

Herald 61

Chapter 61 Makes The Medicine Go Down

The duo came out of the tent and spotted Theocles off in the distance, animatedly trying to explain something to the block-faced Gratz.

Clearly, the latter had no intention to take part in this dialogue and was begrudgingly tolerating the 'talkative man' while he waited for the soon-to-be dead slave to convince his mistress to accompany him.

And the man was relieved to find out that he would need to wait long, as he greeted, "Master Damious has sent me to accompany you, madam."

"Um, then please escort me." Cambyses flatly accepted.

So, with the lead of the mercenary, Cambyses followed, towed by the two men behind, across the dimly lit camp that was saturated by dejection and forlornness.

"Wait." Cambyses cried out as they were passing the huge pot of sweetwater outside the medical camp. "I would like to take some sweet water to serve to Master Damious." She said her practiced line.

Then right on cue, Alexander sprinted up to get a jug of sweetwater for his mistress.

Gratz did not find this strange because he had not seen Cambyses make any food or drinks while he was there.

Traditionally cooking was done over an open fire outside and he did not think a tent could have a stove inside it

Moreover, he was also being distracted by Theocles, and against the backdrop of the night sky, he had failed to notice the smoke coming out of the chimney.

As Alexander approached the sweet water pot, he was somewhat relieved to see Mean not there, because he was sure the fiery chipmunk would not let go of the news of her mistress's marriage without a fight.

Alexander reasoned that Aristotle probably had a hand in suppressing the unpopular news to avoid unrest in the camp.

But surprisingly he did meet someone he had not seen since the first battle, Bartholomew.

"Alexander, what's all the rush?" Came the unusually cheerful inquiry from the man who was helping others fill jugs of sweet water.

"Bartho, where were you? I didn't see your shadow till now." Alexander exclaimed.

"I was in my tent sleeping. Only woke now." Came a slightly embarrassed reply.

After Romeus had found the unconscious man, the lazy pig did not take him all the way to the medical clinic. Instead, he dumped him in his tent which was much closer.

"Say, are you free now? I could need you soon." Alexander off-handedly asked as he filled up a jug.

"Sure, I can come." Bartho enthusiastically nodded. "What do you need?" He then placed his hands on his sword handle aggressively.

Bartholomew was the slash-first-ask-questions-later kind of guy.

"Just follow me." Alexander gestured. And then ominously muttered to him out of everyone's earshot, "And be ready to cut Damious when I give you the signal."

This made Bartho go a bit wide-eyed, but then he just nodded and grinned.

Alexander had decided to do this last moment because, although he was quite confident in his poison plan, he always preferred to have a backup.

And although it was not the most elegant plan B, Alexander figured the total surprise factor could catch them off guard.

Alexander filled the upper part of the drinking pot under Gratz's watchful eyes, and then after taking a swig of the leftover liquid, he offered Gratz the jug.

Feeling parched the man did not refuse and gulped the entire contents down.

"Ahhh" He let out an involuntary joyous moan.

"I hope you can say I made it myself to master Damious." Cambyses requested the mercenary.

Understanding where she was going, the man of little words nodded and uttered, "Of course."

Done with this little 'detour', the team of five made their way into the medical tent.

Along the way, no one questioned the addition of Bartho, who introduced himself as a medical staff.

Not to mention Cambyses, Alexander, and Theocles, who vouched for him, even Gratz, who saw him handing sweet water, thought him to be a doctor and verified the claim.

"My dear! I have missed you so much." Just as the group approached the guarded bed, headed by Cambyses, Damious exclaimed in jubilation.

If he was not injured and strictly told by the medical staff that sudden large movements would open up his wounds, the bear would have certainly gotten up to hug his to-be bride.

"Greeting, master." Cambyses bowed slightly bending her knees.

"I hope master would be kind enough to overlook my previous discourteousness. I have no excuse." She humbly pleaded.

"Haha, no no, forgiven, forgiven, I can forgive all your whims, my darling," Damious shouted exaggeratedly.

"How can I ever be mad at you, sweetheart? Instead, I am sorry that I got injured and could not be there for you at such a time. Poor girl, poor girl." He lamented shaking his head.

The two love birds seemed to have wiped out the existence of everyone around them as they flirted.

And this display pleased most of the people present, even Melodias who seemed to there reporting something to Damious but it confused one- Bartholomew.

But he did not outright cry out because he saw Alexander lightly smiling and remembered his warning to wait for the signal.

Thus he patiently waited, the bloodthirsty warrior's blood silently boiling at the thought of fighting and killing so many people.

But it would seem, it was not yet his time, as Alexander simply watched the play unfold.

"Master, as an apology, I have made some sweet water for you. It's meager but please have some with these hardtacks." Cambyes offered, placing the tray by his bedside.

"Yes, leader, I saw madam prepare the sweet water in front of me. It would be remiss not to have some." Gratz sprouted from the side, essentially saying in code that the food was safe.

"Haha, then please, please." Damious warmly gestured.

He had his eyes on the tray from the moment he saw Cambyses carrying it and could not wait to taste his wife's homemade cooking.

But there was one person who was very concerned by Cambyses's one eighty-degree turn- Aristotle.

He knew Cambyses and felt there was something wrong with how eager the girl was to serve the drink.

So he decided to be a party pooper,

"Wait, let the slave drink." He exclaimed in a crass voice that seemed to burst the serene environment.

Having the sweet lovely dovey atmosphere destroyed, infuriated Damious and he bellowed, "Bastard! Get this fu*king old coot out of my sight!"

"Master Damious, leader Aristotle did not mean anything by it. He was just being cautious." Pallidus tried to defend his old master.

'Master Damious, huh. So you have already switched sides.' Alexander thought as he did not miss the small change in address.

"He wants to let a mere slave taste my wife's cooking. I will have that old bastard's and that slave's tongues cut out!" Damious roared in indignation, as he lambasted Pallidus.

"Apologies my lord, a thousand apologies." Pallidus went down on his knees and begged "But leader Aristotle may be right, Why don't I taste it?" He asked as a compromise.

Even Pallidus found Cambyses's tamed acting a bit suspicious.

"There will be no need for that. Both I and the slave tasted it before offering it to master." Came Gratz's reassuring voice. As Damious's most loyal lackey, he felt personally attacked that they doubted his credibility or competency.

This was also the reason Damious reacted so strongly. Because he was more than a hundred percent sure, a hundred and a ten percent sure that because Gratz said it was safe, then it was safe,

Seeing the two parties in an uncomfortable position, Melodias bravely stepped forward as a mediator.

"Since Captain Gratz said it was safe and both he and Alexander tasted it, then it must be safe," He praised the mercenary.

"But since leader Aristotle has expressed his distrust why don't I have a little sip, to put everyone's mind at ease? I am sure all of us here would not mind something to wet our throats." He suggested.

Damious was reluctant at first but decided to allow Melodias to do this as a face-saving for Aristotle.

So the shabby mercenary stepped forward and held up a small clay cup as Cambyses deftly with both hands poured the normal sweet water.

As Melodias quaffed it down it with a satisfying "Ahhhh", Cambyses deftly and without anyone noticing, switched her finger from the lower hole to the upper hole and quickly filled another cup, which she then offered to Damious.

The mercenary leader snatched the cup like a hawk snatching its prey and chugged it down in one swift gulp, feeling the heavenly taste wash down his throat.

This sweet 'medicine' was the best thing he had ever tasted and somehow this one made by his wife seemed to taste even better than the one he had before.

It tasted sweet, sour, and a bit salty, which seemed to elevate the drink to another level, with the bitterness much reduced.

So he demanded, "Another!"

Cambyes obeyed and this time, remembering Alexander's advice to try and distract the mercenary leader from noticing her covering the hole, she choose to look at him directly in his eyes as she poured, even letting out a small shy smile.

Damious was smitten and felt that even if he was served animal food by her, it would taste like heaven.

He finally stooped after three cups and a bit of the hardtacks, strangely feeling a bit sleepy which he chalked up as his body's exhaustion finally taking over after having a hearty meal and decided to close his eyes for a bit.

And that was the last would he would ever close his eyes, passing away peacefully in his sleep, no one even aware of it until the next day.

Chapter 62 Aristotle Rests

Alexander breathed the biggest sigh of relief up until this point of his life when he saw Damious take a second cup of the poison.

It meant his plan had worked and Damious could not detect the extra bitterness over the extra sweetness.

At last, the main antagonist in his path was dead and everyone and everything else could wait.

But what if Damious still did not die?

Well if Alexander's poison was so shabby that even after two drinks one did not die, well then he deserved to get cucked.

Cambyes was even more relieved.

After all, she was the one actually doing the poisoning and she smiled gorgeously at Damious chugging the second drink down.

Of course, Damious saw this as his new bride happy that her husband was enjoying her cooking and even asked for a third round.

This created the image of a tombstone inside Alexander's head and he knew he had won.

Not even Rasputin could survive three massive overdoses of slipknot juices.

After taking three drinks in quick succession, with a bit of hardtack that Cambyses offered, the leader then stated he was feeling full and asked to be excused, as he shut his eyes for a bit, promising Cambyses last minute that their wedding will be as grand as a king's.

'I don't need a royal wedding with the likes of you. I only need you to die.' Cambyses sneered in her heart, though in reality she lightly patted her 'husband's' hand.

"Leader has fought two battles today and was injured in the last. I am sure he will accompany you all day tomorrow." Gratz spoke to his to-be madam from behind.

