smell of ores, where thousands of slaves silently dug for iron ore in the dusty air...

Their bodies were bare, their skin turned coarse and dark from long labor, their hands calloused and embedded with dust and rock fragments, their hair unkempt, appearing like savages. They wielded simple iron tools, digging pick by pick, each swing seeming unusually heavy...

Squads of Aldean Tribe warriors, dressed in tunics and holding long spears and light shields, patrolled the entire mine expressionlessly. Their eyes were as sharp as eagles; any slave attempting to slack off or resist faced severe punishment. The slaves dared not slack off in front of them, even in exhaustion, they could only work as hard as they could.

The entire mine was immersed in an oppressive atmosphere, only the slaves' heavy breathing and the sound of tools striking echoed...

A not-so-far distance from the pit stood mounds of iron ore, stacked into small mountains. The dark brown iron ore was bathed in sunlight, coated with a faint, textured golden glow.

The slaves loaded the iron ore onto carts, transporting it cart by cart to the banks of the Kupa River, three miles away, where the Aldeans had built a dock holding over twenty ships.

At this moment, a group of Aldeans was directing the slaves to load the transported ore into wooden baskets, then carry them basket by basket onto the ships...

"How much longer until they're loaded?" The Aldean Elder, Temisplous, watching over this process from the dock, couldn't help but ask.

"Rest assured, they will be loaded by sunset, not delaying our departure tomorrow," Karsipengpas said indifferently.

At this moment, a shout came from afar: "Father! Father!..."

Familiar voices made Karsipengpas look up, only to see a group of people hurrying over from the south, led by his eldest son, Kobrunbodus.

Karsipengpas felt a flicker of worry in his heart and quickly went forward to ask, "What brings you here? Has something happened in the settlement?"

"Home is safe and sound, just—" Kobrunbodus whispered, "Father, your previous crew from the sea came to the settlement looking for you. They brought some pirates from other ships, urgently wanting to see you. I worried about them lingering near the settlement too long affecting its safety, so I brought them here quickly."

Karsipengpas looked behind his son, scanning the panting crowd; they were either his subordinates when he was a pirate or friends he met at sea...

Finally, his gaze fell on one person: "Onomabatis, you were so eager to find me—is it because something major has happened at sea?"

"Boss, your previous warnings have come true!" Onomabatis said with lingering fear, "The Romans have indeed dispatched a sizable fleet to the Adriatic Sea to besiege us. Their warships cover the entire sea area, with Roman ground forces assisting their operations. I've heard many pirate ships have been sunk, and many pirates captured..."

Fortunately, we heeded your warnings before, not daring to stray far from our habitat during this time, and sent people to scout around. Once we noticed something amiss, we hid on an island.

But unexpectedly, those damned Romans already knew our hiding spot, transported soldiers using warships to strike the island. I quickly led my brethren to escape the island by swimming, heading into the hills after coming ashore.

But unexpectedly, Roman cavalry ambushed us on shore, scattering our ranks. Some... some brethren were killed or captured by the Romans—"

"How many brothers have we lost?!" Karsipengpas' face changed abruptly, asking urgently.

"About... forty-five people..." Onomabatis responded with a heavy tone, head lowered.

Karsipengpas felt a wrenching pain in his heart. Over the years as a pirate, he had accumulated a total of three ships with about one hundred and fifty subordinates, losing a third of his men at once.

Even though most of his pirate subordinates were not from his own tribe, they were still compatriots, and the bonds formed through enduring life-and-death situations at sea over so many years ran deeper than with family. Thus, hearing their distressing news immediately filled him with sorrow.

"...We fled into the hills, and unexpectedly, the Romans dared to pursue us, so we led them around the mountains for two days, making them suffer before they retreated..."

Onomabatis continued, "Our place of residence on the island has been captured by the Romans, and our ships seized. After much discussion, everyone decided to come find you.

While on the way to your tribe, we ran into a few groups of pirate brothers who escaped from the Roman Army's encirclement. They also agreed to join us in seeking you—"

"Karsipengpas brother, do you still recognize me?!" A burly young man among the group behind Onomabatis stepped forward, shouted excitedly.

