

Herald 31

Chapter 31 God's Favoured?

After leaving the medical camp, Alexander quickly made his way to the front of the camp, where the soldiers were ordered to meet and get into formation.

But as he approached the clearing, a different sight greeted him.

Instead of the neat rows of orderly soldiers he was expecting to see, he was surprised to see the soldiers had divided themselves into two different crowds, the much larger one headed by Menes and Theocles and the other much smaller one headed by Nestoras and Xanthine.

The four men appeared to be in a standoff, each glaring at the other menacingly with a divide between them that seemed like the red sea had just parted them.

Off to the side, Aristotle and Pallidus seemed to be trying to say something to Nestoras and the man was furiously shaking his head as if to reject it.

As Alexander approached closer to the clearing, he could hear a cacophony of shouts, swears and curses flying around with the two loudest voices being Nestoras and surprisingly Theocles.

He even picked up words like treason, betrayal, dog, rumor and surprisingly his own name.

It was pretty easy to infer what these men were at their throats for.

The imminent attack.

"You,.. you cursed slave!" Nestoras was the first to notice Alexander's shadow, and he roared, incensed at the sight of him.

After all, in his mind, this scoundrel was the mastermind of this entire shit show.

"*Clang*, I am gonna kill you right here and now." Then in his rage, Nestoras suddenly unsheathed his sword and attempted to approach Alexander, deciding to get rid of the troublemaker once and for all, regardless of any kind of backlash.

"*Clang*, just try!" Roaring Menes too drew his sword and stepped in front of Nestoras, pointing his meter-long bastard sword at his leader's cheat.

" You, damn n****! How dare you point a sword at your leader?" Nestoras cursed using the worst possible slang.

The red-eyed bull apparently forgot the warning he himself had given to Pallidus about using that word just a while ago.

"He is not yours to kill." The giant replied in a calm tone, not moving an inch and seemingly unperturbed by the gross derogatory remark.

"I am his master and he is my slave. I can kill him whenever and however I like." Nestoras screamed.

"We are at war! He is a squad captain now. You can't kill a squad captain whenever and however you like," Menes reminded in a hard tone.

Then he issued a naked threat, "Now back off or I will end you."

His jet eyes seemed to light up with a fiery glow as he gazed into Nestoras's eyes with steely determination and the leader understood the giant wasn't bluffing.

He really would attack him if he tried to move forward.

And given Menes's skill, he was willing to bet his own money that even if both he and Xanthine were to join forces, Menes would likely cut both of them off.

After all, Menes was unanimously considered the best warrior within the mercenary group, a group full of people whose job was to be a warrior.

The only one who might have a chance against Menes would be Cambyses, who might be able to use her light footwork to dodge and parry his attacks and slowly tire the giant down and then use her agile speed to flank and penetrate the slower, heavier man's defenses.

Note the use of the word 'might' because that scenario would still rely on Menes making mistakes and even then the encounter would likely be in his favor.

Hence, understanding his chances and seeing no one step up to help him, Nestoras wisely decided to back down, and sulkily returned to the head of the crowd.

And this little display of force had an unintended devastating effect on the people following him, as many began to waiver and doubt if they chose the right side.

Alexander saw and heard all of this as he approached the crowd and as he got closer, Menes strode over to him in large steps and gave him a giant hug.

"It's great you are here, boy. I was just about to send Remus to find you." He said, patting Alexander's shoulder enthusiastically.

"What's happening here?" Alexander asked.

He expected the soldiers to be ready to march and his original plan was to make a big speech in front of them to try and convince them to stay.

But now it seemed that someone had done the job for him.

But before Menes could explain, a known yet kind of strange voice greeted him from the front, "It's good to see here." Said Theocles mellifluously.

Alexander craned his neck to see the man and was surprised to see he was standing- on Menes's side and even more surprised to hear the man speak so politely to him.

Because, due to his frequent clashes with Cambyses, if Alexander were to choose if his relationship was good or bad with Theocles, he would have to choose- bad.

So why was he on this side and why was he being so polite?

Seeming to sense Alexander's apparent confusion, Theocles said in a sweet tone, "I met Cambyses a while ago and gave her everything you wanted."

He said this in order to demonstrate his support for Alexander.

Alexander, though not quite understanding what was going on, seemed to get the hint and replied in kind. "Thank you. It will help the wounded very much."

"Theocles here has been amazing." Menes started. "He made a huge speech in front of the soldier, claiming that you Alexander had gotten divine revelation. He said you started the rumor to stop the attack because the gods told you they were displeased. He was even the first captain to state he would not lead his phalanx to battle." Menes finished his long recount.

And then he asked the million-dollar question everybody here was waiting for, "So is what he said true?"

Alexander was internally incensed that Theocles revealed he was the one who started the rumor.

But it seemed Theocles had said it to help him stop the deployment.

Hence, he was still unsure of Theocles's motives, whether he was pulling him up into the sky or pushing him into a pit.

And he considered claiming divinity here and now.

It had its advantages- like instantly gaining effective control over the mercenary group and massing a large blind following.

But there were massive drawbacks too.

They were trapped in a foreign land and no one could tell what was going to happen in the future.

If he claimed divinity now, everyone would defer to his judgment unconditionally over every issue. And not just in this one camp but all over the various camps.

It will be alright if his decisions are correct but what happens if he makes a mistake?

After all, he could never claim to be right all the time.

Will the people label him as a fraud and lynch him?

There certainly was such a possibility.

It was a double-edged sword.

Hence, after considering it for a bit, he decided not to accept the moniker of "God's Favoured."

But he did not want to unequivocal reject it either. Because the perks were just too lucrative.

Hence he decided to take a book out of the fortune tellers and soothsayers from his previous life and decided to be vague and answer in general.

"Well, what's taking so long?" Nestoras impatiently shouted, seeing Alexander be silent.

This bought Alexander's attention back and after getting a bit of time to organize his thoughts, Alexander answered, "The god of lightning- Ramuh has struck us twice, destroying our cavalry and killing our General. "

Here he made a bold leap and claimed Agapios was dead.

Because although there was strong circumstantial evidence to support his conjecture, he still wasn't hundred percent sure.

"Yes, I am afraid our general is dead. That's why none of us have seen him and commander Samaras has hidden this news from us."

"Samaras is a cheat."

"Liar."

"Thief."

Hearing this, some of the hot-headed men started cursing Samaras, the same men who were seemingly ready to march under Samaras's command.

Seeing their behavior, Alexander was once again reassured that he did the right by not accepting the claim to divinity.

"Brothers please." Alexander raised his hands and signaled to the agitated crowd to calm down.

"By striking at us twice, Ramuh has told us to leave Adhania. You all know I have been always deferential to the gods. That's why I believe we shouldn't attack."

"Yes, yes, the gods must be respected."

"Clap, clap."

"Whistle."

Thunderous applause and cheers of approval echoed through the crowd.

Alexander could even hear some utter, "Son of Gaia."

Alexander again gestured to the crowd to calm down and said, "Please, I am not finished.

Then he continued, "But that is not why I started the rumor. The reason why I started it was because I looked around to see my wounded brothers, my exhausted brothers, I saw their suffering and I saw how tired they were and I was convinced they needed rest. We need to rest. We need to eat. We need to sleep." His octaves kept increasing rising with each sentence and by the last one, it reached a crescendo, climaxing in a huge roar.

"Clap, clap."

"Whistle."

"Yes, yes, you're right."

A second, ear-deafening cheer rocked the camp.

Chapter 32 Spiraling Nestoras

Alexander was no great orator and his speech just now wasn't particularly articulate or special.

But it played to the soldiers' hearts.

It plucked at the strings of their desire to rest and eat.

Because they have been awake for more than thirty-six hours, were on a forced march, and had little to nothing to eat.

