

Herald 21

Chapter 21 Heart To Heart

Alexander observed Camius scamper off, when Cambyses suddenly spoke up, "You know, this is the first time I heard you use that word."

"Huh, what word?" He turned to look at her.

"Instinct. Never heard you say that before. It's always reason and logic with you." She pointed out.

"Hmm, you're right. Needed the right tool for the right job I guess." Alexander admitted.

So why had Alexander's irrational approach worked? Because this was a different time.

In Alexander's time, people were naturally suspicious of each other and always wanted reasons, proofs and evidence to convince them.

But here and now, people tended to trust the people they had an emotional tie with. Emotion and not reason moved most people.

"You've changed." Cambyses made an observation.

"We all have. You're no longer the sickly cripple and I'm no longer the helpless slave. It's called growing up." Alexander replied.

"That's not what I meant." She shook her head.

"When I first met you, you had this invisible aura around you. Like you were not part of this world. It's lessened now."

'What fearsome observation power! Is this what they call a woman's intuition?' Alarm bells started ringing inside Alexander. She had somehow managed to stumble into his biggest secret.

Rapidly trying to think of a rebuttal, he decided not to outright dismiss it, but to bend the truth. "I guess I am different. I think and act differently. That's why I always had trouble mixing with others. Now I guess I am starting to adjust myself."

"No, that's not it." She again shook her head. "You have a kind of walk to yourself that feels like nothing can hold you. That you could just fly away if you wanted to. I know it because I once felt it too. When I was in that closet, I too felt not attached to anything. But yours is much stronger."

"That..."

She suddenly grabbed his wrists and asked, "Hey Alexander, what are you? How do you know so much? Are you Gaia who came down to save me from that Hell?" Her misty, emerald eyes gazed longingly at her lover's almond black eyes, eager for an honest answer.

Looking at those earnest eyes, Alexander knew he couldn't give his usual "learned it from a traveling sage" cookie-cutter answer.

He would totally lose her trust if he did that.

But what could he say?

Saying he was a god was far easier than trying to explain to her that he was an alien soul from a different planet a few thousand years in the future who took over the dead body of an orphan.

Even the raving mad wouldn't believe this creatively bankrupt explanation.

So he tried to delay the answer.

"This isn't the time or"

"This is exactly the time. Who knows if we will last the night." Cambyses almost shouted, shivering in anger.

Seeing this Alexander realized that recent events had really shaken her.

It was easy to forget that she was merely sixteen years old. And that in this world, she really had only him to rely on.

He also understood had to give her a straight answer here. There would be no weaseling out of it if he still wanted her as an ally.

"Okay, you want the truth? I will tell you the whole truth." Alexander finally relented. "Not right now but I swear by today I will tell you the truth. I just need to organize my words."

Hug. Cambyses simply hugged him in reply.

"You!" Alexander was shocked as he hurriedly tried to pry her off of him.

To think she would openly hug him in public. If someone saw them, it wouldn't end well for either of them.

This wasn't the 21st century.

This was an extremely conservative society where such an open display of affection could have grave consequences.

The names and jeers an unmarried woman could receive if she was found out were enough to drive one to commit suicide.

Fortunately, this part of the camp was quite secluded and everyone was too busy with their own work.

Cambyes on the other hand was totally unconcerned of such considerations and just hugged Alexander even tighter as he tried to pull her off.

"*Sob* *sob*, I was so scared when he came at you. It felt like my heart would burst, *sniff*." Cambyes suddenly burst out crying.

Alexander was stunned. He felt like today alone he received more surprises than in the last ten years combined.

Because he had never seen the girl cry before. Not even once over the ten years he had known her. Not even after all the horrific things that happened to her.

She was abandoned in the corner of a tent, malnourished and developing rickets.

Alexander coincidentally found her one day when he was cleaning Nestoras's tent and from then on poured his heart and soul into treating her.

He would share his meager food with her, drag her outside to sunbathe and even help her exercise.

At meals, he would tell her little stories to coax her to eat.

He even used his little influence to get Mean to help him look after her.

And among all these things, although she showed great reluctance at first, she never ever shouted or threw a tantrum, much less ever shed a drop of tear.

She once proudly said, "I left my tears in that dingy corner."

But now that proud, strong girl was crying, no bawling for him.

It made his heart ache and swell.

In reality, she saved him as much as he saved her.

When he came to this world he was much like her- lost, scared and alone.

Being sold as a child slave to a roaming mercenary band, war, hunger and death hounded him at every step. For a man of the 21st century, it felt worse than hell.

So when he found her, it felt like he found himself. And saving her felt like saving himself because it gave him a reason to live and helped him forget the abject misery he was in.

He tenderly laid his hands on her head, lovingly caressing it and gently cooed in her ears, "Silly girl, I would never leave you."

"You promise, *sniff*?" She asked coyly.

"I promise."

"Good. You're not allowed to die without my permission then." Cambyses finally let go of the embrace and proclaimed majestically.

"As you wish princess," Alexander replied, placing his hand across his chest and bowing.

"Hehe" Cambyses simply giggled.

Chapter 22 Trying To Gain An Ally

"So, out with it. What's my task?" Cambyses asked after calming out a bit and wiping her tears off.

"Let's go to the medical camp first. I wanna inspect the wounded." Alexander replied in a seemingly unrelated note and started quickly making his way to the clinic.

"Oh, don't you have more important stuff to do?" Cambyses asked in surprise, hastily following in tow.

After all, it was Alexander that specifically instructed to spread the information as quickly as possible.

"Camius is more than enough. His mouth never stops moving." He assured. "Now, what do you think of the offer they made me?" Alexander asked somewhat cryptically.

Cambyses frowned at the question.

She personally thought it was a great offer. She thought that finally all his hard hard work had paid off.

But if he was asking her, it probably meant she was wrong and that there was something off.

But what was it?

"You mean they were lying?" She asked, confused.

"Umm... yes and no. It's a bit more nuanced than that." Alexander hinted ambiguously. "But, carry on. Elaborate. What do you mean by lying?"

" Uhhh, that they would find a reason not to make you captain. Like manpower or supplies shortages. Or give you bad and wounded soldiers or.....okay I don't know." Cambyses confessed, clearly finding faults with her own reasoning.

"That's a good theory." Alexander nodded. "But any such measures would be temporary. Do you really think supply and manpower problems or subpar soldiers can stop me?" He asked with a big grin on his face.

'Of course not. Anyone who knows anything about you would know just what kind of knack you have for turning trash into treasure.' Cambyses lampooned internally.

"So what could they do?" Cambyses straightforwardly asked.

"Well, I don't know for sure. But here's what I would do. Disband the third phalanx."

"Disband the third phalanx.....?" Cambyses repeated, confused and horrified.

What does 'disband the third phalanx' mean? Even if the entire phalanx is killed, a new third phalanx will be made.

The only theoretical way to do it would be if they only ever have two phalanxes.

"I can see you're having some wild thoughts there....hehe." Seeing Cambyses's incessant frown, Alexander chuckled. He could almost see the mental gymnastics she was doing.

"What I mean is that the survivors will most likely be added to the four other phalanxes in the short term.

In the long run, a new sixth phalanx will probably be formed using them. And what will happen to the third phalanx you ask? 'The third phalanx will forever be dedicated to the memory of our founder, Constans and the soldiers he led', will be the slogan. What do you think?" Alexander inquired.

"I think you haven't slept in a long time." Cambyses curtly replied, absolutely not convinced.

"Haha, I too wish to sleep, my dear. But, it is not being paranoid if someone is out to get you." Alexander reasoned.

"Just think about it. Constans was the muscle that formed this mercenary group. Isn't it romantic to have the memory of 'an eternal warrior' dedicated to a unit? A brave warrior that died in battle and had his deeds immortalized. Is it really that impossible?"

"Yes, it is. Your idea of a unit dedicated to Constans being purely decorational is absurd. As a matter of fact, it should be the strongest unit to honor his legacy." Cambyses rejected his rhetoric.

