

## Perish 196

### Chapter 196: Heading to the Destination\_2

"Me?" Tini Bazus snorted, "I want to build a strong house, have someone make a comfortable bed, then lock the door tight and get a good sleep. You bastards, don't even think about waking me up!"

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Such a commotion occurred in every tent.

But in a few tents, the situation was different.

"Kadosos, Mark...Leader Maximus said that upon reaching Validosi, everyone in the troupe could receive land. Can we get some too?" a blacksmith asked anxiously, referring to the group of blacksmiths who had escaped during the Womans River battle, disrupting the camp and now being guarded.

"I'm not sure," Kadosos replied cautiously, "However...Leader Maximus once said, 'As long as you obey the army's commands from now on and don't violate military law, once the campaign ends, you will no longer be treated as criminals...' 'By that time, you should also be part of the army."

"Exactly! Leader Maximus needs us! If we can forge weapons and armor for his army, a lot of weapons and armor, he will surely grant us land!" another blacksmith encouraged loudly.

Even though these blacksmiths had decent wages in Sarabia before, they never owned their own land. Despite being blacksmiths by trade, their yearning for land was no less than anyone else's, especially since Maximus promised land comparable to that of ordinary Roman citizens, which would certainly not be small!

"Hmph, don't dream too much. Maximus would never give us land! When we reach Validosi, he'll turn us into his slaves, forging and working for him until death!" someone sneered in the dark.

"Shut up, Sistos, this is all your fault! If it weren't for you inciting us, we wouldn't have fled, wouldn't be worrying about whether we could get land—"

"Was it me who incited you?! Wasn't it because you hated Maximus for forcing you away from your homes with swords and spears, leading to your decision to escape? You even said you'd help the Roman Army to disrupt their camp, hoping they'd suffer a great defeat to get back at him—"

"Damn you, Sistos, shut up!" someone roared, lunging at Sistos and punching him in the head.

Sistos ducked to avoid the blow, preparing to fight back when yet another person rushed at him...

Soon, Sistos was being pounded into the bed, fists raining down on him, multiple voices shouting, "It's all this guy's fault, beat him hard!"

"If he dares to keep talking nonsense, tear his mouth apart!"

"Stop it! If you hurt Sistos, we'll all have to pay for it!"

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At dawn the next day, the Maximus Army broke camp and set out. Led by the Alde Tribe Envoy, they bypassed Tarsatica City, walked a short distance along the coast, and then headed east into the mountains.

Before entering the mountains, Maximus heeded the advice of Karsipengpas to dismantle all the carriages (not abandoning them because Karsipengpas said that in the mountainous area, supplies are scarce, and all carriage parts are valuable), with the materials loaded onto pack animals, while the rest of the supplies were carried on the soldiers' backs.

As Cleobrotas said, entering the mountains brought cooler weather, mainly because the high mountains and dense forests blocked the scorching sun.

Sometimes, the rebel army trekked on winding mountain paths, with towering peaks on both sides, seeing only a sliver of sky above. Wild goats leaped between the cliffs, dislodging stones with nowhere for soldiers to hide;

At times, they moved through towering forests, with thick soil made of dead branches and leaves, snakes and insects slithering, herds of wild boar darting through the woods, and large lynxes lurking in the trees... Even seasoned warriors were wary walking through here;

Sometimes the rebel army crossed ridge lines, even in the scorching summer, where snow still lay thick, clouds swirling around their feet, making each step hard to breathe, not to mention the pack animals which required pulling and pushing to progress...

Daytime marching was difficult, and resting at night was an even bigger issue, with no large open spaces for campgrounds. They had to clear the ground as best as they could, light bonfires, set many sentries, and have others wrap themselves in cloth blankets, sleeping on the ground around the fire.

Every day there were injuries and illnesses, the excitement and passion for finding a new home slowly drained by the arduous march, and murmurs of complaint started to arise within the troops.

Maximus could only instruct his attendants to spread words like, "If we are struggling so much in these mountains, those well-off Roman Soldiers surely wouldn't dare to venture here; life will be safer beyond the mountains..." to calm the troops' moods.