Then they had to fight a battle in the sweltering heat, get doused in freezing rainwater, and then run through mud and grime to escape the enemy.

Even for these hardy folks, it was a miracle they could stand, let alone again fight.

So it's little wonder that they were eager to return to their camps to rest.

"Boy, you said the gods spoke to you. So who was that sage you kept mentioning?" A deep booming voice cut through the roaring crowd, putting a damper on the celebrations.

It was Nestoras and his face seemed like someone had just painted it black.

"Obviously he said it because until recently we would not have believed him. It might have even a commandment from the gods." Even before Alexander could answer, Theocles offered an explanation.

Alexander again looked at the man with a profound gaze, and thought, 'What has Theocles been eaten today?' and 'When did we become so close?'

But regardless of past happenings, today and now he seemed to be squarely in team Alexander and he wouldn't push him away until he showed signs of otherwise.

That being said, Alexander was reluctant to be called a god, at least for now.

So, although grateful for Theocles stepping in, he decided to clarify the matter.

"Ahem, you misunderstand Nestoras. I never claimed to hear the gods." He pronounced shaking his head. "I only said that Ramuh has struck us twice and we should respect the gods and not attack again."

"That's the same thing." Nestoras flared illogically.

But Alexander decided to ignore the mad idiot and decided to address the crowd again, "Brothers, hear me. I, Alexander do not claim to be God's favored. I only spread the rumor because we are too tired and don't have the strength to attack now." He stated in as clear a term as possible.

Of course, Alexander confessing to spreading the rumor that caused a small 'mutiny' was no joke.

Samaras would be well within his authority to severely punish him.

But since Theocles had already let the cat out of the bag, there was little use denying it.

And if what he said did become true, he could reap immense rewards.

And what if he was wrong?

Well, there's nothing called a perfect play.

You can only play the odds.

Alexander believed in his own judgment and deemed the attack highly unlikely to succeed and thus decided to roll the dice and confess.

In this way, if he was proven true, people could quote the first part of his speech as him receiving divine guidance, while the people could quote his second part to say he is mortal.

But why would some people consider him divine even after he clearly said he wasn't?

Because sometimes people believed what they wanted to believe.

Because at times of strife and danger, many people sought out god.

Because knowing or being close to someone close to god and drawing associations with them was an irresistible temptation to many, even if that person explicitly denied it.

In Alexander's previous life, there were scores of such examples.

The fourth Caliph of Islam- Ali is considered to be Allah by a minor sect of Islam, even when he in crystal clear terms told everyone he was not.

Buddha is considered to be God by a sect of Buddhism, even when Gautama claimed to be only human and he himself was unsure about the concept of God.

In India, many people who have not claimed to be god is worshipped like one by some people, from politicians to movie stars to cricketers like Sachin Tendulkar.

The list could go on.

(Author Disclaimer: The above examples are not in no way a generalization. I did not, nor do I intend to say all the above groups follow the given example. I said only a small/minor number of people claim to do it.)

"Rest this and tired that. You fu*king pansy. Why don't you just say that after losing one battle you lost your marbles, you stupid coward. Seeing Alexander slip his trap, Nestoras started to unrestrainedly curse at him.

"Soldiers! When did a slave become your leader?" He tried to foment the crowd.

"He will be treated as a squad captain when we are at war! It was you who promised him that, remember?" From the back, Menes spoke out.

"I promised him, I can take it back." The irrational leader exploded.

Not wanting to rely on Menes, Alexander decided to take a shot himself, "Heh, you mean the coward that ran through a barrage of spears to slay the enemy captain and stabilize the phalanx while the "brave" leader left his command to go see his son and killed thirty-three of our brothers? That coward? "

Alexander returned the favor with venom coated in sarcasm.

"*Crunch*" Nestoras simply silently clenched his teeth.

In fact he clenched it so hard that he shattered it, producing an audible crunch.

If Nestoras was still in of good, sound mind, he would not have attacked Alexander the same way he did just some time ago and got figuratively thrashed.

But he did do that.

And this little phenomenon didn't escape the six main people there and they began to finally understood just how far gone Nestoras was.

But these people were not Nestoras's only worries.

Because Alexander's little rebuttal also generated a lot of murmur among all the soldiers, who deferred to their mates in the first phalanx to verify Alexander's claims.

Within this tight, small, thousand group, the soldiers considered each other brothers, and when they learned of the veracity of Alexander's words, many were saddened and outraged that thirty-three of their good brothers were sacrificed in such a callous manner.

The trust the group following Nestoras had in him diminished even further as they began to openly criticize him.

Seeing the soldiers get unruly, Aristotle decided to quickly throw his protege a lifeline.

"Calm down," he roared, "What are you? Some civilians?"

This old roar calmed the restless waves as the soldiers silently turned to look at the tall, old man.

Seeing he got the crowd's attention, Aristotle said, "In life, there's always ups and downs, highs and lows. Nestoras is currently at his low. He has just lost his only heir but the gods won't give him even the time to grieve. He is cold, tired, and hungry just like all of you but he has no time for such luxuries. Because it's up to him to find an escape from this treacherous place. It's in his hands that resides the fate of more than a thousand souls. Anyone in his place, anyone placed under such a burden would surely have faltered long before him. So please try to understand his position."

Aristotle appealed to the crowd to not get angry with Nestoras but to try and empathize with him.

And it mostly worked. Many angry scowls turned into piteous and understanding looks.

Then he tried to chisel away the last bit of dissatisfaction, as the old man declared, "Yes, I admit Nestoras has made some mistakes. But to err is human. Name one among us who hasn't made a mistake. But we should always try to rectify our mistakes. And so I now announce that all families of the thirty-three killed soldiers will be given a year's wage of payment as compensation."

This drew a large cheer as such a huge bereavement payment had never been paid in this small mercenary group before.

Theocles even staggered a bit back in shock, thinking, 'How the hell are we gonna afford it?'

Usually, almost all mercenaries sent some of their money to their families, mostly through trusted merchants or friends. who looked forward to the coin their brother, father, or husband would send them to maintain their livelihood.

And if one died, all his possessions would be returned to their family, along with an extra month's pay.

Hence, Aristotle's promise of a twelve times greater compensation to make up for Nestoras's mistake was enough to convince most soldiers to forgive him.

Credit where credit is due, Aristotle really knew what to say and how to placate a crowd.

In one swift motion, he stopped the angry tide from swallowing Nestoras.

Fearsome!

After all, he had been in this business for close to forty years and this was not the first time someone blundered on his watch.

Seeing the crowd cool down, he gently offered Nestoras an exit ramp, "I believe we are all too tired to attack today. Let's do it tomorrow."

But instead of taking it, fortunately for Alexander, Nestoras crassly broke out "You can attack by yourself tomorrow old fart. We are attacking today," absolutely rejecting Aristotle and also smashing the goodwill he had just managed to create for him.

Nestoras, due to recent events was tired, grieving, and very cranky.

He was extremely agitated and would argue with anyone that disagreed with him, regardless of if it made sense or not.

Hence he even insulted Aristotle openly, something he never dared to do.

But Aristotle on the surface did not seem at all fazed by this.

He instead decided to ignore the ramblings of the raving lunatic, judging him to be a lost cause and chose to target his other half, Xanthine.

Chapter 33 March Off

"Xanthine, why don't you back down? Many of the mercenary groups have decided not to participate. We now even lack the soldiers to attack. You should know this." Aristotle appealed.

But Xanthine replied in an unequivocal tone, "Don't bother, Aristotle. The bastards killed my younger brother. I am not letting these bastards get away. Even if I am all alone, I will still go."

Aristotle knew the hard-headed bull for more than thirty years and understood he had made up his mind.

