

Perish 496

Chapter 496: Embassy

It's Maximus again... The pirate chiefs exchanged surprised glances: the mark of this divinely blessed leader was everywhere in the Nix Tribe!

However, Karsipengpas's words did indeed spark their interest in the rugby match.

The carriage continued to race along the southern bank of the Kupa River, quickly crossing a wooden bridge and entering a forest path.

No, the forest path today can no longer be called a "path"; it was actually transformed into an avenue: paved with stone slabs, cemented together, a wide and solid carriageway, deep drainage ditches on both sides, and, outside the ditches, a compacted earthen pedestrian walkway... all these were no different from the previous roads.

Outside the road, dense trees flourished, like a canopy shielding the scorching sun from the sky, allowing only sunlight to filter through the layers of green leaves, casting dappled shadows so travelers no longer felt the intense heat. Instead, the earthy aroma and the fresh scent of grass and trees filled the air, lifting spirits, with birds hopping and chirping in the forest, herds of deer running and playfully calling, while the leaves rustled in the gentle breeze... making for a walk in the forest not a suffering but an enjoyment.

Of course, the road improvements greatly increased the speed of the carriage; by the afternoon, Karsipengpas and his party had reached Linkouka.

If it weren't for the invitation letter he carried, he might have been delayed waiting for the sentry's inspection.

As they entered the western plain of the Sava River, there were many more vehicles and pedestrians on the avenue, mostly heading towards Ophelia City.

By dusk, the carriage arrived at Ophelia Western Fortress.

Compared to four years ago when Ophelia was first occupied, the appearance of this village hasn't changed much; mainly because there are enough settlements on both banks of Ophelia to accommodate tribesmen, and presently no hostile forces can threaten the safety of Ophelia. Thus, Maximus did not order it to be rebuilt, instead focusing human and material resources on road and levee construction.

Yet, the current Ophelia Western Fortress is similar to Todleduo, with the majority of foreign auxiliaries, after years of disciplined labor, becoming reserve tribe members.

Some were reassigned to villages to allocate rooms and land, while others, due to the tribe having no more fertile land, temporarily resided in the fortress. This freed up a lot of residences. Coincidentally, as Nix expanded its territory and population increased, departmental personnel and functions also expanded, and the originally used residences in the East Village were no longer sufficient. Consequently, some officials moved to the Western Fortress, establishing new offices there.

For instance, the Commerce Department, besides managing trade and conducting diplomacy, also had the responsibility of hosting distinguished guests. When the tribe was newly established, the demand in this aspect was minimal; though the Alde Tribe occasionally sent envoys, due to the close distance between the two tribes, they often returned immediately after business, without staying longer. But now the situation is vastly different. As the Nix Tribe's territory expanded, visiting Alde envoys could no longer come and go on the same day. Besides Alde, the Yabod people and the Norik Tribe, who had friendly relations with the Nix Tribe, also had diplomatic needs.

Thus, how to properly host foreign envoys became a concern for both Pigeris and Maximus.

After careful consideration, Pigeris suggested during a Political Affairs Hall meeting that "Nix's House," under the jurisdiction of the Commerce Department, should serve as the venue for hosting foreign envoys. Not only should it provide them with better rest along the way, but it should also establish its headquarters in Ophelia City, the tribe's center, especially to offer comfortable accommodations and delicious meals to deepen their fond impressions of the Nix Tribe, thus aiding subsequent negotiations and interactions...

His proposal was approved, and the tribe allocated five residences in the Ophelia Western Fortress as places for the Commerce Department to host foreign envoys.

However, Maximus found the name "Nix's House" too vulgar and personally named the area "Embassy."

Karsipengpas had stayed in the Embassy last year; he politely declined the offer of the City Guards officer to personally lead him and, accompanied by Agatakus and others, easily found their way to the Embassy's entrance.

The head of the Ministry of Commerce's Protocol Division was Manas, once a slave boy, a personal student of Maximus who initially served as the Chief's Attendant, later assigned to the Commerce Department, managing the tribe's first inn. Over the years, he excelled, and Todleduo's "Nix's House" became well-known, highly praised. Hence, last year, due to his outstanding performance, he was promoted to Protocol Division Head, responsible for managing the Embassy and hosting foreign envoys.

Hearing of Karsipengpas's arrival, Manas, wearing two dragon emblems on his chest, approached with a wide smile: "Uncle Karsipengpas, you've finally arrived! Just yesterday, the chief was specially asking about you on the field!"

Manas called him "Uncle" because Karsipengpas's son Rochemnix had once studied and lived with them, and this term of endearment instantly bridged the distance between them.

"I've been busy with iron ore extraction and transportation, so I'm a bit late this time." Karsipengpas replied a bit apologetically, quickly turning around to introduce the people behind him: "Let me introduce these folks to you..."

After the introduction, Manas warmly said to the slightly reserved pirate chiefs: "Before your arrival, the Chief had already learned about you from the messenger sent by Xie Pangbo's Administrator. He repeatedly asked me to convey his welcome to you, hoping you can enjoy the summer festival here with the Nix people, and after the festival, he will meet you and make proper arrangements for you."

Karsipengpas and his companions were immediately relieved, expressing their willingness to follow the arrangements.

