

Perish 71

Chapter 71: Preparing for the Raid

"At sea, the Pompeians are indeed less vigilant than on land because you don't have a fleet or control of the port, so they don't think you can threaten their safety from the sea. In fact, these coastal towns in Campania haven't faced an attack from the sea for one or two hundred years, and their harbor defenses are extremely weak.

Take Pompeii, for example. Its port area has five harbors; the two built early on even have water gates. Later, due to the prosperous sea trade, the original harbors were insufficient, so two more were built, but those were constructed for the sake of convenience, without water gates or iron chains for interception, and not even a patrol ship around the harbor. The only warning system relies on the lighthouse keeper, but if ships are disguised in advance, he might not immediately notice anything unusual."

"And what about the other port?" the attentive Maximus asked.

"That's the private port of the Vidius family, allowing only their merchant ships and those with trade relations to enter," Quintus said coldly. "This private harbor is equipped with a long breakwater and water gate, with watchtowers on top, making its defenses quite complete. But, unfortunately, protecting just this one harbor is of no real use..."

As soon as the old man mentioned the Vidius family of Pompeii, a rancor seemed to emanate from him, and Maximus quickly shifted the topic: "We've solved the issue of entering the port, but there's another problem—we don't have any ships."

Quintus looked at him with a peculiar expression, as if to say: Young man, are you joking?

The middle-aged man Oluus chimed in: "I heard that a large number of sailors and dock laborers joined your ranks, leading to the near-abandonment of those ports outside Napolet City. Some sailors, when fleeing the port, directly stole port ships and rowed them to the beach near this camp, where the ships got stranded. Later, you set up another camp close to the coast, and the Napoletans didn't dare to reclaim those stranded ships..."

With this reminder, Maximus suddenly remembered: The camp near the coast belonged to Attutmus's Fifth Battalion, who once mentioned wanting to send soldiers out to sea to fish and help the rebel army

increase their meat reserves... But this proposal went nowhere, and he didn't inquire further, but this at least indicated that the Attutmus camp had ships.

Maximus stroked his chin, pondered for a moment, and then smiled, saying: "You are truly impressive! Upon realizing the limited number of my troops, you devised such a detailed raid plan so quickly, which I greatly admire!"

Quintus caught the meaning behind his words, maintained his expression but his tone grew heavy, tinged with slight agitation: "For these years, we've been thinking of revenge without a moment to spare, envisioning the plan to break through and kill the enemy over ten thousand times in our hearts. However, considering Rome's might and our few numbers, fearing the implications for loved ones, we always lacked the courage to act... Until you appeared and gave us hope. Originally, I intended to propose this naval raid after you decided to attack Pompeii through discussion, but unfortunately—"

Breaking off, Quintus changed his tone: "But fortunately, Leader Maximus, you, despite your youth and few forces, dared to lead a lone army against Pompeii, showing great courage. If this plan is carried out and we successfully capture Pompeii, everyone in your troops will surely be awed by your fame!"

Quintus's words struck a chord with Maximus. His reason for taking the risk to meet these Lukaiya people was to see if there was an opportunity to single-handedly capture Pompeii. Although Pompeii had high walls, its few troops and weak combat power were obvious, giving the Supply Camp a chance.

Maximus's interest in such a notion mainly arose because of the mockery from Cross at the meeting earlier, making him realize that despite controlling the Supply Camp and greatly aiding the rebel army, without any military performance, it would be hard to play a decisive role in the rebel army's Military Commander Conference and in military-related topics. Therefore, he wanted to capture Pompeii on his own to prove his military capabilities to Cross and the others.

Maximus didn't indulge in self-satisfaction from Quintus's flattering words. He gathered his smile, sat back on the wooden chair, and solemnly said: "I have one last question about this raid plan of yours—how can you make me believe this isn't a scheme you've designed to annihilate my army?"

"Nonsense! We would never cooperate with those enemies in Pompeii to trap you!" shouted the middle-aged man Oluus loudly.

