

Herald 41

Chapter 41 Heroic Men

As the Adhanian right flank rapidly closed in on the unprepared right flank of Regias's mercenaries, a thousand thoughts ran through his mind.

"Is this the ambush Samaras was talking about? Did they anticipate our scouting and hide beforehand? What do I do now?"

Surrender was the first option that crept into Regias's mind.

It was supremely alluring but he then remembered Menicus's warning, '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.'

And he agreed.

The creative ways the Adhanians killed their enemies who massacred their people had been almost turned into an art form.

He did not want to die like that.

So Regias's only real option was 'fight or flight' and he struggled to choose between the two.

Running was a tempting option.

But then he looked back at the dark, viscous gooey earth that lay behind him and seriously doubted if his soldiers' had enough energy to run through the mud again.

Out of formation, they would be easy pickings for the pursuing Adhanians, especially if these Adhanians had ranged units like archers and slingers.

Then he looked around the forest that surrounded them.

For a second he contemplated running through there but then understood it was an even worse option.

Heading there in this deep fog, meant getting lost for certain and in this cold weather, to spend a whole night with no food, water, or shelter, in a place festering with wild beasts looking to stock up for the winter and the inevitable chasing of the Adhanians meant that the forest was as much a death trap as the mud

To Regias, the encroaching thick white fog seemed to have wrapped the entire forest in white funeral clothes, beckoning them to the other side.

Fight!

Seeing their escape route cut off Regias understood his only option was to fight.

Using his experience, he ballparked the Adhanians to be around a thousand strong and judged them to be an early scouting force

"Form up, form up. Don't run. There are only a thousand peasants coming!" He shouted.

He was confident that his two thousand battle-hardened troops could withstand the attack of only a thousand conscripts, even if they were attacked in their flanks.

"Hurrah." The mercenaries answered.

Any lesser unit would have broken formation and ran at their current predicament, but these veterans didn't.

They chose to stand their ground and fight.

Because, many of them, especially the phalanx captains came to similar conclusions as Regias and thought fight, not flight was the correct option.

"Quick, order the phalanxes to get ready. My first and second phalanx will hold the Adhanians for now." Regias ordered in desperation.

For five hundred men to hold off against a presumed a thousand-man force was a daunting task for any unit, elite or otherwise, but Regias was desperate.

The cause for this was Regias was caught exposing his right flank to the charging Adhanians and he simply could not order all his phalanxes to just turn 90 degrees clockwise to turn their flanks into front sides.

This was because the soldiers were jammed packed together and the soldiers would need inhumane coordination to all turn at the same time or risk bumping and tripping into one another.

If soldiers and phalanxes were able to instantly turn to their sides, then there would be no such things as flanks because the soldiers could simply turn on the spot to whichever direction the enemy was attacking them from, similar to a tank's turret.

But flanks did exist, meaning such coordination was impossible to get across the entire army.

Even in Alexander's previous life, there was no historical record of such on-spot formation maneuvers, and the famous hollow squared formation was invented specifically to counter flanking attacks by the enemy, especially the cavalry because that formation had no exposed flanks to be taken advantage of.

The only real way for a phalanx to change directions was not to turn on its heels like a human did but like a car, in a large curve, almost semi-circular shape.

Hence the turning of a phalanx needed large space to maneuver, space not available in a compact formation like in an army.

And thus each phalanx needed to spread itself out, isolating itself and leaving itself vulnerable to enemy attack.

As such, Regias planned to hold on his own with just two phalanxes units, who quickly turned their front sides to the Adhanians while the other phalanxes would spread out and slowly turn.

This sounded solid on paper, but it had one catastrophic oversight.

Their force estimation was grossly wrong.

Obscured by the coming dusk, the thick fog, and the rapid pace of the Adhanians, they erroneously estimated four thousand troops to be only one thousand.

A four-fold difference!

Even at full physical strength, in perfect formation, and on ideal flat ground, these mercenaries would have had a very hard time against double their numbers.

And now? Facing four thousand heavy infantry with essentially only two phalanx units, totaling five hundred troops?

Disaster!

As the Adhanians closed in on the mercenaries, it was only at fifty meters did Regias who led the first phalanx personally and as luck would have it, Nestoras who led the second phalanx managed to get a true look at the real size of the Adhanian force and understood their mistake.

Both their hearts turned cold and they felt their world spinning as the two men understood the gates of death had just opened for them.

There was no way they could win or even hold off against this enormous force.

There was no time to sound the retreat either or even run.

But befitting their long battle-hardened careers, the mercenary leaders decided not to try and run and then be hunted down like stray curs by the Adhanians.

"Soldiers, the gates of Elysium have opened for us! Gaia beckons to us! Charge." Regias howled.

"Brothers, it would be rude not to invite the Adhanians to heaven with us. Fight." Nestoras roared.

"For Constans, for all our brothers." Xanthine flourished his spears.

"Hurrah, hurrah." Came the fearless roar.

The five hundred soldiers decided to fight and die like men rather than run and be hunted down and paraded like animals.

But although their bravado was unmatched by any, in the face of the unstoppable momentum of the marching Adhanians it mattered little.

The enormous line far exceeding the mercenary's lines on both sides seemed to swallow them whole as spear attacks from all sides overwhelmed the paltry five hundred men.

Nestoras and Xanthine were both fighting like caged lions, parrying, deflecting, and countering strike after strike, but no matter how many they warded off, more and more seemed to manifest out of thin air.

To them, the strikes seemed to come from all directions and they even suspected that some were coming from the sky.

And soon, these two men started to feel their ranks thin.

Friends, sub-ordinates, and familiar faces soon began to fall one after another and the ground began to stack up with their corpses.

Romeus was one of the very first to go.

Craven, unskilled, and placed in the front echelon, he was killed in the very first strike.

Seven spear strikes sped towards him and two each were deflected by the soldiers on his sides, but three made it through.

But Romeus instead of standing his ground and defending, let go of his spear and shield and turned to try and flee and was caught by all three spears in his back.

One strike managed to even come out the other side, fully skewering him.

He fell, violently spasming in pain as he bled out, quickly dying and, his dead body being stepped over the next person filling his position.

The boy who wanted to live by discarding his spear and shield and ditching his comrades was the first to die.

How fitting!

Soon came the other two men's turn as well.

A lucky spear thrust managed to pierce Xanthine's left thigh and he fell on his knees, losing his balance and a space opening up between him and his shield.

Not even the untrained Adhanians farmers would let go of such an easy opportunity and three of them charged, determined to rip Xanthine's soul.

"Oh no, you don't." Turning to see Xanthine become defenseless, Nestoras let out an animalistic roar as he ran to try and cover his senior and subordinate.

Pierce, *Pierce*, *Pierce*,*Pierce*.

But this loss of concentration made him miss the four strikes coming to greet him.

The spears struck his left arm, left rib, left kidney, and the fatal strike, that pierced right through his throat.

"Agghh, agghh"

He fell like a broken puppet, blood foaming out of his mouth as he gurgled incoherently and soon the light faded out of his eyes.

"Boy!" Xanthine cried out a name he hadn't used in over twelve years.

But even before he could turn his head to look at him, a cruel spear streaked through the air, passing through his head and killing him instantly.

Xanthine fell next to his leader, Nestoras's lifeless static eyes staring right through Xanthine's gaping hole in the skull.

Dead! The two men, with so much dreams, and so much ambition were dead just like that!

And this situation was not anything unique.

People were falling left and right, including Regias and his men.

The overwhelmingly larger Adhanians made quick work of the numerically inferior two phalanxes, and in just a few minutes, they crushed them like a small bug.

Then, without losing any momentum, they smashed into the center of the rest of the mercenaries, snapping the whole formation into little chunks and effectively destroying them.

The Cantagenan mercenaries tried their best to resist, some fought, some ran, and some surrendered, but all in all, out of the original two thousand mercenaries, less than fifty would return to camp!

The Cantagenan's left flank had been destroyed.

And in a symmetrical twist of fate, their right flank had also suffered, though lesser but similar defeat.

Now the Cantegenan center was like a sitting duck, with both its wings clipped off.

Chapter 42 Manuk Tightens The Noose

"Commander our right-wing claims to have destroyed the Cantagenan left wing." A runner reported to Manuk

"So soon? Are you sure?" Kefka asked from the side.

He was more expressing his surprise and disbelief rather than doubting the runner.

"The details are still not yet clear but Captain Nulafzam has personally told me." The runner explained, thinking Kefka was doubting his integrity.

"Hmm, that's..." Just as Manuk was about to comment, another runner interrupted him.

"Report, our left wing has broken through the enemy's right wing!"

"What?" Manuk let out a gasp of astonishment.

He did assume the Cantagenan would eventually be defeated, but how could both their wings be broken so soon?

Could it be a trap?