"I certainly remember you, Agatakus, a warrior from southern Epirus." Karsipengpas looked at him, speaking earnestly: "We used to cooperate, intercepting a few Roman merchant ships. We even drank together! Your Helmsman was with us then...The chief sailor... "

Karsipengpas named the several pirate chiefs who followed Agatakus, and they all felt relieved. Since Karsipengpas remembered their bond, he probably would not turn them away.

"Chief Karsipengpas, we've all heard Onomabatis say, a few months ago you predicted the Romans would conduct a large-scale crackdown on us, and repeatedly warned your subordinates..." Agatakus spoke respectfully, hope gleaming in his eyes: "Our primary purpose in coming is to seek advice from you, wise one, on what our next steps should be?!"

Chapter 489: Seeking the Pirate's Protection

Facing the expectant gaze of the crowd, Karsipengpas shook his head with self-mockery: "You guys got it wrong, I'm no wise man. I'm as foolish as you, thinking we can freely acquire wealth from the sea, even Rome can't stop us, humph humph!"

The true wise man is Nix Tribe Chief Maximus. A few years ago, he began to remind me, 'Our reckless actions at sea will inevitably anger Rome. Once this Mediterranean overlord takes it seriously, not only the Adriatic Sea but the entire Mediterranean will have no place for pirates to hide.'—"

Karsipengpas suddenly stopped talking and fell into thought. In fact, at first, he didn't take Maximus's warning to heart. But later, as the Nix Tribe grew stronger and Maximus's fame increased, the rumors of him being favored by the Divine also affected outsiders like Karsipengpas who were closely associated with the Nix people. Over the past two years, Maximus repeatedly reminded Karsipengpas, which made him start to take the matter seriously.

However, since the iron mine was entrusted to the Alde Tribe in the western mountains to manage, due to the success of this matter, it could greatly improve the impoverished conditions of various mountain tribes. Yet, the Nix Tribe's demand for iron ore was increasing daily. Once the supply to the Nix Tribe couldn't be completed on time, it would give the southern tribal chiefs like Ambrosius an excuse to seize control of the iron mines, severely impacting the upward momentum of the mountain tribes.

Therefore, as the leader of the mountain tribes, Karsipengpas had to spend a lot of time personally overseeing the iron mine to ensure unobstructed and smooth mining operations. Thus, his time for maritime plundering gradually decreased, and eventually, he entrusted Onomabatis to manage his pirate crew on his behalf.

Even though he had started to restrain his men from maritime plundering, he hadn't planned to completely disband them. However, the arrival of these people today shocked him: since what Maximus warned about had come true, would the subsequent developments he spoke of also come to pass?

Karsipengpas pondered for a long time before speaking again about Maximus's past words: "Once the Romans fully clear us out, merchant ships in the Mediterranean can sail for trade without worry, which greatly benefits Rome. I believe that from then on, the Romans will view the Mediterranean as their inland sea and will strive to maintain it.

If piracy against merchant ships occurs again, they will certainly dispatch fleets to rigorously suppress them. So, don't imagine slipping out to plunder at sea once the Roman maritime suppression ends!

For the sake of your safety, I suggest you give up continuing to be pirates and return to your tribes, settle down, and farm and herd."

Before Karsipengpas could finish, several pirate chiefs led by Agatakus shouted: "We turned to piracy because our tribe was impoverished. If we return now, the already scarce food in the tribe will be even less, and everyone will starve to death."

"You're fortunate to have a tribe to return to, hehe... My tribe was wiped out by others ten years ago. Otherwise, I wouldn't be roaming the sea with my brothers."

...

Even Onomabatis approached Karsipengpas, whispering, "Boss, knowing the brothers, most have become accustomed to roaming. It might be tough to get them to settle in their tribes and farm, and it might even cause trouble!"

"Living is better than losing their lives and having their bodies hung on crosses by the Romans," Karsipengpas solemnly warned.

"...Maybe dying in battle seems easier for them," Onomabatis muttered under his breath.

Karsipengpas glared at him, then turned to ask the others, "How many of you are there now?"

"I have forty-seven brothers under me."

"I have thirty-six."

"Thirty-one."

"Twenty-eight."

"Nineteen."

...

Including the 105 brothers from his own men who escaped the pursuit, there were over 250 people, over two hundred fierce, battle-hardened men ruthless like wolves... Karsipengpas calculated carefully, slightly shocked, quickly asked, "Where are these brothers?"