"My only hope is that he gains back his health." Cambyses played the part, though internally she was cheering, 'I hope he accompanies the ferryman as soon as possible.'

"Then please stay the night in our camp. We have prepared slaves to help you get ready for the wedding." Gratz suggested.

"I have my own slaves to help me." Cambyses tersely shot down the suggestion.

"I am sorry, but master has instructed us to help you get ready." Another mercenary spoke up, though his tone was more authoritarian than suggestive.

"Your master is sleeping. And seeing how your master is in love with me, as your mistress, you would do well to stay on my good side." Cambyses showed no sign of backing down.

"Hey, if the lady does not want to go, she does not need to go." Floated Bartholomew's lazy voice, laced with malice and aggression.

The black, short, warrior had his hands on his sword, looking manically at the, in his eyes, distasteful mercenaries.

"Ahem," Alexander's small cough echoed from the tent, "This is a medical clinic. A place for healing and not killing. So let's not draw swords here." He politely urged.

Then he smiled knowingly, "I believe we all know why this issue is being raised. Master Damious, quite rightly, is concerned about his bride's safety with us."

He euphemistically said that Damious was afraid of being cuckold.

"But since mistress is unwilling to go, and this gentleman here," pointing to the mercenary to wanted to take Cambyses, "is adamant about escorting her, why don't we reach a middle ground?"

"This will likely be the last night mistress spends with her father's mercenary group, with people she has been with for eighteen years. So why don't we let her stay in her tent? But she will be guarded, by one from our camp, one from leader Melodias's group and two from your group." Alexander suggested.

"Yes, that seems very fair." Melodias was the first to jump on the bandwagon.

"I myself will protect the chastity of the to-be bride." He heroically declared

"Then if mistress has no problem, we nominate Bartholomew as our candidate." Alexander quickly joined in.

Seeing they were politically outnumbered, Grantz nominated himself, and that forceful mercenary named Heliptos as their candidate to guard the bride.

"Great, why don't we have a round of drinks to celebrate." Cambyses happily suggested.

She offered a second round of normal drink to Melodias, then turned to Aristotle and poured "Grandpa, this is the last of my drink. Please have some of your granddaughter's handmade drink on her marriage night."

Alexander knew that the drinking pot could hold upto six small cups of drink, but he did not make the compartments equal.

The upper compartment was smaller than the lower one, meaning the teapot could hold two shots of regular drink and four shots of poison.

That meant that Cambyses, using up three of her shots, had only one left, which she was offering to Aristotle.

Aristotle's instinct still screamed that something was wrong with the drink and snapped,

"Hmph, feed it to your slave lover. I am sure he can't wait to have a taste."

"If you don't want it, I will." The fiery Heliptos greedily reached out to grab the very delicious water.

He had never tasted anything so sweet before until today, and if it wasn't a critical medicine, he would have drank every last drop of it.

But as he was about to swallow it down, a strong firm hand gripped his arm, freezing it in place.

It was Alexander!

"That drink is from my mistress to her godfather." Alexander slowly spelled out in a growl. "It's not yours to drink."

Heliptos stared back at Alexander with equal ferocity, tugging his arm to get it free.

This back-and-forth cascading of forces was evident by how the water in the small, clay cup was shaking, threatening to spill out.

Alexander was not doing truly out of selflessness.

He was afraid if two people from the same mercenary group died, it might draw too much suspicion.

Also, the bigger reason was he really wanted to kill Aristotle.

He even had the mind that if Aristotle did not want to really drink it, he would throw the drink all over him to humiliate him for not drinking something his own goddaughter had made on her marriage night.

With this thought, as the two men were locked in a weird arm wrestle, a wizened, rough voice suddenly decided the match, "Enough, give it to me" Aristotle said.

He could see the looks everyone was giving him and decided, 'If my goddaughter wants to kill me then so be it.'

And so begrudgingly Heliptos let go of the cup and Alexander took the cup to Cambyses who presented it to Aristotle with both hands.

Cambyses was tearing herself inside over the drink.

'Just drop it. Damious is dead. Let the old man who raised you live out the rest of his life in peace.' A part of her heart screamed.

But then the image of her love Alexander surfaced and it drowned out all her doubts.

'For my happiness, please die.' Cambyses roared in her heart as she offered the small cup with hands steady as a rock.

Her limpid, caramel eyes showed no fear, no hesitation, and no anger as she stared into the experienced, haggard, black eyes.

'So that's how it is.' Aristotle took the cup with a mournful sigh in his heart.

'You have decided to offer me a poisoned drink after all, dear granddaughter.' Aristotle came to the surprisingly correct conclusion.

The reason why the veteran came to this conclusion was not because Cambyses revealed something, but because she did not reveal something- anger and scorn!

Knowing the girl from the time she was weaned, of course, Aristotle knew her personality.

He knew without a shadow of a doubt that this marriage proposal would break her heart and possibly doom her to lifelong suffering, but for his own benefit, he did it anyway.

But now he could see none of the anger, helplessness, or even scorn in her eyes when she looked at him, only tranquility and happiness.

That probably meant she was sure that Damious would never wake up again.

Having figured this out, Aristotle surprisingly did not fight.

He had gambled one last time to try and somehow save his life's work from falling into a slave's hand and he had failed.

Damious was dead and faced with the reality that he was all alone and even the girl he had raised from birth had turned against him, he felt his old bones creaking and his will to live quickly fading.

Of course, he never blamed himself for making Cambyses turn against him. As a woman, her entire existence's worth was to fulfill her male relatives' desires.

So, taking one last at the clear liquid, he raised it and roasted, bidding goodbye to this world, "To my goddaughter's eternal happiness. May she and her children be free from all worldly concerns."

Then he downed it in one gulp, drowning himself in the happy memories he once shared with the little girl.

"Well, it's been a long day, please excuse me." Aristotle then slowly turned to return to his tent, intending to pass away in his sleep like Damious and at least spare her goddaughter from watching him die in front of him.

As the withered old man slowly walked out into the dark night, his bronze cuirass reflecting the candlelight like a lighthouse in the dark, Cambyses stared at the lonely, strong back, a lone tear unknowingly falling out of her eyes.

When today's sun rose, could she have known that today she would lose her father, and brother, and have to kill her godfather?

Chapter 63 Looking Forward

Alexander finally felt the exhaustion catch up to him as the burden of his existential crisis was at last lifted.

With him reasonably confident that Damious and Aristotle would soon die, he decided it was time to make his exit.

"Well leader Melodias, I will leave the mistress to you." Alexander cheerfully bid his goodbye and casually picked up the wooden tray with the drinking pot and cups, eager to get rid of the evidence as soon as possible.

"Don't worry, you can leave her to me!" Melodias thumped his chest in reply. "But are you sure you don't want to stay a little longer? Have something to drink?" Melodias politely offered.

"No, I am too tired and can barely keep my eyes open," Alexander revealed his exhaustion with a wry smile.

And he was not alone.

Almost everyone had been awake for close to forty hours, forced to march, fight, soak and run.

The fact that these men could still operate at such extremes was a testament to their peak physical fitness and how bullishly strong they were.

But now even these men seemed to have reached their limits.

"Yeah, me too. Don't know how much guarding I can do." Melodias frankly revealed he too was at the end of his ropes.

"Say, Melodias," Alexander softly called out, dragging Melodias to the side, "how much food does your group have? Cause my group has run out."

"Well, brother, don't worry. All of us know how hard your group has worked to provide all the medicine for us. You will not go hungry while we have even one scrap of food." Melodias solemnly promised, thinking Alexander was asking for food.

"I very much appreciate your offer, but that's not what I meant." Alexander corrected. "What I mean is that how long will our food last? Can we make it out of Cantagena with what we have?" He posed the grave question.

"Oh, that!" Melodias exclaimed with a smile. "Yes, your quartermaster Thecoles bought up the exact issue with leader Damious a while back. He suggested we send some of our soldiers in the night to scavenge some horse meat to make something called smoked sausage."

This news surprised Alexander because he was once again reminded he might be the most knowledgeable fish in the pond, but likely not the smartest.

Other people could too come up with ingenious and creative ideas to solve a problem.

Melodias paused after saying this. swinging his head to see if anyone was eavesdropping and resumed, "I am not supposed to say this because apparently there are a lot of spies within our ranks but what the heck, I trust you."

He then revealed a secret, "Remember when I told you I was organizing patrols? Well, I was actually assembling men to get some meat. And just now we got some of the meat coming in. That's what I was reporting to Damious. It seems that the Adhanians were too tired and too busy with their ritual to notice our men."

"And if they were not, we would be dead," Alexander quipped.

"Yes, but maybe were saved because the son of Gaia blessed us." Melodias strangely commented with a small smile.

But Alexander treated it as if he had not heard it and reminded, "Well if you do go to sleep, please remember to switch your watch with someone."

"Your mistress will be safe with me." Melodias thumped and reassured Alexander for the second time.

Then Alexander turned to the bloodthirsty warrior and holding the wooden tray with one hand, he placed his right hand on the boy's shoulder and apologized, "Sorry, I made you keep awake all night. I promise you can sleep all day tomorrow."

Though the reason Alexander had chosen him was because Bartholomew had slept the entire afternoon and was now likely as awake as a night owl.

"I am just disappointed I could not kill anyone today." Came the fierce reply.

Bartholomew's 'father' said that he had found the boy amongst a pack of wolves who had attacked his caravan at night and was left behind because he fell off the wolf he was riding on. He claimed to vividly remember the naked boy riding on a wolf, smiling and giggling all the way, nary a concern for himself as the bloodthirsty beast charged at them,

And even though, a lot of the sharp edges had been smoothed out after joining the mercenary group and spending time with Alexander, his raw animalistic thirst for violence seemed to have remained.

