

Herald 141

Chapter 141 Alexander's Land

Alexander spelling it out so clearly hit both Ptolomy and Fartaz hard.

Ptolomy was finally opening his eyes to how much of a puppet he had been turned to and Fartaz was furiously thinking about how to refute it convincingly.

"That...I only...I didn't mean anything by" The noble who never had to talk out of anything, a characteristic shared not by all but by many nobles was manifesting itself.

Neither Alexander nor Ptolomy was interested in any of his half-baked excuses and tired of the boy's incoherent mumbling, the latter soon silently witnessed with clenched fists as Alexander swung his sword and beheaded the screaming boy, staining the red carpet a dull rusty color.

As Alexander's guards started removing the corpse and cleaning the surrounding with practiced familiarity, Alexander cleaned his sword with a clean piece of rag and glanced at Ptolomy, "This is what the nobles really think of you, Your Majesty."

Ptolomy only clenched his teeth and his face hardened even more, his thoughts only known to him.

Many might feel what Alexander did for a frankly minor infraction was petty and excessive.

And certainly, without a doubt, Alexander with so much power in his hand was on a warpath, killing whoever slighted him, left and right.

But this was not the real Alexander.

Or else he could have survived ten years as a slave.

Alexander's actions were being dictated by the fact that he now had a relatively small window where he could do whatever he wanted he wanted without almost no repercussions.

He knew he would soon lose this power as the noble and Ptolomy would in the near future start rising their own forces and so Alexander intended to maximize his profits right now by killing as many political opponents as possible while suffering the least backlash.

This would make the king, stripped of his competent advisors, become more dependent on him and thus allow Alexander to expand his influence in the court more easily.

And those were not the only reasons he killed Fatrak.

Exposing the nobles' true thoughts to Ptolomy was only a happy accident, but the real reason Alexander killed the boy was because he was not only stupid but powerful too.

A very dangerous, self-destructive characteristic to have.

Alexander didn't fear intelligent people, as these people usually acted on logic and thus could be predicted and countered.

But stupid people would not do these, but instead, perform acts detrimental to their self-interest just to fuck someone else.

For this reason. Alexander hated stupid, powerful people.

And Fatrak had made himself into the biggest, juiciest target why being both, topped off with him hating Alexander unhidden and undisguised

It was like he was begging Alexander to kill him and Alexander gladly obliged.

Putting this slightly unpleasant experience behind them, the group soon arrived at the heavy oak doors to the study.

Normally these gates would have been guarded by sentries twenty-four, seven.

But now, due to the recent coup, access to his huge repository of forbidden knowledge lay unprotected, though not completely defenseless as it was still locked with a heavy padlock, the key to which remained firmly in Ptolomy's hands.

The king quickly unlatched the lock and pushed open the huge, creaking door, managing to produce a small gust of dust through this effort, and the duo and their translators soon occupied the space called the study.

And Alexander, for the first time since entering Adhania was disappointed by the grandeur of the architect.

Up until now, Adhan had managed to impress him with its opulence and engineering feats for its time.

And for a two-thousand-year-old country, with a few centuries-old royal family at its helm, he had expected the study to be grand and imposing.

But it was tiny, about the size of a typical school library, with a few wooden shelves scattered about containing some dusty parchments.

What Alexander had missed here was that it was not the real library.

Because most of the valuable books and scrolls were stored in the Temple of Ramuh.

What was in the royal study was either of immense importance or of no importance.

The explanation for this almost paradoxical collection was that the information that was of immense importance were things like maps, secret messages, secret codes, various secret treaties, and deals, etc.

Things that were classified information vital to national security and thus should really not be available to some random priests in the temple.

The other category 'of no importance' were basically things like love letters, amateur poems, short stories and other scribbles done by past royal family members.

Things that may be embarrassing but of no strategic or academic value.

As Alexander was taking in the view, Ptolomy walked up to a shelf and like he had done hundreds of times before, bought out a worn-out, yellow-tinged papyrus scroll parchment and unfolded the magnificent map of the whole of Adhania to Alexander.

Well magnificent for their time, as Alexander who was used to computer generated, color-coded maps found it to be akin to a map drawn by a child.

There were only the names of some cities, a long line, presumably a river running straight down the middle of the country, and some arrow-type squiggly bits that were most probably mountains.

Oh! And there was also Tibias on the map, which revealed to Alexander that the country he had heard so much about was a peninsula with the main body attached to a city the map was calling Zanzan.

"Zanzan." Alexander placed his finger on the map and looked at Ptolomy, "This is what the Cantagenans wanted?"

"Yes, they wanted the Zanzan province- which is the name of the city and the province," Ptolomy clarified.

"Hmmm, I'm guessing all these other cities are also really the name of the provinces?" Alexander intelligently asked.

"Yes," Ptolomy nodded.

Alexander then started counting the number of provinces, which, including Adhan totaled twelve.

And amidst the counting, a very familiar name caught Alexander's eye- Matrak.

This made him think about how Ptolomy addressed that Farzah guy, always calling him Pasha Farzah.

"Are all the other eleven provinces ruled by their respective Pashas?" Alexander asked a second question.

"Yes, they each have their own land and army and are sworn to defend the crown," Ptolomy confirmed Alexander's deduction.

'A classic feudalistic society, with nobles answering to higher nobles, to them answering to even higher ones, till the highest one answers to the crown.' Alexander commented in his heart.

Then he made his demand, "I want to be the Pasha of Zanzan!"

As Alexander said this, he had expected Ptolomy to be horrified and then fuss and huss about his excessive demand.

But the king only calmly nodded and consented, "Okay! That was what Cantagena originally wanted, So you can have it."

The ease at which Alexander was made from a commoner to the european equivalent of duke surprised him and he began to smell a rat.

Alexander was a firm believer of the motto- If its too good to be true, then it probably is.

So he asked Ptolomy about the details, "What can Your Majesty tell me about the city and province?"

Ptolomy sent a sly smile towards Alexander as he informed, "I have never personally went there, but I am told that the city and the province as a whole is hilly and the soil is infertile. Not only that, but because it's right next to Tibias, there are frequent border clashes, and banditry is common. And this was before the drought."

After pausing for a second to take good at Alexander's face, hoping to see some regret and second thoughts surface on it, but ultimately disappointed by Alexander's nonchalant facade, Ptolomy continued, "I have heard the province has been hit particularly hard by the drought and when the army went to fight Tibias for grain, they most certainly had snatched whatever meager food the populace had stored to replenish their supplies, leaving them even more destitute."

Ptolomy was feeling generous with his tongues right about now, and so even gave Alexander some more information, "In fact, the situation had gotten so bad that the Pasha of Zanzan had moved his entire family to Adhan to escape the dire circumstances. He's that Pasha Muazz I told you about, and now he is either dead or escaped with Amenheraft."

"Hmm, I see. Thank you your majesty for telling me this. But I don't want to be greedy and so I still want that province," Alexander appeared adamant.

The reason for his decision was simple, he could use the Zanzan province to attack and take over Tibias, thus expanding his territory.

This expansion will not step on the feet of other nobles, or at least too much and so Zanzan became the only viable choice for Alexander.

This was added to the fact the city was a port city, highly advantageous to trading, not to mention the other provinces also had their Pashas still ruling over them and Alexander would need to fight and defeat them to replace them,

So Zanzan it would have to be.

Chapter 142 Three Weeks

While Alexander stuck to his word for once, which was a rare occurrence for sure, Ptolomy instead of gloating or even being happy, looked at Alexander with a deep wrinkle on his forehead.

'This is all wrong. That's not how the script was supposed to go!' Ptolomy cursed inside.

What he had expected was for Alexander to backtrack and then he would swoop in with an offer he couldn't refuse.

Ptolomy had intended to give Alexander some lands around the banks of the river Naher, which was prime, fertile farmland while keeping him close to him, primarily to use him to get all the jobs done.

In just two days, Alexander had proven himself to be a hyper-competent administrator, and not even mentioning his military success, just the former quality would have been enough for him to become a Jamidar (Earl), if not a Matbar (Marquis).

But he could not do this if Alexander became a Pasha (Duke) as he would then be required to see to his own lands.

Thus Ptolomy tried to dissuade him, "Commander, I would advise you to reconsider. Zanzan is really not good. Its population and economy have been decimated, both from the drought and from how the army would frequently recruit from the local population and use them as front-line fodders."

He further added, "And this is why I didn't mind giving it Cantagena. Because it's a wasteland, with its land being rocky and hilly, and even the flat pieces only have heavy clay soil that grows nothing. If you plant a hundred turnips, less than three will grow, and even then those three combined will not be equal to a signal turnip you can grow in Jibatoo, which lies on the bank of river Naher. That's here," Ptolomy pointed to a place on the left bank of the river that ran through the center of the country.

"Hehe, Your Majesty's willing to give this poor soldier such prized land warms this soldier's small heart." Alexander chuckled at Ptolomy's offering.

But then he got upto his old tricks, creating reasons where none existed, "But Your Majesty, Zanzan is not just any province. It's a very strategic place."

This 'revelation' caused Ptolomy to look at Alexander with interest and intrigue.

And seeing the fish had taken the bait, Alexander decided to reel it in, "Your Majesty, think about it. Zantan is right next to Tibias. So why did Cantagena want it and not Tibias?"

