

Herald 161

Chapter 161 Twins Resolution

Pasha Farzah determined that even the danger of internal rebellion and attack by the royal forces was worth it if it meant getting his granddaughters.

And he expressed such sentiment by saying, "Yea, it seems that we have reached a stalemate."

"And does the pasha have a preferred way to resolve this deadlock?" Alexander raised an eyebrow as he asked this.

"Give me Azira and Azura and I promise to help your economy. I will even donate five hundred million roplas to jump-start your economy," Pasha Farzah made a sky-shattering offer that sent Alexander's heart beating wildly.

And the pasha then complimented his carrot with a stick, "Refuse, and you will have turned an ally into an enemy, the very anthesis of what you wanted."

Alexander went silent for a while after hearing the proposal, his brain furiously calculating the pros and cons.

But ultimately, the astounding amount of five hundred million roplas served to only strengthen his resolve to get the twins.

'If you are willing to dish out so much for them, they must even more valuable! I won't let my greed blind me,' Alexander's eyes flashed with a chilly light.

"I have ten thousand men," Alexander then sent a naked threat.

He was done playing nice.

But this only made Pasha Farzah laugh uproariously as if he had heard the biggest joke in his life, "Hahaha, is that the best you got brat?"

His full-bearded grin then turned to look like he was an enraged bear as he smashed his thick as logs arms on the table and snarled, "Well, then lanky brat. We are all alone in his room. How long do you think it will take me to snap that tiny little skull of yours? Huh?"

The pasha then started clenching his huge palms, big enough to cover Alexander's face, open and closed, in a menacing gesture as if to emulate crushing Alexander's head.

"Haha, the pasha is being too polite," Alexander only let out a light chuckle, unafraid and unperturbed, "All the esteemed lord do is express his desire and I will snap my tiny, little skull myself."

This was the same answer he gave when Farzah had threatened to cut off his tongue.

But unlike before, now his light joke didn't lighten the atmosphere in the room.

On the contrary, it only engaged the pasha even more as he felt he was being underestimated and belittled.

He really was contemplating killing this cub in the crib.

But Alexander's next bought some sense back to him, "What will killing me get you? Do you think that after I die, all the soldiers under me will forgive and forget just because you will be dangling a coin purse before them? Just because they are mercenaries?" Alexander sneered.

And then the mercenary leader changed his voice to a flat, monotone octave as he recounted, "When I went to battle Amenheraft outside the city, I left five hundred of my guys to guard the palace and put my wife in charge. Do you know what my last words were to her?"

Alexander posed a rhetorical question.

"At the first sign of a revolt, kill the entire royal family and set the palace on fire as a smoke signal," Alexander no longer had the warm, cordial face he had always maintained, but instead replaced it with a hard, crazed look.

"....." A strange, uncomfortable silence descended on the room, as the two men were locked in a menacing death gaze at each other, the air smelling like it had become saturated with the smell of gunpowder and the tiniest spark could send the whole thing to kingdom come.

"So, you see, you have much more to lose than me," It was Alexander who broke the tense atmosphere as his fierce countenance swiftly changed to that of a friendly, gentle demeanor and he sent a cordial smile toward the pasha.

'I kill him, he kills them and me. One for three,' Pasha Farzah did the simple math.

So, he straightened his hunched back and tried to call Alexander's bluff, "The battle's already over. And you seem to trust that your men will follow the orders of a woman."

But Alexander called it, "Then do it. Maybe you can give them more than the literal billions of ropas that's just downstairs."

"..." Another round of stifling silence followed as the pasha tried to use his vast years of experience spent dealing with others to look for signs of weakness in Alexander.

But Alexander appeared steady as a rock.

Half because he was that good, half because he trusted his pupil to know what to do.

Cambyses was no sheep, but a wolf in pig skin.

The silence lasted for a while, with neither side willing to back down.

But the soldiers advantage was on Alexander's side, so ultimately, it was Pasha Farzah who broke first, unable to take that chance against his two precious pieces of heart.

He had been over the moon when Ptolomy had written to him saying Azira and Azura were not only with him but also unharmed and well.

He was so excited in fact that he made the almost two-thousand-kilometer journey like his butt had been set on fire, rushing to secure his granddaughters as fast as possible.

The reason for this urgency was because he had never been able to devise a good enough strategy with which he was confident in being able to force Amenheraft to give up Azira and Azura.

And so, now that through the machinations of fate and a bit of Amenheraft's cruelty, he had finally managed to get his hands on his beloved granddaughters, he was not stupid enough to gamble the safety of them against a deranged, half-sociopathic, lunatic.

"You wanted a compromise. So let me offer you one," Pasha Farzah clenched out the words as if he was having a hard time speaking.

But the man persevered, "Instead of Azira and Azura, let me offer you someone closer to me, my daughter. She has come with me here, maybe you have noticed."

And then quickly added, "And I'm aware one for two is not a fair trade. So I'm willing to offer her two maids as an additional compromise."

The pasha made a face that seemed to imply that his heart was being ripped apart by the 'tough decision' but Alexander did not grace that offer with even a sneer.

Instead, he replied in a robotic voice, "That's not a compromise. That's not even an offer."

His octaves then rapidly picked up with each successive question, "Does your daughter call Amenheraft father? Does your daughter call the king uncle? Did you launch a rebellion to save your daughter?"

He then sneered, "And besides, haven't you heard the saying, 'Children are what you have only to get grandchildren? The clue is in the name- 'grand'."

"Pffff,...hahahaha," This time pasha let out a genuine cry of laughter, finding the joke truly funny as the tense atmosphere slowly melted away.

"Brat, I'm starting to like you, hahaha" Pasha Farzah admitted with a candid smile.

Of course, it was just not this joke, but Alexander's eloquence, frightening insight, and how he brushed off his hundred million ropals bribe.

The pasha doubted himself if he could have done what Alexander had done if their positions had been switched.

This amount of willpower had gained the old noble's respect.

"So, what's your offer?" Pasha Farzah asked as he tapped his table.

"I'm sure the lord has heard about the arrangement between princess Hellma and the Queen mother," Alexander started with a light smile.

"I'm willing to propose a similar arrangement with them, five years as my guest, a letter a month and I will not let anyone lay a finger on them." Alexander gave his counterproposal.

And this softer condition, combined with the current reality finally pleased the pasha enough as he consented with a nod, "Good, that works."

But then, he quickly added, "But I want my daughter and her two maids to accompany them. To ensure you keep your word."

"That's fine," Alexander had no problem with that, though internally he lampooned, 'I hope that manor has enough bedrooms.' as by his count his house would have twelve members. with eleven of them being women.

"And remember that if anything happens to them, it's war!" The bellicose pasha finished with a threat.

But Alexander, instead of replying with hackneyed sayings like 'I won't let any harm fall on them,' he instead said, "Life and death is up to the gods. No one can predict how and where one will die."

And then he solemnly claimed, "But I can promise you that they will stay in the same house as me, sharing the same roof, the same food, and the same space as me and my family. So, any fate they share, me and my family will too."

In this way, Alexander left himself a way out if by some unknown cosmic forces something were to happen to the twins.

"Hmmm, good. I will hold you onto that!" Pasha Farzah pursed his lips but ultimately nodded.

Then he added, "Well, it's getting late and I have a few things I need to attend to,"

By saying this, he signaled that the talks were over, and so with a bow, Alexander showed himself out, saying the Adhanian saying, "Till we meet again, let health and joy keep you company."

And as Alexander thought back on the past few hours, he remarked, 'Sigh, that old fart was one tough cookie.'

But ultimately he was very happy with the deal he got and was eager to get supper.

Chapter 162 Strengthening Oneself (Part 1)

The next week went in a blurry whirlwind for Alexander as he had to juggle two very important things at the same time.

The first thing was getting prepared to leave for Zanzan.

To do this, he stocked up on all the food he could get his hands on, both by swindling it off Ptolemy and by buying it in bulk from him and Pasha Farzah.

He also got Pasha Farzah to promise him to send thirty thousand tonnes of grain over the next year at a rate of three ropals per kilogram.

This was almost a rip-off for Alexander as the market price for grain was two ropals per kilogram before the drought, but what could he do?

He was desperate and also he had to pay the transportation fee as the journey by sea from Matrak to Zanzan was close to five thousand kilometers.

'A fifty percent markup huh? I will remember to return the favor!' Alexander acidly thought in his heart though it was unknown how much of it he meant as he understood that the price he quoted was before the drought, while the current price of grain was virtually infinite.

People who could get their hands hoarded it and the people who couldn't get it were not able to acquire it no matter how much money they offered.

After all, one cannot eat gold.

Over the past few days, after their initial frosty start, Alexander and Pasha Farzah had surprisingly warmed up to each other, growing closer, and even signing a few secret treaties.

This was because Alexander did not sense any outward hostility from Pasha Farzah in the later days, while the latter was impressed by the former's quick-wittedness and the ability to instantly get a grasp of things.

And because their territories were so apart as to make border conflict an impossibility, in addition to the fact that they had a common enemy who was much bigger and stronger, such close ties certainly made sense.

'I'm glad he is not a slimeball,' Alexander remarked about Pasha Farzah.

He did not fear schemers as every noble was a schemer to some extent.

What he did fear were wishy-washy flippant people who changed sides regularly.