"Uncle, you must be exhausted from traveling all day. Your food and lodging have already been arranged; please follow me!"

Manas personally led Karsipengpas and his party to No.4 Courtyard in the Embassy District, a vacant residence prepared specifically for them. With the help of attendants, each person entered their room, washed off the sweat from their bodies, and changed into loose and smooth linen tunics specially prepared for them. By then, dinner was already laid out on the table.

As everyone entered the dining room, they noticed not only a table full of sumptuous food but also the beer they had enjoyed earlier that afternoon. Everyone was overjoyed; after a day exposed to the sun, being able to quench their thirst with delicious beer in the evening left them thoroughly satisfied with the arrangements made by the Nix people.

Just as everyone was happily eating and drinking, two people entered the dining room: "Karsipengpas, you can't enjoy good food without telling us; you can't keep it to yourself!"

Upon hearing the voice, Karsipengpas looked over and was surprised to see Budocaribas and Xisaites: "Why are you two here?"

"Like you, we also received an invitation from Leader Maximus," Budocaribas answered.

"In previous summer festivals, you never stayed in Ophelia," Karsipengpas remained perplexed, as these two leaders of the Alde Tribe lived along the banks of the Sava River. Whether by boat or by carriage, they could reach Ophelia in time for the festival. In the past, when invited by the Nix Tribe, they always made the round trip in a day, avoiding longer stays in Ophelia to prevent idle talk from leaders like Alistacas residing in the original Aldean Territory.

"We've heard that the hospitality for guests in the Nix Tribe is getting better, and the food more delicious, so we decided to come and enjoy ourselves," said Xisaites, moving next to Karsipengpas.

Karsipengpas asked others to make space and requested the server to bring two wooden chairs, inviting the two to sit down.

"We've already eaten; just two beers will do," said Xisaites, eyes wide, watching the server pour the beers. He eagerly grabbed his, taking a large gulp and letting out a contented burp: "Ah, that feels good! I never thought the Nix could make such delicious beer! But they're too stingy, limiting our drink so we can't drink freely."

Karsipengpas chuckled: "You two didn't come all the way to find me just to drink a few extra beers, did you?"

Xisaites chuckled, while Budocaribas glanced around the table and asked: "Karsipengpas, are these your tribesmen? I don't recall seeing them before."

"They're my brothers," Karsipengpas immediately introduced everyone present and briefly explained why he brought them here.

The two leaders exchanged glances, eyes showing delight.

Budocaribas said to the pirate chiefs: "You need not worry at all. From what I know of Leader Maximus, he would be glad to welcome you into the Nix Tribe.

However, the Nix Tribe differs from other tribes here; it has established many laws that, if violated by tribesmen, result in punishment. You've been at sea for years, used to the freedom; can you adapt to living in the strictly regulated Nix Tribe?"

Agatakus responded calmly: "It seems Leader Budocaribas misunderstands us pirates. Whether we're plundering at sea or resting ashore, we take tremendous risks; hence we must strictly adhere to many rules to survive. So, I believe I can fully adapt to life in the Nix Tribe!

Plus, this journey opened my eyes; the Nix Tribe is completely different from other tribes in these mountains. I think no one would refuse to live as well as the Nix tribesmen!"

Chapter 497: Persuasion

"Yes, yes, as long as we can become members of the Nix Tribe, no matter how many decrees there are, we can endure them!" other pirate chiefs echoed.

Xisaites laughed and said, "Everyone wants to join the Nix Tribe, what about you, Karsipengpas?"

Karsipengpas was taken aback: "What do you mean by that?"

Budocaribas quickly took over the conversation: "He means to say, now that the Romans have started organizing the Mediterranean, we can't be pirates anymore. What will your tribe and the tribes in the mountains to your west do next?"

Karsipengpas forced a laugh: "If we can't be pirates, so be it. We still have the iron mine, which allows us to exchange for a lot of grain and cloth with the Nix Tribe every month, so there's no problem for our tribesmen to eat and keep warm."

Budocaribas solemnly reminded him: "You have a dozen tribes, over ten thousand tribesmen there. Without the spoils from maritime raids, can one iron mine really fully support the lives of the tribesmen in the mountains?!"

Also, we have handled that iron mine before. It's not a large mine, and at your current excavation speed, you'll run out of surface iron ore in a few years, and then you'll have to dig underground, which is much more difficult.

Moreover, the Nix people are increasingly demanding iron ore, and our iron ore isn't as good as the Noric's. When the Nix people significantly reduce their purchase of our iron ore, what will you do?"

"Yes, the tribesmen in the mountains have already gotten used to having enough food and clothing. If you let them return to their previous impoverished lives, I'm afraid no one would be willing." Xisaites immediately reminded.

Karsipengpas frowned, looking at the two with a wary expression: "You two didn't just come here today to have some beer, did you?"

"Of course not—" Xisaites had just started speaking when his foot was stomped on hard, and Budocaribas interjected: "Think about what we've said. After eating, we can talk more in private."

Karsipengpas glanced knowingly at the attendant standing to the side, temporarily suppressing his doubts. But the food and beer that followed tasted like nothing in his mouth.