Such practices were almost unheard of. It had only happened to a small number of kings and even then the chosen unit would usually not be in active military service but something like the royal guards.

For such a thing to happen in a mercenary group was unthinkable. Especially not if it meant such blatantly cheating someone as popular as Alexander.

"Alexander you yourself should know how far-fetched this 'explanation' is. There's no way that's going to happen. Are you sure you're not reading into this too deeply?" Cambyses tried to convince Alexander.

Alexander will be the first to admit his theory of turning the third phalanx purely decorative a bit far-fetched.

He came up with it while talking to Cambyses and didn't have the time to think too deeply about it.

But the aim of this conversation was not to determine if there really was a scheme to get him.

It was to convince Cambyses that there was a plot to get him and to bring her to his side.

Frankly, even Alexander himself was not too sure if there really was something or if he was just imagining things.

But it didn't matter.

Whether or not there actually was a scheme to deny his freedom was irrelevant.

What was relevant was that Alexander suspected there was a scheme.

And since there was a chance, he chose to attack first.

Alexander was by nature an aggressive individual who believed in the first strike advantage and preferred to be the attacker than be the defender.

But, for his attack to succeed this time, he needed to convince Cambyses and get her to his side.

So he stated, " That was just one way they might do it. There are several more."

"And I very much wish I am wrong," Alexander wished. " But do you remember the exact wording of the offer? They said 'we will make you captain tomorrow.' The keyword here being 'tomorrow'. Why tomorrow? Why not today or now?"

"Semantics Alexander, semantics. They just said so because you will be freed tomorrow. There's nothing more to it than that. I think you're finding holes because you want them to."

"Nothing would make me happier than to be wrong." Alexander proclaimed. "And you're wrong about one thing. I most likely won't be freed tomorrow. The exact condition was if we won this battle, I would be set free. Everyone just simply assumed victory was in the bag and started celebrating early. Now, they will find a way to keep me."

"That...I don't believe they will do that. Everyone knows just how hard you worked to get your freedom. They just can't take it off at the last minute on a technicality. Not everyone is out to get you, you know."

"Maybe not Nestoras, but what about the old geezer? That geezer has always hated my guts but still puts on the face of a saint because I am useful to him. Don't tell me you never noticed?"

"That...okay, Alexander, what's the point of telling me all this?" This time her tone changed into a sharp one. She could feel Alexander was leading her on to somewhere dangerous.

"Say if a sword was placed against your neck and asked to choose between me and the geezer, who would you choose?" Alexander asked in a mysterious tone.

"...*Silence* ..."

She simply walked slowly forward with a dazed look, trying very hard to remove the image that subconsciously appeared in her mind.

How could she not understand the hidden meaning behind his question?

"Alexander, what are you intending to do? Aristotle is considered by everyone..."

"Hold on there, I never said anything about doing anything, But just think about it. Just think about it." Alexander emphasized in a reassuring tone.

But far from being reassured, this only alarmed Cambyses to no end.

By how Alexander seemed to refuse to talk about it and denied everything, it most likely meant he had already made up his mind and was merely informing her.

"Alexander, don't do anything stupid in a moment of rage. I of all people know just how hard you worked to get your chance at freedom. But rashly lashing out won't do you any good. Cambyses changed her tone to a pleading one.

"When have I ever done anything rashly? Don't worry, I know my limits. " He assured in a comforting tone.

This alleviated Cambyses's worries to an extent. She knew Alexander wasn't anything like the hot-blooded boys of his age. In fact, most times he was unnaturally cool-headed.

This, paired with the fact that she could think of no way that Alexander might secretly off Aristotle, somewhat eased her mind.

"That's good. Just be a little more patient, okay dear?" Cambyses lovingly soothed her lover.

She breathed a mental sigh of relief as she put the matter off to the back of her mind, chalking it off as Alexander merely venting, half because of rationalizing it, half because she wanted to.

Chapter 23 Medical Clinic

The duo soon arrived at the back of the camp, a kaleidoscope of painful moans, hushed groans and urgent shouts greeting them at their arrival.

"We ran out of space inside," Cambyses said, pointing out to the wounded left under the open sky.

They simply lay on the muddy ground, the lucky having a thin reed mattress to separate themselves from mother earth, some asleep, some groaning in pain, most with a blank look of dejection.

As Alexander scanned the unfortunate souls that lay beside the path, he took note of all the variegated clothes present. It seemed almost every mercenary group had sent their wounded here to get treated, resulting in the mayhem he was witnessing now.

Various people ran to and fro like headless chickens, clothes spattered with blood and exhaustion written all over their faces, as they tried to offer some kind of medical treatment to the suffering soldiers.

The different colored clothes they wore indicated these helpers were from all the different mercenary groups and having never worked together, they were totally disorganized in their effort.

They were pretty unskilled as well, most seemed to be missing even the most rudimentary medical skills and could only provide momentary relief such as cleaning the wounds with a wet towel, rubbing herbal ointment on them or giving them some water to drink.

The few competent ones were seen correctly dressing wounds with properly knotted alcohol-soaked bandages, while the most experienced ones, like those from Alexander's group, were seen stitching wounds or pulling out bone fragments using specialized tongs.

But despite the best efforts of everyone in the clinic, they were sorely lacking in experts, leaving most to duke it out with death alone.

"*Sigh*." Cambyses let out a tender sad sigh at the sight of these helpless men.

She was not still able to steel her heart to such scenes.

But unlike her, Alexander was inured to such sights and after coldly surveying the situation, he spoke up, "Go to Theocles's tent and get all the beetroots you can. Then order the medical staff to give sugar water to everyone."

This order made Cambyses's eyes visibly get bigger in surprise and shaking her head, she replied, "There's no way he will allow that. You know better than me how precious that stuff is and we have barely enough to last a week ourselves."

"That's why you will go now. He shouldn't be there now." Alexander pointed out.

Cambyses scowled at this.

She didn't like doing things like this behind someone's back. And she also didn't like giving what little precious medicine they had out for free.

Yes! Normal sugar water- i.e- glucose was treated as medicine in this backward era. This is because the sick could easily digest it and it could energize the body.

Alexander seemed to sense her dissatisfaction and so he pointed his finger at the wounded soldiers and said, "They have spent too much time in the rain and their body is getting too cold. If we don't give them food to warm them up quickly, most will catch a fever and die. We can get food from the other camps later, but they need the sugar water now. And we need these soldiers to escape Adhania."

This grim reminder of the present made Cambyses refocus her attention on the greater picture.

Yes! For now, they were in the same boat together and needed each other's help.

She nodded heavily and said, "Okay, I will do what I can."

She then started west towards the quartermaster's tent, but not before repeating a warning, "Don't do anything stupid, Alexander!"

Alexander in turn silently watched the first part of his plan to deal with Aristotle successfully unfold with grim trepidation.

"Now for the second part," Alexander muttered inside his head.

He then started swiftly walking past the hordes of wounded, trying to make his way to the main medical tent.

But as he was walking past, his eyes suddenly caught sight of a few fully armored soldiers tending to a small number of the wounded.

From what it looked like they were likely from the same mercenary group tending to their mates.

Though what really caught Alexander's attention was not their comradery but their get-up.

Because, unlike most helpers who wore simple tunics or chitons, these guys were in full armor and looked like they were returning from the battlefield or heading into one.

Alexander thus decided to check it out.

"Guys, please go battle with no worry. I am from Nestoras's group and will personally look after your mates." Alexander casually greeted, playing himself off as a medical staff- which as technically true.

All of them spun towards him expectantly hearing this and a shabby-looking middle-aged man - seemingly the eldest of them stood up and replied, "Thank you, brother. The medical skills of your group have been a lifesaver for many of our brothers. But we decided last moment we won't take part in the upcoming attack!"

The last sentence sounded like music to Alexander's ears.

He could bet everything he had to guess the reason behind his statement.