Those types of people thought themselves to be extra smart and tried to have a foot on both boats thinking that this will guarantee them a win either way.

And most of the time these over-smart people would fail in their objectives because most of the time they did things half-assed.

Alexander feared Pasha Farzah might have been those kinds of people, where he would try to play off Alexander, Ptolomy, Cartagena, and Tibias against each other and then somehow try to eke out an advantage.

And hence he was glad to see the silver-haired man was nothing like that and his ambitions were really grounded to reality.

Thought this was not because the pasha was unambitious, but because he felt juggling the four powers together had too great a chance to backfire.

After all, they were not mindless puppets of his, but free people with their own individual minds, thoughts, desires, and aspirations.

There was little guarantee that they would all dance to his exact tune.

The secret treaty between the pasha and Alexander discussed economic, political, and defense matters.

Economically it was a one-sided exchange as Alexander had little of value to offer the Pasha at the moment.

So, he spent everything he had to buy as much stuff as he could- horses, cattle, mules, and various other livestock animals like chickens, goats, sheep, etc, clothes and bundles of linen, slaves of all types, females, males, skilled, unskilled, etc, various merchant ships to carry his goods, few types of ores, good timber, stone, and so many other things.

The exhaustive list had been made by Theocles and Cambyses over a period of three days as they were told by Alexander to assume that Zanzan would have nothing.

Thus in a single day, the pasha had earned more than five hundred million ropals, about the annual income of his territory, leaving the man grinning from ear to ear for the rest of the day.

But whereas trade was just a one-sided affair, on the side of the defense, it was a much more even exchange.

Alexander learned of the various tactics and military traditions of Adhania, how they liked to organize their army, their preferred tactics, their way of calling up people to form an army, etc, while the old pasha felt his eyes opened as Alexander pointed out how he defeated the phalanx formation by exploiting its weakness, how he placed his captains at the back of the line on horseback to give them better visibility and situational awareness, and how his medical tent at the back helped drastically reduce casualties.

However, the thing the pasha was most impressed by was the Thomas Splint which Alexander showed while he was introducing the pasha to Laykash as the man who killed Kefka.

The pasha's flat territory up north was the dream paradise for cavalymen and he naturally employed large numbers of heavy cavalry,

Thus he was very excited by the prospect of how Alexander's invention would surely save many lives who usually died of leg-related injuries.

But the most important of these matters they discussed was related to politics, where the two men swore to oppose Amenhearft while also limiting Ptolomy's influence, preventing him from seeking third-party support.

And perhaps the most important secret of the secret treaty was how the pasha had asked Alexander to open some temples of Gaia in his territory, in an effort to unshackle his populace from the iron grip the royal family had on them.

Of course, there was no way Ptolomy could tolerate the unsanctioned practices of another religion in another territory.

So the two men prudently decided to hide the temples, understanding that such things would need years, if not decades to show their result.

For the time being, the two men were content to just figure out the basic framework of their alliance and decided to add on more things later, depending on how well the trust between them developed.

So the deal was reached that Pasha Farzah would use his significant influence within the nobility circle to help Alexander gain recognition with his peers, assist Alexander in making treaties with third parties, and in general, take Alexander's side in the event of a conflict with any other third party.

In exchange, Alexander would do the same to the best of his abilities for Pasha Farzah as well, while also training some of the pasha's men on his clinic's medical techniques and the most important thing of all, sending some priests and missionaries secretly to Matrak to spread the good word of Gaia.

Alexander naturally did not spend all his time just in conference with the pasha.

He first bought two thousand personal slaves from the slave traders in the city, intending to use them to start some businesses he had in mind.

He also bought a huge amount of slaves, about twenty thousand of them from Ptolomy, with most of them being former soldiers which he captured the other day.

He did this because Camius told him that these prisoners were mostly conscripts levied forcefully from Zanzan and so Alexander felt that they should return to Zanzan with him.

Of course, he had done this not purely out of altruism, but also because he hoped doing this will boost his popularity with the people of Zanzan when he became their lord.

And sensing this, Ptolomy decided to exact a small bit of revenge on Alexander as he demanded a price tag of eight thousand (8,000) ropals per slave from Alexander, which was similar to daylight robbery as

unskilled slaves like them were typically traded around at three thousand (3,000) to four thousand ropals (4,000).

Alexander had little choice but to accept this, which he comforted himself by telling, 'Welp, after swindling off so much from him, I guess it's only natural that it would happen to me,'

Alexander also settled the payments of the soldiers who won him the war.

He gave each of the ten thousand mercenaries and the Cantagenan soldiers a thousand ropals (1,000), the five thousand Cantagenan slaves and servants that fought were each given five hundred ropals (500), and the native Adhanians three hundred ropals each (300).

The captains and the various officers were given large bonuses too, with captains getting two thousand ropals (2,000), stratos getting five thousand (5,000) ropals and legenus (ten thousand men leader), which were the mercenary leaders got twenty thousand ropals (20,000) each.

The blacksmiths, carpenters, and other artisans were paid another few million for their service and for the supplies they provided.

All in all, Alexander had spent around forty million ropals in this war and pocketed the rest, earning a total of hundred and ten million, sixty million from the war funds, and another fifty million that he had outright stolen.

He had also gotten a cut out of the ten billion ropals he helped Ptolomy steal and then there was the loot he got from sacking the inner city.

Thus in total, in just about a month, Alexander had gone from a pauper slave with nothing to his name to being worth around a billion ropals!

An astounding amount and an astonishing fairy tale!

Chapter 163 Strengthening Oneself (Part 2)

Alexander's job was not finished with just discussing treaties with pasha Farzah and getting his people ready, though just that would have kept him on his feet all day.

No, in addition to those, Alexander had to also devote time to many other things.

He met with the artisans, especially blacksmiths, stone carvers, carpenters, and tanners, where he personally offered them extraordinary salaries to tempt them to join him.

Whereas an artisan typically earned two hundred to two hundred and fifty ropas a month he offered them a fixed salary of five hundred ropals.

And even promised them two and a half hectares of land after ten years of service.

This produced a lot of eager volunteers, thorough there were some that still refused, citing familiar, personal or even religious reasons.

Among them, there was one who had been involved in the making of chainmail for Alexander for whom he found the rejection to be unacceptable.

This project had been kept at the highest level of secrecy by Alexander and the whole thing involved just five people in total and he would be a fool to let one escape.

The individuals involved had been told that this was the secret weapon to be used to defeat the evil rebel and because of suspected spies everywhere they were instructed to not speak a word of it to anyone, not even to their family.

And because of the short labor force, and the labor-intensive nature of the work, coupled with the complete novelty of the whole thing, till now, in about a month just four full-sleeved chainmail had been produced, and even then they were of quite poor quality.

A skilled chain maker would mix different-sized rings together to make the whole thing flow smoothly with the body.

For example, they would use large, thick rings on the front to better protect against enemy thrusts, while using smaller, thinner rings that mesh well together on the arms and fingers to make movement easier.

But the blacksmiths and armorers here had not done these at all, instead just using the same sized ring for the whole body, resulting in a much stiffer armor.

Though, in all fairness, it was not fair to criticize them for something they had never made before.

So, even with the shoddy quality, Alexander was pretty pleased with the result as these men had demonstrated it was very much possible to make chainmail with the existing technology.

What he was not pleased by was that one blacksmith's refusal even after Alexander's repeated offer to migrate to Zanzan with him.

And so, in a cruel twist of karmic fate, while the man and his eldest son, along with a few of his apprentices who were busy working in their workshop, a group of 'rebel' spies suddenly got wind of the secret armor being developed by the Ptolemaic forces, and to stop its production, raided the workshop late afternoon, killing all inside and burning the whole shop down.

How tragic!

And to make it even more heartbreaking, that blacksmith's entire family got assassinated that very night, the ruthless spies attacking them inside their house as the phantoms somehow managed to infiltrate even the inner ring to carry out their sanguinary plan.

Oh! How even more tragic!

Or at least this was the way Alexander portrayed the events after the orchestration of his macabre plan.

And since this 'attack' was made in the inner city, supposedly the most secure part of the city, against a patriot and his family nonetheless, this sent Alexander flying into fury, as he launched a city-wide combing search for any suspect spies and Amenheraft sympathizers, and managed in two days to catch

around a hundred suspected individuals and then got Ptolomy to promptly execute them for the crime of espionage.

In truth, if anyone bothered to look closer, they would have found all the suspects to be either high-level artisans such as guild leaders who had refused Alexander's offer or members of rival gangs who had not submitted to be on Camius's payroll.

This was not just in the heat of the moment plan.

No, Alexander had already taken into account that some of the blacksmiths would not go with him and thus thought of a contingency more than a month ago.

The plan started when he had asked the artisans to move into the inner city and take over the many recently emptied nobles' abodes, even though it did nothing but increase the artisans' commute time to work.

On the surface, the excuse he had given was to provide better security and amenities for the artisans and their families in exchange for their services.

In reality, what this allowed Alexander to do was to easily spy and survey these people, hence always keeping them under surveillance.

He also had hoped that these people would recognize him for the 'generous and benevolent' lord he is and thus choose to move to Zanzan with him.

And for those who didn't...well tough luck.

Alexander had little intention to leave Ptolomy with any significant production capabilities and this was his way of ensuring it.