After dinner, Karsipengpas took the two to his room. After closing the door, he asked in a deep voice: "Tell me, what is it that brought you to find me?"

Budocaribas asked in return: "Now that maritime raiding isn't an option, and mining iron ore can't last forever, what are your plans for the future of the mountain tribes?"

While eating, Karsipengpas had actually thought a lot about this question, but now he shrugged it off casually: "Our life is still pretty good now, so let's just continue living off the iron mine for now. When it's almost exhausted, we'll think about it seriously then."

"Don't wait until things get worse before thinking about it!" Xisaites said anxiously: "I suggest you think about it now... Do you want to sign an agreement with Leader Maximus like we did, and ask him to give the tribes in the mountains a piece of fertile land?"

Karsipengpas was shocked at the suggestion: "You mean... have the mountain tribes relocate to Nix's territory like you?"

"Karsipengpas, you're too smart not to realize that the situation for the mountain tribes will become difficult!" Budocaribas said seriously: "Besides what Xisaites said at the dinner table, there's more trouble with people like Alistacas and Ambrosius!"

Ever since we moved here, Alistacas has held a grudge against us. He initially frequently held tribal meetings to trouble us, but after realizing we always managed to attend on time, he began deliberately delaying notifying us, making us late for tribal meetings and reprimanding us.

Later, we had a big argument at a tribal meeting, and after that, he simply stopped sending people to notify us of meetings. We rely on you for help... You should know all this too.

But this way, it's a waste of time, and constantly being late for meetings isn't a good thing. After discussing with Xisaites, we decided that if Alistacas doesn't send someone to notify us directly, we won't attend the tribal meetings, and so it's been more than half a year since we've met..."

Xisaites sighed bitterly, saying, "Of course, we want to go back to attend the meetings, understand the tribal situation, and visit you, but Alistacas is so obnoxious, and we have our tempers too!"

Budocaribas continued: "Alistacas isn't just dissatisfied with us; he's also displeased with you and the leaders of the western tribes. You should be well aware of this!"

Karsipengpas remained silent.

He knew full well that ever since he gained prestige in the tribe through maritime raids, Alistacas had been jealous and at odds with him. After becoming the Great Chief, he allied with Budocaribas and Xisaites to protect his interests, which made Alistacas detest him even more...

"I'm sorry that for the past half a year, because we couldn't attend the tribal meetings, you've had to bear the pressure from Alistacas and them alone!"

Budocaribas apologized: "I've heard that this spring, Alistacas held several meetings in a row, mainly to discuss increasing the revenue share from the iron ore for the southern tribes. Due to your firm opposition and Cleobrotas's support, and because Alistacas is wary of your friendship with the Nix Tribe, he didn't dare push hard in the end and maintained the existing agreement.

However, the leaders and nobles of the southern tribes have become increasingly fond of using the various things made by the Nix Tribe, and apart from the salt mine, the only other trade for lots of these things is iron ore... Now that Alistacas knows you can no longer be pirates and can only rely on mining iron ore to improve your lives, do you think they'll come up with some ways to force you to give up some of the revenue from the iron ore trade, especially since you have to pass through their territory when transporting the ore..."

"If Alistacas dares do this, he doesn't deserve to be Great Chief! We mountain people will never submit; we'll make a mess of it with them!" Karsipengpas responded firmly.

"If you do this, the resentment between your two sides will only increase, likely leading to ongoing conflicts. At that point, how can you continue the iron ore trade in peace?" Budocaribas reminded him.

"You'd be better off, like us, leading your tribes to relocate here!" Xisaites immediately said: "Look at us now, far from Alistacas and them. We attend tribal meetings when we want, don't when we don't, and he can't control us. It has reduced a lot of headaches. More importantly, if Alistacas ever asks us for food and supplies for some reason, we can refuse without him being able to do anything.

For our tribesmen, they now have their own land and houses. The food they grow is enough to eat, and the excess can easily be taken to the Nix market to exchange for fabric, pottery, and other needed things. When they have free time, they can go watch the Nix people's rugby matches in nearby villages, and when traveling, they can use the docks and roads built by the Nix people...

In many ways, their lives are now even better than before the Segestica people invaded our territory, and we no longer worry about our tribesmen's livelihoods."

Budocaribas reflexively closed his eyes tightly, showing a complex expression.

Karsipengpas didn't notice; he was currently swayed by Xisaites's words.

When Budocaribas and his people relocated to the Sava River, it was a major event in the Alde Tribe, and Karsipengpas naturally paid attention to it. He had even visited Budocaribas's tribe once. As he knew, those tribesmen who gained new homes indeed lived much better than before. Seeing the current relaxed demeanor of these two, and thinking about the effort he puts into improving his tribesmen's lives, and the even greater difficulties he would face without change...

Karsipengpas was silent for a moment and then said softly: "It seems the Nix Tribe doesn't have any extra land now. I know there are quite a few who have just become reserve tribe members this year and still haven't been allocated land."

The two exchanged a glance, hearing clearly that Karsipengpas was getting interested!

Xisaites smiled mysteriously: "You don't need to worry. If you make a request to Leader Maximus now, it's most likely to reach an agreement with him."

"Oh, why?"

