

Herald 51

Chapter 51 Schadenfreude

The mood in the other camp, Cantagena, was, understandably, the polar opposite of that in the Adhanian camp.

In contrast to the jubilant atmosphere in that camp, here hung the gloomy stench of dejection, helplessness, and the mournful cries for the dead.

Many many brothers, fathers, and friends had died, and those alive were still drowning in their remembrance, some fondly recalling past good times, some lamenting for them for not listening to their advice and choosing to participate in the attack anyway and many howling for their loss, believing that they will never see their loved ones again.

They were not crying because they won't be able to see them in this life, no.

They were crying because they believed the souls of their loved ones were eternally damned, never to enter Elysium and thus never being able to see them again.

This was because of the brutal ritual sacrifice carried out by the Adhanians right in front of them that they were all forced to bear witness, where they massacred tens of thousands of their brothers to their god Ramuh, meaning they will be eternally bound to Aaru as deathless slaves, forced to toil away till the end of time in indentured servitude.

This was a potent psychological weapon Adhanian regularly used to make people fear fighting against them as others believe that losing may lead to perpetual damnation.

Alexander himself was also affected by the scene.

The visceral horror of having to watch twenty to thirty thousand men be brutally hacked to pieces in such a packed space and hear them squeal and shout and moan in pain and agony as they slowly bled out shook him and dug up some unpleasant memories that he had previously tried to repress, memories about the butcher of Acme, which, sadly he was forced to take part in.

Alexander thus decided to stop watching this macabre show and made up his mind to go find Cambyses instead.

On his way to the medical camp, he recalled the initial rumor going on about the casualty estimation.

It said that of the original fifty thousand they started with, forty thousand were dead, wounded, or captured and less than ten thousand remained!

An eighty percent casualty rate!

Such huge casualty rates seemed surreal to Alexander, because usually battles ended with twenty to thirty percent casualty rates, as unit cohesion tended to break down above this point and soldiers just surrendered.

Alexander's mind floated to compare today's loss to the Roman's famous loss at Cannae where the Romans suffered, according to many historians a casualty rate of ninety percent.

But even though Alexander left the top of the valley disgusted at the brutal butchering happening in front of him and was saddened by such a high death toll, he had a weird schadenfreude feeling about this loss and particularly about how they lost.

On one hand, this loss reduced their available soldiers left to escape Adhamia, from twenty thousand to less than ten thousand, less than half of their original numbers.

And the Adhanians bolstered by the win could decide to finish off the stragglers once and for all by attacking their camp in the morning.

These were disadvantages.

But on the other hand, his prophecy could not have come true in any better way.

He at best thought that the Cantagenans would be again defeated in battle and forced to retreat.

But now, just thinking about how the battle ended made Alexander's mood be lifted up to cloud nine.

'Ah the fog, the fog, the fog.' Alexander hummed a nonsensical tune in his mind praising the fog.

Because even before the battle ended, just when the soldiers atop the hill started seeing the fog rolling in, many people began to claim the fog as the divine wrath foretold and forewarned by Alexander and those that chose to take part in the battle had forsaken the protection of Gaia and were doomed.

And as the battle went from bad to worse, this news of the manifestation of his prediction, fueled by Camius began to spread like wildfire.

Bearing witness to the cold hard evidence unfolding right in front of them, many began to see Alexander in a different light.

While previously his boyish face and young age would have only drawn scorn as a rookie, now it only drew adoration, as soldiers commented that only a person blessed by the divine power could be so young yet so erudite.

And as Alexander made his way toward the medical camp, he could even see a small group form behind him as they inconspicuously tried to tail him, to observe him.

Deciding not to pay attention to this crowd, for now, Alexander brusquely walked passed the scenery and soon burst himself into the hustle and bustle of the medical camp.

Here he was pleasantly surprised to see that the previous chaos outside the camp had largely subsided, making the camp now seem much leaner, cleaner, and more organized.

It seemed the presence of Melodias's muscle and prioritizing the lesser wounded over the 'not so hopeful in making a recovery' soldiers had worked wonders as now the physicians actually had the time to properly diagnose and treat their patients instead of just running about trying to help everyone.

As Alexander was passing through the outer circle of the medical camp, suddenly he saw something amazing.

In the middle of the camp, there was an enormous roaring fire going, and atop it sat a huge earthen pot with water boiling inside its belly.

Around it were slaves and soldiers, all working furiously washing, peeling, cutting, squeezing, and filtering beetroot juices and then dumping it all into the boiling pot.

Two strong slaves kept constantly stirring the water and mixing the juices and from time to time, someone would take huge jugs of the sweet water out to feed the patients.

Alexander squinted to see the shadow of a person who appeared to be the leader, screaming orders, listening to orders, and wildly gesturing to others to hurry it up.

The shadow rapidly gave away to an unmistakable silhouette, short, sweating, and red with exhaustion-Mean.

Seeing how busy the girl was, Alexander decided not to run up to her and have a chat.

Instead, he shouted from afar, "Mean, you know where the mistress is? It's urgent."

Listening to the all too familiar voice ring her ears, Mean felt a huge rush of pleasure and relief.

She had heard by now of the disastrous defeat they again suffered just now and also knew that Alexander and most of the mercenaries in her group didn't participate in the attack, only Nestoras and a few mad lads did, but still, it was one thing to hear a person you care about being safe and it's a whole different story seeing that person safe.

"Alexander! Thank goodness you stopped us." Mean ran over, glee overflowing out of her face.

"*Sigh*, if only our leader had listened. " Meeting the girl, Alexander heavily sighed, shaking his head in apparent lamentation.

Although internally he was ecstatic.

Yes, Nestoras dying did complicate matters a bit regarding his emancipation, but still, the rich rewards he got and stood to gain, many times offset such minor inconveniences.

But Mean was not aware and even did not care about such intricacies. She simply paid her respects to the dead, "Yeah, let Gaia embrace him into Elysium."

This put Alexander in an awkward position.

Because it seemed that Mean was unaware of the ritual sacrifice going on some distance in front of her or else she would not have said such words.

Maybe because the ceremony was still ongoing so the news had not reached here yet or maybe she was among the only few left unaware, but it was widely considered by everyone in the group, including Alexander that Nestoras and everyone else had been captured.

This was because it was believed till now that the entire Cantagenan army had been surrounded and captured, with only Damiou's two thousand soldiers dying and three thousand returning to camp.

No other credible report of additional soldiers returning to camp had yet been verified.

But instead of letting Mean in on such details, Alexander decided to whitewash it a little.

He said in a heavy voice, letting out a sigh "I heard they fought to the last man, hahhhh."

"Mean, we need a little help over here." A strong, robust voice suddenly cut through the melancholic atmosphere, urging Mean to return to her duties.

Both turned to look back at the man frantically waving at her and Mean instantly blurted, "I saw mistress inside the main tent. I gotta go."

"Wait, please bring me a few sleepknot leaves and some limestone." Alexander suddenly remembered the two crucial ingredients.

"Oh, here, there should be some." Mean readily handed him a leather pouch tied to her hips, seeing no need to ask for any further questions or details as the things asked by Alexander were very common. and then without saying, rapidly turned and accelerated towards the waving man.

Sleepknot leaves were common medicines used to help insomnia and limestones were used as a disinfectant.

It was no formaldehyde but it was the best Alexander got.

Thus, acquiring the fourth and final piece of the puzzle, Alexander tied the pouch to his hips and made his way inside the medical tent.

It was time to prepare the present for Aristotle

Chapter 52 Damious And Alexander

The medical tent like the camp outside seemed to have gained back its seemliness and order, with none of the chaotic ripples now cascading through it.

As Alexander approached the tent, he was eager to get a closer look at the inner workings of the tent and find Cambyses, when his eyes wandered to a strange 'clot' of people that seemed to have formed near the mouth of the tent.

He could not see too clearly in the dark, but he could make out a body on a bed being surrounded by several shadows and he knew this was the man Theocles was talking about.

Alexander had heard of but never seen the man in the flesh, and was interested to check out how true were the rumors saying he suffered grievous injuries.

If he was really as injured as they said, maybe he wouldn't have to kill him after all.

With this cheerful thought, Alexander slowly approached the tent, the faces of the people lit by candlelight becoming clearer and clearer to him as he got closer and closer and soon he could make out the silhouettes of people there.

He identified quite a surprising few, Aristotle, Pallidus, Theocles, and even Melodias along with a few physicians from his group.

But no Cambyses.

"Halt"

"Identify yourself!"

Two strong voices from the front of the entrance unpleasantly barked at Alexander as he attempted to approach the tent entrance and Alexander thought, "Yep, I am in the right place."

