

Herald 381

Chapter 381 Jable's Nobles (Part-4)

"My lord, we have captured a large number of nobles in the mansion over there," A scout pointed to the spire on the roof of the mansion as he made his report to Alexander, before continuing, "But it seems there are a lot of women and children in there as well. And our men are not confident about escorting all of them safely here amidst all the chaos that's going on around. So, would Your Grace be willing to meet them in the mansion over there? Or should we assign more men to bring them here?"

The scout looked at Alexander with clear, limpid eyes, waiting over the order.

"Hmm, the streets of the city are too narrow. So assigning more men might not be enough," Alexander loudly said his deduction, and then he ruminated a bit.

He specifically thought about not wanting to spook the prey.

Just like it is said that the meat of an animal that is slaughtered when it is in a relaxed, stress-free mood tastes better because it has not released various hormones into the bloodstream, Alexander felt that the nobles might be more persuasive to wagging their tongue in their own home, reassured that nothing bad will happen if they just give Alexander that he wanted.

And thus he decided, "Okay, tell whoever is in charge there that I will visit there shortly. And that he is to cooperate with my bodyguards in securing the mansion."

The second part of the instructions was because the regular soldiers were not trained on how to make the premises safe for Alexander.

For that, Alexander had written a very basic manual based on what he had seen in movies and read in books that he had given his contingent of bodyguards to learn.

And he had even instructed them to add to it as they saw fit.

"At once my lord," Receiving the order, the herald gave a quick military salute and then ran off in the mansion's direction.

While Alexander turned to Hemicus to order, "Send some of our men ahead. Have them secure the premises. And tell them to separate the women and children from the men and take them into the nearby barns."

"Also make sure to perform full body checks for the nobles. I don't want any of them to pull a fast one on me." Alexander finished.

Assassinations using hidden blades was a technique as old as human civilization.

"Yes," A short reply affirmed the command.

The Pasha then asked Menes to be in charge of the city in the meantime, and as he and Melodias sometime later were standing in front of the mansion door.

"Welcome my lord," Hercinidus ran up to give a full bow in front of Alexander's horse the moment he saw the large group approach, and stayed obediently still as the Pasha and his entourage disembarked.

"Sergeant Hercinidus, congratulations on a job well done." The very first thing that Alexander did after getting off his horse was greet the sergeant by his name loudly and then land strong pats on the shoulders with a wide smile.

And then, maintaining his image of a generous lord with a generous hand, handed the soldier a leather pouch which he took out from a side saddle, "Here is a little something for you and the missus. Please accept."

Alexander usually was open with his hands when it came to his soldiers and thus rewarded the man for capturing so many rabbits in one single cage.

And the sergeant took it with a wide grin, bowing once again and pronouncing, "Praise be to the lord."

The fact that someone like Alexander knew his name filled his heart with more joy than whatever was inside the pouch.

In fact, Alexander had learned the name of the Sergeant along the way from Melodias, who said that the sergeant was initially part of his mercenary groups and even added that he had married an Adhanian recently.

Which was also why Alexander prepared the package for the man as he did.

And as Hercinidus received the pouch, he could instantly tell it did not contain coin, and would later find it to have some bars of soap, a small beautiful glass showpiece in the shape of a hedgehog, and two hand mirrors.

And this discovery would make him happier than receiving a 1,000 ropals.

Because anybody could gift him money.

But these stuff were unique presents of the Pasha.

Hercinidus was not of high enough caliber to get to attend Alexander's wedding but he had heard from his battalion captain (500-man leader) that it was the spectacle of the century.

That captain especially bragged about the wedding presents, saying it was worth more than a 1,000 ropals, and he especially loved showing around the beautiful mirror, and saying how he had managed to convince a Zanzan girl he was wooing to say yes using it.

And now Alexander had gifted him not one, but two of it!

How could he not be happy?

While Alexander had done this to add a personal touch and also because this stuff was cheap for him to produce.

Much cheaper than a 1,000 ropals, while their efficacy of inspiring happiness and loyalty was much higher.

And after handing the pouch, Alexander even added, "And rest assured, you and your company will get all your due rewards."

This statement blasted away the last bit of acrimony that the man had as before, when Alexander's bodyguard took over control from him, he was slightly afraid that they would lie and swallow up the rewards for themselves.

But with Alexander's reassurance, his smile enlarged even more, saying, "No, no, my lord. Being able to serve you is the greatest reward."

Alexander then said a few more encouraging words to the sergeant, before finally being given the go-ahead by his bodyguards and escorted inside.

'Let's see what were all of you in here,' Alexander said to himself as he entered the lavish mansion.

Alexander did not buy the story Herculidus told him about the nobles gathering in one building after the city was taken over.

Because when shit hit the fan, nobles were a bunch of people who would always prioritize saving their own hide.

It was their general characteristics and to make them go against their instinct meant that they were either here prior to the 'invasion' or there was someone in Jabel with sufficient authority and power to make these scaredy-cats want to gather around him in times of need.

And Alexander would soon find which.

Alexander observed the interior of the mansion as he made his way to the hall room where all the noblemen were quarantined, making note of the lavish architecture, though it naturally paled compared to his own manor.

But the thing that caught Alexander's eye the most was that the house strangely followed a very similar design to his very own one, appearing as just a smaller, lesser, poorer version of his house.

And he could think of three reasons for this.

One reason this could be was because it was built by the same man as the one who did Pasha Muazz's house.

Second was that the owner of the house wanted to copy Muazz's lifestyle.

Or thirdly, this was the standard architectural structure used by all or most nobles of Zanzan.

But whichever the case was, the similar geometry of the house made Alexander quickly cover the distance with experienced footsteps until he found himself in front of the hall room.

"Ohh, why is this here?" But just before Alexander was about to enter the room, he posed this question as he noticed a small pool of blood on the carpet.

He was afraid that one of the nobles might be injured or killed, thus spooking the prey.

Alexander's question was answered by one from the group of soldiers guarding the door answered, "My lord, when we were doing the body checks, one noble refused. And when we insisted, he lunged at us, breaking the nose of one of our brothers."

"And then, in the midst of trying to separate the two men, some blood spilled out."

Who that noble might have been would be evident to all the readers, while the succinct answer left out the part where several of the soldiers made sure to make Maizdy's face swell up by a few times, if even that was possible given the already portly face of the man.

Alexander could tell that his soldiers had likely taken this noble out of the room to give him a good thrashing, extracting multiple times the amount of blood the man had managed to spill.

But he did not ask for details, and only instead said with a light nod, "You did well. Good job," while internally he thought, 'Seems like there are troublemakers there. *Sigh*, it will have to be that then.'

The incident and scuffle must have ruffled the noble's feathers and it was likely the birds would first need to be placated before they would sing.

Alexander signaled the door to be opened and as the light was allowed to escape from the room, Alexander laid his eyes upon his prey.

While Jamider (Earl) Nibbar tried to get up to greet Alexander the moment he saw him.

"My lord, welc....urggg..." But even before he could a full sentence out, a *shoo* sound hit his ear, like an arrow being released, and a moment later felt a stinging sensation around his neck.

And a second later he flopped onto the carpet, not even realizing that Alexander's crossbow bolt had penetrated his throat, and died with an incredulous look on his face.

Chapter 382 Jabel's Noble's (Part-5)

The room that the nobles were being guarded in had many soldiers inside, the bright chandeliers making their weapons and armor evident to all, from the shiny bronze cuirass to the dull shields to the short swords to lastly the crossbows or instant bows each carried.

And these men seemed there to protect just nine men, all of whom were seemingly in a fluctuating mood.

Some of them paced around the large, central table with brisque, nervous footsteps, their hands clasped together, their head down, eyes darting all about in confusion.