Another middle-aged man, Scapula, responded sincerely: "It's easy to prove whether we are deceitful. You just need to ask any Lukaiya person, and they can tell you about our past grievances with the Pompeians."

"Leader Maximus, this time I brought fifty-four people, plus our families, totaling one hundred and fifteen. We'll all stay in your camp, and if you ultimately discover this is a plot, you can kill us and let your soldiers avenge us!" Quintus spoke with determination, shocking everyone.

Scapula immediately exclaimed: "Quintus, what if—"

Quintus sternly interrupted what he was about to say: "Scapula, since we've already decided to join their ranks after revenge, wouldn't it be better to come here a little earlier to adapt!"

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Scapula and Oluus exchanged a glance and finally said helplessly, "Alright, we'll do as you say."

Maximus observed this, and with a plan already in mind, he said, "You don't need to rush. I need to discuss it with my subordinates first. Only when everyone agrees can we implement this plan."

"When can you give us a clear answer?" Oluus asked urgently.

"Tomorrow."

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Once Quintus and his companions had left, Maximus immediately gathered Fesaros, Torrelugo, and Camillus, the three Chief Centurions (earlier, when the number of the Guard soldiers increased from over 300 to 700, Maximus had these three each oversee at least two Centurions. By rights, their positions should be promoted to Great Captain, but leaders like Spartacus, Cross, and others, despite commanding far more than a thousand soldiers, still held the rank of Great Captain. To avoid criticism, Maximus temporarily borrowed this name) and the head of the military advisory group, Flinitus, for a discussion.

Upon hearing Maximus say he wanted to lead the Supply Camp Guard independently to attack Pompeii, the four were a bit surprised. However, after listening to the sea raid plan, they all fell into contemplation.

Having spent many years at the Napolet Port and having traveled to Pompeii's port several times, Camillus personally confirmed the authenticity of Pompeii Port Area's situation as described by Quintus, which further proved the feasibility of this plan.

Flanitnus was surprised that the Lukaiya people had joined the rebel army. Amid his schadenfreude, he lamented the irony of two armies that once fought each other savagely due to following different Roman commanders now working together for the rebel army.

After a moment of thought, the three Chief Centurions unanimously agreed to implement this surprise attack plan. This outcome wasn't surprising, as during this time, they watched other battalions boast about defeating the Roman Army, while their troops trained even more rigorously, yet mostly remained confined to the camp, feeling frustrated. They all yearned to prove themselves.

After reaching a consensus, the next crucial task was to secure the ships.

Maximus dispatched Vorenius to the Fifth Battalion camp to inquire about the ships from Attutmus, claiming that the Supply Camp wanted to try sea fishing to diversify the soldiers' food sources.

Attutmus did not doubt this, as he had previously considered it himself and had instructed his soldiers to maintain the ships stranded on the beach. However, being competitive by nature, he was busy with training to ensure his battalion wouldn't fall behind others, so the few ships never went to sea, inadvertently lowering the guard of the nearby coastal towns.

Vorenius borrowed five single-masted cargo ships from the Fifth Battalion, and Maximus sent soldiers with a seafaring background and carpenters quietly to the beach to inspect and repair them, ensuring they were seaworthy, and instructed the construction team to create five-meter-long wooden ladders.

The next day, after Maximus informed Quintus that the Supply Camp was ready to implement his proposed raid plan, Quintus and his companions were overjoyed and soon, on the third morning, they brought their families to the Supply Camp to fulfill their promise.

The surprise attack on Pompeii was a bold adventure by Maximus and concerned the life and death of the Supply Camp Guard. He was, of course, very cautious, reconvening with the three experienced Centurions, Flanitus, and Quintus for further discussion. They confirmed every detail of the operation and finally decided to launch the surprise attack at midnight with the moon and north wind, as the Pompeians would be less vigilant. Even if they discovered the invasion and attempted to muster the troops, it would be slow. Moreover, with the help of the north wind, the transport ships could quickly reach the port of Pompeii along the coast.