Though Maximus said this, in truth, ever since the march began through the mountains, he remained tense, not anticipating the sheer difficulty of traversing these steep peaks, straining the army's resources tremendously. Their unfamiliarity with the terrain meant a surprise attack could spell disaster.

Maximus regretted leading the troops into the mountains so hastily and quietly instructed Pequot: "Keep a close watch on all members of the Aldean Envoy. If anything happens during the march, seize them immediately!"

As it turned out, Maximus's concerns were unfounded. Throughout nearly twenty days of traversing mountains, there was no sign of an enemy, not even a single figure; the only living things they encountered were wild animals.

As the mountains suddenly lowered, vistas expanded, breathing eased, and most importantly, they saw a river rushing through the valley, with herds of deer drinking along the banks, and even spotted a hunter, javelin in hand and prey over the shoulder, walking by the river.

The hunter, seeing a large group of strangers suddenly appear in the valley, was so frightened that he abandoned his prey and fled, but was shouted down by an elder from the Alde Tribe Envoy.

It turned out this hunter belonged to the village overseen by the elder, located on a hill not far from the river.

Only upon questioning did they learn that the village had been informed about the Maximus Army's alliance with the Alde Tribe and their entrance into the territory; he simply hadn't connected it to the group before him.

"Here, we are within the Alde Tribe's territory. You can proceed with peace of mind," Cleobrotas declared proudly, then gestured to the river before them, "This is the Kupa River, one of the two rivers flowing through Validosi."

"So if we follow this river, we'll reach Validosi?" Maximus looked down at the river in the gorge, noting its steep gradient, swift water, thirty to forty meters wide, and crystal-clear waters, though bottomless.

"No, no, no," Cleobrotas shook his head, "The Kupa flows in a huge loop ahead. If we follow it precisely, it will take over two months to reach Validosi, so we will only follow it part of the way."

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Maximus nodded, then turned to look at the ranks of his troops: The soldiers wore loosened armor, carrying large square shields on their backs. In their left hands, they leaned on wooden staves made from tree branches, while in their right hands they gripped the tail ends of Forka Wood Sticks. The Forka Wood Sticks rested on their right shoulders, with the horizontal rods at the end carrying swollen bags. These bags held not only their everyday necessities but also sacks filled with wheat. Helmets hung from their left shoulders. Their belted tunics were torn to shreds by branches and thorns, and their leather

sandals were slashed by the jagged mountain rocks. Their hair was tangled, their skin dark and grimy, and their expressions were weary... Some had blood-soaked bandages wrapped around their heads, arms, or legs.

To call this an army would be a stretch; it looked more like a group of beggars. The sight made Maximus feel a deep pang of sorrow, so he ordered, "The army will halt here. Find a relatively flat area and set up camp."

The command was met with cheers throughout the ranks. They quickly found a spot near a riverbank with plenty of space. However, no one rushed to pitch tents; instead, they first divided into groups to bathe in the river. Even the horses and livestock were relieved of their burdens and led to the river's edge to drink and be washed.

Meanwhile, the elder from the Aldean Tribe hurried back to his village to bring its priest, who carried medicinal herbs to treat the soldiers bitten by snakes or insects...

The riverbanks were filled with laughter and joy, washing away the somber mood accumulated during the past days of marching.

In the days that followed, Maximus's army marched along the southern bank of the Kupa River as much as possible. However, the terrain was still challenging: uneven hills, overly dense forests, and sudden towering peaks forced the troops to take frequent detours.

But unlike before, the areas they passed through were no longer desolate. Instead, they occasionally saw fishermen casting nets along the river, hunters roaming the woods, shepherds herding their flocks on the hills, and farmers cultivating the flatlands. These people were initially wary of Maximus's army but calmed when they noticed the tribal elders within the ranks, preventing any panicked retreats.

Furthermore, Maximus's army passed through several Aldean villages, which were either perched on low hills or located at the edges of forests.

Maximus observed that none of these villages had walls; most consisted of simple thatched huts scattered haphazardly along the slopes. However, the Aldeans treasured flat land immensely—every small patch of level ground surrounding the villages had been cultivated into farmland.