"I work here." Alexander plainly introduced.

"State your name." Came the aggressive reply.

"I am..."

"Alexander!"

Before he could finish the sentence, from the back came an enthusiastic shout.

It was his self-proclaimed most loyal follower, Theocles and somehow managing to identify Alexander even within this low-intensity lighting, he quickly made his way toward him.

"He's Alexander?" One of the guards spoke in surprise.

"He's younger than he looks." The other one muttered as he craned his neck to try and get a better look at the face illuminated by the fire torches around them.

It seemed that Camius was doing a fantastic job as the rumors of Alexander's 'exploits' had reached even these lowly grunts.

"Come, come." Theocles quickly approached Alexander and gestured to join them.

Alexander gently smiled and followed, saying on the way, "Quartermaster, I have seen the beetroots you allowed us to use being put to good use. It will be your merit for all the soldiers' lives we save."

"Haha, don't mention it. This is what I should have done. As you said, 'We are all in this together'." Theocles loudly proclaimed.

This little exchange was done so publicly to advertise their contribution and remind everyone that it was they that arranged for the treatment of all the wounded soldiers.

Done with this little charade, Alexander saw the Claws mercenary leader Melodias, who chose to tow closely behind Theocles.

Before Alexander could get a word in, Melodias spoke up, strongly patting his shoulders, "Alexander, we are alive today because of you. You could have told me before, you know!"

Melodias was referring to how Alexander played a clueless medical staff the first time he met him to determine how well his rumor was spreading.

"Hehe, I suspect you might have lived even without my help." Alexander modestly said.

In truth, Alexander was very close to being right. Melodias was having second thoughts about obeying commands the moment Samaras declared them and was teetering between following or not following them.

Alexander's rumor only helped to make the choice easier.

"No, no, this credit belongs only to you." Melodias rejected any such praise.

And then he gratefully said, "Thanks for recommending me to this place. Instead of needlessly dying, I got to help clean this place and take care of all the wounded soldiers."

This touched Alexander because he had met very few people and especially not any mercenaries who took genuine pleasure in helping others.

"You have saved a lot of lives." Alexander simply said from the bottom of his heart.

"Hehe, well, I gotta go actually. Damious told me to arrange the night patrol." Informing Alexander, Melodias then quickly left.

And thus finally, after a bit more walking, the duo finally met the small crowd and Alexander got close enough to lay his eyes on the bandaged man, sitting upright and giving orders.

The man they called the bear 'The Bear'.

And Alexander had to admit whoever came up with the name did a very good job because it suited the man perfectly.

Muscular and tall as a mountain, with broad shoulders and long thick sideburns, the man seemed to exude strength and power.

His bare upper torso was bandaged and his right eye seemed to have become unfunctional, judging from the bright red color the bandage covering it seemed to have taken.

But his left one still seemed feral, glowing with strength and ferocity.

It seemed that the rumors about him being injured though true were grossly exaggerated.

As Alexander was checking the man out, the fierce beast also seemed to be checking out the so-called divine son.

Damious had been getting some unsavory news about this boy and even more unsavory rumors claiming that he was intending to kill him.

"You the brat who claims to be the son of Gaia?" The bear gruffly spoke, his tone seeming to be laced with anger and malice.

Alexander almost laughed at this question.

"I have explicitly said in front of everyone that I am not a god or the son of any kind of god. Everyone in this camp can bear witness." Alexander coolly replied.

"Yes, yes, we have all heard it." From the side, Theocles seemed to passionately nod his head in agreement.

This made Damious frown a bit and he shot a quick, almost imperceptible glare at Aristotle, one that Alexander didn't fail to catch.

"Now the show begins," Alexander muttered in his heart as he was eager to see what the rotting old coot had cooked up for him this time.

Clearly, he had egged Damious to mark Alexander as a threat to his authority without giving him all the details and the bear had taken the bait.

Damious was really caught a bit off guard by Alexander's answer. He was ready for a series of questions, rebuttals, and mockery when Alexander claimed to have divinity, but what to do now?

Damious was a fighter and not a scholar.

He much preferred to just use intimidation, loud shouts, and his physical size to get his way.

But such tactics seemed unusable currently because of his injuries and the place.

He thus found himself in a bind. thinking the boy was two steps ahead of him.

Not only did he deny such claims, but he had also done so much earlier in a public space in front of an audience, thus automatically refuting anyone claiming that he was scared and was only lying to weasel out of the way now in front of the current default leader.

Well almost anyone.

The not-so-bright Pallidus tactlessly accused, "Then why are soldiers calling you Gaia' blessed? How could all the soldiers have done it without you knowing?"

"*Silence*" Alexander simply closed his eyes and moved his head, disdaining to even offer a reply.

He believed any human with a modicum of intelligence could come up with the answer by themselves and those who couldn't were just not worth talking to.

But Thoeclis seemed eager to discredit this fool in front of Damious, so he replied with a sneer, "What does soldiers calling him a god have got to do anything with him? You were there when he rejected all divine claims. Is the earwax too much back there?" He sneered.

"I believe all of us just wants to know how you knew." Aristotle's chirpy voice came to Pallidus's rescue.

"Knew? Knew what?" Alexander inquired innocently.

"About the fog. Why didn't you tell us about the fog?" Came Damious's angry roar as he flexed his muscular triceps.

'Rash and prone anger. Easier than Aristotle.' These words floated into Alexander's mind.

Then he said "I only told everyone that we were tired and lacked the energy to attack. I never uttered the word 'fog'."

"So do you know how the fog appeared?" A man from Damious's entourage asked.

"Surely 'I know everything in the world' does." Pallidus sarcastically sneered.

As a matter of fact, Alexander did learn in junior school how the mixing of warm, moist air with cold air formed mist and fog.

But he suspected none of them wanted that answer.

They just wanted an excuse to attack him.

Unwilling to play this charade for longer, Alexander blurted out. "What do you want me to say? That I knew about the fog but didn't tell you for some reason but did tell everyone that they were too tired and so shouldn't go?"

"Hehe, Alexander, you misunderstand. We only wanted to know if you could offer any more advice on how to avoid pitfalls. It's a long way to Cantagena." Aristotle craftily claimed.

"Sorry, I don't. I am no general." Alexander curtly replied.

"Yet, you can act like one. You went against orders to try and even succeed in preventing a full deployment." Damious coolly pointed out.

Then surprisingly he said, "Don't worry, I am not mad. In fact, I am quite relieved that you managed to prevent so many deaths. Aristotle here has told me all about your exploits upto today and I must say, am very impressed. So I would like to invite you to join my group." Damious magnanimously offered.

'This dangling a bait in front feels weirdly familiar.' Alexander thought in his head.

Refusing to bite, he gently, but firmly rejected. "Sorry, this group is my home."

"Hahaha, yes, I did hear about your strong loyalty. Tell you what, as your master is dead and as the overall commander of the mercenary groups I can set you free. I will even make you one of my personal guards!" Damious swung an even more delicious bait in front of him.

But Alexander swore in his heart, 'With your soldiers destroyed, you are commander of jack.'

He replied in the same hackneyed tune, "My master is dead. And now I exist to serve only my mistress and her father's group."

"Oh, that's good then. Because as her godfather and guardian, I have arranged for Cambyses to marry Damious!" Aristotle said in a crafty voice with a damn smirk, as if he had nailed Alexander once and for all.

Chapter 53 Aristotle's Regret

Women of this time were little better than slaves.

Some may argue they were actually worse because a slave at least had a chance to become free and an emancipated male slave had more rights than a woman.

Free women of this time were always under the control and supervision of a male relative, who wielded absolute power over her life decisions.

First and foremost was her father.

If he was absent, then it was her brother.

If she lost both of them then it would be her uncles.

If she was married, then it was her husband.

If she became a widow then it would be her son, and if the widow had only daughters then it would be her son-in-law.

And if she could not be placed into any of these categories, she would be handed over to a godfather or a guardian, chosen by her father at the time of her birth to guard and guide the fairer sex in his absence.

That godfather could hence arbitrarily dictate any and all aspects of her life- including of course marriage.

The only women who could escape this twisted societal structure were either powerful noblewomen or very rich businesswomen, who were very very lucky to have the stars align for them to create the perfect opportunity for them to escape.

But Cambyses was neither lucky nor rich or powerful.

As such, Alexander knew full too well a long time ago that if he wanted to get her it would have to be through Nestoras, Octavius, and Aristotle.

So, Aristotle's declaration though unexpected did not shake him too much.

But it did shake his new follower, Theocles who bellowed in rage, "Aristotle! Have you gone mad? We don't even know if Nestoras is dead or not!"

Plop.