It almost appeared as if they thought that if they looked long enough at the floor, they would be able to read the soon-to-be-sent revelation from god that would tell them how to escape this predicament.

Others did the same thing just sitting, their body occasionally twisting and turning to show their discomfort.

While some had gathered around Maizdy, whose entire face was bloodied supplicating words of comfort to him, as the fat man fumed in rage.

When the soldiers had barged into the room, he was the first one to greet them with the lambasting words, "How dare you swines attack us?" and then attempted to make the soldiers not only leave the mansion but surrender to him.

An endeavor he failed in because Jamider (Earl) Nibbar quickly intervened, saying in a soothing, flattering tone, "Now, now, my lord. Let us be patient. These men are just obeying orders. We need to talk with the Jakqum that orders them to get anything done."

And this managed to avoid an altercation for that moment.

Though it was an effort rendered quickly futile when altercations did break out after the soldiers declared they were going to body search the nobles and everybody complied except Maizdy.

'*Sigh*', this is called being in a rock and hard place' Nibbar said as he sat at the head of the table, thinking how he had to manage both the opposing soldiers and the noble themselves, his mood currently at a nadir.

He also reminisced how the soldiers had moved all the women and children to a nearby barn meant for the horses, and though it was said this was 'to protect them from all any danger' meaning preventing suicide and such, the act still gave Nibbar a bad feeling.

'I can't rely on these idiots to do anything. I need to talk to that Jak...no Alexander personally to eke out an escape, Even if means temporarily switching sides.' Nibbar was ready to promise almost anything to Alexander to come out of this alive, even betraying his fellow nobles.

And thus eager to show his willingness, and trying to start the conversation before any of the nobles did something stupid, he jumped out of his seat the moment he saw the young man, almost a boy walk in with his entourage.

"My lord", He even addressed the approaching Pasha as 'My lord' to show his friendliness.

But it was all for naught.

Because even before he could say the word 'welcome', his eyes caught a bow-like thing, held horizontally by the boy, and shortly after, he suddenly felt a stinging, warm sensation around his neck which rapidly turned into agonizing pain.

And as his vision darkened and he slumped over the table, lying in his pool of blood, Jamider (Earl) Nibbar still could not believe what was happening to him.

'Did the bastard shoot me? Was I, a noble shot?' He thought incredulously as death tightened its grip on him, the reality not sinking in until the very moment the black wings of the angel of death became apparent to him.

"..." And as Alexander lowered his crossbow, the room sounded like it was a tomb.

No one, not even the people closest to Alexander had expected this course of events, and they all looked at him with shock and fear.

The soldiers were afraid that they had done something wrong to warrant such a move from their lord.

While the nobles were shocked that one of their own was killed in cold blood just like that.

Even in battles, the moment a noble surrendered, from that second on he would become untouchable.

Which gave rise to the strange phenomenon where many battles in Adhania between nobles would seemingly abruptly stop because one side would all too easily surrender the moment they saw things not going their way.

So, if nobles were protected so well even during battles, the shock that one of them, a Jamider (Earl) at that, was killed without nary a word could be imagined.

They looked at Alexander with first stunned horror, before the realization of the reality made them feel cold with fear until finally it transformed into boiling rage for some.

'Since we are going to die, then let's go out fighting,' Some thought, trying to jump out of their seats

But these martyr-like thoughts were temporarily extinguished by Alexander's loud, warm greeting,

"Good morning gentlemen. I am glad to see all of you are well." He paired a kind, gentle smile with the light, jovial greeting, as he sat strode towards the table and sat on a chair after he himself pulled it out.

Alexander had been a bit confused at first about how to greet the nobles.

Saying 'Goodnight' did not feel right as it gave a different meaning.

And thus he thought that since it would be morning soon, it would be more appropriate than a good evening.

But the nobles had much more important stuff to consider than whether Alexander's greeting was appropriate or not.

Like if he intended to kill them all or not?

And so they watched with weary eyes as the heavily armored man took a seat at the opposite end of the large, long table, but not before very prominently and suggestively placing the thing he used to kill Jamider (Earl) Nibbar upon on the table.

This was a clear, naked threat.

While Alexander looked at the frightened nobles and felt smug, happy that he had succeeded in his first step, which was to give himself the impression of being a bit crazy.

And that was also why he had already decided prior that he would kill the first noble to speak up.

To create shock and awe among the nobles

And Jamider (Earl) Nibbar just happened to be the unlucky one.

Because for the last time in his life, this noble would be a bit too over-smart, rather than being just smart.

The nobles were in flux about what to do.

Alexander's warm smile directed towards them as one of their own lay dead with blood pouring blood out from his throat contrasted each other too much, and none of the nobles dared speak first.

And so Alexander said again, his smile widening to a grin, "I said how are you, my man? Well? Or did my men scare you, hahaha?"

He appeared to be half-deranged, with a few screws loose.

Finally, a while later, understanding that not answering this nut-case might not be the best idea, one of the nobles, felt that he should get up and give a full bow, before greeting,

"Greetings my lord. We are immensely happy to meet you. How can we be of service?"

The tone was gentle and servile.

"Hahaha, well you could have met me at my wedding. It was just a week ago and Jabel's pretty close. So did you not come?" Alexander seemed to have picked the second sentence of the greeting as the most interesting one.

'Because you bastard did not invite us,' All the nobles you heard this swore in their hearts.

But outwardly another noble quickly chirped up,

"Hahaha, yes, yes, it was our mistake. But Your Grace, see, many of us are still recovering from the plague and so could not make the time. Thousand apologies, thousand apologies." This seemed to a quick-witted one, as others soon followed suit.

"Yes, yes, that's right. We very much wanted to meet The Lord. But the illnesses... really...ohhh," One breathed a fake sign of resignation.

"Yes, yes..it is truly a shame on us that Your Grace had to come to meet us. But the plague...ohhh,' Another involuntarily shivered.

"Hahaha, oh, so that's it, that's it. I understand," Alexander exaggeratedly nodded his head as if buying this excuse.

It appeared that though these men were not leaders, they sure could wag their tongues.

"So, what important has made the lord visit us at this late hour? Is it Tibias?" At last, understanding the situation was safe, Kyamin opened his mouth, probing Alexander and the man that had silently sat beside him, Melodias

"Hahaha, well as you mentioned, since there was so much plague in Jabel, and we have eradicated the plague in our city long ago, we came to see what was wrong," Alexander gave an improvised joke answer just the nobles had given him stupid excuses.

"*Bang*, Jakqum! Do you know what you doing? Do you not care about the treaty?" It was the noble side the first to crack, more specifically Maizdy, who was no longer able to bear with the farce.

'Fuuuccckkk,' While Kyamin internally almost tore his lung out hearing this, as did many of the other nobles.

And if any of them was half as brave as Jamider (Earl) Nibbar they would have shouted a severe scolding, if not landing an outright slap on the fat man.

But they were not.

Which was why they were not called Nibbar.

Instead, they could only look on horrified as the current lord of Zanzan raised that new weapon and pull the trigger.

Shooo

Chapter 383 Jabel's Nobles (Part-6)

Alexander's attention had been drawn toward Maizdy the moment he had entered the room.

How could it not?

The man was huge, occupying almost two chairs and having his face all wrapped and bandaged, with some of the fat around his face even spilling out from between the linen clothes.

Clearly, this was the troublemaker.

Shooo

And hearing the loud shout, Alexander simply shot out a crossbow bolt, its sound as it traveled through the air making the nobles imagine they were hearing the joyful laugh of death harvesting another life.

Thud

But fortunately for them, this time, the steel bolt only drilled itself into the thick, mahogany table, landing just far enough from the obese noble to miss him but nevertheless close enough to almost make him pee himself.