Or it could just be that Bartho is by birth an aggressive individual.

Who can tell?

"Well, you can kill as many as you want as we scoot. I doubt the Adhanians will just let us go." Alexander offered some weird words of comfort.

Usually, an army chasing after you was not a pleasant thought.

But this seemed to cheer the long-haired warrior up, who grinned and nodded.

As Alexander was leaving, Cambyses too decided to make herself scarce.

"All of you," she turned to address the medical staff still frantically running around, and as their boss, she commanded, "stop everything, have a bite to eat, and then go to sleep. If you work any harder, you will die before the patients do."

This order seemed like a divine revelation of salvation from the heavens above and the slaves, servants, and volunteers all quickened their pace to finish their immediate job at hand and then get some shut eyes.

Many were up until now running on pure sheer will and likely on the verge of collapse, so this instruction came in the nick of time.

After delivering this, Cambyses almost regally said to her assigned four guards, "I too am sleepy. Escort me to my tent."

Then she addressed her slave, "And Alexander, send Mean to me."

'You are getting into your role a bit too much Cam.' Alexander grumbled in his heart.

He did not miss how Cambyses chose not to use the word 'please' when addressing the guards or how dismissively she called him.

But he still played the role of a perfect servant, bowing and saying, "I will find her right away."

"Madam, we have a few slaves master has specifically prepared for you." Gratz offered.

But faced a quick rejection.

"No need." Came Cambyses's almost reflexive answer.

"Wait, send the most beautiful one." Suddenly Cambyses changed her mind.

This last sentence produced an almost imperceptible twitch in Alexander's face as he swore, 'Cam, the deal was you could sleep with Mean anytime you want. Not every other woman!'

Alexander suddenly remembered a funny saying he heard he could not exactly recall where, 'If a woman turns lesbian, it's the man's fault.'

Though Cambyses's own reason for changing her mind was far more altruistic.

She simply feared that after a hard day's fighting, these soldiers might choose to vent their desires onto the slaves and female servants.

Cambyses did not have the power or the space in her tent to save all of them.

And she, shaped by the thoughts of her time, also believed some rewards like sexual relief should be given to the soldiers.

So she chose to save the most beautiful one, which in her eyes was the most valuable and was thus most worth saving.

"Then I will send all and madam can choose to her liking." Gratz cleverly proposed.

This pleased Cambyses and she felt this Gratz might not be a half-bad slave.

But she ruefully remembered the man was a freeman and she had just killed his master who he is fiercely loyal to.

Not a prime candidate for a loyal slave.

And then she suddenly started looking forward to seeing how Alexander would gain their loyalty and make them follow him.

Alexander watched with a placid look as the girl left the tent under the care of four strong men and then casting his glance one last time at the 'bear', whose chest Alexander could no longer see moving, he along with Theocles made their exit.

As the duo walked out of earshot range of all prying ears, Alexander congratulated, "Melodias has told me how you solved our food crisis. You have proved to the son of Gaia why you deserve to be quartermaster."

"It was only through the wisdom Gaia bestowed me." Theocles humbly bowed.

"I am very pleased. But there's something I would like you to do." Alexander then handed the tray with the drinking pot and cups to Theocles and said, "Destroy the pot. Smash it into as small a piece as you can and bury the pieces separately over different places. Then retrieve the identical-looking piece from Nestoras's tent and bring it to me."

Being assigned this little job sent Theocles over the moon.

Because he finally understood it.

He had been strangely silent during the second part of the meeting with Damious because he wanted to see how the son of Gaia would overcome this titanic challenge.

And now he understood that the answer lay with the drinking pot.

Theocles had no idea how but he was sure somehow, some kind of poison had been delivered using this.

And then he remembered the identical-looking one in Nestoras's room, which until now he thought was this one and understood just how far back the boy started planning it and a chill went down his back.

But this was not a chill of fear, but a chill of ecstasy.

Pure, undiluted pleasure at being trusted with such a crucial information and at being able to serve such a competent master.

'He intended to switch this special pot with the ordinary one all those years back!' Theocles excitedly thought.

He made up his mind then and there to sell his daughter as a slave to Alexander or to Cambyses or if that was not possible even to Mean!

Selling a freewoman as a slave to a slave!

How ludicrous!

Theocles swore, "Unless a god comes down to earth, no one can find the smallest traces of it. If I fail, may I be smitten out of existence," then disappeared into the night.

But why did Alexander not discard the evidence himself?

Because the one downside of being considered divine was the constant presence of the 'paparazzi' i.e- the common soldier dying to get a look at him.

Even this particular secluded spot only existed because most of the soldiers were out scavenging horse meat, but Alexander would bet anything once he went somewhere suitable where he could bury the pottery, a thousand eyes would greet him.

So, delegating his task to the much less conspicuous Theocles, Alexander made his way to the outer medical camp to look for Mean and after a bit of asking around found out she had gone to another camp, to supervise the curing of the meat into smoked sausages.

That's why he didn't meet her last time and that was also why she did not yet get the news about her mistress's marriage and kick up a storm.

Following Cambyses's order, Alexander thus sent a messenger to Mean, telling her to return to her mistress's side as soon as possible.

While he was there, Alexander coincidentally saw his mistress stopping to admire the earthen pot and then as if noticing him even through the night's dark background, flashed him a big, happy grin.

Cambyses stopped there because as she was passing the large earthen pot, she was struck by a sudden realization.

The realization that Alexander had sent her to get the beetroot all the way back then just to set the stage for his ultimate play.

And the comprehension of just how competent her husband was sent the girl's heart reeling and she felt herself wet her pants in excitement.

And as fate would have it, her eyes by coincidence caught hold of the man in question, and so she involuntarily grinned, her smile hidden from the guards behind her.

Yet, Alexander did not quite understand the meaning of this but deciding it was finally time to get some sleep, and determining anything and everything else could wait till sunrise, he made his way to his tent to get some much-needed shut-eye.

He was dog-tired and he had a big day tomorrow.

Chapter 64 Ptolomy

While Alexander was getting some much-needed shut-eye, Amenheraft entertaining a few strange guests, and Manuk busy overseeing the funeral rites of the dead and the sacrificed, Nulafzam and a few others found themselves almost sprinting through the desolate, wet, pothole-ridden streets of Adhan.

Only the stars blinked overhead, their minuscule glow shading the pitch-black night in an eerie glow, the light making the city appear to be a necropolis, all its vitality sucked out.

The dingy, narrow streets that the men traveled by were jeweled by mostly ruined, barely standing shabby houses, many of them missing doors and windows, and even their occupants, most homes had turned to tombs and mausoleums for their dead occupants, while some housed people sprawled across the bare floor as if they were dead, their hands and feet caked with mud and dirt.

Some could even be seen sleeping smack in the middle of the road, their faces half submerged in a dirty puddle, likely fainting after drinking from it.

These people slept with nary a care in the world, leaving everything bare to the elements for the drought had snatched all their possessions long, long ago.

Now, they lived only by the robotic instincts of their body to live.

The group had little fluctuations in their mood at this scenery.

They had grown inured to such display over the last three years and even before then, as soldiers campaigning to foreign lands, they had seen and arguably done things much worse.

But for Nulafzam, where it did hurt was that the jewel city of the east, Adhan had been reduced to this dried husk of a skeleton in just three years.

And it stung him even more that he probably would never be able to see this city again.

The group quickly crossed the city's outer ring into the inner ring, one reserved for the ones with not red, but blue blood- the nobles.

Nulafzam still would sometimes be astonished by how crossing just a simple wall could make such a big difference in one's experience.

There were no signs of the hunger, destitution, poverty, and desperation here that he had seen just earlier.

Everything here was clean, prim, and proper, with wide roads for carriages, magnificent architecture, and nice, clean air.

The inner circle wall seemed to have filtered all the unpleasantness out, separating the reality of being rich from the reality of being poor.

These things did sometimes ring inside the dubbed by the nobles- oddball Nulafzam, but not right now.

He had much more pressing concerns, concerns about his master- Ptolomy.

The group naturally made their way to the most magnificent architect piercing the skyline, the palace, flashing their unusual seal at every checkpoint to gain access.

As they approached the royal palace draped in the night's shadow with its spires reaching to the stars, these hooded men inconspicuously made a right turn, evading the main entrance and choosing to enter the palace by a secret passage.

It should be noted that secret passages were not all like what Hollywood liked to portray them as, ultra-hidden, narrow passages that attackers could sneak through to attack and take down an otherwise impregnable castle.

Although such things did happen, it was once in a blue moon occurrence, aided by lots of additional factors.

Usually, though secret passages were narrow, they were rarely 'secret'. Instead, they were mostly guarded and protected by both men and materials like gates, used to get things in and out of the castle.

It could be mundane things like food and livestock for the kitchen which would otherwise clutter the main entrance,

Or it would be prohibited or shameful goods like whores and goods officially banned by the law.

It could be even a way to secretly pass information without the knowledge of the prying eyes of so many of the servants.

The uses for a secret passage were endless and so to prevent their exploitation by the enemy, they were designed with narrow choke points, made to funnel soldiers into narrow corridors and thus negate the attacker's numerical advantage and so allow a small number of castle guards to hold off against a very large number of enemies.

Nulafzam's group made their way to one such passage and were quickly let through into a dimly lit room.