As the Aldean Envoy members gradually returned to their own villages, not one invited Leader Maximus to camp near their settlements. It was evident they were still apprehensive about such a large army disrupting their villages' order.

The Maximus Army then turned southeast and, after several days of trekking through mountain paths, reached yet another sizeable river.

The river was called the Dobra. Karsipengpas explained that it was a tributary of the Kupa River, flowing into the main river some ten miles north of Validosi.

Maximus's army crossed the river at a shallow point and continued marching southeast. A few days later, another broad river extended before them.

This was the Murenica River.

Karsipengpas noted that the Murenica River was merely another tributary of the Kolana River, which passed through Valdosi. However, in Maximus's eyes, the banks of the Murenica River were far flatter and more expansive than those of the Kupa River. Standing on higher ground, he gazed upstream to the southwest and saw rows of houses and farmland densely packed on either side of the river, with villages lining up one after another...

At this point, Cleobrotas announced his departure, as he needed to personally report on the alliance and land purchase agreements to the Aldean Great Chief. The Great Chief's main camp was located some ten miles southwest, on the eastern bank of the Murenica River.

The Aldean Tribe had only one main camp, which housed the Great Chief. Whenever the main camp's population grew too large, noble families from the camp would lead groups of tribesmen to establish new settlements elsewhere. If a village developed well, its leading noble could become a candidate for the position of tribal elder.

The Aldean Great Chief's position was largely hereditary. The council of tribal elders consisted of a fixed fifty members, initially elected from over 200 villages every three years. However, the number of villages had dwindled to fewer than 60...

Maximus learned this information during his casual chats with Karsipengpas along the way. By now, only two envoys remained in the group: Karsipengpas and Budocaribas.

The army continued their march eastward along the northern bank of the Murenica River. After just one day's journey, they arrived at Budocaribas's village.

At this location, steep peaks flanked both sides of the Murenica River, and the riverbanks abruptly narrowed.

This village was somewhat unique, with its tribesmen living on both sides of the river, both areas surrounded by wooden palisades. Watchtowers stood within the walls, and a floating bridge connected the two riverside settlements. Compared to other Aldean villages, this one resembled a military stronghold.

Budocaribas lamented to Maximus about his hardships. He explained that his village had originally been located in Validosi, a land of fertile soil and abundant aquatic resources. It had been one of the strongest and largest villages within the Aldean Tribe. However, years of warfare with the Pannonians had left them with countless casualties, forcing them to retreat to their current position. Even now, they were frequently harassed by the Pannonians, leaving the tribesmen's lives in extreme hardship...

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Maximus did not respond to this; the arrival of his army was the best reassurance he could offer.

The army had to continue eastward, which meant passing through Budocaribas's village. Even though the soldiers had adhered strictly to military discipline and behaved admirably after entering the territory of the Alde Tribe — something Budocaribas had witnessed firsthand — he still appeared tense. After all, this was the first time the Maximus Army was directly entering an Aldean village; if any unexpected incidents occurred, tens of thousands causing commotion within the settlement could result in a disaster.

To address this, Maximus reassured Budocaribas once again, while Budocaribas entered the village ahead to communicate and interact with the tribesmen. Outside the village, Maximus issued strict orders to all department leaders to keep their subordinates under control and ensure nothing went wrong upon entering the settlement.

An hour later, the village gates opened, and the Maximus Army entered in orderly silence.

Although Budocaribas had warned the tribesmen beforehand, some curious individuals stepped out of their houses and gathered along the village's main road to observe.

This was the Maximus Army's first close encounter with the Aldeans within their village. In their view: the Aldean soldiers maintaining order at the roadside, though armed only with rudimentary wooden shields and spears, clad in plain one-piece garments, and sporting disheveled hair without armor, still exuded fierceness through their muscular physiques, sharp gazes, and intimidating presence. By contrast, the observing Aldean tribesmen were mostly women — thin, dressed in tattered clothes, barefoot, yet possessing a delicate charm...