And made the nobles look in horror at the huge, needle-like steel bolt glinting light out of its smooth, hard body.

Alexander had these steel bolts specifically made for him.

Weighing much more than a typical bolt, these traded the range and distance for deadlier lethality at close range, able to destroy close targets.

This trade-off was perfect for Alexander, because he already had an army of bodyguards who could take care of the far-away threats, and so the only time he would need to act was if the killers had somehow managed to make it through his screen of men and get close enough to him.

Thus for Alexander's personal protection, the range was not an issue.

The ability to kill any killer reliably was.

"My lord, this is Lord Pasha Muazz's eldest son, Maizdy. Now, please let us stay our weapons," Seeing the fat man still alive and unharmed, water returned to Kyamin's heart, and he hurriedly spoke up to introduce the two.

If the 'crown prince' of Zanzan -Maizdy was to be killed, the treaty would become null and void at that very moment.

"Pasha Muazz? Who is he? Which province is he a pasha of?" Alexander put on a facade of incredulity, while his men at the back promptly reloaded the crossbow for him.

Alexander meant to say that since he controlled the territory, how could they call another person its ruler?

"*Grit*, *grit*" Maizdy ground his teeth in rage and frustration hearing this, a sound that was heard across the room.

But the threat of that weapon and the steel arrows it shot out made him restrain himself, as he could only scream, 'Bastard thief. Zanzan is my father's! Zanzan is mine! Bastard! F*cking Bastard.'

In fact, he was not only angry with Alexander, but with his nobles as well.

Because he was irritated by how these men were being all differential and calling Alexander 'My lord' when he was really an imposter and a usurper.

This was unacceptable, Zanzan had only one lord, and that was his family.

While Kyamin, not being brain dead like that, engaged Alexander with civility, gently answering, "My lord, under the treaty, the status of Zanzan has been left undecided, with both kings claiming different people as its ruler. And for now, both such people are recognized as legitimate. So, until the conflict is resolved, both sire and Pasha Muazz hold the legal title of Pasha."

He had in a scholarly tone described the messy situation regarding Zanzan.

And to his credit, he even made it sound half logical.

Because if one thought about it for more than a second, this did not make any sense.

For example, could Pasha Muazz collect taxes from Zanzan since he was also the legal ruler?

Theoretically yes.

But realistically no.

Or could he appropriate any land of Zanzan to a third party?

Again, Theoretically yes.

Realistically no.

And these examples were just the tip of the iceberg.

So this clusterfuck of a situation, created by the inability of both sides to come to an agreement, gave rise to this illogical situation, while also creating some bizarre loopholes.

"....." Alexander did not bother replying to this absurd situation.

It was as it was.

Instead, he ruminated on why would such a big fish be in this dump.

'Could it be because of him the noble gathered together?' Alexander found that unlikely given how dumb he appeared until now.

While he missed the fact that actually, he had killed the smartest one, the one because of whom the nobles had gathered together with his first shot.

"I see, so it was Esteemed Lord Muazz's son! It is an honor," Alexander heavily nodded, before naturally asking, "So, what is Lord Maizdy visiting a dump like this? And meeting with so men so late, hehehe."

The innuendo was clear.

And it had the rotund man's entire face turn the same color as his broken nose.

To think that an honorable noble would be accused of that!

And by a worm!

"The lord is here to meet his relatives. He really loves his niec...*thud*." An up until now quite noble quickly spoke up before the chubby man would flare up.

And then suddenly he was not speaking anymore. he was simply slumping off his chair.

This time the crossbow found its mark directly through the man's temple, the silverly steel sticking out like the man had become a unicorn.

"If you are gonna kill us, then simply kill us! What's with the games?" Seeing this finally Kyamin snapped, his nerves snapping.

He had had enough.

With two nobles dead in a matter of minutes, he felt that Alexander was simply there to see them burn.

Which was true, but not yet.

"The liar said that Lord Maizdy had come to visit Jable because he loved his niece. Well, if he loved him so much, why take two months to come?" Alexander asked while he cocked the crossbow.

And then further posed, "Moreover, why come to visit this dump, but not take him to his territory? You know, one that's not plague-infested. Some uncle he is, am I right, heh?" He smirked.

Then Alexander's cheerful eyes transformed into a cold, black pair as he scanned the silent as a church mouse group for an answer, before his light, friendly tone changed to a deep, penetrating one.

"I'm here to just ask some questions. Answer them truthfully, and you and your family will not have a hair touched on them."

"Lie...and know that there are six others who are just as eager as you. I hate liars." Alexander's voice made the nobles feel the freezing wintery wind almost warm and inviting.

And this tactic worked, as the slightly later, the sweet words and even more soon drifted into Alexander's ears.

"Me...me my lord. I know everything. Lord Maizdy is here leading the army..."

"Shuuut! Uuuupp!" But that noble did not get to finish the sentence, as the enraged Maizdy had gotten up from his chair to pounce on that skinny man, as if to crush the man under his large body weight.

Bang, *Bang*, *Bang*

For a fat man, this Maizdy was surprisingly athletic, as the shower of fists he landed on the noble were either slow or weak, evident by the crisp sound it made with each contact.

It sounded as if bones were cracked and smacked under the strike of heavy muscles.

But unfortunately for the portly man, he could not continue his assault for long, at least not long enough to incapacitate the traitors, as both the soldiers and even the surrounding nobles tried hard to separate the two.

And after the soldiers landed some solid strikes of the attacking man's face, and even a shield bash, the large, whale-like entity while lost its steam, plopping into the ground, with a bloodied face before being dragged like a sack of potatoes to the edge of the room.

"My lord, Maiz...Lord Maizdy has been always a bit hot-tempered, a bit impulsive. Perhaps it would be better if he could be moved to a more secluded room," Kyamin then diplomatically asked, while the men helped that skinny noble up, his face bruised and bloodied.

"No need." But Alexander simply brushed off the request while waving his hands, as he then turned his head back, and addressed, "Justas, Sico, Lymat, you three have been standing for a long time. Sit on that fatso!"

Alexander just asked three of his bodyguards to use a noble as a seat!

"Alexander, have you gone mad? Or do you truly not want to let us leave here alive?" Kyamin shouted at the top of his lungs.

He thought he had seen it all.

But this amount of disrespect,..this.. using a noble, a pasha at that, as a chair was an unthinkable act of humiliation.

Kyamin would not have believed it if he had not seen it.

And facing such humiliation, no self-respecting noble would ever not declare war against the other party.

And not just war, but total war i.e- total destruction of the opposite side.

Like how the Allies took over every inch of Germany in world war 2 and forced an unconditional surrender.

Or even more appropriately, how warlords in China used to destroy every enemy city, killing all its people, and razing the city to the ground.

Not conquer, or annex it.

But destroy it.

Much like what was happening to Jabel

And since Alexander's action would cause a total war if it got out, it appeared the only path was total eradication of the evidence, i.e- killing all the nobles who witnessed it.

Chapter 384 Noble's Talk (Part-1)

After Kyamin finished shouting at Alexander, he then looked at the pasha with reddened eyes.

He was still not reserved to die like this.

And fortunately for him, Alexander was still not willing to kill him yet, as he gave him the excuse,

"And why would I not be serious about letting you live? I remember that Lord Maizdy actually died while escaping the city."

"His horse was galloping at full speed, and accidentally stepped on a large pothole it missed in the dark, breaking its legs, and causing the lord to fall and break his hip."

"And then in the ensuing chaos, under the pursuit of bandits and wild animals, his body was forever lost," Alexander very casually gave this recount, sending a very suggestive smile towards Kyamin as he said so.