"That..." Ptolomy too had found it strange but didn't think too much about it.

How Cantagena and Tibias divided their loot was upto them.

Alexander shook his head saying, "We certainly don't know why they wanted to do this, but we can definitely say for sure it was not something good for Adhania. And so we must stop it."

"But Tibias is our ally!" Ptolomy blurted out confused.

Hearing this, Alexander's tone turned didactic, "Your Majesty, please understand that Tibias is no longer your ally. In your original plan, Amenheraft would have lost his army and his city, and with the ongoing drought, that would have been his final nail in the coffin as the nobles would abandon him."

Ptolomy was stunned by how accurately an outsider, a mere layman, no, a former slave was able to dismantle the complex inner working of their schemes with no inside information.

And it made him unconsciously shiver.

But Alexander did not notice this subtle change as he continued, "But now, even if Amenheraft loses the city, many nobles will still regard him as the man who ended the drought. And then Amenheraft, under their asylum can give Tibias and Cantagenans the same if not better conditions to turn against you."

"That.." Ptolomy tried to counter.

But was shut out by Alexander.

"And if your Majesty gives Tibias and Cantagena the land you promised, Amenheraft will certainly call you out for selling out Adhania, Even the small number of nobles that support you will then turn against you because they will view the selling of their country as the ultimate betrayal."

"But, commander..according to the original..." Ptolomy mumbled.

"I have often wondered how Your Majesty could have agreed to give his country's land away." Alexander finished Ptolomy's sentence for him.

Then he gave his own thoughts, "And I reasoned that the three powers that orchestrated this probably would have discarded you as a scapegoat after they had finished carving up the new territories".

"No noble can tolerate a king that gives away lands to foreign powers to help him usurp the throne. Certainly not the nobles of a proud and strong country like Adhania.

Alexander had spoken quite some dangerous things and used some choice words such as 'usurper' to describe Ptolomy.

But instead of being offended, the king now sighed in amazement, saying, "**Sigh*, Alexander. I have confirmed from hundreds of people that you were truly a slave. And even then I still have a hard time believing it. I think you are even more intelligent than my brother or even Pasha Farzah."

"You honor me too much," Alexander bowed with fake modesty.

Then Alexander asked a question that had crept into his mind some time ago, "Your Majesty, Adhania seems like a huge country. So the drought should not have been as severe as it was. Even if crops in some areas failed, it could have been supplemented by food from other provinces. So what happened?"

Ptolomy here drew a rueful smile and said, "The drought did truly hit the entire country. Places like Adhan and Zanzan were hit particularly hard, but most of the country was too hit."

Ptolomy with a nod then said, "But yes, as you said the drought should not have been as catastrophic as it was."

"And the reason why it did was because the various Pashas refused to provide aid as a way to punish father."

Ptomoly looked at Alexander saying, "We would not have rebelled if he didn't have the tacit approval of all the major powers."

Alexander was honestly surprised by how the previous king had managed to antagonize all his major retainers.

'These powerful people certainly had their own frictions, and to get them to unite together to hate you unilaterally is really something,' Alexander somewhat praised the previous king.

At last, Alexander asked about the excuse with what he bought Ptolomy here, "Your Majesty, where are Amenheraft's troops now?"

Ptolomy here gave a detailed report, "Three weeks ago, just before my rebellion, my spies reported that the army was here- The horn of tress." Ptolomy pointed to a peninsula at the eastern southernmost edge of the map.

"So, they should be here by now today." Ptolomy placed his hand a bit upper to the city of Zanzan.

"What is the scale of this map?" Alexander asked curiously, intrigued to know the true size of Adhania.

"Scale?" Ptolomy pronounced in confusion.

This word was said not in Azhak but in Thesian as both Ptolomy and his translator seemed confused by the new term.

So Alexander elucidated, "How big is the map compared to the real Adhania? How much does one centimeter in the map represent in real life?"

The duo was even then confused by Alexander and it took a bit more effort to make them understand the novel concept Alexander was rewarded with a giant shake of the head for all his effort.

"Commander's ideas are truly revolutionary. I had never thought of that!" Ptolomy praised.

And then he gave Alexander the information he wanted, "The Horn of Tress is around two hundred kilometers from Zanzan by sea. And Zanzan is an additional eight hundred kilometers from us. It's been

twenty days since by rebellion and that's why I believe they must be around two hundred kilometers past Zanzan by now."

"A twenty-kilometer-a-day march- average," Alexander loudly commented.

And then stated, "So, it will take a month for Amenheraft to attack us!"

Alexander was not pleased but not too unhappy as he could cobble together some army in this time frame.

But for the first time, Ptolomy corrected Alexander's mistake, "I'm afraid it won't take that long. The road between Zanzan and Adhan is very good. I would even go as far as to say it's the best road in the whole of Adhania."

This made Alexander look at the man in askance as roads between cities weren't really a thing at this time.

And so, with immeasurable pride in his heart. Ptolomy elaborated. "Zanzan was built basically as a fortress to deal with the threat of Tibias posed to us, with it being so close to the capital. So, the royal family spared to cost to build and maintain this road so that the fortress could be reinforced and resupplied at the quickest time possible."

Ptolomy then reminded Alexnader, "That was how Manuk was able to bring the slinger. He put them on the horses the cavalries used and rode through the open road like the wind."

'This Manik guy is formidable,' Alexander made a mental note and then asked the critical question, "So how long?"

"Three weeks. Tops." Ptolomy gave Alexander his deadline.

Chapter 143 Freedom Of Religion

Alexander felt that Ptolomy might have underestimated the speed of the army on the paved road and he made his own calculations.

He used the top marching speed the Romans achieved- thirty-six kilometers a day, and got the result that the army would be here in twelve days!

This was wholly insufficient, as just recruiting, arming, and forming proper formations for fifty thousand raw recruits, with all the squad captains, captains, stratos, and legigus (ten thousand men leader) would take a minimum of a week.

But there was nothing Alexander do about that now.

It was what it was.

So Alexander decided to make the most of a bad situation.

He decided to ask for more stuff.

"Three weeks is really short Your Majesty. I'm afraid the soldiers will need more remuneration," Alexander euphemistically raised the question of payment

"You mean you want more from me. Well, go ahead then," Ptolomy in a rare display of foul mood, curtly tore off the shred of pretense.

"Hehe, well I'm a soldier too," Alexander appeared not the slightest bit offended as he slightly guffawed.

"Well, since His Majesty has torn off the shred of pretense, it will be easy for me to state my demands." Alexander smiled in a way that looked to Ptolomy like the way a devil would.

Alexander then raised his index finger and said, "I want my province to be an autonomous zone. This means that I will swear fealty to the crown and defend it if it's attacked, but will have no other obligations. So no taxes, no tributes, no donations."

"Okay." Ptolomy nodded in agreement as this was pretty standard stuff with all the pashas.

But Alexander added an additional clause that Ptolomy agreed to without understanding its true implications and something that he would come to regret soon.

The clause was, "I want to be able to set up my own governance structure, my own taxes, my own policies, my own religion, and my own judiciary system."

"Own religion?" Ptolomy's eyes bulged in shock as he remembered the soldiers calling Alexander the divine son of Gaia.

'If I give him this freedom, what difference would there be between him and me?' Ptolomy asked himself, justifiably alarmed that Alexander could claim divinity and replace the royal family.

Which in fairness Alexander very much planned to do!

"No, that's impossible! The religion of Ramuh is the one and only religion acceptable in Adhania," Ptolomy vehemently rejected this proposal as in his mind Adhania needed only one patron god, not two.

"But Your Majesty, I'm a believer of Gaia. And I need a temple to pray," Alexander's eyes seemed to glow with religious fervor.

But this did not move Ptolomy, who said in strong words, "I'm sorry. All other religions are banned in Adhania. If you want to pray, change your belief and pray to Ramuh."

The reason Ptolomy was so staunch in his stance was that the royal family's legitimacy to rule came from their claim that they were the descendants of Ramuh, which was the only god Adhania believed in.

If other religions were allowed in, with their own gods and pantheons, the followers of those religions would have no reason to fear and obey the progenies of Ramuh, as he was a god that they don't worship.

Even Ptolomy, who was a bit stupid, was not that stupid.

But Alexander was not deterred.

Ptolomy was currently weak, allyless, and fully dependent on him for protection.

If it really came down to it, if push came to shove, Alexander was determined to strong-arm him

But before going to such extremes, which had the potential to easily backfire and make Ptolomy hostile the moment the latter gained enough strength to oppose Alexander, Alexander decided to try the diplomatic route.

Alexander first shook his head widely as he bitterly said, "Your Majesty, I'm sorry but what you are proposing is impossible for me to do."

Then he passionately announced, "I was captured as a slave at the age of eight, And toiled away, risking life and death for the next ten years till I was finally given freedom. In these ten years, there have been multiple times I thought I would die but was miraculously saved by various extenuating circumstances."

"I have always believed these circumstances to be the divine intervention by the goddess, who must have been looking out for me."

Here Ptolomy said to himself, 'Bullcrap. There are millions of child slaves like you. So why would the goddess pay special attention to you? Does your goddess have a special taste for young boys?'