But before this scene could develop any further, Alexander suddenly dropped to his knees and kneeled, submissively proclaiming to Damious, "Slave greets his new master. May my life be useful to him."

"Alexander, you, you.."Theocles eyes bulged out to the point of almost bursting open and his mouth hung open in shock.

'How can a blessed of the gods ever lower his head to anyone? Did I choose wrong? But what about the fog?' Theocles's mind seemed to almost overload trying to think of an explanation for the phenomenon occurring in front of him.

Even Damious and Aristotle were shocked by this.

Damious didn't think the so-called legendary rebellious slave described by Aristotle would submit to him on his first word and was delighted by the display of what he took as his own power cowering the slave to submission.

He started to believe these people lacked the ability to control this slave, while he, the leader of ten thousand mercenaries had the charisma and reputation to gain his loyalty and obedience.

Aristotle on the other hand was disturbed.

Very disturbed.

He had long cherished the thought of seeing Alexander's face ashen at having his lover snatched and he had even prepared a sarcastic speech to gloat at his misery.

But now, he seemed to get an inkling of the kind of monster he just annoyed.

Because a strong enemy was not scary but a flexible and willing to patiently endure humiliation was.

p Revenge was a dish best served cold after all.

He felt Alexander had submitted to his little plan a bit too 'easily' and did not feel assured at all because his rough understanding of the boy told him there was no way Alexander would ever go down so easily without a fight.

Aristotle was fully aware of the kind of feelings Alexander and Cambyses shared for one another and he expected him to at least show some shock on his face if not throw a tantrum over his woman as Cambyses did over him.

When Aristotle had told Cambyses of his decision to use her marriage as a way to obtain protection, food, and money for the group, the girl had burst into a tirade, screaming, stomping her feet, and even threatening to beat him.

She even begged him in a torrent of tears not to do this.

But this display had only hardened Aristotle's resolve as he felt sure this was Alexander's one weakness and the only way to deal with the boy and save his position in the group.

By making Alexander someone else's problem.

But right now, Aristotle was having second thoughts.

Because he finally began to look at the holes in plans.

When he first thought up this plan, he did not think too deeply about it because at the time he was still reeling from the shock of the news that the Cantagenas had gotten lost in the fog and got captured themselves.

He was deathly afraid of the meteoric rise Alexander would have in the group once soldiers saw his warning coming true and so when he heard Damious was injured and seeking to get treatment in his camp, he ran to him to find a way to use him to suppress Alexander.

And as they talked, from the losses they suffered to their supplies situation to how they were gonna run away, the talk evidently drifted to Alexander.

There Aristotle fed the bear a mixture of truths and exaggerations to try and get Damious to deal with the boy.

But Damious's reaction was lukewarm at best.

Though Alexander's little inventions pricked his interest a bit, he did not yet believe everything Aristotle was spewing and found it hard to believe that an eighteen-year-old slave could be the schemer told by Aristotle.

He felt that instead of Alexander being the criminal mastermind as made out by Aristotle, it was more plausible that the old man was just senile and incompetent.

Aristotle too sensed Damious's disinterest and felt he was underestimating Alexander like they did before.

But he found it hard to convey this to the injured man.

But then, Damious's attitude suddenly u turned after a runner whispered something in his ears.

All of a sudden the mercenary leader started taking great interest in the boy and was eager to deal with him.

This was because the runner had informed him of the two rumors.

As they talked and planned and schemed. Aristotle suddenly noticed something, suddenly he struck it big.

Because, by the hands of the goddess of fate, he noticed that the mercenary leader seemed to have taken quite a liking to the young girl attending to him, Cambyses.

Aristotle could not have asked for a better coincidence in his dreams.

He thought 'why deal with the boy by myself when I can make it someone else's problem.'

And so, reasonably assuming Nestoras to be dead, he introduced himself as Cambyses's godfather and proposed to give Cambyses's hand in a marriage alliance and her slave Alexander as dowry in exchange for food and security for his group until they got out of Adhania.

And Damious all too happily accepted, thinking of a hundred different ways he could off the traitor that lost him the battle and getting a beautiful wife to boot.

But now in hindsight, Aristotle felt he had been too hasty.

Because he forgot to take into account Alexander's now new status in the soldiers' hearts.

And he felt that the boy could have used his influence to put up a decent fight against his proposal.

Even Theocles who stood right beside him seemed ready to go to war on his behalf.

Thus sensing something not quite right about Alexander just folding to his request, Aristotle tried to backtrack, "Alexander, you don't have to so readily accept this. Nothing has been set in stone yet."

But Damious's loud, boisterous laughter drowned out any of Aristotle's words.

"Hahaha, good, good. Aristotle told me you had abnormal feelings for your mistress, but it's good you are intelligent enough to understand reality."

Then, acting as if the marriage was already done, he crassly assured, "Don't worry, as long as you follow my command, you will follow lead a life ten times better than you did under father-in-law. But..," with his voice turning dangerous he warned, "I am concerned about the relationship Aristotles says you had

with my wife. Although I am grateful to you for saving her, you are not to have any more contact with her. And after the ceremony, to ensure the safety of my bloodline, you will have to be castrated!"

This was an insane proposition because such procedures had a fifty-fifty percentage of survival chance at the best of times.

And now, not to mention the bleeding and risk of infection, just the fact that they would have to march tens of kilometers a day would be enough to kill Alexander if he was subjected to such a procedure.

"Damious, you think you can come here and spew such nonsense? You are just a loser dog."Theocles was utterly incensed at this proposal and if there were not several men protecting Damious, he certainly would have taken his chances.

"The words 'loser dog' struck a nerve with the twice in-one-day defeated mercenary leader and in a fit of rage, he bolted out of the bed and squarely punched Theocles in the solar plex, knocking Theocles clean off the ground.

Even tired, injured, and exhausted, the bear was nothing to scoff at.

But this display of strength and ferocity, though very impressive, failed to impress two very important men, Aristotle and Alexander.

Alexander was very happy to see his initial impression of Damious as more brawl than brain was true, understanding the brash, hot head would not be too difficult to deal with.

Hence he didn't even take the threat of castration seriously, as in his eyes, Damious was already a dead man walking.

He could find a hundred ways to take care of this one-eyed cripple.

Aristotle too began to understand more and more that perhaps he had chosen the wrong partner.

Because Alexander could not be dealt with raw muscle.

Or else Xanthine and Constans would have been enough.

So he tried to back out again, "Damious, Alexander is like my son and an irreplaceable part of our camp. I can never agree to such a dangerous procedure. Let us talk about the marriage alliance later."

These shallow, insincere words moved no one.

"The marriage between me and my sweetheart has already been set. We will perform a simple ceremony tomorrow and have a grand feast once we return to Cantagena." Damious unilaterally declared, treating Aristotle's words as fart.

Chapter 54 Damious In Love

Damious had been smitten with Cambyses the moment he had laid eyes upon the young girl, working tirelessly to clean, disinfect and bandage his wounds.

He felt the warmth of her hands, he smelled her sweet scent and he could feel the tenderness she treated him with.

He had also found the girl's demeanor very different from every other woman he had met.

Unlike most women who turned meek and submissive at first sight of his face and huge frame, he found her to be brave, strong, and independent, even running towards him eagerly to administer treatment.

And this was not even mentioning her body and figure.

Tall and slender, with a beautiful sharp face jeweled with soft, caramel eyes and long ponytailed chestnut hair, she was dressed in full-body tight-fitting leather armor making her look like a heroine right out of a portrait.

The armor hugged and accentuated her beautiful body, especially her curves, and made her thighs and hips stand out.

But the most prominent place that drew every man's eyes towards was her butt.

p Because her rear was truly divine.

Possessing a pear-shaped body, Cambyses had a slender torso with modest breasts but wide hips and a huge, jiggling ass, sculpted by the gods.

And that was also the very first thing that Damious laid eyes upon when he was bought first into the medical tent, her bending over and preparing some medicine.

He found that sweet ass to be mesmerizing and later interactions with her only made his love for her grow.

Damious had fallen in love at first sight with Cambyses and he was determined to get his woman as he felt only someone accomplished as he was worthy enough to possess such a jewel.

So, while Damious was thinking of ways to take Cambyses, yes, take, because Cambyses's own opinion or consent did not matter, Aristotle offered him a far easier way out, a marriage proposal.

It seemed that the girl was effectively an orphan and the old fool wanted to give him his goddaughter and a so-called, 'problematic super slave' in exchange for food and protection.

He on the surface agreed, because, though he had always intended to take Cambyses one way or another, he figured doing it this way would produce the least resistance from the girl.