"This fog is obscuring our vision. Maybe our troops only defeated the vanguard and thought they smashed through the entire wing." Kefka came up with a plausible explanation.

"Hmmm, maybe you are right." Manuk nodded.

Then he ordered, "Both of you go again. Confirm the details with your own eyes and then report back."

"Remember to report back only what you see, not what Nulafzam or Akashy tells you." He again emphasized.

"Yes, sir." The two runners answered in unison and then quickly run off in opposite directions.

"Archpriest, this fog, what do you think, is it a blessing or a curse from the gods?" Kefka asked in a surprisingly teasing tone.

It was well known within Adhania's inner circle the disdain Kefka had for the gods or anything related to religion.

The only reason he hadn't been branded a heretic and burned at the stake was because he knew when to stay his tongue and when to wag it, and the even bigger reason was because he was the king's uncle, sharing the same father but different mother with Amenferaft's father.

"Hmmm" Manuk hummed a reply as he traced his chin and seriously surveyed the encroaching fog trying to submerge everything.

Visibility was rapidly deteriorating and he expected to soon get reports about units having difficulty maintaining proper lines of communication.

"Has Ramuh descended on this mortal plan?" Manuk seriously thought of the possibility.

In their religious scripture called the Takqa, it was said that Ramuh rode on a misty cloud, wielding a lightning staff in one hand and an orb in the other.

In actuality, the real reason behind the fog was the scorching afternoon sun and the freezing rainfall afterward.

The chilling rain cooled the blisteringly hot ground, causing it to release heat that warmed the air around it, making it less dense and causing it to rise up.

As this hot air rose through the rain, it absorbed some of its moisture and pushed the colder denser air down.

As time passed and more and more rain continued to fall, the ground got cooler and cooler, until all its heat was taken by the warm, moist air above and now the colder, denser air resided near the ground.

But this warm, moist air above and the colder, denser air near the ground did not simply sit still.

Soon due to convection, they began to mix, and upon coming into contact with the colder air, the moisture in the warm air began to condense into tiny water droplets suspended in air, a phenomenon we call fog

And since the fighting was occurring at the foot of the hill, all the fog began to roll in there, slowly creating almost a white cage around the soldiers.

But Manuk did not know this.

Limited by his dogma and the knowledge of his time, he had no idea of the complex science behind the creation of fog and believed it to be another one of Ramuh's divine interventions.

"Blessing." He replied with a big grin.

"Then how will our soldiers fight in this condition?" Kefka asked impatiently.

He seriously did not want to ask this zealot why he said it was a blessing so he just pointed out the difficulty soldiers soon would face

"The soldiers can fight. They just need to swing their swords in one direction." Manuk answered straightforwardly.

"What?" Kefka asked totally confused.

It had to be pointed out that both Kefka and Manuk were civilian ministers who were thrust into military commander positions in this dark time to need because there was no one better or more trusted by Amenheratf.

Although both men had campaigned before and seen up close how battles were prepared and commanded, they had never actually fought or led any unit until today.

Before today Manuk's duty as the archpriest was to bless the soldiers before battle.

Kefka was Amenheratf's spymaster, who would advise commanders and generals on the number of enemy forces, the nature, and habits of the opposing generals, the situation in the enemy's country, etc.

Thus, although close to the front lines, they would not actively take part in the fighting.

That was until today when both men were thrust into the fiery crucible of battle.

And though Kefka's performance here was not bad by means, it was Manuk who distinguished himself as a once-in-a-hundred-years genius.

As such, seeing Kefka, the plotter and manipulator so confused brought quite a bit of satisfaction to him, and thinking of Ramuh's recent descent he was in a cheerful mood.

So he decided to indulge his colleague a bit.

He explained, "Our plan was that once the approaching Cantagenans were detected, eight thousand of our heavy infantry at the back of the cauldron would disengage and split into two flanks of equal strength and proceed along the edge of the woods to attack the enemy's flanks and reinforce the slingers."

"And let it be known that I objected to it. There is no way our soldiers can march through the mud and intercept the Cantagenan army before they destroy our slingers and open the cauldron." Kefka reminded.

"And I have already told you that I have personally looked at it. The woods are a bit higher than the field and it is connected to the field by a slant. The water will drain quickly and because that part has not been trampled by tens of thousands of soldiers, our soldiers can march much faster through the drier ground. It can be done."

"Well, the Cantagenans seemed to have anticipated your strategy and sent their flanks to intercept you." Kefka somewhat gloated.

"And the reports say we destroyed them." Manuk countered.

"So, what, we still haven't reinforced our slingers." Kefka shrugged.

"The cauldron is still holding. We have yet to get any reports of any breakthrough." Manuk reminded.

But just as Manuk finished his sentence, a worried runner came to him and said, "Sir, the slingers can't hold their positions much longer. Please allow them to retreat."

"I knew this would have happened. I told you we should have closed that cauldron when we had the chance. Now because of your greed, we will lose both." Kefka almost launched himself into a screed.

"It's nothing too serious. I have anticipated this and already have a plan." Manuk coolly answered.

Though in reality, he was rapidly turning the gears in his head to think of a solution because he did indeed not in this possibility into consideration.

He forgot to take into account that the Cantagenans might split their forces and form wings to stop any relief attempts of the slingers.

Then Manuk quickly made up his mind and gave his first order to two nearby runners. "You two go and urge the two flanks to march with haste. If they are engaged with the enemy flanks, try to have some rear units break off and attempt to relieve the slinger."

He then turned to the runner who gave him the news and said, "Go and inform His Majesty to order the remaining six thousand infantry to slowly open a small path at the back cauldron, allowing the trapped soldiers to pass through there.."

"What? Manuk, did you suffer brain damage" Kefka cut off Manuk and cried out in terror. He even began to suspect if Manuk had turned traitor.

"Let me finish." Manuk icily shot back.

Then he turned his head back to the runner and said, "Tell His Majesty that opening a gap will break the soldiers' morale in the cauldron, and instead of fighting to the death, they will run through the exit thinking it's their allies that have opened the gap. But in reality, they will run not towards the Cantagenan army but be funneled through a corridor guarded by our eight thousand infantry into our camp. We can then butcher them in the 'corridor' like sheep." Manuk finished his explanation.

"Yes, commander!" The runner performed a perfect salute after receiving the order and explanation and quickly ran off.

Manuk then simply turned to look at Kefka with a smug shine in his eyes.

"Hmph, your talents are wasted in that temple." Kefka jealously grumbled.

He also understood now why Manuk said that his soldiers would have to only strike in one direction.

With all the Cantagenans being funneled through a narrow corridor, the soldiers will recognize anyone in front of them as an enemy and anyone besides them allies.

Genius!

And though Kefka didn't know it, It had to be pointed out that Manuk had thought of the entire strategy on the spot!

Years later, some historians would claim that in the 'Battle of the Two valleys', the Cantagenan's biggest obstacle wasn't the lightning strike or their general dying or the fog, but Manuk!

Chapter 43 Warning

Sir, I have personally confirmed the Cantagenan left wing has been broken through. Our soldiers are now marching to attack the Cantagenan center but this fog has slowed down their advance." A previous runner he had met before reported to Manuk.

Manuk silently nodded and reasonably assumed that since the right wing's report was true, most likely the left's one is as well.

But as he was absorbing this good news, Kefka worriedly spoke up, "They won't be able to reinforce slingers in time."

What he meant by that was by the time the runner Manuk sent to Amenheratdt got there, received the king's permission, relayed the order to the heavy infantry and the heavy infantry actually pulled off the maneuver, the slingers will most likely have been defeated and the cauldron opened.

"Hmm, okay, order both our flanks to slow down their march and not lose cohesion. In this low visibility, it would be disastrous if they got separated and then attacked or got attacked by our own forces." Manuk prudently ordered.

"Sir!" The runner receiving the order frantically ran off.

Then Manuk pointed to a nearby herald and tasked, "You go tell the slingers to slowly open the cauldron by dividing themselves into two lines and then slowly start retreating."

This order seemed to reverse every previous order Manuk had issued and Kefka had an overwhelming urge to try and strangle Manuk.

But he held himself back and warned in a voice suppressing his deep anger, "Manuk, I will not question this tactic of yours. You have proved yourself to be Adhania's greatest general. But remember, although you have won this war for us, you will rapidly use up all that goodwill if the cauldron breaks."

"Haha, Kefka you thinking too hard about this. Do you think just opening the cauldron will cause the birds to fly away? What do you think the trapped Cantagenans will see when the cauldron is opened? A wall of spears charging towards them. Without the fog, they certainly could have recognized their allies. But now? In this fog, most of these stressed-out soldiers will see soldiers brandishing spears and think it's us! They might only not run but even attack them! Haha!" Manuk joyously chuckled.