"They all came along, but to avoid any misunderstanding, we had them wait in the mountains over there," Kobrunbodus pointed toward the distant hills.

Karsipengpas breathed a sigh of relief, giving his eldest son an approving look: these people managed to bring so many men from the tribe to here, a significant part of which must be due to Kobrunbodus. It seems he's well aware if so many people stayed close to the tribe too long, there would inevitably be problems...

He pondered for a while, then said, "Since some of you don't want to return to the tribe, some have no tribe to return to, and you can't continue being pirates. Perhaps there's only one way to live well... and that's to join the Nix Tribe."

"The Nix Tribe?" Except for Onomabatis, the other pirate chiefs were unfamiliar with this tribe. After all, they weren't Aldeans but from the southern mountains, commonly roving the Adriatic coast, naturally unfamiliar with the Nix matters.

Karsipengpas briefly introduced the Nix Tribe, of course, hiding the true origins of the Nix people.

The pirate chiefs were shocked to learn that the Nix people, just a few years ago, were a mercenary army invited by the Aldeans to come here but took only a few years to defeat the powerful Pannonian Tribe Alliance and occupy vast lands...

They were also attracted by the tribal policy of the Nix Tribe to accept tribesmen from all ethnicities and allocate them more than fifty acres of land, deciding to first go discuss this with their men, including Onomabatis.

Watching them hurriedly head towards the distant woodlands, Kobrunbodus worriedly asked, "Father, you suggested they join the Nix Tribe. Will the Nix people agree to accept them?"

"I need to seek the Nix people's opinion, of course. But I believe Leader Maximus will agree," Karsipengpas confidently stated, "because currently they are quite short of labor. Not long ago, they took away five hundred Pannonian slaves from us and suggested that I should ensure the slaves are well-fed and housed, and their safety guaranteed..."

Heh heh, if I hadn't had the brothers risk capturing more prisoners from the coastal towns of Afeilica over the past few years to bolster our mining crew, our iron mine would have also lacked labor. Maximus owes me a favor!

This time, I received an invitation from Maximus to attend the Nix Tribe's summer festival. I'll take the opportunity to propose letting these pirate brothers join the Nix Tribe. He shouldn't refuse.

However, until I gain his consent, so many people certainly can't all be taken into Nix Territory. I'll have to keep them here first—"

Karsipengpas looked at his son and solemnly said, "While I'm gone, you will stay here and manage the iron mine for a while. The important thing is to keep these guys under control. Don't let them cause trouble here. I'll leave Onomabatis too, with my brothers to assist you."

"Don't worry, Father. I'll take good care of this place, ensuring nothing happens!"

Kobrunbodus's confidence stemmed from managing the iron mine the past few years while Karsipengpas couldn't resist going out to sea to plunder. He was very familiar with the iron mine affairs and also well-acquainted with the 800-plus tribe warriors guarding the slaves here. With their support, he wasn't worried about the recently escaped-by-the-skin-of-their-teeth pirates causing unrest.

Half an hour later, Onomabatis led a team of over two hundred people to the nearby simple dock. The destitute pirates, after discussions, finally agreed to join the Nix Tribe. Of course, Karsipengpas's personal prestige among the Adriatic Pirates played a significant role.

Although Temisplous strongly opposed, Karsipengpas insisted: the iron mine is now under the management of tribes in their mountain area, so he naturally has the authority to allow these pirates to temporarily reside at the iron mine camp.

The iron mine camp is also by the Kupa Riverbank, not far from both the mining site and the dock. Before the Nix people ventured into the mountains, it was merely a barren land. Later, the Alde Tribe decided to reopen the iron mine and tasked tribes like Budocaribas and Xisaites, who had lost their territory, with management. To accommodate thousands of slaves and the nearly thousand warriors guarding them, tribe leaders like Budocaribas led their tribesmen to build dormitories, houses, warehouses, and fences on the desolate land near the mine.

When Karsipengpas and his people took over, they further improved the camp, which now has a wooden wall and lookout towers, with houses spread throughout, and its scale surpasses any of the Aldean tribes living in the mountains. Some Aldean warriors stationed here even requested to bring their families to reside here, but Karsipengpas ultimately did not agree.