He had judged, from the brief period of contact with her, that the fiercely independent girl would not likely be keen on the marriage and he felt he could use the welfare and security of her father's mercenary group as a bargaining chip to tame the feisty tigress.

The mercenary leader had no qualms about using such blackmail to get the girl's heart and decided that the help given to this mercenary group would depend entirely upon his mood and his new wife's ability to please him.

As for the slave, normally he could have just killed one without anyone caring one hoot.

But this proved to not be an option under current circumstances as he had somehow magically placed himself as the cornerstone of belief in many of the soldier's hearts.

So he intended to use the excuse of castration to make him die from bleeding or infection and remove his thorn from his side once and for all.

He had no interest in a slave, useful or not, obedient or disobedient, who he found a danger to his rule and his wife was said to be in love with.

And he will be damned if an old senile fool from a puny mercenary group was going to stop him from doing anything.

"Quartermaster, please do not worry. I fully understand and support my master's to carry out the procedure. And don't worry, with my medical skills, I have an absolute guarantee to survive the castration." Alexander calmed the furious Theocles down.

"Haha, that's good, that's good." From the side, Damious joyously cheered.

"Alexander, you....." Theocles finally had the time to calm down and think about what Alexander was doing.

Judging from what he learned about the boy, it felt like Alexander had already decided what to do and was just setting the stage up for his final move.

'But what was that move?' Theocles internally asked.

Damious was too closely guarded and his bodyguards kept an ever-vigilant eye on anyone trying to reach for their weapons and they even tasted all the food and drink before giving it to their leader.

Assassination seemed out of the option.

But if Damious did not die, how could the blessed of Gaia live?

'Am I just going to wait and see the son of Gaia die?' Theocles cursed himself for his powerlessness.

Alexander stopped paying attention to the internal fight he could almost feel coming from Theocles and decided it was time to make his exit.

He had better things to do and it was time to close this little clown show.

He said, "Master Damious, although you will be my master tomorrow morning, until the time the marriage ceremony has taken place, I am afraid I am still the mistress's slave and have to report to her. Thus I am unable to follow your command of not anymore meeting with her. Forgive me."

"...." Damious frowned at the well-thought-out argument and unable to counter it, began to find Alexander even more irritating than before.

Alexander, on the other hand, hearing no rebuttal, proceeded, "I was originally here to find mistress and deliver the news that her father, our dear leader has indeed died in battle."

"Who did you hear it from?" Aristotle sharply asked, almost jumping toward Alexander.

Without Nestoras and Xanrhine, Aristotle suddenly didn't feel safe in his own camp!

"From an Alcmene mercenary who somehow managed to escape and make it into the camp. He described Nestoras to the tee, saying he fought with him in his ranks and saw him die to a spear." Alexander made up the story as he went.

"What about the others? What about Xanthine? Why didn't you say this earlier?" Aristotle launched these questions in rapid-fire mode.

Although he suspected Nestoras's death, he still felt as if his body was on fire when Alexander seemed to confirm it. It seemed the old man was alone in this ocean of malice.

"That mercenary could not tell anything about the others, most likely because they were too few in numbers to form an independent phalanx unit of their own. They must have been scattered across different units " Alexander bullshitted again.

"What's the name of the mercenary? What does he look like? Where is he?" Aristotle impatiently asked, absolutely unsatisfied with Alexander's answer.

"He said his name was Hannibal Barca." Alexander pranked the old man. "He was Caucasian, had a full beard, and was ye high" Alexander raised his left hand upto his chin, "and I saw him run towards Alcmene's camp." Alexander gave him a random description of a man with words that just popped into his mind.

"Follow me then." Aristotle quickly commanded Alexander to help him find the soldier amongst the sea of humans.

"I have to give the news to mistress. She must be very worried. Do you know where she is?" Alexander had no intention of going on a wild goose chase with this old fool.

"You.." Aristotle spat out in rage,

Damious on the other hand looked at the exchange with bemused amusement.

But listening to Alexander mention Cambyses suddenly made him yearn to see his sweetheart.

So he fondly reminisced, "I heard my wife has returned to her tent, apparently upset at the marriage proposal. *Sigh*, the little girl must be scared that having just lost her brother, and father and now forced to wed a stranger. If I wasn't injured, I certainly would have gone to console and assured her and tell her that things will only get better from now on."

"Thank you, Master, for telling me. I am sure mistress is just overwhelmed by everything that's been happening around her. Once she calms down, she will naturally see that you are the best person for her. But this lowly slave has one small, selfish request that he would like to make if you permit it." Alexander asked with the utmost servility.

"I allow it." Came Damious's almost regal reply.

"Aristotle, the so-called godfather of my mistress has sold her for food and security, I do not blame him, that is the reality we are in now. But I can see Master truly loves her. So it is my minor request to you that you do not make things too hard for her. She has had a difficult childhood and my only wish is to see her happy." Alexander pleaded.

"You don't have to worry. I love my wife with all my heart." Damious gave a passionate but ultimately flat reply.

After all, in his mind, why does anything a slave with less than twenty hours to live say matter?

But Alexander appeared to be very pleased by the reply, as he burst into a huge grin, "Thank you, sir."

Then asked his permission to be allowed to leave, " Now, if you will excuse me."

But just then Aristotle broke out, "Wait, you stay!"

Chapter 55 Meeting The Bride

Aristotle didn't know why but he felt that letting Alexander leave this place would be very bad for him.

So he repeated, adamant about not letting him in his sight, "You stay. As her godfather, it's my duty to inform Cambyses."

But Alexander didn't see this old cripple as anything amounting to a real threat anymore.

So, he defiantly proclaimed, "I am afraid you are the last person my mistress wants to see right now."

He then bowed, "Now, she has personally urged me beforehand to tell any news of her father, so if you will please excuse me."

Seeing there was no way he could really stop Alexander, Aristotle signaled with his eyes to Damious to help him.

Damious too didn't feel good about a male slave, presumably his to-be wife's lover, being alone with his sweetheart.

So, he said, "Boy, I need a guard here. You stay."

But Alexander simply shot back, shaking his head, "I still belong to Nestoras's mercenaries group. I am not under your command yet."

This made Damious's face go black and a huge frown formed on his face.

He couldn't remember the last time a freeman, much less a slave had been so rude to him.

He had originally wanted to use his men to forcefully restrain Cambyses, but Aristotle talked him out of it, saying taking the group leader's daughter with such force so openly would likely cause the other groups to view it as Damious trying to annex other mercenary groups.

So, he could only let her go, with Aristotle promising she will be ready for marriage tomorrow.

But, now it seemed that the slave he hated would get to spend time with his wife.

"The leader has commanded you to stay, slave." Angry at the insolence, one of Damious's lackeys decided to step forward in his commander's stead, gripping his sheathed sword and blocking Alexander's way.

"*Clang*" From behind Theocles directly drew his sword.

But Alexander only drew jeers, "You want to restrain me by the sword? Here? In front of all these people? Hahaha...go ahead punk! Make my day!"

This made the man feel perturbed as he looked around his surroundings, identifying hundreds of pairs of eyes from all over the tent and even from outside scanning him, particularly from a little crowd that seemed to form to look at Alexander.

He was then reminded that they weren't in their own camp.

"Let him go." Came Damious's imperious command from behind, understanding that there was little he could do without causing a scene.

But this exchange also made Damious finally empathize a bit with Aristotle over his concerns with Alexander.

He began to believe that maybe Aristotle really did not exaggerate the abilities of this slave and this made him want to kill him even more.

Given the permission to leave, Alexander did not immediately scamper off.

Instead, he turned around to face Damious and smiled, "Master, is being too paranoid, I simply want to deliver the news of my previous master's passing to my mistress. Nothing more, nothing less."

He then put forward, "Master, let me convince mistress to bring you something to eat. It will be soon dinner time and I am sure you are getting hungry."

This improved the mood of the grumpy giant who suddenly yearned to be fed by his new love.

So he uttered, "Umm, you do that."

"Thank you. Then brother", Alexander turned to look at the man who almost had drawn his sword, "please come with me. I am aware how seriously master takes his security and I want you to oversee the food preparation."

This made both Aristotle and Damious quite pleased because the person Alexander chose was Damious's most loyal captain and blindly loyal to him.

Thus, believing that they would have at least some supervision over the slave, both men nodded with encouragement, and the trio of Alexander, Theocles, and the mercenary soon exited the camp, making their way to Cambyse's tent at the back with haste.

"What's your name, brother?" Alexander tried to make light conversation along the way.

"Gratz," Came the terse, rough reply.

"Brother Gratz, do you have any tips for pleasing master? I believe I can be quite useful with the right guidance" Alexander pretended to be very eager to start his new life of servitude.