Here the group stooped and Nulafzam alone was gestured to enter the heavy wooden door at the other side of the room, which he with practiced motion pushed open and enter.

The familiar room was dimly lit, with another heavy wooden door on the opposite side and empty, save a table and two chairs that decorated its center.

On the table lay some bread and a glass of water, refreshments for the spy as he waited for his master's arrival.

The famished man quickly sat down and started to wolf the meal, determined to finish it before the king and soon-to-be the ex-king arrived.

It would be a major breach of etiquette if a man of royalty was made to wait for his subordinate to finish his meal to hear a report.

With his meal quickly done, a few moments later, the heavy wood soundlessly opened, to reveal a thin, clean-shaven man with sunken cheeks and curly black hair, Ptolemy.

"Greetings Your Majesty," Nulafzam did a full bow toward the simply dressed man.

"I am no king." Came a young voice.

This hurt Nulafzam more than it did the boy in his mid-twenties.

"This servant was useless and had no excuse." Nulafzam hung his head in apparent shame.

"And what could you have done differently?" Ptolemy asked almost with self-derision.

'Nothing' was the reply that formed inside Nulafzam's heart.

He suspected even if he were to back in time, he would be able to do nothing differently to change the outcome of the battle.

So he replied to his master with a wall of silence.

"Hahhh, well it seems Ramuh has truly blessed my brother." Seeing Nulafzam wallow in self-pity, Ptolemy let out a sigh of resignation.

He could realistically only blame his loss on luck.

Then he asked, "Tell me in detail what happened. I did hear bits and pieces, but I want the full details of the battle, both the battles."

"Yes," The spy started his recount, "We met the Cantagenan force of fifty thousand with our twenty thousand, but Manuk had hidden an additional fifteen thousand of the elite Raskun slingers in the woods to use as a pincer force.."

"So the Raskun slingers are really here! Do you know how Manuk bought them? And how did he get here in the first place?" Ptolomy asked a question he just could not find an answer to.

"I heard he put them on the cavalry horses and rode day and night," Nulafzam informed.

"Horses? Cavalry? Is the heavy cavalry here too?" Ptolomy had gotten no report of Adhanian cavalry being present.

"No, he only used the horses from the cavalry. I heard most died from the march." Nulafzam said what he knew.

"I see. Then tell me about the lightning strikes." Ptolomy asked the thing he was most interested in.

"It's like I reported. The sudden lightning strike destroyed the charge of the Sycarian cavalry and it somehow then both destroyed itself and its infantry. The Raskuns only picked off the leftovers." Nulafzam revealed the tragic news with bitterness almost dribbling down.

"*Sigh*" Ptolomy heavily sighed and shook his head, 'So close yet so far.' his heart muttered.

In some unknown corner of his heart, he had hoped maybe Nulafzam's recount would contradict the report he sent via a spy.

"And the fog?" Ptolomy again asked, wanting to know just how much did Ramuh bless his half-brother.

He was still unclear on the details of this particular 'magical' phenomenon as it happened just a while ago.

"Yes, but before that, I have confirmed a stray lightning bolt had killed general Agapios just after the first battle ended." Nulafzam delivered another heavy news.

And this, as he had suspected, sent the young ruler's mind into a tumble.

He did not doubt the authenticity of the report for a moment as Nulafzam would never in a million years report something so grave without a hundred percent guarantee,

And he did not particularly care about Agapios's death either.

But he did care how he died.

Of the all things he could have been killed by it had to be a lightning strike.

Up until now, he had still hung onto the barest, thinnest hope that maybe, even with the appearance of two miracles, based on the terror Amenheraft's father had submerged the nation in, he could somehow fight it out.

Or at least negotiate some kind of peace settlement where he would give up all political power, in exchange for Amenheraft swearing in front of the gods to not hurt or kill him.

It was admittedly a long shot, but now, with Adhania's most hated general killed by a divine strike from Ramuh, even that possibility seemed to turn to 'fog'.

Noticing his young master dazed and dejected, Nulafzam could not really find words of comfort.

What words of comfort could someone say to a person who had the keys to controlling the strongest superpower in the east almost in his grasp, only to lose it not because of bad decisions or being outplayed by the enemy, but because of fate?

Hence he decided to carry on with his report like a drone, providing his master with the most accurate depiction he could draw of the peril he was in.

"The Cantagenans seemed close to breaking the cauldron when the fog rolled in and they lost their coordination, resulting in being caught by a counterattack that saw all of them captured."

Nulafzam delivered the hard news.

"Um, and I have seen all of them being sacrificed Ramuh," Ptolomy revealed an information even Nulafzam did not know.

From atop his chamber, he could see for tens of miles and he spotted the distinctive ritual taking place just outside the city.

"So what do we do?" The tall man then asked his spymaster.

Chapter 65 Flight

Ptolomy had already understood his time on the throne was up.

What he was really asking Nulafzam was 'How to escape?'

"Master, if we want to have any chance at survival, we must leave now. My sister will take you with open arms." Nulafzam offered.

Then the man urged his master "I have already noticed strange gazes while coming here and many soldiers tried to ask me about the details of the battle. The winds have already changed and they are not in our favor."

Ptolomy let out a heavy sigh and determined said, "Then let's go now. We are ready."

After that, he knocked on the door and it was pushed open by a fair, dainty hand, revealing a beautiful young girl in a commoner's cloth.

Behind her were two burly men, each carrying heavy sacks on both their hands and back.

As the small, gilded shoes soundlessly trekked across the stone floor, Nulafzam bowed and greeted, "Greeting, Princess Hellma."

The wheat-colored girl, with a simple ornament adorning her dyed black hair, soundlessly nodded and then stood beside her brother, her limpid eyes seemingly unconcerned by the perils that lay ahead.

"From this moment on, we are no longer royalty. Do not bow to address as such in public." Ptolemy instructed.

And though such a command, wounded the spy's heart, he still understood and complied, "As you wish, master Ptolomy."

Amenheraft would surely send his armies to hunt down his father's killers, and escaping would be much harder if they stood out like sore thumbs among the general populace.

"I am also no longer Ptolomy and she is no longer my sister, Hellma. From today, I am Ankesh and this is my slave Numean. I am the heir to a small noble family in Leguna and I came to Adhan to secure some food from Pundit Muazz. And you are my family's guard." Ptolomy explained his cover story.

"Understood, lord Ankesh. Then please follow me." Nulafzam did not spare much more words, as he almost herded the people out of the palace through the passage.

He had felt it when he was coming here and knew it was rapidly turning dangerous for the rebels, especially the royal siblings.

Many nobles who rebelled might choose to defect once more and hand the two to Amenheraft for amnesty.

Thus, once the most powerful man in Adhania and his sister- the famed beauty of the kingdom- were forced to tuck their tail between their legs and run from the very city they once ruled.

In addition, they could take almost nothing of value they owned with them, afraid such glitter will attract the eyes of bandits or worse the mercenaries still outside the city.

So, with a handful of coins, and little food and water, they appeared outside the secret passage where now a contingent of about fifty riders awaited them.

Out of the tens of millions of people he once lorded over, out of the hundreds of thousands he commanded as the army, this was the entirety of people considered loyal by Ptolomy, a mere fifty, not five thousand, not even five hundred but just fifty, less than many merchants would have to protect their wares.

But Ptolomy had little time to wallow in his lack of influence and after he and the spies donned their armor, they straddled their horse and rode.

Waving the banner of the royal family, they rode like the wind, not one checkpoint daring to stop the mass of fifty soldiers waving the flag of Ramuh.

As Nulafzam felt the rush of wind in his face, his eyes all of a sudden spotted a large trail of smoke on the horizon, which he found most unusual.

Because the smoke seemed to come from the inner district which housed the nation's elites and was an unlikely place for a fire to start as there were protocols that were in place to stop any such occurrences.

This was added to the fact that it had just rained and most places were still damp and wet, miserable conditions for a fire to start.

So in Nulafzam's mind, only one word appeared- sabotage.

'But who? And were they friends or foes' He asked himself.

The group of riders managed to escape the shadowy clutches of the city at the nick of time, because while they were busy running, Amenheratf was entertaining a few unusual guests.

These 'guests' lay prostrated on the ground in front of him, crying, pleadings, and asking for his forgiveness.

Many even offered their own life in exchange for amnesty for their families!

Yes, these were the rebels, some of whom sneaked here to swear fealty to their new king, after bearing witness to the miracles he performed.

Amenheratf looked at these craven despots with unfeeling eyes and an unmoved heart.

But as much as wished, unfortunately, he understood the reality that he could not kill them all like he actually wished to.

Because such drastic measures would inevitably push these and other nobles who were on the fence off the edge and with nothing to lose, they would fight him to the bitter end, only prolonging the suffering for everyone, with nothing but personal satisfaction to gain for Amenheratf.

A lesser, more impulsive lord, like Amenheratf's father, might have chosen such a course of action, but not him.

So he was now left to figure out how to properly punish them.

He racked his brain to arrange the appropriate level of punishment that maximizes their pain and suffering without causing them to rebel and soon came up with a blueprint.

"Whoever brings me Ptolomy and Hellma will receive special consideration." Amenheratf made a standard declaration.

None of the rebel nobles were surprised by this classic move, a move so classic, that calling it classic would be considered classic.

But classics were called classics because they worked.

Capturing the rebelling royals would essentially decapitate the rebellion as the nobles would have no one legitimate to rally behind.

And understanding this these nobles had already asked their forces in the city to capture Ptolomy if the situation presents itself, though they did think such a scenario was highly unlikely.