But he kept these thoughts to himself and put on a facade of rapt attention to Alexander's speech, who was now saying, "And that is not even before taking into account the events that transpired yesterday. Without the goddess's help, I would not have been able to enter the city of Adhan and I certainly would not have dared to attack the Temple of Ramuh."

Then Alexander asked Ptolomy, "So Your Majesty, tell me, how can I turn my back on the goddess after all she has done for me? I would be eternally damning my soul," he finished with an exclamation.

Ptolomy though impressed by Alexander's eloquence, which he would admit Alexander was very good at, still remained adamant.

"Your soul will not be damned, Ramuh will protect you. As the son of Ramuh, I will personally guarantee your soul enters Aaru," Ptolomy reassured Alexander.

But Alexander had a counter even to that, as he shook his head again, "Your Majesty, I'm afraid that's no good. My heart will not allow that."

Alexander's voice then trembled with fake fear and terror, "Treason is a heinous crime and those criminals deserve to be burnt at the stake. But that's at least against a mortal. How grave a sin would I be committing if I betrayed a god?"

And at last, Alexander loudly asked, "And even if I did change my faith, can Your Majesty really trust someone who had once turned his back on his goddess after she had done so much for him?"

Would I be reliable and trustworthy in anyone's eyes if I committed such blasphemy?"

Ptolomy let out a heavy, sigh after Alexander's impassioned cries, understanding that his man would never look at him as a god.

But failed to do this, Ptolomy, in a rare moment of genuine ingenuity gave Alexander a tricky proposal, "Fine, although all over the Zanzan province is too much, you and your family can believe in the goddess Gaia in private. I give you permission."

'Finally! A crack!' Alexander was not the slightest disheartened by the new trick Ptolomy employed, but overjoyed.

"Your Majesty, I can very well understand your misgivings about giving permission for the Adhanians to worship another religion. The single religion of Ramuh is the core strength and pillar of legitimacy for the Adhanian royal family and allowing it to loosen is tantamount to striking one's own foot with an axe." Alexander had a soothing, understanding tone to his voice.

"If you know it, then why are you harassing me to change it?" Ptolomy asked in anger and frustration.

"Hehe," Alexander let out a small chuckle, that Ptolomy had grown to hate, and asked, "Then, how does Your Majesty plan to convince the nobles that the man who raided the temple of Ramuh, killed its priests, and then looted it, is not only alive but is also being rewarded with land and even the title of Pasha, a nobility rank only below the king himself?" Alexander had a cool, slight smile as he looked at Ptolomy for his answer.

"That....Amenheraft..." Ptolomy flapped his mouth like a fish at this new critical question.

Alexander had hit him in his weak spot and he had no answer.

The 'Amenheraft going mad' story would be only enough to deceive the ignorant masses and not the well-connected and well-informed nobles.

The only way Ptolomy could think of to sate the bloodlust of the zealous nobles was to kill Alexander, but that was currently impossible.

"What do you suggest?" Ptolomy drew the words out with great difficulty through his clenched teeth, understanding Alexander was about to rip him off.

"Your Majesty, name goddess Gaia a second patron god that protects Adhania. Say that the goddess and Ramuh have decided to jointly oppose the pantheons of Cantagena, Tibias, and Iyizarid. And then build a statue of Gaia next to the statue of Ramuh in the grand temple," Alexander said with a beaming smile.

"That...that's too much! The Takqa clearly states that Ramuh is the leader of the gods and is singular in existence. He has no partners or allies, so it's impossible to allow the statue of another god to be placed on equal footing as him, much less a woman. Even as the king, I cannot change these core beliefs so blatantly." Ptolomy decided to put his foot down and told Alexander in no uncertain terms he would be unable to fulfill these demands no matter the cost.

Thus Alexander was forced to think of a compromise.

Chapter 144 Getting Zanzan And More

Alexander took note of how Ptolomy mentioned the word 'woman' in a belittling way while rejecting his proposal, making Alexander understand that the status of women must be really low in Adhania.

He wondered how much of it was religious dogma and how much of it was culture and the result of times.

But whatever the reason was, the little word Ptolomy had uttered carelessly made Alexander want to spread his own religion, which would have many feminine liberties.

This was certainly not a purely altruistic motive as, although locking women inside their houses was a violation of basic human rights, from Alexander's pragmatic lens, it was more of a waste of human labor and resources.

Women generally made up around half the population and so locking them up in houses and having them do menial jobs was just a waste of precious resources.

Understanding what was at stake, Alexander decided not to eat the cake in one bite, recognizing the fact that changes took time to take place and so toned down his demands.

He proposed a compromise, "Fine, then, Since Your Majesty is so adamant, let's do it this way. The goddess Gaia, because she is a woman, will be revered as a subsidiary god of Ramuh, with her statue placed a head below Ramuh to show her lower status. The statue will also be made of stone to display her mundanity as compared to the golden statue of the god Ramuh."

"And last of all, her temple, next to the temple of Ramuh will be much smaller and less grand."

This new, more submissive portrayal of the goddess and hence her followers pleased Ptolomy and he was of the mind to grant Alexander the person.

But the fact that the people would see Ramuh and Gaia at the same time gnawed at his heart as he felt he would remind the people every time that there was another god other than Ramuh.

So he proposed, "I can give you the permission to build Gaia temples in Zanzan and one small one in Adhan. The people of these two provinces can also worship Gaia without persecution."

"Your Majesty is magnanimous," Alexander thanked Ptolomy with a bow as the latter gave the permission to worship Gaia in two provinces when the former had asked for only one.

The temple at Adhan was meant by Alexander to be purely symbolic.

But for Ptolomy this was not a big deal as he doubted if even a single worshipper of Ramuh would change faith to a small, unknown, foreign goddess when they lived right in the heartland of Ramuh's faith.

And only the future would tell how right or wrong Ptolomy was to allow this.

For now however, Ptolomy was unaware of the future and was instead busy proposing a new restriction, "But there is no need for the goddess to be next to god Ramuh. I believe gods should reside in their own temple." Ptolomy claimed.

This new condition was not a deal breaker for Alexander, as the reason he had proposed it was just as Ptolomy had predicted, 'To make the remember Adhan had a second patron god.'

And he could let it go if Ptolomy was being completely obstinate, but Alexander felt he could pry this concession out of Ptolomy.

He chuckled, "Your Majesty, you are still stuck in the past times. Remember you are not the only one who is claiming the title of 'Divine son of Gaia. Amenheraft is doing it too."

Ptolomy wrinkled in displeasure at his thought as Amenheraft's claim was and would continue to erode his authority in the future,

"What does that have anything got to do with this?" Ptolomy had an exasperated tone to his voice as he knew Alexander never said anything without reason.

"Your Majesty, Amenheraft claims to be the descendant of one god. Why don't you claim to be of two!" Alexander had a sly smile as he said this.

"Two?" Ptolomy asked in surprise.

"Yes, two." Alexander nodded, "If God Ramuh is your father, then proclaim goddess Gaia as your mother. After all, even the gods need a partner to produce a son."

Alexander claimed this as if he was an expert in god biology,

And then he quickly added, "Of course, the mother's status is much lower than the father's."

Alexander's new proposal moved Ptolomy as he thought it was a good way to differentiate himself from the 'imposter'.

And so Alexander got to keep his statue next to Ramuh.

Alexander was mostly pleased with this result, although sighed a bit in his heart, 'Welp! Looks like I was being too greedy,' at the thought that he was unable to get full, equal status of his religion as compared to the religion of Ramuh.

There was also one more important thing, arguably the most important thing that Ptolomy had missed in Alexander's proposal.

Ptolomy had paid too much attention to the religious claim and he even took into account the tax and judiciary system demand, which he consented to as all this was standard practice as well but he missed Alexander's hidden masterpiece- the 'own governance structure' that Alexander had demanded.

This was mostly glanced over by Ptolomy as he understood it as being Alexander's ability to appoint his own nobles and peerage.

This was also very normal and raised no red flags for Ptolomy.

But in Alexander's mind, it was something wholly different.

He had his own ideas about governance and statehood that if revealed, would cause major earthquakes throughout the ruling class of Adhania.

And for that reason, Alexander chose to keep that a secret for now.

Getting these concessions, Alexander opened his mouth for more, "Your Majesty, after I take over Zanzan city, there are bound to be nobles rebellious to me. I, therefore, ask you to grant me the permission to kill any noble that disobeys me!"

"That..." Ptolomy hesitated at Alexander's bold demand.

This was one of the powers exclusive to the royal family and more accurately the king and not even a Pasha could kill a mere shordar (baron) without the king's consent.

Of course, the nobles, being the creative murderers they were always found ways to get around it, from poisons to assassinations to forced suicide, but at least on paper, they could not formally try and execute a member of the nobility.

This was in fact one of the core strengths of the royal family that allowed them to rule Adhania, as any noble in favor with them was unkillable, and any not, just a dead man walking.

This ethereal hold on the nobles' life was what allowed the king to project his will all over the country and Ptolomy wanted to absolutely deny this request.

But for Alexander, it was vital that he could do this as without it his 'own governance structure' would be useless.

So he reasoned, "Your Majesty, the nobles that do not submit to me, in return do not submit to you. In other words, they are rebels and traitors. They deserve no mercy."