The seaborne troops were made up of most of the soldiers from the Third and Sixth Centurions led by Camillus, who were experienced seamen from Napolet Port and could navigate at night without issues.

Additionally, thirty Lukaiya people led by Oluus would participate in the sea raid. Although slightly older, they were seasoned Roman veterans who could compensate well for the inexperience of Camillus's troops.

A total of 200 soldiers would carry out the seaborne raid on the port, with an average of 40 per ship, well below the carrying capacity of a single-masted merchant ship, thereby ensuring sailing speed.

Maximus was a meticulous person. After the action was determined, he outlined several key points, requiring the soldiers participating in the raid to undergo simulated training until they were completely familiar and proficient.

Simulated training? Even Quintus, with twenty years of military experience, had never heard of such a term, let alone others who were curious.

Maximus called in the construction team and spent half a day meticulously setting up on the training field. So, when Camillus led the soldiers participating in the raid to the training ground, Maximus surprisingly had them sit fully armed on the ground repeatedly making rowing motions, stopping only after a set period. Then, the first six soldiers in line had to carry a ramming wood from the ground, run dozens of meters forward, and smash into a wooden board firmly anchored in the mud and standing tall. The whole team then had to run over 100 meters along a designated route and knock down another wooden board with the ramming wood before arriving at two mounds about three meters high and four meters apart, climb one mound, position the long wooden ladder over the gap, and walk across it to the other mound. Then, they had to run nearly 200 meters to engage in combat with waiting soldiers and ultimately win to finish the exercise...

After a round, the soldiers were all panting heavily, some puzzled and even grumbling in their hearts: Leader Maximus was deliberately tormenting them!

But Quintus, watching from the side, suddenly understood: this was to have the soldiers train for the entire process of raiding Pompeii.

"What's the use of such training, it's like child's play. On the actual day of the raid, the pressure of death will make them incapable of moving a muscle!" Oluus mocked nearby.

"No, I think it does work," Quintus earnestly replied. "Look at them; they don't know how to effectively use the ramming wood to break doors, get nervous and fall off the suspended ladders, and at the end can't even lift their sword and shield... Although this isn't the real battlefield, if they can keep training this way, when the day of the raid comes, they should be able to perform to some extent."

At this moment, they saw Maximus walking to the front of the team and loudly saying, "Brothers, I heard that everyone in your Third and Sixth Centurions actively requested to join this raid, with no one backing out. Some even pestered Camillus after not being selected. I'm very pleased; you are truly men unafraid to fight the sea!"

Despite being drenched in sweat, the soldiers lifted their heads proudly.

Maximus then changed his tone: "However, your performance just now disappointed me. This training is not to mess with you but to simulate the entire process of raiding Pompeii. At that time, you will set out fully armed, row the sails for over ten miles, and storm into Pompeii Port. Your actions will inevitably alert the sentries at the port. While they sound the alarm and gather the troops, you must quickly climb onto the docks, use the ramming wood to break through the port's gate, rush into the port area, swiftly traverse narrow alleys, reach designated buildings, break through the doors, rapidly climb to the rooftop, set up the ladders, and cross over a ten-meter-deep cliff to enter the city..."

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Maximus continued: "...Then, without stopping for a moment, march west along the road. Along the way, Pompeian soldiers who arrive one after another may already be chasing from behind, or they may be shooting arrows at you from the city walls not far from the road. If your actions are slow or your reactions dull, you might die under their arrows or be caught and surrounded by the enemy.

When you arrive at the Herculaneum Gate, you'll still have to fight the enemy guarding the city gate. You must kill them as quickly as possible to seize control of the gate before the enemy's main forces arrive. Only then can the main force of the Guard, lying in ambush outside the city, enter smoothly, allowing us to secure ultimate victory... Now tell me, can you do it?!"

The group fell into a silence. After a long while, a few soldiers hesitantly responded in low voices, "...We... can do it..."