They had all assumed that Ptolomy would hole himself inside the palace and choose to defend his city to his dying breath and never considered the young rebel would so decisively simply leave the nest and fly away.

The reason why Ptolomy had done so was because he was under no illusion that once the soldiers learn of Amenheraft's three miracles, most will desert him at the drop of a hat.

Only Nulafzam and the fifty people who followed him were ideologically and personally motivated enough for him to trust them.

Add to the fact that Amenheraft had an army and the army sent to help Ptolomy had been defeated twice by Amenheraft himself, flight was the only real option for Ptolomy.

But without having the time to consider such minor intricacies, and not knowing their prey had already escaped to the woods, each of the nobles made more grandiose claims than the other, blaming everything on Ptolomy and trying to wash themselves of any guilt.

It seemed the fault of their rebellion was everyone else's except theirs.

But such blathering did not move Amenheraft one bit.

"We were coerced, Your Majesty."

"We were threatened, Your Majesty."

"We were forced, Your Majesty".

"Ptoloy held our access to food and water as hostage, Your Majesty."

"We were bewitched by that sorceress Hellma, Your Majesty."

Everyone had an excuse for everything, except the true excuse, except the true reasons they all threw their dice with Ptolomy.

And Amenheraft wanted to hear them say it from their own mouth.

Fed up with this nonsense, the king spoke languidly and almost dismissively, "I have had a very long day and I am tired of hearing these trites I have heard a million times before."

"So unless you are interested in telling me the truth why you rebelled, then leave. I will decide your punishment once I take back my city." He issued a naked threat.

This frankness surprised the nobles.

Usually, veteran politicians like them spoke in a roundabout, equivocal way because it left all the participants with multiple ways to interpret a saying and thus enabled them to circumnavigate any landmines they might accidentally set off.

So they were caught off guard by the king's demands to so openly incriminate themselves.

Noticing the nobles' reluctance but not a total rejection of his proposal, Amenheraft pushed them more, " Whatever you say as your reason, I will not treat you any differently for it. I swear it by the name of my father Ramuh."

Then he openly said, "You all rebelled because you thought Ptolomy could give you things I could not. I am more interested in knowing the things you desire and coming to an agreement to prevent such uprisings in the future."

This display of political foresight moved the nobles, many of who had grown disillusioned with the previous king's rule and considered Amenheraft to be the same bad apple from the bunch.

But it seems they were wrong, because this time, the apple had likely fallen far from the tree.

They also were aware that if Amenheraft truly decided to look into it, he would be able to uncover most of their skeletons in the closet.

So a few of them decided to reveal these themselves and try and earn some brownny points.

"I did it for revenge for my wife and daughter." A middle-aged noble blurted out.

"A lot of us did." Another joined in.

"I believed the king had lost the mandate of heaven."

"Ptolomy promised me the hilly mines."

"I smuggled ores into Tibias and they blackmailed me."

Once one confessed, it seemed the floodgates had been opened, and all their dirty desires and wishes came pouring out to wash Amenheraft's feet.

And the king listened with relish as he demonstrated the ability to manipulate and channel his will into the minds of his subjects.

The sign of a true politician,

Chapter 66 The King's Decision About The Mercenaries

The reasons for the rebellion were just as Amenheratf expected.

Though a few had chosen to participate out of greed and lust for power, most had done so because the royal family had lost their trust and confidence.

Instead of Ptolomy being some genius able to sway the hearts and minds of nobles and the populace, or the rebellion being a result of the appearance of the drought- a divine sign that foretold the end of Adhania as many people claimed, it was really fueled by the incompetent ruling of his father.

Many things he did had the effect of pushing the nobles out, allowing Ptolomy and foreign powers like Tibias to infiltrate and with a bit of help from mother nature enlarge the cracks and ultimately instigate a full-scale rebellion.

Listening to the reasons, Amenheraft thus decided it was high time for major reforms, or a repeat of the situation was inevitable.

As Amenheraft was swimming in all his ideas, from his next move after he took back the throne, to how to punish the rebels, to how to deal with the foreign powers, and even about what to do about the mercenaries a few kilometers away from him, a herald's loud from outside the tent suddenly snapped his concentration.

"Report! Your Majesty." A familiar voice from outside the camp called out.

"Enter." Came the king's regal reply.

The man entered the opulent tent and was the cream of the crop of his profession as he did not even glance at the prostrating nobles.

He simply saluted and addressed the king, "Archpriest Manuk has sent me to deliver an urgent message."

Amenheraft was surprised by this as he could not think of a real situation right now that would require his involvement and one that Manuk could not solve by himself.

So he asked the nobles to excuse themselves, "I have heard all your reasons and claims. Stay the night here and I will escort you back to the city tomorrow."

The nobles all breathed a collective sigh of relief at this statement as it signaled that there was still room to negotiate with the king.

With Amenheraft not choosing to execute them outright, but instead taking them hostage, it likely meant he would heavily punish them, even executing some of them but not weed out their roots.

At least, their bloodlines would be allowed to continue, though almost inevitably their standing in Adhania would likely plummet.

But for rebels, even this result was highly sought after.

Amenheraft's father would not have likely even granted them such.

So all of them said some flattering platitudes and then quickly got their sore appearance out of the king's sight.

"What is it that could not wait till morning?" Amenheraft raised his tired voice.

"Your Majesty, I am sorry, but the Captain of the royal guards, Beirut has succumbed to his injuries and died just moments ago." The messenger then performed a hand gesture done for the safety of the soul of the deceased.

Amenheraft did not expect to lose both his sword Lamiz and his shield Beihrut within a few hours. At least he did not expect to be alive while losing both men and it put a damper on his euphoric mood.

But such was life and after silently following the messenger's hand gestures, he excused him with a heavy, sad sigh.

The mature statesman then dragged his tired, unwilling body up from his chair and coming out of his tent instructed his four royal guards to escort him to offer his condolences to Manuk and personally bless the warrior.

He had his flaws, but no one would deny his loyalty to his king and post.

'Tonight will be a long night' Amenheraft lampooned in his heart as he recalled these past memories.

But even with this heavy heart accompanying him to his meeting with Manuk, fate decided it still was not enough.

Because a second scout coincidentally intercepted the king on his way and delivered an infinitely stronger soul-crushing news.

Without obeying any protocol or etiquette, the messenger rudely almost screamed, "Your Majesty, our spy's in the city are saying all three of our granaries are on fire. Look!"

The ashen-faced soldier then pointed to a part of the horizon that had three distinctively darker shades than the rest and almost appeared to be moving.

It was smoke, three large, dark plums of smoke!

Witnessing this, Amenheraft felt as if it was his heart that had been set on fire and finally empathized with the kind of despair Agapios and Samaras must have felt just today.

He even had half a mind to kill the messenger to stop this news from spreading but on cooling his head a bit understood there would be no point.

Even a one-eyed cripple would be able to see the chimneys of smoke and if the winds blew in the right direction, even the deaf and blind would be able to smell the burning wheat.

Amenheraft was so shocked by this sudden turn of events that he did not ask the messenger any follow-up questions, but instead almost started sprinting towards his most competent advisor, Manuk, hoping the man could pull another rabbit out of the hat and rescue him once again.

On the way, he desperately prayed to Ramuh to bless them with another bout of rain, because without this grain, Amenheraft might lose the throne even after winning the war.

Those were the seeds that he would have planted to grow new crops.

And this was not to even mention his starving army whom he had promised unlimited free meals the day they entered Adhan.

Amenheraft feared that robbed of their prize, these soldiers blinded by hunger, may start a riot.]

Hungry men and swords were not a healthy combination.

While the news of the potential possibility of starvation spread throughout the army, Manuk was off to his own world

He seemed heartbroken at his brother's loss and even when Amenheraft entered the brightly lit tent, Manuk did not offer even a simple bow.

He did not even get up or turn around.

"He was poisoned" Were the first words he choked out, his back around towards the king.

He just sat crouched by his elder brother's body, caressing the dead man's swollen arms and crying and grinding his teeth

Amenheraft paid his condolences and then patiently waited for the veteran archpriest to regain his composure.

And soon the old Manuk was back.

"His arm is swollen and blue. And his bandages are black. Laced with poison no doubt." Manuk analyzed.

"Probably facilitated by Nulafzam. Now we know who the spy was." Amenheraft expanded on the analysis.

"I presume he is missing?" Manuk asked a question he felt he almost certainly knew the answer to.

And a silent nod from the king stamped his suspicions true.

Done with the 'pleasantries' Amenheraft could no longer dilly dally and revealed the real reason why he was here, "Our granary is on fire." He said with a dark face.

And this succeeded in making Manuk's eyes the size of golf balls.

"How many?" Came a hopeful question.

"All three," Amenheraft replied quickly.

Then the two men strangely stared at each other for some time, Manuk slowly digesting the implications and Amenheraft eagerly waiting for his magical solution.

But it seemed that Manuk had used up all his magic points before on the battlefield and was out of spells.

He was unable to offer any real solution.

"Perhaps the Cantagenans have some." He hopefully directed.

But Amenheraft simply shook his head as he understood that it was unlikely that they would have enough to feed his army for any real period of time.

Compared to the huge stocks of the three granaries, these poor soldiers would likely have little.

Also, Amenheraft had other plans for the large number of free mercenaries at his doorsteps.

"I have decided to hire the mercenaries to attack Matrak province and depose Farzah. Kefka told me that he was the one who supplied the poison which killed my father. I can forgive all others but not him" Amenheraft informed Manuk, clearly stating he could never forgive regicide.