"That's pretty wishy-washy thinking on your part. What if they can see through the fog and do recognize the Cantagenans? Are you going to just pray that they don't?" Kefka sneered back.

"Even if they do recognize, it's no big deal." Manuk shrugged. "These soldiers will then, feeling like being released from hell, will likely break rank and try to get out of the encirclement. They will then storm in front of the Cantagenan front lines, meaning the Cantagenans won't be able to attack as freely as they would like. The fog won't certainly help them in this. Th..."

"But the Cantagenans don't need to attack and defeat us. They just want to make us retreat far enough so all their soldiers can escape." Getting impatient with Manuk's long-winded explanation, Kefka interjected midway.

"Yes, that would have happened under normal circumstances, if they were only facing a frontal attack. But this fog was most likely hidden from them that both their wings are gone and a massive force of twelve thousand is about to clash into the flanks of their center. If they knew that they would have certainly run by now." Manuk postulated.

"So you are saying those escaping the encirclement will simply smash into our approaching wings?" Kefka seemed to understand Manuk's strategy.

"Yes, unless our wings lose their way in the fog. That's why I told them to slow their march and not stray too far by mistake in their haste." Manuk nodded with a smile. "We also have a thousand archers in each of our wings and even our slingers who although are now using swords can switch to their slings in a single command and thus chase down any escaping soldiers."

Manuk in his genius had created a trap using both the front and back exits!

Kefka simply shut his mouth and thanked in his heart that this fearsome general was on their side and not the Cantagenans

He also vowed to not pick any fights with him from now on.

Samaras felt like his whole world had collapsed.

Two devastating news saying both his wings had collapsed almost destroyed his will to fight.

Even until now, he chose not to accept this report, thinking there's no way a force of two thousand veteran mercenaries could ever be defeated in such a short time, and so he kept sending runner after runner again and again to authenticate the news,

He still believed the flanks existed and that these news reaching him were due to the commanders unable to properly judge the situation because of the fog.

But even if those wishful thinking were to come true, even his own central attack wasn't going to plan.

He had assumed that just gently tapping the slingers would cause them to collapse and run away, but these battle-hardened warriors, even with just a sword and no shield showed no sign of simply backing down.

The much more agile and nimble slingers rapidly closed the distance between them and the Cantagenans, got in between their spears, and attacked them at so close range that the Cantagenans could not freely move their spears, dealing large damage to the outnumbered Cantagenans.

This tactic was not anything new to the slingers.

After shooting their limited number of stones, all slingers were expected to get their swords out and go and join the melee.

Even then, currently, the ever-battle-tested combination of shield and spear was proving its mettle again and it seemed the Cantagenans were slowly gaining ground against the slingers.

But this progress was too slow for Samaras's liking and this fog was rapidly turning visibility to zero.

So he seriously contemplated on cutting his losses and running, not wanting to commit the same mistake as Agapios.

But at such a time, a piece of pleasant news greeted his ears.

A runner came to him with a smile on his face informing him that the slinger had been separated into two lines and the cauldron had been broken.

Success! They could finally rescue their fellow soldiers.

Samaras's heart ballooned in ecstasy and he immediately ordered his center to press the advantage and open the mouth even more.

But as the soldiers enthusiastically fought to enlarge the escape route, some of the more keen-eyed began to notice a weird little detail.

Some of the soldiers attacking seemed to have uniforms similar to theirs or at least they did wear Adhanian.

But in the fog, most only managed to catch a glance of the uniforms and all of them chalked it up to their eyes playing tricks on them.

After all, there was no way their own brothers would be attacking them right?

But such a thing was indeed happening, exactly prophesied by Manuk.

The trapped soldiers in Cantagenan uniform and mercenaries in their own ones were mistaken because of the fog to be Adhanians and Samaras's center, which was supposed to rescue the trapped soldiers was now actually killing many of them.

Some managed to evade the incoming attacks from both Adhania and Cantagena and escape to the outside but many were killed.

It was only after quite some time did some observant Cantagenans notice the undoubtedly Adhanian slingers attacking both them and the soldiers in front of them and it was only then they realized to their horror that they had been massacring their own brothers!

As the Cantagenas tried to rectify this mistake and properly command and coordinated their trapped brother's escape, suddenly a horse galloped upto Samaras, its rider's voice booming in fear, "Samaras, order the retreat."

It was Damious, and when Samaras turned to look at him, he was horrified to find that the mercenary leader's right eye was gone, being replaced by a wooden stick that was sticking out!

A lucky arrow had managed to get through his helmet and pierce his eye,

Not only that, his entire face looked like a canvas had been painted red, the blood showering his eyes, nose, and mouth and slowly trickling down his chin onto his horse.

The fact that this man did not only lose simply consciousness but could still talk and ride proved just how strong he was.

"Damious! What happened to you? And how?" Samaras asked, looking horrified at the bloody giant.

"My troops got ambushed by the Adhanians and were completely decimated. And they are coming for your flanks now! Run!" Damious manically shouted.

"What? How many are coming? How did you lose so quickly?" Samaras tried to stay as calm as possible as he attempted to get all the useful information from Damious.

"Don't know. Couldn't see anything through the darn fog. They simply appeared in front of us like ghosts and snapped our flanks like a twig." Damious replied with a certain fear in his voice.

Samaras was stunned by the recount.

He never thought he would ever get to see the boisterous giant be afraid

But without giving Samaras the slightest chance to speak, Damious then announced in an absolute voice, I am ordering my soldiers to retreat. The rumor was right. The gods don't want us here. This damned fog is their curse!"

Chapter 44 Finish

Samaras was stunned upon hearing Damous wanted to just quit.

Quit when they were so close?

He had given the man everything he wanted, every penny he had just to get him to take part in this battle, and now he wanted to run?

Just like that?

How could he ever accept that?

But he knew snapping off at his largest supporter right here in the middle of a war was not the best course of action.

So with a herculean force of willpower, he kept his cool and said, "Damious, we have already opened the cauldron. We just need a little more time for all the soldiers to get out."

"If you don't run now, none of you will ever get out." Damious roared in frustration.

"Damious, you are injured. Let me get you some medical treatment first." Seeing the two-meter bear was adamant about leaving, Samaras tried to change the topic.

But it didn't work.

Damious simply ignored what Samaras said and shouted, "Brat. I just lost two thousand good men right now. To verify it, I even personally went to the front lines and lost my good eye. Yet, you don't believe me? Fine, if you want to stay, then stay. I am leaving."

Then, he addressed directly his soldiers, "Men, we are retreating. Right now!"

After that, without listening to even a single thing Samaras had to say, Damious decisively left the battlefield taking around three thousand of his soldiers with him.

Samaras's grand army of fifteen thousand had now been reduced to a mere eight thousand.

Just as Samaras was about to also order the retreat, he saw the mercenary leader Alcmene rushing to meet him.

"Sir, I think Damious is exaggerating. Don't order the retreat." These were the first words the leader said to Samaras. Then he explained, "I don't think leader Damious saw everything clearly in the fog. Think about it, if he can ride to and deliver the news to you before your runners could, it means the Adhanians are not yet close enough to be spotted. And in this fog who knows how long it will take." He intelligently pointed.

Though Alcmene had his own agenda for saying this.

Because if Samaras did order a retreat, he likely will get zilch from him, and given his mercenary group's financial situation, it will likely cause him to bust.

That's why when he confirmed that Damious was pulling out, he feared Samaras might too and thus ran all the way from the back to meet him.

And Alcmene's words worked.

Because Samaras seemed to share his views, "You do make some good points. Okay, let's wait a bit longer." He agreed.

Though some might say he agreed a little bit too easily.

This was because Alcmene was the voice of 'reasonable possibility that Samaras needed to convince himself that he still had time to rescue all the soldiers.

He planned to let them safely return to camp while his army slowly retreated, acting as the rear guard to protect them from the pursuing Adhanians.

Also, another reason he didn't believe Damious but did Alcmene was because he wanted to.

Because if Damious was indeed right, then he was royally screwed.

Retreating now would be tantamount to losing the war.

And then his only realistic option would be to surrender.

Thus, the young man, not wanting to do that, decided to bury his head in the sand and hope Alcmene was right and the injured man was wrong.

And good news!

Because the injured bear was indeed wrong.

Decimating the right flank of two thousand troops consumed quite some time for the Adhanians, and in this fog and mud, their march slowed down to a crawl, as they proceeded slowly to keep unit cohesion.

And Samaras, being a competent general, although dismissed Damious, nevertheless chose to pay some attention to the claim as he sent multiple runners to look out for any incoming attacks to their right flank.

And that's where the good news ended.

Because although the Cantagenan right wing had managed to put up some fight before being obliterated, its left flanks just vanished like a puff of smoke at mere contact with the enemy.