But still, he decided to keep a poker face and shouted incredulously, "What? Didn't commander Samaras order a counter-attack to free our brothers? Is your entire group disobeying?"

Alexander tactfully avoided the word "mutiny" as it had too strong of a negative connotation.

"Bah, when does that cheat get to command us? We are not his slaves." A thin-faced man from the middle retorted.

Alexander was quite pleased to hear the discontent in his voice. So he decided to press on.

"Cheat? Commander Samaras? What do you mean?" He asked acting confused.

This time the shabby man replied, "Samaras threatened not to pay us if we don't attack. Even though he owes us two months of pay. If that's not a cheat, what is? No silver, no steel."

"No silver, no steel, huh. That's very apt brother. I never would have guessed you were such a talented poet." Alexander smiled, seemingly praising the man for his rhyming skills.

"No, no, that wasn't me. It's what I heard." The man replied honestly, not taking any credit.

"Heard? From who?"

"Everyone's talking about it. They say that only General Agapios can cancel our contract and Samaras is trying to scam us."

"Really? That's some bold claim!" Alexander exclaimed in seeming disbelief.

"It is." The man nodded in agreement. "But it also makes sense. So we decided unless we meet General Agapios, we won't attack."

This made Alexander finally understand the get-up. They were prepared to march at any moment but only at Agapios's command.

Alexander was internally ecstatic that his words had been carried with such accuracy. and speed.

Even he didn't expect it to become so widespread so soon.

He then decided to ask the most crucial question to test the ultimate strength of their resolve. He asked, "But are you going to just leave all the other soldiers to die?"

This caused all their faces to become visibly darker. But then the middle-aged man retorted in anger, "If we could we would have. But to launch such an attack when dusk is so near is suicide. I have a responsibility to take care of my men." He reasoned.

This genuinely surprised Alexander, because at face value many tended to think Samaras's plan was solid and a win was still possible.

But this guy seemed to have doubts..

"I agree with you. To launch such an attack now does seem imprudent." Alexander nodded in support.

"By the way, how come you don't know anything about all this brother? Everyone here seems to know." The man suddenly inquired, his tone abruptly turning suspicious.

After all, it wasn't unheard of for spies to slip past enemy lines and directly infiltrate camps.

And now that he took the time to observe Alexander again, he didn't seem dressed like a medical staff.

He was too clean, with no blood on his hands, no dirt under his fingernails and most critically, no medicinal or alcohol smell on his body.

This was of course because Alexander had just taken a bath.

Alexander easily understood the meaning behind his question and decided to formally introduce himself.

He pronounced, "Ah, how rude of me! Let me introduce myself, I am Alexander. Until now I was with captain Theocles organizing the medicines for the medical camp and wasn't around."

"Ah, so that's it, I understand." He said noddingly. "I am Melodias by the way, the leader of the Claws mercenary group. Please send my regards to captain Theocles for all the medicine he has provided. Even though he himself was injured."

This last sentence made Alexander suddenly wake up and take a good look at the man.

Because what he said was most likely a trap. It was probably meant to check if Alexander really did meet with Theocles and was not just using his name.

In this era, unlike Alexander's previous one, people tended to easily believe someone if they could produce a familiar or famous name.

But this man here seemed different.

This very much piqued Alexander's attention.

"Fortunately captain Theocles is unharmed and well," Alexander replied with a smile, deftly dodging the trap.

"Ah, yes, I remember now! I must have gotten mixed him with someone else, apologies. Haha, I met him some time ago and it's been too hectic recently." Melodias smoothly played it off.

Alexander simply knowingly smiled and nodded, sharply observing the unusual man.

It was unlikely that he knew Theocles before today's battle as mercenary groups tended to stay within themselves.

As the leader of a mercenary group, he would have at best only known Nestoras as another group's leader.

But this shabby, unremarkable-looking man, with a small stumble under his chin and a medium build, seemed to correctly identify the man behind the medical supplies and contact him just after the battle.

He was even here personally looking after his men.

This made Alexander form a very high opinion of the man. So he decided to leave a good impression.

He looked around until he spotted a familiar face and shouted, "Hey Adrias, come here. I want to take special care of these men." He ordered, pointing to the wounded Slash mercenaries.

"Oh, Alexander! Okay, I will do what I can." Came the hectic reply.

Alexander then turned to Melodias and advised, "Please make sure to keep them and do not let them catch a cold. I have to go now. Take care."

"Thank you, brother. May we meet again." Melodias replied in a grateful tone and saw Alexander stride off into the main medical tent.

Little did he appreciate the fateful encounter that happened just now.

Chapter 24 Overstretched And Buckling

As Alexander entered the large medical tent, his nose twitched uncontrollably as he was assaulted with the pungent smell of a mixture of blood, sweat, alcohol and medicinal herbs, and his ears were bombarded with shrill cries, hectic barks, and eternal low groanings.

The chaos here seemed to have reached its zenith as the most critically wounded were being treated here.

Various slaves and helpers swiveled around each other in the narrow spaces as they walked with determined intent to reach their destination.

Alexander could see that most of his own medical personnel were in here and hence the treatment being given here was significantly better.

At least the help here, however small, actually benefited the wounded.

But alas, this clinic was designed with the mind of handling the casualties of a small one thousand mercenary group. Not for ten thousand.

The clinic here was too small to house all the wounded rushing in and the single tent became a cage filled with the death throes of the dying.

As Alexander scanned the tent for the person he came for, he cursed internally, "They simply let anyone and everyone in. The idiots!"

He could clearly see the disorganized people trying and failing miserably at any type of coordination. This not only didn't help but it even obstructed those trying to help.

People would scream endlessly for something like bandages or medicine or stitches or even ask for assistance from somebody, only to be overridden by an even louder scream.

The people handing out supplies would also lose their way. Many lost track of the people they were supposed to find in the crowded space, many forgot the thing someone wanted because of all the noise, some simply misheard the request and some had their supplies snatched up by others on their way to their destination.

It seemed like a fish market rather than a clinic.

Alexander hence decided to do something about it.

But first, he had to find the person he came for.

After a bit of head swerving, off in the distance, Alexander spotted a small, slender shadowy figure slipping past the chaotic mass and trying to give medicines and orders to the medical staff.

Her face was flushed with sweat, her slender arms were slightly shaking and Alexander could hear her hoarse voice all the way across the tent.

There she was - Mean, the current de-facto leader of the clinic and Alexander's current person of interest.

"Mean, over here," Alexander called out, gesturing her to come towards him.

Hearing the familiar voice and seeing Alexander's silhouette, Mean's face lit up like a Christmas tree and her mouth subconsciously burst into a wide grin.

"Finally someone who can take over from me." Mean gleefully thought as she assumed both Alexander and her mistress were here to take the helm.

"Alexander, thank Gaia you're here. I am about to lose my mind here." Mean complained loudly as she briskly walked towards him, strongly shoving anyone in her way to the side.

"This place is a mess. Why did you let in some many wounds? We can't treat so many." Alexander pointed out.

"It's because that shit-eater came and took all our extra men. The helpers from the other groups are nowhere near as useful." Mean cursed.

Shit-eater was Mean's term of endearment for Pallidus.

He must have come here personally to force all the volunteers and lightly wounded of Nestoras's group to go into battle.

"Where's mistress by the way?" She then asked, after looking around and seeing no sign of Cambyses.

"I sent her to try and squeeze some more medicine from Theocles," Alexander answered half truthfully.

"Oh, that's good. We are running really low." Mean cheerfully replied.

"By the way, Alexander, what about your fight with Nestoras? Will you be alright?" Mean then asked, her question dripping with worry.

"*Smirk*, everything's fine." Alexander brushed off any worry as he curled up his lips and waved his hand like he was clearing the air.

"Besides you have already enormously helped me by spreading the rumor. It's already started working." He proclaimed

"Well, it was mostly Remus. The moment he heard it was from you, he turned into a canary. That boy is loyal to a fault."