"What about our armies?" Manuk asked puzzled, viewing it as a waste to use mercenaries when their armies could do the job perfectly well.

"They will help with preparing the fields. We need our men to grow wheat." Amenheraft dictated.

Of course, it occurred to neither man that perhaps the people whose friends, fathers, and brothers they just sacrificed to their god as eternal slaves might not be open to taking them as their client.

For all their competency, they still possessed some hubris, believing mercenaries to be little more than money-hungry mindless brutes who would do anything and forget everything for gold.

This was mainly because Adhania with its strong army never employed or really interacted with mercenaries, resulting in the information gap.

Seeing that snatching food from their to-be allies was not an option, Manuk then revealed a bitter smile, "The nobles always have large stocks of grain. After we take the city, maybe we can make them hand it over for amnesty."

But even he knew this was a bad plan because it would set a precedent that rebels could be pardoned if they gave enough food to the king.

This did not sit well with him or Amenheraft, but Manuk felt that desperate situations call for desperate measures.

Of course, an alternative option was for the imperial forces to storm the inner ring and snatch the food by force from the nobles.

But this would likely cause rebellions to sprout up all across the nation.

Because the nobles that stayed in Adhan were not the true bigshots of Adhania but their representatives- families, and relatives.

The real ones lived in their fiefdoms, almost as kings, while swearing fealty only to the crown.

These Pashas were the true arms and legs of Adhania, and like how the head could not survive if its limbs decided not to obey its orders, Adhania could not survive if all its Pashas decided to rebel.

Hence, such a course of action did not even cross the two men's minds.

"No, we will do no such thing." Amenheraft was not pleased by the suggestion.

He ordered, "Tell the army to turn back and march towards the 'Horn of Tress. And sent an envoy to Tibias to tell that we are willing to return the 'Horn of Sands' in exchange for grain."

This order stupefied Manuk so much that he could barely keep standing.

The conditions Amenheraft offered Tibias would see them regain all the territories they had in the two-year war with Adhania.

"Your Majesty, such an order will be unacceptable to anybody. The army might even rebel!" Manuk almost shouted in fear.

But Amenheraft remained unmoved, "Then say it was because Ptolomy set fire to the granaries and the nobles hoarded all the food, letting the blood of all the brave soldiers go to waste."

He instructed, "You are the archpriest of the Temple of Ramuh. Use your priests to spread the news. Let these rebelling ingrates bear the wrath of the army and the peasants."

"I can do that no problem, Your Highness. But are we really going to let Tibias go scoot free after what they did?" Manuk asked with just indignation all over his face.

"I understand your frustration Manuk. And I too would like nothing more than to punish everyone who instigated this rebellion severely. But reality has forced for to pick and choose your targets carefully." Amenheratf sighed.

He then claimed loudly, "I would rather let a foreign power like Tibias off than those traitors. As Adhania's enemy it's only natural for Tibias to attack us when we were down. We would have done the same to them."

"But those nobles, why did they attack Adhania? It was their duty to protect Adhania, but instead, they backstabbed us in our moment of need. I will never let those greedy pigs benefit." He voiced menacingly.

Seeing the king had made up his mind, Manuk could only nod in reluctant acceptance.

,m Perceiving this, Amneheraft then offered some words of comfort, "Don't worry Manuk. In a few years, we will take everything back, with interest."

This put a smile on the priest's mouth as he understood, 'Yes, this humiliation was only temporary.'

Chapter 67 Next Day

The sun finally rose over the horizon, like it always did for millennia, signaling the start of another day as it released its radiant rays and illuminated the vast world that lay in front of it.

Its sparkling rays cast aside the mist that tried to snuggle the ground and exposed everything the mistress of the night tried to conceal for the whole world to bear witness to.

The citizens of Adhan finally understood the extent of the damage caused by the fire and they also saw their god-king entering the city in a magnificent procession, finally deposing the usurper Ptolomy.

Nulafzam and Ptolomy rode through the forest, bee-lining for Matrak, the warm, gentle sunlight feeling like the hot iron brands on their skins.

They knew the greeting of the sun signaled the start of their relentless pursuit by Amenheraft.

And at last, the true carnage of the battlefield, especially the killing and burying of the tens of thousands of soldiers, was laid bare for the mercenaries and Cantagenans to witness.

A strange striking mound had appeared on the flat ground between the two valleys that seemed to be emanating a strange smell and was being guarded by giant vultures and hungry wolves.

It did not take a genius to figure out what was underneath.

The Adhanians had buried the sacrificed and killed, both theirs and Cantagenas, in a giant pit and left after simply covering it.

Alexander had himself seen the mound and ruminated how in just a few months, mother nature will likely transform this grotesque mass of mangled flesh, bone, and blood into a meadow of trees and flowers, removing most signs of the carnage it once witnessed.

'How significant is living, if everyone ends up the same?' It was a question that haunted philosophers and thinkers since humans could think and it drilled its way into Alexander's mind too.

The boy had woken even before the sun had, his body refreshed and his mind eager to witness the things today likely held.

The excitement in him was so strong that even after the brutal physical exhaustion of the past few days, his body seemed back to its peak with just a bit of sleep and food. ready to take on the world.

Maybe it was the organic foods, or the clean air, or the constant physical exercise, or just plain genetics, but after using this body for ten years Alexander knew exactly just how superior this body was his old one and he cherished it.

This one seemed to be an upgraded version, stronger, faster, and better.

'A lot of good things will happen today,' He cheered himself as he performed calisthenics in front of his tent, even before the light penetrated the darkness.

Then at the crack of dawn, just as the first thin white line appeared on the horizon he decided to start gathering his forces, and hence he went to wake his master, who to Alexander's 'horror' discovered him dead.

He used this excuse to quickly wake up the soldiers in his mercenary group, after which they were hastily assembled to perform a simple funereal ritual for their founder, then buried him on a hill near his tent.

The entire thing went off like a rehearsed play, with no one raising the question about how he died.

Fever, exhaustion, and age were Alexander's expert analysis.

And no one questioned it, or at least no one whose voices mattered.

For those whose voices mattered all knew or did not care about the old man, save for Pallidus who was left all alone.

Thus the death of Aristotle caused little stir and Alexander had essentially become free.

Done with this practice run, Alexander then turned his mind to the real prize, Damious.

Since the camp was still in relative tranquility, he guessed that Damious's cold body had yet to be discovered and he decided to beef up the defenses of his camp before his minions inevitably came looking for blood.

Alexander had little doubt these people will hold their medical camp responsible for their leader's death with or without evidence and he wanted to be ready.

So, after the funeral rites, he urged the soldiers to prepare breakfast and then quickly assembled his army, reinforced Cambyses's tent, increased the guard in the medical camp, and gained himself a full contingent of bodyguards.

Alexander was ready!

And soon things unfolded quite textbook style.

The bodyguards beside Damious had also fallen asleep due to exhaustion, and when one of them was woken by the sting of the sun rays hitting his eyes, he finally noticed the pale, cold, unmoving, body of their leader.

He immediately went into panic mode, shouting and screaming as he tried to wake his fellow comrades.

And right on cue, Alexander who was already there acting as a medical staff came to his rescue, accompanied by his entourage of Menes and Theocles along with a few others, all fully armed.

"It seems leader Damious has succumbed to his injuries. My condolences" Theocles pointed out the elephant in the room.

"Bullshit. You," one of the mercenaries menacingly pointed to Alexander and said, "killed him."

Alexander only sneered and replied, "We all saw you sleeping while you were supposed to guard your leader. It was your negligence that killed your leader. Now you want to blame it on me? Is that the best you could come up with?"

At this point, Menes spoke out his rehearsed line, "Alexander is right. We suspect you to be guilty of derision of duty or worse spies from Adhania. Come with us!"

"Joke! Who do you think you are?" Naturally, the mercenaries refused to back down.

"*Clang*" At once all the soldiers following Menes drew their weapons, unsheathing swords, and pointing spears at the outnumbered mercenaries.

"If you do not come quietly with us, then we will treat you as spies." Menes issued one last warning.

But even against such bad odds, the loyal, veterans did not budge one bit, determined to rather die than be humiliated as pawns in a conspiracy.

As Menes was about to order the massacre, Alexander suddenly turned himself into a mediator.

"Wait, wait, we don't want to capture and kill you or anything!" He shouted to try and defuse the situation.

He then continued, "Menes is not quite good with words, brother. You just misunderstood him. What he meant to say was that you should all stay here and we will call the various leader who can listen to both sides of our story and determine who is at fault here."

This compromise seemed to cool the bodyguards and so they waited, in the meantime sending their own messengers to inform all their brothers of their leader's death.

They did not have to wait for long, as hearing of Damious's death and understanding a leadership crisis was at hand, the last three remaining mercenary leaders- Menicus, Melodias, and Petricuno quickly presented themselves in the medical camp.

Along with Melodias also came Damious's once-to-be bride, Alexander's mistress- Cambyses with Gratz, Heliptos, and Camius in tow.

Alexander had relieved Bartholomew to get some sleep at dawn and switched in the talkative merc.

With all the required party present, the show began.

Menicus, being the eldest here was given the honor of starting the question but his opening statement was weird.

Instead of taking witness accounts, he looked at Alexander, carefully burning the boy's image in his mind, and addressed, "So you are the slave that everyone calls the son of Gaia. Yes, yes, only someone blessed by the gods could do what you did. Your warning saved his old bone's life. Thank you." He afterward performed a slight bow.