It seemed, as Karsipengpas had mentioned, the Alde Tribe had endured frequent battles in recent years, suffering heavy casualties, resulting in a scarcity of men and a surplus of women — something particularly evident in the frontline village of Budocaribas.

From the perspective of the Aldean tribesmen: the large army entering their village was composed of soldiers who were all robust, marching with heads held high, emanating an intimidating aura. Each soldier wore armor, carried curved red square shields, had ornate short swords strapped to their waists, and bore bulging packs on their backs, showcasing their martial valor and apparent wealth.

The women in the ranks were equally sturdy, with glowing complexions, walking as boldly as the men, their assertive presence catching the attention of the roadside Aldean warriors, whose eyes involuntarily fixated on their ample bosoms.

Maximus, however, kept his focus elsewhere: the village's houses were densely packed and chaotic, clearly lacking proper planning. All the structures were wooden, with roofs featuring shallow angles and eaves just about 1.5 meters above the ground, covered with thick straw and mud. The wooden walls were similarly coated with mud. The houses were small, likely accommodating only two to three people... Maximus wondered if this was due to the Aldeans' limited construction skills or if such houses were suited for the local climate; he thought to seek advice from the locals later.

He didn't see the chief's main residence of Budocaribas, nor did he find a village square used for gatherings or training. He had heard of a small dock built by the riverside, but it seemed far off and was nowhere in sight.

With only a quick glance at the village, the army moved on without stopping, exiting the eastern gate of the settlement and marching another half mile before reaching their temporary encampment.

The temporary encampment had been agreed upon by Maximus and Budocaribas during their journey. Given that Validosi was a swamp abandoned for years that would require time to prepare for habitation — along with the threat of sudden Pannonian attacks — the army needed a secure rear area for rest and storage of supplies.

"This is farmland cultivated by our tribesmen, but to help you settle down quickly, we've had no choice but to relinquish it for now," Budocaribas said regretfully.

"Elder Budocaribas, your village's kindness will always be remembered. I promise it will be repaid someday!" Maximus showed an expression of gratitude, though inwardly he thought: Old man, didn't you state before that your village was still suffering attacks from the Pannonians? Clearly, these eastern lands are their primary target, as evidenced by the sparse stalks in the fields. Now my army is stationed here, essentially acting as a shield in front of your village, ensuring you can farm safely behind us. You should thank us instead!

Of course, Maximus kept such divisive thoughts to himself.

Since it was already early September and the wheat in the fields had long been harvested by the Aldeans, the soldiers had no additional work to do in this regard. Maximus issued orders immediately, and the entire army enthusiastically began constructing the camp.

"Leader Maximus, should I first take you to see the lands of Validosi?" asked Cardosipampas.

"That would be excellent!" Maximus eagerly agreed, as he had been intending to make such a request.

Maximus instructed Flanitnus to oversee the soldiers constructing the camp and took Quintus and Volenus along.

Upon hearing they were heading to Validosi, Budocaribas decided to join the group as well.

The five men rode towards their destination, and before long reached a stretch of marshland ahead.

"This isn't Validosi; it's the convergence of the Murenica and Kolana Rivers, and the resulting marsh is caused by flooding," Budocaribas explained.

The group circled westward around the marsh, riding along the west bank of the Kolana River, and soon arrived at Validosi.

Led by Budocaribas, Maximus and the others climbed the western hill of Validosi. From the elevated vantage point, they looked eastward to see the Kupa River winding southward, while the Kolana River snaked northward like two twisting green ribbons, eventually merging into a broader river that flowed gently eastward.

At the confluence of the two rivers lay expansive marshland. Under the noonday sunlight, the marsh shimmered with rippling reflections. Clusters of reeds and aquatic vegetation flourished abundantly; when the river breeze blew through, they swayed like waves. Flocks of herons soared in the sky, dispersed across the water, or craned their necks in song. Occasionally, circular ripples appeared on the water's surface before a heron dove sharply, emerging soon after with a wriggling fish in its beak, triggering a scramble among nearby herons. It was a beautiful tableau of wetland ecology.