But still, he tried to convince him one last time to back down,

"*Sigh*, such is the life of a mercenary. Death hounds us all. Today was Constans, tomorrow could be me, the next day you. Such is our fate." Aristotle said in a deep, melancholic voice.

"If it's my fate to die on this battlefield then so be it. I much prefer to die there surrounded by my foes than in a soft bed, weak and frail, unable to control my own shit and piss." Xanthine gutsily retorted.

Seeing that there was no way of getting to either of them, Aristotle finally gave up.

"Ohh, it seems both of you have made up your minds. Then go. I shall pray for your victory" Aristotle said in a pained, disappointed voice.

"Instead of praying why don't you come to battle with us? What good will praying do?" Nestoras sarcastically asked.

"We have had this conversation before my son. You have made your decision and I have made mine. We both did it thinking it was for the best of this group and I hope I am wrong and you are correct."

Finishing his sentence, the old man seemed to age ten years and his frame seemed to shrink, as he simply turned and walked away, his spine bent and shoulders slouched, like a defeated lion who had been exiled from his pride.

"Hmph, I AM right." Nestoras shot back, indifferent to his master's sadness.

Then he shot back at Pallidus and asked, "And you? What's your excuse for not fighting?"

Pallidus returned a cold reply, " I trust Aristotle's judgment."

"You mean when it suits you. Heh, craven worm." Nestoras cursed.

"*Silence*" Pallidus didn't even bother to look at the mad dog.

Then. at last, he turned to, in his eyes, the betrayer - Theocles.

"Why?" Nestoras spoke a single syllabus that seemed to contain a mountain of questions, inquiries, doubts and emotions.

Because Nestoras really could not think of a reason why someone usually at odds with Alexander would side with him and even defend him so strongly.

It seemed like he had turned into Alexander's sycophant overnight.

It just didn't make sense to him.

"I believe in Alexander more than you." Came the short, curt reply.

"I thought you believed in money? I thought you said we had to take follow the order because our treasury was empty." Nestoras asked, agitated.

"Birds die for food, humans die for wealth. An empty treasury is better than a filled grave." Theocles answered in metaphors.

"Now you are poet, huh, schmuk." Nestoras lashed out again, furious at not getting a straight answer.

Then he turned to face the crowd, pointed his finger at them and shouted, "All of you bastards remember this- 'This is not the end.' Once I come back, there will be reckoning."

The crowd simply stared back at him with stony silence.

After that, he turned to face his entourage, "Now loyal soldiers follow me. And I promise to lead you into victory. Those who follow me now will also get to keep everything you loot from Adhan." He enticed.

But his little "recruitment" speech did little to inspire the soldiers.

Maybe the promise of wealth could have attracted some greedy and stupid ones, but he had to offer it just after Theocle spoke the poetic words, 'Birds die for food, humans die for wealth', which was still pretty fresh in everybody's memory.

And after the recent show of force by Menes, the revelation of Ramuh's will by Alexander, Nestora's performance in the last battle, and his general state of mind, few soldiers felt optimistic about following their leader to battle.

As such, the crowd around him not only didn't get thicker after his declaration, it instead dispersed, leaving less than a hundred men scattered around him.

It was humiliating and Nestoras face looked darker than a black hole.

But instead of going off like a super volcano, he just simply turned and signaled the men, whose numbers were not enough to even make half a phalanx, to follow, as they made their way to the battlefield.

So, how could Nestoras use this small number of men to make a difference?

How will he deploy them?

Nobody knew, not even Nestoras.

Alexander saw the troops who were 'too small to be called a procession' march off to battle, when suddenly an immature, high-pitched shrill pierced ears, "Alexander, you gotta stop him."

He slowly turned around to locate the owner of the familiar voice, a strong, medium build boy of 160cm, with curly back hair and big doe eyes.

This was Remus and he was currently running towards Alexander in full armor with panic written all over his face.

"Remus! What's gotten you worked up about, boy?" Alexander greeted him calmly, in polar opposite of Remus's urgency.

"It's bad Alexander. Really bad. Romeus went to the battle with Nestoras. You gotta stop him." Remus pleaded.

"Hmm, Romeus is Nestoras's guard. It's only natural for him to go." Alexander logically pointed out.

"But he can't fight. He can't still remember the formations. And with so few that followed Nestoras, he likely won't survive." Remus cried in fear.

"Well if you can figure it out, why can't he?" Alexander asked almost sarcastically.

"Alexander, you know how he is. I tried talking to him but it only spurred him on. They haven't gone far. Please, I beg of you. Just talk to him. He has always listened to you." Remus pleaded for his brother's return with tears in his eyes.

That was not true.

Romeus didn't always listen to Alexander and was a gross exaggeration on Remus's part. He simply listened to Alexander a bit more than others.

"If I go in front of Nestoras now, I will bet the sun and moon that he will leave me at the first chance." Alexander lightly said.

Then his voice turned serious, "Everybody listened to what I had to say. And some chose to stay some chose to go. They each made their decision using their own mental faculties. What's more is there to talk about?"

"Fine, if you won't go, I will." Frustrated at Alexander's indifference, Remus attempted to rush toward Nestoras's group by himself.

Chapter 34 Remus

"Wait, you brat." Seeing the boy essentially about to commit suicide, Alexander hurriedly pulled the boy by the arm and stopped him.

"Let, me, go. I am also Nestoras's guard. I have to join him." Remus spelled out.

"Idiot, you want to die with them that badly. Why didn't you go earlier then" Alexander scolded the boy for his poor logic.

Then he sternly said, "Now, listen to me. You going there isn't going to help Romeus at all. In fact, it will have the opposite effect. Do you get it?"

"But still I gotta try," Remus said in a pained voice, as he still tried to slip out of Alexander's grasp.

So why would Remus being there have the opposite effect?

Because Romeus was a jealous, talentless piece of a hack.

Even though Remus was light years more talented than Romeus, he never treated his brother differently.

In fact, he always tried to share his spoils with him as much as possible.

He would try to teach Romeus the swordplay that Nestoras taught him.

He would share the extra food and money he got.

He even got him a cushy job as Nestoras's guard, for which he had to do a bucket ton of chores.

But he was happy to do this, to help his brother-his only kin in the world.

But did Romeus see and appreciate these efforts?

No, not for a second.

Because you see, the thing that's worse than having an overachieving brother is having an over-achieving brother who likes to gloat and show off.

At least, that's how it appeared in Romeus's eyes.

Every time Remus would share something, instead of looking at it like something Remus was doing to help him or just sharing it with his brother, he would look at it like Remus was flaunting his achievements, taunting him and saying that he could never be equal to him.

As such, Romeus slowly began to change.

After all, sometimes. familiarity breeds contempt like no other.

He began to despise the 'charity' given by Remus and would actively try to ignore or do the opposite of it.

Although he did take that cushy guard duty job. In that case, Romeus was more than happy and willing to exploit and accept Remus's gift because it suited him.

Alexander, of course, pointed this out to Remus but still, he continued to do this because he felt that his brother was just foolish and ignorant and it was his job to take of him, even if he did not want it.

As the boy relentlessly against his vice grip, Alexander decided to use his trump card, the god card to get him to calm down.

"He chose his fate. The gods have written it. Who are you to challenge the gods?" He said.

"But, I can't just let him die without doing anything." The boy repeated like a broken recorder.

"Yes, you can." Alexander felt his temper rise and snapped.

"You,... you,.. how can you say that?" Remus stopped struggling and turned to look at Alexander incredulously.

How could he tell him to just watch his brother die?

Seeing his red, snot-dripping face and the anger in his sky-blue eyes, Alexander was suddenly reminded of something.

It was not his problem.

Certainly, he liked the boy. He had talent, was quick-witted, and even funny.

But at the end of the day, this didn't concern him.

It was between them brothers, between family.

As a stranger what right did he have to obstruct them?