Also, what's more, the left side of the battlefield was significantly less muddy than the right side, meaning Ashania's left wing was rapidly gaining on the Cantagenan central left flank, a blind spot that Samaras overlooked because his communication lines with the left wing had been cut off and he assumed they were still there, though he was unsure of what they were exactly doing.

Thus with having all their eyes in just one direction and forgetting about the other side, they never saw what hit them.

As the doom procession silently approached, Samaras and co. were kept none the wiser but instead, they kept receiving good news after good news, saying how they were pushing back the Adhanians and how many of their rescued brothers were rejoining their ranks to participate in the fight.

But a small nagging did creep into some captain's mind, mainly that much fewer than anticipated people were running towards them.

This was of course because of Manuk's tactic, which caused the soldiers at the back, who due to the fog could not properly identify directions, to run through the opposite 'exit' into the Adhanian camp.

And this was missed by the Cantagenan captains, who, without proper visibility and lack of communication, chalked up such doubts as human error.

It was amidst this euphoric high, did a runner all of a sudden ran up to Samaras, white as a sheet of paper, and give him the unbelievable news, "Commander, the Adhanians are behind us and they are attacking our rear, The escape route is cut off!"

"What? Which Adhanians? Where are the Adnanians?" Samaras, expecting another pie to fall from the sky, seemed genuinely confused at the report.

The best his mind could come up with was that Damious had chosen to return and rejoin the battlefield.

Sensing his commander's disbelief, the runner reported again, "Commander, the Adhanians are behind us. Leader Alcmene is dead and our escape route is cut off. I confirmed it with my own eyes."

It had to be said that Alcmene was the one who negotiated with Damious to be placed at the back in exchange for joining this battle.

And in a cruel twist of fate, it was because he positioned himself at the very back, thinking that if things did go south, he would be the first to bail that he was the first to bail.

Just not in the way he intended.

Upon hearing the confirmation of the disaster, Samaras felt faint and he struggled to stay atop his horse.

He had a strange deja vu feeling that this exact thing had happened just this afternoon.

But he was still a trained military commander, so he bit his tongue to regain his composure and lambasted in an enraged voice, "What the f*ck are those runners and scouts doing. I specifically told them to pay attention to the right flank. Where are they, I will personally behead all of them before I die. Traitors! All of them are mother f*cking traitors."

Samaras cursed out slangs that he, as the eldest son of one of the largest noble houses in Cantagena, had never ever uttered, nor ever thought that he would have to.

"No, sir, you seem to misunderstand." . " The runner understanding his commander's confusion tried to elucidate, "They didn't come from the right. They came from the left."

Yes! This was the same group that butchered Nestoras and co.

Hearing the runner's explanation, Samaras felt that he had turned deaf, with sound managing to enter his ears but his brain not being able to process them.

"The left flank, the left, left, lefttttt..." Inside Samaras's head, only the word 'left' kept ringing.

And then he started cursing himself, 'I forgot about the left. I forgot about the left. How could have I made such an amateur mistake of forgetting my right and left.'

"...order, your order....Commander, what is your order?" After what seemed like a long time, did finally Samaras began to feel some coherent sounds entering his ears, which apparently were the incessant shouting of the herald and he, at last, snapped back to reality.

The herald had noticed his commander simply daze off into the distance after his report and so to snap him out of it, he kept repeating asking him to give them their next command.

It was only after his third shout did Samaras's gaze finally return.

Samaras then turned to look back at the expectant runner with a mournful smile and uttered in a shaky voice three words, "Order the surrender."

"Yes, sir." Surprisingly, the runner kept a professional face as he received the order and didn't argue with his commander.

Because even the most basic student of military tactics knew that once your enemy can attack you from both the front and back, the battle is over, you know you have lost.

So how did the wing that was ordered to attack the flank of the centre end up attacking the rear?

Because as the Adhanian slingers slowly retreated, the Cantagenans chose to push their advantage and advance, so the place where their flanks were before the fog set in now became their rear.

As per Samaras's command, the order for surrender was passed down from captain to captain, who were informed of the situation, who then passed it from man to man.

Thus the war between Adhania and Cantagena had effectively ended, with Adhania against all odds triumphing decisively above Cantagena.

Chapter 45 View From The Top

The sound of the horn of surrender reverberated throughout the battlefield as the Cantagenans blew it to signify their loss, while the runners all ran to individual captains to inform the precarious situation they were in and told them to do what they thought best.

All this was witnessed by the mercenaries from atop the hill with grim, somber countenances as all of them felt their heart shatter at the sound of this distinct, unmistakable sound, hammering in the reality that they truly lost the war.

"Congratulations. Your warning came true." Menes said to Alexander in an almost sarcastic way.

"Thanks." Alexander shamelessly replied, seemingly unable to detect the sarcasm.

After all, if his warning had failed, he would have been very lucky to keep his neck.

When the fog came rolling in, it had caused quite a commotion within the entire camp.

People like Camius immediately claimed it to be the warming foretold by the blessed son of Gaia and his old-time friend, along with a few others, even started praying to Alexander, as one would to statues in a temple.

The appearance of the fog even shook Alexander at first.

Wild thoughts like 'Maybe gods really do exist?' and 'Am I in a supernatural world' began to appear in his mind.

The latter was really, not at all as preposterous as it sounded because Alexander personally knew the existence of at least one 'supernatural' being- him.

After all, he had no idea how he got here, why he got here, who bought him or who put him in this body.

And as a bonus, he also had no idea where he was.

He had yet to see a map with any real detailed maps bigger than a city-state, so had no idea if he was on earth from a different time period, on earth from a different timeline or if he was on a completely different planet altogether.

He didn't even know if he was in the same universe or in a parallel one.

And if he was on a different planet in a different universe, then, the existence of supernatural beings was certainly not out of the question.

Alexander certainly read Chinese wuxia and xianxia novels, where immortals existed, cold and aloof beings, disinterested in the mortal worlds below, viewed as mysterious beings, and worshipped as gods by the unaware, ignorant populace.

Thus, there certainly was a small possibility that Ramuh really did exist and so did Gaia and every other god.

But soon rational thought began to return to Alexander and they snuffed out the ridiculous, irrational thoughts that spontaneously surfaced in his mind.

There certainly was a scientific explanation behind the appearance of the fog and its appearance on the battlefield was likely a coincidence.

After all, Alexander reasoned that if the fog was truly magical and created by a real Ramuh to help the Adhanians, then it would have affected only the Cantagnans and the mercenaries.

But from what he could see, both sides were having problems with visibility.

And even if Ramuh was somehow real, Alexander had already dug a hole for himself that he was unable to extricate himself from.

After all, the potential rewards were too great and hence Alexander could only dig deeper, hoping he was in a normal world, identical to his previous life.

Or else his only option was to draw the ire of a god and perish.

Thus, fixing his mind on this course of action, he immediately noticed the current situation as a prime opportunity to cement his position in the hearts of the soldiers and so he instructed Camius, like last time, to spread that it was Alexander from Nestoras's mercenary group that forewarned about the impending disaster.

And Alexander wouldn't be disappointed as the flames of this rumor would soon touch the heart of almost all the soldiers, making him almost untouchable.

"Alexander, I heard Damious is seeking treatment in our camp. I am gonna check it out." Suddenly, from the side came Theocles.

Though his tone sounded as if instead of informing Alexander of a decision he made, it sounded more like the man was asking for his permission.

"Sure," Alexander uttered a single reply and Theocles soon sprinted off.

Alexander was aware that Damious had decided to run mid-battle and back then it had caused a huge ruckus when the observing soldiers saw Damious abandon Samaras and leave the battlefield with his three thousand troops.

Many booed and jeered him from the top and some in camp even blamed him for their loss in hushed tones.

Although Alexander didn't think Damious did any major strategic mistakes, him leaving the battle prematurely provided a golden opportunity for him to exploit.

He intended to knock down and if possible even kill the mercenary leader to wrestle control of all the mercenary groups.

And he believed this was the time to strike.

Yes, this slave was that ambitious.

He didn't just want to replace Nestoras or Aristotle to become the leader of a small, now less than a thousand men mercenary group.

He believed that only he was capable enough to lead all the survivors out of Adhania with the least amount of casualties and he aimed to lead everyone.

So he decided to rescind the previous order of, "Menes, Nestoras is likely dead. Even if he is not, this loss will be enough to oust him as the leader. I want you to prepare the soldiers to get them to nominate me as the next leader."

Instead, as the giant was about to carry it out he said, "Wait! Scratch that."

This made Menes halt and wordlessly turn his head to get new instructions, which were, "Spread across the troops that Damious has been bought out by the Adhanians and that's why he abandoned Samaras at the critical moment. And he now feels threatened by the divine son of Gaia and intends to kill him."`

This made Menes give Alexander a long, deep penetrating look.

He understood that with Alexander's rising fame it was inevitable that it would clash with Damious's authority sooner or later.