Thus Alexander had managed to keep his secret armor secret, cripple Ptolomy's industry, while also making the capital of the country, the base of power of his king and a likely rival, into a gold mine of information, all with the help of the king- Ptolomy.

But in all fairness, Ptolomy really could not have been blamed for this.

How was he supposed to know that Alexander was developing a brand, new, revolutionary armor in the backyard and he had one of its makers killed just because the blacksmith had refused to go to Zanzan with him?

In Ptolomy's eyes, for Alexander to kill a perfectly ordinary blacksmith seemed as significant as him killing a fly or a bug, utterly pointless.

No, instead to Ptolomy, the clandestine murder appeared to be a genuine attack by Amenheraft's royalist forces, designed to sow chaos and fear in the city and so when Alexander had handed him a list of suspects on a silver platter, he saw no reason to doubt it.

He even thanked Alexander for taking the time to deal with the city's internal issues even though the former mercenary leader was so busy getting ready to leave.

Speaking of leaving, this exodus proved a bit of a challenge for Alexander's spymaster Camius.

He had spent the last month working tirelessly, almost sixteen hours a day to expand Alexander's reach into the bowels of the city and until now had managed to at least create the skeletal structure of an intelligence network in the capital.

But he naturally could not stay here in Adhan as he had to follow Alexander to Zanzan, which made him a bit muddled on who to choose as his representative here.

He had not had enough time to get to know the various gang leaders well enough and so after much deliberation he had decided to leave the network at the hands of a man called Goruk, who was the leader of one of the biggest gangs in Adhan.

How right or wrong was Camius to choose this almost unknown man?

Only time would tell.

But this was not Camius's only job as he had also been tasked to convince the soldiers to join Alexander and immigrate to Zanzan.

This proved to be a mixed bag, as some were eager, some ambivalent and some outright said no way.

The first party mostly consisted of Alexander die-hards- people like Menes, Camius, Batholomew, etc.

People whose agreement was a no brainer

There was another group that was very eager to join, which was the Cantagenan slaves and servants.

Almost all of them agreed to come with Alexander when he had promised to set them free in exchange for living in his territory and Alexander accepted his first five thousand foreign immigrants.

The next group, those unsure whether to accept the offer made up the majority of the people.

They ranged from men from the various mercenary groups to even Alexander's own group.

The main excuse of these people was mainly that they had family in Thesos and although Alexander offered to bring them here using his own money, many were reluctant to leave their homeland.

Even some of the soldiers from Alexander's own group deserted, and all in all, out of the original ten thousand, Alexander only managed to retain four thousand.

The majority of them have from Menicus's original group of twenty-five hundred, followed by Alexander's and then Melodias's.

The largest percentage that 'deserted' was not from Petricuno as Alexander had predicted, but from Heliptos, who had, at last, decided to stay, but his mercenary group had not.

Heliptos's control over his mercenary group had always been weak and most of them were born and raised true Cantagenans.

So for them to leave their homeland and serve a country they had been at war with for so long was unthinkable.

These people formed the last group, people who didn't even entertain the notion of settling in Adhania, which included Petricuno, the other two mercenaries, and the bulk of Damious's group.

All wanted to reach their motherland and protect it.

But surprisingly, most of the Cantagenans decided to stay.

Alexander would later find out the reason being these men were primarily from Cantagena's sister states and had little love for their big brother, who according to them was overbearing and dictatorial.

'Hmmm, looks like even Cantagena's allies don't like her very much,' Alexander was now more interested to know about this frequently mentioned city-state.

Chapter 164 Forcing A Truce

While Camius was busy recruiting soldiers from the mercenaries, Alexander also remembered to make recruitment drives in Adhan itself, offering large cash prizes to anyone willing to join him.

He particularly targeted the Adhanian army that fought with him, and the army officers.

Hence, out of the four to five hundred thousand men in the city, about fifty thousand agreed to move to Alexander.

But such a huge exodus managed to alarm Ptolomy and so Alexander had to settle for just seven thousand, even then he had to pay Ptolomy a pretty commission.

But Alexander dished it out, for he feared the population in his territory might be non-existent.

Done with all, Alexander had one final job to do, where he tasked the artisans to make some new things for him.

The first and most important thing he ordered was the making of a heavy plow.

Ptolomy had told him Zanzan was infertile because of its heavy clay soil, which was true when using the light, wooden plows the world used today.

But with a heavy plow, which was a light plow with a metal wedge attached to the back of it, heavy clay soil, which had a tendency to hold water and stunt plant growth, could be effectively drained and cultivated, even producing much better yields than the light soil prominent in Adhan.

To keep this a secret, Alexander had the plow made separately.

He tasked the carpenters to produce the wooden part of the plow, which was just a light plow with wheels attached to it and a strange hole at the back.

While the blacksmiths made the metal wedge that would actually turn the soil and tilt it.

Because iron was expensive, he had the wedges made out of bronze, though in the future, they would be replaced with high-quality steel.

The second thing he had made was a horse collar that was attached to the plow.

The current straps wrapped around the trachea of the horse and constricted it, making them push against the horse's throat the harder they pulled the plow, thus restricting the plowing speed.

But the horse collar circumvented this problem by wrapping around the horse's shoulder, allowing the beast to pull with much more force.

Of course, the collar was not just for horses, it worked on mules and donkeys as well.

As Alexander was busy with these preparations, the second important thing that took up Alexander's time was him occasionally checking in on Pasha Farzah and Ptolomy, who were busy preparing the groundwork for the peace negotiations that were just a week away.

Amenheraft was camped just a hundred kilometers from Adhan, in a city called Harik, and his delegation was scheduled to arrive in five days.

Strangely, it was not Amenheraft that was willing to initiate peace talks but Ptolomy.

But this was in hindsight to be expected, as Ptolomy was undoubtedly the weaker side in the war, and thus needed the time much more urgently than Amenheraft to shore up his forces.

Just because Amenheraft had lost a battle didn't mean he was out.

Even with his high command in tatters, it was still possible for him turn it around as he had access to much more resources.

Amenheraft was of course aware of this and was adamant about not accepting any kind of truce and was eager to begin round two shortly.

But reality seemed not to favor the previous king this time.

As by a combination of diplomacy and military strong-arming, Ptolomy, or more accurately Alexander and Pasha Farzah had managed to force Amenheraft to come to the negotiating table.

First, the military defeat, particularly the mid to high-level personnel lost really hurt Amenheraft, just as Pasha Farzah had predicted, and it made him unable to raise another army quickly enough.

But this was Amenheraft's lesser of the two problems.

A far, far lesser problem, as the much graver circumstances, presented themselves when Alexander proposed a plan to capitalize on Amenheraft's weakness.

And like a hyena latches onto its dying prey and starts eating it when before the prey is fully dead, the shrewd mercenary leader let the experienced Pasha Farzah set about making the trap.

The esteemed lord began this by removing the firewood from underneath and threatening to dismantle Amenheraft's whole base of influence.

Using his vast experience he immediately pointed out the nobles loyal and critical to Amenheraft and quickly sent letters to these noble families, offering amnesty, huge bereavement payments, and even huge sums of money as bribes in the form of economic subsidies to switch sides, an offer that the poor as a church mouse Amenheraft could never hope to realistically compete with.

He also very smartly made Ptolomy personally write these offers as a show of sincerity, as the king was forced to write letters for twelve to fourteen hours a day, while his heart bled unceasingly at the huge cheques he was forced to hand out.

'*Sniff*', was the throne worth it?' Ptolomy lampooned as he gazed at his bandaged thumb, which had started to bleed after holding on to the quill for so long, his heart aching as the astronomical windfall he just gained as rapidly vanishing in front of his eyes.

But if it was some form of consolation, the nobles, who were living in constant fear after realizing that they might have chosen the wrong side, quickly accepted the presented the huge cheques and promptly capitulated, greatly furthering Ptolomy's cause.

And few could blame them, as along with Ptolomy very politely forgiving them for all of their crimes, the money he offered was truly huge.

Even by huge standards, they were truly huge.

This amount was determined mainly by Pasha Farzah, who poured over all the financial records the royal family had of other houses and made the appropriate offer.

Usually, the targeted noble would be offered at least the equivalent sum of twice his annual income.

If the noble was big or important enough, or particularly loyal to Amenheraft, this offer could have extended to thrice or even four times, along with a written explanation of how the money was legitimate and not cursed as this money was presented by the two saintesses to the army commander Alexander as a sign of loyalty to the rightful king Ptolomy.

The explanation went on to further say that the saintesses have been punished for their indiscretions, but as their heart was in the right place even if their actions were not, and the king being moved by the piety shown by the two, had decided to spare their lives and simply exile them to Zanzan.

This lame excuse fooled almost no one, as how could such an easy way of just giving away everyone's money exist?

If it was so easy, how could the people have enough trust to store their hard-earned money there?

But what that piece of paper with some ink on it did was give all of them the perfect plausible deniability and in front of such a huge amount of money, nobody was willing to look the dead horse in the mouth.

Well, almost no one, as a few ultra-hawkish and particularly zealous devotees still called for the 'witches' to be burnt at the stake but no one took them seriously.

Everybody knew that the city had been invaded and most likely sacked, meaning the twins were just scapegoats for Ptolomy to clean off the dirty money he got from the mercenaries, who gave it to him in exchange for Zanzan.