Maximus sternly swept his gaze over everyone: "It seems you're self-aware. If you can't even successfully complete such a simple training, how can you carry out a surprise assault on Pompeii and return safely! As your leader, the thing I care about most is whether you can make it back alive. So, I hope you will repeat this training over and over, not just by day but also at night, until you master it to perfection—so much so that you can complete the entire simulated action in the shortest time even with your eyes closed. This is the only way to ensure that by sweating more in training, you bleed less in battle!

I sincerely hope—when the day comes that we take Pompeii, every one of you will still be alive to bask in the envious gazes of the other troops and to hear their heartfelt admiration as they say, 'The soldiers of the Supply Camp's Guard are remarkable! They are heroes capable of creating miracles!'"

After hearing their leader's deeply stirring words, the soldiers' breathing steadied, their backs straightened, and they stood tall and energized.

Camillus seized the opportunity to shout out loud, "Brothers, should we continue training?!"

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

Quintus watched the Guard soldiers resume their training and remarked softly, "Even among slaves, there are outstanding individuals."

"You're talking about Maximus?" Spukala was moved inside.

Quintus nodded without elaborating and instead turned to Oluus: "I think you should lead the others to join the training as well. We've been out of combat for over a decade now. Aren't we a bit rusty? Don't make a mistake during the assault and provide them with a reason to laugh at us."

Oluus sneered, "It's magnanimous of us not to laugh at them. What makes them think they can laugh at us! Still, we should train alongside them a bit, so we can coordinate smoothly during the assault..."

As Oluus spoke, he turned to gather his companions. Though he still looked down on the Guards' recruits, his extensive battlefield experience reminded him that war was no trivial matter—it could never be taken lightly!

...

At dawn, in the backyard of the rebel army headquarters near the olive oil farm, a wooden shed was set up in front of the kitchen on the open ground. Inside were more than ten makeshift wooden tables and benches, forming the "exclusive cafeteria" of the Supply Camp's logistics department.

At that moment, a group of youths was having breakfast there. Most of them had finished eating, leaving only a few slowly chewing and savoring their food. Among them was a child with a slender frame and delicate features, resembling a girl. He was the only grandson of Quintus—Valerius Quintus.

Since the Lukaiya people had arrived at the camp with their families, Maximus had assigned the elderly and women among them to the logistics department, while their children were placed directly into the youth team. Because Maximus treated them the same as his subordinates, without detaining them separately, even though the Lukaiya men had to live apart from their families, they could accept it.

"Valerius, eat faster! We're all waiting for you!" Akegu urged.

Valerius quickly stuffed the remaining bread into his mouth and then downed the rest of the oatmeal in the pottery jar in one gulp.

"I've already grabbed your shield and sword for you. Let's head straight to the training ground." Magus said as he handed him the wooden shield and wooden sword. These items were crafted by personnel

from the military warehouse. They were smaller and lighter than those used in soldiers' military training but were much more refined.

"Thank you!" Valerius reached out and took them.

"Let's go." Akegu patted Valerius on the shoulder and led the way out of the cafeteria.

Valerius followed the other children, hopping and skipping as they made their way to their dedicated training ground. The Guard's training field was right next to it, separated by several rows of oak trees.

Once the youths arrived, they immediately quieted down and quickly formed four long columns. Under the guidance of their captain, Akegu, they began jogging around the training ground...

After five laps, Valerius, trailing at the end of the group, began to feel a bit drained. The vice-captain, Casius, who was also at the back noticed something was off and promptly asked with concern, "How are you holding up? Can you keep going?"

Valerius, unwilling to be looked down upon, hesitated before saying, "I... I can still go on."

"Then push through, just one more lap to go. You can do it!"

Casius's encouragement gave Valerius strength. He gritted his teeth, followed the group, and managed to finish the lap, though he was so tired that he could barely stand.

Casius quickly supported him, helping him walk slowly along the sidelines, while comforting him: "Everyone struggles when they first start running. I was even worse than you then—ended up throwing up my breakfast. Akegu and the others laughed at me a lot. But after running for a few days, it gets easier to handle. Now I can run ten laps at a decent speed without any trouble. Trust me, if you stick to this every day, you'll be just like me in no time."