"Mmm," Alexander nodded with a slight smile. Then he added, "We need to clear the tent. There are too many wounded and we have to prioritize. We will try to save the more lightly wounded first."

"I agree. We sometimes can't even get to a patient because the path is so congested. And in the back, there's little light coming due to the overcrowding. There's not even much space to light candles there and it will be dark soon." Mean pointed worriedly.

And then she asked, "But Alexander, how are we going to that? We don't have the men to forcefully throw most of them out."

"You're right. HmMMMM....." Alexander put his hands on his chin and began to think.

Without muscle, it would be impossible to force many of the wounded to leave the clinic.

As he was brainstorming, suddenly a new, unfamiliar face began to surface inside his mind. It was shabby with an unclean stubble, droopy eyes and sunken cheeks -Melodias!

The Claws's mercenary leader had left a good impression on him and he thought it was worth a try to ask him for help.

"I might know someone who can help. Let me check it out." Alexander claimed. "But I got a job for you in the meantime. You know the trunk I keep in the clinic. I want you to get it for me. And some fresh beetroots."

Why did Alexander need these? Mean didn't see a need to ask.

"Okay, no problem. I am getting it now" Mean readily agreed and without wasting any more time, sped off into the tent.

Alexander too turned around to search for Melodias and soon found him in the same place.

As he approached him, he noticed that the patients Melodias was tending to seemed to have gained some new bandages and a few lucky ones even had thin blankets on them.

It looked like Alexander's command had worked.

Noticing Alexander's arrival, Melodias turned around and stood up in joy, exclaiming, "Alexander, haha, thank you, brother. You really helped our men this time."

"No no, we are all in this together. I only did what was right." Alexander humbly smiled.

And then continued, 'Listen Melodias, I came here to ask for a favor. The medical tent is getting too crowded and I was hoping to clear some space. Can your group help?'

Melodias instantly understood what he was implying. He wanted his help forcefully throwing out some of the wounded.

He certainly was not fond of this idea as some of his own men were there.

But Alexander did do him a favor and rejecting him to his face would be too rude. So he asked in a neutral voice, "What do you want us to do exactly?"

Alexander clearly sensed the careful, probing tone and decided to inform Melodias of the dire picture.

"Our tent is so crowded that we can't even properly move there. Our medicine is severely lacking and we don't have the men to take care of everyone. We are losing people we could have saved because we are being overwhelmed."

This revelation caught Melodias slightly off-guard. In hindsight, he was too busy taking care of his men to really think about the logistics of the medical camp.

"Oh, I had no idea things were so bad." He exclaimed. "Now that I think about it, I do remember seeing a large group leave just some time ago. Okay, let's go. Like you said, 'we are all in this together.'" Melodias declared.

Hearing the overcrowding was actually killing soldiers, Melodias-the ever pragmatic man decided to help Alexander.

"Boss, we have many brothers..." A concerned voice rang out from behind Melodias.

"Of course they can stay," Alexander interjected reassuringly.

"No, this is war. We will try to save those we are confident in saving." Melodias raised his sturdy hands and decisively shut down any protest.

This pleased Alexander very much. Because now they could lead by example.

"Please follow me." Alexander gestured.

"Androus, go and tell everyone to meet me in front of the medical camp. ASAP!" Melodias turned and shouted orders to a thin-faced man.

Then he faced Alexander and smiled, "Lead the way."

As the small group made their way towards the clinic, all of them distinctly felt the situation getting worse.

They came across more and more wounded left unattended and uncared for and more and more idlers.

They could hear considerably more grumbling and even saw some small groups crosswords with their commanders who came to recall them back to battle.

It seemed that further men were being pulled away for the new attack, while some started using the rumor as an excuse to not work but idle.

If something was not done soon, the treatment of the whole medical camp could soon stop.

Hence it seemed that Melodias's arrival was like timely coal in the winter.

Chapter 25 A Teapot

"Alexander, over here!" A thin hand waved up high as a short cry called out from far.

Over in a small clearing to the side was Mean, waving her hand.

She held a small round linen bag in her right hand and next to her on the ground lay a small unassuming trunk, presumably the one Alexander wanted.

"Mean, let me introduce you to leader Melodias. He has been kind enough to agree to help with the situation in the clinic." He introduced once he met up with her.

"Thank you Master Melodias for your assistance. We are truly in desperate need of help!" Mean slightly bowed and humbly expressed her gratitude to the shabby-looking man.

Though inwardly she was asking, "Who's this dead fish-eyed drunkard Alexander dragged in? And if he is a leader why is he back here?"

"Melodias is the leader of the Claws mercenary. We met through the hands of fate and in the short time I have known him, I have come to fully trust him." Alexander elaborated, trying to dispel some of Mean's doubts.

Translated into English, what Alexander meant was- 'I just met him but he doesn't seem to be a total asshole. This is the best I could do. Sorry!'

It was unknown how much of Alexander's exaggerated claims Mean truly bought but at least outwardly she enthusiastically replied with a bright smile, "I have long heard of the Claws mercenaries and leader Melodias's exploits in battle. With such an esteemed leader here, we can certainly restore order to the camp soon."

Mean didn't bother to ask why this mercenary group was not getting ready for battle.

It was none of her concern.

She desperately needed men and would not look a gift horse in the mouth.

Melodias on the other hand could almost feel the flattery being rubbed all over him and lightly smiled at the exaggerated praises.

It seemed they were truly desperate.

"We are all in this together," Melodias repeated the hackneyed remark.

Then he decided to show his sincerity and said, "Now let us not waste any more time. Alexander told us the tent is too crowded and we are ready to help vacate some of our own men to make space."

This declaration clearly demonstrated his goodwill and helped Mean shed a lot of her doubt.

It seemed he was there to truly help and not be afraid to be the bad guy.

"Yes, yes, please follow me." Mean nodded this time with genuine alacrity.

But just as she was getting ready to set off, she suddenly turned and handed the bag in her hand to Alexander, "There's everything you wanted inside."

And she added with concern "Just be careful, okay."

"Thanks." Alexander gratefully smiled. "Mistress should be here soon with more sugar water. Until then I leave things here up to you. Be sure to prioritize helping the lightly wounded first. And keep everyone warm. Make sure they don't catch a fever." Alexander started ranting off some last-minute advice to Mean like a concerned older brother.

,m "Yes, yes I get it. Now go!" Came Mean's impatient reply.

He then turned to Melodias and solemnly said, "Leader Melodias, I leave the fate of the clinic and the wounded to you."

"Haha, Alexander you are being too serious. Rest assured I will do my best." Melodias laughed and thumped his chest loudly.

"I would be more worried about you. This attack doesn't seem right." He added with concern.

"Yea, you and me both." Alexander inwardly thought.

But he showed no reluctance outwardly and simply smiled, "I will try my best. Let Gaia guide us."

"Let Gaia guide us." Mean clasped her hands and repeated. Then she turned to lead men to 'clean up' the camp.

Alexander too wasted no time picking up the trunk in one hand and then started towards his own destination.

As Alexander set off, he felt that the outside had turned into the perfect autumn late afternoon.

The warm sun, gentle amber-hued sky and the cool weather after the torrential rainstorm made one want to lay out a blanket outside, sit down and just have a nice, relaxing picnic.

That was if not for a literal war that was going on a stone's throw away from here.

Alexander speedily zigzagged his way past the meandering narrow walkways, as if he was being hounded by the rays of the soft late afternoon sun.

To him, this gentle ambiance felt even harsher than the midday summer sun.

Because it reminded him that dusk was rapidly approaching.

As he sped across, he noticed that the camp had become mostly deserted by now, save for a few slaves and soldiers left behind to guard the valuables.

So there were few to monitor where Alexander was going.

Though occasionally Alexander did come across a few who were frantically getting ready or a squad hurriedly sprinting towards the front, none of them stopped him.