And this produced a mixture of happiness and fear among all the listeners.

Happiness at the thought of this troublesome man-child being finally out of their life.

But fear that killing Pasha Muazz's son and successor would certainly mean the destruction of the treaty and result in a direct war.

But soon all of them reasoned that since the die had been already cast, they can only jump onto Alexander's ship.

Because Maizdy's ship was sinking.

And they were not loyal enough to follow him to the depths.

And besides, they reasoned it was ultimately Alexander's problem.

They were really innocent, and so, even if the worst came to worse and they were captured by Pasha Muazz, he would likely understand if they told him they only did the things they did because they were forced and under duress.

At least that was the sliver of hope they hung on by, praying that that bad-tempered noble would be understanding.

"Hahaha, I just remembered that we have not been properly introduced by Lord. I'm Talukder (Viscount) Kyamin. My fiefdom is in the Kyash area, around east of the Cisrian hills." Kyamin had an oily smile as he greeted himself, making his choice evident to all.

"You bastard...you dare! My father will skin y...*urggg*" Maizdy attempted to go off on a tirade as he understood the nobles were openly betraying him.

But his journey was stopped short after a strong punch to the jaws from one of the soldiers.

While the nobles and the lord basically ignored this howling dog and continued one by one with their introduction.

After finishing which, Kyamin, as the representative of the noble finally asked this with a gentle smile, "Then what does Your Lord want to know?"

"Write!" Was the only word Alexander said.

'Write? Write what?' The nobles appeared confused, and they looked curiously at Alexander for clarification.

But Alexander did not need to, as soon, the soldiers, as they were told before took out a few sheets and placed one in front of each of the nobles.

"I remember hearing one of you say Maizdy was here for something related to the army." Write about that," Alexander slouched back in his chair in a relaxed posture as he said so.

He preferred written statements over verbal ones, because, one- it made it easier to notice logical mistakes, and two- in situations like this, the others could not fix their story on the fly to match the others.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the table, the nobles examined the new material with curiosity and wonder.

'What's this? Papyrus? New kind of vellum?' They wonders as they picked up the paper and felt it against their fingers.

"*Ahem*" But Alexander's cough quickly made them remember why they were given that, and soon the quill met paper, with the sound of scribbling filling the room.

'Darm it, cunning bastard.' And while Kyamin wrote all the secret plans, he also kept on cursing Alexander.

Because writing the plan meant he could not lie about it as he did not make prior preparation with the other nobles.

And so he could only go the opposite way, and try to include as much information as he knew into the single sheet about the 'army', and hope that his voluminous recount would please this daring psycho the most.

And after almost half an hour of rapid writing, with many of the papers chuck full of small text on both sides, the men finally let go of their quills and these now almost blackened papers were collected and given to Alexander.

"Here, you read half, I will read half," Receiving this, Alexander divided the paper in half, giving Melodias three, and him taking three.

But if Alexander was hoping to reduce his workload in this way, he was sorely mistaken.

Because Melodias in an embarrassed voice squeaked out, "My...my lord, I can't...I have not yet learned ...to read Azhak."

The man quietly mumbled this one out, afraid to say it out loud in front of subordinates.

"..."

Well it had been only two months, and Melodias was virtually illiterate to begin with, so ultimately Alexander chose not to criticize his army's second in command in front of his employees.

Instead, he only made a flat face and pursed his lips showing his disapproval, before taking back the papers and starting to read through them, while Melodias could only turn his head in another direction to avoid the awkwardness.

For Alexander, this reading proved to be quite important.

Because reading six different versions of the same story, he got the main gist of what was meant by the word 'army'.

And after finishing reading and re-reading the pages, Alexander pronounced what was in there so that everybody could know.

He said in a somber voice, "The pages basically say that an army of about forty to fifty thousand (40,000-50,000) men will come to Zanzan from the east late this month. They will have ten thousand (10,000) mercenaries and some five to six thousand (5,000 - 6,000) cavalry, and chariots, with the rest being made of conscripted peasants."

"And Maizdy was sent here to be the leader, along with that man called Nibbar being his assistant."

Alexander thus finished succinctly after pointing to the slumped-over, dead Jamider (Earl).

After Alexander finished, the threat of an attack on the horizon did not cause any panic as one might expect.

Because inside the room were veteran warriors who would not flinch at the sound of the words war and battle.

No, instead they were surprised.

"Does Amenheraft wish to break the treaty unilaterally?" Melodias loudly asked the question which was on everybody's mind.

'Unilaterally? You are the one breaking it unilaterally!' Kyamin shouted in his heart at this shameless accusation, given that it was Alexander who unambiguously threw the first punch.

But outwardly answered in a neutral tone, "The king believes that if he can take Zanzan out of the alliance, then he will no longer have to comply with the treaty. And this is why he even hired the famous Jahal mercenaries."

"Hmmm," Alexander audibly hummed hearing this answer.

Because it created many more questions than it answered,

So he decided to tackle them sequentially so as to not forget any of the points.

He thus started with the first and most important point, "You said that Amenheraft believes that retaking Zanzan will make him no longer bound to the treaty. Essentially meaning that he thinks winning the next battle will win him the war."

"But why does he think that? I only control just one city. Why does he think that destroying one plague-ridden city will destroy His Majesty Ptolomy? Will Adhan and Matrak simply dissolve if I die? Does he think that I'm the king and not Ptolomy?" Alexander believed that this could never be the real reason for this hasty attack.

It made no sense.

Even if Amenheraft was a prophet and somehow got to know about the huge potential of Zanzan, it was still only potential.

To risk breaking the treaty so early appeared suicidal for Amenheraft given his financial situation.

"We don't know Your Grace. We were only told this." Kyamin answered quickly and in a high-pitched voice, almost sounding like he was squeaking, as he was afraid Alexander might stick a bolt through him thinking he was lying or hiding information.

So he quickly pointed, "The real details might be only known to Lord Maizdy and Lord Nibbar."

"..." Not getting his answer, Alexander pursed his lips and coldly glanced at the other five as a way to pressure them.

He doubted Maizdy would talk, and instead of waiting his time there, he wanted to squeeze these men.

But they only cowered and avoided eye contact, drooping their head low.

"My lord, these are only Talukders (Viscounts) and Shordars(Barons). Perhaps they were only instructed to obey orders," Seeing no response, and afraid Alexander might kill another man just to ven, Melodias lightly whispered into the pasha's ears.

And this seemed to make sense, as Alexander whispered back, "Yea, you may be right." before adding in Thesian, "All these appear to be shrimps. With neither the size nor the spine. No wonder they know much of anything."

Alexander was referring to both their low strength in terms of land and wealth and their low levels of loyalty.

Because as much as Alexander did not like Maizdy, and would call him an idiot for not understanding the situation, he would also say the man had spine.

Chapter 385 Noble's Talk (Part-2)

Alexander could not figure out the reason behind Amenheraft's hasty attack.

And he ignored Kyamin's advice about asking Maizdy because he doubted he could get much information out of the fat man without weeks of brutal interrogation.

Unlike these soft shrimps, who were singing like a canary just in the hope of getting out of here alive.

"So, what does my lord think the real reason is?" So when Melodias then posed the million-dollar question.

Alexander gave a very simple, but quite anti-climatic answer, "Don't know." making Melodias be at a bit of a loss at what to do.

"Let's keep asking and see what we can know." Alexander then simply addressed as he moved to his second point, "The disasters that hit Adhania must have not been easy for anyone. So where is Amenheraft getting his men from? And who is paying them?"

"....." This was an important question, and the nobles looked at each other inquisitively, but it appeared none knew.

"My lord, it is possible His Majesty might have promised them greater land. After all, we were also promised such," A noble at last hypothesized, the logical statement drawing nods from the others.