Chapter 74: Young Men Valles listened intently, feeling a warmth in his heart, and nodded firmly.

After a while, Akegu shouted loudly, "Everyone, come here and form up!"

The resting children immediately gathered together, quickly forming a dense phalanx 10 wide and 5 deep, and Valles quickly took his position.

From the sidelines came an elderly man with graying hair and a dignified expression. His name was Lufus Gracchus, once a Roman veteran who had later fallen into the hands of Rome as a public slave. Now he was a member of the Supply Camp's military advisory group. Over a month ago, when Maximus wanted to select a military instructor for the newly formed youth team, Gracchus had voluntarily applied and secured the position.

He stopped in front of the formation. Akegu immediately strode forward, clenched his right fist, pounded it against his chest, and reported loudly with clear annunciation, "Instructor, the formation is ready. A total of 52 people, all present. Please issue your orders!"

"Very good, fall in." Gracchus scanned the children before him. Every time he saw their youthful and energetic faces, he felt a bit younger himself. His gaze lingered slightly on a few of the children—those were children of the Lukaiya people, once enemies and now comrades in the slave-led rebellion against Rome. The arrangements of the Goddess of Fate were truly wondrous!

Gracchus felt ripples in his heart but said aloud, "Next, we will proceed with formation training."

Youths were different from adults. Their bones and muscles were not yet fully developed, and excessive emphasis on strength training could harm their bodies. However, they were young and quick learners, making formation training far more effective for them than for adults. This was a military training plan that Maximus and Flannitus had devised after multiple discussions.

Gracchus held a military horn and played various signals. The youths responded to the commands issued through the horn, advancing at times, halting at others, forming shield formations, charging forward, or retreating en masse...

Afterward, Gracchus gave further commands, directing the youth team to turn left and right, transform into circular formations or columns, or have the rear ranks advance while the phalanx extended to both flanks. During training, their formation was often messy because newcomers like Valles were completely unacquainted with the instructions, slowing down the pace of the entire formation shift.

However, Gracchus never called for a stop or issued corrections. Instead, the other youths actively guided the newcomers on what to do. Everyone eagerly collaborated, with very little complaining. As a result, though the training was somewhat sloppy, the atmosphere was good, and gradually it began to improve.

After formation training ended, the children took a short break before beginning engineering training.

Gracchus divided the 52 youths into two groups for a competition. Each group was tasked with digging a trench 5 meters long, 1 meter wide, and 1 meter deep, setting traps within it, and using the excavated soil to build a 1-meter-high, 5-meter-long mud wall. The team that finished fastest and best would win, while the losing team would have to run three laps around the field.

Both teams threw themselves into the task with all their energy, working fiercely.

Valles was assigned to the group led by Casius. Casius specifically placed Magus at Valles' side to personally instruct him on what to do. Earlier at breakfast, the meticulous Magus had handed Valles his weapons; now, Magus was being extremely strict.

Since the deaths of his parents, Valles' grandfather, though neglectful in care, had never let him endure hardship. This was his first time doing such heavy work. Yet influenced by the lively atmosphere, he neither shirked his duty nor resented Magus' strictness. Instead, he diligently followed Magus' guidance and focused on the task at hand.

Two hours later, Gracchus began inspecting the trenches completed by the two groups.

"The first group finished first, but the walls of the trench are not steep enough, the sharpened stakes placed in the bottom of the trench are neither deep nor numerous, and not enough water was poured in... Imagine if you were on a real battlefield, and the enemy wanted to cross a wide trench to attack your camp. Steep walls and slippery ground would make it very difficult for the enemy to climb out of the trench. If they lay a wooden ladder across it and try to rush over, a single slip could send them falling onto a dense array of stakes below, where death would await them." Gracchus explained the deficiencies as he demonstrated with actions.

The dust-covered youths stood in formation nearby. At an age when they should be playing without care, they now listened as an old soldier described life and death on the bloody battlefield. None of them thought it odd; instead, they listened attentively.