This was the consensus reached among most of the nobles regarding the events that transpired inside Adhan and it hit surprisingly close hit to home, as it went on to prove that the Hollywood caricature of a dumb, brutish noble was just that, a movie troupe.

In reality, most nobles, receiving the best education afforded to them, were smart, resourceful, and competent, with only a few black sheep mixed in with them.

And being smart people, they chose to accept the money and let the royals tear each other apart, as most believed that both the royals would try and bring them over to their side, with gifts, benefits, and lands.

The nobles were not adverse to the civil war.

But they were unwilling to resume it right away, as the drought and the two-year fierce war had depleted a lot of their manpower, and they needed to get their farmlands and economy in shape.

And so, like Ptolomy's letters urged, the nobles around Amenheraft pressured the king for a truce, which, as his die-hard loyalist base was mostly dead, Amenheraft was forced to assent to.

Thus, with a grumpy heart and great reluctance, he sent Manuk and Pasha Muazz, the two most high-ranking officials still with him to Adhan, to negotiate ceasefire terms.

Ptolomy naturally had promised these delegates safe passage through the city and ten days later the battle took place, the two men, one representing the divine powers of Amenheraft and the other the nobles that follow Amenheraft, entered Adhan to meet with the rebel king.

Chapter 165 Truce Negotiations (Part 1)

A key point to be noted was that the negotiations were called a truce or an armistice and not a peace treaty.

It meant that both sides would only cease hostilities for a set amount of time, and resume once the time passed.

And currently, that very amount of time was being fiercely discussed.

Across a large simple table sat two of Amenheraft's delegates, while to their opposite sat three men—Alexander, Ptolomy, and Pasha Farzah.

"We demand that the city of Adhan be returned to the rightful king and in exchange, we are willing to overlook the transgressions of the rebel," Manuk made the opening statement.

"Hehe, archpriest Manuk, come on," Pasha Farzah chuckled at the absurd demand, "There's no need for this tired dance. Let's stop wasting our time, and get on to the real business."

He talked to Manuk like one would to a friend after meeting him after a long time, in a soft and vivacious tone.

"Oh, but Pasha Farzah, this 'is' real business." Manuk returned with a smile, placing a particular emphasis on the word 'is'. "

"It's only a matter of time before Adhan is back in our hands. So, I'm giving the rebel a chance to redeem himself,...his one and only chance," Manuk said these words as his eyes narrowed toward Ptolomy.

"It may be Adhan will fall to your hands, ...it might even fall tomorrow" This was said by Alexander in a low voice, who then added, "But only the gods and prophets know what's in the future. For us mortals, it's best to make decisions based on reality."

"..." Alexander's speech drew Manuk's gaze toward him as the archpriest burned the memory of the boy who snatched his beloved city from under him, and then deal with a crushing defeat to him in open combat.

If Manuk wasn't unarmed, he might have tried to kill Alexander then and there even at the risk of his own life just to vent his anger.

The hateful, menacing glare escaped no one's notice as Alexander flashed a provocative grin toward the archpriest.

"So, this is the famed divine son of Gaia," Manuk slowly spelled out, the mockery in his voice unmistakable.

"Haha, well I did defeat the son of Ramuh," Alexander returned the taunt with an extra helping.

And this hit a very sensitive nerve for Manuk, as he was once again reminded of his failure.

The last battle casualty list still made Manuk have nightmares, and now the man who orchestrated the whole thing was mocking him so openly.

Hateful!

"Pasha Alexander is a bit mistaken here. You defeated the fake son of Ramuh. The real son of Ramuh is right here beside us, hahaha," Pasha Farzah burst into laughter at his own joke.

"Right, right, my bad, my bad.....hahaha." Alexander too joined him for a chuckle, while Ptolomy tried very hard to stifle a laugh as he tried to appear regal and imposing.

"*Smash*," Manuk simply slammed on the table in thundering fury, as his eyes lit up in rage.

A single action spoke a thousand words about how utterly incensed he was.

He could take personal insults all day.

He wouldn't likely care even if they cursed his family or parents or ancestors.

But the moment they touched Amenheraft, the moment they mocked him- the moment they made fun of a god, all cards were off the table.

Manuk had personally ordered the executions of tens of thousands of heretics and it filled his heart with boiling-hot rage that he couldn't do the same with the three people that sat before him, who in his eyes were the greatest of blasphemers.

But although Manuk's little display had drawn the attention of everyone, for Alexander and co.. it failed to produce even the tiniest bit of fear and they roared even louder at the childish tantrum thrown about.

"My lords, it was you who wanted not to waste to time. So can we stop wasting time and get to business?" This voice was deep and oily and came from the fat, no, obese man that sat next to Manuk.

Pasha Muazz was a man whose body width seemed to exceed his body length, as the stubby man walked with the aid of a cane, the flaps on his face bouncing and shaking with every step he took.

His flank was so huge that when he sat on the provided chair, Alexander had half the urge to congratulate the man on accomplishing the near-impossible task of somehow balancing his whale-like blabber body on such a small, four-legged piece of furniture.

"Do you people have any pre-requisite conditions you would like to put forward,....any realistic conditions?" Pasha Farzah asked, pointing the last three words to Manuk.

"You people are the ones who are screaming for peace talks. You people are the ones who spent billions of ropas to invite you here. So you start," The experienced Pasha gave off the vibe that it was the Ptolomic forces that need this armistice and not them.

Which was true, and because they were the ones who called first for the truce, this put Ptolomy on the back foot at the negotiating table.

"Well, first we want Amenheraft to recognize Ptolomy as a king equal..." Pasha Farzah didn't get to finish his sentence as he got cut off by Pasha Muazz.

"Hold on, I thought you said realistic demands," He interjected.

Alexander then looked at Pasha Farzah, who gave him the signal with a slight nod and so Alexander offered:

1. Ten years of cessation of all hostiles between the provinces of Matrak, Adhan, Zanzan, and all other provinces.
2. One hundred thousand tonnes of grain by the end of next year as war reparations
3. The expulsion of Pasha Muazz as the pasha of the province of Zanzan and the recognition of Pasha Alexander as its new ruler.

4. Free passage for the movement of people and goods among all the territories for the discussed time frame.

5. The release of nobles held in captivity by Ptolomy.

As soon as Alexander finished, Pasha Muazz swung his inflated white arms around as a gesture of brushing off the offer as he snarled, "You call that an offer? Are you people drunk?"

"Here's our counter offer," Manuk had returned to the conversation,

1. Three years armistice

2. Five billion ropas as compensation for all the nobles killed by Ptolomy.

3. The third point is null and moot. Pasha Muazz was, is, and will always be Zanzan's rightful ruler.

4. Goods entering the three discussed territories will not be subjected to any additional tolls, but goods leaving will be.

5. The release of all nobles held in captivity by Ptolomy.

6. All nobles, including the king and his family, be permitted into Adhan, and their security assured during the entire week of Jtaama.

7. Execution of the mercenary leader Alexander for the looting and killing of nobles in the inner city.

And lastly,

8. Immediate release of the princesses Azira and Azura from captivity and their return to their rightful guardian- their father, Amenheraft.

"Hah, and here we thought you guys came here in good faith to negotiate," Pasha Farzah scoffed, not bothering even to point out what he found absurd about the proposal.

"Five billion ropas as compensation? You want us to pay you?" Alexander asked in incredulity at the ludicrous demand.

"Has being defeated by me cooked your brain? Or did you conjure up an imaginary world where you won? " He then sneered at Manuk.

"Frankly I'm impressed by your shamelessness. I always knew were a slimeball, but this is a new low even for you, Manuk." Ptolomy opened his mouth for the first time, jeering at the priest.

To wage war against someone and then defend payment from when they defended themselves.

It took a special kind of shamelessness to demand such.

"Heh, if anyone is shameless and a slimeball, it's you people. Rebelling against the king, killing priests and stealing from the temple! You think we don't know how you got all that money?" Manuk sniggered in reply, not thinking there was anything wrong with his demands.

And then he pointed at Ptolomy and shouted, "Aren't you afraid of divine retribution for stealing from the gods and killing his messengers?"

Pasha Farzah quickly jumped in to defend his king, "Neither of these accusations are true. As said in the letter, which I'm sure you have read, the priests were killed under the orders of Amenheraft as witnessed by all the surviving priests. And the money was given as a show of loyalty by the temple in recognition of the king as the true son of god." He recited the memorized script.

"And I never killed or looted any nobles. This was done by a few rioting scoundrels and they have been identified and executed," Alexander had decided to pin the death of all nobles onto those unfortunate palace guards.

"Bullshit," Manuk spat out at this preposterous claim but didn't argue it as it had been tacitly agreed to by all.

Chapter 166 Truce Negotiations (Part-2)

The pinning of all the nobles' death on just a hundred or so handful of guards was just a paper construct, beautiful to look at from far, but it would crumble at the slightest poke of scrutiny.

Although there were many nobles who came forth as eyewitnesses as to the guilt of the executed palace guards, and this was verified independently by neutral parties, the most glaring flaw of that recounting was that all these nobles were staunch supporters of Ptolomy.

Of course, this inconsistency was explained by claiming that nobles belonging to Amenheraft's faction were all absent from Adhan for the following three reasons.

One- Many died in the first battle when Amenheraft tried to capture Ptolomy.

Two- Many fled the city with Amenheraft when the city fell.