But though logical, it did not make sense for Alexander.

"I remember that all of you swore that you will abide by the treaty. And in exchange, you received a lot of money. So explain yourself." Alexander in a gentle tone asked, hiding his frustration.

"...." There was another pause as the nobles looked uncomfortably looked at one another as if deliberating whether they should say it.

But finally, understanding Alexander was going to pressure them anyway, one of the nobles picked up the courage to at last say it, "Since, the Pasha said he hates lairs, then let us be frank. A lot of us feel that you have already broken the treaty when you massacred the temple. So we..."

But this noble was cut off from finishing his accusation by a flustered Kyamin, who quickly interjected, "My lord, Lord Jamil I just tired. We all know that the happenings at the Temple were the work of the gangs and street rats. And we thank you for punishing them."

"That's right, that's right, we are ever thankful that you destroyed those crooks, They were always a constant menace to us."

Soon, to cover up this Jamil, the others joined Kyamin to try and distract Alexander with lavish praises and puffery.

But their efforts appeared mute, as the one currently being rescued suddenly barked, "Bah! You spineless cockroaches. Why are you sucking up to him? I lost my daughter that day! He is my daughter's killer! Murderer! Butcher!"

Alexander was caught a bit back at this outburst, how the seemingly soft, spoken gentleman turned red-eyed and combative at the snap of a finger.

"Apologies, my lord, thousand apologies." Seeing this vituperation, Kyamin figuratively lunged forward with apologies, saying, "Lord Jamil is still grief-stricken about his loss. And could not control his temple. Please show mercy, my lord pleasure," The lord even clasped his hands.

It appeared his daughter was a trigger.

Alexander only performed a light smile hearing this, as he slouched back and in a languid manner answered, "Well, since we are all being frank, then you should also know the reason why the Temple was destroyed by the wrath of the gods. Because some mice dared to accuse the gifts of the gods as being cursed. Naturally, they would be smitten." He said this while looking at his nails, as if the men he was talking to were not worth his attention.

And Alexander was basically reminding them he killed the priests because they were the first to spread malicious rumors about him.

"....." Another difficult silence followed as Jamil wanted to retort, 'You have no proof,' but held off on that because neither did he.

And because he was getting death glares from all the others who were telling him to keep his trap shut.

'If you want to die for your daughter, you go die alone, Don't drag us into it,' Seemed to be the message.

It was at last Kyamin who diffused the awkward silence, laughing jovially and saying,

"Hahaha, yes, yes, the lord is right. We both sides have had our differences. But the important thing is that we look past these differences and move on."

"Yes, let's" Alexander too answered with a friendly smile, as he raised his third point,

"The number of men you said doesn't seem to be small. And there are so many horses as well. How will they come? Land. river or sea? What route will they follow? How will they be supplied? Tell me everything about the army." Alexander eagerly asked.

Forty to fifty thousand (40,000 - 50,000) moving was basically a moving town, so these were important questions to be answered.

Would they march through the other areas of Zanzan?

Or use the waterways?

And since Zanzan was hit pretty hard by the famine, how would the army feed itself?

Because foraging would not be an option, as the deadline for the attack appeared to be late winter, meaning before the spring thaw and the sprouting of the plant, shrubs, and even grass.

And all the poor folks of the countryside were basically inside Zanzna, so no stealing from them.

"This we know. In fact, we know quite a bit because this because we were actually asked to help regarding this" This was said by the skinny noble who had first uttered the word 'army', and who appeared very enthusiastic about reporting his answer to Alexander.

"All the troops will travel by sea, my lord. And they will carry all their supplies with them as they land at the Hatamum. That's a small city, almost like a hamlet 40 km east of Zanzan." This noble introduced, before continuing,

"Then they will then march westward to Zanzan, while the ships keep themselves close to the shore, ready to resupply the troops along the way. And once they reach Zanzan, they would lay siege to it, with the intention of taking it."

He then finished by saying, "And as native nobles, we were approached by the King's emissaries to help the troops reach Zanzan in any way that seemed necessary."

"Which means showing the troops the land, directing them along proper, easier, or sometimes secret routes."

"While also preparing appropriate accommodations for the nobles, arranging appropriate food and entertainment, and all other things. I'm sure My lord understands."

Alexander did understand, as the noble was eluding to having to arrange beautiful women for the officers and nobles.

Sometimes poorer nobles would even arrange for their daughters to serve the nobles in the hopes of climbing through the ranks of nobility through marriage relations.

And it made Alexander hold nothing but disdain for this custom.

'Are they going to war or a brothel?' He thought.

Alexander believed that if the mind was occupied with the thoughts of beautiful maidens one was going to be served up, or that fresh flower one tasted just the night before, when was he going to have the peace of mind to plan for the war?

Never mix business with pleasure.

But Alexander quickly pulled his thoughts out of this and instead asked the more important questions, "Why will the troops land there? Why not much nearer to Zanzan? And will there be a naval blockade?"

"Yes, there will be a blockade. Some troops might even try to land at the harbor," This time Kyamin gave the answer, snatching the opportunity from that thin noble.

Because they believed the better they could answer Alexander, the more favor they would be able to earn.

And so following that endeavor, Kyamin further added, "The reason for landing at Hatamum is because in the winter, the waters get choppy around Zanzan. There are also sometimes huge storms and typhoons. They will want to avoid this. And Hatamum is a relatively safe, calm port that is also about 2 days march from Zanzan. It is perfect."

And finished by saying, "And this is also why the naval blockage will likely be only a secondary attack, with few troops participating."

"That's right. Besides the Jahal mercenaries are feared for their cavalry. They will want the land," That noble, whom Alexander remembered being called Latif added.

'Hmmm, I did think that they had a lot of cavalry.' Alexander recalled the number as five to six thousand (5,000 - 6,000) and was even amazed that it belonged to a mercenary group.

"You guys keep emphasizing that 'Jahal' mercenaries. Who are they? Why do you sound so scared of them? And how does a mercenary company have the money to use cavalry?" Alexander had picked up on that name and was curious.

And more importantly, as far as he knew, using cavalries was almost the exclusive right of the Adhanian nobility.

So how could a mercenary company use them?

"....." The nobles could not believe there was anyone in Adhania who did not know about the Jahal mercenaries.

They were famous to the point mothers would scare naughty children with their names.

'I was impressed at first seeing the brat not even flinch hearing their name. I even thought the boy had balls. But now I see that he is just ignorant.' All the respect that Kyamin, and all the other nobles had gained towards Alexander was washed away by this question.

And they even added to their hears, 'And even his entourage is just as ignorant. No wonder his nickname is Jakqum. A Jakqum leading a bunch of Jakqum's.'

Chapter 386 Noble's Talk (Part-3)

In the nobles' eyes, someone so out of touch with the happenings of Adhania was a dead man walking.

Even Maizdy, who had been quietly simmering up until now could not help but let out a guffaw of disdain,

'To think there could be someone this stupid,' He spat out in his heart.

And since Alexander did not know about the Jahal mercenaries, and as the nobles held no real love for Alexander, they decided to let him know their true horror on the battlefield.

And so only gave a surface introduction, "The Jahal mercenaries are a mercenary group from Kuleef. Officially they mostly help keep their employer's land trade routes safe. Hence the large use of cavalry."

"But really they belong to Pasha DJose, the ruler of Kuleef. And they help him maintain his hold over the trade routes around Kuleef. " Kyamin revealed an open secret.

'DJose! Where have I heard that name?' Hearing that familiar name, Alexander ruffled through the pages of his memory, to finally recollect his conversation with Pasha Farzah he once had in Adhan.