Either they were too busy, assumed that he was on a supply run for the medical camp or simply didn't care.

And so soon Alexander found himself in front of a small unassuming tent.

So what was this tent?

It was Cambyses's tent, now open and left unguarded.

It seemed that Nestoras wanted almost all able-bodied men for this attack to make up for lost numbers and had pulled out most of the guards.

Alexander took advantage of this convenience and deftly parted the tent flaps and strode inside the tent, without Cambyses's permission or knowledge.

There he was greeted with the familiar yet a bit changed scenery.

The tent was sparse as it always was, but little things like the combs, mirrors, jewelry and vases were missing.

Presumably, they were moved to a more secure position, possibly with all the other treasures.

But the most striking feature of the tent still remained though- a punching bag fixed into the ground by a wooden peg.

Alexander made this fifty kg sack of sand from cowhide to help Cambyses recover from her rickets.

It was hard to hang it from the ceiling of a tent, so he made it sit on the ground with a large peg driven into the ground to stabilize it.

He also made her custom-made gloves from goat leather and she would and still does spend hours kicking and punching this, mostly as a measure of stress release.

Beside the punching bag were several crude weights, which because iron was too expensive, was made of stone and wood.

Like the punching bag, Alexander also made these to help her grow muscles and strengthen her once soft bones.

And last of all, next to the wardrobe, in the middle of the tent laid the centerpiece - a bed.

A normal, hard, twin-sized bed she sometimes shared with Mean, a luxury afforded to her both because of her status and her childhood illness.

And this was the thing Alexander was now most interested in.

He briskly approached the bed and bent down beside it.

Then he open the trunk to reveal a cacophony of miscellaneous objects - clothes, shoes, combs, various oddly shaped tools- presumably surgical tools, small pots and pans, a few bits of metals, etc.

But all the way at the bottom was something strange, something that looked like a straw ball.

Alexander carefully took it out and gently unwrapped it.

He slowly peeled the straw padding, revealing what was inside it- a teapot.

It was an ornately decorated drinking pot and it was nothing like anything in the market.

Firstly, I had no top lid to open and fill the pot.

Instead, the liquid was filled using a hole at the top of its handle.

It was something Alexander made from memory and an identical one existed in Nestoras's room.

Except that one had only one hole at the top of its handle, but this one had two.

Alexander carefully hid the pot under Cambyses bed, cautiously placing it behind the junk she had brushed underneath beforehand.

He then followed the same procedure for the beetroots.

After completing this arrangement, he got up, simply packed everything up in his trunk and left the tent with his trunk as quietly as he came, with none the wiser.

So why did he do all this in Cambyses's tent and in such secrecy?

Because the pot and the beetroots were the second part of the puzzle to deal with Aristotle. And he needed to hide them somewhere till nightfall.

His own tent was too obvious and too exposed. He shared it with seven others and it was impossible to keep any secret there.

But Cambyses, due to her status, her position as the quartermaster and being a young maiden had the fortune of owning a personal private residence.

One that was impermeable to most members of the group- on the account of most of them being male.

Hence there was little chance of someone accidentally bumping into and discovering it.

And even if Cambyses or Mean, the only two allowed free passage in and out of the tent were to discover it, Alexander could easily explain it.

Thus this was the perfect hiding spot.

Coming outside, Alexander glanced at the cloudless sky and muttered, "They should be almost ready to march now."

His eyes flashed a peculiar light and then he hurriedly started towards the front of the camp, determined to stop this foolish charge.

Chapter 26 Theocles And Cambyses (Part I)

While Alexander finished collecting his second piece of the puzzle, the one collecting his so-called first piece ran into a spot of trouble.

Cambyses found herself inside Theocles's tent, being stared down by the tall, bearded man with a cool, cold look in his eyes.

It seemed Alexander was wrong.

Because Theocles didn't actually leave the tent to participate in the battle.

Instead, he chose to stay behind.

"So why did Alexander send you?" Theocles asked in an interrogative tone.

"To get more beetroots. Like I already told you." Cambyses repeated the answer to the question she had been already asked multiple times.

"No, I mean why did he really send you?" Theocles pressed again.

From his tone, it was clear that although both he and Cambyses shared the title of quartermaster, he felt undoubtedly the superior.

"What do you mean "really"? What's real or unreal about wanting to give medicine to dying soldiers?" Cambyses cried. "I am in charge of the medical camp and I need those medicines."

"I am in charge of the whole camp and I think we need to save them for more important times." Theocles retorted.

It had to be said, the position of the quartermaster was quite strange in this mercenary group.

Within a small thousand-man group were two quartermasters, one in charge of the medicines and one in charge of the overall camp.

This system was brought about by Alexander, who pushed Cambyses to get an important position.

But this inevitably caused friction between her and Theocles, who saw this as an encroachment on his "territory."

Thus the bad blood.

"I believe Alexander has already told you why we should treat the others. It's best for all of us." She reminded.

"I am not stopping you from treating them. I just think you should use other medicines. This one is too precious." Theocles commented.

"We need it to save them, NOW. Others won't work. Alexander himself said so." Cambyses asserted.

There was a reason she bought up Alexander. It was because when it came to medical knowledge, he was considered the end all be all by most in the group.

Because he was yet to be proven wrong.

Though it was mostly not because of Alexander's outstanding medical skills- his skills would be considered very crude by modern standards but because the people they called doctors in this time period were little more than licensed butchers.

Most of the time they did more harm than good.

Like trying to freeze fever patients and not letting them have blankets because they thought the cold would counteract the hot body.

Or not letting cholera patients not drink water because they thought drinking excessive water was what caused the disease in the first place and the excess "emissions" was the body's way of balancing itself.

There were many more such examples, not even mentioning the so-called supernatural methods which included beating the devil out, burning the devil, etc, where these so-called doctors actually helped patients die faster than they would have if they had simply left them alone.

"Soldiers have survived wounds from battles before Alexander and his "miracle" medicine. And many more will continue to do so in the future. I'm sorry. We have many advanced techniques and unique medicines developed by him. Please feel free to use those." Theocles diplomatically answered, shutting down Cambyses's last-ditch effort.

It seemed even Alexander's recommendation was not enough to fleece the vegetables out of him.

"Fine," Cambyses spat out in enraged dejection.

Theocles had refused her flat out and there was little she could do.

Although they were both quartermasters, in name equal, it was only on name. In reality, she was more of an assistant to the quartermaster and not even an assistant quartermaster.

After all, the traditional, ultra-conservative Nestoras would never really hand any kind of real power to a woman.

Cambyes knew full well she was only put here as a way to appease and motivate Alexander.

Just as she turned around on her heel, ready to storm out fuming, a pleasant voice suddenly rang out from behind her, "Now, now, don't be hasty. I never said I wouldn't give it to you, now did I?"

It was Theocles, though only listening to his voice, one would wonder if he had been body swapped.

Because now, contrary to his earlier stern, martinet voice, it sounded sweet and mellifluous, as if he was talking to his doting daughter.

Hearing the voice, Cambyes suddenly screeched to a halt, stunned! She had known this man from birth and never once did she hear this kind tone.

Unsure what to do, she stood for a while with her back to him, half expecting her to be hallucinating from overwork, half expecting him to jeer at her for actually believing him.

But neither of that happened.

So slowly she turned, meeting with a now kind-looking, lightly smiling face.

"I never said, I wouldn't give you the beetroots, now did I?" Theocles repeated.

This was technically true in the loosest sense possible. He never uttered the exact words, 'I won't give you the beetroots'.

"No one with more than a single brain cell would think like that." Cambyses cursed him inside her head.

Though outwardly, keeping a stoic, poker face with great difficulty she voiced out in confusion, "What do you want really?"

,m This was a first for the girl. Because although she had always clashed with the boorish Theocles, this was her first time meeting the scheming Theocles.

"I can give you the beetroots. But I need something in return." Theocles slyly suggested, his eyes narrowing to a crescent.

