

Perish 91

Chapter 91: Developing Maritime Trade

Maximus thought briefly, then ordered Frantinus to assign one of the Centurions to the Personal Guard, while evenly distributing the other three among the three Great Captains.

With this arrangement, Fesaros, Torrelugo, Camillus, and Oros were all quite satisfied.

Thus, Maximus had completed the fundamental restructuring and adjustments of his army.

The central structure of the military was as follows: Military Officer Frantinus, temporarily in charge of five subordinates; Quintus, Chief of Staff, overseeing the staff with over twenty members; Military Judge Sidonius, temporarily assigned a unit of twenty men.

Combat units included: Oluus, Captain of the Personal Guard, commanding 130 soldiers (including 30 veterans from Rocalia); Fesaros, Great Captain of the First Battalion, commanding four Centurions, totaling 400 men; Torrelugo, Great Captain of the Second Battalion, commanding four Centurions, totaling 400 men; Camillus, Great Captain of the Third Battalion, commanding three Centurions, totaling 300 men. The Maximus Army now had a total of 1,230 soldiers, finally surpassing the thousand-man mark.

Additionally, the numbers in the logistics departments had also reached a thousand, with the ratio of combat personnel to non-combat personnel nearing 1:1, a testament to the unique characteristics of this force.

Because some logistics department heads were still stationed at the Vesuvius camp, Maximus only adjusted the combat units for now. Matters regarding logistics would have to wait until all personnel had arrived at Pompeii to convene a meeting for discussion.

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At dawn, the cries of seagulls stirred Tegcharles from his slumber.

"Theos..." Tegchamos murmured instinctively before rolling over to continue sleeping. Unexpectedly, his hand struck something hard. The pain finally forced him to open his eyes, revealing a narrow and shabby stone hut, rather than his luxurious bedroom at home.

Rubbing his eyes, he crawled up from the rough wooden plank bed and staggered to push open the wooden door. Bright sunlight instantly poured over him. Shielding his eyes with his hand, he looked down at the doorstep. There, as usual, was a wooden plank holding a pottery jar filled with porridge and a piece of bread.

"Still the same stuff!" Tegchamos muttered in dissatisfaction, but the growling from his stomach silenced any complaints. He bent down to pick up the breakfast and was about to bring it back inside when he heard someone nearby say, "Tegchamos, I really admire you. With everything so perilous right now, you still manage to eat and sleep soundly."

"Things have come to this; just take it as it comes. Thinking too much will only scare yourself," Tegchamos said, his eyes darting as he glanced at the tall middle-aged man standing on the opposite side of the corridor. Lowering his voice, he added, "Besides, I don't believe these slaves will kill us."

"Oh? Why is that?" The tall middle-aged man immediately asked.

"Look, those Slave Soldiers threw many corpses into the sea at dusk two days ago. We saw it ourselves, and you even recognized some as members of the Vidius family. This proves that after occupying Pompeii, these slaves killed many people in the city, including quite a few characters of importance. Compared to them, we are merely insignificant merchants. Killing us would be simple, but instead, they've imprisoned us in these lodgings for refugees, assigned guards, and bring us meals every day. This is far more troublesome than just killing us outright. Precisely because of this, I suspect they have a purpose for keeping us alive. Daltemas, you were known for your cunning in Regium; I don't believe you haven't realized this."

"Realizing it doesn't change anything," the middle-aged man named Daltemas said, his face clouded with worry. "Slaves are ignorant and submissive, but once they rise in rebellion, they often become even more brutal and unpredictable. Today, they might plan to keep us alive; tomorrow, they might decide to chop off our heads and use them as wine jugs... Our lives are entirely in their hands, like fish caught from the sea, doomed to be slaughtered at their whim."

"Well, I'm just taking things one day at a time. When those slaves first captured me, I already mentally prepared myself for the worst—to die." Tegchamos spoke indifferently. As his gaze shifted to a tightly shut wooden door nearby, he couldn't help but ask, "Has Kroxi Bas come out?"