"I'm no brother of yours. I'm a freeman and you are a slave." Came an angry retort.

"Haha, yes, yes, then please sir Gratz, may you share some of your wisdom on how to serve master Damious." Alexander corrected himself in the most patronizing way possible.

"No." Gratz clenched out the words through his teeth.

Alexander simply smiled and nodded, understanding the tight-lipped man had no intention of saying anything to him.

'They are already treating me as a dead man walking, huh,' Alexander smirked in his heart. 'Well, the feeling is mutual buddy.'

Soon under the curtain of the moonless night, their path illuminated by large fire torches lit at small intervals, the trio approached Cambyses's tent in silence, stopping some distance from it, in a large, largely empty space.

Here Alexander eloquently said, "Theocles, why don't you entertain brother Gratz here with some of your stories, while I deliver this very personal obituary to her."

Theocles instantly got the hint to keep Gratz here and before the man could say anything, he started "Gratz, let me tell you about the time I ..."

Leaving the two men to 'bond', with Gratz shooting a resentful look at Alexander's back, he made his way to the entrance of the tent, which was, strangely, making loud thudding sounds.

Alexander precisely knew what this was because he had heard it lots of times before, as Cambyses was known to do this when she was frustrated.

He deftly parted the tent and as his eyes adjusted to the low candlelight, he could make out a shadow, whirlwinding around the punching bag,

Her cheeks were puffed up and the engaged lioness seem to make each punch and kick with even more increasing power and precision, as if wanting to smash the punching bag to pieces.

"You will tire yourself out before you get a chance to hit Damious at this rate." Alexander joked.

"You...." Cambyses, only now realizing an intruder had entered was frightened and then stunned at the voice.

She turned around like a frightened fawn to see her beloved at the front gate and then uncontrollably bolted towards him, spontaneously bursting into tears along the way.

"Alexander! Wahhhhh." The always strong-on-the-outside girl cried uncontrollably on the shoulders of her slave.

"There, there, silly girl. Everything will be alright. Look, you even bruised your hands." Alexander cooed as he patted the girl's chestnut hair.

But Cambyses seemed inconsolable as she just bawled over him.

"Haha, what's this? Didn't you say you left all your tears at that corner?" Alexander then light-heartedly poked fun at the girl.

This seemed to wound the prideful girl, as she quickly gained back her composure, and then as if suddenly remembering something, Cambyses screamed, "Quick, leave. You, you shouldn't be here. Damious will kill you."

But Alexander simply drew a loose smile, "Relax, tiger. He said he will wait till tomorrow to kill me."

"What?" Came Cambyses's befuddled reply.

"Let's sit down first. You got something to eat?" Alexander nonchalantly asked as he strode forward towards her bed.

"No, Mean took everything other than a few hard tacks," Cambyses answered, still confused with the line of dialogue.

"Well, then boil some water and serve some hard tacks woman." Came Alexander's quip.

Cambyses still felt she was missing a lot of things in the conversation, but seeing Alexander make himself comfortable beside her bed, she nevertheless decided to follow Alexander's request, figuring she could ask questions in detail as they ate.

So she lit up the kindling already present in the indoor stove designed by Alexander and then put an earthen pot with some water in it to boil.

Alexander always tried to drink boiled water whenever possible and this little habit had even rubbed off on Cambyses.

Setting the water to boil, she took a candle to the back and produced some hard tacks from a small wooden jar.

But as she was returning from her little trip, she almost frightened herself to see Alexander somehow magically sitting in front of some beetroots that seemingly had appeared out of nowhere and a drinking pot that used to belong to her father.

"Sweetwater and hardtacks. Not a bad dinner considering our circumstances." Alexander beamed a bright smile at the wide eyes girl as he patted the ground, gesturing for her to sit down.

This calm, darn care for the rest of the world had a profound calming effect on the girl and instead of the bubbling and simmering rage she was just feeling, Cambyses now felt that as long as she was with Alexander, everything would be alright.

"Where did you get the beetroots? And I didn't see you carry the drinking pot" Cambyses asked the two obvious questions.

"Everything in due time, my dear. Everything in due time." Alexander rhymed. Then he pointed, "Now help me prepare these beetroots."

So the duo soon sat opposite each other, the woman using a dagger and the man surprisingly using his sword as a makeshift knife to peel and cut the beetroots into bite-size pieces.

Alexander was the first to break the silence.

"Congratulations on getting married," He almost managed to say it without smirking.

In reply, Cambyses only glared and points her dagger, saying "Your jokes are not funny. Don't try me."

"Hehe, what's the use acting all tough now, you eighteen-year crybaby." Alexander mocked undisturbed.

"Enough. I have been patient enough. Now, speak slave, your mistress orders you." Cambyses commanded in an almost regal tone.

She usually spoke like this with Alexander when they were alone and she wanted something from him.

In other words, this was her way of begging for something from Alexander

"Hehe, okay okay, let's talk." Alexander sensing the depressed girl about to snap, figured it was time to get serious.

Chapter 56 Barbed Alexander

"First of all, my condolences, Nestoras is most likely dead." Alexander delivered the heavy news. to Cambyses

And she seemed to take the news pretty well.

"Um," Came only a slow, single nod.

There was no sign of shock on her face, no crying, not even a yelp.

After all, she figured as much when Aristotle, not Nestoras had arbitrarily arranged her marriage.

A while of silence later, she muttered a small question, "Who told you?"

"You misheard. I said 'most likely' dead. We have yet to receive confirmation. But the Adhanians have surrounded and then killed or captured almost everyone. Only Damious and his soldiers managed to survive." Alexander explained.

"No one would have missed him if he died," Cambyses said grinding her teeth.

Then came a hopeful interpretation, as she looked at Alexander with pleading eyes, "But that means he may be alive, right?"

Alexander stared back at the pleading eyes, which were begging to agree with them.

But Alexander heartlessly dashed her little flame of hope, "We will have to wait till at least tomorrow morning, to say anything definitively, but if he was alive, he should have been back by now. Or at least someone from our group should have."

"Hahhhh." Came a long, heavy sigh, that seemed to contain an endless mix of emotions.

The girl had lost both her brother and father within a few hours and although she did not get on well with either of them, sometimes even to the point of hating them, they were still her kin, sharing the same blood.

Now, she felt all alone in this wide, cruel world.

"Well, let's be honest here, Cam," Alexander endearingly called her to break her out of her melancholy.

And then dropped a bombshell, "Him dying was not really that bad. It might be actually quite good."

The balls on this guy to say such a thing to a poor girl that had just been orphaned!

".... *Silence*" Cambyes only looked at Alexander placidly, choosing not to even dignify that statement with a response.

"Come on Cam, don't look at me like that. Octavius, Nestoras, and Aristotle, these three only saw you as a convenient tool to appease me. They never cared for you." Alexander again poked Cambyes insensitively.

"Is this your grand plan?" Finally having enough, came Cambyses's low roar. "To make me so angry that I kill you and then I follow you out of guilt?"

She then burst out, "You homeless stray cur, that's my father you are talking about. Your parents might have left you to die by the ditch, but at least my father fed, clothed, and reared me. Don't you dare talk about him like that!"

By the end of her tirade, Cambyses was so angry that she started brandishing her dagger in front of his face.

But Alexander seemed to not even notice this display of hostility.

He simply pointed, "Oh, then what about Aristotle? Would you feel the same way if he died?"

The surfacing of that name seemed to cool the girl, drowning her just anger for her father with endless loathing.

She also felt that this was Alexander's true objective and that everything else he had said was just a smokescreen to get her to answer this question.

She had felt like this before, like being a puppet, merely controlled by Alexander to get what he wants

And she hated the feeling.

So she decided not to play this game and directly asked, "What's your plan out of this, Alexander? Cause the best I could think of was a double suicide."

"Oh, my, I did not think you were that determined my love. But I would hate to leave this earth without first tasting that ass, hehe." Alexander made an obscene joke with a vulgar smile.

This caused Cambyses to flush with embarrassment, and she shouted in frustration, "You rogue scoundrel. If you don't want to tell me, then fine. Don't tell me. "

"Haha, when did I say I won't tell you? You are the star of my plan, of course, you have to know." Alexander informed.

"Me?" Cambyses was understandingly confused. Then her eyes turned sharp and her voice hardened, "What do you need me to do?"

"What do you think you are doing?" Alexander returned the question.

"Huh?" Cambyses seemed to have not understood the question.

Alexander repeated, "What do you think you are doing, here and now?"

"Umm," Cambyses looked at the peeling on the floor and the cut beetroots pieces on a cloth she had spread across and said confusedly, "Cutting beetroots?"