And that it was very much Alexander's style to preemptively strike rather than wait for the other party's attack.

Menes on the other hand felt he did not have a scheming nature and though he could detect pitfalls, he wasn't apt at creating ones.

Even when Alexander had tried to teach him political intrigue, he struggled to keep his eyes open.

He had always felt much happier letting Alexander deal with these complex issues while he could just turn off his head, follow orders and win.

And it was because of such convenience and trust that Alexander won't screw him over was he loyal to the boy.

Alexander, on the other hand, liked Menes because he was competent, loyal, and most importantly ambitionless.

He on the other hand didn't actually dislike Damious for throwing Samaras to the sides.

Alexander understood that this was a typical risk anyone ran when using mercenaries.

Using mercenaries had its benefits- you could get very good, experienced men for frankly a small amount of gold. If one wanted to produce elite units of similar caliber to mercenaries, one would need

to be fanatics like Exolas or pour gold that was not really possible to afford for anyone except the likes of the super-rich Adhania or Cantagena.

But the downside was that mercenaries were only good when you were winning wars, not when losing, or even when showing signs of losing a war. Because, in the eyes of mercenaries, a losing employer may not have the coin to pay them or worse yet not be alive to pay them.

Thus it was common for mercenaries to backstab their employers when things were going south for them, either in an attempt to steal valuables from the employer's camp or to gain favor and pardon from the opposite camp.

And many times they would get it and even be paid gold, because the other side would want to set a precedent so that others would switch sides in future battles too.

So, in Alexander's eyes, Damious not switching sides was already generous in his eyes. Alexander was not sure he would not have done so in Damious's place.

And as for the soldiers blaming Damious for the loss or claiming Samaras could have retreated with the army if Damious had stayed, Alexander found them to be solely delusional.

They all witnessed the incident from above when the much thicker Adhanian wings crashed into the Cantagenan ones and shattered them, and the veterans in the camp understood the battle was over.

And they all correctly blamed Samaras for splitting his already meager force in the dark, even after knowing how hard it would be to keep proper coordination with the individual units in such an environment.

When the Adhanians were approaching the unsuspecting Cantagenans, they had been detected by the Cantagenan mercenaries atop the hill and some in desperation screamed at the top of their lungs from atop to warn their fellow brothers below, but how could human voices travel so far or make it through so much noise?

The only thing these soldiers succeeded in doing was getting a sore throat.

They also resorted to sending people to inform those below of the imminent attack but they were too late.

Obscured by the fog, many runners who believed the warning were actually unable to locate the formation nor were they able to determine when the formation was attacked.

The people from above were also unable to determine the exact details due to the fog, and hence as a precaution, they sent people to inform the runner to tell Samaras to order a retreat.

But without concrete information, these people only received scorn from the fighting soldiers.

No one simply believed that a contingent of two thousand soldiers could be defeated so quickly without their knowledge and they even thought that these 'rebels and traitors' who disobeyed orders and chose to not fight with them were just trying to incite them to lose, just to save face.

Thus four thousand good men were lost due to human hubris.

Even now, as Alexander glanced below, he could see chaos and confusion with the Cantagenan ranks as they struggled to absorb the fact that their wings were gone, four thousand of their brothers were dead, and Adhanian right wing had manifested itself at their rear and the Adhanian left wing was on an imminent course to destroy their center flank.

They had effectively lost.

Many lamented for letting their ego and anger blind them from trusting their brothers but there was little anyone could do for them.

Their fates rested on the hands of Amenheraft.

Chapter 46 Rewards

While to the Cantagenans on the battlefield, the sound of the surrendering bugle felt like the cruel footsteps of death, the same sound, to the Adhanians, sounded like the sweetest piece of music.

Won!

Against all odds, they had won!

They were ecstatic.

"Your Majesty, All praises belong to you, we have won." Manuk rode up to Amenheraft as he officially delivered the good news.

Then he got down from his horse and prostrated in reverence.

"All glory belongs to the owner of the world." All of AMenheraft's retinue followed suit, including Beihrut and Kefka, as they congratulated the king on his win.

Seeing his retinue piously prostrate before him, Ameheraft spoke, "This war was won by the blessing of Ramuh! All hail to our god of thunder, lightning, and rain, Ramuh! He has blessed us today, he has blessed us with rain, he has blessed us with thunder, he has blessed us with lightning, and he has blessed us with this fog."

"And most of all, he has blessed us with his divine son, me and he has blessed all my loyal followers. And I swear to lead all of you to prosperity. For your loyalty to Adhania in its darkest hour of need, I promise you eternal salvation." Amenheraft then spread out his arms as wide as possible as he magnanimously declared.

"Most Gracious is our lord, Most merciful is his rule." Everyone chanted in gratitude.

All of them were feeling an enormous sense of relief wash over them as they understood that this war was finally over.

Previously they had won the battle, but now they had won the war, effectively knocking Cantagena and her allies out of Adhania and securing their capital and by extension their country.

Soon their main army would be back, Ptolomy will be captured and Tibias's little scheme will disappear into smoke.

Then they will settle scores with every single one that kicked them when they were down.

This was the joyous feeling in everyone's heart.

It had to be said that even now, many of Amenheraft's retinue and even Amenheraft himself felt it kind of surreal that just a few hours ago they thought they had lost everything, and now, within the time that for many of them seemed like just the blink of an eye, everything was firmly in their grasp.

Many felt like pinching themselves to prove to themselves that this was all real and not some dream.

And almost all attributed this miracle to Ramuh and Amenheraft, god's divine son on earth.

"Manuk, you are the one who contributed the most to his war. Your bravery and strategy in leading the fifteen thousand slingers to reinforce us will be written in history books and be praised by generations till the sun is swallowed." Amenheraft felt it was time to reward his most competent retainer.

And what a reward it was.

It would be the first time in Adhania's history that an archpriest would be mentioned in any history books by name. Because every priest, from the lowliest acolyte to the highest archpriest was subordinate to the royal family and particularly to the king.

That meant that, according to the Takqa, any of their achievements were in fact the sole achievement of the king, and they were just mere tools used by the gods to achieve that goal.

As such, to hear the son of god, make an exception for him and give him credit for an achievement that originally belonged to the king, sent Manuk over the moon.

But he maintained his composure and humbly said, "I am unworthy, Your Majesty."

Hearing Manuk's self-demeaning reply, Amenheraft didn't stop.

He then announced his second reward, "For your unmatched courage, valor, and mettle in trapping thirty thousand soldiers, I announce that his year's divine mistress will be your daughter Makila."

This made Manuk look up at the king stunned and shocked, his eyes tearing up at the immeasurable honor.

Only a member of the royal family such as a princess or a queen consort could become the divine mistress.

To allow his daughter, the jewel of his eyes, to have the honor of taking a place beside Ramuh, was an unmatched reward that was almost impossible to find an equivalence for.

In fact, many could argue to allow a mere mortal to become a divine mistress was tantamount to blasphemy.

So, although eternally grateful, Manuk attempted to turn down this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

He prostrated and prayed, "Your Majesty, this humble slave has no words to express his gratitude. But I believe a mere mortal like Makila is not suitable to become the divine mistress."

But Amenheradt blew such objections away, "Nonsense. I am the son of Ramuh. I judge your daughter to be worthy. Who can defy me?"

This answer made Manuk so pleased that he felt and he felt so much happiness course through his body that even if Amenheadt were to rip out his heart right now, he doubted he would feel any pain.

With tears streaming down his face, he thanked the king, "This unworthy worm and his daughter will toil for all eternity for this grace,"

"Um, rest assured, you and your daughter will have a place beside me in Aaru." The king promised.

Then he turned to his second retainer, Kefka, and said, "Kefka, despite being a civilian minister, you have commanded the troops, especially during the first battle with remarkable competency. Without your valiance in holding the right flank, we certainly would not have this victory today."

"Only by your grace, Your Majesty." Kefka thanked.

"But," Suddenly Amenheraft's amicable voice turned hard, "As my head of intelligence, you have failed in your entirety to gather any kind of information about the coup d'état. You should be beheaded for your incompetence."

Yes, it was Kefka's gross negligence that enabled the coup to take place, but in fairness, although Kefka did reveal to be lacking in this particular circumstance, he did warn Amenheradt to not leave the capital about a week ago, saying many of his sources were giving suspicious and contradictory news and he suspected something foul about it.

But who was going to blame the king for that?

The king couldn't be wrong, he could only be led astray by blundering subordinates.

"*Silence*," Kefka simply lowered his head in shame and embarrassment.

A spymaster who could not spy on a coup that was happening right inside his house, a coup that was attempting to usurp the very people he was tasked to guard was an enormous failure for him.

And Kefka did blame himself, if not fully, but at least partially for the enormous mishap. After all, this coup didn't just one day appear out of nowhere. It was planted and slowly grew right under his nose with him none the wiser.