"...By comparison, though the second group was slower, they did better in these areas." Gracchus calmly delivered his final assessment, "Based on your performance, the winner this time is the second group!"

Casius, Magus, and their teammates cheered loudly. Valles couldn't help but join in enthusiastically. He had sweat for this too and deeply felt the sense of collective honor.

The youths in the first group were a bit crestfallen. Akegu voluntarily took responsibility: "Our group lost this time—it was my fault. I only focused on speed and didn't enforce strict standards. I hope everyone can forgive me!"

One youth immediately responded, "This isn't just the captain's fault; all of us are to blame! Maximus once said, 'No one is without fault. It's okay to make mistakes, just as long as you correct them!'"

"Gaurus is right. We should learn from today's mistakes and strive to beat the second group next time!" another youth declared loudly.

"Yes, we'll definitely win next time!!" the first group's youths shouted, their morale reignited.

Ah, to be young! Gracchus smiled silently as he watched the scene of jubilation before him. After a while, he finally said loudly, "Next, we'll proceed with one-on-one combat training!"

The youths let out an even louder cheer. Compared to the heavily regulated formation training and the tough, exhausting engineering tasks, this was their most eagerly anticipated activity. What child doesn't enjoy some playful sparring?

Only Valles and a few other newcomers felt nervous. Although they had already participated in two days of training, this was their first time engaging in one-on-one sword combat exercises.

Lufus first paired the youths, aiming to match opponents of similar skill levels to maximize the training's purpose.

"Valles, your opponent is Dorin."

Gracchus' words rendered Valles speechless: My opponent is a girl?!

Maximus held no bias against women. Of the youths in this team, five were girls who underwent the same training as the boys. While he didn't intend for them to engage in combat when grown, he hoped the training would develop their health, making them less prone to illness and better able to endure the hardships of marching.

But when Dorin stood before Valles, his complaints stopped abruptly.

Dorin, 14 years old, was the daughter of farm slaves. She had joined the rebel Supply Camp very early on. When she first arrived, she was frail, but after half a year of improved nutrition and hitting a growth spurt, she now stood a full head taller than Valles of the same age, with a robust physique. If not for her soft facial features and slightly pronounced chest, she could easily be mistaken for a boy.

"Hey, watch out. I won't go easy on you," Dorin said, staring straight at Valles. After issuing her threat, she immediately charged with her wooden shield raised.

Valles raised his shield to block. When their shields collided, he found himself overpowered, stumbling back a step.

Dorin charged again with her shield. Valles resisted, but once more he was forced back, his arm tingling from the impact. When Dorin made her third charge, Valles dared not block. He sidestepped to evade instead.

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Dorin, not one to let up after gaining the upper hand, pressed forward relentlessly. Her wooden sword struck out in swift arcs until, finally, Valles failed to dodge in time and took a hit to the shoulder, letting out a pained "Ouch!"

Dorin immediately stopped in her tracks and asked with concern, "Are you okay?"

Valles rubbed his shoulder. Dorin had held back her strength, leaving no serious injury. As the pain subsided slightly, he responded, "I'm fine."

"Shall we keep going?" Dorin blinked at him, a trace of disdain playing across her face.

Unwilling to be looked down upon by a girl, Valles gritted his teeth. "Of course, we'll keep going!"

"Alright then, let's go again." Dorin readied her stance instantly.

"Hold up!" Instructor Lufus appeared at some point and was now standing to the side. He stepped forward and asked Valles, "Have you never practiced sword fighting before?"

"No... no, I haven't," Valles admitted truthfully, feeling a bit embarrassed.

Lufus was surprised. He thought to himself: since this child's grandfather is the Chief Centurion of the legion, how is it possible that he wasn't trained in swordsmanship from a young age? That's a core tradition of Rome! What Lufus didn't know was that after losing his son and daughter-in-law, Quintus became consumed with revenge, utterly neglecting his grandson's care and education.

After a moment of contemplation, Lufus said, "Dorin, go over to Magus's group and spar in rotation with them."

"Yes, sir." Dorin glanced at Valles before turning and walking away.