Budocaribas spoke seriously: "Didn't you just say that the Nix Tribe now has many new reserve tribe members without land to allocate? Their Twenty Peerage System's decree clearly promises 'each tribe member must be allocated land.'

Additionally, earlier this year during the farm off-season, the Nix Tribe held military training for their tribe members, which was much larger and more stringent than in the past. Even Maximus personally participated and punished quite a few tribe members who violated military law...

So, we estimate that the Nix Tribe might launch an attack on the Pannonians soon!"

"What? Nixes are going to war with Pannonians?!" Karsipengpas was deeply shocked.

"It's actually not surprising," Xisaites said with a gloating look: "The current Pannonians are no longer as arrogant as when they invaded our territory. Since being defeated several times by the Nix people and the Segestica Tribe's destruction, their strength has been severely weakened. Meanwhile, the Boyi people to the north have been constantly at war with them, taking their land north of the Delaware River...

We heard that as early as last year, some elders of Nix had proposed to go to war with the Pannonians, but Maximus didn't agree. However, this year I think Nix has no choice but to fight!"

Chapter 498: Maximus's Child

"Now is a golden opportunity. If we go with you to meet Maximus, not only can we request his permission for your mountain tribe to migrate, we can also propose mobilizing our tribesmen to form an army to help the Nix people defeat the Pannonians."

"This way, once the Nix people occupy more of the Pannonian territory, they should allocate a larger expanse of land to us."

Elder Karsipempas eyed the two men suspiciously and suddenly sneered, "I wondered why you two were being so kind-hearted. Turns out you want to rope me into convincing Maximus so our tribesmen can fight and die!"

Xisaites retorted angrily, "Yes, we do have our own motives for coming to you, but isn't what we're saying true?! Aren't you unable to set sail anymore? Don't you have conflicts with Alistacas and his people? Isn't your mountain tribe currently facing difficulties? Isn't asking Maximus to allow migration of your tribesmen the best solution to these problems?"

"We've been here for years now. While everything else is fine, our tribesmen constantly compare themselves to the Nix people and complain that their land is too small. That's why we want to join forces with you to negotiate with Maximus so the three of us can form an army to participate in the war."

"This way, our numbers won't be insufficient. And after victory, the Nix Tribe will grant us more land. When your tribesmen move to the newly acquired land, they won't complain like ours do. You'll avoid a lot of trouble—won't that also be for your benefit!"

"As for concerns about casualties among the tribesmen... With the Nix people's current strength, they won't need us to fight to the death. Victory will come easily!"...

Xisaites' ardent speech left Elder Karsipempas momentarily speechless. After a moment, he shook his head and said, "It was difficult enough for you to leave the Aldean Territory back then, and now you want me to lead the mountain tribe to leave too? Do you think Alistacas would agree?!"

"I think Alistacas will agree!" Budocaribas said confidently. "We've already set a precedent. Alistacas was certainly furious at first, but by now he's used to it. He might even be glad about our departure, as it reduces the opposition against him during tribal meetings. Look, he hasn't sent anyone to notify us to join the tribal meetings for over a year."

"Moreover, our departure provided benefits to the southern tribes. They gained more land. If you leave, they stand to gain even more; they'll be able to fully control the iron mines and acquire more goods from the Nix Tribe. Even if Alistacas truly disagrees, those tribal leaders will pressure him into agreeing!"

Elder Karsipempas pondered for a long time before cautiously responding, "Give me some time; I need to think it through thoroughly."

The two men, disappointed by his hesitation, frowned.

Xisaites couldn't help but urge, "We estimate that the Nix people will begin their campaign against the Pannonians after the autumn harvest. Time is running out; you'd better give us your answer soon! Otherwise, we'll go to Maximus ourselves to discuss the matter of deploying troops!"

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Early the next morning, Casius, head of intelligence at the Nix Tribe Secretariat, arrived at the main house's dining room and handed a confidential file to Maximus as he was having breakfast.

Maximus took the file into a side room, read through its contents carefully, and his lips curled into a faint smile. "Casius, do you think Elder Karsipempas will ultimately ask me to allow those Aldean tribesmen from the western mountains to migrate to our territory?"

"Leader, if Elder Karsipempas wants his tribesmen to live better lives, migration is the best choice. He's always worked hard to improve his tribe's impoverished situation, so I think he'll eventually agree to the persuasion of Budocaribas and Xisaites," Casius replied without hesitation.

"Hmm, Karsipempas is a bit stubborn, but once he comes around, he's easy to convince." Maximus chuckled. "If he's willing to bring his tribesmen to migrate to Nix, I'll certainly welcome them. But Budocaribas and Xisaites think that dragging Karsipempas into this will make me agree to their plan to lead troops into battle for more land. Hmph..."

"You don't plan to agree to their request?" Casius asked softly.

"With our tribe's current military strength, defeating Brochi and Mazi is relatively easy. We don't need extra help."

"If their army simply strolls onto the battlefield and they effortlessly acquire land comparable to that of our tribesmen, what would our people, who firmly believe in the Twenty Peerage System, think? Other outsiders might also try to imitate them!"

Maximus snorted coldly, "Budocaribas and Xisaites are too greedy, wanting to pocket one gain while eyeing another!"