It would not be at all excessive to execute him for such a mistake.

Spymasters had been offered for far less.

"But given the countless sacrifices you have made and the enormous benefits you have brought Adhania in the past, along with your contributions here today, I judge you worthy enough to be pardoned for your crimes. I will excuse your head today," Amenheraft graciously decided to pardon his uncle.

And then he announced, "You will be removed from your post from today and I will assign you a new post with the chance to redeem yourself. Work hard."

Amenheraft's last two words were code, meant to convey to Kefka that he would be soon reinstated as spymaster but right now he would be sent somewhere away till the dust settles, to prevent those with jealous eyes from targeting him for being incompetent enough to allow the coup to occur right under his nose.

Kefka understanding the code, replied humbly, "This incompetent slave shall strive with all his body and soul to try and pay back His Majesty's infinite mercy, even if I can only return just the smallest grain."

Done with Kefka, Amenheraft turned at last to his third retainer, Beihrut,

"My loyal Royal guards Captain, your heroism does not need to be said in words, that bloody bandage is all the proof one needs. You have fought till your body almost broke and bleed till you had no more blood to spill."

"Without you holding the left flank for as long as you did, taking punishment after punishment from the elite Cantagenan cavalry, they would have certainly broken our wings and destroyed us today. For your bravery and sacrifice, you will be made lord of Ankook and be given Hellma as your concubine."

"Your generosity knows no bounds, Divine son of god." Beihrut quickly kneeled and expressed his gratitude,

Even the usually tactless brute at least had enough sense to know what to do here and understood just what kind of rich reward he was being offered to him.

Ankook was among Adhania's top ten largest cities and Princess Hellma was said to be among the most beautiful woman in all of Adhania.

Chapter 47 Beihrut

Beihrut was very pleased by the reward Amenheraft announced.

Although he could not care less if he was made lord of Ankook or lord of the slums or even the lord of Adhan, because he had absolutely zero interest in ruling, he was very very pleased for being awarded the Imperial princess Hellma, whom he had always lusted over, but never thought would actually get the chance to hold.

Because Beihrut, for all his martial prowess and gallantry, was by nature a scum, the lowest of the low.

He was a born sadist and pervert who took pleasure in sexually assaulting underaged children and particularly enjoyed hearing them cry and scream.

In fact, he had forcibly taken many children, had many child brides, and killed scores of them, all under the complete immunity of his royal guards captain title and even under the much bigger umbrella of protection of the previous king.

His victims ranged from innocent civilian girls who simply went outside with their parents when they caught his eyes while he was traveling, to underaged daughters of various nobilities he visited to even fresh acolytes of the temple.

As such, it was common knowledge among citizens in Adhan and even in some minor nobility circles to hide one's children whenever Beihrut was near.

Some even went as far as to smear ash and dirt on their children's faces and clothes to make them appear less attractive.

As a matter of fact, many noble houses decided to participate in the rebellion for revenge for their daughters, who were humiliated and sometimes even killed by untouchable Beihrut.

Many of them had petitioned before again and again to Amenheraft's father to punish the brute or at least discourage him, but the king simply paid no ear to such drones of lesser beings, stating, "It is the right of those serving close to the son of god to partake in pleasures forbidden to the common mass. Beihrut. choosing your daughters is their greatest luck in life."

This was not at all surprising because it was well known among the nobility that Beiheut would, along with indulging himself, regularly gift Amenheratf's father with similarly underaged children, whom the previous king quite enjoyed having.

But it had to be pointed out that for all his so-called tactlessness and immunity, Beihrut never crossed one line.

He never attacked anyone from the royal bloodline, not even the illegitimate ones.

For a mere mortal to attack the descendant of a god was unthinkable, even to him.

But this did not stop him from lusting over them.

Especially the current king's half-sister Hellma.

The abnormal lust he felt toward her was nothing like he had ever felt towards any other girl.

The imperial princess was just 140cm, had exotic wheat-colored skin, and was just fourteen, the perfect age in his opinion- no longer a small girl but not yet a grown woman.

And Amenheratf had just given her to him, the girl of his dream just like that.

And what was more he had given her not a bride but as a concubine, as a mistress with no social status.

That meant that he could do many things to her that otherwise as his legal wife would have been not possible to do, things that might leave marks on her and be problematic.

Just thinking about the depraved things he would do to the golden-colored porcelain doll made Beihrut's loins hot.

Amenheratf was of course aware of everything. He had even specifically given the rewards to Beihrut knowing this.

Hellma was Ptolemy's own sister and this was his way of punishing the rebels.

And because of Beihrut's complete disinterest in governance, the huge city and lush pastures of Ankook would still be effectively in his hand.

After rewarding his three highest retainers, Amenheratf surprisingly bought up the name of a fourth dead retainer.

"There is one more person I would like to reward. He had sadly left us today, fighting bravely without equal- Lamiz. And for his unmatched sacrifice, I will have Lamiz be entombed and buried with me as part of my eternal guard." Amenheratf dropped a bombshell.

This bought an enormous chatter among the crowd as the 'Eternal guards' were stone statues of only living royal guards who were buried with a king's dead body to protect him through the journey to the afterlife.

A very key important point to being the eternal guards was to be alive.

Manuk tried to explain this to his king and tell him why a dead person could not serve as an eternal guard, " Your Majesty, only the living, from the plane of the mortals can protect your soul from the dangers of the Path. Lamiz's soul is already in the underworld. He cannot come to your aid."

" I have made up my mind, Manuk. Lamiz will accompany me through the Path. It's my soul and I will protect it as I wish." Amenheratf declared majestically, with a tint of anger in his voice.

"As you wish, Your Imperialness." Manuk sensing the king's mood prudently retreated.

After dealing with his most important retainers, he then turned to all his lesser entourage and spoke, "It's night, and let us return to our camp tonight. I shall reward all of you richly in due time."

"Your Majesty, to serve you is our eternal reward."

"I have witnessed Ramuh in action today. My soul is at peace."

"We exist only to serve you."

Various flattery and humble proclamations rang out from the crowd after Amenheraft's announcement, each eager to outdo the other to praise their king.

As the king seemed to be retiring to his tent for the day, suddenly Manuk posed a question, "Your Majesty around twenty-five to thirty thousand Cantagenans have surrendered. What do you intend to do?"

This was a very important question because depending on the king's answer, he would have to make many arrangements, such as a place to keep the captured, give them food, schedule guard routines, and many more.

"Hmmm." Came the long drawn-out reply of Amenheraft.

Chapter 48 Manuk's Proposal

Amenheraft seemed to pretend to think for a while about the question, though in reality, he had made up his mind hours ago.

"Our Adhania has suffered too many men and material losses in these last three years. These strong slaves will be a great asset to our mines and farms." He revealed the cruel fate of the captured soldiers.

State-owned captured slaves had an average life span of less than five years, being worked off to the bone under the cruel lashing of their supervisions, nourished by subsistence barely fit for animals.

Many would argue crucifixion that took three to seven days was a much more preferred way to go.

But some may wonder why surrendered soldiers were being treated as such?

Because in this time period, surrendering to an enemy did not mean a guarantee of survival or being treated like a prisoner of war according to the Geneva convention.

A captured or surrendered soldier's fate lay entirely with his captor and it ranged from being simply let go to slavery, to various creative ways of dying.

When any commander ordered a surrender, it did not mean waving a white flag and laying down one's shield and spear, and then standing in an orderly line to be captured and bound, like in modern times.

It simply meant all the soldiers were now discharged from the military chain of command and they were to do what they themselves thought was the best for their own survival.

So they could try to run and risk being killed, they could try and fight out or they could simply give up and let themselves be captured with a promise from their captors that they would not be killed, a promise that their captors had no obligation to keep.

Even if the individual soldier to whom one surrendered would promise not to kill him, if the military high command ordered it, that soldier would have to obey.

And even if he didn't want to do it, well, there were always other soldiers who made no such promises.

On the surface of it, Amenheraft's proposal was very sound.

But Manuk seemed to disagree.

He said boldly. "Your Majesty, I fear I cannot quite agree with his arrangement."

"Oh, why?" Came the curious reply.

Amenheraft knew something was up when Manuk had decided to ask him about the fate of the captured soldiers, something that should have been quite clear to him.

But Manuk had never objected thoughtlessly before, so Amenheraft decided to hear the man make his case,

"Your Majesty, as you have said, this war was won due to Ramuh's blessing. I believe we should show our appreciation." Manuk proposed.

"Yes, I do know that. That's why I chose Makila as the divine mistress." Amenheraft noddingly reminded.

"I'm afraid that's not enough, Your Grace. Six months is too long. The divine mistress ceremony is in March, we are only in September. It is imperative that we show Ramuh our appreciation as soon as possible." Manuk implored.