"Kid, you won't be sparring today," Lufus said in a gentle tone. "We'll start by practicing the basic stances for sword fighting. See, this is how you hold the wooden shield... Yes, just like that. Holding it this way conserves energy, makes it easier to exert force, and protects your arm from injury... Step forward with your left leg, push off with your right foot, keep your body slightly crouched, the wooden shield guarding your chest, and hide the wooden sword behind the shield—but always be ready to

thrust. That's it, just like that. And this is very important: always keep your eyes locked on your opponent's. Even if blood splatters on your face, you must not blink, understand?"

Under Lufus's careful guidance, Valles spent the remainder of the time practicing sword-fighting stances and movements by himself. By the time Lufus declared the end of the morning's military training, Valles's arms were so exhausted that he could barely lift them.

Next, Akegu directed everyone to reform into a column and led them back to the farm's rear courtyard.

Standing outside the "dining hall," Acronis saw them approaching and immediately called out with a beaming smile, "Children, come drink a jug of milk sap to quench your thirst!"

Among the chorus of "Thank you, Auntie Acronis!" came a softer voice saying "Thank you, Mama," which belonged to Naisuya.

Valles cradled a jug of milk sap in his hands, sat down at the wooden table, and took a sip. It tasted tangy and slightly sweet, refreshing and cooling. He promptly drank the entire thing in one gulp and let out a satisfied burp.

"Tasty, right? This is a secret recipe from the kitchen, with a bit of honey added—it's something most people don't get to enjoy. We're lucky to be in the Supply Camp and have Auntie Acronis looking after us; otherwise, today's lunch might've just been greasy soup. So today, we're pretty lucky," a lively boy leaned over and began chattering. "You shouldn't have finished it all at once, though. You should save some to pair with the bread—it tastes better that way."

Valles recalled that this boy's name was Manas and replied with a wry expression, "But Manas, I've already finished it. What now?"

After hesitating briefly, Manas picked up his own jug. "I'll pour you a little more."

At that moment, Valles remembered something Maximus had privately said to him two nights ago during his first evening lesson: "Child, even though you're new here, don't worry about being excluded or bullied. These kids have all endured hardships since they were small—they understand patience and

kindness. They'll treat you like a brother and look after you. I hope you can see them as your siblings too and think of this place as your home. Live happily here..."

As Manas poured a small amount of milk sap into his jug, Valles felt both moved and a bit ashamed.

Manas leaned closer and whispered, "You got beaten pretty badly by Dorin today, didn't you? That girl doesn't act like a girl at all—once she starts fighting, she's like a wild storm, no holding back—"

"Manas! Are you talking behind my back again? Feeling itchy, are you?!" Dorin's voice suddenly shot out from behind, startling Manas. He frantically waved his hands, saying, "M-Me? Talking behind your back? No way! I was just explaining to Valles how best to drink milk sap, right, Valles?"

Catching Manas's exaggerated winks, Valles nodded. "Yes, that's right."

"You're both no good," Dorin glared at the two of them and huffed angrily. "I heard everything, and Naisuya can back me up!"

Naisuya gently interjected, "Manas speaking ill of others behind their backs is certainly wrong. But Dorin, you're big-hearted, so why not forgive him this once? Oh, my mother just brought out the bread. Let's go help distribute it."

Dorin snorted, then turned and walked toward Acronis.

"Whew, that was close. Thank goodness for Naisuya," Manas said, sticking out his tongue nervously.

Valles couldn't help but laugh.

When Valles first learned that the youth team—and by extension, the entire squad—had a midday snack, he was genuinely astonished. Roman citizens usually ate just two meals a day, yet this slave-armed team ate even better!

Now, as he ate warm bread and sipped sweet milk sap, listening to Manas and the others banter and brag, he felt an indescribable sense of comfort. The morning's fatigue seemed to vanish entirely.

The afternoon was designated for work. Since Valles had received a few years of education in his early childhood, he joined Akegu and the others in the warehouse after lunch, assisting Gaius in cataloging and processing the plundered supplies.