

Herald 17

Chapter 17 Father And Daughter

Five pairs of expectant eyes greeted them as they entered the spartan, brightly lit tent.

The men, dressed in full armor, stood around a massive table, going over the large crudely drawn map laid over it, trying to strategically place large wooden carvings on it.

It appeared they were strategizing their next move.

"Girl! Why are you here?" Nestoras ignored the two men and pointedly asked Cambyses in an angry booming voice.

He was in no mood to deal with his daughter's antics now.

Cambyses seemed steady as a rock in the face of her father's wrath.

"I am sorry father. Earlier in the medical camp, I was too shocked to see brother like that and ran away." Cambyses said in a choking voice, shedding tears and drooping her head low.

"The padawan has become the master." Was Alexander's first thought seeing this charade.

Even he couldn't shed tears at will.

Anyone can force a laugh. But crying at will requires once-in-a-generation talent.

Alexander had the urge to nominate the girl for the Oscars.

Nestoras was visibly taken back at such a display. "I am not angry dear." Nestoras quickly changed his tune to a gentle, loving, fatherly voice. "But we are in a war right now. Once I am finished here, I will come to your tent as soon as possible." He promised mellifluously.

Nestoras didn't buy the tear works for a second. He perfectly knew why she was here and he knew very well the kind of thoughts she held towards Octavius.

It could be said that not throwing a celebration party was showing restraint on her part.

But he could not just come out and say it.

He was someone who cared greatly about his image and prestige. And two brother and sister at each other's throats would reflect poorly on his parenting skills.

Hence he decided to spew such insincere honeyed words.

But unfortunately for Nestoras, this play wasn't performed for him, but for the six other people in the room.

The captains present all knew about the feud between the two brother and sister but always chalked it up to childish infighting.

Cambyse was always careful to display herself as a brash, hot-headed but ultimately virtuous, good and even slightly naive woman.

Alexander taught her to always try and make her opponents let their guard down. And what better weapon is there for that than a woman's tears?

"Commander let her stay in the corner. She clearly just wants to be close to you." Menes the softie spoke out.

"This is a war council Menes. How can we allow civilians in such a sensitive meeting? Military discipline should be maintained at all times." Nestoras gently chided his second in command.

He really did not want to see her face right now.

"Heh, who's a civilian in a mercenary group? Are we living in a city-state? And military discipline in a mercenary! Joke! When have you ever enforced that when they steal, ****, drink and brawl as they wish?" Alexander silently rolled his eyes as he lampooned Nestoras in his head.

Alexander always felt Nestoras was a paradoxical man.

On one hand, he fought hard to maintain this image of a fair, just and loving commander. Yet, he, again and again, covered for Octavius's mishaps, without any concern for his social standing, which greatly eroded his leadership.

Same with Alexander. He greatly appreciated the boy's skills but also disliked him for getting too close to his daughter and the influence he had over the group. But in fear of the influence Alexander wielded, he let him do as he pleased, even promising to grant him freedom.

He was someone who wanted the best of both worlds but frequently ended up with none.

"Ahem, I am not sorely here because I wanted to see you father. I know how hard all this has been for you, forced to take the helm of the group without even the time to grieve for your "only" heir, Cambyes paused, giving particular stress to the word "only".

"Ah, there's the gloating. Never misses an opening that one." Alexander smirked in his mind.

Cambyes then continued, "But there are grave issues with our supplies that the captains should be aware of."

"We will get deal with it later." Nestoras curtly cut the girl with a wave of his hand, clearly irritated and suppressing his anger.

"Let the girl say her piece. I too am curious about our logistics." Came Aristotle's wizened, gruff voice. The old man was holding a piece of parchment and strangely, looking at it with some fear.

"We have run out of medicine and food will last at best a week- even with rationing." Cambyses reported the dreadful news.

"So we HAVE run out of food. ...*Sigh*..." Aristotle remarked, looking back at the parchment. "But we should have enough medicine. Our wounded are not that many." Aristotle asked, puzzled.

"None of the other groups have medical facilities like ours. They have all stormed in to get treatment in our camp. I believe the commander witnessed it firsthand." Cambyses explained.

Nestoras did see it, but he was too distracted by Octavius's death and assumed the wounded as theirs.

"What! You are just giving our medicine for free?" An angry voice roared into existence. The owner of this sonic boom was Pallidus, a tanned man of medium build with curly hair and wide shoulders. He was the capital of the second phalanx.