"No," Daltemas replied with a sigh. "Yesterday, he wouldn't stop lamenting why he couldn't react faster, or else he could've escaped from the port in time and avoided being caught by these slaves. I think he's driven himself mad with guilt by now."

"Indeed, compared to those who managed to flee the port in time, we are quite unlucky." Tegchamos let out a deep sigh and chose not to dwell on it further to avoid dampening his mood. As he was about to return to his room to enjoy his breakfast slowly, he noticed Daltemas suddenly lean out over the balcony. "What are those slaves up to now?!"

Tegchamos felt a pang of alarm and turned to look outside.

Their residence was a three-story, linear stone building adjacent to the port, originally rented by Pompeii Port officials for dock laborers. Each floor was divided into numerous cramped rooms, with corridors doubling as balconies. The corridor of their quarters faced away from the sea and towards the port's residential area.

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At this moment, the two saw countless slave soldiers wielding weapons but with incomplete armor pouring into the area. After a cacophony of shouts, curses, and shoving, the open space in front of the residential area used for temporarily placing and transporting goods was crowded with the residents of the port area.

Yesterday, these robbers forcibly gathered the port's people just like today, inciting them to join their ranks. As a result, quite a few port slaves and freedmen were swayed and became part of this group of bandits. Are they here to recruit again today?... With suspicion and unease, the two paused on the corridor, listening intently.

Their building was very close to the crowd, and the voices of the slave leaders shouting faintly reached their ears...

"These bandits are actually going to drive all the residents of Pompeii out of the city!" Daltemas showed a look of shock on his face.

"No, they said it's not driving out, but inviting, and each household that voluntarily leaves the city can receive a silver coin as compensation—"

"The whole house is taken away, what can a silver coin compensate for!" Daltemas said somewhat angrily.

"At least they made this gesture and are also allowing the Pompeians to take their belongings with them when they leave. When have you ever heard of bandits or pirates performing such merciful acts?" Tegechamos said with a playful look.

"It's nothing but the cat crying over the dead mouse; in the end, they still have to use force to threaten!" Daltemas said bitterly, and the continuous cries and begging voices from the front made him suddenly feel a sense of solidarity in calamity: "I wonder what the Romans are doing, not continuing to send troops to eliminate these bandits, but instead allowing them to continue to ravage Campania!"

"The Romans have been defeated twice, so now they probably don't dare to send troops at will, right? Besides, it's almost time for the election of next year's governors; surely family affairs are more important than the matters of allies." Tegechamos spoke with a tone of sarcasm.

"What family, whose family, now we are all Roman citizens." Daltemas reminded.

"You are wrong; you are a Roman citizen, while I am just a Sicilian." Tegechamos said coldly.

Daltemas only then suddenly remembered: Although Regium and Messina are only separated by a narrow strait, their political status in Rome is now vastly different. The Roman civil war decades ago ultimately made all Italians Roman citizens, while Sicily is still a province of Rome, and the Sicilians do not enjoy the rights of Roman citizens.

Daltemas, for a moment, did not know how to speak, so he remained silent.

Tegechamos turned to go back inside the room, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw a man in a luxurious robe leading a team of slave soldiers walk into the building: "Someone is coming, could it be they're looking for us?"

Tegechamos's premonition was right; soon, the man in a luxurious robe appeared before the two of them. Though the man wore fine clothing, his skin was dark and rough, and he walked with a limp, giving a ludicrous impression of a dressed-up monkey, but he felt no shame, instead, smiling as he asked, "May I ask which of you is the Messina merchant Tegechamos?"

Tegechamos suppressed his inner unease and said nervously, "I... I am."

The man smiled and nodded at him, then looked at Daltemas: "Then are you the Hibernian merchant Kroxi Bas? Or the Regium merchant Daltemas?"

"I... I am Daltemas..." Daltemas glanced furtively at the fierce-looking slave soldiers behind the man, his voice trembling as he spoke.

"Where is Kroxi Bas?" the man asked.

Tegechamos pointed to the tightly closed wooden door beside them: "In there, he hasn't come out since yesterday, seems to be sick."