Ptolomy frowned a bit at these words and then, "Okay, you can punish them. But remember you can only do it to the nobles of the Zanzan province and no one else. And even then remember to exercise

restraint!" Ptolomy after repeatedly emphasizing and warning Alexander at last relented understanding that he would unlikely be able to retaliate against Alexander even if he did kill some nobles.

At least that was the case for the time being,

And so, since it was inevitable, Ptolomy didn't bother wasting his breath arguing and just gave it to Alexander.

Alexander was happy with the meat he had managed to get till now.

And with these privileges whetting Alexander's appetite, he decided to open his mouth a bit wider, "Your Majesty, I have noticed that the three provinces of Adhan, Matrak, and Zanzan will have to fight the other nine provinces. I propose that I get to keep any province I conquer!"

This proposal, though many would expect Ptolomy to blow his top, was met with relative coolness.

Ptolomy held no illusions that Pasha Farzah and Alexander would not want more land for their assistance in helping him keep his throne and knew there was no point in trying to deny this.

So he haggled, "That ...that's too much. I'm already giving you Zanzan, I can at most give you another."

But Alexander's appetite was too small to be satisfied with just one province.

He started by reminding Ptolomy, "Your Majesty, you are not giving me anything. You are exchanging Zanzan for Adhan, which going by your own word, is a steal for you."

Then he then out a dejected, forlorn sigh, "But what can I do? This is reality, this is the fate of the weak and powerless."

And afterward, in a swift mercurial shift, Alexander's tone chirped up as he demanded, "Your Majesty, let us divide the nine provinces evenly among the three of us- Your Majesty, Me, and Farzah!"

Chapter 145 Laying Foundation

Dividing the loot evenly three ways between the three factions might sound like a fair move, but to Ptolomy it made no sense.

Why should the royal family get the same portion as a former slave?

Was the question that popped up in Ptolomy's head.

So he denied Alexander's request and countered, "Three provinces is too much. I can give you Zanzan in exchange for Adhan. I can give you Kuleef for helping me defend Adhan and I will give you Abu Hamam once you help me win the civil war."

Ptolomy offered by pointing to the two coastal provinces south and southeast of the country.

This proposal sounded generous on paper, but Ptolomy conveniently left out the fact that Alexander would still have to fight and conquer them, which were a thousand and two thousand kilometers respectively from Zanzan, and this was not to mention how those two provinces bordered Ankoot and Aqliah- two ultra-royalist provinces.

Alexander was not happy being denied a whole province, but also not unhappy with the proposal as this was adequate to keep him busy for the next ten to twenty years.

He however chose to hide his pleasure and instead lament in mock sadness, "Fine, two it is. I certainly can understand Your Majesty's concern about letting too much land landing in the hands of nobles."

Then using this jumping point Alexander opened his maw gaping wide and taking the most important bite, "But then Your Majesty, I want the legal permission to add territories of other countries as my own without any repercussions!"

The brazen, almost ludicrous proposal stunned Ptolomy and for a moment he became muted in shock.

'If I grant him that, then what will be the difference between him and me? Separate taxation, judiciary system, religion, ability to appoint nobles, and now the freedom to annex other territories. All these add

up to make a free country!' Ptolomy at least had that much IQ to understand what Alexander was proposing.

So he roared out in anger, "What! Has power driven you mad? I always knew you were ambitious but this is reaching for the trees and trying to grab the moon!"

"Denied! Denied! Absolutely denied!" Ptolomy burst like a raging, broken record player.

Alexander only sneered at the tirade and got Ptolomy to calm down, "Your Majesty, then tell me how do you expect to win the civil war that will inevitably happen?"

"That..." In a swift mercurial change of mood, Ptolomy's face began to change to various colors as he contemplated the problem of opposing nine provinces with the strength of three scattered ones, with one being a cripple.

But even faced with his reality, Ptolomy understood it was a supremely bad idea to give Alexander this power, "That... we can defeat them on our own. Anyway, there's no point giving you that power as you would then become a free country."

"Haaaah," Alexander let out a heavy sigh.

If he couldn't get permission to annex foreign territories, Alexander would seriously contemplate leaving Adhnaia with the temple loot.

But before that unfortunate finality could occur, Alexander offered his last tender, "Your Majesty, it seems we have reached an impasse. So let me provide two options- I want five provinces for helping you- Zanzan, Ankoot, Kuleef, Abu Hamam, and Jhruba."

"That..." Ptolomy flared up but was stopped by Alexander raising his hand, and saying, "Let me finish."

Alexander then continued, "Without me, you would have nothing. No city, no throne, no land, and likely not even your life. When Arazadm, wanted you, there were many that wanted to exchange you to avoid the war, just ask Petricuno if you don't believe me. But I went to war for you."

"Alexander that's..." Ptolomy awkwardly stammered.

But Alexander paid no heed, "Giving five provinces away to rule over the other seven provinces is a deal you would have taken in a heartbeat when you were running away. But now, you don't want to?"

Alexander when gave his ultimatum, "Give me five provinces or give me the power to annex foreign lands."

Then after showing the stick, Alexander decided to sweeten the deal, "Choose the latter and I will give you the billions of ropals I got from the temple."

"That...when did that loot become yours?" Ptolomy asked incredulously.

And Alexander replied with narrowed eyes, "The day I decided to take it from the temple!"

He then asked with a sneer, "When did that loot become yours?"

"I...that..." Ptolomy had just assumed it to be his as the loot of hundreds of tons of gold coins was being stored in the palace.

Alexander here decided to clear Ptolomy's confusion, "Your Majesty never hired us for a specific price. So the loot is the mercenaries' properties."

"When did mercenaries start costing billions of ropas?" Ptolomy raged in indignation at this daylight robbery.

Alexander quickly quipped, "The day the mercenaries captured the jewel of the east and helped a stray, pauper rebel sit on the throne. From that day, they started costing billions of ropas."

Ptolomy's face darkened like the moon clouds at Alexander's mockery and he felt immeasurable fury at how, in his mind, was being ripped off.

But Alexander ignored the king's foul mood and restated his demand, "So, Your Majesty, please choose-five provinces or billions of ropals and the permission."

After Alexander finished, a song of silence and quiet descended upon the room, as Ptolomy struggled between the two options or the potential third one of firing Alexander.

And while Ptolomy thought, allowing his brain to calm down, he began to think that the second option might not be as bad as he thought it to be.

Alexander would be given a poor, underpopulated, malnourished, and infertile province, surrounded by hostile nobles and provinces.

For him to just protect his existing territory would be a huge challenge, so expanding his territory seemed almost out of the question.

Thus Ptolomy, with a fake mask of reluctance, said, "Fine, I want my billions of ropals."

"Hehe, you have made a decision you won't ever regret," Alexander congratulated, though in his heart he sneered, 'Hehe, you have made a decision you will sorely regret.'

Ptolomy then asked Alexnader, "Alexander, how do you intend to give me all the money? That money by law belongs to the church. Many nobles, even many pashas won't like this."

Alexander though had a perfect answer for this, "Rest assured, Your Majesty, I never really stole from the temple. That wealth was given to be as a gift by the temple!"

"What?" Ptolomy wondered if he was having hearing problems or if the translators had got it wrong.

So Alexander told Ptolomy the full story, "Over fifty priests and priestesses, and hundred of my men bore witness that it was Azura and Azira who picked up the coins and put them in my hands."

"They did what?" Ptolomy for the second time in a row thought he was having hearing troubles.

So Alexander reassured him, "That's right Your Majesty, you can ask them if you doubt me."

"That..that..tha.." Ptolomy's grin widened with the utterance of each syllable, as he could not believe such a difficult problem had been solved so easily.

'*Sigh*, if only the boy could be tied down to me.' Ptolomy lampooned.

Then he loudly cheered, "Excellent commander. With this, we can say that they were giving the coins to you, who really was my representative. And thus I can get the money with no problem. Hohoho"
Ptolomy burst into boisterous laughter.

Alexander only lightly smiled and then raised another issue, "Your Majesty, speaking of money, there is still the issue of payment for the mercenaries- both for yesterday's battle and for the battle three weeks from now."

This mention of to be expenditure rapidly deflated Ptolomy's mood, who sulkily asked, "So, how much do you want?"

"One hundred million roplas," Alexander gave a huge number.

"Haaah, why don't you ask for a billion," Ptolomy almost screamed and felt like storming out of the study instead of being forced to listen to such absurd words.

But Alexander remained cool and collected and reasoned, "Your Majesty, the number is really not that large once you think about it."

"Oh! It's not really that large, huh? Pray tell, commander! Pray tell!" Ptolomy sarcastically urged Alexander.

Alexander, who didn't seem to get the sarcasm, seriously gave the answer, "One thousand ropas shall be given to the fifteen thousand brave men that helped win us the war. That's fifteen million ropas".

"The sixty thousand men that will fight Amenheraft will also be given a thousand ropas each. That's sixty million ropas."

"The various supplies and logistic personnel will cost ten million ropas. That comes to a total of eighty-five million ropas."

"The rest of the fifteen million will be used by me to reward my officers, captains, and the other mercenary leaders."

