

HERALD OF STEEL

Chapter 14 Cambyses

During the entire time they were drying themselves, Mean seemed totally unfazed by the sight of two naked men in a tent alone with her.

This was a sight as common as the sun rising and setting to her.

After all, in this era, for a roaming band of mercenaries, personal privacy wasn't at the top of their priority list.

And that was doubly true for slaves, who were treated as chattel. There was nothing shameful to hide from them, just as one wouldn't hide anything from a chair or table.

The men would bathe fully naked in rivers and lakes, leaving everything bare to mother nature. Many times the women and female slaves would follow suit.

She had seen it all. But luckily for her, from the time she came of age, she had access to her mistress's personal quarters, protecting her own dignity and shame.

Alexander soon dried himself and then put on a tunic and a pair of pants above his loincloths. Camius followed suit, courtesy of Alexander lending him a set of his dress.

Just as the two men became decent, a feminine voice rang out from outside the tent.

"Mean are you in there? What's taking so long?"

Without waiting for a reply, the owner of the voice parted the tent flaps and casually stepped inside with powerful steps.

She appeared to be 160 cm tall with chestnut hair tied in a long ponytail. She had a small well-placed nose, thin lips and a pointed chin giving her face a sharp look. Dressed in blood splattered linen armor, she appeared like a heroic general right out of a painting.

Cambyses scanned the tent for Mean but when she found Alexander, her emerald eyes lit up in joy.

"Mistress I am....."

"Thank Gaia you are safe," Cambyses said beaming with a smile, totally ignoring Mean.

Her smile bloomed like an exotic flower, drawing all light to it.

"Only by mistress's grace." Alexander bowed and replied in an unusually servile tone.

"Um, you did well my knight. This princess is pleased." Cambyses praised in an animated tone.

Seeing this playful exchange, Mean and Camius felt like awkward third wheels.

For once in his life, Camius decided to show some tact and resisted the urge to shout "Go get a room," or ask "What's a knight?"

Mean also felt quite uncomfortable watching her mistress show such an open display of affection, especially in broad daylight in the presence of others.

"Mistress, I am sorry. I was held up helping Alexander." Mean loudly voiced her reason for being late, in an attempt to steer away the conversation.

"Um, you did well." Cambyses commented in a dismissive tone, barely looking at her.

"Groan." Seeing this Camius silently rolled his eyes in his head.

There were rumors that the daughter of the mercenary leader was in love with a slave.

But it seems the rumors were false.

She wasn't in love. She was completely infatuated with him.

Up until now, she hadn't even acknowledged his presence in the room.

Despite her failure, Mean wasn't deterred.

"Alexander, Camius here." Mean tried again, this time loudly calling Camius by name to draw attention as she handed each of them a mug of warm sweet water.

"Thank you, little sister." Following Mean's cue Camius also loudly said his thanks.

Finally, this seemed to work as the girl realized where she was and was momentarily stunned as her cheeks turned red in embarrassment.

In fact, Cambyses cannot be fully faulted for such behavior.

She was alive today only because of Alexander. So when she heard that the battle was lost and Alexander was on the front lines, she felt her entire world go dark.

She didn't dare to ask anyone in camp about Alexander specifically for fear of spreading rumors.

Hence when she saw Alexander alive and well just now, it felt like dawn had arrived in her world and she barely controlled herself from running over and hugging him.

"Thanks." Alexander looked at Mean with a grateful gaze as he took big gulps of the beverage.

It tasted bitter.

For the native people, who didn't know of either sugar or honey, this drink might seem like a taste of heaven, but for Alexander, who lived in a world of processed sugar and carbonated drinks, it tasted mediocre at best.

There were unfiltered microfibers, scum, and various organic acids in the extracted juice and even the water tasted stale.

But still, it was the best way to regain his strength and it actually tasted leagues better than anything else he could have at the moment.

"Gulp, gulp, gulp." Both men swilled down the drink, bringing relief to their patched throats.

It felt like rain had finally arrived after a long drought as their throats sang chorus of joyous hymns.

"Ahhhhhhh, another." Camius loudly requested a refill.

Mean complied and soon bought refills for both of them along with some hard tack.

"Here mistress, you haven't eaten anything since morning." Mean also handed the same to Cambyses.

As everyone ate, a strange, uncomfortable silence filled the tent as each was lost in their thoughts.

Alexander thought of what will happen next?

Mean thought of her next job.

Cambyses thought what would be appropriate to speak about next?

Camius the simpleton thought of his next bite.

Finally, after the men had mostly had their fill, it was Cambyses that broke the silence.

"What will happen next?" She asked in an uncertain voice.

"..."

Silence.

These were the four golden words that occupied the minds of every being in this field.

What will happen to them next?

Slavery? ****? Death? Or worse?

Everyone was trying to figure out their fate.

Seeing no one speak up, soon three expectant pairs of eyes laid on Alexander, looking for his guidance.

"How would I know anything? I am as lost as you guys." Alexander silently cursed in his mind.

But his confident face belied any such fears.

He wrinkled his forehead, as if in deep thought and asked "Mean, how much food have we got?"

"Ummm, about a week's worth."

"It will take at least a month to get to Cantagena." Camius chipped in.

"We need food." Cambyses worriedly pointed out.

This was also the problem Alexander was brainstorming all this time.

How to get more food? How not to starve?

As he felt the gears inside him turning, suddenly an epiphany hit him.

That was it!

He slapped his thighs in excitement, "Horses! We will eat the horses!"

"What? What horses?" Camius asked totally confused.

"The dead horses. The thousands of dead horses lying in front of us" Alexander spelled it out.

"That ...that.." For the first time in his life, Camius found himself tongue-tied.

"That can work. Yes! That can work." Cambyses said excitedly.

"I agree mistress. If we can get the horses before they start rotting, we can make jerky and smoked sausages." Mean added noddingly.

"Haha, Adhania might have Ramuh but we got Alexander." Camius loudly cheered. Just like that their biggest problem was solved. Alexander was truly blessed by the gods.

"Keep this quiet for now. We don't want it to somehow enter Adhanian ears." Alexander cautioned. "And Mean pointed out one very important thing I forgot. We need to get the horses before they start rotting. In this weather, it might have already started. We will go tonight. How many men have we got?" Alexander posed the last question specifically to Cambyses.

"*Sigh* We got a lot wounded. Loads more than we can handle. But fortunately, most of it is only cuts, bruises and swellings, gifts from the peltasts. They can still fight."

"That's good then. By the way, on my way here I saw many soldiers of different colored armor running through our camp. What's that about?" Alexander asked.

"The others noticed our medical camp and its facilities. Now they are all flocking here. We can't even dare to reject them!" Cambyses sighed.

"Hmmm, are they paying for the treatment?" Alexander pointedly asked

"The only word they utter when asked about it is "later", *sigh*. Cambyses shook her head.

"Hmmm, okay keep treating them. Not like they can run." Alexander commented. Then he looked at Cambyses's blood splattered armor and asked "Didn't I tell you to always wear clean clothes in the clinic? So who repainted your armor?"

Cambyses looked down to see the "paint" and shrugged, "Who knows? Didn't even notice till now. Many desperados try and grab me to save them. I can only prioritize."

She spoke in a flat, disinterested tone that certainly didn't befit a 16-year-old.

"You did the right thing. We aren't magicians. We can only try to save as many as we can." Alexander tried to offer her some comfort in an awkward tone. He was never good at consoling people.

A girl like her in his world would be still in school, enjoying the best time of her life. Not listening to the death throes of dying soldiers.

These ten years had hammered home again and again just what kind of privileged life he once led.