While the scenery was striking, Maximus only wished to quickly drain the marsh and convert it into farmland for his soldiers to cultivate.

Noticing Maximus transfixed, Budocaribas couldn't help but remark, "Leader Maximus, isn't this Validosi splendid? Look at how vast and flat this land is! If it weren't for—"

Maximus interrupted him, scowling, "Elder Budocaribas, I remember you telling me Validosi to the east was a vast, fertile plain. Now all I see are dense forests!"

"Uh, well..." Budocaribas stammered in reply, "Although there are many trees, it's undeniably flat land without hills! Besides, those dense forests act as a barrier, forcing the Pannonians to detour instead of attacking directly..."

Maximus frowned and said nothing.

Quintus suddenly interjected, "Leader, I think our base could be built right here. These hills are fairly level and close to Validosi."

"That's not possible!" Budocaribas shouted in sudden panic, drawing everyone's attention to him. Hastily explaining, he added, "You don't know how close this is to the marshland. At night, the mosquitoes are unbearable, making sleep impossible! Moreover, there isn't enough land here to grow crops — you'll end up starving!"

#### Chapter 199: Alexander the Great

"We all come from humble beginnings, we're not afraid of mosquitoes. Besides, we can burn certain herbs outside to drive them away." Volenus, understanding Quintus's silent cue, also reacted to support Quintus's statement: "The mountainous terrain here isn't a problem. I noticed the soil on the hills is quite thick, and we have some Samnite soldiers in our ranks who are skilled at cultivating farmland on mountains."

Budocaribas was momentarily at a loss for words, beginning to rack his brains on how to persuade further.

Maximus glanced at him, understanding why he was acting this way. Based on the previously observed terrain, there are two marshlands as barriers east of Budocaribas's village, yet he is still harassed by the Pannonians, likely because they pass through the gap between the marshlands. On the other side of the gap is the hilly area he mentioned. If the Maximus Army establishes a settlement there, it would completely block the Pannonians from harassing the Alde Tribe. But if the Maximus Army's base is built on this side, the route for the Pannonians to harass the Alde Tribe would remain unimpeded.

"Let's go, let's also take a look at the hills over there." Maximus's words made Budocaribas's eyes light up again.

"I don't know if we can cross the river?" Maximus inquired further.

"We can cross, we can cross." Budocaribas responded hastily: "Although the Kolana River is relatively wide, the water is shallow in autumn, and in several places, it can be easily waded across, let alone riding a horse across."

This is also what gives Budocaribas the biggest headache, as Pannonian incursions increase during autumn and winter.

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As Maximus and his group were crossing the river on horseback, Cleobrotas was in the Aldean Great Camp, giving a brief account of his experiences to the Great Chief Acoupaigos.

After listening, Acoupaigos asked only one question: "What do you think of that young leader?"

Cleobrotas replied without hesitation: "I think he is somewhat like Alexander!"

"Who?!" Acoupaigos's eyes widened.

"The former King of Macedonia who conquered Persia, that Alexander!" Cleobrotas said with a serious expression: "Like Alexander, he shows vision and ambition far beyond us ordinary people at a young age! However, his talents are currently only displayed in his language and thoughts, and we still need to see his future actions."

Acoupaigos was silent for a moment before asking, "Is that the main reason you agreed to let him buy land and ally with him?"

"Great Chief, you gave me autonomy before I left," Cleobrotas quietly reminded: "I believe if this young leader can realize even half of what he envisions, our Alde Tribe will not only overcome our difficulties but gain even more!"

The Illyrians have special feelings for Alexander the Great. Although the Macedonia Kingdom once conquered Illyria and forcibly recruited Illyrians into their army, 3,000 Illyrian light infantrymen followed Alexander the Great throughout his eastern campaign, earning countless accolades and immeasurable wealth. A few of them eventually returned to Illyria, spreading their experiences, which were continually celebrated by later generations.

After Alexander's death, Illyria eventually became independent but remained allied with the Macedonia Kingdom, being led by Macedonia, until being defeated by Rome... Now, as the Illyrian tribes face turbulent times, it makes one nostalgic for the hero's glory of those days.