"Hmm, this Pasha DJose, is he the king's brother?" Alexander asked wanting to confirm this suspicion, and after the nod of affirmation from Kyamin, many of the things he had doubts about this whole thing began to fall into place.

"So that's it, heh!" Alexander could not help but let out a smirk at having figured what all this was out

"Did my lord figure it out?" Melodias from the side curiously posed.

Alexander considered hiding his deduction from the nobles as he did not want them to know his hand,, but given that dead men tell no tales, and assuming that if he showed he knew their plans, they would open up more, decided to answer.

"Yes. just now I did." He began with a nod, feeling curious, attentive gazes from all sides, both from the soldiers and the nobles, as he gave his thoughts, "This attack is not one of Amenheraft's, but came from his brother, DJose, who is Pasha of Kuleef, and for those who do not know our neighbor."

Alexander's bold claim made Melodias raise his eyebrows in surprise, while the most intense reaction came from Maizdy, who actually knew the inside story.

And his shock continued to accrue, as he heard Alexander recount, "Back in Adhan, I and the king beheaded DJose's son. And Pasha Farzah had warned me back then that the man would certainly seek revenge."

Alexander then continued with a shake of his head "But I did not think he would be that impatient. I don't even believe he has received the money from Ptolomy. What a hot-tempered man, no wonder his son ran away from him, hehehe."

At the end of his speech, Alexander let out a breezily, easy chuckle that surprised the nobles.

Not only because of the clear deduction but also because of how unfazed he appeared to be even knowing he was facing a Pasha.

This was a real Pasha, not the self-styled, playing house with just one city Pasha like himself,

Someone capable of turning their blood freeze with just a sentence.

They did not know whether to label Alexander ignorant or arrogant.

But what they did not know was that they were the ignorant ones, as Alexander had fought against actual their king three times just in the last three months.

And he had won two times.

And won decisively at that.

So what was one measly Pasha to him?

"So, the man is impatient to the point of not caring about the treaty? Can he influence Amenheraft that much?" Melodias sounded surprised, adding, "I remember My lord reasoning the former king was broke and would not risk breaking the treaty before getting his money. So who is the real king here, him or DJose?"

Melodias's frank question made the seven nobles, yes even Maizdy blush.

They had been angered at first by this lowly commoner addressing their ruler so rudely, but then could only feel ashamed by how openly they were talking about his weakness.

This was their god-king he was talking about.

And to hammer this point home, Alexander answered with even more brutally honest comments, "Losing so many nobles in the last battle has probably meant that Amenhearft has lost a lot of prestige among his retainers. In addition to that, being broke must have not helped. I suspect he can't control his men as well as used to. And this war might have been started arbitrarily by a faction without Amenheraft's express permission."

Alexander's words felt like nails in Maizdy's heart, because the situation was just as Alexander said.

Though the nobles still respected Amenheraft, there were signs of some of them slipping, with the once monolithic block fracturing into three particularly distinct groups that were slowly taking shape.

There were the ultra-loyalists who believed in Amenheraft as the God-king and acted exactly as he decreed.

The most popular faction, and one that was rapidly gaining momentum- The moderate or neutral faction, who were primarily tempted by Ptolomy's promise that they would not be left alone if they stayed neutral.

And lastly, the hardliners who wanted war and as of now, more importantly, revenge.

And though this fracture was not critical yet, the signs were already beginning to manifest.

"Meaning to say that Amenheraft can no longer guarantee the unholding of the treaty?" Melodias expertly picked up on the implications of Alexander's words.

"Hmm, no, not exactly," Alexander gently shook his head, reasoning, "The money we offered to give would make anyone wanting to break the treaty a lot of enemies. Even from his allies, "

He then hypothesized, "I remember Pasha Farzah saying that Kuleef was Adhania's biggest port and the richest province after Adhana and Matrak. So possibly he offered Amenheraft personally a lot of money. Maybe even emptying out his entire treasury because he loved his son so much." Alexander said so by raising his thumb,

"Or" Alexander then raised his index finger to say, "And this is the more likely thing, they don't think attacking me will destroy the treaty!"

This remark made many surprised and shocked.

What did he mean by that?

Alexander was very much an alliance pillar of Ptolomy and one for whom his two allies would presumably go to war to defend.

But Alexander explained succinctly, "Because I think Amenheraft believes that Adhan and Matrak are too weak to break the truce even if he blatantly crosses the terms. He and his people must believe that Adhan and Matrak can be appeased or even cowered to observing the treaty even after destroying me."

Surprisingly, Alexander found that the imminent attack on him was also due to the same reason he dared to attack Jabel- Because one side believed that the other side would want peace rather than war after fighting for so long, thus securing the treaty.

"They are really looking on down us, huh?" Melodias let out a bitter-toned murmur, as he turned to look at Maizdy and ask, "Is what my lord said true?"

"....." The large man only turned his head, quite a difficult task given he was pinned to the floor.

While his heart betrayed his stoic facade for it beat frantically, 'What amazing deduction! Father needs to know this. I hope one of these idiots can relay this conversation to him.'

Maizdy had already given up on his life, and now his only wish was that his father would become weary of this cursed star.

While in the meantime, Maizdy's refusal to answer, was all the confirmation the group needed.

Events were happening most likely as Alexander had described.

"I presume that those ships you were talking about will be Djoser's?" It appeared that seemingly a long time later, Alexander had decided to finally let the nobles into the conversation.

"Ye..yes," Came the hesitant reply, which was followed by this question from Alexander,

"Jahal mercenaries and Kuleef ships. You are still telling me that you do not know who is attacking me?" He then sneered, accusing them of lying.

"My lord, the mercenaries only make up only 10,000 of the 40,000 to 50,000 men. And the only others we know of would have come from Jamider (Earl) Nibbar," Kyamin slanted his eye towards the dead man indicating that the number now may vary, before adding, "That still leaves a lot of others we don't know about."

This noble was at least clever enough to cover his hide.

"Yes, that's right. For all we know the mercenaries and the ships could have been hired. They are mercenaries and ships after all," And that noble named Latif cover his fellow colleague this time by emphasizing the reason.

He did not want to see another crossbow bolt launch.

This all sounded possible, as so Alexander moved to the last topic that was bothering him,

"Okay, one last thing to ask before I release you," He said, "That 40,000 to 50,000 men army. Why that many?"

Alexander's question appeared incomplete as the nobles look at him fluxed, so he expounded,

"What I mean is that though 40,000-50,000 sounds like a lot, Zanzan's walls are formidable. Seems pretty low for a siege. And how can ships carry enough food for a prolonged one? Can anyone explain?"

A city as big as Zanzan, with high walls and 150,000 people ready to defend it, would be a very nut to crack, especially with the primitive siege methods.

So Alexander was implying that there was a rat here, who likely made the incorrect assumption that Zanzan was the same ghost they had left it and then passed this information on to Amenheraft.

Chapter 387 Noble's Talk (Part-4)

The nobles had no answer for Alexander

"....." And as Alexander was beginning to fume, Kyamin in an oily tone let out, "My lord, we are not the only nobles that know about Zanzan. A lot more of them have already left Jabel for other territories. They all have relatives there."

"That's right my lord. If you wish, we can even find out who said it. Maybe a week," A smartly mustached man made this daring promise.

"No, it's alright. Let them make this mistake," Alexander lightly replied with a wave of his hands.

If the enemy wanted to think Zanzan was a vanishing city with about 20,000 to 30,000 men, then let them.

Alexander would hold the surprise for the battlefield.

"Okay, I think that's it. Does Lord Melodias want to ask anything?" Alexander felt he had squeezed out everything he wanted to know.