The man gestured to the soldiers behind him, then walked into Tegechamos's room, saying, "This time I'm here to discuss something with you."

In the cramped room, there was nothing but a board on the floor for a bed, and the air was filled with an unpleasant sour odor.

The man showed no disgust and sat down directly on the bed board, allowing his robe to drape over the dusty floor: "Please sit down, let's discuss slowly."

As soon as the man finished speaking, Tegechamos immediately sat on the other side of the bed board, while Daltemas hesitated for a moment, swept the floor with his hand, and sat opposite the man.

"Let me introduce myself first." The man said loudly, "My name is Pigeris, and I am the Commerce Officer of the Maximus unit of the Free Italy army."

The man's statement contained a wealth of information, prompting Tegechamos to cautiously ask, "May I ask what is this Free Italy army?"

Pigeris was about to answer when he saw his subordinate soldiers pushing a person inside. This person had a thin build, kept his head lowered, and was mumbling something continuously.

"Is this Kroxi Bas?" Pigeris pointed at him and asked.

"It's him." Tegechamos replied.

"Let him sit there." After Pigeris spoke, the soldiers pressed down on Kroxi Bas's shoulders, forcing him to sit by the door.

The room was nearly full with just 4 people sitting inside.

"Free Italy is the name of our entire group. We initiated this rebellion and resisted Rome to free all City States and races in Italy from Roman oppression, and to restore freedom," Pigeris said proudly, echoing words newly learned from Maximus Four, while Tegechamos and Daltemas listened as if hearing a strange discourse, their expressions somewhat dazed.

"Maximus is one of the leaders of the Free Italy army and also my leader. This city was captured by him leading his army alone..." Pigeris said proudly, and the expressions of the other two people began to show an impression.

"Our intention is simply to strike at the Campagnians who are willing to serve Rome. We have no intent to offend you, who come from far south. The reason we took you under our watch is also to ensure your safety," Pigeris said earnestly, looking out for them: "Now that the situation within the city is stable, Leader Maximus sent me to prepare to let you go—"

"You... you really want to let us go?!" Daltemas asked excitedly.

"Of course." Pigeris nodded heavily: "Not only will we let you go, but we will also return the ships, goods, and sailors you brought with you."

"Really?!"

"I am speaking to you on behalf of Leader Maximus, so it's true!"

Tegechamos and Daltemas finally showed a look of joy, eagerly saying in unison, "That's wonderful! When can we leave?!"

"You can leave at any time." Pigeris looked at the three with a somewhat enigmatic smile, suddenly leaning forward and saying in a low voice: "But after all the effort and fear you have endured coming from the south and having suffered losses, gaining nothing and going back empty-handed, are you willing?"

"May I ask... what do you mean by this?" Tegechamos asked tentatively, a thought stirring in his mind.

"You come to Pompeii for trade, naturally for Campania's wine, olive oil, or wheat..." Pigeris emphasized: "Not only do we have these things, but in enormous amounts and of excellent quality—" Pigeris halted his words, gazing meaningfully at the two in front of him.

Even before Tegechamos and Daltemas could react, Kroxi Bas, who had kept his head down, suddenly lunged forward, shouting, "Do you have Falernian wine? I want fifty jars!"

Pigeris was startled but seeing the excitement on the other's face, he immediately wore a slight smile: "Don't just mention Falernian wine, we also have Statania wine and Calania wine (at the time, Campania produced three kinds of high-quality wines). Not to mention 50 jars, even if you want 1000 jars, I can provide them for sale to you!"

"1000 jars! 1000 jars!..." Kroxi Bas's face twisted in excitement. The three premium wines from Campania were famous throughout Italy, but they were primarily reserved for the Romans. Other Italian City States seldom had access to them. Now, a golden opportunity for profit was laid before him, yet he scratched his head in anguish: "I don't have that much money!"

"It's okay if you don't have enough money," Pigeris said gently. "We can also barter goods. Leader Maximus has stated that our Free Italy army needs weapons, leather, tents... As long as you can procure these, the price of these wines will be halved for you."