And third- Many were killed in the melee ten days ago.

And all this was true, as many nobles did die in those instances, but it was also true that Alexander killed many of them in their homes, as evidenced by the presence of a large number of dead women and children who never fought in battle.

But for now, it seemed that the nobles were willing to turn a blind eye to this, retracting their fangs and closing their eyes, as they waited for their venom glands to fill up.

They didn't buy the cooked-up story and only bid their time to strike.

Responding to the list of 'shooting for the moon and hoping it lands on earth' demands made by Manuk, Alexander pointed out his side's objections,

"Three years is too short- eight years is the minimum we can do."

"And it will be you who will have to give us sixty thousand tonnes of grain."

"Zanzan will be mine, no questions asked."

"Tariffs for the provinces can be discussed."

"The captive nobles can be released as a show of goodwill... if you are willing to assent to some of our demands."

"And killing me and taking the twin princesses are not something we will bother discussing."

"If you insist on Azira and Azura, then let's stop here. There's the door," Pasha Farzah pointed to the way out, showing his true feelings about that particular demand.

"That's right. Amenheraft should have taken them with them when he had the chance. The princesses will stay with us. Where they are safe!" Alexander bolstered Pasha Farzah's stance.

"Fine, we are willing to temporarily let the guardianship of the princesses be passed onto you," Manuk in a fake reluctant voice relented.

"But," he quickly added, "we want you to give up that stupid idea about Zanzan."

"Our stance of Zanzan is absolute. From now, till the end of time, Zanzan will be the fief of Pasha Alexander and his family." Ptolomy spoke in an imperious, absolute tone, showing they will not budge a bit on that point.

"Hah, you think I will ever let a filthy slave rule my territory? The territory my forefathers have poured their life's blood and sweat into?" Pasha Muazz bellowed in indignation.

He turned to glare menacingly at Alexander and sneered, "Do you know that I hunt your kind for sport! The miserable squeals they make when my dogs tear you mongrels apart, hehehe."

Drool started coating the fat, slimy mouth as the man cackled in delight.

"Then why don't you go and defend Zanzan from my army? And then we will see who hunts who?" Alexander said this without even bothering to look at the overweight man, instead paying more attention to the nails on his hand.

"You...." Alexander's reply made the Pasha immediately choke on his laughter and he found it hard to control his temper.

Being a religious fanatic, he considered all people outside of Adhania heretics and blasphemers.

He also found anyone of not nobility to be base and irrelevant, and he saw slaves as just inanimate objects. no different from the rocks and stones scattered all over Zanzan.

And congratulations to Alexander, for he was all three, thus completing the holy trinity of hatred for the Pasha.

As to why the Pasha was here and not defending his territory, well because almost all the men that he could have defended the city with were here, in Adhan, either captured or buried.

This, he had no one to defend the city with!

So, embarrassed and incensed, the Pasha only huffed and puffed at Alexander, unable to throw any real threats toward the man.

"Pasha Alexnader, shouldn't bother hunting this waste. You have a much bigger target, that pretender that dares call himself the son of Ramuh," Ptolomy smiled and joined Alexander, taunting not just the Pasha but his lord too.

".....we can understand reality." Manuk spookily started.

"And although we vehemently oppose it, we will allow that lowly mercenary leader govern Zanzan.... for the time being...until the day comes we can overthrow and replace him with its rightful ruler." Manuk let out an exasperated sigh as he said this.

And he was joined by the man beside him, who looked both furious and helpless.

They had come to the negotiations having a basic idea about what Ptolomy wanted and they knew the opponent's primary focus was on Zanzan.

And although they tried to halt this with all their might, the groundwork set by Ptolomy and others for this particular maneuver had been too solid.

Amenheraft could think of no way to dismantle it.

Using the astronomical money Alexander had stolen from the temple, he had made Ptolomy bribe all the pashas, all for the purpose of pushing this armistice and recognizing him as the ruler of Zanzan as opposed to Muazz.

And although the other pashas didn't outright accept the second demand, neither did they outright refuse.

They tacitly agreed to let Alexander become a pasha, though openly they said they would never recognize him as one of their own.

In this way, they intended to make Alexander become a pariah while also expressing their displeasure at the king for so casually replacing one of their own.

This was because civil wars in Adhania were not uncommon, in fact, the current royal family had gotten into power when it replaced the previous ruling dynasty with its branch family, very similar to how Ptolomy was attempting to replace Amenheraft, but, even if the nobles chose the wrong side in such conflicts, they wouldn't lose their title, at least the big ones.

Some may have to pay reparations or even might have to concede some territory, but death was usually spared unless they perpetrated some heinous crimes.

And even then, only the small and minor nobles would be executed, just as a warning to others to get in line.

So, for Ptolomy to so blatantly tear up this unwritten rule angered the pashas and although they didn't outright oppose the decision, all of them decided to excommunicate Alexander from their ranks, meaning trade with him would be restricted or totally banned, they wouldn't make any treaties with Alexander and they would exclude him from all their social gathering, restricting with social connections and partnership opportunities.

This they reasoned would shunt and cripple Alexander as the way noble houses grew and became stronger was by trading and forming alliances with other houses.

And if Alexander was unable to meet the nobles, unable to go to various parties to know who was who, and which nobles did what, then he would simply wither away and die.

Or at least, that was what they thought and only time would tell how right or wrong they were.

The group was unable to come to any amicable terms about Zanzan, and the issue was left in limbo, with Alexander vowing to take over the city, while Pasha Muazz vowing to make life 'hell' for him.

With these hot words exchanged and tempers flying, the men decided to take a small recess, where they breathed in fresh air, ate some snacks, and talked among themselves to devise strategies.

And soon, the men met again.

"About the money,.....we are also willing to give Amenheraft a loan." Pasha Farzah opened the next round with the issue of money, tapping his finger on the table as he said so.

"Loan?" Pasha Muazz frowned at the word.

Loans meant loan sharks and although he was one and quite liked being one, he didn't like the idea of owing money to one.

"Yes, loans," Alexander repeated. "We are aware of the financial difficulties of Amenheraft. And although they are enemies, King Ptology is boundless in mercy and benevolence and someone who never forgets familiar...."

"Get on with it," Manuk voiced in frustration.

"Hundred million with a ten percent interest." Alexander offered.

"Five hundred, no interest," Pasha Muazz raised all five of his stubby fingers.

"We will sell two hundred million in Legumum. And two hundred million will be loaned at two percent" Pasha Farzah stated in a final tone.

Legumum was a contraceptive plant that was highly desirable, and grew only around the Life Sea, meaning Ptology had a complete monopoly on it.

And thus him willing to exchange it for ordinary goods made it a very profitable trade for Amenheraft.

"Fine, but the two hundred million must be given first," Manuk cleverly demanded the loan first, his intention transparent.

"We will give you the half loan after the first hundred million ropas worth of trade is done. And the rest after the completion of the trade," Pasha Farzah wasn't to be swindled.

"Fine, but we want fresh Legumum. Not from stock years ago," Manuk demanded, which was assented to.

"Now, the topic of Jtaama..." Pasha Muazz turned to Ptolomy for his decision.

Chapter 167 Treaty Of Unease

Jtaama was a week-long pilgrimage for the followers of Ramuh performed centering the Life sea.

This included praying, chanting, and various other ritualistic activities, combined with celebrations like dancing, bathing in the sea, sacrifice, and much more.

It was the most holy occasion for the followers of Ramuh and whoever had the means and way to get to Adhan would surely try to get there.

Almost all the nobles or their representatives would attend the festival and many nobles, even pashas whose territories were thousands of kilometers from Adhan would occasionally personally come to take part in the last day afterparty.

And as Amenheraft and his retainers were mostly religious in nature, barring them from performing their pilgrimage was impossible.

Just like Ptolomy and his forces would not take a no in the acquisition of Zanzan, Amenheraft saw no point in a ceasefire if they couldn't have access to their holy site.

"I'm willing to allow protection and safety to all allied, neutral, and belligerent parties during the week of Jtaama. But they won't be allowed to bring any weapons into the city," Ptolomy stated his condition.

"No weapons? Is this a joke!" Pasha Muazz flared up at the absurd condition.

"No harm will come to them. We swear in the name of Ramuh," Ptolomy sincerely proclaimed.

He really was serious about not harming a single pilgrim, even his mortal enemies in that time period.

"Hah, you people are priest killers, temple looters, and king slayers! Do you think your swears mean anything?" Manuk bellowed in rage, brushing off Ptolomy's proclamation as garbage.

'Smart man,' Alexander smirked in his heart.

Even if Ptolomy had no intention to kill these men, Alexander didn't think he could let such defenseless ducks go.

After all, he never gave made any promises to these men, and he would a fool to let go of this golden opportunity.

"Then we will allow them to carry a single-sheathed sword," Alexander offered the compromise with a smile.

"We are not warriors. And you outnumber us." Manuk frowned as he revealed their problems.

He then wanted, "A contingent of a thousand soldiers as bodyguards must be allowed to accompany us."

"If you people are so scared to come to perform pilgrimage, then don't come," Pasha Farzah blew away all of Manuk's whining as he brusquely waved his hand.

"That's right. We are already showing courtesy of the highest level by not charging you a premium to enter the city. It's our city after all," Alexander loudly reminded.