"Umm, yes." But Melodias seemed to have a little bit of extra curiosity, as he politely asked,

"My fellow lords, all of you must have your maps regarding the area. And it would be very useful if we could have a look at them. They will greatly help us prepare for the coming invasion."

Melodias sounded very respectful and deferential.

"Yes, yes, all of us have them with us," And one noble blurted out, even adding, "I have it in my room. I can fetch it right now." as he attempted to get up from his chair.

But Melodias only raised his hand as a signal, and lightly said, "No, it's alright, we can find them by ourselves."

'Ourselves!' Melodias words turned the heart of the noble into a chilly tundra.

"My..my lord, what do you mean by ourselves?" Kyamin screeched out in alarm,

Followed up by Latif who turned up the octaves, "That's right. This was not the deal," while, Jamil barked,

"See, I told you he was a bastard. Fucker never intended to never let us live."

It appeared the cat was out of the bag.

"Ahh..." Melodias cried out a whoopsie, before turning to Alexander guilty, "Sorry My lord, it seems I let the words slip."

Melodias knew this single mistake could cost him a lot in future promotions.

Would anyone trust a subordinate with a loose tongue?

"It's fine, don't worry about it. I was also finished with them," Alexander, at least outwardly and in front of everyone did not blame Melodias as he lightly blew it off.

And his confirmation drew another crazed period of shouts from the men, as they said unspeakable things to Alexander and even extended these curses up to his parents and even the previous fourteen generations.

And if not for the soldiers who had stepped closer to them to stop them from doing anything foolish, they would have certainly rushed at Alexander to kill him.

Alexander let these harangues pass through his ears like soothing music.

And after the nobles finally tired themselves out, Alexander decided to see how much further he could take this farce.

Ideally, he wanted to extract a written confession of all their various, because every noble had committed crimes.

And if possible, if the sun had risen from the west, even the deeds of their lands.

"My lord, your manners wound me," Alexander's surprising opening muted the nobles.

'The bastard is going to kill us and he says 'he' is hurt,' They felt Alexander was truly a bona fide politician.

But Alexander was not yet done as he continued, "While it is true I wanted to kill you before, as a way to erase any witness of me breaking the treaty, but now things have changed. Because I alone cannot defeat this great army attacking me."

"So, I wish to ally myself with you." Alexander made his made-up statement.

"..." The nobles only silently listened, not biting.

And this was okay, as Alexander finished by saying, "But just saying you are my allies will not work. I wish to see your sincerity. So I hope that you will write about all the various misdeeds you know about your fellow lords. And then sacrifice it to the Temple of Ramuh as a means of purifying yourself,"

Alexander pronounced this world's very first Christian-styled confession.

"Bullshit! You bastard! That's bullshit!" And this was the initial response, coming from the predictable Jamil.

"Lord Alexander, although we had our differences, we both are nobles. And words between nobles are sacred. Do you not fear the gods?" Kyamin was desperate as he pulled out the god card.

The confession was a no-go.

But Alexander very much wanted this, as he said, "If we are speaking of the wrath of the gods, then did you know that we dug up many bones of women and even children in Zanzan? Bones which had arrow marks on them"

This made the nobles turn silent, as Alexander at last posed with a sneer, "Are you going to say none of you what happened there?"

"...That was not us.." The nobles said in unison, vehemently denying any involvement.

This types of acts may be committed but never admitted.

And Alexander appeared to be understanding, nodding his head and saying, "Yes, I know, I know," before adding, "But the ordinary people don't know that. So I'm afraid they will not like our alliance until they know you have truly repented."

This lame excuse did not convince anyone, as they thought, 'What you really want is leverage using our crimes. And since we will not be writing our own ones, we won't know which to omit.'

Every noble knew a bit about the other, so it was very much possible one or two dark fishes had slipped out of their nets.

"...If we write this, will we live? Do you swear? No matter our previous crimes, do you swear?" Finally, Shordar (Baron) Latif cracked.

'Gotcha! Alexander really did not think this would work.

It appeared this timid noble had quite a skeleton in the closet.

"Of course! Revealing and seriously repenting will absolve you of all sins. The gods are merciful to the weak mortals. I, Pasha of Zanzan swear to the gods that all seven...um six of you will be allowed to live if you repent!" Alexander said this with warmth and piety in his voice.

'Is he really going to let them go?' And his promise sounded so sincere that even Melodias appeared confused.

And so, with Latif as an example, and seeing him start to write the various sins of the other six, the others too quickly capitulated.

Even the bad-tempered Jamil joined.

It seemed no one wanted to die.

And when that stack of paper finally landed on Alexander, signed and even stamped by its respective writers, oh boy did it have some dark things.

Though it was not really unexpected, and included mostly things like how one noble had snatched a peasant woman from her husband, how some of them held regular human hunting sports, how one of the noble's wife loved torturing her slaves, how some sadistic loved flaying little girls alive, and as such.

The crimes against Maizdy were particularly long both because they were well-known, and because he was gonna die anyway, which included almost all of the above.

But one of the others were too far behind.

For example, Latif, that soft-spoken, timid noble so eager to lick Alexander's boots, it was said that he was a homosexual and that he hated women with a passion.

In fact, Kyamin wrote that Latif would buy women slaves from him whom he would cut their breasts off and then enjoy watching them bleed out.

He had even built a special room to enjoy this.

No wonder he was hesitant to confess.

And it was not to say Kyamin was any better.

He was a slave dealer and was usually the main organizer and supplier of Muazz's human games.

Every one of these men were rotten to the core.

'Well now I feel much less guilty about killing them,' Alexander felt that he was doing the world a service by getting rid of these beasts.

And then, though he further wanted to make the nobles write the deeds to his land, he found that pushing it, and thus he got up and bowed, saying, "Well, gentlemen, the Goddess Gaia has read your confession. And though you have sinned, she has decided to forgive you..."

The slight pause made the nobles break out into glee.

A feeling that evaporated almost instantly, as Alexander pronounced, "The goddess says your death in this world will absolve your crimes in the Hereafter. And she will let you then be reborn in her garden as pure flowers. So Die!"

"Nooooo *arhg*"

"You can't do *urgggg*,"

"The gods! Do you not fear.."

The nobles all screamed and thrashed as the guards moved in at the signal, being helplessly cut down by the steel swords

And the bodyguards made quick work of them.

While Maizdy made this clever remark before death, "Hahaha, good, good. Kill us. Break your swear. We will live in the heavens. And you will burn in Hell for eternity."

But who was Alexander?

He only shamelessly grinned, "Break vow? Who is break vow? The one who made the vow is the Pasha of Zanzan."

"But have I ever introduced myself as Pasha of Zanzan?"

"Or have you heard any of the soldiers call me Pasha of Zanzan?"

"No."

"And besides, who do you claim to be the Pasha of Zanzan?"

"Is it me?"

"No,"

"Because the one who made the vow according to you is Muazz, hahaha."

Alexander's smile got larger and larger following each question until even his canines were showing, and his smile appeared like the devil laughing at their foolishness.

Chapter 388 Return From Jabel

Alexander's smile appeared like a devil widening his fangs. as he grinned in glee at each of the nobles being beheaded.

"So that's it..." While Kyamin could only let out a weak, helpless smile seeing, resigning himself to the loss as he felt the world turn dark and cold around him.

They had tried their best, even resorting to revealing each other most shameful secrets.

But it seemed that had failed.

The cards had always been in Alexander's hand.

And they had been always banking on Alexander keeping his word.

But it seemed that the game was rigged from the start.

"Bastard..." The hot-blooded Jamil vomited the curse along with a lot of blood as he slumped over.

The soldiers had not only attacked with swords but crossbows as well, making them all riddled with bolts, looking almost like a porcupine.