"Take Falernian wine for instance. Its regular price is 5 Gold Coins per jar, but this year, due to our influence, the price is bound to double. Meanwhile, a set of leather helmet, leather armor, shield, and short sword costs only one or two Gold Coins. One set of weapons can be exchanged for one jar of Italy's finest wine, which you can then sell in any town for 10, maybe even 20 Gold Coins. Soon, you'll all become Italy's wealthiest merchants!"

Daltemas had been hesitant on the issue of selling weapons to the rebel army, but Pigeris's enticing words finally swayed him.

Tegechamos, however, had no hesitation. For merchants, chasing maximum profits is natural, particularly given the Sicilian resentment toward the Romans. Sicily, much like Mount Etna, once cultivated vineyards and produced fine wines. But after the Romans seized control of Sicily, they had turned it into Italy's granary. Successive Roman Governors emphasized expanding wheat fields and forced Sicilians to sell their wheat to Italy at low prices. Roman officials, arrogant and overbearing, had committed many wrongs in Sicily.

Thus, selling weapons to the rebel army to stir trouble for the Romans didn't weigh on Tegechamos's conscience. In fact, he welcomed it and said, "No problem selling weapons to you. The only issue is that I'll need at least three to four days to sail back to Messina, and six or seven days overall to return here with the weapons. Will you still be in Pompeii by then?"

Pigeris smiled and said, "You must have noticed earlier that our soldiers were asking Pompeians to leave the city. That's because the entire Free Italy army is moving in. We'll be here for quite a while, giving you ample time to make many trips back and forth."

Pigeris reassured the group with a guarantee.

Daltemas finally spoke up: "The town I live in doesn't produce weapons, but we do have raw iron ingots. Would you need them? If you do, could this also reduce the price of the wine by half?"

Tegechamos glanced at him, hesitated briefly, but decided not to expose him. After all, Regium and Messina were situated across the Messina Strait, with merchant ships bustling through the ports daily. Regium, like Messina, should have no shortage of weapons trade. Daltemas's words likely stemmed from a fear of being penalized by the Romans if it became known that he sold weapons to the rebel army.

"Raw iron ingots," Pigeris pondered. "That could work as well, but the price reduction wouldn't be as steep."

Some reduction was better than none—negotiations could always be revisited later. Trading with the rebel army required caution above all else. Daltemas exchanged a glance with Tegechamos and said, "Next time, I'll bring a large quantity of raw iron ingots to trade with you."

"Good," Pigeris nodded.

"Leather! And tents! I'll bring them to you soon, but you must sell me the best wine!" Kroxi Bas exclaimed, waving his arms enthusiastically, shouting like a man possessed by wine frenzy—a stark contrast to his earlier defeated demeanor in the corner of the room.

"This year, almost every vineyard in the Vesuvius Region has been seized by our army. Not only do we have an abundance of volume, but we also have a variety of types that can fully meet your needs," Pigeris said, standing with a smile. "To thank you for trusting our army, I'd like to invite you to visit our supply warehouse. Each of you may select 10 jars of wine to take with you as a token of our friendship."

"Is that for real?!" Kroxi Bas lit up with joy.

"Leader Maximus has said that anyone willing to trade with our army is a friend of Free Italy. For friends, we will never let them suffer losses. We hope you'll profit greatly every time, so that you'll continue being our friend and trading with us in the long term," Pigeris stated plainly but persuasively—his transparency forged trust.

"Your Leader Maximus is truly a shrewd man! Let's go, take us to your warehouse!" Tegechamos rose, all his previous unease evaporated, replaced by sheer excitement. He inwardly thanked the Goddess of Fortune: had he not overslept the other day and delayed his departure, he wouldn't have stumbled upon this lucrative opportunity!

Kroxi Bas and Daltemas swiftly followed suit, urging Pigeris to lead them to the warehouse. At this moment, they had entirely forgotten their earlier perilous experiences and regarded themselves as honored guests of the rebel army.