In fact, Maximus knew full well: these two leaders of the Aldean Tribe were making such proposals out of dire necessity.

Since their migration to the Sava River, their tribesmen were no longer plagued by hunger and cold, nor were their lives at risk. But happiness is a matter of comparison. As they looked around, they saw that the Nix people lived far better lives and that the Nix Tribe's system was much more advantageous for ordinary tribesmen's development, which naturally bred dissatisfaction toward their own leaders and nobles.

Although Budocaribas maintained relatively decent relationships with his tribesmen due to shared hardships, with little wealth disparity, this discontent would grow over time and ultimately erupt. But this was exactly what Maximus wanted—he wouldn't tolerate a group of outsiders within his territory who were exempt from tribal decrees. Now that Budocaribas saw trouble looming and hoped to use this method to resolve it, how could Maximus let them succeed?

Casius instinctively understood the implications of his leader's words but hesitated slightly.

Maximus noticed. "What's on your mind? Speak."

Casius hesitated briefly, then asked carefully, "Leader, yesterday Lord Xie Pangbo sent an urgent message suggesting the tribe recruit pirates in the Adriatic Sea and other seas who are being hunted by Rome, as a way to compensate for the labor shortage in the tribe. Do you agree with this suggestion?"

Maximus responded with an encouraging question, "What's your take on it?"

"I think..." Casius mustered his courage, "Lord Xie Pangbo's suggestion is overly risky. Rome is currently focused on eradicating pirates, and if we recruit them now, it will undoubtedly draw attention. If we alarm Rome, it may bring significant trouble to the tribe."

Maximus nodded, "Xie Pangbo is diligent, and his abilities are commendable. Snowdonia wouldn't be as prosperous as it is today without him. But sometimes he focuses too much on immediate benefits and neglects potential dangers—a dangerous approach indeed! He should know we'll soon be at war with the Pannonians; won't there be an abundance of labor then?"

Casius detected a trace of dissatisfaction in Maximus's tone and opted to stay quiet.

"Casius." Maximus looked at his protégé with approval. "You're doing well! But as the intelligence chief, you must not only gather information but also learn to discern its accuracy and value, voicing your insights when necessary like you did just now."

"Understood."

"You worked late into the night yesterday and came so early today. Have you eaten breakfast yet? Come eat with us." Maximus patted Casius lightly in a friendly gesture.

"Thank you, Leader."

Around the dining table sat Maximus's family. His three wives—Nexia, Florist Luscia, and Geniandafra—were present along with two young boys: nearly three-year-old Gandlicusi (born to Florist Luscia) and eighteen-month-old Flermisde (born to Geniandafra).

Maximus entered the dining room and arranged for Casius to take a seat. A servant from the Ministry of Internal Affairs quickly brought over breakfast.

Having dined with Maximus often, Casius showed no discomfort, simply said "Thank you," and tucked into his meal. He was indeed starving.

"Daddy." Gandlicusi set down his spoon and piped up, "Can I sit beside you when we watch the match today?"

Maximus looked at his eldest son. His delicate little face was smeared with porridge, his mouth slightly open to reveal two tiny tiger teeth, and his big, shiny eyes glimmered with anticipation...

Maximus gently asked, "Last year, you sat with Mom. Why do you want to sit with me this time?"

"Because... because if I sit with Dad, I won't get scolded."

Maximus chuckled silently. Children are so straightforward in their thoughts.

"Alright." Maximus agreed readily.

"Thank you, Daddy!" Gandlicusi beamed, his crescent-shaped smile radiating pure joy.

"Me too! Me too! I want to sit with Daddy too!" chubby little Flermisde chimed in excitedly, his words still slightly muddled due to his young age.

"Alright. Little Flermis can sit with Daddy too." Maximus smiled, deciding to indulge them both.

"Yay! We can sit with Daddy and watch the match!" Gandlicusi cheered, pulling his younger brother into the celebration. He even began to strategize, "I'll sit on Daddy's left, and you can sit on his right—"

"No, I want to sit in Daddy's lap!" Flermisde declared, lifting his chin defiantly.

"No!" An authoritative female voice interrupted, and both boys immediately clammed up, glancing in slight fear at Nexia, seated beside Maximus.

Chapter 499: Leader's Family

Nexia immediately showed a gentle smile and persuaded, "My sweet little ones, you've been tricked by your father! Sitting next to your father isn't comfortable at all. At that time, lots of uncles will surround him and keep talking to him. Can you even watch the match peacefully? It's better to sit with Auntie. This time, Auntie promises not to scold you. Let's watch the match properly together, alright?"

Gandlicusi glanced at the kind-faced Nexia and then at the calm Maximus, hesitating before squeezing out a softly spoken, "Okay..."

"Okay!" Flermisde echoed his brother's words.

Gandlicusi put down his wooden spoon and said, "Mom, I'm done eating. I'm going to play in the yard for a while."

"Finish the porridge cleanly, and wipe your face. You can run in the yard, but no playing with the ball. If you get your clothes dirty, I won't take you to watch the match." Nexia said sternly.

"Understood." Gandlicusi replied, his head hanging low with slight disappointment before quickly drinking all the porridge in his bowl. After wiping his mouth with a cloth napkin, he pushed the wooden chair aside and skipped happily out of the room.