Alexander gave the full breakdown of the expenses.

Then finished by slyly saying, "So, you see Your Majesty, one hundred million ropas is not an excessive amount. In fact, it's barely enough."

Chapter 146 Buying Insurance

Alexander on the surface very neatly gave his reason for the hundred million ropas price tag.

But Ptolomy, having at least a basic sense of prices, only sneered, "Heh, commander, are you sure you are not confusing tustas for ropas?"

Then he sarcastically added, "Let me remind you in case you have forgotten, one ropal is equal to ten tustas."

"So, in essence, you are asking for a billion tustas! Has the commander turned into a wastrel just because you don't have to foot the bill?" Ptolomy scathed Alexander.

But Alexander appeared unperturbed by this attack, understanding that swindling so much money even from a baby would be hard.

"Your Majesty is looking at it the wrong way. Amenheraft's forces are probably larger and definitely more trained than ours. And two to three weeks is impossibly short for any mortal to turn a group of peasants into a contingent of battle-hardened veterans. So, we need that money to boost morale and make the soldiers fight out of greed." Alexander cleverly made his point.

But even this appeared inadequate to convince Ptolomy, "We are already giving them three meals a day even when we have a chronic food shortage. What more can they want?" He asked.

"And a thousand ropas for each of them! Have these peasants ever seen a thousand ropals in one place?" Ptolomy exclaimed in incredulity at the high prices quoted by Alexander.

"Thirty million, The drought has depleted the treasury and that's all I can offer." Ptolomy gave his offer.

Of course, Ptolomy conveniently left out the billions of ropas lying literally on the floor inside his palace right now.

In response to Ptolomy's vehement opposition, Alexander wagged his silver tongue, "Your Majesty, you have a few billion ropals which I doubt any of your forefathers had in raw cash. So what is a mere hundred million out of a few billion? A few small percentages. Remember Your Majesty, all the money in the world is of no use if it is locked up inside a safe gathering dust."

Alexander then warmed, "If you do not spend this money, and we lose, then this money will not save you. As a matter of fact, it will then only end up in Amenheraft's hand while you and me will likely end up dead."

He then enticed "The next war will likely be the hardest battle of your life, Win and you will experience a meteoric rise. Lose and you will be thrown into the abyss."

"Can you take that risk just for a mere seventy million ropas?" Alexander asked perhaps the most important question of Ptolomy's life.

This clear way of representing the fact was a novel concept for Ptolomy and it really put things into perspective.

Could he ever forgive himself if he lost his life because he skimmed out on a few tens of millions of coins, a sum he could more than makeup in about a year?

Could he ever forgive himself if he lost in such a way when the heavens gave him back the city he never in his wildest dreams could have thought he would get back?

The answer that Ptolomy came up with was- No!

"Will we win if I give you the money?" Ptolomy asked with a pointed stare.

"Winning is up to the gods. But it will maximize our chances," Alexander gave a diplomatic, evasive answer.

"Heh, I wish I could talk like you," Ptolomy sniggered but ultimately agreed to Alexander's proposed budget.

"Well, I presume that's all?" Ptolomy's head was starting to hurt a bit with all the haggling.

"Yes, almost everything I wanted to talk about is done," Alexander said with a light smile.

"Almost?" Ptolomy asked in surprise.

'What more ways can he cheat me' He wondered.

Alexander then brazenly said, "Your Majesty, let's do away with the superfluous, polite bullshit and talk frankly for once."

"You don't trust me and I don't trust you, So I want some guarantees that the conditions I negotiated will be respected. To that end, I want Azura and Azira as my concubines an...." Alexander did not get to finish his sentence as Ptolomy interjected.

"That's not upto me to decide," He curtly cut off Alexander.

Then Ptolomy quickly added, "Amenheraft doesn't really care about them, but part of Pasha Farzah's reason for this rebellion is to ensure their well-being. Whatever you want, discuss it with him. I am too weak to help you."

Ptolomy made his position crystal clear and Alexander understood this was really upto to the former to decide.

So, Alexander proposed, "Then let them remain in my custody till Pasha Farzah demands otherwise."

This Ptolomy assented to.

And then thinking it was over, attempted to say his closing statements.

But Alexander peeped, "You cut me off before I was finished, Your Majesty."

He then continued, "I wanted Azura and Azira to check against Amenheraft and Farzah. But I still want someone to check against you."

Next Alexander slowly spelled out his arguably greatest demand, "I want, Princess Hellma and the Queen mother as guests!"

BAAANNNGGG!

Ptolomy smashed his fist on the hard oak table with everything he had, wanting to really connect that fist with Alexander's face and seriously contemplating if he should try to.

The force of the hit was so great that his fist got bruised and if one looked closely enough, one could even figure out that the table had become a bit darker red, stained by the small amount of blood smeared on it.

Alexander's translator even jumped up a bit in fright at this aggressive action, while Alexander only chuckled in his heart, 'Hehe, found his weak spot.'

Done with this show of force, Ptolomy cursed out profanities, while flinging his arms wildly, "Fuck off. No deal. Just fuck off!"

In the face of this vituperative tirade, Alexander remained cool as a cucumber and steady as a rock, Ptolomy's outburst only strengthening his resolve to get those women.

After allowing some time for Ptolomy to tire himself out and cool down, with Alexander even going as far as to ask his translator to offer the king some cold water, Alexander coolly said, "I remember when I met you two days ago, in that tent. There you said that you intended to take back some of the lands you promised to the Tibias and Cantagena.."

"I never said that," Ptolomy hissed in anger at the unjust accusation.

But Alexander pursed his lips and corrected, "Maybe not in so many words, but certainly you implied it."

"I didn't imply anything!" Ptolomy violently tried to defend his integrity.

But Alexander wasn't buying it, "Perhaps not. But that is what it sounded like to me and I'm afraid that I must take that possibility into account."

Then Alexander made something clear that Ptolomy seemed to have missed, "Your Majesty probably stopped listening after I uttered the words Princess Hellma and the Queen Mother. But unlike Azura and Azira, I didn't ask for them to become concubines, but instead become guests in my home."

This nuanced change in status produced a nuanced change in Ptolomy but even still he was livid.

"Guests? Haah, you mean hostages!" Ptolomy huffed out in anger.

Alexander only slightly smiled and nodded with a single word, "Yes."

"No, absolutely not. You can have anyone but not those two," Ptolomy decisively rejected Alexander's demand.

Then he countered, "If you don't trust me that much, you can marry one of my daughters."

"Yes, marriage," Ptolomy repeated, thinking he had found a way out.

His eyes began to shine like a light bulb and he started vigorously shaking his head, "You can have all three of my daughters and even my wife if you want!"

Ptolomy had a crazed, almost demented look on his face as he made the absurd offer willing to sell his entire family just to get those two.

'Heh, having a milf and her three identical daughters suck me off at the same time is a fantasy I would be willing to die for.' Alexander joked in his heart.

And then lampooned, 'But alas! The naive offer has just exposed how much he loves those two and I would be a born fool not to take advantage of it.'

Alexander afterward gently rejected Ptolomy, "Your Majesty, although being able to marry just a single princess is not even a dream I would ever dare to have, much less three, it is an offer that I will sadly have to forgo."

He then offered his explanation, "Your Majesty ran away with princess Hellma instead of your family, even at the threat of their execution. And now you have made the offer to exchange your family for her and the queen mother. Will they have any use as a bargaining chip?"

"That..." Ptolomy appeared a bit flushed at being essentially called uncaring.

But Alexander continued with an even more dangerous statement, revealing Ptolomy's deepest, darkest secret, "It's clear that you are madly in love with your sister and adoptive mother, much more than your

wife and even your daughters. This is why you so readily offered your daughters and wife and this just goes to show how little binding the offer would have on you."

"And so I can't accept it." Alexander made his position clear.

Chapter 147 End Of Negotiations

Ptolomy was more than double the age of Hellma, thirty-two as compared to the princess's fourteen and just a year younger than the queen mother who was thirty-three.

And him being in love with his half-sister and adoptive mother was a secret only to him.

To the rest of the women around him, it was plain as day.

That's why Nanazin had so quickly jumped to defend Ptolomy when Alexander asked him why he chose to save Hellma and not his daughter, in an attempt to keep this shameful secret hidden.

Seeing there was no point in hiding it, Ptolomy stated to Alexander, "Yes, you are right. I'm in love with Hellma and Seelima. And I only married Nanazin because of political reasons"

"And one of the reasons why I fought for the throne was to be able to marry them which normally I couldn't. So, you see, me exchanging them for the crown makes no sense. Without them, the throne is meaningless." Ptolomy revealed his mindset.

Alexander didn't mind Ptolomy loving the queen mother.

But as for his feelings toward Hellma, he could only call him that eleven-letter word that starts with a p and ends with an e.

However, Alexander hid these thoughts and instead seemed to empathize with Ptolomy, "Your Majesty, loving the person your heart desires is nothing to be ashamed of. The queen mother protected and raised you and it's only natural to be in love with a person who cares and dotes on you."

"And similarly for princess Hellma, I'm sure you have watched grow up right in front of you. You certainly helped rear her, care for her, and even played with her. So, it's only natural to develop feelings of longing and attachment to such people."