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Pigeris stood at the dock, watching Tegechamos's merchant ship disappear into the horizon, releasing a sigh of relief. Today's dealings had finally concluded. Judging by the merchants' reactions, the likelihood of Tegechamos and Kroxi Bas returning for trade in 10 days was exceedingly high. As for the cautious Daltemas—that remained uncertain. But regardless, Pigeris had already exceeded expectations. Leader Maximus would surely confirm his temporary assignment as a permanent one after hearing his report...

Chapter 94: Blacksmith Shop_2

Commerce Officer of the Maximus Army—what a pleasant name!... Pigeris displayed a happy smile, brushed the dust off his robe, and turned to leave the dock.

Crying sounds echoed throughout the port area as families in Pompeii, supporting the elderly and carrying the young, with bundles on their backs and pushing carts loaded with belongings, walked tremblingly on the road leading out of the city under the watchful eyes of armed rebel soldiers...

This scene reminded Pigeris of the tragic fate his family suffered in Little Asia. He felt not an ounce of sympathy; rather, he felt a bit of resentment: compared to the cruel and greedy Romans, Leader Maximus was still too merciful. He should seize the Pompeians' properties, demote them all to slaves, make them transport goods at the dock day after day, or toil under the scorching sun to repair the city walls...

Every time he touched his completely powerless left leg, the hatred for the Romans burned in his chest. He walked with some difficulty across the sea gate into the city but did not immediately go to the town hall to see Maximus; instead, he walked straight east along the road by the city wall.

The roadsides were similarly lined with armed rebel soldiers, and in the center of the road were still the weeping Pompeii citizens. But compared to the port area, there were more people here, so the rebel soldiers responsible for monitoring and maintaining order were highly tense. If it weren't for a team of soldiers following behind Pigeris, he might also have been mistaken for a Pompeian and forced into exile. After all, these rebel soldiers came from various units, not just the Maximus Army, so they might not recognize him.

After walking for a while, Pigeris turned north and then east again.

This street was even wider; it was Pompeii's commercial street, north of it lay the wealthy district, and to the south were the arena and theater. Hundreds and thousands of people gathered here daily to purchase goods from various places, bustling and lively, yet now it was deserted.

Pigeris walked slowly down the street, observing each shop along the way: fruit shop, butcher shop, vegetable shop, fish shop, bakery, olive oil shop, wine shop, pottery shop, bottle painting shop, gold and silverware shop, sports equipment store...

Seeing these shop doors tightly closed, Pigeris felt full of regret: if the Pompeians weren't allowed to leave, these shops could be under his management, and he would do his utmost to restore the prosperity of this street! But now, the entire rebel army was stationed in Pompeii, and the soldiers used to looting and being supplied by the Supply Camp wouldn't come here to spend money to buy goods...

What a pity!... Pigeris sighed lightly and secretly made up his mind: since he was now a Commerce Officer, the next time such an opportunity arose, he would surely suggest it to Maximus! He believed Maximus would heed his advice because, compared to other leaders, this young man was more daring and foresightful. Otherwise, he wouldn't have made the decision to trade with Italian merchants at this time.

As Pigeris reached halfway down the street, he heard a "clang clang" sound from the front. He looked in the direction of the sound and saw a building with three chimneys standing alone at the end of the road, beside the city wall, separated from other shops by a small distance. Its chimneys billowed black smoke, and two fully armed soldiers stood in front of the door, with several soldiers walking towards it...

Pigeris knew that was the blacksmith's shop, the only shop still operating in Pompeii, but unfortunately, it had already been taken over by the Maximus Army and was not open to the public, only serving the army's needs.

Seeing this, he felt a bit disinterested, stopped wandering around, and turned to head toward the city hall to report his achievements to Maximus.

Meanwhile, those soldiers had already walked up to the door of the blacksmith shop. A soldier guarding the door immediately and loudly asked, "Hey, this is a military zone, unauthorized entry is prohibited, which part are you from?!"

Another soldier quickly intervened, "Arisius, no need to shout so loudly, I know these guys, they're all from our Second Squad." After speaking, he smiled and looked at the people approaching the door: "Tini Bazus, I heard you actually refused to become a centurion and got scolded by our Great Captain?"

