

HERALD OF STEEL

Chapter 10 Aftermath

Agapios watched the scene unfolding in front of him with shell-shocked horror. Even now he could not understand where things had gone wrong.

One minute they were on the cusp of victory, the next minute they had been defeated and routed.

The shock was so great for the old man he felt his heart almost give out. He simply sat atop his horse in silence, not uttering a single word as he seemed to have aged ten years.

The shock he was experiencing now was only second to the shock had experienced that day.

After a night of drinking and merriment, he had come back in the morning to find his son's head placed on the mantle of the fireplace and his mutilated corpse lying on the floor.

Next to him laid his wife, naked, beaten, broken and raped. Her face had been beaten black and blue, her breasts were chewed off at various places, her lower half had been destroyed and her entire body reeked of piss. But she was still alive, left to groan in pain and humiliation.

As a veteran soldier, Agapios was not green to such sights. He even ordered such acts against his enemies.

But seeing his own family like this, the realization that his family was being tortured and humiliated while he was out partying was a blow that eternally scared him.

"Does the heavens have no eyes?" The general muttered mournfully as brought himself back to the present, laying witness to his soldiers getting massacred in the field.

The agile slingers had come out of the forest and outflanked the retreating soldiers, forming a cauldron and trapping anyone escaping.

Agapios estimated more than twenty thousand soldiers were trapped in the encirclement. The best fate for these soldiers would be being sold into slavery.

Although most likely they will either be crucified or sacrificed at the temple of Ramuh.

"Sir, sir, we need orders." Samaras's screaming brought the dazed general back to earth and he looked back at the adjutant with equal parts confusion and uncertainty.

But soon his training kicked back in and his eyes regained their sharpness as he ordered "Have...."

Boooooom! Agapios never got to finish his words.

Because fate had decided to play its second card.

A stray bolt of lightning hit the general atop his horse and sent him hurling across the air, forming a perfect arc as he landed squarely on the ground, twitching in pain as hundreds of millions of volts of electricity coursed through his body.

"Nieegg" Samaras's horse bucked wildly in terror at the cataclysmic boom and violently threw off Samaras as it attempted to run off and in a profound twist of tragedy, directly ran over the fallen general's head, smashing it under its hooves.

The general's skull cracked open like a squashed grape and the insides neatly flowed out like red jelly, mixing with the mud and rain to form a grotesque red puddle.

Agapios died without even understanding how he died.

How tragic!

The Cantagenan who devoted all his life protecting his state, who sacrificed his family for it, one who vowed to destroy the devils that haunted all Cantagenans dreams died in such a way.

Not in a warm bed surrounded by a loving family, nor on a battlefield gloriously defending Cantagena but in such a comical way.

Maybe the heavens really have no eyes.

Amenheratf, on the hand, felt like he was living in a dream. The battle that should have been like playing dice with the devil ended up in a landslide victory for him.

The trap had worked better than he could have ever asked for even in his dreams. The battle that should have been fought tooth and nail, ended up being a complete lopsided victory for him.

The soldiers that threatened to push his country to the abyss just some time ago were now running away like headless chickens, their panic-stricken screams sounding like music to Amenheratf's ears.

"Ramuh has truly blessed us. Praise be to the divine son of Ramuh. Praise be to King Amenheratf."

From his side, Manuk prayed to Amenheratf with utmost reverence, his hands stretching out to reach the sun.

Then he plopped to the ground, prostrating in front of him and gently kissing his shoes, his eyes streaming with tears of joy and deference.

All the retainers around Amenheratf followed suit, prostrating in front of their king and swearing their fealty once again.

All of them felt a ponderous weight lifting from their chest as they all breathed a sigh of relief.

The last few years of Amenheratf's rule hadn't been smooth. Adhania was experiencing its worst drought in recorded history, with no rain for over three years.

Hunger and destitution overran the country and its people resorted to unimaginable acts just to put food in their mouths.

On the other hand, the royalty refused to lower their lavish lifestyle one bit, only increasing taxes to fuel their extravagance.

At first, some grains were imported from Tibias to relieve the crisis, but soon even that stopped.

Understanding the peril its greatest enemy was in, Tibias raised its export grain prices to astronomical heights.

The Adhanian nobility was also unwilling to use up all its wealth to feed its citizens whom it saw as little more than chattel.

Only the army was kept barely fed to prevent it from rebelling. But soon even that amount of food proved to be too much.

So what do to do when you are starving but your neighbor has silos full of grains?

War!

Adhania was soon embroiled in a massive three-year war in an effort to feed itself. This only spread even more ruin and destitution as more and more lives were lost and more and more "war" taxes were imposed.

All this caused the citizens to reach their tipping point and many were ready to rebel. They started to question the legitimacy of Amenheratf's rule, stating he had lost his divine mandate.

They said that as the son of Ramuh -the god of thunder, lightning and rain, this drought was a divine sign that Amenheratf was unfit to rule.

At first, this rhetoric was only limited to ordinary citizens. But soon it began to infect the lower nobility and over time it climbed up to the highest position of power, the royal family!

This was how the groundwork for Ptolmy's rebellion were laid.

But now, such claims would vanish into dust.

The king had saved Adhania from certain doom. At the critical moment, Ramuh had blessed him with rain, lightning and thunder to help him in battle. Such events were witnessed by all and left no one in doubt as to Amenheratf's right to rule. The biggest threat to his crown was no more.

As the archpriest, Manuk was overwhelmed by such a thorny issue solving itself so easily.

The zealot truly believed that the gods had a hand in this battle and he could only prostrate in front of his king's divine radiance, in awe of the divine miracle he had just performed.

Amenheratf's heart was also filled to the brim in glee at the result of the battle. But as a seasoned politician, he kept a stoic, dignified face.

He slowly raised his hands and piously proclaimed " Rise my loyal subjects. This battle was ordained by my Father as a test. So rejoice, for He has informed me all of you have passed. As my most loyal retainers, you shall have a place beside me in Aaru. Praise be to Ramuh!

"Praise be to Ramuh. Praise be to the owner of the world, your Majesty
Amenheratf."

All his retainers chanted in unison, their zealous proclamations revibrating
throughout the battlefield.