"There were too many. We couldn't refuse them. What if they got violent? Wounded soldiers are rarely the most rational." Cambyses tried defending herself.

"So you just let them bully you out of all "our" medicine. What about our soldiers? Should we let them just die? Like your brother?" Pallidus asked with a particularly nasty jibe at her brother.

Of course, his words made no sense. The group's wounded were being treated well and Octavius didn't die out of a lack of medicine.

So what was the reason for this tirade?

Well, Pallidus was to Alexander what Octavius was to Cambyses. Someone who hated him for his success. And like Octavius, his hatred spread by proxy to anyone close to Alexander.

"Ahem" Alexander made a small cough to draw attention.

He could see Nestoras about to lambaste Pallidus for his comment about his deceased son.

Hence he decided to interject to prevent this council from devolving into a contest of shouting, cursing and scuffling.

"I believe mistress did the right thing." Alexander started.

"Really? How do you figure that out, brainiac?" Pallidus sneered.

"Let the boy speak, you fucking turd." Aristotle loudly lashed out cursing, clearly losing patience over this juvenile bickering.

This put the much younger captain in his place, as he lowered his head and backed down.

Alexander gave a grateful nod to the old man and continued, "We have lost a lot of good men in the last battle, to the point we are heavily outnumbered by the enemy. Every soldier is precious to us now. If our medicine can save one soldier, then we can add one soldier to our ranks."

Alexander paused to see everyone nodding to his words.

He then continued, "Captain Pallidus said we are just giving away our medicine for free. We are not. Nothing in this world is free. Mistress has told us of the food storage. We can exchange medicines for food. Our medical staff are taking care of their wounded. Surely they deserve remuneration, such as food and money. I believe that medicines exist not to be hoarded but to be used to save lives. By healing their soldiers, I believe we can build goodwill among many mercenary groups." Alexander finally finished his reasoning.

" *Clap* *Clap* *Clap*" Menes was so impressed by his speech that he broke out clapping. He even slapped Alexander's back in excitement.

Other than Pallidus, everyone in the room also started showering Alexander with praise.

"Nice idea, boy."

"Our food problem is solved, hahaha."

"Nothing is a problem for you."

"Thank you." Alexander lightly smiled at all the praise.

But then he said, "But you are praising the wrong person. I didn't do anything. It was all done by the mistress. She and her alone. All my contributions should go to her. This time she has contributed enormously to the group, saving us from certain doom."

He then started clapping in honor of her.

But strangely his claps seemed to ring hollow. It seemed that no one had joined in.

Sometime later, following Alexander's lead, Menes chimed in but the others stood still, making a face that looked like they had swallowed a fly.

"*Cough*, yes Cambyses did a great contribution this time." Nestoras reluctantly squeezed out the words. "And she will be rewarded appropriately at a suitable time." He ambiguously promised. "But we have wasted a lot of time and need to get this council going." He hurriedly announced in an effort to shift the topic.

"Yes, yes."

"Oh, look at time."

"Let's get started."

Everyone else also suddenly changed their tune and agreed with Nestoras.

They would rather praise a slave than a women. Such were the prevailing customs of the time.

Seeing this blatant injustice, Cambyses did not lash out, on the contrary, she only dropped her head with a rueful smile on her face.

But Alexander was incensed at this. He would generally describe himself as a mild-mannered, nonviolent person. But this time, this act, somehow made him boil in rage.

He wanted to walk over to Nestoras, grab him by the collar and punch him in the face for the bigot he was.

How could a father favor a slave over his own child just for being born the opposite gender?

Alexander fought very hard to keep a calm facade, when suddenly a light kick to his ankle jotted him out of his thoughts.

Seemingly sensing Alexander's rage, Cambyses had kicked him to snap him out of it.

As Alexander turned his head to look at what hit him, his eyes came across a gorgeous tanned face, painted with a teasing, mirthful smile and eyes twinkling in delight, seeming to say, "Who cares about these old coots? You cared. That's enough for me."

Alexander rarely saw that side of the usually brash, haughty girl and he was once again reminded why he fell for her.

It took all his willpower to keep a poker face and not kiss her then and there.

Fearful that his self-control might not last, he quickly straightened his back and hurriedly strode over to the council table to listen to the commander's next instructions.

"Still got it" Cambyses proudly smirked.