"I, Alexander certainly won't judge you." Alexander loudly proclaimed which managed to draw looks of slight gratitude from Ptolomy.

Alexander then nodding his head in an understanding manner said, "Since Your Majesty is so adamant then let's come to a compromise that satisfies us both"

Alexander then offered his new terms, "Instead of them being a guest in my home indefinitely, they will stay only for seven years, And they will each write a letter to you once a month confirming their well-being. I believe that should satisfy us both."

These much mellower terms softened Ptolomy but he still grumbled, "Seven years is too long. Two years is the maximum I can give."

But Alexander would not budge that much, "Your Majesty, you have said that you fought for the throne to get the two women. Tell me, since you waited almost thirty years is a mere seven really that much? Are you willing to throw everything that you already have just for a pittance?"

Alexander then raised in palms, "I'm sorry Your Majesty, but two years is too short. Five years is the minimum I can accept. Anything less and I fear all the agreements we have reached in the last few hours will be for naught as I don't believe you will stick to all of them."

"You don't trust your king?" Ptolomy had a tinge of anger in his voice at a mere mercenary making such acquisitions.

Until now, nobody had dared to so openly call him a liar.

"Hehe, of course, I do Your Majesty. I trust you with my life," Alexander said animatedly in an exaggerated way.

"But I also believe in the phrase, 'Trust but verify'," Alexander spoke a phrase he always lived by.

Listening to Alexander's ultimatum and thinking back how he would likely lose everything if he refused this, Ptolomy's face went through a myriad of kaleidoscopic shades of colors as his heart burned and ached at the thought of not being able to see his most beloved two women.

For Ptolomy it felt like a part of his soul was being ripped apart.

But, fortunately, the man did not let his emotions rule him and instead let his brain make the decision, and so he finally agreed to the proposal, albeit with a small modification, "Fine, they will stay with you for five years as guests. In the meantime, you are not to touch a single hair on them or by Ramuh, I swear it will be immediate war." Ptolomy threatened in a menacing way.

And given how crazed Ptolomy was about the two, even willing to go as far as to sell his own family to get these two, Alexander didn't doubt Ptolomy's resolve, and so quickly promised, "I wouldn't dare, Your Majesty."

While in his heart Alexander swore, "That bitch poisoned and killed her last husband. You think I'm gonna touch her with a ten-foot pole?"

"Ummm," Ptolomy curtly nodded and then added his last addendum, "And they will be required to participate in the Sacred Jtaama (Pilgrimage) held in early September every year "

"Of course, Your Majesty. I will personally escort them to Adhan," Alexander quickly promised in joy, not knowing what he was getting himself into.

"Good, then I will hold you onto that promise," Ptolomy heavily nodded.

And with this, the negotiations came to a close,

Alexander's fears of Ptolomy not following through with some of his commitments were largely abated, which in all fairness were true as the latter really did intend on renegeing on some of them, which was, at least for the time being, not possible due to the Achilles heel in Alexander's hand

And so the duo walked out of the study, one ticking almost everything he wanted off his wish list and the other barely managing to save his dignity.

'Ahh, Christmas has come early,' Alexander sang in his heart.

The talks had lasted quite a few hours and after Alexander came out of the study and gazed outside, he noticed that the sun had moved from the east side of the sky to the midwest side, signaling that morning had passed and even noon was nearing its end.

Alexander estimated that it was around two to three o'clock.

Feeling hungry, Alexander made his way to the main hall of the palace downstairs, where he felt the whole floor being wrapped up in the sweet, earthy aroma of cooked porridge.

The cooking to feed the hundreds of thousands of people tomorrow had already begun.

Alexander followed his nose and the hustle and bustle to pinpoint the center of the chaos and was soon taken to a part of the palace he had not yet visited.

It was past the inner courtyard, through a second large corridor, which then opened up to a grand hall even bigger than the front one.

And the opulence and grandeur displayed here were on another level compared to the former hall.

The huge hall was located right next to the Life sea, with one small door leading to the palace that Alexander entered by and the three other sides only barricaded by magnificent pillars, allowing everyone to bathe themselves in the warm breeze and the sandy shores of the sea.

The structure was more than a hundred meters going by Alexander's eyeball estimates, made of black onyx floors and white marbled pillars giving it a dissonant feeling using the contrasting colors and making one feel reverence and diffidence once inside.

The marbled pillars were huge and craved with golden mosaics halfway up, making them sparkle in the golden sunlight like they were made of solid gold.

The ceiling was domed shaped, with many colorful religious depictions of Ramuh decorating the inside walls and with huge golden chandeliers hanging off it to illuminate the place once the sun set.

There was a raised white marbled platform at the end of the hall, right at the edge of it, just bordering the sandy beaches and all along the border of the hall. at regular intervals, there were many small pools filled with water.

Next to these were velvety, translucent curtains, hiding large beds next to them.

The whole architecture and the painting made the place feel like a place of worship while the pools and the beds made it feel like a place a noble would bring his concubines for some sybaritic fun in the water and bed.

'Is this the royal family's temple or the king's personal haram?' Alexander asked himself as he noticed both the ritualistic and hedonistic motifs.

Little did he know it was both and he would soon be forced to be a part of it.

But right now, the place was neither as it was being mobbed by literally ten thousand people.

Currently, next to each of the forty or so pools was a huge burning log fire, on top of which sat a gigantic pot of boiling porridge, bubbling away.

Several slaves and servants attended to each of the huge pots, stirring the gruel inside, putting fresh wooden logs to keep the fire going, cleaning the accumulated ash from underneath, pouring the water from the pool into the pot and mixing it with the grains to make the porridge, and once cooked, removing the huge heavy pot off the fire by placing thick wooden sticks under the neck of the pot and lifting it up with the help of several men and then replacing it another one to start the process again.

The whole place screamed one word- Busy! Busy! Busy!

Chapter 148 Preparation For Tomorrow

Alexander came here to see how the preparation for the great 'feast' that was about to take place and was quite satisfied by what he saw.

All the people seemed to walk with purpose and determination and although there was some chaos, overall the situation seemed orderly and organized, albeit a bit noisy.

Carts full of grains and firewood were being transported to each cooking station by donkeys and then dumped right on the floor.

Buckets full of water were being taken out of the jacuzzi-type pools to fill the pots, while some had run out of their pool water and were now being serviced with barrels of water drawn by donkey carts.

After each batch was done, the earthen pot would be replaced by a similar-sized one, while the former would be covered with a piece of cloth, Alexander suspected them to be curtains, and then put on carts to be stored in the temple.

'Looks like Cam is doing well,' Alexander praised, as although he believed others might have done everything he was seeing right now, that covering the food was something only people close to Alexander whom he had taught them to do, would have followed.

After all, personal and dietary hygienes were very low among all strata of society in this time period.

Alexander, after looking around a bit, finally found his mark- Cambyses and went to greet her.

"So, how's it all going?" Alexander asked the woman who was talking to a servant about some water shortage.

"Alex, finished with the meeting?" Cambyses greeted him with a smile, while off-handedly gesturing to the servant to make himself scarce.

"It was good. I will tell you later," Alexander played down his victory with a flat tone and pursed lips.

And then asked about the preparation, "So, any problem with anything?"

Here Cambyses let out a tired sigh, "You dumped us with so much work without any warning. Honestly, it's overwhelming."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have overslept," Alexander apologized while at the same time taking a dig at Cambyses, for which he was rewarded with a stinging pain on his foot as Cambyses stepped on it, sending a menacing look at Alexander.

She did not appreciate the fact that Alexander, after thoroughly enjoying himself with her and Ophelia, was now blaming them for his blunder.

"Easy tiger," Alexander only chuckled.

And then asked, "How much are you cooking?"

"When Menicus came to me, saying I was to lead the servants to cook enough food to feed four hundred thousand people in less than twenty-four hours, I thought it was a joke," Cambyses informed Alexander.

Then continued, "But other doing a bit of math, I figured it wasn't that bad. Well, it was bad but not THAT bad." She emphasized.

Cambyses afterward showed her working, "Four hundred thousand people will each eat around, talking generously, two hundred grams of grain. That's eighty tons. And since grain to water in porridge is around one is to two, that makes each serving six hundred grams or two hundred forty tons in total."

Cambyses further added, "We have ten thousand people working here, five thousand of our own, and an extra five thousand Menicus snatched from the slave dealers in the city. So that comes to twenty-four kilograms of food to be cooked per servant. Granted not all of them are cooking but still, this number is doable."

Alexander was very impressed with Meniscus, for his quick thinking, as getting so much help within a few hours was no small task.

It required cunning, decisiveness, guts, and most of all experience.

Right after exiting the hallway, Meniscus understood the mammothness of the task, and so sent a phalanx unit into the city to get all the slave dealers to 'donate' their slaves to the palace for three days.

Some agreed immediately, and some needed some steel, pointy encouragement, but in the end, they all complied and within three hours, the palace had five thousand extra pairs of hands.

Alexander was also impressed by his pupil's mental math capacity, "Your math skills have not gotten rusty. Good,"

And this praise made Cambyses smile a bit.

Alexander then asked, "What are you cooking? And how much can you make in an hour?"