"The city of Adhan will be a safe sanctuary for all pilgrims during the week of Jtaama. I swear it!" Ptolomy solemnly promised again.

Manuk gazed deep into the king's eyes and could see no pretense, only sincerity.

But still, he hesitated.

He didn't like the idea of letting Amenheraft be unguarded.

Seeing this Alexander reasoned, "Bringing bodyguards will make us bring bodyguards. And those soldiers tend to be overzealous about their masters. If it's just the nobles, they will think twice about starting a conflict without their lackeys there to do the fighting for them."

This made Manuk go silent for a bit, as he ruminated on Alexander's words, huddling up with his partner and whispering something.

And after a while, he nodded, "Okay, we agree,"

And thus, with the major issues done, after a lot of grumbling, recess, and haggling, the day-long meeting finally ended at dusk, whereupon, even with the insistence of Ptolomy to rest and spend the night in Adhan, Manuk and Pasha Muazz decided to leave the city and soon met up with Amenheraft three days later.

In the end, these were the terms that were agreed upon:

1. An armistice of six years would last between the forces of Polomy and Amenheraft.

Any noble may enter a covenant with either party, Ptolomy or Amenheraft. Whoever enters into any one of the parties will be considered part of that party. Likewise, any sort of aggression against them will be considered aggression against that party.

2. Four hundred million ropals will be paid to Amenheraft, with half exchanged for goods and half given as loans.

3. Adhan will become a safe sanctuary for all during the week of Jtaama.

4. Tariffs between provinces will follow their pre-conflict time rate.

5. All captured nobles were to be released.

This came to be known as the Treaty of Unease as it failed to address a huge problem- Zanzan.

Although Amenheraft agreed to acknowledge Alexander as the city's ruler, they refused to recognize him as its pasha, and the matter of how the nobles under him would be treated couldn't be agreed upon.

While Ptolomy argued that Alexander had the full right to demand the loyalty of the nobles of Zanzan and even execute them if refused, Manuk pointed to the fact that those nobles had a covenant with Amenheraft and thus that would violate the ceasefire as stipulated in the first point.

Ptolomy refused to recognize this argument saying that a Pasha could appoint new nobles and since Alexander as the new pasha did not recognize any noble who didn't swear fealty to him, they were not nobles, and thus the first agreement didn't apply to them.

Manuk naturally refused to accept this argument as they saw Alexander only as an occupier and unable to come to any written terms, the debate was finally left with an uneasy verbal assurance that Alexander would not harm the nobles and vice versa.

Hence came the name 'Treaty of Unease', as both sides knew it was only a matter of time before Alexander or the nobles in his land became the belligerent party and destroyed the ceasefire.

The treaty also subtly proved just how weak Ptolomy's faction was.

Even after they had won so decisively, the terms of the treaty greatly favored Amenheraft.

He got all his captured nobles back bolstering his image and weakening Ptolomy's.

He got the highly desirable Legumum and also two hundred million free ropas, which, although on paper a loan, neither side expected Amenheraft to pay it back.

He even got to attend Jtaama and lastly he managed to effectively half the desired time of truce by Ptolomy.

Whereas Ptolomy, for all his efforts, for all his victory, and for the five hundred million roplas he spent on each of the nine pashas, and two and a half billion on the hundreds of nobles and priests, just bought himself six years of peace and a few minor nobles to his side.

Even the question about Zanzan was left decided, which could be the powder keg to start the conflict at any time.

'*Sigh*is this how Hannibal felt after his victory at Cannae?' Alexander ruefully commented as he gazed at the thin piece of papyrus where the agreement was written, thinking back on how the Carthaginian general had killed fifty to seventy thousand out of eighty thousand Romans in that battle, and still, lost the war in the end.

To put into context how devastating Cannae was, Rome only had a population of four million at that time, which meant that the country had lost around two percent of the entire population in just a single day and a fourth of its adult male population.

But the Romans fought on undeterred and unfazed,

That's how tough the Romans were, and if Amenheraft and his retainers of fanatical loyalists had such zeal, Alexander was fucked.

But fortunately for Alexander, it didn't seem to be the case as they came to the negotiating table after a bit of setback and some heavy bribes, meaning Alexander would just need the time to slowly carve off the meat from the giant creature and devour it slowly.

And with those calming thoughts, Alexander retired for the day.

And soon, three days later the date for his departure had come.

The day after the negotiations concluded, Alexander attended the king's coronation where priests appointed by Ptolomy proclaimed him king.

The ceremony was lackluster at best with just one of the original elven pashas attending, and no other high-ranking noble present.

The priests looked very lonely as they doused the king with holy water, performed various rituals, burnt incense, and rubbed mer (a kind of balm), before proclaiming him divine and putting the crown on his head.

This ceremony was also where Alexander was officially announced as the Pasha of Zanzan and a great feast was held.

Here he finally got to formally meet Pasha Farzah's entourage and met many of his retainers.

There he also met the city lord of Agnirat, Inayah, the famous lady who was one-third of the piece that poisoned the previous king.

She was tall, with an ebony complexion and a mature oblong face, her auburn hair draping over both sides of her ornate, pearl-white dress.

And next to her was a silver-haired, fair maiden introducing herself as Pasha Farzah's daughter Mikaya, wearing a full-sleeved black dress with a pearled necklace, the one who would be accompanying him to Zanzan.

He exchanged some general pleasantries with them and then went to socialize with the other men, little knowing that he would be meeting the two ladies again tomorrow and under much different circumstances.

Chapter 168 An Awkward Encounter (R-18)

The next day, during the afternoon, running late for his lunch and feeling famished, and thinking that it was a shortcut, Alexander took a few unknown turns and got lost on the second floor while trying to return to his room on the next floor.

And as the man wandered through the twisting and unfamiliar corridors, trying to find a way out of the maze of rooms and hallways, suddenly the sound of low grunts and the distinct, rhythmic noise of flesh hitting flesh caught his ears coming.

Alexander could never mistake that sound for anything else and the curious man decided to follow the sound to find out exactly who could be performing these acts in such broad daylight, which led him to a room at the furthest end of a corridor.

And as he approached the wide open door, expecting to see a tryst between a maid and a soldier, and intending to lightly scold them for doing these at work time. Instead, the scene that unfolded before him literally stunned him beyond words.

Alexander could have confidently sworn that he was never been so surprised in his two lives.

For in front of him was not an innocent little tussle under the bed, but a full fledge orgy in open display, as he witnessed three ravishing mature women being swarmed by eight or nine men, with each of the ladies sucking multiple rods while some were being impaled in their lower orifices, the shaking from below sending shockwaves through their voluptuous bodies and making their plentiful jugs jiggle with ecstasy.

Alexander recognized none of the men and thus judged them not to be from the palace guards as only soldiers from Alexander's mercenary group, which were his most trusted soldiers and whom he knew by at least face if not by name.

And that wasn't the most concerning part, nor was seeing such a scene in such an open way, but it was the participants that appeared in front of Alexander that knocked the words out of his mouth.

Because in the room, with the door shamelessly left ajar, was a black beauty with her auburn hair tied neatly in a bun who Alexander recognized as the city lord, Inayah, there was a pale white bombshell with silver hair who had just yesterday introduced herself to Alexander as Pasha Farzah's daughter Mikaya and the last lady that Alexander could barely believe as being her, a lady he would regularly meet in passing in the hallway, sometimes multiple times a day, the lady who had magnificent curly locks that reached her slender shoulders, it was the queen- Nanazin!

The group hadn't spotted Alexander yet as they immersed themselves in unrestrained carnal pleasure, giving Alexander an unobstructed view of what was happening inside.

Lady Inayah was in the center, sitting on her knees on the thick, fluffy carpet and busy stuffing her mouth with the two thick rods that stood in full attention next to her, greedily devouring one and then quickly switching to the other as she took them deep inside her mouth like an experienced courtesan.

The men serving her also seemed very experienced as they stood in perfect attention, with their hands clasped behind their back, uttering nary a sound as their lady deepthroated them.

The lady had kept her luxurious one piece on her as she did this, the strapless red smoking dress showing off her deep cleavage, as down below, the hem had been parted by another man, who lay beneath her and seemed to be diligently licking her tiny flower nestled between her slightly opened legs, his hard rod standing proudly in front of the city lord, leaking like a faucet with precum.

On her left was Pasha Farzah's daughter Mikaya, and very nearly Alexander's fiancée.

She, like the lady next to her, too had her mouth filled with thick, meaty lollipops, which she seemed to be enjoying licking very much as she made pleased nasal groans while bobbing her head up and down.

She also had two extra bulging sticks behind her, who were wrapping themselves on the silvery, almost snow-like hair of their mistress and vigorously rubbing them.

Mikaya did not have a single string of thread on her, as she let everyone soak in her full ethereal beauty, displaying her silver-white hair, her flawless fair porcelain skin, her thick silvery bush below, and her glorious peaks to all.

The lady seemed to be very absorbed in the act, as she sucked on the rods vigorously, while also enthusiastically jumping up and down on the turgid rod below her, causing her magnificent melons to swing wildly, and making the room echo with the 'slap,' 'slap,' sound of wet flesh hitting each other.

But these two women were not in the most compromising position in Alexander's opinion.

No, Alexander felt that that dubious distinction should belong to the lady on the right of Lady Inayah.

