

## HERALD OF STEEL

### Chapter 9 End

While Agapios was laying out his plans, the Sycanians were doing their own thing.

Although their commander was dead and their last charge failed, they weren't out of the fight yet.

Xenophides's second in command, a veteran of the 'War of Flowers', took the helm and vowed, "Revenge for the commander!"

Famous for always redeeming any defeat, these mountainous riders were skilled, brave, fierce, and bloodthirsty, valuing honor and victory above everything.

They were trained from birth for this one thing and they fought not only with supreme skill but also with unmatched zeal.

That's because lending their cavalry to Cantagena was Sycania's only real source of income. Its lands were too poor and the mountainous terrain made trade difficult.

As such Sycania rose and fell with their cavalry's performance.

"We can attack though there." A scouting cavalry reported to the new commander.

"Okay, form up! It's time to show the Cantagenans our worth!" The commander ordered.

Hence, the cavalry was soon ready for a second charge.

Now, although the previous charge had been disastrous, the one silver lining of it was that the dead bodies of men and horses had filled up the ditch, forming a small grotesque bridge of flesh.

And the Sycanians intended to ride through it and deliver righteous vengeance,

So without permission, likely in an attempt to prove their worth to the Cantagenans, they massed their cavalry and charged again into the hailstorm of stones, ignoring the lives each stone volley reaped.

"Charge," as the tightly packed cavalry bulldozed into the forest, the goddess of fate, in all her whimsy, decided to play her first card.

"Bang." A lightning bolt suddenly hit a tree next to the charging infantry, instantly exploding it and sending deadly shrapnel into the middle of the cavalry.

"Niggghhhh" Almost all the nearby horses screamed in terror at the sound of the explosion, bucking and jumping to try and throw off their rider and escape.

"Ambush! Ambush!!" Some of the riders screamed in the confusion and broke formation to try and escape the imaginary encirclement.

The calmer and more experienced riders tried to calm things down but the chaos and confusion in there were too much.

The beasts also started to get out of control, blaring and agitating each other as the sight of the burning tree frightened them beyond any control. They crashed into one another in this tightly packed formation, with the trees acting as a barricade and preventing them from dispersing.

Hence the incident later known as the "Stampede of the thousand beasts" occurred.

The charging cavalry lost cohesion in the dark forest, riders randomly driving their horses in different directions and slamming into each and causing a stampede. Thousands of riders fell off their horse and were trampled to death.

The ones that managed to exit the forest fared no better. They all ran like headless chickens in the rain, trying to return to the base camp. On their way they rammed into the Cantagenan infantry flanks, smashing their testudo formation and trampling countless hapless allies. Some even started spreading panic by shouting phrases like:

"It's over. Ramuh has descended."

"The gods have abandoned us. Run, the gods have abandoned us"

"Lost, lost, we have lost! "

"Run for your lives. Save yourselves! Save yourselves!"

These phrases were first spoken by only a few but soon these spread like wildfire.

Many god-fearing soldiers saw the burning tree, standing alone in the rain and darkness like a lighthouse, and took it as a sign of Ramuh's divine intervention. They simply dropped everything and ran.

Others saw the horses running wildly through the battlefield and mistook them for the Adhanian cavalry. Thinking that the enemy cavalry had broken through their flanks, they also ran.

"Stop, don't run."

"Halt, anyone who runs will be tried as a deserter!"

Damious and Samaras screamed their throats out to try and stop the collapse but it was of no use.

This was a rout.

Of course, The Adhanians didn't let go of this golden opportunity. They immediately counter-attacked, morale soaring to high heaven as they truly believed that Ramuh had come.

The slinger and archers were particularly effective, launching volley after volley of devastating strikes to smash the fleeing soldiers. They had been unable to do much damage to the infantry while it was in a testudo, but now, these twenty thousand troops seemed like the grim reapers, harvesting lives by the hundreds.

In just a few minutes, the Cantagenans had somehow managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

Alexander was also retreating, or more accurately running like all the others in this hailstorm of stones, arrows, and actual hail.

Like almost all other soldiers, he too had heard the "bang" of the lightning striking the tree from his testudo formation and witnessed the burning husk of the tree.

And soon afterward he felt the ground shake as there came a cacophony of horse neighing, human moans, and shouts.

Alexander felt all this happen around him and a chilling thought crept into his mind. Either the enemy cavalry had outflanked them or their own cavalry had lost control!

Soon his latter fears were proved right. Black shadows riding horses seemed to come out of the forest but they were all disorganized. Many ran without any sense of direction, running into their allies' formation and trampling them, and even smashing into their own supply lines.

Some of the idiots were even shouting morale-destroying phrases.

It was at that point Alexander concluded, "We lost."

Alexander wasn't the only one to come to such a conclusion. Almost everyone did. And so everyone ran, and the front started to collapse like a house of cards

Fortunately for Alexander, this scattered cavalry seemed to mostly run towards the rear camp and not towards the front. Hence the formations in the front were not hit as hard and they could withdraw in an orderly fashion.

"We are retreating. Stay in close formation and proceed as we practiced." Nestoras commanded in a heavy, unwilling voice. To lose when they were this close to victory made his heartbreak.

"No, we shouldn't retreat like we practiced. Instead, we should disperse and run." Suddenly Alexander's young voice pierced the ears of the soldiers.

"....."For a moment there was pin-drop silence within the phalanx.

And then came Nestoras's enraged roar "Brat it was you who designed the retreat plan. And now you don't want to follow it? Is this all a game to you?"

It was true that Alexander had designed a complex retreating maneuver that he copied from the Romans. The idea behind it was that since almost all the casualties an army suffered were during retreating, so by devising a proper retreat maneuver, casualties could be minimized.

"That maneuver was designed to be carried out in a proper retreat. Look around you, this is not a retreat, it's a rout! We are running away!" Alexander shouted, revealing the limitations of his plan.

He then explained "If we move in this large formation we will be painting the biggest target on our back for those slingers. Without the testudo, they will tear us to shred in no time. And that's not even mentioning the crazy horses that are running across the battlefield, They can easily smash into our formation and demolish it."

Alexander then gave his own suggestion "I suggest we break off into groups of three. The center man will protect the front, while the two at the side will cover the flanks. Be sure to keep your shield at eye level so you can see any stray horse coming towards you."

This was Alexander's genius, to be able to come out with detailed plans in no time under critical conditions.

The plan seemed quite sound. The three-man team was big enough to protect from all sides but small enough to evade the slingers and agile enough to dodge any charging horses.

As the soldiers were murmuring and evaluating the plan, an aged, booming voice spoke out, "I agree with the boy. Let's follow his plan." Aristotle firmly approved of Alexander's proposal.

His consent wiped away any objection to the plan and so Nestoras quickly finalized it "Okay, let's follow Alexander's plan. I will go tell our other formations to do the same." Nestoras then quickly sent heralds to the four other phalanx formations under his mercenary group.

Soon the unit broke off and after a treacherous march, Alexander's group of three finally managed to make the perilous journey back to the camp almost a kilometer away.

They, fortunately reached the camp in one piece, managing to evade the mad horses and missiles thrown at them.

Alexander had Camius and Bartholomeo on his sides to help him run the gauntlet of stones and arrows and as soon as they reached the camp all three collapsed in exhaustion.

The brutal march, the intense fight, the freezing rain, and the knee-deep mud had sapped every bit of energy of the three men and they were barely conscious.

And, this scene occurred over all the allied camps, meaning Cantagena had lost all offensive capabilities for at least the next day.

They had lost the battle!