

HERALD OF STEEL

Chapter 8 Adhania's Counterattack

"Sou sou sou" Soon stones started raining through the air, bringing death and destruction to the Cantagenans.

The fifteen thousand slingers had arranged themselves evenly on both sides of the forest and started shooting devastating volley after volley, particularly shredding the unarmoured enemy light cavalry.

These slingers had greater range than the primitive bows of the time- which were made of softer wood rather than the hardwoods of later times.

Although less accurate, when hit at a large formation in large numbers, these volleys were frighteningly effective, breaking bones and causing concussions.

The cavalry was particularly in a bad position. They had no shield unlike the infantry and the stirrup hadn't been invented yet. Hence horses hit by stones would buckle and throw off their riders and many would be subsequently trampled.

The tide of battle seemed to have suddenly turned towards the Adhanians.

"Have the infantry form the testudo. And quickly split the cavalry and charge at the slingers." Agapios commanded Samaras hurriedly.

The testudo was a shield wall formation where the soldiers would lock their shields at the front, top, and both sides, forming a packed formation that was nigh impenetrable to projectile weapons.

But it had a huge drawback. It made the unit completely immobilized and stuck in one place.

"Sir, our communication lines have been cut. We can't transmit orders!"

Samaras reminded the general, repeating the words the runner said just a few moments ago.

It seemed age was finally catching up to the valiant general.

"You think I don't know that." Agapios snapped. "You go yourself. Tell Xenophides I personally command it."

"Sir, spitting the cavalry and charging in this weather into a wooded forest is not something a prudent man would do." Samaras tried persuading the general on his tactics.

To do a cavalry charge inside a forest in darkness went against even the most basic cavalry doctrine.

In his own opinion, Samaras thought they should withdraw, or at least pause all offensive till the weather cleared up.

"I understand your worry. But look, those slingers have no infantry protecting them. They are defenseless and the Sycanians will just have to blindly charge and this trap will vanish into smokes." Agapios confidently claimed.

"Okay, but let's not split the cavalry. We can take care of them one at a time." Samaras suggested a compromise.

He felt there would be strength in numbers if the Adhanians had any more nasty surprises.

"No, I want them destroyed at the same time. They could retreat if we give them time. Now go!" Agapios commanded decisively, shutting down any more of Samaras's objections.

"It seems the general is getting impatient," Samaras thought.

"Yes, sir." He then performed a military salute and quickly rode off to carry out the commands.

"The infantry will hold ground by forming a testudo while the cavalry attacks the slingers." Samaras relayed the general's orders to Damious and the commander of the cavalry- Xenophides.

"Joke....don't get over yourself, Cantagenan, what are we, your servants?" Xenophides angrily snapped at Samaras, waving his hand and dismissing the command.

"My cavalry can barely see anything in this weather. All my horses are bruised from the hailstorm and now you wish us to charge into a forest? Fat chance!" He then turned his horse and seemed ready to ride off.

He commanded the most elite cavalry of the Cantagenan alliance- strong, sturdy and capable of fighting for a long time, each one of his horses was precious and he would be damned if he lost them by such foolish tactics.

"Please wait, commander!" Samaras pleaded from the back.

This cavalry wasn't Cantagena's own but from her sister city-state Sycania and so Samaras simply could not force them to obey.

"The slingers are not defended by anybody. You can smash right through them in one single charge." Samaras explained the situation. "In this rain and mud, the enemy infantry hasn't been able to yet arrive to support the slingers. If you attack quickly, you can smash this Adhanian trap and be the hero of this war." Samaras enticed Xenophides.

Hearing such honeyed words, Xenophides paused, clearly moved.

If what Samaras said was correct then those slingers would be just fish on the chopping board.

With minimum effort, he could take care of them and have his name enshrined in the history books for eternity- as the hero who destroyed Adhania.

Who wouldn't want that?

It had to be also said that Sycania was not rich by any stretch of the definition. Its only resource were the several strong, sturdy native mountain horse breeds that lived in its area.

So if he could contribute greatly today, the modest Sycania itself would also bag untold riches and greatly improve the lives of its citizens.

So his eyes lit up with zeal.

"Okay. I will get it done." Xenophides nodded affirmatively.