For unlike the other two, that busty woman didn't even have her feet on the ground as she was split roasted into the air by the two, huge black men that were stuffing her two holes.

The queen, Nanazin wore only black high heels and a matching tight corset that hugged her midriff, accentuating her bare breasts and making them appear even more full as the soldiers filled both her ass and mouth.

Because she was facing Alexander sideways unlike the other two who were directly facing him forward, Alexander could clearly see how the queen was being lifted off the ground with just two thick, black rods stuck inside her and couldn't help but appreciate how her breasts would swing and sway under the rough pounding she was receiving, while she could only moan and groan.

And she was receiving a rough pounding no doubt about it, as the muscular, almost like carved-out-of-granite thighs of the man behind her were fiercely slapping against her meaty, exquisite rump, jiggling it everything it was struck and making the queen arch her back in pleasure.

Slap! Slap! Slap!

The hard pounding echoed through the room as it made the queen's fair butt bright red, while she held on for dear life.

Because she wasn't being attacked just from the back, but from the front as well.

The muscular man with his hands clasped behind his back rapidly humped inside the royal's mouth as the queen hugged the strong man's waist like a koala, letting her lose herself in the sensation of this double penetration.

Nanazin had her eyes closed and her mouth filled, unable to make even a tiny bit of noise as she hung in the air using the phalluses like she was a wet cloth hung out to dry.

Alexander didn't know much about the other two other than their name, but for Nanazin, the image that he had of her, that of a calm, refined lady, soft-spoken and always dressing conservatively, had been irrevocably erased away, only to be replaced with the picture of a depraved woman.

He knew would never be able to forget what he had seen today, of how the queen looked like as her sticky saliva drooled out of her face, while white stinky love juice hung off her snatch and fell like raindrops onto the white carpet under the rhythmic pounding.

Alexander didn't know how long he had been there, but it was a sweet, sultry voice that snapped him back to his senses, "Ah, Pasha Alexander, is there something you need?"

It was Lady Inayah who had finally noticed the intruder's presence and sent a charming smile towards Alexander as she asked the question, not bothering to stop for a second what she was doing while she made the inquiry.

This caught Alexander a bit off guard if not only for the fact that the lady seemed totally unconcerned and unabashed by the acts she was performing right in front of him.

Alexander had never encountered such a situation in both his lifetime and seemed unsure of how to respond.

'Confront them?'

'Smile and greet them like everything is fine?'

'Close the door and walk away?'

'Pretend that I don't understand Azhak?'

'Explain how I got lost?'

'Turn and run?'

Alexander's brain seemed to have jammed and overloaded as he tried to think of an appropriate response.

"Oh my, he seems to have stunned beyond words, how innocent, hehehe" This time it was the pearly giggle of Mikaya that addressed Alexander as the woman finally stopped bouncing and took the time to have a good look at Alexander.

"Kyahhh, Alexander! What are you doing here?" The commotion finally bought the queen's attention back to this world as she quickly let go of her favorite meat stick and screamed at the man.

The look that Nanazin had was one of pure terror as she looked at Alexander like she had seen a ghost.

'Ahhh, finally a normal reaction,' Alexander was at last glad to know that it was not him that was crazy but those other two women.

Chapter 169 Lesson In Adhanian Customs

As Alexander was racking his brain on how to respond to the peculiar circumstances that greeted him, Nanazin in the meantime had swiftly gotten the other rod out of her buttock and then rapidly proceeded to hide behind Lady Inayah, crouching and shaking in shame, as she tried to curl herself into a ball.

But the rest of the group was not interested in the queen's bashful behavior as all of them stopped what they were doing and stared pointedly at Alexander, eager to know, "What was he doing there?"

"Haha, I seemed to have gotten lost. Sorry for the intrusion!" Alexander attempted to brush off the entire thing as a minor foible and then quickly turned to leave.

"Hehe, since you got here, then stay. After all, it must have been fate that guide you here," Lady Inayah's soft, languid voice seemed to have a hypnotic effect on Alexander, as he felt spellbound to stay like he was being drawn in by an invisible magnet.

"Right, right, we will be very glad to have you join us," Mikaya chirped in a fresh voice.

Despite her mature demeanor, this lady had a very high-pitched, almost childlike voice.

But to Alexander, this seemed like the call of a siren and he felt that he would fall to his doom if he accepted it.

So, with all the willpower he could muster, he squeezed out, "I deeply apologize for any inconvenience I might have caused. Please let me close the door and let you get on with your day,"

"Hahaha," Just as Alexander finished these words, a huge roar of laughter ran across the room, as it was not just not the ladies, even the men didn't seem to be able to contain their laughter.

Alexander even spotted the shoulders of the queen who was hiding behind Lady Inayah shaking, as if she was trying very hard to stifle a burst of laughter but failing miserably.

'What's so funny?' Alexander asked himself as he failed to understand the joke.

"Ohh! What a cheery boy! We will have so much fun in Zanzan!" Mikaya lustfully sang toward Alexander as he was reminded that this promiscuous woman would be occupying his house for the next five years.

'Maybe I should allow Azira and Azura to return home,' Alexander felt a headache coming.

"Hehe, it seems Pasha Alexander is not quite yet versed in Adhanian etiquette." Lady Inayah had stood up by now as she put her left hand on her hips.

She then explained, "In Adhania, nobles usually build at least up to two floors, because the last few rooms on the left side of the second floor are usually reserved for such purposes. And to prevent anyone accidentally walking in on them, the doors are usually kept open so the sound can reach them before any awkward confrontations can occur. Like this!"

"Why not just do the thing in secret with doors closed," Alexander pointed to a much simpler solution.

"Hmph, it seems the rumors were true, you truly are a bumpkin," Mikaya taunted from behind, as she rotated her hips in a circular motion and ground against the helpless man's pelvis below.

While Lady Inayah offered some actual helpful advice.

"Haha, Pasha Alexander although it is understandable as you are a Thesian, it would be best if you could learn our ways to better fit in. And the sooner you do it, the better." She gave counsel with a sweet smile.

She then further explained, "I know in Thesos women are valued for their chastity and sole loyalty to their husband. But in Adhania, things are a bit different. Although the general populace largely follows these rules, the noble women can fraternize with men just as men do with other women!"

Lady Inayah didn't miss the shocked look on Alexander's face, as too didn't Mikaya, who chimed, "After all, if you men can do it, why can't we women?", which was a surprisingly sound and modern argument.

Yes, if Alexander can sleep with multiple women, why couldn't Cambyses do the same with other men?

"But..." Alexander blurted out.

"But what about the bloodline?" Lady Inayah helped Alexander finish his sentence with a prophetic tone.

And she gave the answer, "In Adhania, around the Life sea grows a unique plant called Legumum. I'm sure you heard of it. Its juice can prevent pregnancy with almost complete certainty. And even if one conceives, the royal family has a secret recipe using the processed juices that can induce even late-stage abortions."

The special plant only grew around the Life Sea, thriving in the unique ecosystem created by the special plankton that came to give the sea its distinctive pink color.

'So it's like the roman Silphium.' Alexander thought about the contraceptive plant Romans used to prevent their own conception, which they used so much that the plant had become extinct in Alexander's modern times.

But fortunately for this Legumum, unlike its other dimensional brother, it was zealously protected and hoarded by the royal family, as it was one of their greatest source of income, and due to the short supply, restricted its use to only among the nobility.

This had created a huge black market for the stuff, as its properties were too desirable to let go and even small vials of the stuff would go for astronomical prices as people like rich merchants, well-off artisans, and even foreign powers fought for it.

And that's also why Amenheraft was so happy to get two hundred million roplas of it in exchange for ordinary goods.

Lady Inayah still continued, "So, you see, in Adhania, women, or more specifically noblewomen have much more freedom in certain aspects of their life than in Thesos."

"Of course, there are some caveats as women are not equal to men." She then quickly stated while pointing out some examples, "For instance, the woman must ask her husband's permission before she can sleep with another man, ...though this is more of a custom than a rule, for as long as she proves that she will use contraception. not granting it is seen in poor taste."

"But" Lady Inayah raised her index finger in a didactic way, "this rule doesn't apply to the slaves. For a slave is a thing and a noblewoman has the full right to relieve her sexual frustrations using that thing, as long as she does not get pregnant."

"And to make sure the child is her husband's, to show that she is using contraceptives, the noblewoman does this acts in a room with the doors open so the husband can check on her anytime. In this way, there's no snooping around in the back or cheating," Inayah gave a very pragmatic reason behind the open-door custom.

'Why not do this in the first place,' Alexander lampooned inwardly.

"Thank you, Lady Inayah, for sharing this invaluable knowledge. I will be sure to repay this kindness in the future," Outwardly, Alexander performed a small bow in gratitude and then attempted to leave.

"Hehe, then Pasha Alexander might be able to help with a little itch I have done there," The city lord immediately caught onto Alexander's perfunctory reply and made a suggestive wordplay as she flashed a sultry, lascivious smile.

'Hell no. You want dicks, pick others!' Alexander cursed in his heart at the licentious request.

He then flashed a professional, fake smile, the one where one excessively curves his lips upwards, and said, "I'm afraid I might not be the man for the job."

"See, Lady Inayah, these Thesians are such prudes!" Mikaya charmingly pouted at Alexander for his refusal.