Acoupaigos, with a heavy expression, sighed and said: "Sometimes ambition is like a raging fire, and it can burn us down instead."

"Great Chief, didn't you say before that it's fine to make mistakes as it would just mean the Alde Tribe perishes one day sooner?"

Cleobrotas's words made Acoupaigos smile helplessly: "Since you hold this young leader in such high regard, it seems I must meet him too."

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Maximus crossed the Kolana River. The hills were not far from the East Bank.

Maximus rode up a low hill and continued gazing eastward: beyond the confluence of the rivers, the Kupa River flowed east, flanked by expansive flatlands stretching eastward with the river. But this was by no means naturally formed, as there was a settlement by the riverbank roughly eight or nine miles away.

When Budocaribas told Maximus, "That is a Pannonian settlement," Maximus was quite surprised and hadn't expected the Pannonian residence to be so close to Validosi!

Upon his further inquiries, Budocaribas had to reveal an even more astonishing fact: from this Pannonian settlement eastward along the river, Pannonians have established several settlements on the banks of the Kupa River, nearly one every ten miles.

As Maximus and his party peered at the Pannonian village, the Pannonians within the settlement noticed them and promptly dispatched a unit of soldiers heading for the hills.

Maximus and his group had no choice but to return to the West Bank of the Kolana River and once again thoroughly inspected Validosi before returning to the temporary base.

Upon returning to the camp, Maximus was informed by his subordinates: "The Great Chief of the Alde Tribe has arrived."

Maximus hurriedly went to meet him.

Chapter 200: Alexander the Great\_2

"Ah, Great Chief, I didn't know you were coming. Just now, I was following Elder Budocaribas to inspect the land of Validosi. I've kept you waiting, my sincerest apologies!"

"No, I should be the one apologizing. You've traveled so far, and as the host, I failed to greet you in time, and now I've come unannounced without prior notice. Please forgive me."

"Not at all, Great Chief. You're incredibly busy, and yet you've made the effort to personally come here—it's truly an honor for us! We've only just arrived and fear our hospitality may not be sufficient."

"No need for that. I just came to take a look and have a chat with you."

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The two smiled warmly, exchanging pleasantries while sizing each other up.

From Acoupaigos' perspective: Maximus was indeed very young, yet to command an army of more than ten thousand at such a tender age, his abilities were unquestionable! Furthermore, Cleobrotas mentioned that his subordinates had a strong allegiance to him, an anomaly indeed! Listening to him speak, his tone exuded a maturity slick with tactfulness—more akin to the demeanor of a seasoned elder. Such a stark contrast between his appearance and performance—Acoupaigos had never encountered anyone so extraordinary, his curiosity only deepened.

In Maximus' eyes: The Great Chief of the Alde Tribe had a wizened face, hair as white as snow, a hunched frame, and a weary expression that suggested he could scarcely stand on his own without the

aid of attendants—appearing as though he teetered on the brink of death. Yet, his sharp eyes radiated an aura of undeniable authority that made one instinctively cautious.

"Leader Maximus, what are your thoughts on Validosi?" After some small talk, Acoupaigos directly posed the question.

"It is a swampy area, perfectly living up to its name Validosi (which, in Illyrian, means swamp)," Maximus shrugged helplessly. "Moreover, to its east, there are countless Pannonian settlements, all too close to Validosi!"

Pointing at the soldiers bustling in the camp, Acoupaigos spoke with admiration, "When I arrived here earlier, I observed for quite some time. You've only just reached here today, and yet in such a short period, you've managed to construct a camp far superior to many of our villages! With such incredible building skills, transforming Validosi shouldn't pose a problem for you. Additionally, were it not for the threat of the Pannonians, we wouldn't have abandoned Validosi, nor would we have considered selling this prime land to you."

Acoupaigos spoke so candidly that Maximus could only nod, "Great Chief is indeed correct, I was being too demanding."

Acoupaigos smiled meaningfully, "I've heard, Leader Maximus, that you've set a grand goal of driving out the Pannonians. Yet, seeing them in person, have you now grown hesitant?"