"If you want to know 'why Alexander wants those?' I don't know." Cambyses guessed the information he wanted.

"Hmmm." Theocles frowned.

He had a gut feeling that Alexander was surely doing something but couldn't put his exact finger on it.

He had no leads.

He studied the boy in secret and understood him very well to know he wasn't the type of guy to take things lying down.

Theocles was dead certain Alexander would soon do something.

But what!

Even squeezing Cambyses, supposedly the person closest to Alexander got him nothing.

It seemed she truly didn't know anything.

Chapter 27 Theocles And Cambyes Part II

"What do you know about the rumor?" Theocles then asked in a roundabout way.

He would pay every coin he ever earned to bet Alexander had something to do with it.

Cambyes subconsciously furrowed her brows.

Normally she would vehemently deny any knowledge of such things.

Spilling anything out would be dangerous for her and Alexander.

But she sensed that Theocles was absolutely sure Alexander was behind it and if she didn't give Theocles something, anything, right now, she would have to return empty-handed.

She didn't want that.

She didn't know why Alexander wanted to feed all the wounded soldiers the precious sugar water right now, whether he was being truly altruistic or if he had any hidden agenda.

And frankly, she didn't care.

All she wanted to do was not disappoint him.

"Alexander, Camius and Menes." Cambyes spelled out three names, omitting Mean and cleverly replacing Remus with Menes.

What she implied with those names was that they were the ones that masterminded the spread of the rumor.

Though she left it intentionally vague enough to not directly implicate them.

It was after quite a bit of deliberation that she decided to tell the truth or mostly the truth.

Her reason being- even if it got out, it would only be the words of a quartermaster of a small mercenary group, one that has a record of altercation with both her and Alexander and so lacks credible authority.

Thus given Alexander's in-camp reputation he had a chance to shed or deflect blame onto others.

"I see." Theocles nodded, expecting as much.

Those two were with him when they left the war tent after all.

He then committed the two names along with Cambyses to memory as part of Alexander's inner circle.

"What else? I need more." He pressed.

It was gonna take a bit more than something he could have reasonably guessed to please him.

There was a reason he played the whole charade of first rejecting and then offering to accept Cambyses's request on a few conditions.

A person who gets something after thinking he just lost it is much more malleable to persuasion.

Theocles believed that Cambyses would have never opened up so frankly if he simply offered the deal- 'Tell me about Alexander and the rumor and I will give you the things.'

"He did it to stop the attack. He believes the gods are against it." Cambyses replied solemnly.

"What? Did he say those exact words?" Theocles suddenly raised his voice, clearly agitated as he stared at Cambyses with engorged eyes.

"I swear by Gaia herself, he told Camius these exact words, 'The gods have struck twice. We have offended them and thus we shouldn't fight.'" Cambridge repeated word by word the rumor that Alexander instructed Camius to spread.

Strangely this rumor didn't catch on with the soldiers like how "No silver, no steel" did.

Funny how people have predilections for rhymes.

"*Silence*" Theocles sat as if petrified, trying to process the implications of Cambyses's words just now.

He did not suspect Cambyses's words for a second. She had sworn to the gods, and although it is hard for people of modern times to relate to or even understand such swears, for people of ancient times such proclamations were considered as good as written in gold.

No one dared to lie while swearing to the gods.

Theocles was not a superstitious man, at least he was much less superstitious than his fellow men, an extreme rarity at this time.

But he did believe in the existence of a higher power, one omnipotent and omnipresent.

And if someone asked him to choose if Alexander was blessed or not, he would gravitate towards 'being blessed.'

Many of the skills displayed by Alexander seemed of divine origin to him.

So when Cambyses swore by the gods to inform him that Alexander believed the gods are against them, he seriously felt a need to reconsider this offensive.

He had already gotten several reports of many soldiers and even entire mercenary groups refusing to participate in the counter-attack- using various excuses such as a need to see Generally Agapios, demanding back payment, suffering too many casualties, or simply being too tired.

And he felt they should follow suit.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of staring blankly into the distance, Theocles, at last, snapped back to reality.

"Take everything you need. And get Tal and Sal to help you with anything." Theocles suddenly announced as his eyes regained their usual eagle focus.

In an apparent change of heart, he not only gave Cambyses complete access to his stores, he even gave her access to his two slaves to assist her.

"....." Cambyses simply stared slack-jawed at the man, like she had forgotten how to close her mouth.

She and Theocles were always at loggerheads.

So hearing Theocles give her such free reign, she had a hard time understanding what was really happening.

What Theocles was giving her permission to do was the same as a homeowner telling a thief who came to rob him to help himself to anything and everything he wanted from his home.

And not only that, the homeowner even lent him his slaves to help him carry his stolen goods.

Absurd!

But Theocles seemingly did just do that.

And he didn't even seem to notice Cambyses's unusual state.

After that, he continued, "And tell Alexander that I too believe we shouldn't attack. I am going to try and convince Nestoras now."

Saying that he abruptly got up and briskly walked past Cambyses out of the tent to find the leader, leaving her all alone in with full permission to collect all the booty she wanted to her heart's content.

But, in all this time, even until Theocles left, Cambyses simply stood still like a block of wood, confused and in disbelief.

How did she go from having 'no beetroots for you' to 'have all the beetroots you want'?

Even many years later, Cambyses would have a hard time understanding what really happened here.

How her simple words 'I swear by Gaia' caused the usually skeptical Theocles to associate Alexander with divinity and change the course of his and many others' lives.

Chapter 28 Samaras And The Leaders

"How many have we got," Samaras asked in a low growl, trying hard to suppress his raging fury.

"About half." Came Damious's flat reply.

"*Grit*" Samaras ground his teeth in frustration.

They were already outnumbered and now a quarter of his total forces had rebelled.

"Not one fucking cent to these animals." He cursed out loud.

This all started with that abominable rumor. It spread like wildfire throughout the ranks so fast that the command had virtually no time to react.

Even before they knew what was going on, Damious was confronted by a group of mercenary leaders demanding to see general Agapios.

"We would like to offer some of our medicines to the general." They claimed.

And when Damious wanted to accept those on behalf of the late general, they insisted that it be them who gives it to him personally.

After Damious categorically shut them down, they demanded, "We want some of our late payment."

This time it was Samaras's turn to be in the hot seat.

He came to meet the group after learning about the commotion and reassured them that all dues will be paid by the end of the campaign as stated in the contract.

He swore no one would be cheated out of a single coin.

This seemed to placate the group a bit but still, some doubt kept gnawing inside the heads of a few leaders.

They felt Samaras was hiding something and not telling them the entire story.

Being mercenaries they had little to no loyalty to Samaras, especially when they were losing, so they decided to use the things said in the rumor such as the contract being between them and Agapios to demand either arranging a meeting with Agapios, getting some of their dues back or drawing up a new contract.

"The contract will be what it is." Samaras unequivocally rejected drawing up a new one. Then he threatened, "You have sworn an oath to the gods, do you intend to break it?"

"The gods witnessed the contract between General Agapios and us. We have broken nothing." A hot-headed mercenary leader name Petricuno shouted.

"Yeah, you are just a cheat trying to swindle us." Another one chimed in, fanning the flames even more.

"Who said that?" Samaras roared like an enraged lion and furiously started searching the group for the voice as if someone had just stepped on his tail.

Of all the things that the rumor spread, that particular accusation got him the most.

Because he was actually innocent of any such embezzlement.

He swore in his heart if he caught who started this rumor, he would tear him limb to limb.

"Please calm down Commander Samaras." A wizened, mature voice spoke out from the crowd.

He was Menicus, the oldest mercenary leader in the group.

"Alcmene didn't mean anything by it. We are all hungry, cold, and exhausted, so some of our tempers are running a bit high. Please forgive him." He soothingly said.

Although this seemed to mollify the enraged commander a bit, he still kept looking at the man as if he wanted to swallow him whole.

"Hmph, all of you get your troops ready, now!" He commanded in a harsh tone.

