

HERALD OF STEEL

Chapter 4 Amenheratf

"Your Majesty, Captain Beihrut can't hold on much longer." A clean-shaven, well-built bald man rushed to Amenheratf on horseback, his eyes filled with worry.

He was Manuk, the archpriest of the Temple of Ramuh and the king's right hand.

"Once the enemy cavalry defeats him, we are finished. Please save us my liege." He implored, his request laced with trepidation

The Cantagena army was rapidly cutting through their ranks and morale was quickly plummeting.

Many phalanxes had casualties verging on being catastrophic. The worst ones like Captain Beihrut's had close to 30% dead.

Amenheratf carefully listened to his commander's report and then nodded in satisfaction as he replied in a regal voice "Beihrut has done very well. Tell him to hang on a bit longer and bait the enemy a bit closer."

Amenheratf could not gather any cavalry for this battle, hence he tasked the job of protecting his right flank from enemy cavalry to Beihrut, the captain of the royal guards. The significantly stronger left flank was left to Kefka.

Captain Beihrut was given Adhania's best of the best, the elite 'king's royal guards' to compensate for his numerical inferiority. The royal guards was widely considered to be the most prestigious unit in the entire army and entry required not only peerless skill but also fanatical loyalty.

For Adhania, to lose even one such warrior would be a tragedy, but today, in less than two hours this most glorious unit had been almost wiped out.

Manuk's heart sank when he heard the king deny his request. But even then he decided to try again.

He got off his horse and bowed before his lord. He then raised his clasped hands above his head, and pleaded again "Your Excellency, Captain Beihrut might not last that long. The situation over there is catastrophic. Please let us spring the trap now or there might not be a trap to spring!"

By how Manuk was emphatically beseeching the king to act it was clear the situation in the front lines was beyond desperate.

Adhania's most elites were getting slaughtered and Manuk could not just stand still and watch, not when the leading them was his own brother.

But realistically such losses were hardly surprising. The soldiers were outnumbered and out "horsed."

No matter how elite you were, fighting cavalry with short spears was a death sentence for anyone.

Although there were ways for infantry to counter cavalry using various polearms such as the pike- which was a longer spear, the opponent cavalry had javelins with them that they could use to punch holes in the spear wall and then charge into the openings.

In addition, few carried the longer 4-6m long pikes, mainly because of the lack of training of the conscripts that made up the bulk of the army. The longer pike needed much more skill and discipline to use in large formations without skewering allies.

Armed with mostly 2-3m spears, fixed in a static formation and vulnerable to flanking attacks, the Adhanians seemed like dead men walking.

"Beihrut will hold the line for as long as I command it, or die trying. Don't question my decision again, Maluk." The king flashed his right hand in front of Manuk and declared in an absolute tone, unequivocally dismissing all of Manuk's pleading.

" Your Majesty....!!" Manuk felt crushed. He simply raised his head and looked at the king, his eyes locking with his. And in return, Amenheratf stared back at his subject, his cold icy eyes meeting Manuk's teary moist eyes.

The two men stared at each, neither one willing to back down.

Amenheratf atop his horse seemed like a deity staring down at the pleading mortal Manuk. Time seemed to have paused as the men engaged in a silent battle of will, both unwilling to concede. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity one relented.

It was Amenheratf!!

Yes, the god-king was the first to break eye contact and tacitly acknowledge defeat.

"Sigh..." Amenheratf stepped down from his horse and slowly approached Manuk.

The 40-year-old veteran politician had a keen sense of observation. This short exchange finally made him wake up to his mistake and he decided to make up to his friend.

He then gently placed both his hand on his loyal subject's shoulder and kneeled down. Amenheratf's eyes met Manuk's as he consoled him in a soothing tone " I understand your worry about your brother, Manuk. I really do. We three grew up together and trust me when I say I consider him as much a brother as you do. But he must hold on a bit longer, Manuk, he must. Our country, our people, our wives, our children, are all depending on him. Ramuh is depending on him."

He then took a deep breath before continuing in a low voice "It's not yet time to reveal the trap. He has to draw the enemy in closer. We have sacrificed Adhania's entire cavalry to arrange it and we cannot let it fail. It's our one and only trump card."

Amenheratf tried his best to convince Manuk, his tone changing from authoritative to almost pleading.

By the end of his speech, Amenheratf's stone-cold countenance had changed to that of a martyr, his icy eyes now filled with infinite determination.

Manuk stared back at his king, visibly shaken by such pleading. Unknowingly, tears started flowing out of his eyes.

"It's good to have you back." Manuk said in a choking voice, embarrassingly wiping away his tears as he stood up.

'Finally, he was back. His friend was finally back. What a relief!' Manuk refreshingly thought as his mouth involuntarily curved into a smile. His king was no longer the tyrannical despot from a few days but the friend he once knew. The one he used to always beat at sword practice.

Amenheratf also looked at Manuk, now not as a subject but as a friend. He couldn't remember the last time someone talked to him in such an informal intimate tone. Even his wife, even in their bed was always deferential.

Although he ought to reprimand Manuk for not following proper etiquette, Amenheratf strangely felt refreshed. It felt good to be sometimes treated as a friend instead of a deity.

Looking was the huge bald man desperately trying to wipe away his tears, cheeks all puffed up, Amenheratf suddenly had the uncontrollable urge to laugh at such a comical sight.

"Haha.. of all people in the world, to think I would see you cry one day. Hahaha. Today is a good day. Today is a great day." Amenheratf roared in delight, tears coming out of his eyes as he struggled to remain standing.

Manuk's face in turn grew redder and redder as the king continued laughing.

"To think a grown man like me ended up crying in front of everybody. How embarrassing" Manuk thought as he wished for the ground to split open and swallow him then and there. "The king and my brother will never let me live down." Manuk lampooned.

Manuk decided to swiftly exit this embarrassing situation. So he rapidly got on his horse, placed his left hand across his chest, and said in a formal tone "I will go and tell Beihrut the news, Your Majesty. But please hurry."

Then he quickly turned his horse and galloped away to the front lines, eager to forget this exchange.

"Wear your helmet. We don't want an arrow sticking out from that magnificent mirror of yours, haha." The king shot back in a jovial voice from behind.

"And tell Beihrut to hang on just a bit more. Victory is within our grasp" Amenheratf added, his voice echoing through the Adhanian camp.