"Hmmm, so what do you suggest?" Amenheraft asked with a slight wrinkle in his brow.

As an expert on the Takqa himself, he was pretty sure what Manuk was going to say and he didn't like it one bit.

Manuk of course understood his king's displeasure, after all, he had served under him for almost twenty years and knew him for even more.

So he decided to decorate his reasons a bit, "Your Imperial Majesty, our supreme Lord Ramuh blessed us with three blessings today. First, with the thunder strike that destroyed the cavalry charge, second with this fog that trapped the Cantagenan soldiers coming to the encircled soldiers, and third is a lightning strike that killed Agapios."

"What! Agapios was struck by lightning? Where did you hear it?" It was Beihrut that suddenly interrupted Manuk who was speaking to the king, proving once again the man had little more than muscles for a brain.

"A spy in the Cantagenan army relayed the report even before the start of the second battle. But I didn't tell anyone because even I didn't believe it that time, assuming that the spy had been discovered and was being used to mislead us." Manuk said.

"But you believe it now. So show us the evidence." This time it was Amenheraft that asked Manuk eagerly.

Because if that thorn in their side was truly dead by Ramuh's will, then he might really have to follow Manuk's proposal.

"Yes, I did some basic interrogation of some of the newly captured soldiers. They all spoke the same thing- 'General Agapios was struck by lightning and is now recuperating. And their current commander is someone named Samaras.'"

"Samaras?" Amenheraft quizzically asked, feeling like he had heard the name before somewhere.

As Cantagena's mortal enemy, he was actually quite well acquainted, at least by name to all their famous generals and admirals, but he could not quite recall this particular name.

"He is Agapios's protege. Eldest son of the Kashbu house, he is heralded as Cantagena's rising star and Agapios's successor." Kefka eagerly said the details, likely in an effort to show his usefulness to the king.

"Was. My soldiers confirmed his death." Manuk corrected Kefka.

Then he continued, "I also met some different clothed soldiers. Most likely mercenaries. They told me something even more interesting. They said that Agapios was dead and Samaras was hiding this. They believe the reason for this hasty attack was because Samaras wanted to win before people could figure out their general was dead and surrender."

Manik then added his own opinion, "I find this explanation much more believable. Agapios would not have likely made the rookie mistakes we saw in the second battle."

"So what do you propose we do to show our appreciation to Ramuh?" Understanding where this was going, Amenheraft asked with a deadpan expression.

He knew what Manuk was going to say and he knew Manuk would likely convince him.

But it still stung him to lose so many good, free mules.

"Your majesty," Manuk started, "Ramuh has blessed us three times. The first blessing can be equalized with you being his son. The second blessing can be equalized by Mikala as the divine mistress. For the third blessing, we need something more. We need to give him the Cantageneans! Only the blood of these heathens will sate Ramuh." He proposed.

Yes, Manuk here proposing live human sacrifice!

The live human sacrifice of almost thirty thousand humans!

Chapter 49 Losing Cool

Amenheraft knew this was coming but he was really reluctant to just kill all these good, strong men.

Adhania had been devastated by the drought and was facing acute manpower problems, especially because almost all able-bodied men had decided to join the military as that was the only service that could give them at least some consistent source of food.

And after the two-year war with Tibias, the country was left with a massive manpower vacuum.

"I understand the need to show reverence to the gods. But I am god on earth. And I need these able-bodied men. The war has left us with a severe shortage of men and if we can't find replacements soon, most of our farmlands will be left unattended." Amenheraft surprisingly said this in a way that almost sounded like him explaining himself to his followers.

Because he knew even he could ignore his retinue's collective desire to appease the gods.

"Your Majesty, I am not ignorant of the country's plight. There are reports that during the war, driven mad by hunger, scores upon scores of peasants, disobeyed orders and. repeatedly charged head-first into well-fortified Tibias fortifications, just because they thought those garrisons had some food. I very well understand our tender desire to feed, clothe, and nurture your subjects." Manuk seemed to empathize with his king.

"But, please remember, the person who is truly responsible for feeding your subjects. The person who is truly responsible for clothing, nurturing, and protecting your subjects. That person is your divine father Ramuh, who has blessed you in his stead. And we must please him.

"It is because he has decided to end the three-year drought by blessing us with rain, thunder, and lightning at our most critical time can we have the luxury to talk and debate about cultivating our farmlands and feeding our people."

Then Manuk asked a question, "Ask yourself this Your Majesty, if someone a few hours ago offered you the condition that he could win you the war and secure your throne, but in exchange, you would have to give him all the captured soldiers, would you have agreed?"

The question was rhetorical and everyone present knew the answer.

'I would have agreed in a heartbeat.' Amenheraft spoke in his heart.

But the issue was he had mostly secured his throne now and next he wanted o turn his focus on keeping it.

Amenheraft thus tried again, "Everyone here knows if I was given such an offer a few hours ago today, I would have taken it without a second's consideration. Because at that point my main goal was to just get my throne back and nothing else. But now that goal has mostly been. Now we have to turn our attention on how to keep it."

He looked around to see his followers still hanging to his words and said, "These past few weeks have been eye-opening for me. My eyes have been opened to who are my friends and who are my enemies. My eyes have been opened to those who are competent and those who are incompetent. And my eyes have been opened to the suffering of my people."

Then in a melancholic voice, he recalled, " I remember seeing children fighting over scraps of food with dogs. I remember mother's having no breast milk to feed her infant and I remember men too weak to even stand and walk, only laying beside the road, eyes half closed as vultures circled above them waiting for their rotten feast."

Amenheraft's voice turned shaped as he questioned his followers, "Is this the country you all want to rule? A sick, decaying country where its people are too weak to even work? A country with no vitality? A weak country ripe for the taking by the Tibiasians? By Cantagenans? By the barbarians? When did we become so weak to be bullied this like?"

These hard questions caused jolts in the minds of many of Amenheraft's followers.

Many felt their egos bruised and though most of them didn't care one hoot if these peasants lived, died, or suffered, being intelligent people they did wonder things like, 'If this country falls what will happen to my family?' and 'Can we maintain our lifestyle if these peasants don't work?' and 'Can we maintain your lifestyle if we are conquered or if the peasants have nothing to pay taxes with?'

Thus Amenheraft's speech seemed to sway the people to want to enslave and not outright kill the prisoners of war.

Among them, Kefka, being among the highest echelon of the ruling class and a part of the royal family decided to speak up for the king, "Manuk, we believe the king is in the right here and that his will should be followed. None of us here would ever dare claim to be disrespectful to the No we should always show how grateful we are. That is a must. But we also believe we should look at reality."

"We? Who's this 'we' you talking about You speak only for yourself." Suddenly Manuk interjected with a deep growl, anger simmering in his voice.

Kefka expected this much.

After all, although Manuk was very reasonable when it came to civil matters, he was a completely different beast when it came to matters regarding religion.

Dogmatic, extremist, and fundamentalist would be apt adjectives to describe his beliefs, and trying to reason with him on religious matters was as useful as talking to a block of wood.

But nevertheless, Kefka decided to use his silver tongue to try and change his mind, "*Sigh*, I believe what His Majesty is trying to say is that Ramuh has blessed and saved us because he cares about us and he cares about this country. But without these slaves, we risk losing our country even after winning the war. Our peasants are too few and too weak and without these slaves, we won't be able to cultivate all our land. That means the food shortage and famine will continue even after the drought has ended. More of our people will then continue to die and we will continue to become weaker. Can you accept such an outcome archpriest?"

It needed to be pointed out that Kefka being so eager to argue with Manuk and defend the king was not purely altruistic.

A large part had to do with the fact that Amneheraft had just said that in the last few weeks his eyes had been opened to those he found competent and those incompetent, which Kefka took as a direct jab at him.

Thus Kefka was eager to win back some favor.

Manuk was ready to retort back Kefka's question, when an enthusiastic voice from the side rang out, "Your Excellency Kefka has made some great pints."

This was one of the few nobles still loyal to Amenheraft who hadn't been arrested by Ptolomy.

That man said, "We are in September, the prime season for planting wheat. Our much-awaited autumn rain has come but we must hurry. But over the three years of drought, most of our farmland has been left empty and uncared for. We need as many men as possible to quickly prepare the field, till the soil, and start planting seeds. Time is running out and the faster we plant the better. Archpriest Manuk, we need these slaves. We need them to live." He implored.

But extremists and fundamentalists are called extremists and fundamentalists for a reason. They are blind to logic.

Manuk was getting irritated at having to repeat time and time again the same thing. So he lambasted, " Everything you have now and today is due to the blessing of the gods. Now that you are out of danger all of you want to just shirk your responsibility? Because it's too inconvenient for you? Because it's too hard for you? You ungrateful, backstabbing curs!"