Flermilde followed his brother's actions and hurriedly shouted, "Brother, wait for me! Wait for me!..."

He wobbled as he chased outside but fell with a "plop" onto the ground. Maximus and the three ladies sitting nearby acted as though they hadn't seen anything and stayed still. Gandlicusi, however, ran back, helping his younger brother up while complaining, "You're so clumsy, falling even while walking!"

Maximus watched the two brothers holding hands and running out of the dining hall with evident satisfaction. He knew very well that the strong affection between these two half-brothers was mainly attributed to Nexia.

After Florist Luscia gave birth to her son, she originally intended to raise him herself. But taking care of children is an exhausting task, and her health wasn't particularly good. Very soon, weariness brought on illness, which then led to the child getting a high fever. After barely recovering, Nexia decided to lend a helping hand to assist her sister.

Whenever she had free time, Nexia would help Florist Luscia take care of the child. At first, it was purely assistance, but later, she began to take the lead. Gandlicusi, who was born relatively frail, not only rarely fell ill under her care but also grew increasingly strong.

Later, Florist Luscia became pregnant again, leaving her with no energy to spare. As a result, Gandlicusi's upbringing essentially fell into Nexia's hands from then on.

Geniandafra's situation was different. She was carefree and playful. After giving birth to Flermilde, she felt it troublesome and didn't want to care for the child. Additionally, the scene of Gandlicusi's high fever back then had left her deeply shaken. Thus, she voluntarily approached Nexia to ask for help with caregiving.

Though Nexia couldn't have children herself, she experienced maternal joy through raising other children. Caring for one child was manageable, and two were just as fine. She accepted Geniandaфра's request, which also improved their relationship.

Nexia was skilled at raising children—she could be firm when necessary and loving at the right moments. The two sons were closer to her than they were to their respective mothers. Moreover, under her deliberate guidance, the children shared a deep bond and loved each other dearly.

"Ugh...ugh..." A sound beside him interrupted Maximus's drifting thoughts. He turned to see Florist Lusia frowning tightly, holding her pregnant belly, and showing signs of nausea.

"Florist, what's wrong?" He asked with evident concern.

"I...feel a little uncomfortable," Florist Lusia feebly replied.

Nexia immediately stepped to Florist Lusia's side, placing her left hand gently on her back and her right on her swollen belly.

After having helped countless pregnant women deliver their babies over the years, Nexia quickly identified the problem. "Oh, it's because the baby is moving too much."

Maximus grew tense. "Could it be time for the baby to arrive?"

"It's only seven months—how could that be?" Nexia glared at her husband before summoning a maid with a gesture. "Quick, come help me guide her back to her bedroom for some proper rest!"

"Yes, madam!"

Nexia looked at her husband again. "Leader, for safety's sake, I need to stay home and take care of Florist Lusia. I won't be able to attend the ritual."

"No, I'm fine. I can attend," Florist Lusia immediately objected.

"Listen to me!" Nexia scolded firmly, instantly silencing Florist Lusia.

"If neither of you can attend, that's fine. I believe the Danu Goddess wishes for the safety of Florist and the child," Maximus said solemnly, increasingly stepping into his role as Divine Son. "Only—Nexia, you just promised the two children you'd take them to watch the match—"

Nexia hesitated briefly before responding, "Then you and Geniandafra go first. Once Florist's situation has settled, I'll follow."

"Alright."

After Nexia escorted Florist Lusia away, Geniandafra leaned closer, whispering, "Leader, for this ritual appearance, should I wear the yellow dress or the red one?"

Under Maximus's extensive support in technology, manpower, and funds, the weaving workshop of the Nix Tribe had not only significantly increased fabric production, becoming another pillar industry for the tribe, but the artisans—driven by praise and promotions—also rigorously studied their craft. They discovered new dyes and made notable advancements in dyeing techniques.

Additionally, thanks to Maximus's advice on clothing design, the weaving workshop began producing garments not only in varied colors but also in innovative styles.

At first, the tribesmen were curious about these new garments sold by the tailoring shop, which differed from traditional clothing. Few purchases occurred, though. To counter this, Maximus and his three wives often wore these new clothes to public events, gradually changing the tribe's perception and boosting sales.

However, as the tribal leader, Maximus needed to maintain a dignified demeanor, so excessively novel outfits were unsuitable for him. Nexia frequently worked in hospital maternity wards, and Florist Lusia preferred staying indoors at the main house. Only Geniandafra often ventured outdoors and enjoyed showcasing new styles, making her the most influential "model" for the weaving workshop.

The two dresses Geniandafra mentioned were formal gowns newly crafted by the workshop, and she yearned to wear them, capturing all the attention at the event.

But Maximus frowned and said in a stern tone, "Today is the sacred day of praying to the Danu Goddess for a bountiful harvest. As the High Priest, I must wear a pure linen robe to perform the solemn sacrificial ritual. As my wife, you must do the same. Do you understand?"

"Understood!" Geniandafra pursed her lips. Though slightly discontented, she dared not argue back and obediently sat down.