Cambyses gave the menu, "We decided to keep it real simple, Just water, grain, and salt. Thankfully, due to Adhan being literally next to a sea, the palace warehouse that mountains of the white stuff."

"As for how much in an hour, we are limited by how many pots we have to store the food. You see those pots?" Cambyses pointed to the huge cooking pots and said, "Each of those can feed a phalanx of around three hundred, So around a hundred kilograms. We have a total of sixty cooking stations and those pots are quickly filling up. If Heliptos did not send more from the nobles, we would have been in trouble." Cambyses revealed her bottleneck.

Alexander calculated that around two and a half thousand pots of similar size would be needed to store all the food, though, in reality, it would not be that much as the cooking would continue along with the service, meaning many pots will become free later on.

But still, that was a lot of lots.

Cambyes at last finished her speech by claiming, "The majority of the cooking time is taken just boiling water. So a batch takes around half an hour, so that's twelve tons an hour and thus we will be done in around twenty."

Alexander nodded approvingly at this speed as it meant that they would be done before dusk tomorrow, which was the deadline for the service to end.

So Alexander first praised Cambyes for a job well done while in his heart he thanked himself that he had such competent people working under him.

At first, he was quite afraid of the immense task he had undertaken, doubting if he had bitten more than he could chew, but due to Menicus's quick thinking, Cambyes's organizational power, and the servants' willingness to quickly obey orders, the apparently insurmountable task had become manageable.

'*Sigh*', no matter how able the king is, he can't do anything without an army of competent advisors,' Alexnader reminded themselves.

After praising Cambyse for her hard work, he instructed, "Cam, these servants will have to cook throughout the night and then till dusk tomorrow. There's no way any human being can work for so long. Feed half of them and get them to sleep. They will switch with the remaining at midnight."

"Half! We might not finish if we let so many men rest," Cambyes seemed reluctant to follow the orders.

But Alexander insisted, saying he will try to find some soldiers to pick up the slack.

And so Cambyes gave the order and soon some of the cooked porridge was being served as lunch to the servants.

But here, Alexander ran into an unexpected problem, where there were not enough bowls to serve the porridge on!

'*Sigh*', some problems are not apparent before one starts doing a job,' Akexnader lampooned, as, like any normal person, for this kind of event. he was more worried about cooking the food than serving it.

Then he quickly ordered them to get all the pottery in the palace and use them.

Alexander also thought of the problem if some of the people tomorrow are so poor that they don't even have a bowl to bring them with them.

And so he ordered all the extra pottery to be given to the temple to be used tomorrow in case of emergency.

This would, later on, bring an enraged Ptolomy to Alexander demanding to know why he was just giving away priceless china to filthy peasants, to which Alexander would respond with the convoluted reply of, "Your Majesty, this is to reduce the chance of revolts. These people are unlikely to riot knowing if Amenhearft wins and enters the city, all this precious stuff will be taken away."

Then Ptolomy would simply turn away and leave, leaving Alexander to wonder whether the former bought the lie or was just exasperated.

After Alexander had done all these, and dusk was being to approach, he asked a question that had slipped out of his mind, "By the way, Cam, how did you find this place?"

"It was the queen mother that told me about here," Cambyeses revealed with a smile.

"Queen mother?" Alexander was first a bit surprised and then found it natural that that shrewd woman would intervene.

"Yeah, her. At first, we were going to do it in the courtyard in front of the palace." Cambyeses revealed.

"But who knows where she heard it from, but after hearing of our plan, the queen mother sought me out and told me of this location, saying it was much closer to the temple due to an emergency backdoor between the palace and the temple, and that the place had a roof, so rain won't be a problem." Cambyeses had a cheerful tone to her voice as she recalled this happy encounter.

"And then you found that the place also had drinkable water inside!" Alexander finished her sentence on her stead and got a nod of affirmation.

"Great, well, keep up the good work," Alexander praised Cambyses again, and then excused himself by claiming, "I will have to thank the queen mother myself."

With this done, he went to find the four women to tell them about their new habitat location.

'I wonder how each of the four will react? I'm particularly interested in seeing those twins' reactions,' Alexander whistled in his heart as he made his way up the stairway toward their room.

Chapter 149 Convincing The Twins

Alexander first made his way to Hellma and Seelima's room, where the mother-daughter duo seemed to have taken the news relatively well.

Though Hellma scowled at Alexander the entire time, the bigger, mature version of her only smiled sweetly and assured Alexander that they understood the circumstances and neither of them had any problem with the arrangements whatsoever.

How much of that was true and how Alexander actually believed the dangerous women were similar in quantity- minuscule.

But Alexander's next pair, proved a lot more hostile, as Azura and Azira only screamed and hissed at Alexander after he made the proposal.

"Huh, as if we will go anywhere with you, bad man!" Azira screeched.

"That's right. That's right. We are priestesses of the Temple of Ramuh. We will stay and die here," Azura who appeared a bit more mature reasoned with Alexander.

"Heh," Alexander only sneered, "What kind of priestess gives their temple's wealth away?"

"*Hisssss*, that's only because you tricked us, grrrr," Azira stood up on her feet like her tail was stepped on and ground her bare teeth at Alexander.

But instead of being intimidated, Alexander only found the tall girl's reaction cute and endearing.

He then told the girls, "Whether I tricked you or not is upto the king and the people to decide. But let me tell you something your uncle and I have decided. Tomorrow you and the priests will be made to swear in front of all the people how you handed me the riches of the temple and how I stole not a single coin from there."

"That...we will never do that. You threatened to hurt grandpa if we didn't," Azura loudly accused Alexander.

"Haha, did I," Alexander only chuckled and then brushed his hands, "Then tell the people that. Or just lie and say that you never did such things."

"We don't lie." Azira looked even angrier at being accused as such.

"That's right! Mother taught us that lying is a big sin," Azura had a bit of sadness in her voice.

'Ah, so pure,' Alexander was liking these two even more.

Then he informed, "Well, princess, it doesn't really matter what you say. The king wants the billions of roplas in the temple and he's gonna get it."

"And the only way he can take it without suffering immense backlash from the nobles is by saying that I was gifted the wealth by the priests of the temple and then gifted it back to the king."

"To that end, we have made preparations to have the twenty or some priests who told us about your father's escape swear in front of everyone that you gave the temple's treasures away when I demanded them of you."

"That's a lie.." Azira shook her dainty, ebony fists in rage.

"Oh, is that really so? I thought lying was a huge sin?" Alexander taunted with a pointed smirk.

"Well, umm, it's not fully ..true..it," Azira began to dawdle her finger as she found it hard to articulate her thoughts.

But Alexander cut her off, "Whatever the truth is doesn't matter. Not in the face of billions of ropas."

Then he asked a question, "Now, tell me, princesses, what do you think the nobles and people who stored their money in the temple think when they find out that you were the ones that gave away all their hard-earned cash?"

"They...they...will" Azira had a shaky, scared voice as she tried to say what came to her mind.

"They will kill us!" Azura gave sound to her sister's fears.

"Yes. And the king will agree because he will need a scapegoat," Alexander ominously predicted.

"You,,,you are lying," Azira shouted, though the certainty in her voice was distinctly missing.

Alexander picked up on this and chuckled, "Hehe, looks like even the princess doesn't believe herself."

"Father,..father will save," Azira stammered as she tried to grasp at the last straw like a drowning man.

"No, sister, he won't," This was Azura, who said it with a heavy melancholy in her voice.

"Sis, what do you mean?" Azira looked at her other half in shock.

"I mean, what commander Alexander said at the dining table was probably right. Father has probably abandoned us," Azura said with choking sobs.

"That...that...that's not true. Father left us because he respected our wishes." Azira almost screamed at her twin,

And then she pointed her immaculate digits towards Alexander and accused, "You, what did you do to my sister? Your forked tongue killed Uncle Barzan, Brother Fatrak and now it's poisoning Azura!"

'Well she isn't completely stupid,' Alexander chuckled inside that the girl had managed to get sixty-six percent of the answer correct.

Though he didn't do anything to Azura, he certainly had was up to his elbow with the other two.

Alexander responded to the accusations laid before him with a smirk, "Your Highness, your father doesn't love you. The proof is in the fact that he left you under the complete mercy of some ruthless mercenary while he made his getaway. If he truly cared for he would have forced you onto the boat and thus saved you."

Alexander then asked, "Tell me Your Highnesses, if the person you met yesterday was not me but any other person, what would have been your fate?"

"Did you think your status as a priestess would have saved you? We massacred hundreds of priests in the temple before getting to you. And that's not even mentioning that we don't even worship the same god as you."

"Or did you think your status as royalty would have saved you? Surely you can't be blind to what's happening to the nobles in the city, can you?"

Alexander's poignant questions deflated the spunky Azira while the melancholy on Azura's face only darkened.

But Alexander wasn't finished, "And even if you believe that Amenhearft left you here truly respecting your wish, even then the proof that your father cares not for you, is given by the fact that Pasha Farzah rebelled partly due to the unjust death of your mother."

"Why would he have rebelled if Amenhearft had privately given more compensation for his lost daughter?"

"That,,, that." The twins found it hard to give an answer.

They had always suspected their father had grown cold and distant in recent years, much more preferring to spend his time with their new stepmother and baby brother than them, but the duo never took that into their hearts.