So he suddenly let go of the boy's hand and solemnly said, "I am sorry. Please do what do think is best."

"What?" At last free, the ecstatic boy was about to run off when Alexander's solemn apology made him stop in his tracks.

He had never heard Alexander speak like that before.

Alexander repeated, "It's not right for me to stop you. You want to go to your brother, please, go."

Although this sounded like good news, Remus was actually more concerned.

"Why are you speaking like that Alexander?" He asked, his extremely sharp senses picking up the now cold detached tone from the previous warm, concerned one.

It seemed like Alexander stopped caring about him.

"It is very possible your brother will die today. I don't want you to blame me later that I didn't let you save your brother. Go, if you want to go." Alexander fully disclosed.

"Will he really die?" Remus asked, shivering in fright.

What Alexander said was gonna happen, usually tended to happen.

"Most likely." Alexander coldly replied.

"Will me going there help? Remus asked a question he knew the answer to.

"No. He went there to prove to you that you are wrong and he is right. You going there will only spur him on to be even more reckless." Alexander confirmed his suspicions.

The boy, expecting such an answer, simply stared at the ground for a while and then declared in a steely voice. "Alright, I won't go. As you said, I can't help Romeus. He has chosen his path and I shouldn't stop him. The gods have written his fates and who am I to challenge them?" He finished with a quote Alexander told him.

"Are you sure? You can still catch up. Don't let it become a regret for the rest of your life." Alexander pressed.

"Umm, I will that pray you are wrong and the gods have written blessed fortune for my brother." He said in a choking voice, now tears suddenly streaming from his eyes.

Then he turned and started running towards the camp, his tear drops staining the soil.

Remus felt that if he stayed there any longer longing at his brother's back, even if his brain told him not to go, his heart would force him to go.

Such a situation would not be favorable for either of them.

So he decided to shield his sight from his brother's image and retreat into the silently observing crowd.

"*Sigh*, this war is tearing us apart" From the side, Menes let out a long breath after silently witnessing the conversation.

And Alexander could not help but agree.

A mercenary group whose leader goes to battle with less than a hundred soldiers while most chooses not to follow doesn't likely have a bright future.

Regardless if they win or lose, this mercenary group's days were probably numbered.

Glancing at the back of Remus, Alexander muttered, in admiration "Such immense willpower. To want to do something so much yet stopping oneself from doing it. I wish I had one-tenth his willpower when I was his age,"

And although no one knew it, today's incident would stay with Remus for his entire life, shaping, moulding and sculpting many major decisions of his life.

Chapter 35 Alexander, Slave Or Free?

Casting his eyes off Remus, Alexander turned his attention to another man, who seemed to have taken the wrong medicine today.

It was time he had a talk with him.

"Theocles, I wanted to talk about our supplies situation. Cambyses tells me it's really dire." Alexander said, approaching the bearded man.

"Ah, Alexander, I wanted to get your advice on that as well. She is right, we are in a bit of a pinch. Let us go discuss this somewhere quieter." Theocles enthusiastically gestured to follow.

Many might find a freeman being so cordial to a mere slave surprising.

But this was not a unique case for Alexander only.

Because, unlike the pitiless, racist, extremist of the American south where slavery was determined by the color of your skin, here slavery had no barriers.

Race, sex, religion and even social status held no say if you could or could not become a slave.

One could become a slave by being in debt, being captured as a prisoner of war, being conquered, or because of committing a crime.

If one's luck wasn't good, even the sons and daughters of nobles could become slaves.

And because of this potentiality, though punishing and beating a disobedient slave was considered normal, society as a whole tended to look down upon anyone who would kill slaves without any reason.

Of course, a slave master could legally beat a disobedient slave to death in public just as well as he could do it to a fully obedient one.

But this was the social equivalent of putting your feet up on the table during a dinner party or wearing a bikini to a wedding.

Technically legal, but you won't be making any friends this way.

And in this age of strict social hierarchy, one's social standing meant a lot.

Much, much more than it does in modern times.

One's business, social contacts, friends, and even access to good food and drinks all depended on your social status.

And thus, most people who made it there were careful to toe the line and not stray far for fear of being turned into a pariah.

As most slaves looked like them, though they had no legal rights, they could surprisingly set up shop, earn money, hold official posts and even be tutors for their master's children.

A slave could give his own opinions and even argue with his masters over things such as business, work, investments, etc.

And most of the time, if their masters were reasonable, would take heed of their judgment because many times a slave would know more about a particular topic than them.

Some slaves were even paid wages by their masters and could buy back their freedom.

And, it was common to see rich masters free slaves in their wills, almost the equivalent of modern-day charity donations.

As such, though not legally seen as humans, society viewed them as one.

It was just that society didn't believe all humans deserved the same rights.

Hence it was not at all strange for Theocles to Alexander treat amiably, who was far from being ordinary.

Invited to get away from curious ears, Alexander agreed, "Then please lead the way."

Soon, under the curious gazes of the crowd, who stayed behind to witness the battle about to occur at the foot of the valley, the duo made their way toward the middle of the camp.

"How long do you think this group will last?" Alexander offhandedly asked as he followed Theocles meandering through the tents.

"If Nestoras doesn't die soon, then not long. Most likely this campaign will be our last." Theocles ominously predicted.

"Hmmm," Came the silent hum of agreement from Alexander.

He too shared Theocles's view.

A leader who charges into battle alone, against the advice of all his phalanx captains, with less than a hundred people following him was of no sound mind to lead anyone.

In his mind, Alexander, who has skeptical about the existence of god, silently prayed for Nestoras to not return alive today.

The rest of the walk passed in silence, as the duo at last reached the place Theocles was leading them to, his tent.

"Tal, Sal, did you finish helping Cambyses?" Theocles asked the two standing guards as he approached them.

"Yes, we helped mistress carry everything she asked for. She's at the medical camp now." Tal answered nodding his head.

"Good, good, great job." Theocles exaggeratedly praised. "Now, I am sure both of you are tired today. Return to your quarters and I shall call you when I require it." He said.

The slaves looked at each a bit confused at this order, and then Sal suggested, "But, sir your tent will be left unguarded. Let at least one of us stay."

"Go, now!" Suddenly Theocles's amicable tone turned fierce as he commanded the slaves to leave.

Hearing the hard tone, the two slaves quickly lowered their heads, turned around and left for the communal slave quarters, leaving the two men out of any prying ears.

"Please, kindly enter." Theocles softly invited Alexander to follow him inside the tent.

And after they entered, he pointed to a chair and gestured, "Please sit here and make yourself comfortable."

"I will stand. Your attitude is making me sick." Came Alexander's freezing reply."

"Hehe, I just want to know I am on your side." Theocles wasn't at all bothered by the rude answer.

Even he would be on guard if someone he didn't get along with suddenly started getting all chummy.

"Right...." Came the slow drawn reply.

"You are right to be suspicious. I can even guess what you are thinking, 'What's he plotting?', 'Did someone put him up to this to get my trust?', 'What's his angle?' Well, let me explain." Theocles said, spreading out his arms.

"This ought to be good." Alexander thought, as he silently stared at the man.

"To make a long answer short, it's because you are the only realistic choice," Theocles revealed.

Then he started to explain in excruciating detail his entire reason, "You see me siding with you was not an impromptu decision. As a matter of fact, I decided to mend our bridges after long and careful deliberation." He revealed.

"I will admit I didn't pay a lot of attention to you at first. All those new things you showed in your childhood, I chalked it up as you being a bona fide boy genius or that sage story you made up. It was only after Nestoras replaced Constans with Menes as second in command did I vaguely started getting a sense of your ambition. Tsk, tsk, so low yet so ambitious, you are." Theocles said in a surprisingly praising tone.

Sensing the tone of his voice and knowing the various powerplays inside the group, Alexander had an inkling where Theocles was going, and so decided to open up a bit.