"Ahem, about that," Menicus coughed, preparing himself to make his case.

"We have no intention of breaking our contract. But many of our soldiers feel dejected after today's loss. A small part of the remunerations now would greatly boost morale and motivate the soldiers to fight." He politely stated.

In essence, Menicus wasn't asking to be paid back in full right now, but only a partial repayment.

"Everyone will be paid accordingly once the campaign is over."

But Samaras refused even this compromise, again repeating the same hackneyed words he spoke before.

In fact, Samaras could not really be faulted for this.

Because he was broke!

Like truly broke.

The original plan was to use the mercenaries to win the battle, meet up with Ptolomy and have him bear the cost or let the mercenaries sack the capital.

Whatever meager sum Samaras had at his disposal, he gave all of it to Damious to win his loyalty.

He had hoped Damoius's prestige and muscle could quell all dissents from the other mercenary groups and make them follow him but he had grossly overestimated the mercenary representative's hold on the other groups.

Hearing Samaras reject even this lowered compensation, Menicus did not launch a counterargument.

Surprisingly, he just nodded and asked to be excused politely, "I understand. Then please grant us some time to gather our soldiers and get ready."

"What! He..."

"Let us get ready, Regias." Menicus sternly cut him off, glaring at the short man.

Regias in turn only lowered his head in indignation.

Soon the leaders made their exit under Samaras's fierce eyes, exiting Samaras's camp in silence, a heavy cloud of dejection hanging about the air around them. Most sulkily looking at Menicus on the way.

"All of you are blaming me, thinking that I simply bent my spine and accepted whatever Samaras demanded, isn't that right?" Far away from the main camp, Menicus finally turned his face to the crowd and asked them in a knowing voice.

"*Sigh*, some of you youngsters are too rash." He shook his head in disapproval, letting out a long deep breath.

"What if Samaras had decided to take us hostage? Or worse simply slayed us then and there? Have you ever paused to think about that?" He asked.

"That..old man, aren't you being too paranoid. How could he do that?" The one who called Samaras a cheat and scammer- Alcmene asked in a bewildered tone.

"People have done far stupider things in wars, especially in losing wars, boy" Menicus stated in an experienced voice.

"And why do you think he could not do it, huh? He could have taken us hostage, and threatened to execute us if our soldiers refused to take part in the attack. Or he could have executed us and forcibly integrate the mercenary groups into the Cantagenan ranks. I personally would have executed the leaders and elected new leaders from each mercenary group's ranks with the promise of huge rewards if they fought for me." Menicus stated some ominous outcomes.

"That ...that." This time it was Regias who started to stammer, finding it hard to find the words to counter the old man.

"Don't expect a losing man to do things rationally. Samaras is a drowning man, and a drowning man clutches at a straw. That's why I said the things I had to say in front of him. To appease him and get us out of that place as quickly as possible. Do you understand me, you little pups?" Menicus rhetorically asked in a triumphant voice.

In fact, it was quite scary how close Menicus was to the truth.

In truth, Samaras did have half a mind to arrest or execute these mercenary leaders and then force the soldiers under him to fight for him.

But there was also the risk of the mercenaries turning around and attacking him just like he wanted to attack them.

These men were no sheep but fierce warriors.

There was also his concern with Damious.

How would he react to him doing such things?

What if Damious chose to stab him in the back at the critical moment?

The man was a mercenary after all.

And even if he could do all this successfully, he still lacked the necessary time.

He would need days, if not weeks to finish integrating and consolidating his new forces and by that time the cauldron would have been closed, its occupant liquidated and the Adhanians would probably have packed and gone home.

The risks far outweighed the rewards and so he chose not to take such drastic actions.

Because failure would mean the literal complete destruction of his army.

"So what do you suggest we do now, old man?" A third voice, that of Petricuno chimed.

Since Menicus got them out by promising Samaras aid in battle, the crowd by default looked at him for what to do next

"*Shake*, I don't know and that's up to you to decide individually." Menicus shook his head, anti-climatically drowning everybody's expectations.

But before anybody could flare up and curse him, he craftily suggested, "If you are worried about the promise to attack, just say your soldiers refused and you can't do anything about it."

This drew a lot of knowing smirks from the mercenary leaders.

But the old man wasn't finished yet. He started again, "Although I can't tell you what to do, let me offer you my two cents. General Agapios is most probably dead and Samaras doesn't have the coin to pay, not even a small part of it."

The leaders weren't too surprised by the first part. They were smart people who could read the clear signs.

If just meeting Agapios could quell all the dissent, Samaras most certainly could have arranged it long ago.

But the last part drew astonished gazes from all the others.

Because their employer was Cantagena who was well known to be always generous to their mercenaries and always paying their dues on time.

So it was generally acknowledged that being employed by Cantagena was a safe option and many mercenaries here chose to heed Cantagena's call because of its good reputation.

Hence it seemed unlikely to them that Cantagena would be willing to damage its reputation for decades just for a one-time gain.

But as they would find out soon, this time Cantagena was indeed willing to do so!

Chapter 29 Leaders Decide

Cantagena hired twenty thousand mercenaries, knowing they themselves could never pay them if they lost.

Why?

Because the Cantagenan senate never even considered losing.

The drought, Tibias's scheme, and an internal royal coup had set up such a perfect storm that the entire senate believed that Adhania would fall no matter what.

The rewards were so attractive and the risks so low that they had to bite.

So although their coffers were empty and they were in no state to finance a war, they decided to do it anyway.

They determined that everything would go according to plan and that this little trick would leave none the wiser.

To ensure their success, they even appointed their best general, Agapios, and their most prominent rising military star- Samaras in command.

But, unfortunately, plans tend to not always go as planned.

And this was one of those 'sometimes'.

Which brings up the elephant in the room, why did Cantagena- supposedly the richest city-state of Thesos have no money?

Because it lost the "War of Flowers" sixteen years ago.

After its defeat and the subsequent loss of its hegemonic status of Thesos, the once economic powerhouse began to rapidly lose its markets due to a variety of reasons, some internal, and many external.

But although its income began to nosedive, it never reduced its expenditure.

As a matter of fact, its spending actually increased because of things like bereavement and support payments for soldiers killed in battle, disability stipend for soldiers suffering an injury in battle, building a new army, repairing and building new fortifications to withstand future attacks, helping allies prop up their economies and a whole host of other things.

Even more, to lock down the Exolas army and prevent it from coming to Adhania's rescue, Cantagena dug from the bowels of its coffers whatever it had left and raised a second army, and attacked Exolas at immense cost to itself.

As such, the fact of the matter was Cantagena was dead-ass broke.

No way were they ever going to be able to afford the kind of expenses twenty thousand elite mercenaries demanded.

So, they did not really bother to argue with the mercenaries over their asking price, letting them charge whatever their hearts desired.

And then they instructed Agapios to make Adhania and Ptolomy pay for it or have the mercenaries sack its capital- Adhan.

Although Cantagena had played such underhanded cards behind their backs, but unfortunately, the poor mercenary leaders were completely unaware of this, of the true extent of Cantagena's economic woes.

So they began to bicker with Menicus over his 'wild conjectures, some greatly doubting his credibility, though not necessarily because he was wrong but because they were unwilling to accept his claim.

"What makes you say that?" Petricuno, one of the ones doubting Menicus raised his voice in frustration.

He didn't like what the old man was saying and really hoped Menicus had finally gone senile.

But still, the ability Menicus displayed until now had earned him his respect and he felt that he at least ought to give the old man a chance to explain himself.

"The reason why I asked for a partial payment was because I wanted to check the status of Samaras's treasury. But he refused to spare even a single coin. He must have given everything he had to buy Damious, that's why his group is so quiet." Menicus reasoned.

This shrewd old man was once again correct, he was three for three by now.

All the leaders hearing the explanation frowned hard, each trying to find the best possible explanation for this without considering the worst.