The camp once housed over ten thousand people at its peak; now, with the Nix Tribe repeatedly taking slaves and for other reasons, about six thousand people reside there, with enough spare wooden houses for these two hundred plus pirates.

Early the next morning, Karsipengpas, Temisplous, and two Aldean elders set out with the iron ore-laden fleet. Along with them were several pirate chiefs including Agatakus, and Karsipengpas's pirate subordinates, Diocles and Nikaradas, who represented their brothers to first witness the Nix Territory.

Chapter 490: Transporting Iron on the Way

The fleet sailed downstream, arriving at a dock on the south bank of the Kupa River by midday.

The sailors docked the ships and assisted the tribesmen stationed at the dock in unloading baskets of iron ore from the ships onto the carriages outside. By the time these tasks were completed, it was already dusk, and everyone rested and ate at the dock.

The next day, the sailors navigated the fleet back to the ore dock, while Karsipengpas led the caravan south along the dirt road specifically built for transporting iron ore. It took two full days to reach the north bank of the Murenica River.

Here was another riverbank dock constructed for the iron ore transport, where people once again labored to move baskets of ore onto the cargo ships.

After a full night of rest, everyone boarded the ships refreshed in the morning and set off.

With the fleet sailing downstream, it didn't take long to pass by the village where the Budocaribas tribe once lived.

Since the tribesmen moved to the Sava River, this land returned to the southern tribe of the Aldean. Not only were the wooden walls and floating bridges dismantled, but the large stretch of flat land between the two swamps was also cultivated into wheat fields. There was no trace of the temporary camps the Nix people built, and tribesmen could be seen at the riverbank guarding their wheat fields with joy, anticipating the autumn harvest. It was hard to imagine that five years ago this land had been ravaged by war, and the hearts of the tribesmen were filled with despair about the future... The arrival of the Nix people changed everything!

As Karsipengpas was contemplating, Diocles by his side pointed ahead and exclaimed, "When was a wooden bridge built here?!"

A short distance away, at the fordable section of the Kolana River, stood a wooden bridge. It wasn't a floating bridge; its arch, more than three meters high, easily accommodated their fleet.

"You haven't returned to the tribe in years, have you? Now you can't be a pirate anymore; you should visit and see the territory of our Aldean tribes," Karsipengpas replied, "This wooden bridge was built the year before last by the Nix people, mainly to facilitate travel between us Aldeans and the Nix tribe."

"I remember it used to be easy to wade across; wasn't it unnecessary to go through so much trouble to build a wooden bridge?" Diocles said with some disdain.

"People can wade across easily, but it's not as simple for carriages. Did you see that—" Karsipengpas pointed to the western end of the bridge. Over there, a donkey-pulled carriage was preparing to cross the wooden bridge, followed by several pedestrians carrying bundles or items...

"With this wooden bridge, it's more convenient for the tribesmen to cross. Who would want to wade anymore?" Karsipengpas said wistfully.

Diocles gazed up at the wooden bridge towering above them, where the sunlight reflected off the river, creating countless shimmering patterns on its underside, making it quite a sight.

He turned to look at the east bank; although it was still morning, there were already quite a few pedestrians on the riverside road.

"They're probably heading to the Nix market to trade, aren't they?" Diocles asked curiously. "It looks like there are quite a few people."

"This is only in the morning; once the sun is up, more tribesmen head to Snowdonia. The goods sold at the Nix market are just too attractive!" Karsipengpas continued, reflecting on how he spent most of his years at the iron mine and often dealt with the Nix, leaving him with deep impressions.

"From what you said before, the Nix people only settled here a few years ago. What good things can they make?" Agatakus, who had been silently observing, asked. Since he decided to join the Nix, he naturally wanted to learn more about this emerging tribe.

"Never underestimate the Nix people. Although they established the tribe only a few years ago, many of their tribesmen are skilled craftsmen from coastal towns. It is said that Leader Maximus frequently receives enlightenment from the divine, allowing him to innovate and create new useful items from time to time..."

Karsipengpas seriously explained, "At first, the pottery they made was very much admired by the leaders and nobles of our Aldean tribes. Their crafted daily iron implements were more durable, cheaper, and our ordinary tribe members preferred to buy them. Eventually, the furniture, farm tools, and even wooden sculptures they created became items that tribesmen enjoyed purchasing.