"Yes, cutting beetroots is part of the plan," Alexander nodded enigmatically.

This only drew a displeased look from Cambyses, unhappy with not getting a straight answer.

"Don't be like that. It will be just easier to show you." Noticing such, Alexander reassured the girl.

Then he brought up an older question, "You still haven't answered me, 'Do you see Aristotle like you saw your father?' It's important."

"Why? You intend to kill him?" Cambyses asked calmly and then quickly followed up with, "How?"

Alexander was surprised by the eagerness with she asked the latter question and so decided to reveal his list of targets.

"Him, Pallidus and Damious." He told.

"Did you decide to kill him all the way back when you came out of the command tent? Was that why you tried so hard to convince me that Aristotle was trying to kill you?" Cambyses suddenly seemed to have entered zen mode as she felt she could barely make out the stretches of Alexander's plan.

Alexander was genuinely feeling a bit proud that his disciple could see so far and so he decided not to insult Cambyses's intelligence.

He frankly revealed, "In order to marry you, both Nestoras and Aristotle had to go. I planned to convince them but yes, I did have a backup just in case."

This nonchalant reveal, especially with how casually he admitted to planning her own father, almost crashed her soul.

Yes, she and her father had their differences.

But still, he was her father and her own lover had plans to kill him.

Who could bear such a news?

She felt so hurt that even her tears refused to flow, almost freezing inside her eyes.

Seeing the wounded woman, Alexander surprisingly did not try and explain himself.

On the contrary, he seemed to add salt to it, "In some twisted way, I was quite happy to hear that Aristotle had arranged a marriage for you. And with Damious nonetheless. Now you have no incentive to protect the old fart. The stars have aligned to help me."

"Because you can get close to them using me and then kill them?" Cambyses asked in a robotic voice, eyes blankly staring into the distance as if she could see Alexander's plan.

"Close. You" He said pointing his finger to Cambyses, "will kill them."

This statement seemed to bring back color to Cambyses's eyes as she turned to look at Alexander and repeated, puzzled, "Me?"

She could think of no way she could kill all three men simultaneously.

"Yes, you. Why do you think I spent so much time trying to convince you Aristotle was an enemy? Because I needed your permission? No, it was because I need your help." Alexander heartlessly revealed.

Silence Cambyses was so shocked by the barbed words coming out of his mouth, that she literally had no response.

,m 'Was she just a tool for him?' She asked herself as she just blankly stared at Alexander with teary, out-of-focus eyes.

Looking at the rapidly plummeting loyalty stat of Cambyses, Alexander decided it was time to explain some things to the still a bit naïve woman.

He started with a heavy breath, "Hahhh, Cam. Let me tell you some hard truths we didn't tell you."

"Slaves can be killed by their master's anytime for any reason. This is a reality that's very hard to understand for anyone who is not a slave. This fear of dying anytime anywhere made me do things. Things I am not proud of."

"But I did do them. And sometimes I did use your influence to do them. But I never did it just for me. How do you think you managed to protect Mean from Octavius? It wasn't easy for me to protect her from the shadows. But I knew how much she meant to both of us."

"And so I bore the hardship and did it. But as I struggled, I faced the impossible obstacles ever-present for a slave and understood that for a slave to survive, to live, to truly have any real chance at being treated as a human being, I would have to earn my freedom and become a freeman."

Cambyes here decided to interject Alexander, "What did you do to protect Mean?" She asked curiously.

"Ancient history," Alexander lightly brushed off.

But she insisted, "I want to know."

So Alexander gave a very brief summary, "I had a few people always follow and look out for her. I told her never to be alone. And I asked Nestoras to restrict Octavius and ensure Mean's chastity as a reward for my continued innovations."

This was news to Cambyes because even as Mean's mistress she was unaware of the danger her beloved slave was.

"I didn't know anything." She said mournfully.

"She insisted that you were not told anything. She was afraid you would pick even more fights with Octavius." Alexander disclosed.

This revelation made Cambyes think that maybe there were things in the back she was unaware of and she decided to backtrack on the thought that maybe Alexander was not just using her to get his freedom.

Chapter 57 Convincing Cambyes

"Let's get back to the topic," Alexander's voice bought Cambyes back from her thoughts.

He then resumed, "I understood that I would have to become a freeman to have a chance at living like a human. And I tried to do that honestly. I worked myself to the bone and I almost succeeded. And, if we had won today, we wouldn't be having this conversation right now."

Here Alexander let out a heavy sigh, *Sigh*, but that's not what happened. We lost and I quarreled with Nestoras and then started the rumor. And I don't regret anything one bit, because if I hadn't done what I did, I would be dead by now."

Here he switched his pitch to a low, pleading one, "But that gave my master the perfect excuse to forever deny my freedom. But anticipating such a possibility, I had long before taken steps to ensure my freedom, through blood and death. Cam. I swear I had no intention of harming anyone as long as they gave me what rightfully belongs to me. The thing that I rightfully earned and they swore would give me."

By the end of Alexander's speech, he was choking on his own voice.

This rare display of weakness from, in Cambyses's eyes, the omnipotent Alexander melted the girl's soft heart and she began to look at the situation through Alexander's eyes and started to empathize with the reality he faced.

It was us or them, eat or be eaten, kill or be killed.

She then softly said, "You didn't kill my brother or father. That's why I will forgive you. And I have no qualms about killing Pallidus."

"But" here her tone turned inquisitive and even a bit puzzled, " Why is Aristotle doing this? He is old, has one foot in the grave and all his supporters are dead"

Alexander was very pleased to see Cambyses asking such questions.

Shaking his head, he said, "Aristotle does not believe he is old, weak, and alone. He believes he will live forever. He thinks by ousting you and killing me, somehow he and Pallidus can win against Theocles and Menes. The senile fool."

In the end, Alexander gave a disdainful snort.

"Theocles? Oh, yea, he was acting a bit strange. He gave me all the beetroots and I even heard he defended you against father. What's up with that?" Cambyses's attention was drawn to the unusual addition to their team.

"It's a long story, but the gist of it is that he believes me to be the blessed of goddess Gaia."

"Hmmm, a lot of people seem to think you are a blessed of Gaia. I heard everything while I was in the clinic."

Then Cambyses eyes turned into a crescent, "And I seem to remember asking you about it and you promised me that you will tell me by today. Well now's as good a time as any."

She then folded her arms, waiting for Alexander's response.

This put Alexander in an awkward position.

He had been far too busy to think of a good way to answer the girl and now felt torn between saying the truth or making it a bit malleable.

In the end, considering the future implications, he decided to do the latter, choosing not to outright lie and to cleverly evade.

He knew a simple, 'I don't know' or 'Now is not the time', will never satisfy the girl.

It might even cause her to lose faith in him permanently.

So he figured he would have to decorate his answer very elaborately.

So elaborately that she does not even detect that he did not answer her question.

So he started, "You are asking me if I am god or mortal, huh? Well, let me tell you a story. It might not make sense at the start, but you will get it once I finish it."

Taking a deep breath, Alexander then started his recount, "There once was a girl who lived with her mother. The girl was born blind and thus had never seen color.

One night the mother was giving her milk.

But the mother was having a hard time getting her to drink it because the daughter did not like the taste of milk.

So, to coax her, the mother said, "If you drink milk, you can see again, dear."

This made the girl very excited and so she asked, "Really mother? Then what does milk look like?"

The mother replied, "Milk is white in color."

The girl being blind had never seen any color.

So she asked confused, "Mother, what does white look like?"

This stumped the mother for a bit but she quickly came up with a witty reply.

"Clouds are white." She said.

But the girl had never seen clouds.

So she asked, "What is a cloud?"

The mother said, "Clouds float in the sky."

Then came the predictable question, "What's a sky?"

The mother still patiently answered, "Skies are where birds fly."

"What's a bird?" Chirped the girl.

Seeing that this was going nowhere, the mother began to feel frustrated, thinking her daughter was just trying to stall for time and not drink her milk.

So she cunningly said, "The heron is a bird."

And when her daughter asked, 'What's a heron?', the mother thinking she had finally won said, "Heron is white in color. And it snatches the eyes of naughty children who don't drink their milk."

But hearing this, the daughter started screaming in terror, saying, "Oh my god! The milk is going to snatch my eyes. I'm not drinking any milk."

"Hahahaha." As Alexander finished his story, came Cambyses's pearly laughter as she bent over and clutched her belly.

She laughed for a while and finally after the girl stopped laughing, Alexander asked, "So do you understand the moral of the story?"

"You mean to say I am that blind girl and you are the mother?" Cambyses intelligently got the point.