He revealed with a crafty grin, "Nestoras was my absolute master and had complete control over me in my first eight years. I had to be very obedient and carefully toe the line. But with my talent revealing itself, Nestoras began to appreciate me more and more. He began to slowly trust me more and more and even let me indulge in some of my fancier whims. All to keep the golden goose laying good, large, golden eggs."

This golden egg was a euphemism for all his innovations, from food to tactics to medical skills.

He then raised his fist and said, "But using this trust, over time I managed to manipulate him more and more to my way. My magnum opus till now is the Menes-Constans thing that you pointed out. I simply hinted to him that if Constans remained second in command, it may be hard for his son Octavius to smoothly take over and he bought it hook, line and sinker.

"I then pointed him to the only viable candidate who could go toe to toe with Constans here- Menes and Nestoras looked at the black giant with love in his eyes. After all, Menes had little reputation in the group, had the low status of a former slave and his previous master was Octavius. A perfect subservient second in command in Nestoras's eyes, who would not only not challenge Octavius but could even help and protect him, as he did before... heh."

That little 'heh' he said at the end with a disdainful smirk carried almost an infinitude of mockery towards his master.

Because it was after that did Alexander suddenly seem to gain wings and now, protected by Menes, his demure towards Nestoras began to rapidly change.

He started to do things his way, in ways that benefitted him, regardless of his master's wishes.

Menes too changed from the dumb, loyal giant they all thought of him he was.

He left Nestoras and Octavius's faction soon, finding his own faction with Alexander and the two began to openly consolidate their position in the soldiers' hearts at an astronomical pace.

And because of Nestoras and Constans's rivalry, who were more focused on each other than Alexander and Menes, the two youngsters could grow and flourish to this day.

Chapter 36 Puppeteer

Listening to the slave before him gloat, Theocles, even though he was on the same side, felt a bit acidic in his heart.

He let out a sigh in vexation, "**Sigh*, Nestoras and Aristotle should have killed you at the beginning when you were still just a normal albeit a bit popular slave. No matter the potential future loss!"

"It's easy to find mistakes in hindsight." Alexander pointed.

"Yes,.. yes, it is. I can't claim to have done much better, myself." Theocles dejectedly admitted. "As you said, 'we all wanted the golden goose to keep laying good, ever larger, golden eggs'.

"We must have thought things like, 'how can we adults be unable to deal with a brat whose nose milk is yet to dry?' and 'are we going to be afraid of a mere slave who is yet to grow hair down there?' and 'we can kill him any time anywhere'. Hehe, boy were we proven wrong." Theocles unreservedly ridiculed himself.

"Greed and overconfidence. Greed and overconfidence." Alexander spelled it out twice to highlight its importance.

" Yes, two certain things that lead all men to ruin." Theocles nodded heavily.

"We should have been more careful about you and we should have never overlooked Menes just because of his skin color." He emphasized.

It had to be noted that even among slaves, black slaves were discriminated against as being big dumb brutes, a stereotype originating from how the black slave trade was run.

Ironically, born-free black people were not treated as such, being treated as equals like all other races. It was only the black slaves that were subjected to this bigotry.

"You know", Theocles informed." after Constans lost his candidacy to Nestoras, he genuinely took the defeat graciously. He never had a motive to usurp either Nestoras or Octavius. It was you who planted that baseless seed of suspicion in Nestoras's head and the fool watered it, fertilized it, and let it grow. And it was only after Nestoras showed his hostility to Constans did Constans also start showing hostility to Nestoras. That behavior was of course seen by Nestoras as confirmation of his suspicions, not even considering that it might have been his recent actions that provoked him. So he doubled down on Constans, and Constans retaliated in kind, ultimately fracturing the once harmonious group."

"Hehe, if the group was harmonious and united, how could a lowly slave like me ever rise?" Alexander ridiculed him with a chuckle.

The example with Nestoras and Constans was one of the most simple examples of human psychology.

If someone, suppose- Man A, thinks that another man, Man B is hostile to him. So in response, he shows hostility to him, Man B, who was in reality just minding his own business now sees that Man A is becoming hostile to him. So to protect himself he also turns hostile to Man A. And this behavior, Man A sees as confirmation of his suspicions and becomes even more hostile.

This creates a vicious positive feedback loop where both men become increasingly hostile towards each other because they believe it is the other person that's becoming hostile when in reality neither of them really wants to be hostile to one other.

A real-life example would be a global arms race.

Theocles seemed unperturbed at being mocked by a mere boy.

He simply sighed and said with a deep look, "Yes, you are like a puppeteer conducting his show. It's absurd to think that this was orchestrated by an underaged boy."

"Your little stunt meant that the camp divided itself into three factions, me, Xanthine, and Constans in the neutral sometimes anti-Nestoras faction and Aristotle, Pallidus, and Nestoras joining forces to contain your faction.

"And this worked for the time being. A delicate balance with each other acting like a three-legged stool kept the group stable. To further strengthen the group, we even selected a legitimate successor- Octavius- to discourage coups from you or Menes." He revealed.

"But today everything has changed. Today's battle killed Octavius and Constans and made Xanthine suddenly decide to switch to Aristotle's side. Our delicate balance of power has been shattered." He lamented.

"That's very good. Although the battle was a fiasco, I will admit a few positive things happened for me." Alexander gloated.

"Yes, I am sure it has," The middle-aged man gently smile.

"After today's result, How could you, the ever-opportunist, let go of this golden opportunity? I understood a battle for the control of the group was inevitable. With Constants and the successor of the camp- Octavius dead, the likely successor candidate would be the strongest warrior- in this case, Menes or following the tradition of the leader's protégé becoming the successor, you or Remus. All three candidates are someone neither Nestoras nor the old coot, Aristotle can ever agree to." Theocles exposed.

Alexander lightly smiled.

That was his conclusion as well.

Alexander voiced out his thoughts then, "I do agree Constants dying was an immense boon for me. That monster was the only one who could go toe to toe or muscle-to-muscle with Menes. And Remus is too young and greatly under my influence. Realistically, it would have to be me or Menes, who is.."

"Under your thumb." Theocles snatched his words.

And then quickly added, "Sorry, could not resist," as Alexander simply stared back with an icy stare.

"But, you can see my options." He then proceeded to end his long explanation, "Choose either the old decaying side of Nestoras supported by the old farts- Aristotle and Xanthine who both have one foot inside the grave or choose the vibrant, young and competent side of you and Menes. And with Nestoras becoming increasingly deranged after his son's death, the choice was made even easier. He is no longer fit to lead us." Theocles, at last, finished his long answer.

"You forgot the word 'scheming'." Alexander reminded him to add that to his description. "Heh, I schemed so much. You aren't afraid I will scheme against you? He then smirked.

"That's why I chose you. You can scheme against me. Nestoras can't." Theocles returned a chuckle.

Chapter 37 Side Chosen

While Theocles and Alexander discussed Nestoras, Xanthine, Constans, Menes, and Octavius, keen readers might wonder, 'What about Pallidus?'

Why did neither men bother to discuss him?

Because they disdained even mentioning him.

He was one of those people who were not good enough to be useful but not terrible enough to be fired.

p He was okay as a captain but more importantly, he was the loyal attack dog of Aristotle, doing things unsuitable for either him or Nestoras, which is why they still kept him.

But when it came to managing or ruling people, the incompetent fool was not even qualified to run as a village chief, let alone lead a mercenary group.

His own phalanx was entirely managed by his deputy- Ignomus.

The buffon just had muscles and knew only how to bully the weak and fear the strong.

Although Theocles seemed to portray as Alexander the only viable option, Alexander had a different thought, "You say you only had two options, me or Nestoras. But what about the third option- you?"

