

Herald 19

Chapter 19 Master And Disciple

Smash. Two herculean fists slammed down on the table as if wanting to snap it in two.

To think a bug would dare attack him using his son. A bug he fed and raised.

"*Clang*, I will murder you, you fucking ingrate." Nestoras had gone completely red-eyed and pulled out his sword, bullishly charging at Alexander, fully intending to cleave him in half.

"Kyahhhhh." Cambyses screamed in terror and tried to madly dash in front of Alexander to shield him from her father.

She felt as if her heart was being squeezed out of her.

"Stop." A single dull, deep sound rang across the tent. And as if by magic, Nestoras seemed to be frozen in place, his puppet strings cut off.

It was Aristotle.

And with one word he bought the insane Nestoras back.

This was the level of control he had over his protegee.

He then addressed Alexander, "That's enough out of you, slave. You are not a freedman yet." He made a naked threat.

But Alexander was past caring.

He shrugged his shoulders and said, "So what? We will all be dead in a few hours. Me and you in the same pit, you old fart. You want me to lead my brothers to death. Not gonna happen! Find someone else."

After venting and seeing these blockheads were dead set to commit suicide, Alexander simply turned and stormed out of the tent, fuming with rage.

"Anything Alexander has ever said, is yet to be proven wrong. I would give some weight to his words. " Cambyses turned to face the council and made a simple statement.

Then she too left the tent to chase after Alexander.

"I will get the troops ready." Menes also found an excuse to exit this shit show, and quickly left, leaving the five bitter men free to bicker to their heart's content.

"What are you lot waiting for! Get out now." Nestoras barked, waving his sturdy hands furiously and heaving in frustration.

As the three men left, each sporting a different expression, Nestoras simply ignored them and was instead occupied by something that seemed much more important and urgent to him.

He vowed to make the slave know his place. And teach that disobedient daughter of his her place. How dare she fall in love with a mere slave!

Nestoras conveniently forgot that he was praising the very same "mere slave" as God's blessed just some time ago.

"This slave is very hard to deal with. I thought I had sufficiently overestimated him, but still, I fell short. To not even take the captain bait. What fearsome self-control! I need to nip out the bud now. He can't become a free man." He tightly clenched his fists in iron determination.

But these were not Nestoras's thoughts but Aristotle's!

He had always wanted to remain the group's leader, the mercenary group he built using his own two hands along with Xanthine and Constans till the day he died.

But alas, the mind is willing but the body is failing.

From training troops, meeting with the captains, settling both major and trivial disputes, keeping inventories of existing stocks, planning to buy new stock, finding new work contracts, the work list of a mercenary group leader is endless.

And age had caught up with the old man and he just could not bear the high physical burden such a post put him under.

So, he let his protege Nestoras take over, while he ruled from the shadows.

That was the plan anyway.

But the arrival of one slave threw everything he had planned into complete disarray and even till now, he couldn't really find a good answer to Alexander.

He felt that the boy was gaining too much popularity too quickly and if this was allowed to continue, soon, both he and Nestoras will be under his thumb.

If he was to become a freedman, he suspected it would only be a matter of time before Alexander became the sole captain, helmsman and quartermaster of this ship.

His 'son' would be dethroned even before his death.

The mere thought of that filled Aristotle with dread.

He would not, he could not let happen.

No matter what.

Publicly killing him was not an option. That would produce too much of a backlash and after the recent fiasco, Nestoras would certainly lose his leader status if he did that.

His pampering of Octavius had left his rule too fragmented, with each captain basically could controlling their own phalanx. Even his own first phalanx was divided into two factions, one led by Nestoras and Aristotle and the other by Alexander and Menes.

Aristotle was even in the first phalanx just to prop up Nestoras. Otherwise, he feared the rising stars Alexander and Menes would have swallowed him already.

That was also why Alexander and Menes weren't transferred to another phalanx. Only Aristotle, with his vast years in the group and using Nestoras's group leader authority could contend with the young upstarts.

Hence he wanted to use today's opportunity to drag down Alexander's popularity.

He planned to systematically sabotage and weaken the third phalanx through a range of schemes he came up with after Alexander took command, thus slowly eroding his authority in the camp.

After all, at the end of the day, for a mercenary group winning was the end all be all, all other things being secondary.

Because that was how they put food on their plates.

Of course, Aristotle would be the first to admit that it was no foolproof plan. But this was the best he could come up with, this was the extent of his abilities.

But, all the scheming was naught.

Because the fish had flatly refused to swallow the bait. He even somewhat managed to turn the tables back on them.

Xanthine and Theocles both seemed very displeased hearing Nestoras's incompetence.

Death at any time was something all mercenaries accepted and embraced.

Death of friends, families and loved ones were baggage every single of them bore in their scarred hearts.

But Nestoras not being able to such clear distinctions and leaving command in the heat of battles just to look at his dying son and killing thirty-three in the process, made everyone seriously reconsider if he was still fit to be their leader.

Aristotle would again have to wipe Nestoras's ass in the dark and appease the two.

"He wasn't always like this at all. *Sigh*" Aristotle muttered in a melancholic voice.

In the past, he was once smart, strong and decisive and thus was able to become Aristotle's protégé.

But one thing ruined him.

Love.

He fell in love twice. He fell in love first with Octavius's and then with Cambyses's mother.

And when both died during childbirth, it seemed they took his intelligence with them.

Because he turned from a brave, charismatic and charming leader to a dull, boorish and egoistical brute, too busy maintaining an image than doing actual work.

His character took an even more drastic change when an infection claimed his manhood.

That was the nail in the coffin that pushed him above the edge.

His fear of being heirless and pampering his son, the crystallization of his love, took precedence above all else and it cost him crucial allies, like the various captains of the phalanx, whom he chose to neglect or ignore.

Of course, he conveniently forgot about his other crystallization of love, Cambyses. He threw her in a cold, dark, dinghy closet somewhere and simply abandoned her, like a careless toddler discarding his toy after becoming bored with it.

If not for Alexander finding and rescuing her, the girl named Cambyses would certainly be six feet under by now.

Nestoras only held onto his leadership by Aristotle's support from the dark and by Alexander's marvelous discoveries,, which he could tout as being the owner of as he was Alexander's master.

Else Theocles would have become the leader by now.

Of course, it wasn't only Nestoras that changed.

Aristotle too had changed in the meantime.

Whereas at one time he wanted a strong leader to lead the mercenary group to greatness, he now wanted a malleable one he could bend to his will.

But to keep the facade of a strong, independent leader, he publicly kept a distance from Nestoras, whereas in reality, nothing happened without his say-so.

This weak leadership and infighting proved fertile ground for ambitions to grow and flourish. From Xanthine to Pallidus, to Theocles and Alexander, to even Menes it spread like wildfire.

The proof was in the fact that a freed slave could become second in command in just eight years, sidestepping arguably the more experienced veterans.

"*Sigh*, if there's one good thing that came out of this fiasco is that he won't be becoming free anytime soon. I bought myself some time." Aristotle consoled himself.

He could use Alexander's behavior today to punish and delay his freedom.

"Next time, becoming free won't be so easy." He promised to himself.

But prolonging the problem wasn't the same as solving it.

Fortunately, the job of a mercenary had a high turnover rate.

And in these treacherous lands, thousands of kilometers from home, running from a relentless enemy, who knows what can happen?

"Let's see how long you can run, little fish," Aristotle smirked with a crafty glint in his eyes.

But what Aristotle had forgotten in all his scheming was that he was a mercenary too, with the same turnover rate.

And the fish he wanted to bait wasn't an innocent shrimp, but a ravenous shark.