"Becoming a centurion involves worrying about so many things, it's so tiring. It's more comfortable being on my own but there's no choice, the Great Captain knows I'm capable, insists on making me one so I had no choice but to accept." Tini Bazus shrugged, showing a helpless expression.

The soldier laughed and said, "Tini Bazus, you're still as much of a talker as ever. You're made a centurion not because you're capable, but because this time in Pompeii we've taken in too many new recruits, over 400 in the city and over 1,000 at the port, so anyone with some combat experience is being promoted to team officer. All of us brothers who came from the Pontus army, we're all centurions now."

"Mairtilas, so does that mean you're a centurion now too, why are you standing here guarding?" Tini Bazus joked.

"Guarding the blacksmith shop is a duty that every squad in our Second Squad will take turns doing, you'll be up soon too, didn't you know?" Mairtilas laughed as he asked.

Tini Bazus was momentarily speechless. He had been so bothered about becoming a centurion these past few days, he hadn't paid attention to the centurion's orders.

"Alright, let me introduce you, this here is Arisius from our squad, who just joined yesterday. He originally worked as a laborer at Pompeii Port."

"You... hello, Captain Tini Bazus." Arisius nodded awkwardly in greeting.

Tini Bazus, taking on an elder's demeanor, tapped his fist on the other's chest and nodded, saying, "Hmm, not bad, very strong, you're sure to become a good soldier in the future! Let me introduce you too, this is Samoras, one of the soldiers in my squad. He's no new recruit; during the night raid on Pompeii, when we battled the Pompeii City Guards, he took down three enemy soldiers all by himself!"

"That's truly impressive!" Arisius looked at Samoras, standing before him like a steel tower, and sincerely praised him.

Mairtilas suddenly remembered something and asked in surprise, "How could you have veterans in your squad?"

"Didn't I just say? The Great Captain values me highly, so he specially gave me this privilege." Tini Bazus boasted confidently.

Mairtilas was momentarily taken aback by his bluff.

But the reality was that Tini Bazus, under the centurion's urging, agreed to serve as a centurion for the New Soldier Team, but Samoras insisted on following him and becoming his subordinate. The reason was that during the battle with the City Guards, Samoras advanced too far forward, nearly getting surrounded by enemies, and it was Tini Bazus's clever rescue that saved him. Samoras, though straightforward, understood gratitude and insisted on joining Tini Bazus's new soldier squad. The centurion eventually agreed.

At this point, Samoras couldn't hold back any longer and said, "Tini Bazus, when are we going back? I'm hungry and want to eat something."

Tini Bazus stopped bragging, turned back, and placated, "We'll be done soon, and then we're going back."

"Hurry up." Samoras rubbed his stomach and urged pitifully.

"Mairtilas, I don't have time to chat with you here, our short swords are damaged, and we need to get them fixed as soon as possible." Tini Bazus said, drawing out the short sword he carried, its blades on both sides looking like they had been chewed by a dog, filled with various nicks.

Chapter 95: Accident

Mairtilas exclaimed in surprise, "Whose short sword is this? How did it get damaged like this?!"

"It's this kid's. That night he fought bravely, charging ahead, but ended up surrounded by enemies who slashed at him repeatedly. In the end, his short sword ended up like this..." Tini Bazus pointed to his subordinate and complained, "Yesterday, the Great Captain instructed us to turn in all damaged weapons and bring them here for repair. But this guy insisted his weapons were fine, and it wasn't until this morning I discovered..."

Mairtilas glanced at Samoras. The burly man responded with a goofy smile, and Mairtilas somewhat understood that this soldier under Tini Bazus likely wasn't all that sharp.

After thinking for a moment, Mairtilas said, "Here's what we'll do... You take this short sword in by yourself. Someone in the courtyard will assist you. Tell him, 'You're a soldier under Leader Maximus, bringing this short sword for repair under orders.' They probably won't refuse. If anyone tries to make trouble for you, don't argue with them—just come outside and tell me."