"Hahaha, it seems you don't know me quite as well as you like to think." Theocles let out a jovial laugh.

"Did you know that I was in line to compete with Nestoras for the mercenary leader position? Yes, Nestoras, Constans, and I all vied for the mercenary leader position. Sure Nestoras was the favorite, supported by the then-leader Aristotle, but Constans had Xanthine, both of them were founders and Constans was older and more experienced than Nestoras. Hence they were pretty well matched." Theocles recounted.

"But where was I you ask? I was the wild card! I represented the neutral or ambivalent soldiers, much like I do now. Although I could not realistically win, I would influence who won. Because whichever side I joined, would have their scales heavily tipped in their favor."

"All of them knew this. And all of them enticed me with various perks. At last, Aristotle used his authority as the mercenary leader to make me an offer I couldn't refuse. He offered me the quartermaster position in a backroom deal in exchange for my support for Nestoras. And I took it, much preferring to use my mind for taking inventory rather than for plotting and scheming."

After that, he finished by asking Alexander, "So, tell me, why would I want to become the leader in my old age when I gave it up in my youth?"

"Maybe, because you have an actual shot now. Maybe after tasting power for so long, you want more. Maybe you want to personally screw over Aristotle who used me and Cambyses to erode your power. Or maybe everything you said was a lie." Alexander graciously gave several possible answers.

"Heh, nothing escapes that little head of yours, huh?" Theocles only smirked in response. "If I wanted to become leader, I could have teamed up with you in exchange for your emancipation from Nestoras and replaced him some time ago. Why didn't I?" He asked rhetorically.

To Alexander, this did seem to make sense.

Theocle then let out a heavy sigh, "I am already pushing forty now. I may have a good ten, maybe fifteen years if I am lucky, of fighting left in me, I can already feel my body squeak and creak when I do any heavy exercise. I don't have the strength to be a leader anymore. I just want a cushy job and I think you are my best bet to getting it." Finally, Theocles showed his selfish motive.

"Hmm, I see. Okay, you have convinced me and I will trust you for now." At long last, Alexander finally let his guard down.

In fact, if Theocles had only said that he didn't want to be the leader and only wanted a cushy job, he could have won Alexander's trust much sooner.

After all, call Alexander a cynic, but he never believed anyone ever did anything altruistic, at least not people in power.

He was much more reassured when people in power told him they were doing something for personal gain rather than for some grand good purpose.

"Thank you, you won't regret it. And don't worry, after Nestoras returns, I and Menes will force him to release you. With you becoming a freedman, doing many things will become a cinch." Theocles eagerly offered, wanting to make himself appear valuable.

Hearing Theocles's offer, and the implications of it made Alexander have mixed feelings about it.

On one hand with Nestoras returning alive he would be free by today, but as they had discussed before, Nestoras still breathing would likely mean the death of this mercenary group or at least a deep schism.

This did not sit well with Alexander who saw the mercenary group as one coherent group of muscles that he would need to get his grand plan off the ground.

He had even picked out a few suitable locations for him to plant his dream.

But then Alexander suddenly remembered, Nestoras's fate was not in his hands.

At the end of the day, it would be the gods that would decide if he returned or not.

And if he did return, Theocle's support would come in very handy.

So he politely accepted the offer, "Thanks, I will not forget this help."

Then he asked, "But do you have any plan for Aristotle."

"Don't worry too much about the old man. He has hidden it very well, but he is not very well. Took some medicine for headaches and nausea from me just a while ago.." Theocles revealed an important piece of news. "We can make him do what is best for the group, announce you or Menes, the successor or better yet the leader."

Alexander was surprised by the news of the wizened warrior stealing medicine.

Medicines were usually Cambyses's department but it seems the old man didn't even fully trust his god-daughter, hence he came begging to Theocles for some.

"It seems the old lion can't outrun death forever. Thanks." Alexander expressed his gratitude for this new revelation.

"Don't mention it." Theocles quickly returned.

Thinking that the conversation was over Alexander turned to leave the tent when Theocles suddenly spoke in a surprisingly pleading tone, "There is one last little thing I wanted to know."

Chapter 38 Loyal Zealot

Alexander turned back to look at the man, who seemed to be finding it hard to form words.

"A little thing. A tiny thing. It's really no big deal. " He started to stammer and beat around the bush.

Alexander had never seen the always eloquent man lose himself like this and subconsciously a frown formed on his face.

Noticing this, Theocles finally plucked up the courage to straightforwardly asked, "Are you really not blessed by Gaia?"

His tone and expression were wildly different from what Alexander had ever seen before. Instead of the usual rough, deep voice, it was deferential and he looked at him with almost puppy dog eyes.

Alexander instinctively wanted to deny this, but stopped himself.

This could be an opportunity, he thought.

So he said, "I will deny ever saying this, but the goddess Gaia has told me not to reveal myself yet. Her whims are fickle and I can only get glimpses of what she wants to show me."

What Alexander really meant by that was 'The knowledge I have with me might or might not help us out of this predicament. So don't count on it too much.'

But Theocles interpreted it as 'Goddess Gaia does speak to me. But she sends things according to her will, not according to my needs..'

Upon hearing Alexander tacitly confirm his connection to divinity, Theocles practically leaped up in joy, his hooded eyes lighting up as he promised, "Don't worry, your secret is safe with me. If I utter a single word about it, let me be damned to the river Styx for all eternity."

It had to be said that Theocles was not a god-fearing man.

He could even be labeled as being closer to being atheistic rather than theistic.

That was until he met Alexander.

The young boy had displayed knowledge and maturity that in his eyes really would only come from the gods.

As such, his theist views started to overtake his atheistic ones, and although Alexander himself always denied it, he still held the view of him being related to the gods.

So getting an explicit confirmation of his beliefs was enough to send the man over the moon.

But, what about Alexander saying he could not see the messages properly?

How can someone claim to be able to talk to gods and not understand what they are saying?

Wasn't that just fraud?

Well, how can it be easy for mortals to understand a god?

Given the gods' infinite knowledge, it's only natural for any human to feel overwhelmed and not be able to fully comprehend their messages.

The fault lay not with the gods in their infinite power, but with the frail human minds' inability to accommodate and comprehend them.

Of course, this belief was not Theocles's but spread throughout the ancient world by soothsayers.

,m Soothsayers were a real thing in this period and place, holding positions of power enough to affect every policy of a nation.

They did not only exist in small or medium city-states but also held immense power in places like Cantagena, Adhania, and even in the broken royal court of Mikana.

The things they said when they were put in a trance and made to participate in an annual ceremony were heard and interpreted by the ruling class and the city's next year policies were decided based on this.

Once a soothsayer of a small city-state prophesy was interpreted as the ruler's newborn son one day growing up to overthrow him.

Hearing this the ruler did not abandon, exile, or simply kill his new flesh and blood.

No, that would have been far too humane.

He cooked and ate the boy.

Such was the immense power soothsayers held over those who chose to believe them.

Hearing Theocles's passionate vow, although Alexander kept a poker face, internally he was happy as a punch.

He had just obtained a blindly loyal, god-fearing zealot with access to all the camp's resources.

So he decided to play the part of a divine being, "Gaia has witnessed your vow and is impressed with your pure heart. She said never to lose that purity and never to lead someone astray."

What Alexander meant by that was- 'Don't ever fuc*ing lie to me.'

Hearing Gaia had talked to Alexander about him just now, Theocles felt an overwhelming surge of emotions and he simply prostrated onto the ground, completely surrendering his heart and soul to Alexander.

Then he solemnly declared, " I hereby declare to follow the son of Gaia till my death. May the goddess witness me and save my soul from damnation."

Responding to his first follower's promise, Alexander quickly replied in a deep, pious tone, "Work hard, and Gaia will surely take you in her gentle embrace."