This display of a freeman bowing to a slave showed just how partial Menicus was willing to be towards Alexander and all the faces of soldiers from Damious's camp seemed like they had swallowed a fly.

The other mercenary leaders also seem to understand the hint that Menicus had already made up his mind.

But, Damious's soldiers still made up more than a third of their remaining force and all present here knew that they had to give them at least a semblance of a fair trial.

So the hot-headed Petricuno jumped in on the conversation, "They say you are the one who came up with this medical camp, and that your skills are unmatched." He addressed Alexander.

"So tell me how do you think he died?"

"I have not gotten to examine the body, but my guess is he caught a cold and died. Look" Alexander pointed to the bare man and said, "I instructed all the patients to properly cover themselves so they don't catch a cold. But he does not have a single piece of cloth on him."

"Bullshit. The leader could swim in frozen lakes naked and not even sneeze. Who are you kidding by saying he dies from a mere cold? He does not even have a runny nose!" Gratz shouted in an enraged voice.

Of course, he and his brothers as a whole were not buying it.

But his last sentence had the inadvertent effect of directing everyone's sight towards Damious's nose which was leaking black fifth common in a dead body.

There was no way to verify the claim and many shot suspicious gazes toward Gratz, doubting his credibility

Chapter 68 Cambyses's Challenge

"My men were all here the entire night. No one saw or heard anything strange. I believe Alexander's explanation that Damious died of natural causes." Melodias expressed his own judgment.

This crushed the Damious mercenaries but they seemed unable to retort.

Many present also began to think that maybe Damious had just died from illness or injury.

He was human after all.

But someone who was absolutely convinced that something was up was Gratz.

He did not, could not accept the death of his master.

So he screamed, strangely pointing his fingers toward Cambyses, "Our leader was killed by that woman. The witch wanted to marry her slave, so she killed him with magic. Witch! She's a witch I tell you."

'Close, but no dice.' Alexander sneered in his heart.

But this irrational screaming had the strange effect of actually swaying some minds.

,m Because the people of this time did not believe in germ theory which had not been invented yet but instead believed that death and disease were caused by supernatural entities.

These supernatural entities included only gods and goddesses, but also demons and devils, and various mythical beasts and human-like apparitions and entities.

As such many ignorant people started lending their ears to Gratz's absurd claims.

Spurred on by this outburst, another mercenary also chimed in, "Yes, it must have been when she fed him. She placed a spell then."

A second one joined in, "Poison. The witch must have used poison."

This single word seemed to jolt awake something inside Gratz's mind and remembered a funeral taking place in this mercenary group over the death of Aristotle.

He also remembered feeling a bit confused back then because he wondered how the marriage was going to proceed with the bride's godfather dead.

But he then threw it to the back of his mind, because he believed his leader could easily solve this little inconvenience.

But now all those feelings came rushing back because he felt they could connect the dots.

"Yes! Poison!" He shouted excitedly.

"The witch poisoned the two men trying to get her married. That's why both the old man and leader who drank from the pot are dead." At this point, he started howling in grief and even drew his sword, roaring, " Men! These scums killed our leader."

Alexander had watched this farce until now with bemused amusement, even thinking Gratz might not have made a bad detective in his previous life.

But now he felt the whole circus was rolling towards a dangerous cliff.

If this frenzy spread was not stopped soon, a riot of three thousand very angry soldiers was imminent.

As such, he decided to step in, when a gravelly voice outstripped him.

"But I also drank from the pot. Twice." Said the voice, the sound waves cascading through the air, striking the eardrums of the bubbling crowd and causing them to simmer down.

It was Melodias and he appeared fearlessly in front of the hysterical Gratz and coldly asked again, "Well, then tell me why I am alive? What was the poison magic?"

The harsh tone and physical intimidation made the manic man calm down and he struggled to think of his next reply.

But how could Alexander allow the man such breathing room?

He struck, from the side, "The contents of the drinking pot were personally verified by Gratz. Everyone one of you" Alexander addressed Damious's mercenaries, "bore witness to it. So what does he mean the drink was poisoned?"

Then he addressed the crowd in general, "And why does he slander us by saying we killed our founder? All are still deeply shocked and saddened by the loss of our leader and founder in a single day. This is blatant mudslinging."

"Brother Alexander, Gratz is just tired, fatigued, and grieving. He did not mean anything by it." This surprising statement came from an unlikely source amongst unlikely sources- Heliptos.

And the person most surprised was not ALEXander but Gratz who turned to face the man with eyes in danger of almost falling out.

This betrayal seemed like a bolt out of the blue for him and Graatz immediately understood Heliptos was trying to get on their good books to get their help in succeeding Damious.

To think the vultures would be feasting on his leader's body even before it cooled, sent Gratz's blood boiling and he barely held himself back from stabbing the traitor.

"You scum. After all he had done for you...." Gratz dragged the words between his teeth.

Alexander too made his judgment about the man named Heliptos after his surprising change in stance.

Alexander recalled how he had tried to grab Cambyses's drink and now his display of jumping ship at the opportune moment, and hence labeled as greedy and power-hungry but not too bright.

'Not a bad candidate for someone looking to fill up a discardable position." Alexander wrote in his heart journal.

"I believe Gratz is personally too involved to make truthful statements." Theocles craftily said.

"I believe so too." Feeling himself left out, Petrucino weighed in as well.

But Gratz was a demented man on a mission.

He screamed again, "Don't let them fool you. I never drank from the pot, only the sweet water before it was poured. Yes! The poison must have been in the pot. Bring the pot." He demanded.

"But Melodias also drank from the pot." Alexander reminded.

"Bah, the witch must have cured him." The deranged man spat out.

"Pot! Bring the pot!" Some mercenaries from the back started chanting.

"Quite! This is a place of healing. It's not a place to shout and cause a ruckus." Menes yelled at the top of his voice to dampen the boiling crowd.

But that seemed to only fuel the mercenaries even more.

"Pot!"

"Pot"

"We want the pot!"

They started chanting with even more vigor.

Alexander's mind suddenly drifted out of this serious situation and wondered if he should find some joints for them to enjoy

Aa Alexander was lost in a tangential thought, a wizened voice rang out,

"And what will you do if you find the pilot?" It said.

This simple question again took the wind out of the mercenaries, returning the chaotic clinic to one as calm as the windless summer afternoon.

Menicus's voice continued, "The pot that you ask for, if it did contain poison as you say, must have already been washed, cleaned, and dried. How are you gonna find the poison?"

But insane people were called insane because well...they were insane, impenetrable to logic.

As such Gratz said, " Bring the pot first. We will determine everything else later."

It was at this point a sharp voice pierced everyone's ears.

"Enough, why don't you just say what you want to say? That you want just someone to blame your leader's death. You want money!"

It was Cambyses and she just opened another can of worms!

A woman speaking like that was a first for many and everyone turned to look at the beautiful heroic girl, standing proudly with her left sword on her sword hilt, glaring at the mad dog.

"Witch!" Gratz simply looked at the girl with pure loathing, uttering only a single word.

He believed, no he was convinced that the girl had something to do with his leader's death and he wanted blood.

"Four times. You have called me a witch four times. Well, if I really was a witch, you would do well to stay out of my way." Cambyses menacingly threatened.

"Your powers don't work on me." Gratz simply growled.

"Well then, let the gods decide if I am innocent or not," Cambyses smirked

"*Clang*, I challenge you to a Trial by combat. Right here, right now." She drew her sword and offered the man a duel before the eyes of the gods to determine who was right and who was wrong.

"I accept." Gratz gleefully took the offer in a heartbeat, barely holding back his excitement.

After all, what could a mere woman do to him?

They belonged in the kitchen, cooking, cleaning, and rearing children.

"*Clang*, I'm gonna enjoy butchering you, witch!" He then likewise drew his sword.

'No, I am gonna injure her first, maim her, **** her, make her squeal, make her confess', Gratz could barely keep his grin on his face, as he thought of the myriad of ways he was gonna enjoy this.

After all, a Trial by combat was sacred, that took place under the sight of the gods and no kind of interference by anyone was allowed.

It could only end when one side was dead.

Alexander was disturbed by this turn of events.

If he was a betting me, which he was not, he would certainly put his money on Cambyses.

He did not know how good a fighter Gratz fighter was, but chances were he was likely not as good as Cambyses.

This was not even mentioning the blatant discard and underestimation he showed for his opponent.

Cambyses would likely cut him to ribbons before he could understand what happened.

But even then just because Cambyses was favored to win does not mean she will win.

She could lose and the thought of her dying very disturbed him.

So he intended to step in and nominate himself as her champion.

But Menicus's aged voice beat him to it, "The challenge has been accepted by the two under the sight of the gods. Clear the space and let the battle begin!"

Chapter 69 Cambyses Vs Gratz

"Wait mistress, let me be your champion." Alexander still tried at the last second to switch with his to-be wife.

It felt too dangerous.

But the feisty girl shot him down, "What champion? The idiot called me a witch. Did he call you a witch? Stay put and let your mistress do her job, slave."

The last sentence drew an imperceptible twitch to Alexander's face as he felt slightly insulted at being talked to like this in front of everyone by his soon-to-be bride.

'Looks like I will need to give her a proper spanking later.' He thought with some spite in his heart.

"The challenge was issued by the challenger by herself. I am afraid only she can participate." Meniscus from the side interjected, clarifying the rules.

"Brother Gratz go easy on her." From the side, Heliptos urged, already showing whose side he was on.