Tini Bazus asked in surprise, "Mairtilas, are you implying that the blacksmiths inside might refuse to repair my short sword?"

Mairtilas lowered his voice and said, "You should be aware that the blacksmiths inside are Pompeians, compelled to join us under the threat of force. Do you think they're happy to work for us? But when we came here for duty, the Great Captain Torrelugo explicitly reminded us, 'Our army has finally secured two blacksmiths, and Leader Maximus hopes that, over time, they will come to genuinely accept us and willingly craft weapons for the army. So during your shifts, aim to interact amicably with them and avoid any conflict whenever possible.'"

"I understand now. Don't worry, I'll handle it carefully and won't cause you any trouble." Tini Bazus nodded knowingly, then asked Samoras to wait at the entrance while he himself walked into the courtyard of the blacksmith's shop.

The courtyard was fairly small. In the center stood a well. Against one corner of the wall lay a large pile of pitch-black charcoal, while the opposite corner held a heap of oddly-shaped discarded iron equipment. Long nails jutted out from the courtyard walls, on which hung several forged iron tools—scythes, shovels, hammers, saws... Additionally, wooden racks were lined up in the courtyard, each holding neatly arranged short swords, shields, helmets, breastplates... The entire courtyard was packed tight.

As Tini Bazus looked around curiously, a young man with bronzed skin and a well-built physique approached, his upper body bare. Smiling, he addressed Tini Bazus, who was clad in leather helmets and leather armor, and said, "Hello, which unit are you with, and what brings you to the blacksmith shop?"

Tini Bazus straightened his posture and replied, "I am Tini Bazus, First Centurion of the Fifth Hundred-man Team, Second Battalion of the Maximus Army, sent by the Great Captain to deliver this damaged short sword for repair."

The young man took the short sword, unsheathed it for inspection, and immediately exclaimed, "It's damaged so severely!"

"Can it be repaired?"

"No problem. It'll just take a bit more time. Please wait here; I'll go inside and inform Pessianaxis."

"You... aren't the blacksmith?" Tini Bazus finally caught something unusual in his tone.

"My name is Endias, and I'm currently an ironsmith apprentice." The young man replied candidly, his expression growing somewhat emotional. "I used to be a slave at this blacksmith shop, working endlessly on heavy and grueling tasks, all while wearing oppressive shackles on my hands and feet. Like Leader Maximus always said, we labored like cattle and sheep... It was thanks to your army's rescue that we gained our freedom! Now, we're part of the Maximus Army, entrusted by the leader to remain here as apprentices to learn smithing skills so we can eventually craft weapons and armor for you all."

In the past, Tini Bazus might have dismissed such words without a second thought, but after spending time within the ranks and being influenced by the army's ethos, he felt a sense of shared understanding. "Brother, we've all been slaves. To be rescued and granted freedom is truly our fortune!"

"You're absolutely right!" Endias said passionately. "A comrade who used to share my quarters was scratched accidentally while transporting some finished farming tools about ten days ago. That night, he developed a high fever. Pessianaxis didn't call for a doctor, and he endured for a few days before passing away. He didn't live long enough to see today, this better time..."

Endias sniffled slightly, suppressing the aching sadness in his heart, before speaking softly, "Please wait here for a moment. I'll take this short sword inside and speak to Pessianaxis. Then we just need to register some details, and you can leave."

"When should I come back for it?"

"You don't need to come back. I've heard there's a dedicated team tasked with collecting repaired weapons and distributing them to you."

"Understood." Tini Bazus nodded, then inquired casually, "My name is Tini Bazus, from Pontus in Little Asia. What's your name?"

"Endias, from Iberia."

"Now that we've met, we're brothers. If there's anything you need, don't hesitate to find me!" Tini Bazus echoed the words he had been repeatedly saying to the new recruits recently and added emphatically, "I am the First Centurion of the Fifth Hundred-man Team in the Second Battalion of the Maximus Army." At that moment, he felt that being a centurion wasn't such a bad thing.

"I'll remember that." Endias responded with a smile and walked into the room holding the short sword.