"I will. And I still remember the Holy son asking me about the food crisis before. Please let your faithful servant manage it. I promise to not disappoint you."

He then looked at Alexander with zealous flames burning in his eyes.

Seeing someone so eager to work so hard for him, Alexander consented, "Okay, I will leave it to you then. And remember to call me Alexander as you did before. The goddess still doesn't want me to reveal myself." Alexander reminded.

"Yes, a thousand apologies. I will be sure to remember it." Theocles swiftly replied.

"I will leave you to your work then. I want to see how the battle is going." Saying this, Alexander strode out of the tent,

"Then please take care. And I will always be available if you require even the smallest assistance." Theocles shouted from the back as he showed him out with the utmost deference.

As he left, Alexander muttered in his heart "I can see the appeal.", referring to the many examples of people in his previous life who claimed to be gods and created their cults.

Just the power and pleasure he felt with only one follower prostrating before him was so intoxicating.

Alexander's heart throbbed in both fear and excitement at the thought of what it would feel like if an entire nation did this.

Chapter 39 Battle Begins

"Your Majesty, a large Cantagenan contingent, estimated to be around fifteen thousand strong is heading straight towards us." A scout cavalry informed Amenheraft.

Although this report was largely redundant.

Because such a large force assembling so near was impossible to miss.

Even if they were asleep, just the sheer noise of all those people marching and singing together would have probably woken them up.

"Looks like you were right, Manuk. Hehe, the bait just looked that delicious, huh Agapios? Hearing his scout's report, Amenheratf let out a small chuckle as he taunted Agapios, still unaware of the latter's demise.

Agapios had always been a thorn in Adhania's eyes.

Though Cantagena was a naval superpower, with its sailors regarded as being the best of the best and only matched by the Sybarsis, in contrast, Cantagena's land forces were just above average, a far cry from the absolute elites wielded by the likes of Exolas and Adhania.

And unlike the latter two's army made up of mostly loyal, professional soldiers supplemented by conscripts, Cantagena's army was made up of mostly conscripts and mercenaries, supplemented by a professional core.

But even with such a mismatch of quality of forces, it was the genius of Agapios that enabled Cantagena and her allies to hold off the combined aggression of Exolas and Adhania for so many years.

As such, to be able to trick one of the greatest military commanders of his times not once but twice caused the king to be very pleased.

"It seems the old lion is really desperate. If he wasn't at the end of his ropes, he would certainly not have launched such a risky attack at the dawn of dusk." Manuk replied with a pleased, knowing smile.

The words 'desperate' and 'at the end of his ropes' had double meanings here that few around them could understand.

It did not only refer to the battlefield situation right in front of them but also to the situation back home.

Manuk knew that depending on how the battle went for Agapios, it would positively or adversely affect his illegitimate daughter, Ophenia, back home.

A daughter graciously gifted by Adhania to the general on that fateful night twenty years ago.

But unaware of all the complex web of intrigue, the captain of the royal guards from the sides said, "His soldiers must be at the end of their ropes with the long march, yet he dares to attack so soon. The lion has turned into a senile old cough, cough."

But before he could finish mocking the enemy, suddenly he let out a series of ear-splitting coughs.

"Brother...", Seeing his elder brother cough up blood, Manuk rushed to hold him in panic.

"I am okay, I am okay, Something just got caught in my, cough, cough." Beihrut tried to play it off as nothing.

"Beihrut, Manuk and Kefka can take it from here. You have contributed greatly to the defense of Adhan. Now, go rest." Amenheraft witnessing his royal guard captain's pale face asked him to retire in concern.

"How can the captain of the royal guards leave to rest for himself when his king is in the battlefield?" Beihrut loudly claimed, visibly offended at the idea of leaving his king alone.

He declared, "I will leave your side when I am dead."

Knowing the man since childhood, Amenheraft understood he had made his decision and arguing any longer would be a practice in futility.

He was called the 'Mad royal dog' for a reason after all.

So he simply consented, "Okay, you can stay. But only next to me. You are not allowed to fight in a battle nor command it. Just rest here. We will camp soon and you can rest then."

Receiving the command, Beihrut simply sat atop his horse, sulking.

He felt the king was being unnecessarily careful.

He had been injured before and recovered just the same.

And he will damn sure recover from this one as well.

But what Amenheraft, Manuk, Beihrut, or anyone else in the camp failed to notice, all being absorbed in their work, was that Beihrut's face was rapidly becoming pale and he was running a raging fever.

Usually, even with the kind of injury he took, the strong as a bull man should have been able to easily recover.

So the question was, why was his situation deteriorating?

Seeing the battlefield develop just as Manuk predicted, Amenheraft decided. "Manuk, you go take personal control of the battle from Kefka. This was your plan and you should be the one to execute it."

"Thank you, Your Highness. Please wait for my triumphant return." Manuk quickly thanked and then turned his horse.

"Wait." Suddenly Amenheraft's concerned voice rang out from behind. "The report said ten thousand troops, but by our estimates, it should be twenty thousand. Be careful of any last tricks that old lion might have." He cautioned.

"*Nod*, I will keep it in mind, Your Majesty." Reassuring the king for the second time, he quickly rode off.

"March straight ahead and as quickly as possible." Samaras gave the simplest command possible, knowing that following complex orders would be impossible for soldiers in the dark.

"Hahhh." Came the collective cheer.

In this marching formation, in one phalanx of no particular specialty were about a hundred very special people.

Yes, there they were, Nestoras, Xanthine, Romeus, and co.

Because they were too few to form their own unit, they were put in another rag-tag phalanx led by Riggins's mercenary group.

This mercenary leader had chosen to heed Samaras's call at the last moment.

As the army waded through the knee-deep mud to engage the enemy, Samaras kept barking at them to walk faster.

It seemed no matter how fast they moved their two feet, it was never fast enough for the new general.

Though, in all due fairness, Samaras could not really be faulted for his haste.

Dusk was dawning fast and he wanted to engage the enemy before the light faded.

Also, just before the cauldron became sealed he sent runners inside it to ask the soldiers trapped inside to resist and fight and not surrender, promising them they would be relieved before dusk.

He made the oath by the names of the gods and he had to keep it.

"If it wasn't for that rumor, I would have had more time." Samaras cursed and cursed the same words inside his mind.

Though, this was in fact true.

They had wasted a lot of time convincing and even forcing soldiers to join the offensive, which severely put them behind schedule, which led them to this brutal forced march and made the already exhausted soldiers even more tired.

"Will these men be able to even lift their spears once we meet the enemy?" This thought ran across Damious's mind after looking at the dead-eyed, panting, exhausted faces of the marching soldiers.

It seemed that a stiff breeze would knock them over.

And Damious wasn't the only one to notice this.

Almost all the captains sensed this.

But they were all also aware of the reality and hence were forced to accept the situation.

They had no choice but to march at full speed in such treacherous terrain, expending enormous stamina to meet the enemy, just to have a chance at winning.

As they were approaching to clash with the enemy, suddenly a horrifying thought crept into Samaras's mind, "What if there's an ambush waiting for us just like last time?"

This single thought shook him to the core and he rushed to Damious, "Damious, there might be an ambush waiting for us. I want you to send two thousand soldiers from each flank into the woods to check for any."

"What? What ambushes? All the slingers are here engaging in melee." Damious asked incredulously.

"We fell into a trap before because we didn't scout properly. Do you want to do it again? Do you know if all the soldiers were used to make the cauldron? Adhania could hide fifteen thousand soldiers once, they can do it again." Samaras made a dark prediction.

He was somehow in his mind convinced there was a second ambush waiting for him.

After all, if it works one time, why can't it work a second time?

"Why are you saying it now? What's the use? We already gave them the commands." Damious argued, reluctant to issue completely new commands when they were so close to the enemy.