The most likely alternative they could think of was Samaras stealing the money.

But a bit closer look revealed this was unlikely.

Because even if he did steal it, if he could not win the war, it was unlikely he would live long enough to spend it.

Even if he only wanted to escape Adhania, he would most likely need their help.

The other less probable scenarios ranged from Damious holding Samaras hostage to Samaras being a traitor to him being simply an idiot.

But at last, all the leaders in their heads agreed that Samaras running out of money was the most plausible explanation.

Because if they were in his position and had the money, even if only some money, they would have gone with Menicus's suggestion and used some of it to appease and motivate the exhausted and dejected soldiers.

They all thought, "Samaras's staunch refusal was quite telling and Damious's enthusiastic support probably means that he has swallowed the last of Samaras's coin."

"Hmm, I believe you are right. Samaras's recent actions do indicate that." After some time of silence, Petricuno was the first to admit his belief towards Menicus's statements.

"But if what he said is true then what? What do we do now? Surrender?" Regias asked full of anxiety.

"I will again repeat what I said, 'I don't know and that's upto you to decide individually', Menicus spoke up looking at the crowd.

"But surrendering is impossible. Don't forget what we did at Acme and it is well-known what Adhania does to enemies like us. Death is a hundredfold better option." He gravely warned.

He then finished at last by saying, "I have decided that my group won't fight in the upcoming battle no matter the coin. This was a bad investment and I am going to take the loss. All of you make sure to take your decisions wisely. Your and your soldiers' lives depend on it." Saying that, the old man slowly walked away from the group and towards his camp.

The leaders silently observed the old man leave and then briefly looked at each soon to see if anyone else had anything to say.

But seeing no one speak up, they too chose to disperse in silence.

As they made their way to the camp, each group leader was doing a myriad of calculations inside their head.

Some felt Menicus was exaggerating and decided to take part in the battle anyway, willing to roll the dice to win big or go home.

Some, like Petricuno chose to believe Menicus and decided like him to not deploy and chalk this up as a loss.

Some believed Menicus, but their financial situation did not allow them to take such a huge loss.

So they decided to take part in the attack, in the hopes that it will somehow miraculously recuperate their loss.

Thus, this was turned into something akin to a game of poker where one's back was pinned to the wall and they had to choose- cut their losses and quit or double down and go all in.

And all the mercenary leaders now had to decide which option to pick.

Decisions! Decisions!

Chapter 30 Samaras

The final decision made by the mercenary leaders produced about half the expected number of soldiers, as reported by Damious to Samaras.

"Go, tell them that if a single soldier from a mercenary group doesn't fight, the whole group won't get a single fu*king coin!" Samaras burst out in a tirade. .

"I advise you not to do anything so stupid." Damious commented. "It was already hard enough to convince the ones we did and even when threatened with beatings and pay cuts from their group leaders many refused to go. Most were just too tired." He complained with ironically a tired voice.

"Win! We just need to win! A win today and now and we can feast away all our fatigue inside Adhan." Samaras declared in a crazed tone.

To this man, only victory mattered now, for him and his love.

Understanding the mental state of his superior, Damious decided to inform of something that might cheer him up.

He said, "We got some solid leads on who started the rumor."

"Who?" Samaras's eye suddenly turned sharp as he turned to face the giant and he uttered just a single word from the depths of his soul.

The hate he felt towards the one who started this rumor was probably at the moment higher than his combined hate for the whole of Adhania.

After all, if it was not for that accursed rumor this attack would have been ten times smoother.

"I don't know exactly yet. But it's pretty much confirmed it spread from the mercenary Nestoras's camp. Particularly from that medical clinic." Damious gave the full details.

"I heard almost all the mercenary forces sent their wounded there," Samaras recalled a report with some difficulty.

That particular report came to him because a few of his soldiers, who wanted to get some treatment from the clinic, had gotten into a brawl with some of the mercenaries, who were supposedly blockading the clinic, saying it was reserved for only mercenaries.

Such petty disputes were dime a dozen and at that time, Samaras had bigger fish to fry

So he threw the report into the dustbin of his memory, only to recall it with great arduousness just now.

"Yes. Even many of my men are there. But that place is now a chaotic hodgepodge of people, so finding out exactly who started it is proving difficult." Damious explained the challenges.

But then he offered some reassuring news, "But we have a pretty good suspect. It's likely to be the Claws mercenary leader-Melodias."

"A mercenary leader, huh? I suspected as much." Samaras agreed with the erroneous Damious.

In his mind, only a mercenary leader had the guts and the manpower to spread a rumor so quickly.

"But do you have any proof? Even I can't deal with a mercenary leader without proof." Samras said.

"Not yet. But, it seems Melodias never had the desire to deploy. I didn't see him when Menicus came to see me and he has been supposedly treating the wounded inside Nestoras's camp all this time. A prime opportunity to spread the rumor." Damious conjectured.

"Hmm, that is pretty suspicious. Once we get back, have your men arrest him and then hang him for plotting against the military." Samaras off-handedly signed off on a death warrant.

"Don't worry sir. I will bring him to you with irrefutable evidence soon. I just need a little bit more time." Damious offered a sweeter deal.

"Time, huh? *Sigh*, if only we had a bit more time we wouldn't be in this mess!" Samaras deeply exhaled as he was again reminded of his situation.

Time!

The thing most precious to them now.

The thing all of them were short on.

If they had a bit more time, they could have rested. Then maybe more soldiers would have joined them.

Maybe they could have even convinced, cajoled and strong-armed all the mercenary groups into the attack if they had the time.

But alas, the enemy won't stop for them.

"Sir, all the soldiers are almost in position. You are needed to command them." Just at that moment, a runner came dashing towards Samaras to relay the news.

"Hmmm, I will be there soon. Go." Samaras ordered.

"Wait, before you go, I have to ask, it was you who was pleading to Agapios to retreat. But now it is you who wants to so recklessly attack? What changed?" Damious questioned.

"Ophenia changed," was Samras's answer in his mind.

Though he would never admit this, but this attack was greatly motivated by his personal feelings- to obtain the love of his life.

Hiding this fact, instead he decided to guise it as one of strategic importance, which in fairness it was.

"When I pleaded to the general we had our entire army then. We could have launched a second wave even after our retreat. We could have even feigned a retreat and caught the Adhanians out of formation like they are now." Samaras theorized.

"But now, retreat means death. We can only win by attacking and rescuing the soldiers." Samaras spoke with an unmatched in his voice. "But do idiots see that? No. They only see gold and silvers. Not realizing all the gold and silver in the world doesn't matter if you're dead. Fu*king idiots." Samaras finished one last rant before the battle.

This situation was in fact a classic example of looking at the same thing in two completely different ways.

While Alexander believed they had lost all offensive capabilities and should cut their losses and run, Samaras still believed they had a chance to rescue the trapped soldiers and do a complete uno reverse and win, much like Adhania did to them just some time ago.

"Remember the Cantagenans will be the one to take the vanguard this time and the mercenaries will follow behind." Damious reminded his commander of the deal the mercenaries struck with him.

"Um, that's fine by me." Samaras readily nodded his head in agreement.

After all, he really didn't have a choice in the matter.

And besides, in actuality, the mercenaries were really too tired and his fresh Cantagenan troops would most likely be much more useful.

He then advised Damious on the tactics, "It's almost dark. We will just slam straight into the mouth of the cauldron in one giant formation and open a gap to allow the soldiers to flee. Remember to concentrate on keeping the mouth open and not chasing fleeing enemies." He emphasized.

"Yea, I understand. We don't have the energy to run after them anyway, hahaha." The giant laughed out loud and then urged his horse to his station.

Samaras soon followed suit.

But it had to be said that Samaras, in all his planning, consciously or unconsciously assumed the slingers would simply run away at first contact.

He never bothered to ask, 'What if they didn't'.

What if they had a countermeasure?

What if the slingers were reinforced by regular infantry?

And this oversight would come back to bite him hard.