"Yes," Alexander nodded. "The mother had the best intentions for her child. But their perspectives were so different that it was very hard for the mother to convey her message in a way her daughter could understand."

"Heron's are white and attack human eyes because to the heron, the cloudy, translucent, moving eyeballs look exactly like a fish swimming underwater. But the daughter equated white to milk and the mother just trying only to scare her as being actually real."

He then craftily said, "My answer is very much like this example. That's why I asked for some time so I could think of a way to explain it. But now that I think about it, it's very hard for me to give you a straight yes or no answer."

After that he decided to give some sketchy details, "But the best example that I can give you is when I sleep I feel like I am in a hazy dream-like space, where I float and various 'things' engraved with strange markings float around me. I don't know where I am and I certainly can't talk directly to any god, but I can sometimes, somehow read the engravings on these floaty things. Sometimes they have useful information, like how to make sweet water or cure your constipation. Most times they contain things illegible to me."

"You did not have to bring up that." Cambyses blushed at being reminded of her embarrassing history.

What Alexander had described was roughly his memories floating inside his head.

But seeing how Cambyses was blushing and not asking further questions, she seemed to have taken it as some kind of mythical space.

This signified that she had at last bought the story.

Success!

And although Alexander did feel a tad bit sad that he would never be able to share his past experiences with his new love, he had chosen to hide the truth after a bit of deliberation.

Because he was afraid that, she might leak it accidentally.

Even if she said it only at home, the many slaves and servants around may spread it.

Alexander did not want his true origins to be known by anyone.

Also, even if she never told anything to an outsider, she might tell their children and Alexander was afraid that in such a case they might not look up to him, thinking everything he had ever done was because he had the knowledge beforehand.

But in practice, possessing knowledge and knowing how to apply it were two very different things.

There's a reason why the derogatory saying 'bookish knowledge' exists, which has the meaning that just reading a book does not equate to being able to apply it in practice.

Just like the sweet water example, Alexander was surprised to find the juices to have sour and bitter notes, because he didn't take into consideration proper filtering.

Alexander would himself admit that this consideration was pretty far-fetched and unlikely, but he didn't see an urgent need for Cambyses to know this and he did not want to take any chances with the future of his successor.

Or at least that's how he justified his elaborate little white lie.

Chapter 58 Cambyses's Rights

The duo finally finished chopping the vegetables and then Cambyses bought out a crude juice extractor.

Its design was crude among crude- just a wooden piece with a funnel on the top where small pieces of beetroots could be mashed by a mallet and a collector at the bottom to catch all the extract.

As Cambyses started 'grinding' the beetroot, she asked while keeping her head down, "So Aristotle dies, huh?"

She seemed to have finally accepted the reality that the old man, her godfather, had to die.

And although she didn't share much love for the man, she did spend her last eighteen years knowing him.

Thus it made her sad to think that he will be killed.

But Alexander did not seem to share the same sentiment.

He pointed out, "With your father dead and him leaving no heirs behind, you are legally entitled to all his property, including me. But you are a woman. And women in Thesos can own very limited property.

That means by law you need a guardian or godfather who will look after them. Currently, that guardian is Aristotle and after you get married, it will be your husband, me." Alexander said, already declaring Cambyses his bride.

This marriage proposal sounded crude, insensitive, and tactless even to someone living in an ancient, patriarchal society and thus somewhat irked Cambyses

She cut off Alexander with a shout, "Bah, who said I was gonna marry you? Keep dreaming slave."

"Hahaha, so which man are you gonna marry, mistress?" Alex teased.

"Why marry a man? I heard that in the east, even two women can marry. I will marry Mean." Cambyses tried her best to win the argument.

And this unconventional answer somewhat amazed Alexander.

Because in this time period, marriage itself was seen as a sacred, inviolable concept that existed solely between men and women to produce babies and form a family.

Homosexuality was quite prevalent at the time, Alexander was even well aware that Cambyses and Mean did not just innocently sleep in the same bed, they frequently crossed scissors.

But such practices developing into marriages for the people of this time was as absurd a concept as turning water into fire.

So to hear such 'modern talks' out of someone essentially in the earth's classical times, two and a half thousand years before her time, made Alexander feel quite impressed.

But he also knew that Cambyses was not really serious, she only said to win an argument.

"The water has boiled." Alexander noticing the rolling water informed Cambyses.

Hearing this, she quickly dumped all the extracted beetroot juice, along with the mashed beetroot pieces into the hot water, to get all the sucrose to dissolve in the water.

Done with that, she asked, "So you intend to get me to poison them? Using this sweet water? And father's drinking pot?"

With the few clues Alexander had given, the clever girl seemed to have mostly figured out the plan.

"Yes." Alexander lightly smiled. "Aristotle is currently your owner. And by extension my owner. Unless he dies, we can never be free!"

"Fine" Came Cambyses's sigh of resignation.

Then abruptly her voice turned icy cold, and she talked in a tone Alexander had never heard before, "You said, as a freeman, I couldn't understand what a slave felt like. Well, then why in my life have I never felt free? Why did I feel like a slave to my father? Why did I feel like a slave to my brother and why do I feel like a slave to Aristotle? "

Then Cambyses demanded in an absolutely domineering way, "I will help you poison everyone. And I will set you free afterward. But you have to swear to the gods that you will also get me free. Swear to me that I will be able to do things I want."

Alexander was ecstatic that finally, all the pieces were in place.

So he enthusiastically agreed, "Sure. I will make you a freeman. Not a freewoman but a freeman, with all the rights a man has. You don't have to pay me any dowry, you can keep all your father's property, you can work and earn money, you can keep all your earnings, you can buy and sell land and property at your will and you can divide your assets to your children as you wish. Will that suffice?"

"No, I don't need th.. that much." Cambyses strangely stammered.

It seemed that she thought the deal was a bit too good to be true and was afraid that Alexander might misunderstand her as if she was trying to blackmail him during a crisis.

She then proposed a revised agreement, "I can accept all the offers, but I also want to be able to sleep with Mean without your permission."

"Okay," Came a quick quip. Alexander trusted Mean as much as he did Cambyses and he knew long ago that both of them were more 'bi' than 'straight'.

But strangely, as far as Alexander knew, they only seemed to get it on with each, even though both had other female and even male slaves around them.

So Alexander saw no problem with this.

"But I will give you all my father's property as my dowry. And I also promise not to buy any male slaves without your permission." Cambyses offered a compromise by herself.

Alexander was in fact very pleased by the latter proposal.

When he had offered her the right to buy any property, he was concerned about this. But chose to just trust Cambyses.

So Cambyses restricting her by herself made Alexander think that his trust in her was not misplaced.

But the former proposal did not sit well with him.

Alexander detested the concept of dowries, "You should keep the property. It's your birthright."

But Cambyses reasoned, "No, think of it as a gift or even an investment. I know you have big dreams. Dreams so big that I can't even see them right now. But I want to see you build them. And you will need money for that. A penniless freeman is worse than a slave. At least a slave doesn't need to worry about his food."

This thought did cross Alexander before and he was truly in need of money. So reluctantly he decided to accept and promised, "Okay, in exchange for your help, I will show you a life you couldn't dream of."

"I will hold you onto that promise." Cambyses grinned.

Chapter 59 High School Chemistry

The water had been boiling and cooking the beetroots for some time now, its steam escaping through the makeshift chimney into the dark sky.

Seeing the beetroots essentially cooked, Alexander took the heavy, hot pot off the stove and slowly emptied the contents through a cloth strainer into another large pot.

Then Cambyses cleaned the strainer and helped Alexander repeat the process multiple times, switching the sweet water multiple times between the two pots, to try and filter out as much of the scum and debris as possible.

Normally, it would be at this point that they drank the water.

But today, Alexander decided to process the water even more.

He took out some of the limestones from his pouch and holding the crushed powder by his fist, he put all of it into the hot sweet water.

He then quickly placed the pot again on the stove and started vigorously stirring it with a large wooden spoon.

This move surprised Cambyses, but she did not react too strongly.

After all, she had seen Alexander do plenty of strange things before, and it usually produced something amazing.

So she patiently waited by his side, holding a large candle to better illuminate his surrounding.

What Alexander was doing was basic high school chemistry.

For him to get the people to drink the bitter poison he had prepared, he needed to first refine the sweet water more and increase its sugariness to hide the bitterness.

To do that Alexander asked the question 'Why does my sweetwater taste bitter and sour? And not sweet like juice?'

And he came up with two different reasons.

He reasoned that most of the bitterness was due to improper cleaning and from the unfiltered micro-fibres.

So to reduce the bitterness, he decided to thoroughly clean the beetroots beforehand.