Maximus did not let himself be provoked, his expression remaining calm as he replied, "Defeating the Pannonians is undeniably our long-term goal. However, we've only just arrived here. Everyone is exhausted and urgently requires rest. Furthermore, nearly a month of traversing mountains has consumed too much of our supplies. The remaining grain within our ranks will barely sustain us for another month or two. Hence, avoiding conflict with the Pannonians for now is purely a consideration of practicality."

"No wonder a young leader like yourself is capable of commanding such a large army—you truly think things through comprehensively." Acoupaigos offered a few words of praise before continuing, "You and I have already forged an alliance. Since our ally is facing difficulties, naturally, we ought to provide support."

However, in recent years, our Alde Tribe has faced frequent wars, and resources have been scarce. Fortunately, the autumn harvest has just concluded, and our grain supply is relatively sufficient... Isn't it written in our alliance agreement that we would establish a market? We will strive to deliver the supplies and grain you need to the market, where you can purchase them. If the funds fall short, no problem—just owe it for now, and we'll settle it later... How does that sound?"

"If the Alde Tribe can offer robust support, then I can rest easy!" Maximus' face lit up with happiness. Moments later, Budocaribas approached Acoupaigos and whispered a few words in his ear. The Great Chief, maintaining an impassive expression, asked, "Leader Maximus, are you planning to establish your residential base on the rear mountain of Validosi?"

"No." Maximus replied seriously, "On the way back, after much deliberation, I concluded that it would be better to set our settlement on the hill to the east bank of the Kolana River. It's much more suitable for our development."

"Oh..." Acoupaigos nodded.

The two exchanged knowing glances. Maximus then asked, "Great Chief, could you tell me more about the Pannonians?"

"If I begin talking about the Pannonians, it'll be a long story. Do you have the time to listen?" Acoupaigos countered.

"I do." Maximus replied without hesitation and sat right down on the grass, patting the ground beside him.

Acoupaigos paused for a moment, his attendants about to speak, but he waved them off. They assisted him as he slowly sat down. After a moment of contemplation, he began, "The Pannonians, you see, are actually Illyrians—"

"Ah, the Pannonians are also Illyrians?!" Maximus exclaimed in surprise.

"Of course they are. They look much like us, and their language is nearly identical to ours. How could they be anything but Illyrians? However, there are some differences now—"

"What differences?" Maximus' curiosity was piqued, and he pursued the question.

Acoupaigos glared, "Do you want to hear me speak or not?!"

"Speak! Speak!"

"I heard it from my ancestors, who heard it from their ancestors..." Acoupaigos said as he reflected. "The leader of the Illyrians and the leader of the Pannonians were originally brothers. One chose to lead his people north to settle in the Great River Plain, while the other chose to remain in the mountains. Their relationship was strong, and they frequently helped each other..."

Back then, the Great River Plain was covered in swamps and thick forests. The Pannonians endured great hardships but managed to grow and develop, their population increasing steadily, and their territory expanding... Until one day, northern barbarians invaded—"

Maximus couldn't help but chuckle, "The Romans call you barbarians, yet you call other tribes barbarians—what irony..."

"These barbarians were Celts (Romans often call them Gauls, while Greeks refer to them as Celts). They were fiercely aggressive and wielded sharp weapons. The Pannonians were defeated and retreated south within the Great River Plain. But the Celts didn't stop. One Celtic tribe, the Skodisqi, crossed the river and continued south, eventually forcing the Pannonians to surrender—"

Upon seeing Maximus hesitating to speak, Acoupaigos interjected, "Ask what you want to ask."

"When did all this happen?"

"Hundreds of years ago? A century? Decades?..." My ancestors didn't provide exact timing, and we don't particularly care since the Skodisqi people didn't march further south to wage war against us." Acoupaigos shrugged, his expression nonchalant.

Then he sneered, "It's said that back then, life was miserable for the Pannonians. Each year, they had to hand over most of their agricultural output to the Skodisqi and send the majority of their men to fight wars for them. They were always thrown into the vanguard, suffering heavy casualties with no rewards in return..."