Manuk roared out the last sentence in indignation.

Silence

Everyone stared wide-eyed at the archpriest who seemed to have lost his mind.

For a priest of the temple to go as far as to call the king, who was also the head of the temple such words so openly, was blatant blasphemy!

His soul had no way of redemption.

p This little scene seemed like a replay of Beihrut's little episode just a few hours ago.

Guess hot-bloodedness ran in the family.

Amennheraft also felt a tinge of anger rising through him as he was running out of patience for dealing with this unreasonable fool.

The only reason he was even arguing about this and did not simply decree his decision was because he respected Manuk and valued his opinion.

But that felt increasingly hard to do as Manuk seemed to be in no mood to be reasoned with.

Just as Amenheraft decided to ignore Manuk and decree his decision, the deep booming voice of his royal guards captain bellowed out,

"Stupid brother, what nonsense are you spewing out of that mouth of yours? Has a single victory gone to your head, you pig with muscles for brains?"

Beihrut cursed a saying often Manuk threw at him.

And this was probably the first time in Manuk's whole life that Beihrut ever scolded him, usually, it was always the other way around.

And this weird, comic happenstance calmed both Manuk and Amenheraft down.

Chapter 50 Sacrifice

Sensing his tempers were running high, Amenferaft took a deep breath, calmed down, and then slowly clasped his hands behind, "Manuk we understand your position. And we all know you just want the best for all of us here. And yes, according to the Takqa we are supposed to offer sacrifices to the gods in exchange for their favor."

"Okay fine, you want some people to offer the gods, we will give you half of the thirty thousand- fifteen thousand men to appease the gods." Amenheraft proposed a perfectly reasonable middle-ground solution to their argument.

But Manuk was a fundamentalist and not someone reasonable when it came to religion.

He was someone who would follow the book to the tee and no way was he going to accept anything short of a full sacrifice

This bullheadedness many would argue ran in the family, Beihrut was widely known for his stubbornness, but few who met Manuk would associate him with such a quality.

Because usually, Manuk was very level-headed and reasonable, until it involved religion. Then he would suddenly turn into a complete manic zealously and extremely aggressively defending every single word without exception.

But Beihrut's roar, like with Amenheraft, also bought some coolness back to Manuk's head and he understood rashly that lashing out would not convince anyone, especially when keeping the soldiers alive as slaves had so much tangible benefits for everyone.

Hence he decided to appeal to their soul.

"Let us recount our god's blessings today" Manuk proposed. "Without the first blessing, the first thunderstrike, our slingers would have had to fight tooth and nail to destroy the Cantagenan cavalry. By that time our outnumbered infantry might well have been overrun and destroyed, losing us the war. The second blessing occurred out of our sight, a lightning bolt struck and killed our most hated general-Agapios, throwing the Cantagenan high command into chaos. The third blessing occurred just now- the Cantagenans were close to breaking the cauldron and rescuing their trapped soldiers when a fog disoriented their sense of direction and disrupted their lines of communication, trapping all of them in."

Manuk then lifted his thumb, "The first blessing can be said to be because Ramuh decided to help his son on earth."

Then he raised his index and middle finger, "But without the second and third blessings, without Agapios dying and the fog trapping the soldiers, none of us here would be debating what to do with the captured soldiers. We have only captured the soldiers because the gods designed it such. This gift is theirs and yet you mortals dare to steal from the god?" He asked in a hard, furious voice.

"The king is a god too." The noble that spoke before retorted.

"Yes, His Majesty Amenheraft is a god. No one can ever deny that." Manuk admitted with a nod.

"However, it should not be forgotten that technically His Majesty is yet to be coronated. The previous king's funeral ceremony is still pending and His Highness is yet to become king in the eyes of the gods."

"But even if we forget that technicality, remember, King Amenheraft is a god amongst mortals. He has been granted authority to do whatever he wants in this mortal plane to mortals. But not to the gods. Remember, even the god-king cannot take what belongs to his divine father Ramuh."

Then Manuk asked, "All of you want to use the slaves to farm. They will help end the famine, you say. They will help produce food, you say. They will save our starving populace, you say. We only need them till the autumn rain ends, you say. Have you ever stopped to ask if it rains no longer?"

"What if, out of your greed, you do not offer the gods their rightful gifts, instead use them to plant crops, only to find out that the gods in their displeasure have decided to resume the drought? Does any one of us have the power to make it rain when the gods deny it?" Manuk finished his inquiry.

The questions raised by Manuk bought back fear to many present.

Yes, the coming of rain usually signified the end of the drought.

Usually.

There have been many records where heavy rainfall occurred amidst droughts and many thought the drought was over only for it to be prolonged for years.

Manuk's questions had moved even Amenheraft.

Although he was a very pragmatic leader who mainly viewed his so-called divine right to rule as nothing but a convenient political tool, still in his heart, in a small, hidden corner, resided a genuine fear and reverence for the gods.

There have been many rumors about the origins of the drought, many saying this was a curse by the gods to the Amenheraft family.

It said that this was the gods signaling that the Amenheraft family had lost their divine right to rule.

They pointed to the excesses the precious king, Amenheraft's father indulged in and blamed every misfortune occurring around them on him.

Now in fairness, even Amenheraft would agree that his father regularly went too far.

Even as his son Amenheraft would sometimes be disgusted by some of his father's practices, such as forcibly taking the wives of various nobles openly in front of them, taking his concubines in large open parties, sharing his various wives with other nobles, raping young boys and various other turpitude too many to list.

But although disgusted and understanding the severe consequences of his father's actions, Amenheraft, even as the crown prince, had almost no power to do anything about it.

As king, his father was god, and crown princes had been executed for far fewer infractions in the past.

A few of his own brothers had been killed by the king for minor foibles.

As such the best Amenheraft could do was try and mitigate the damages caused by his father from the shadows, without drawing the ire of the king.

But clearly, his efforts were not enough as the rebellion occurring now proved.

But Amenheraft, although didn't learn from his father how to be a good king, at least did learn how not to be a bad king.

And the two biggest way to not be a bad king was to one- to heed his loyal retainers' advice and two- to not upset the gods.

And if Amenheraft was to forcibly stop the sacrifice today he would be violating both points.

He feared that if he stopped the sacrifice and the drought returned, it would be the end for him.

He suspected even his most loyal retainer Manuk would likely abandon him.

Hence with a heavy heart and a tired voice, he asked "Manuk, is there really no other way?"

He had suspected such an outcome just as Manuk brought up the topic, and although he fought the good fight it seemed the inevitable was going to happen.

"I am afraid not Your Majesty. Even if you decree such a decision, I will command the troops to execute all the captured troops. And if I am killed for my actions, I will gladly die a martyr. At least, the gods will bear witness to my intentions and save my soul from eternal damnation." Manuk fearlessly declared.

Amenheraft listened to Manuk's determination with a deadpan expression and then conceded in a flat tone, "Haaahh, then do it. I am tired and I leave the ritual and ceremony to you." He then finished by waving his arms dismissively,

"Yes, Your Majesty." Manuk promptly replied.

Right then an ear screeching, coughing sound blasted their everyone's ears, "*Cough*, *Cough*, *Cough*."

It was from Beihrut and he kept coughing and coughing while everyone started till phlegm mixed with blood was vomited out and he couldn't stand anymore.

"Brother!" Seeing the giant be toppled, Manuk quickly ran up to the kneeling man, eyes filled with concern.

And just as he touched the man, it felt like he was touching a hot frying pan.

Beihrut's entire body seemed to be on fire.

"You, you have a burning fever running. Why didn't you go rest, idiot?" Manuk exclaimed in horror.

"Nulafzam, Nulafzam, where are you?" Manuk then started looking around for Beihrut's adjuvant for help.

But surprisingly he was nowhere to be found, absent from his to-be post.

And not only him, a large part of Beihrut's retinue seemed to be strangely absent.

Manuk if he was still cool-headed as before would have certainly picked up on this discrepancy but he was too occupied and simply chalked up the absence with them being somewhere else for the moment.

After all, in an army of twenty-five thousand, it was all too easy to lose track of a few men.

But, although Nulafzam didn't answer Manuk, his manic calling was soon answered by the people around, who picked Beihrut to his camp, assigned some doctors, and reassured Manuk that his brother will be looked well after.

And so Manuk, leaving his brother at capable hands reluctantly left to perform the ceremony.

He prayed that the ceremony will be enough to appease the gods and help obliterate all obstacles in their life and even help cure Beihrut.

,m With this in mind, Manuk soon commenced the ritual, where all the soldiers chanted in unison after him as they stabbed and executed the captured soldiers, turning the night sky into a mournful chorus of screams and howling and painting the black ground bright red.

But what of Nulafzam and others you ask?

Well, they were currently in front of the city gates of Adhan, flashing a strange seal to the gate guards!