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Since rugby started gaining popularity in the Nix Tribe, numerous makeshift stadiums were built across towns. Especially in the Ophelia Region, aside from the countless temporary grounds, there were eight formal stadiums established under tribal leadership for official matches. The most famous of these was located not far from Ophelia Western Fortress, named Iyenos (Illyrian Language, meaning 'Sacred').

Today, perhaps owing to the arrival of the sacred ritual, the weather was not only clear but the sun also less intense, with a refreshing breeze flowing from the Sava River.

Early in the morning, tribesmen from all directions came to gather, encircling the Iyenos Stadium in layer upon layer, expanding outward magnificently.

Despite the crowd, the tribesmen—young and old—sat quietly on the grass, without jumping or loudly chatting.

There were two distinct spots outside the stadium where no tribesmen were gathered. One was directly north. Here stood a multi-tiered fixed grandstand built from a mix of cement and wood. The audience was mostly fixed—Leader Maximus and his family members, key tribal officials, and invited guests (including foreign visitors and tribesmen who made outstanding contributions this year).

The other was directly south of the stadium, facing the grandstand, where a statue of the Danu Goddess stood. This statue originally belonged to the first temple of the Nix Tribe, located deep in the forest near Lin Kou Village.

The priests had carefully transported the statue from the temple early in the morning to this location. The statue had undergone changes since its original form. At Maximus's request, artisans added gold leaf to some parts, which now glistened under the sunlight, emitting dazzling brilliance and enveloping the dozens of priests surrounding it. This sacred aura was the primary reason why the tribesmen maintained such disciplined order.

Around the stadium and among the sea of people were some striking items.

These were livestock figures fashioned from hay and wood. The most eye-catching among them was a towering wooden ram several meters high. Sturdy tree trunks and branches wove together to form its muscular body, emphasizing its powerful presence. Hay was intricately crafted into fur—soft, textured, and dyed white—reflecting sunlight brilliantly.

The Nix Tribe's skilled artisans seemed to have poured all their expertise into this ram, making it another focal point of the area.

Suddenly, the quiet crowd stirred. Maximus and his family ascended the grandstand surrounded by guards.

The tribal elites—Volenus, Quintus, Flanitus, Pigeris, Gaius, and others—along with technical giants like Spukala and Minujus, craft leaders such as Sistos, Sesret, Yulitimos, Torimias, and champions of various industries like Pro, Midosacus, and Seckblas—all rose to their feet to greet and pay respects.

Chapter 500: The Football Final

On the stands, there were certainly foreign guests: allies of the Nix Tribe — the Great Chief Alistacas of the Alde Tribe, elder Cleobrotas, Ambrosius, Budocaribas, Xisaites, Karsipengpas, and several pirate chiefs including Agatakus, who were specially permitted to participate in the festival; friendly leaders of the Noric Iron Core Tribe, including Sphili and Druid Podamochi, as well as several leaders from the Yabode Tribe.

Additionally, there were some special guests — several Pannonian leaders from Lake Gonami, including Adatis, the son of Iberus.

Although these guests all stood up and greeted politely, whether it was out of friendship, pressure, or just perfunctorily... that was hard to say.

However, Maximus always wore a smile and patiently returned each greeting, occasionally exchanging a few words, thus his progress was slow.

Since Nexia was temporarily absent, the two children, being led by Geniandafra, followed Maximus and without any restrictions, impatiently urged, "Dad, can you go faster!"

Acronis quickly stepped forward, bent down, and with a serious expression, gestured for the two children to be silent.

Indeed, the two children immediately quieted down because, besides Nexia, only Acronis could keep them disciplined in the main house.

"Let me take care of the children," Acronis said somewhat displeased to Geniandafra.

But this was exactly what Geniandafra wanted, and she hastily agreed.

Maximus finally arrived at the small platform at the top of the stands, sat down in the main wooden chair, and immediately called to the Ritual Officer Kefisofon who was waiting there, "Don't keep the tribesmen waiting, let's start quickly."

"Yes." Kefisofon quickly notified the band in front of the stands.

The ten horn players in the band blew the copper horns with great effort.

"Wooo!!!..." The high and long sound of the horns echoed throughout the stadium.

The west gate of Ophelia Western Fortress not far away suddenly opened wide, and one carriage after another rushed out, traveling along the avenue to a specially reserved pedestrian path outside the stadium.

Next, players from the two teams participating in this rugby final from Snowdonia and Todleduo, as well as their coaches, supporting staff, the referee, medical staff... more than 150 people in total gathered after getting off the carriages, which was one of the increasing results of the development of rugby matches at the Summer Festival.

The sea of people surged again, and most of the spectators outside the stadium stood up, craning their necks to look towards the pedestrian path, waving their arms, shouting loudly, expressing their support for a certain team or player, and the entire area outside the stadium gradually began to boil.

However, although the spectators were excited, they all remained in their places because this was one of the important decrees formulated by the tribe for the Summer Festival. If someone violated it, they could be accused of blasphemy, would be banned from watching the games in the future, and would not be able to worship at the temple, and would be looked down upon by other tribesmen, which was more unbearable than being killed, so even the most excited spectators dared not break this ban.

Ignoring the cheers of the spectators, the players walked with heads held high under the lead of their respective coaches to their designated zones on the field.