Moreover, the cloth they wove was plentiful, of good quality, and affordable, leading many of our tribesmen to buy their fabric instead of weaving their own..."

"Is the leader of the Nix tribe really favored by a divine being? Which deity is it?" a pirate chief interjected, his face full of skepticism.

"Since you're preparing to join the Nix tribe, I must warn you!" Karsipengpas said seriously, "Leader Maximus indeed achieved many things others couldn't. The Nix tribe rapidly developed and grew stronger in a few short years. All the Nix tribe members firmly believe he is favored by the divine and even consider him a reincarnation of a divine descendent! Once you're in the Nix Territory, watch what you say, or you'll anger the Nix people, which could be troublesome for you!"

The pirate chiefs glanced at each other, and Agatakus asked somewhat displeasedly, "Will the Nix people force us to worship their god?"

"Besides taking an oath at their Danu Temple when you join the Nix tribe, they won't force you to worship their deity regularly, considering that many of their tribesmen come from other races—"

As Karsipengpas spoke, the image of the Danu Goddess appeared in his mind. He had visited the Danu Temple many times, deeply feeling the goddess's compassion and mercy in the sacred and solemn temple of nature.

He hesitated, then added with emphasis, "The Nix people mainly worship the Danu Goddess, who indeed watches over the Nix tribe. Once you've been there long enough, you should be able to feel it."

"Danu Goddess?" The pirate chiefs were either Illyrians or Epirus people, completely unfamiliar with the Celtic creation goddess. Thanks to Karsipengpas's warning, they dared not say much more, but knowing that the Nix wouldn't force them to worship their god reassured them significantly.

Agatakus pondered Karsipengpas's previous words and, wanting to learn more about the Nix, asked, "Brother Karsipengpas, you mentioned many goods the Nix make that appeal to your Aldean tribe members. What do you Aldeans exchange for them? Gold and silver coins?"

"Except for trading with Romans and Greeks along the coast, where we must use gold and silver coins, among us mountain folks, most trade is by bartering goods."

Karsipengpas explained with a hint of helplessness, "Initially, tribesmen could exchange grain, livestock, and poultry for what they needed. But after the Nix no longer needed those items, our tribesmen began growing flax, cutting timber, and even getting hired by the Nix during the farming off-season, assisting them in farming and working to obtain what they needed."

The pirate chiefs exchanged surprised glances, realizing that although the Nix and Aldean were allies and the Nix was supposedly supported by the Aldean, indications showed that the Nix were actually leading!

As they talked, the fleet entered the Kupa River and passed through the Validosi Swamp, where the riverbank suddenly appeared entirely different. It was fortified with a sturdy dyke made of stone bricks and cement, over two meters high, forming an inverted trapezoid that extended eastward, firmly confining the river within its bed...

The pirates in the fleet, well-versed and having seen many riverbanks in Italy and Greece, were amazed at encountering a tribe capable of constructing a dyke in the backward mountainous areas to reduce floods for the first time.

What surprised them even more was the sight of a towering, slowly rotating water wheel on the riverbank.

As everyone began to marvel, a boat approached from ahead.

This boat differed from those they had seen on the river before, with wooden boards erected on both sides of its center, creating small windows in between, topped with a long wooden plank... It resembled two boat boards sandwiching a wooden box.

"This boat looks so strange; I wonder what it's used for?" a pirate chief asked curiously.

"It could be used for river combat," Karsipengpas replied.

"A boat like this for combat?!" Agatakus said, as if hearing a joke, "It seems quite clumsy, probably not very agile, and not fast enough, easily susceptible to enemy ship ramming and capsizing; also, with that small cabin in the middle, it can't fit many sailors, leaving it at a disadvantage in close-quarter battles..."

Although Agatakus operated on the sea for years, sea and river battles shared similarities, primarily involving ramming and boarding.

Karsipengpas shook his head, saying, "The Nix tribe has a new weapon called the crossbow, said to have been inspired by the Danu Goddess through Leader Maximus and crafted by craftsmen. The crossbow is like a bow and arrow but shoots further, more accurately, more powerfully, and is easier to master.

Nix sailors can use crossbows, hiding in the cabin and shooting crossbow arrows through those windows, able to shoot down any enemy approaching the boat without worrying about thrown javelins; even if an enemy ship manages to get close, fighting and boarding would not be easy tasks either."