Instead, they were even happy that their father was finally showing a bit of happiness after their mother's death and the pair also particularly liked seeing their father dote on their youngest sibling,

Alexander then finished his argument by saying, "The only one who can protect you is now Pasha Farzah and me. But if Pasha Farzah does shelter you, the religious nobles of his territory will likely revolt."

"So that leaves only me," Alexander thumped his chest proudly.

Though inwardly he lampooned, 'Because the nobles under me are already rebelling.'

Alexander's words made the usually energetic twins visibly downcast and Azura, who appeared to be the maturer of the two, said, "Commander Alexander, please let us think for a while. The date of departure is not until a month and we will give you the answer by then."

Alexander was pleased to see that his efforts were not in vain and that they had managed to produce quite the effect.

The twins' attitude had changed from outright hostility to a poignant, somber reflection of their circumstances.

So Alexander bid his goodbye, "As your wish Your Highness. Please tell me your decision before we leave. If you want to go I will take you. And if you want to stay, I will also respect your wishes."

Then with a bow, Alexander excused himself.

And as he made his way, he could make out the twins screaming and shouting at each other, clearing each having strong opinions about the matter.

"We did steal their money. So, if the people want us dead, then let them kill us," Alexander heard Azira roar out.

While this was countered by Azura yelling, "I will not die that the hands of a mob for a crime I didn't commit."

And then Azira sneered, "Heh, when did you start fearing death sister?"

To which her sister retorted, "The day they burned mother right in front of us."

'Well looks like the girls have a lot to unpack here,' Alexander commented as his cat-fight reached his ears.

Of course, inwardly he had already made up his mind about the duo as their personal choices were just an illusion.

Not mentioning the fact he found the girl fresh and charming, their facial expressions pure and refreshing to his eyes, even without considering that the fact that they were related to all three great powers of Adhania, Amenheraft, Ptolomy, and Farzah, made them a vital chess piece Alexander could never let go.

If the princesses' refused to accompany him, he planned to simply tie them up and kidnap them.

And with these thoughts in mind, Alexander made his way toward his bedroom,

Chapter 150 Propaganda Drive

As Alexander made his way to get some much-needed shut-eye, he by chance spotted a familiar but unlikely figure- Camius, snooping around the third floor.

"Camius, what are you doing here?" Alexander asked with a smile as he noticed Camius's strangely bulging pockets.

"Stealing all the things I can get away with, doc," Came the kleptomaniac's honest answer, which caused Alexander to roar out in laughter.

"Haha, fine, fine, don't let me stop you," Alexander brushed his hands at the 'innocent' act and attempted to enter his room.

But then suddenly, a lightning bolt of thought sparked inside Alexander as he remembered something and hurriedly instructed, "Camius, quick. I want you to find and arrest Pallidus. Now."

"Pallidus?" Camius seemed confused as he remembered the man had left the group.

So Alexander elucidated, "Yes, Pallidus. Tomorrow a few soldiers will be executed to please the nobles. And I want Pallidus mixed in there as well."

"*Whistle*, you are one vindictive man, commander," Camius grinned and then quickly left to carry out the order.

Though it was upto the individual to determine if Alexander was vindictive or somewhat too cautious as he attempted to snuff out any would-be detractors before they had a chance to grow.

Pallidus would never be on his side and so Alexander thought it was better for the man to die.

And in this way, tomorrow Pallidus would leave for a new plane.

As Camius, left, the exhausted Alexander finally managed to catch some sleep, the night being a peaceful one, as Ophenia too was tired from a hard day's work, couldn't come to attack him.

And right around, midnight, he felt a warm, soft body hug him and the sweet, familiar smell told him it was Cambyses and then, even before the dawn broke, he felt the warmth disappear as Cambyses most likely went off to work.

Alexander too woke shortly after, right at the crack of dawn, and quickly got dressed to get to the temple.

As he and his bodyguards made their way to the temple, escorting the king, the day before them promised to be a glorious one.

The light blue sky showed nary a cloud in sight, as a cool, northerly, salty wind graced the people of Adhan with its presence, the still early, dim sun shining gloriously in the eastern sky.

Alexander was looking forward to the day but a report from last night did cause him to frown a bit.

He was told that when Grahtos had told the people that free food would be given at the temple tomorrow, a crowd immediately began to gather right at the edges of the inner city gate as early as noon the day before, and many even attempted to break in.

The crowd had swelled to such heights by dusk that a riot seemed imminent and Menes quickly sent the eight hundred men from Alexander's group to suppress any unruly behavior and then promptly shut the gates.

'*Sigh*', hopefully, we can maintain order,' Alexander wished in his heart as he recalled the report.

And his heart was calmed by the knowledge that around five thousand armed soldiers were on standby to crush any attempted uprising.

With this reassuring thought, the entourage quickly made their way to the temple, where they were greeted by various priests and priestesses.

After the pleasantries were said, and what the priests were supposed to say double-checked, Alexander began to inspect the various preparations that were made for this day.

The inner temple was now literally covered end to end by several rows of huge, covered pots, ready to transfer their contents to the hungry bellies of the populace.

The Temple of Ramuh's inner courtyard was raised at an elevated position, which housed the temple itself, accessible on all sides by a twenty-meter wide, fifteen-meter high, four-way staircase.

Below the actual temple, was the outer courtyard, around a hundred meters long and a hundred meters wide, encompassing the inner courtyard within its center.

The king sat on his throne, under a glorious parasol, right on the edge of the staircase, imperiously overlooking the outer courtyard. as he was flanked by Alexander, who sat on top of his horse and both were protected by a hollow square formation of elite spearmen.

Below, in the outer courtyard, Alexander could see there were fifty, evenly spaced cooking stations, each holding a pot with a slow simmering flame to keep its contents hot and bubbling away.

A squad of armed soldiers, numbering around five guarded each pot, so as to deter any idiots from doing anything stupid, or causing any trouble while two were responsible for handing out the actual food.

Alexander also noticed that each of the cooking stations had a cart full of very expensive-looking pottery beside them, as wanted by Alexander in case of an emergency.

He was pleasantly surprised by the total number of extra pottery present as he didn't believe the palace had so many reserves, and so guessed correctly that Cambyses had likely 'requisitioned' them from the nobles.

And after finishing surveying these secondary preparations, Alexander placed his eyes on the main showpiece of today, the main character, the person for whom all this was arranged- Kefka!

The blonde man, who had gone significantly paler, had been taken out of his sealed wrapping late last night, and given a bath, heavily perfumed to disguise any smell of rot, which thankfully wasn't there much to begin with due to the cold weather, then dressed in the golden armor he had been killed in and at last placed in an open casket for all to see.

The open mausoleum of the king was smack right in the middle of the huge outer courtyard, made of a magnificent golden casket that Ptolomy had gifted Alexander from the treasury the previous day, and guarded by twenty armored men.

Alexander was then informed that the two mercenary leaders had bought with them the Adhanian soldiers who had been locked in the cell two days prior due to their crimes and ordered them to be placed at the foot of the temple stairway, to be soon executed.

Alexander was also secretly informed by Camius that he had successfully managed to lure Pallidus and his close group into the cells and because the others were busy sacking the city, this group would not be missed by anyone any time soon.

This pleased Alexander because he could finally get off this thorn without much huss and fuss, as no one was likely to notice five extra men out of a hundred.

And by the time anyone who truly cared noticed, the body would have vanished into thin air and Alexander could chalk up the death as just missing.

Being satisfied by all the preparations, Alexander, at last, ordered the gates to be opened, and soon a tsunami of hungry, impatient peasants assaulted the temple.

But after the expected initial chaos, order was quickly established under the expert guidance of the four thousand soldiers that had been deployed just for this purpose.

These mercenaries might be unruly, but they were also professional fighters, who had long dealt with having to tame wild recruits and this experience was now being put to use here.

They used loud whistles, ear-splitting shouts and barks, and thick wooden clubs to quickly get the mob to separate into fifty separate queues, and afterward, the food distribution began in earnest, with the server loudly chanting, 'Praise be to King Ptolomy,' as he poured the hot gruel on to the awaiting empty pot.

Alexander could see all of the fifty queues literally extending from the temple to outside the inner city gates, making him give a true sense of the scale of the total number of people that had come for food.

And as the populace waited for their turn to receive their ration, entertainment in the form of news was provided by the priests and even some soldiers, as they walked between the queues, loudly proclaiming the 'true story' of the events that had folded two days ago and educating the public about the things that had really transpired in their city in the recent days.

They were both surprised and horrified to know that archpriest Manuk- the gentle, caring man that had always appeared in front of them in times of need was actually a usurper and a rebel and then were pleasantly pleased to learn about the magnificent exploits of the new king- Ptolomy.

They lamented and cursed that the twin saintesses had been corrupted and gave away all the temple's riches and then rejoiced when they heard the king had managed to get them all back.

The populace also witnessed the hundred or so, weak, naked men being beheaded and their corpses dragged away for committing crimes against the nobles, though they were not made aware of what those crimes were.

Menicus's men were also present, loudly trying to recruit artisans and soldiers, which caused many cheers of joy to erupt when the remuneration in food was declared.

Many excited voices could be heard wanting to join the army and this way the temple feast continued.