Also, he used a cloth strainer multiple times to slowly filter out much of the micro-fibres.

Usually, like how the sweet water was being prepared in the medical camp, they used a large strainer with wooded holes to just catch the large beetroot pieces. and let all the small fibers into the drink.

But he hoped that the cloth will capture everything and only filter the water.

In this way, he hoped that these two additional steps would reduce the drink's inherent bitterness.

As for the presence of sourness, Alexander reasoned that most likely it came from the organic acids present, as he remembered acids being sour.

So he decided to use an acid-base reaction to neutralize it.

Limestones also known as Calcium Carbonate was available to him and he knew that he could use it to make lime water, chemically called calcium hydroxide, which was a base, and make it react with the present acids.

To make this, he would need to decompose, under heat, the insoluble and nonreactive with organic acids, calcium carbonate into calcium oxide, and carbon dioxide.

The carbon dioxide would bubble away as gas and the calcium oxide would then react with the hot water to make the base calcium hydroxide.

This base would react with the acids to make salt and water, thus neutralizing the sour taste.

That was the theory anyway and when Alexander put the limestone powder into the sweet water, he intended to put his high school chemistry knowledge to the test.

The reaction soon started taking place, characterized by the bubbles of carbon dioxide coming out of the water, which drew an astonished gaze from Cambyses, and after some time the bubbles died down, signaling the decomposition reaction was over.

Understanding this, Alexander stirred the pot for a while longer letting the base and acid have enough time to react, and then, finally after some time, took the pot off the stove and filtered the water one last time.

Two pair of curious eyes soon cast their gazes on the new product and from the color alone Alexander could tell it was a success!

Alexander's theory had been proved right and even under the poor candlelight, Cambyses could see a marked difference between this sweetwater and what she usually had.

It was much clearer.

Alexander then gestured for the girl to have a taste, and so without further ado, she took a small spoonful, blew on it to cool it down, and sipped it down.

"Honey! It tastes like honey!" She screamed in joy, thinking she was drinking pure honey.

Cambyes had only ever once managed to taste a bit of the crazy expensive liquid called honey and this taste reminded her exactly of that.

And felt ecstatic while drinking this, both because of the taste and because she knew that from now on she could drink such a delicious product from such a common product as beetroot.

"It tastes passable." Alexander, on the other hand, from the side unfeelingly commented.

To him, it was, though a lot lesser, still a bit bitter and sour. And now it tasted a bit salty from the newly created salts. It was a far cry from the store-bought white granular sugar he usually bought, but he figured that the sweetness had increased just enough to be able to hide the poison's bitterness.

"Passable? You mean you tasted something sweeter?" Cambyes asked with incredulity.

But only received Alexander's enigmatic smile.

Alexander then nonchalantly put his hands inside the pouch and brought a few sleepknot leaves Mean had given him, rolled them into a ball, and squeezed them, dropping a few drops of the leaves' juices into the sweetwater.

"*Gasp*" Came Cambyes's huge gasp as she looked at Alexander in disbelief.

She had finally figured it out,

She had been asking herself how could Alexander possibly poison those men, who were quite likely on high alert.

And only now she understood it.

The sleepknot leaves juices he used were regularly administered in small quantities as sleeping medicines.

This property had been known for thousands of years and the lethal effect of taking it in large doses causing a heart attack in sleep was also well understood.

So, it would be impossible for Alexander to make anyone drink a bitter drink.

'This was why he made a sweeter drink, to camouflage the poison' A light bulb went off inside Cambyse's head.

But this was only half of his genius.

Chapter 60 A Spoonful Of Sugar

Alexander was not done yet.

Because it was time to reveal his masterpiece.

He drew Cambyse's attention, as he put the piece on the table, "This might look like your father's drinking pot, but it's not."

This surprised the girl and she squinted in the low light to see better.

And Alexander was right. Because she could see that her father's one had one hole at the top of the hand, but this had two.

"Let me show you," Alexander offered a demonstration, "I will pour some of the poison water through the lower hole, and I will pour some cold, normal drinking water, through the upper hole."

Hence after he theatrically said, "Now look at the magic! When I cover the upper hole with my finger, warm, poisoned water comes out. Touch it but don't drink it." Alexander passed the mug he poured the poison in, towards Cambyse to judge for herself.

"But if I close the lower hole, now only the cool, normal drink comes out. Here," Then Alexander gulped down the water he poured and said, "See?"

This little demonstration astounded Cambyses.

She was both absolutely amazed and properly scared.

Amazed that Alexander had thought of such a magical way to deliver the poison and avoid security.

Scared because she understood this plan did not manifest in just a few days or weeks.

Alexander had made and gifted the very similar-looking drinking pot so long ago that she could not even remember it.

But it only hit her now that maybe he had been planning this even before she started properly putting on clothes.

Monster!

For a child to come up with such a plan, years in the making, only that word could describe him.

She suddenly felt the man in front of her might not be human.

But still, gathering up all her courage, she glanced at Alexander like a prey would submissively stare at a predator, and meekly asked, "How many years have you been planning this?"

Alexander certainly did not miss the shift in tone and simply smiled, "Hehe, why ask questions you don't want the answers to? But if you are so curious, I had it specially made without anyone's knowledge three years ago."

His voice then turned jovial, as he asked, "So you want to know how it works right?" Alexander seemed like a child showing off his new toy to Cambyses.

This was something called the "Assassin's teapot" and Alexander in his previous life had an antic replica of it as a party piece.

The teapot was supposedly invented in China and was rumored to have been used for assassinations.

He started explaining, "It's inside is compartmentalized into two, one for each of the holes near the handle."

"When the upper hole is covered, air pressure prevents the liquid in the top compartment from flowing."

"When the lower hole is covered, air pressure prevents the liquid in the bottom compartment from flowing."

"When both holes are covered, nothing flows, and when no hole is covered both liquids flow simultaneously."

Cambyses really did not understand the concept of air pressure but she did understand the gist of how the mechanism worked.

Finished explaining his new toy, Alexander afterward took out an ornate silk cloth and lightly wrapped it around the handle and the small hole, hiding it, and cautioned, "Always remember to keep your finger on the bottom hole. Think the holes are like doors. When the bottom hole is covered, the door for the bottom liquid, i.e- poison is closed. And when the upper hole is covered, the door for the upper liquid, i.e- normal drink is closed. Remember to always keep your finger on either of the holes at all times."

Then he offered, "Here, you practice for a bit. There will be food and drink testers for Damious's and you will need to keep your finger on the lower hole and serve them normal sugar water."

But when serving Damious, Aristotle, and Pallidus, you will need to seamlessly move your finger from the lower to the upper hole, and serve them the poisoned sweet water from the bottom."

"Here you practice a bit." Alexander offered.

Cambyes thus took the small drinking pot and spent a few minutes practicing the fluid motion she would need to make it appear as natural as she could as she slid her fingers from one opening to the other.

The technique she figured out was one where she would use her right hand to hold the handle and place the left hand on top of it, thus obscuring anyone's vision from detecting her finger's movement.

Satisfied with how the silk cloth hid the lower opening, and how her overlapping hands obscured her finger movements, Alexander urged, "Well let's go give Damious his dinner. He must be getting restless."

Saying so, he emptied the upper part of the drinking pot and refilled the lower poisoned part, placed it on a wooden tray along with some cups and hardtacks, and gave it to Cambyes to hold.

"We are not gonna fill the upper part?" Cambyes asked confused.

If the drinking pot only had the poison, there would be little point in such an elaborate setup.

"In time dear," Alexander said with a light smile.

After that, he informed, "You see outside the tent, there's one of Damious's lackeys who came with me to ensure that I don't do anything funny with his leader's to-be bride. He is called Gratz and Theocles is currently keeping him busy. We will refill the upper part in front of him from the sweet water in the medical camp. That should somewhat throw off the suspicion off of us."

Cambyes soundlessly nodded she said, "Well, here to hoping it all works. And if it doesn't..*cling*" She determinedly put her hand on a short sword, with a look of martyrdom on her face.

"Easy tiger." Alexander soothed.

In times of war, Alexander made everyone wear full armor and carry their weapons even in camp because he felt that in such a tense situation a sneak attack by the enemy or even a greedy ally was always a possibility.

But this had the negative effect of some trying to solve all problems by steel and not words.

Some hotheads like Cambyses and Mean.

"Everything will work out just like I planned," Alexander tried to cool her.

"Now take the tray and let's go. I have lots of things to do after they die."

Alexander's casual attitude of thinking of things to do after the assassination and thus belittling the dangerous endeavor worked to soothe the frayed nerves of the young girl and she silently picked up the wooden tray with a firm look.