'This level of sycophancy...' The mercenary leaders all had mixed emotions about this guy.

Soon, the space around the entrance of the medical tent was cleared and a dueling ring with the mercenaries as the walls was created.

Shields were not allowed in Trial by combat, so both combatants faced each other holding swords in both hands.

Most soldiers from Damious's group jeered and booed Cambyses, expecting the duel to end soon.

If gambling had not been strictly forbidden for any trial by combat, many would likely have opened gambling booths with their money firmly on Gratz.

After all, Gratz was one of their best commanders and the most trusted man of their late commander, so how could he lose to a mere woman, no to a girl!

Menicus was chosen as the arbitrator of the match, and the old man, surprisingly had a loud bark as he shouted,

"Start!" and signaled the beginning of the duel.

"Get her."

"Show her what is a real man!"

"Witch!"

"Kill!"

"Kill!"

The crowd cheered the man on and urged him to finish it quickly, while Cambyses's side silently watched.

But neither party attacked, instead, they simply started and started to circle one another like ravenous sharks.

Because duels in reality were not all like what Hollywood tended to portray them as.

In actuality, duels were a bit boring as combatants would wait and observe, thrust feints, and like they were doing now circle one another to try to find a weak point in another's defense.

Duels were a test of nerves as much as a test of skills as it was possible to let the pressure get to one and make a premature strike thinking he had found a weakness while it was all along it was just a feint the opponent had created just to lure in an attack.

This could see one get parried and counterattacked and likely killed.

So one had to be patient.

To wait and observe and try to figure out which weaknesses the opponent revealed were fake and which were real.

Usually, this was done by short thrusts to try and open a gap in the defenses and then take advantage of the opponent's lapse in judgment to deliver the killing blow.

Note the use of the word- 'usually.'

Because in this particular unusual instance, Gratz soon lost his patience and partly egged on by the crowd and partly because of overconfidence, charged.

'I was defending just in case the witch had some strange powers, but she's just a scared brat. Hah, I will enjoy this.' The man simply did not put Cambyes in his eyes, and with a manic grin brought his sword straight down the middle, intending to spill her into her skull in two.

Alexander breathed a massive sigh of relief at this move because he was now almost sure of Gratz's skill and determined that Cambyes would win.

The move was so textbook that Cambyes could bet that she would be able to parry it blindfolded.

She expertly brushed the sword onto the right using her sword and then used her footwork to get to his left side to flank him, which caused Gratz to make a wide swing to try and catch her.

"Too easy!" Cambyes smirked at the man, as her sword caught the incoming sword mid-way in the air and parried it towards the ground, planting it in the soil.

Simultaneously, as Gratz was reeling from the shock of having his swords strike the ground and tried to get back his stance, Cambyes retrieved her sword, used her agile speed to get from Gratz's left side to his back, and then...

Well, there was no more, "and then."

Because it was over!

Cambyes did a little dance as she spun on her heels and using her momentum spun the sword one-handedly, cleanly chopping off the head and creating a little red fountain for the crowd's entertainment.

From the time Gratz made his attack to when his head got graciously separated from his body, it took less than ten seconds.

And this was how Cambyes won her first-ever duel.

This abrupt conclusion of the match stunned most soldiers.

Because the duel had ended quickly as they expected but not in the way they expected.

The reason for their shock was also exacerbated by the ease Cambyes ended the duel, almost effortlessly and many felt confused by how quickly Gratz lost the duel.

This was because they all knew Gratz as a good captain and a formidable opponent to face on the battlefield but they had forgotten to take into consideration his individual fighting skills.

Skills that the man had neglected to keep sharp and thus had allowed to become rusty over the years.

After all, the man usually had a literal army to do his battles for him so why bother?

While the soldiers were still digesting the sight of the headless corpse, Alexander was making his own evaluation of the match.

'Cocky.' Was the grade he awarded.

He had always taught Cambyses to kill her opponents as quickly and as efficiently as possible and felt that Cambyses really did not need to do the little dance and chop off his head.

A far less waste of movement would have been to simply stab him through the much wider back into the heart.

Instead, the girl chose to attack the much smaller and thinner neck just for the theatrics.

'I will need to lecture her on this,' Alexander thought as he did not want to see his beloved head cracked like an egg by giant hands because of hubris like in that show.

"The gods of spoken." Menicus declared the end of the match.

And with the all soldiers, though many were unwilling, accepted the judgment of the gods, and the matter of Damious's death was finally put to rest.

Damious had officially died of cold!

Chapter 70 Freedom At Last

As Gratz's body was being dragged off to be buried, Cambyzes, instead of exiting the arena, decided to offer a few words of her own.

She shook off the blood from her sword, sheathed it, and said, "It was only by the blessings of Gaia that I won today. For that, I am eternally grateful to the mother goddess." She then clasped her hands and offered a silent prayer.

Then she dropped a bombshell, "In order to show my appreciation, I hereby declare both my slaves, Alexander and Menes to be freedmen from today!"

The freeing of slaves before the gods was a very practiced custom but the news of the emancipation of one particular slave, sent a thunderous chorus of applause that rang across the group.

"Clap, clap, clap." A myriad of applause rang out of the group.

Even the medical staff from the back and many of the injured cheered.

The announcement was a surprise even for Alexander and he knelt and gratefully said, "I will always be at your command, Mistress." "Haha, finally, finally." Menes strongly slapped him on the back, ecstatic that the man who helped him get where he was was also now free.

"Nothing can hold you now, doc!" Camius congratulated.

"I hope to receive brother Alexander's assistance in our times of need." Melodias came up and personally shook his head.

Heliptos even went a step further. He said, "Alexander, our group needs a leader. Please guide us in our decision."

This was asking Alexander to blatantly interfere with another group's internal politics or if someone took the invitation too literally, could even become its leader.

Alexander politely replied to everyone, even to Heliptos, saying a few insincere words such as, 'It is in the best interest of all of us to have strong leadership and once done with the greetings, bought up the real reason why everyone was here - 'What now?'

This open question caused some darker shades to appear on the leader's face because all of them had asked themselves the same question, "What now?"

"Do you have any thoughts?" Menicus probed Alexander.

Here Alexander smiled and suggested, "I believe we should choose a new leader soon. Let Damious's group have the day to elect their new leader. We have also lost ours and need to elect a new one. What do you say we vote on it tomorrow at dawn?"

"That's good. My troops are too exhausted and need a day or two to recover." Petricuno enthusiastically agreed.

"Ours too." This time it was Menes.

"Okay, then it's decided then. The remnants of Alcmene and Regias also have yet to choose a leader, so will hold the vote on the east side clearing tomorrow at dawn." The natural arbiter of the group Menicus finalized the agreement.

With this decision reached, Melodias raised another concern, "We have all seen the Adhanians enter the city today. What do you make of that?"

"It means both our employers are dead," Petricuno answered with a bitter smile.

"From what I could see, their camp was empty. It looks like their whole army entered the city." Melodias revealed some address information.

"That's good, isn't it? Petricuno asked in a cheerful tone.

"They didn't even leave a contingent to guard us? Weird!" Menes commented.

"Perhaps there are behind-the-scenes things we don't know." Alexander offered his own explanation.

"Hmm, whatever it is we should still reinforce our guards. Who knows if they are preparing a sneak attack." Menicus suggested prudently.

"Yes, I will see to it." Petricuno quickly took responsibility.

"A lot of our scattered soldiers are still returning, especially Cantagenans. What do we do about them?" Melodias showed another problem.

This drew universal frowning, as how to use these conscripts was truly a tricky problem.

The Cantagenan high command had been literally slaughtered down to a single man, first in the battle conducted by Agapios and then in the second battle led by Samaras.

Now, a power vacuum had appeared within those ranks, with no one to lead these frankly stupid soldiers.

Integrating them into the mercenaries existing formation would only reduce the quality and effectiveness of the mercenaries fighting force, and so that wasn't a real option.

Here Alexander suggested the solution of kicking the can down the road, "Let the leader we choose decide how to use the Cantagenans."

And this drew the nods of acceptance from all the mercenary leaders.

Why solve a problem yourself now, when someone else can do it later?

With this, the leaders decided to end their mini-conference and after saying a few token platitudes, they chose no longer to dally and returned to their respective camps

As the extra personnel left and the crowd around them dispersed, the medical tent soon returned to its earlier tranquility and the people started to go back to their usual duties.

Alexander was one of the few who did not leave but chose to stay and smell the air.

Alexander could not remember how many years it has been since his mood had been this good.

Somehow even the air he breathed felt different, somehow better, somehow fresher and sweeter.

Was this the taste of freedom they talked about?

As Alexander was letting his body finally soak in the feeling of being free, Theocles suggested, "Nestoras is likely dead. Let us choose our new leader."

"Yes! I vote Alexander." This overly enthusiastic, almost obsequious sound from Pallidus of all people.

Though in hindsight, it was really in keeping with the craven opportunistic nature of the man.

"Alexander." Menes too joined in, though not before throwing Pallidus a look like he was looking at a bug.

"I too vote Alexander." Theocles made the predictable vote and thus with the support of the three most influential men in the group, Alexander finally obtained the position he had been salivating for over ten years.

Theocles then congratulated his new leader, "We look forward to your leadership and guidance."

"We look forward to your leadership and guidance." All the others present like Menes, Pallidus, Camius, and even Cambyses greeted Alexander.

And Alexander greeted back, "I swear to do what is best for the group. So please lend me your strength."

And thus Alexander today took one of the most significant steps towards fulfilling his dream, obtaining an army.