"I'll give you some time to prepare." The chief referee spoke to both teams and then went with several assistants to inspect the field.

The head coach of the Snowdonia team was Torrelugo. Although he loved to play rugby, his gladiator background made him too large, not fast enough, and not agile enough, making him unqualified to become a player for Snowdonia or participate in such major games. However, Snowdonia was the source of soldiers for the Second Legion, and the players were all soldiers from the legion. As the Legion Commander, he could easily overpower these strong players and make them obedient, so it was only natural for him to become the head coach.

At that moment, he gathered all the players, and with a serious expression, gave a speech: "Guys, since the rugby games of the Summer Festival began, our Snowdonia team has won the championship for three consecutive years. The people of Snowdonia hope you can achieve another glory and bring the Danu Goddess statue back to Snowdonia to bring more luck to our village! I believe you can do it because you are the strongest, right?!"

"Right!! Right!! Right!!!!..." The players shouted excitedly in unison.

Torrelugo's gaze swept around the players, finally resting on one person: "Gowes, you're the captain, do you have anything to say to your teammates?"

"Yes!" Gowes responded in a deep voice.

At this moment, he was no longer the naive newcomer who first joined the tribe and watched from the sidelines. Last year's summer games saw him as the top scorer, and during this year's semi-finals, he was the one who stopped the Sirinos player from scoring, securing the victory. He was the mainstay of the Snowdonia team and the embodiment of confidence in victory.

His tall, strong body exuded strong self-confidence, his sharp and compelling eyes firm and calm. His gaze, which swept over familiar Skodisqi compatriots and once-hated Pannonian enemies, now bore the same emotion for them all because they were all his reliable allies in the game.

"Brothers, our final opponent today is not Westeni but Todleduo. We must not be deceived by their poor records in past years. Remember the performance of the Sirinos team in the semi-finals, and never underestimate Todleduo today. We must give it our all!

If we encounter difficulties during the match, don't panic; consistently adhere to the tactics we've always trained with, and we will eventually win because our Snowdonia team is unbeatable!" Goves swung his arm forcefully, shouting the last sentence intensely, once again inciting a chorus of cheers from his teammates.

On the Todleduo side, Head Coach Oluus was also motivating his players: "...That's right, the Snowdonia team has won the championship for three consecutive years and hasn't been defeated in the rugby games of the Summer Festival. But that isn't frightening because no army is invincible forever, and no team will never suffer a defeat.

Since Snowdonia will fail one day, why can't we, Todleduo, be the first victors? Think about it, at the start of this year's games, no one thought we would stand on Iyenos Stadium, and many people thought we would be eliminated in the first round, but now you are standing here!

This stems from your spirit of never giving in and consistently fighting with all your might, earning victory after victory! Although we don't have players as exceptionally skilled as Gowes or Teresa from the Snowdonia team, if you fight fiercely, vie with all your strength, and persistently disrupt them, you can exhaust our adversaries and win!..."

As a Legion Commander with rich wartime experience, and given his older age, Oluus always acted steadily, but today he rarely showed his passionate side to boost his players' morale.

In fact, to win this final, he even humbly sought advice from his former deputy, now the Fifth Legion Commander and Head Coach of the Sirinos team, Pequot. The fierce fighting and disruption tactics were taught by this cunning man, who nearly won against the Snowdonia team in the semi-finals.

"Come on, brothers!" Oluus extended his right hand, and with a spirited tone, said: "Our team is a whole, and everyone is indispensable. If you all give your utmost, you will win and bring the Danu Goddess back home!"

The players eagerly placed their hands over Oluus's right hand, roaring in unison, their hearts blazing with fervor.

The Todleduo team was a bit different from other teams; a third of the Pannonian players mainly came from other Pannonian Tribes and were captured in the last war. At this moment, they were no different from other teammates, fervently shouting their intent to bring victory back to Todleduo.

The chief referee summoned the captains of the two teams for the coin toss to choose sides.

The coin used by the chief referee was specially made, with the image of the Danu Goddess on one side and Leader Maximus on the other.

The Nix Tribe didn't plan to issue currency yet. However, the hot-pressing technique to make coins was not complex and had long been prevalent in the City States around the Mediterranean. Guided by Sistos, the blacksmiths thoroughly studied it and soon applied the technology within the tribe, such as the circular dragon emblem symbolizing ranks.

Truth be told, there was no need for the Nix Tribe to specially make such a coin for a rugby match or even to include a coin toss.

Yet, Maximus was insistent on this, with deep, thoughtful considerations:

Firstly, the more complex and ceremonial the rugby game process is, the more formal it becomes, attracting more tribesmen participation and making it a unique culture of the Nix Tribe;

Secondly, it highlights the sanctity of the game, using such subtle methods to deepen the tribesmen's faith in the Danu Goddess and awe for Leader Maximus as the offspring of the Goddess;

Further, with the Nix Tribe's continuous growth and the increasing popularity of rugby games, they could also generate profit for the tribe by selling coins like this and other related products.

Of course, the players from both sides wouldn't know how deeply Maximus contemplated about even a game coin as they stood in the center of the field, exchanging glances that sparked sparks.

With the sharp whistle, the game officially began ...