"I forgot about it okay." Samaras frankly admitted. "I was too busy and I have never led an army before and it just slipped my mind."

"If you had forgotten it, It would have been better if it had stayed forgotten." Damious spat out in exasperation, though he was more mad at himself than Samaras.

"Dammit, how could such a simple tactic slip my mind. My brain must have been eaten by dung worms." He cursed himself.

Though in his defense, hunger, fatigue, and sleep deprivation were not known to produce the best-thinking minds.

Both his and Samaras's thinking capabilities had been severely degraded over the last two days and it was showing itself here.

Disaster!

Chapter 40 Fish In A Barrel

Damious was caught between a rock and a hard place.

Although, he did not want to split his forces and his mind kept telling him to ignore Samaras, a small doubt of 'What if' lingered at the back of his mind.

As Samaras had pointed out, it was true they didn't do the proper scouting last time, though it was mostly because it was Adhania who had approached them to engage, leaving them no time to do it.

It was also true that they didn't know where all of Adhania's forces were.

If Samaras was right and there was an ambush waiting for them, to fall for the same trick twice, they would be lucky future generations only called them donkeys.

As Damious was busy contemplating a myriad of things, seeing him dally, Samaras pleaded again, "Damious, I am convinced there is an ambush waiting for us. I am begging you, tell your mercenaries to intercept them. There's still time."

Samaras had changed his words from wanting to scout for an ambush to confidently proclaiming there was an ambush.

Hearing, Samaras's plea and his confident tone and thinking back to his own earlier experience, Damious, at last, became convinced really might be something.

Because if there really was an ambush waiting for them, for them to have even a molecule chance of winning this battle, they had to foil it NOW.

"Okay, I will send a thousand soldiers to each flank." Damious finally relented.

"No, send the two thousand I requested." Samaras objected to the halved number of soldiers.

"We are already outnumbered. And now you want to split our forces even more?" Damious complained with some certain anger in his voice.

"We need to send the two thousand. " Samaras claimed. "Our soldiers are very tired and I fear if they come across some strong units, they might simply break at contact. With two thousand, they will at least have some depth to fall back into." Samaras spelled out his reason to choose the number two thousand.

From this little exchange, it could be seen that Samaras was no incompetent greenhorn and whatever minor foibles he had was a result of inexperience leading large armies and not because of a lack of skill.

For example, to use this particular incident, he had taken into consideration the soldiers' physical state and fighting capabilities and prepared an appropriate mass of force to ensure their survival.

As a matter of fact, Samaras was recognized as a genius in Cantagena and this fame was not undeserved.

The brilliant move Agapios used to catch the Adhanians off guard was in reality jointly developed by the master-disciple duo.

He was Agapios's protégé who was accompanying him in this campaign as a way to gain experience and eventually take his mantle.

He was also to be Agapios's son-in-law, though, alas, that prospect now seemed unlikely.

Hearing Samaras's reason, Damious was a bit taken back at the in-depth thinking and quickly agreed, dividing the twelve thousand-strong army into three parts- the eight thousand-strong central core of mostly Cantagenans and two flanks of two thousand each sent to scout both sides made up of mercenaries.

Although this tactic seemed sound on paper, if they were a bit more patient, they would have realized that Adhanians splitting up to ambush them did not really make sense.

The battle was happening at the foot of a valley and Samaras had camped atop a hill, meaning any and all troop movements could be clearly seen from the vantage point.

Also, ambushes were typically done by outnumbered enemies to surprise and deal critical damage to the enemy.

Why bother waiting for the enemy to get into the appropriate position and then attack them when you can amass your larger force and directly take the battle to them?

But Samaras had made a rash proposal in the heat of battle, letting his doubt and over-thinking get the better of him, and Damious too, seeing they were so close to engaging the enemy had no time to properly think and so in a blind moment of panic, decided to defer to Samaras and split the army!

This would prove to be a big mistake!

"Kefka, His Majesty has sent me to take over," Manuk informed his long-known colleague, placing his horse behind him.

"You're late. So, I have already started the plan." The blonde, flashy man replied in a crafty tone, as if happy to be able to pull one off the star of this war.'

"Good then. I wasn't too optimistic about the cunning fox to bite, but it seems I over-estimated him." Manuk replied in praise, unconcerned about the unauthorized deployment.

This 'wasn't sure' statement seemed to rile up the thin-faced face as he complained, "You...you know how many good soldiers we lost because you commanded them not to close the cauldron too quickly."

"A true tragedy. My heart beats for them all." Manuk replied in a pious solemn way.

Though Kefka knew his colleague as the archpriest at the temple of Ramuh had long ago perfected the art of appearing to bleed for the masses while in reality not feeling the slightest emotion for them.

"But it was worth it wasn't it? I was afraid we would need to fight multiple battles but Ramuh has blessed us. The enemy has swallowed the bait hook, line, and sinker." Manuk justified his approach.

"Hmph, don't count your fish until you caught them." Came Kefka's displeased reply.

Nestoras was moving left, along with Rigias's mercenary group who were tasked with scouting that side.

Nestoras still could not understand why they had received a last-second order to change course from marching straight ahead to marching left, in a northwest direction. and although he wanted to resist, he was reminded he was no longer a mercenary leader here but a mere grunt.

As the group traversed the extremely muddy ground, they soon found out that the closer they got to the forest, the drier the ground became.

This was because the forest was a bit elevated from the open field down below, allowing the soil to drain better.

The soldiers were ecstatic that they could finally properly place their feet on solid ground and not have them sink a few inches and quickly proceeded to the forest.

The head of the formation entered the forest to check for hidden soldiers and fortunately found no signs of an ambush.

Which was good.

What was less good was what lay instead in front of them.

They were stunned at the new nasty surprise waiting for them there, which was no hidden army but just a mass of white!

In their eyes, the forest floor had turned completely white, or more accurately it got fully covered in white fog.

The fog had seemingly appeared out of nowhere and was rapidly filling up the forest floor and it seemed it would soon engulf the entire foot of the valley, where the battle was occurring.

As if the darkness wasn't enough, now they had to fight in the fog too!

Impossible!

Regias decided on the spot he had to inform Samaras of this and then order a retreat.

But just as he was about to order a 180-degree turn to return, a discord of panicked and fearful screams hit his ears.

Because, just five hundred meters to their right all of them saw it, a contingent of Adhanian heavy infantry rapidly closing in on them, determined to smash right into their exposed right flank.

"So this is how it ends, huh."

This was Regias's first thought after seeing the black mass approaching them, wielding, to him what seemed like not spears but the scythes of death.

But, how did such a large force sneak up on a force of two thousand men?

Well, it was already dusk and visibility wasn't the best.

The approaching orderly soldiers seemed to have meshed perfectly with the tall, neat tree lines and the sound of the two thousand men drowned out the approaching march of the enemy.

If anyone did hear anything unusual, most would think it came from their own side.

But many may ask, did none of the four thousand eyes or thousand ears catch a glimpse or hear the sound of so many men?

Well, it is very hard to hear anything with the heavy leather-padded bronze helmet on and even if someone did hear it, there was no way to if whose side it came from.

That's why using unique horns and trumpet sounds that soldiers beforehand memorized was the only effective way to communicate in battle.

As for seeing the enemy, imagine trying to see anything out of a thing that has slits about the size of your eyes.

And not only that the soldiers were always arranged in as tight a formation as possible, without any gaps, to prevent the enemy from exploiting those.

Now, picture yourself in a queue where everyone is almost squashed together and then you try to see what's in front of you.

The only thing you would be able to really see is the hair of the person in front of you and nothing more.

If it's too crowded even raising your head to look up would become difficult as your head might hit someone else's head.

So, although it seemed impossible for an entire army to sneak up on a formation, it was actually possible.

And by luck or by superb strategy, Adhanians managed to pull exactly that off.