"Hehe, the Pasha says so but his little brother seems to disagree. Men are always more honest down there," Lady Inayah tittered, showing her nice, even teeth while pointing at Alexander's bulging crotch below.

Alexander flushed a bit at this reveal, though this was only a natural reaction after witnessing the scene he was exposed to.

"Haha, it would be an insult to you three such beautiful ladies if this didn't happen," Alexander awkwardly smiled as he tried to back out.

"Hehe, I can fully understand the Pasha's shyness," But Lady Inayah's understanding smile stopped him.

Somehow that lady's voice seemed to always stop Alexander, or perhaps it was because Alexander subconsciously wanted this, but his sense of value and modesty was preventing him from outright saying it, and Lady Inayah's voice acted as an excuse for him to stay.

No one knew for sure, not even Alexander and it was unlikely anyone ever would.

The lady then went to offer, "Come, for today, we will do it the doors closed."

But Alexander had no intention to crack so easily.

"Madam, it would be rude for a junior like me to join you. Please forget about this little unpleasant distraction and continue enjoying yourself!" He quickly spelled out and then determinedly turned around, swearing to himself that short of being physically restrained, he was gonna walk out of this Slaneeh's lair.

But this supposed iron will of Alexander proved to be actually a soft putty as Lady Inayah purred, "Pasha Alexander, I heard you were leaving for Zanzan soon. Are you in need of ships?"

And Alexander would have very much liked some ships.

Chapter 170 Nanazin's Standard Pose (R-18)

The distance from Adhan to Zanzan city by land was eight hundred kilometers.

And because the roads were so good, Alexander expected to reach it in about a month.

But if he used ships?

Alexander knew shipping was magnitudes cheaper and faster than land routes, sometimes as far as thirty times cheaper and seven times faster.

So when Lady Inayah hung the bait, Alexander couldn't resist biting.

He closed the door behind him as he entered the room and flashed a smile, "Lady Inayah, please delineate the deal for me."

Alexander knew what the vixen wanted from him, but the payment she had eluded to was just too juicy for him to say no to.

"Hehe, Pasha Alexander is a smart man," The mature lady let out a sultry, victorious smile at him as she stated her terms, "The sea route from Agnirat to Zanzan is around three thousand kilometers, which given the strong northerly wind can be completed in less than two weeks, in around ten days by my estimate."

This made Alexander's eyes bulge out a bit as this reduced time not only meant saving time, but also food, and cost.

'Darn, this option completely slipped my mind,' Alexander cursed himself.

Because Adhan was an inland city and because Amenheraft had come from Zanzan using the road, he naturally thought that he must use the roads to get to Zanzan.

And besides, even if it did, it was not like he knew any ship owners.

He had basically met Lady Inayah just now.

But still, Alexander himself would be the one to admit forgetting such a critical thing was not one of his finest moments.

"How many ships do you have? I have more than forty thousand men (40,000) including ten thousand (10,000) tons of grain and five thousand (5,000) pack animals," Alexander listed some huge numbers that finally caused the infallible smile on Lady Inayah's face to falter.

"So much? Are you going to war? Didn't Muazz leave the city?" Lady Inayah asked in disbelief.

"Haha, so can you?" Alexander smirked, pleased at finally seeing a different kind of face from the lady.

The numbers Alexander said were all real.

"Hehe, Pasha Alexander, here's little advice from your senior. Never assume you are the smartest person in the room!" Lady Inayah narrowed her eyes into a crescent as she gently chided the boy with a smirk.

She then explained, "I wasn't surprised because I wouldn't be able to accommodate your people. I was surprised thinking that the port at Zanzan might not be able to fit them all," Lady Inayah touched the locks of her hair as she corrected Alexander.

'That...darn, I have gotten too cocky as things have been going so smoothly for me lately,' Alexander was both embarrassed and angry at himself after this chastisement.

He was being over-smart.

"I will give you a hundred ships. Eighty for personnel and twenty for the animals. Happy?" Lady Inayah sent a sly smile at Alexander.

"Haha, happy, happy", Alexander was thrilled by the offer.

Even if Zanzan's port was completely destroyed, Alexander could still make landfall using small boats, in batches.

The time and money he would save using the ships made this little potential problem irrelevant.

"So how much do I owe you?" Alexander asked for the price of the charter.

"Nothing," The lady put her pinky on her lips as she smiled.

"Nothing?" Alexander was surprised.

He had expected that Lady Inayah wanted a taste of him in exchange for just making the ships available for hire.

After all, lending out so many ships at a time meant that her trade would significantly drop or altogether stop.

"Hehe, let's say that the price will be lower the more you have please me." Lady Inayah sent a charming, almost predatory smile at Alexander, eager to taste the boy.

"Haha, I might not be that valuable," Alexander felt a tiny prickle of terror looking at that smile.

"Ohh, you underestimate yourself, Pasha Alexander," This was said by Mikaya, who finally got up, releasing the rod inside her with a 'plop' and causing a dollop of juice to fall out of her and darken the carpet as she approached Alexander intending to escort the man in officially.

"A boy, once a slave, became a pasha in less than two months at the age of eighteen. Oh, even fairy tales are more believable." She gazed at Alexander as if looking at the rarest piece of art in the world.

"That's why I was so disappointed when father told me you rejected me for my nieces. I was so looking forward to knowing how the divine son of Gaia would taste like." Mikaya pouted cutely as if wounded by the rejection.

But she quickly chirped in delight, "But it's alright, I can taste you now. And since we will be staying in your home, hehe, maybe we aunt and nieces can even please you together." Mikaya simpered as she kneeled in front of Alexander

"....." Alexander only smiled, finding the drivel she was spewing utterly irrelevant.

And then, with practiced motions, Mikaya helped Alexander release his lower part, with his pants falling to the floor and his shoes leaving his feet.

"Oh...it's big," Mikaya's silver iris shone with genuine glee at Alexander's thick member.

"Hehe, he's certainly blessed down there," Lady Inayah too looked impressed.

And this made Alexander feel quite proud as he knew these women were not saying this to make him feel good.

From what they were doing, Alexander determined they had quite high standards for men, and these true compliments boosted Alexander's self-esteem.

"Good, Mikaya you attend to the pasha," Lady Inayah softly ordered.

And then she turned to the woman hiding behind her.

"Now, Nanazin come here!" The lady's sweet, mirthful tone abruptly changed to a sharp, biting command.

"Whh..what?" The queen who had been desperately trying to hide behind the much taller lady, trying to make her white, fair body mesh perfectly behind the tall, black lady was confused by the sudden mention of her name.

And so she raised her lowered head up, where it met the towering, glowering head of the much taller woman.

"Come here and stand in standard form," Lady Inayah's voice remained cold and authoritarian.

"What...no...Lady Inayah...I..," Nanazin looked horrified at the command as she stammered incoherently.

"Lady Inayah? No?" The mature beauty's face darkened like thunderclouds were brooding over it as she sent a deadly glare to the shivering woman below.

"Sister, quickly comply and get in position," Mikaya urged Nanazin, concerned and alarmed.

"What...no,,, I'm the.." Nanazin was about to say something but stopped when she saw Lady Inayah wiggle her index towards one of the men and they soon fetched her a tiny riding crop.

"No, not that...I'm doing it, doing it," Nazanin screamed in terror at the sight of the tiny wooden, leather-bound tool gracing Lady Inayah's grip and quickly assumed the standard stance, arms crossed behind her head, legs spread, chests out and eyes down.

Alexander was stunned by this shameful position, as the front side of the royal queen, the most honored woman in all of Adhania, was exposed for all to see.

Under the bright glow of the midday sunlight, in a room with all its windows and balcony open, Alexander could see every inch of the full, mature, curvy body of the woman he once respected, her full ripe milky breasts, her sheathed inverted nipples, the pitch black, diamond-studded corset hugging her midriff, her exposed flawless crack that was wet and sparkling, her long, flawless legs and the black straps of her high heels that bound themselves to her beautiful ankles.

Her posture, with the arms behind her head, showed off her smooth armpits- shaved and glossy, with the meat pits glittering as small beads of sweat trailed down them, making the air around smell sweet and fruity.

"Inayah...stop...this...," Nanazin pleaded in heavy pants, her oval face flushed in embarrassment.

Alexander could clearly see she was actively trying to avoid eye contact with specifically him.

"Shooooosh," Lady Inayah cooed next to Nanazin's ear, her inch-wide crop trailing down the queen's sparse pubes.

"No...I'm the queen," The bashful lady tried one last to stop what was about to happen, her statement sounding more like a whimper than possessing any authority.

But she still didn't break her posture, she didn't dare to.

"Are you done being disobedient?" Lady Inayah's voice hardened like steel and she swiftly brought her little crop down to the queen's bare pubes.

"*Smack* ...arghh....one," Nanazin automatically recited the number as she had been trained to do, grunting in pain as her legs buckled under the hit.

But she still maintained her posture.

After the strike, Lady Inayah turned to look at Alexander, her hard face instantly melting into a charming, soft countenance, as if the earlier look was all an illusion.

"Pasha Alexander, to celebrate you joining us, let us show you something special," Lady Inayah sent a lovely smile towards Alexander.

"Yes, yes, just let me massage you down there while you enjoy the show!" Mikaya giggled excitedly as she gently took Alexander's thick rod in her palms and started to slowly pump it.

She then longingly added, "Oh, I haven't seen this play in more than five years!"