As Samaras saw the cavalry commander ride off, Damious gruffly interjected from his side " We have already formed the testudo formation, even before your command. But now our infantry is just sitting ducks. And our front line is not solid. The Adhanians can simply march into these gaps and wreck our lines. I advise we withdraw."

Samaras internally agreed with the giant. But he was a soldier and his superiors were the ones making the plans. And they had other plans.

"With all the slingers around? How? You will be torn to shreds the moment you come out of your testudo." Samaras exaggerated.

Then he put a hand on Damious's shoulder and comforted, "Don't worry, the cavalry will take care of everything. The Adhanians are in the same boat as us and won't be able to see the gaps any time soon. Just make sure you hold the line."

After that, he quickly turned his horse and left to command his Cantagenan army.

From his hilltop, Agapios impatiently waited for the cavalry charge, praying his gamble to destroy the enemy's scheme would work.

And after some time, he finally noticed a formation of horses near the woods, seeming to speed into the forest.

At first, the charge seemed to go as planned, the running horses looking like a smooth dark line from the top.

But suddenly, he noticed that the smooth streamline had become disrupted. Now it looked like it was becoming a crude circle.

Agapios had difficulty seeing anything from the top in this darkness but it seemed that the cavalry was unable to penetrate into the forest.

His heart sank at such a thought and just as he was contemplating on sending a herald to get a hold of the situation, a panicked Samaras galloped towards him.

"Sir, Xenophides is dead." He informed Agapios panting, the shock still lingering in his voice.

"What?" Agapios eyes went wide as asked in a shaky voice.

"How can the commander of a cavalry corp die? Are you sure brat?" He fiercely interrogated Samaras, completely forgetting military protocol as he addressed Samaras informally.

"I was there to personally see the cavalry charge. I saw the unique armor fall to the ground and subsequently get trampled." He confirmed the news.

He further added, "It seems he had decided to lead the cavalry charge by himself. But the Adhanians had dug a ditch along the entire forest and filled it with wooden stakes. The charge he led ran straight into the ditch and he fell."

It seemed that Samaras's persuasion was a little too effective. The veteran commander had let illusions of grandeur go to his head and decided to personally lead his troops to cement his position in the history books.

But instead, he couldn't leave even a dot, becoming only a pile of mangled flesh and bones.

"Good, its good that he died." Agapios angrily vented. "Any commander that leads a cavalry charge in the dark without checking for traps is better off dead."

"...." Samaras simply lowered his head in front of the livid general.

"So who's the other wing cavalry commander?" Agapios asked after calming down, eager to forget this unpleasant setback.

"Ummmm, there is no other wing cavalry. Xenophides refused to split his cavalry." Samaras stammered the answer, avoiding eye contact with the general.

"....."Agapios simply stayed silent, cool anger taking over his boiling rage.

"You go and take over. Take some infantry to fill the ditch and then attack the right and then the left. Go now!" Agapios commanded in an icy voice, his eyes almost bursting with fire.

Samaras was terrified of the state the general was in. But he still plucked up the courage to offer his two cents.

"Sir, I doubt the Sycanians will listen to me. I am no cavalry commander. Let them pull back. My infantry can do the job alone."

Agapios wordlessly glared at Samaras, the majestic aura of the 60-year-old veteran almost crushing Samaras's presence.

Then he let out a long sigh and pointed his index finger to the battlefield, "You see the battlefield. We are fighting at the foot of a hill. So all the water will flow downwards and soon the fields will become a swamp. The cavalry will soon be unable to charge and our soldiers will not be able to move in formation. The pride of our army, your heavy infantry will sink in the mud and become shooting targets for the lightly armored slingers." Agapios laid out his analysis of the battlefield.

"Sir there's still time to order a retreat." Samaras suggested again. He was desperately praying for Agapios to agree.

But the general unequivocally dismissed it.

"No. We can't withdraw. That's what Amenheratf wants. If we withdraw now, the battle will end today. Our soldiers are too exhausted and once they return to camp the adrenaline will run out and exhaustion will settle in. By tomorrow the Adhanian will have built forts and just wait for the main army. So we need to win now. And we need the mobile cavalry to do it. Now go and take charge of the Sycanians, cavalry commander or not." Agapios commanded in an absolute voice.

"I will try my best sir." Came a tired, unenthusiastic reply.