And as the man stumbled, his bloodshot eyes never left Alexander, hatred glowing out of them, as if he seemed to curse Alexander's shamelessness.

In fact, even Melodias had half-blushed with Alexander's flimsy excuse, along with his bodyguards.

The macabre scene lasted less than five minutes, and as the muffled grunts died down, Alexander slowly got up from his chair to address the soldiers, "As you have heard, there are maps in this house. I want every inch searched thoroughly for them. There should be nine. Go!"

Alexander was much more interested in the loot than taking care of the bodies.

"Yes," The soldiers shouted in unison before fanning out.

While Alexander turned to instruct Melodias, "You stay here and see that everything of value is collected and properly stored. Pay particular attention to collecting every bit of papyrus. And once you have done this, set fire to the mansion."

Alexander wanted the bodies to turn to ash just as the house.

"At once," Melodias received the order with a salute.

And finally done with this, Alexander at last made his way outside the large mansion.

"*Sigh*, it's already morning," He squinted at the sky, finding it dull and overcast.

The meeting had lasted close to six hours, and dawn had broken a lot earlier, a phenomenon missed by Alexander due to the heavy curtains and that the wintery sun had yet to wake up.

In fact, it might be very much possible that the sun might not even choose to show its face today.

'Well at least it's not snowing,' Alexander murmured feeling the freezing breath escape his mouth, as suddenly a scout appeared and reported after saluting, "My lord, thank goodness you are free. Lord Menes is asking what to do with all the noblewomen and men that the soldiers have captured. They are currently in the military camp."

"And also there are a lot of women and children that you instructed to be moved to the barn. They are asking for food and blankets. What should we do?" The man looked at him with limpid yes.

"....." The thought of killing so many defenseless people, particularly women and children certainly struck Alexander's conscience even for a little bit and he paused to give the order.

'No, if I let these people go, they will never be grateful. They will only plot to launch attacks against me and my family. Maybe now, maybe few years from now, or maybe even decades from now.'

But ultimately Alexander clenched his teeth and hardened his heart to give the order,

"We have gotten what we needed. Tally which soldier collected how many nobles and then kill all the men, women, and children. We have proof that they are devil worshippers."

The nobles did confess to the fact that they helped spread rumors about Alexander and thus the label 'devil worshippers' did have the tiniest bit of merit.

"...Yes, my lord," The scout was a bit surprised that they would simply kill the nobles after spending so much effort and even money capturing them.

The custom was usually to ransom captured nobles.

And the man was sure Alexander could have earned a pretty penny from this.

But he knew this was not his place to intervene.

So, after a bit of pause in surprise, he quickly bought a scroll, wrote down the order, got Alexander's sign and then performing a military salute ran off.

While Alexander was escorted to his personal camp at the edge of the city, where he decided to get some sleep.

He had skipped it last night.

And after we woke up the following evening, he joined Menes on supper, "So, there is an army heading towards us?"

It appeared Melodias had filled Menes in.

"Mmm, we can talk about the details once we get back to Zanzan. There is time." But Alexander appeared disinterested in this topic, and more interested in stuffing his mouth with the dried fish with bread.

So the two generals finished the meal in relative silence, with Alexander occasionally asking about the city, and particularly inquiring about the maps.

"We found six of them my lord, of varying detail and depicting different areas. We will need some more time to fully understand them," Melodias was quick to reply.

Six out of nine was a good result.

And also Alexander's presumption of there being nine was erroneous.

Because Maizdy and Nibbar certainly did not have maps with them, and among the nobles, one or two might have possibly lost in the chaos.

So Alexander nodded happily, "Good. We can read them back in Zanzan." as he finished his meal.

No mentions of the valuables looted were discussed, and certainly, nothing about the frailer nobles killed.

The campaign lasted another day, and the marching took another day extra, until the huge column finally entered Zanzan late at night, laden with many riches.

Seven nobles had all their riches taken, and the soldiers had been careful enough to lick the tiniest scraps of meat from the bones, as evidenced by how some of the men even carried fine timber for 30 km as battle booty.

All in all, this campaign, which lasted four days from its start to finish, was a resounding success, with a major thorn removed from Alexander's side, and costing him less than 20 dead, and 30 wounded.

A less than 0.1% casualty ratio.

While the approaching army was dealt a heavy blow they did not even know about, for without the native nobles' support, these new troops, landing in unfamiliar territory, and without proper accommodation and supplies in place, will certainly find it difficult to operate as easily as they must have hoped.

And without Maizdy to lead the army, or Nibbar to offer guidance, the operation certainly would be delayed or might even be canceled, which would be much to Alexander's advantage.

The only thing the young Pasha lacked currently the most was time.

Alexander entered the city with these hopeful thoughts, where, even this late, a large crowd had gathered to welcome back the heroes.

And as the soldiers passed through the streets, illuminated by held torches on both sides, songs were sung, various dancers performed all the sides, and flowers, nuts, and berries were used to welcome them back.

'Hmmm, I should build a triumph. That will make these occasions grander,' This plan came to Alexander as he witnessed the cheering crowd.

He had found that Adhania already had a custom of greeting its returning soldiers, as they were also greeted as such in Adhan, and thus felt that a Roman triumph, with its magnificent arches, would be quite fitting.

The procession slowly passed through the city, until it made a full circle of the city, and it was finally then Alexander was allowed to return to his manor.

Alexander had noticed his family in a heavily secured part of the crowd, but only after entering his estate did he have the chance to talk to them.

"Welcome, back" Cambyses was the first to run and hug him.

This felt like the longest four days of her life.

She had never been away from Alexander for even a day until now, and she had barely the past days, her mind gripped by impossible 'buts and ifs'.

"Hahaha, I'm glad to see you are well too," Alexander responded in kind to this overt show of affection, even gripping Cambyses's back and lifting her up into his arms.

He too had missed her.

And with this done, he turned to slowly greet his other women, which were a lot less passionate, followed by Mikaya and The Queen Mother.

"Alex, leaving your newlywed wife. How horrid you are," The silver-haired girl did not forget to take a jibe at Alexander, while The Queen mother really meant her sting,

"My lord Pasha, how brave of you to destroy the evil nobles. I'm sure the greater devils will be covered by the valiant victory."

The meaning was obvious, 'Now that you have killed these nobles, what's stopping Amemheraft from tearing the treaty?'

This was certainly a concern.

And something even Alexander had thought before the campaign, which was 'how to sell the attack to Ptolomy and Farzah'.

And initially, he wanted to make up the excuse of a possible incoming attack and that his was just a preemptive strike.

But fortunately for him, DJose had made this explanation much easier.

And so in a masochistic schadenfreude way, Alexander was even grateful to DJose for this war.

Thus Alexander replied to Seelima as such, saying, "Haha, this strike will certainly make the greater devils pause. They might even stop doing anything foolish."

Alexander did not want to give the news of war right after returning and thus made this wordplay.

And Seelima seemed to understand, her eyes turning from anger to curiosity.

Chapter 389 Alexander's Jabel Celebrations (R-18)

'Does that mean he has found some kind of plot,' Seelima was smart enough to understand the wordplay, and the anger in her eyes turned to curiosity.

But she resisted questioning him right then and there.

She knew Alexander was tired and it could wait till morning.

While Alexander was looking forward to how Cambyses would greet him in their bedroom.

And he was not disappointed, as she and Mean were there in their bikinis, ready to help him take a bath and destress.

Cambyses wore a flaming red bikini, the tight panty barely able to hold back her fleshy ass, while Mean was garbed in an innocent white, her petite boobs and ass densely locked inside the clothes.

The spring scenery certainly had a positive impact on Alexander, as he wanted to jump on to this feast then and there, but held up on it in order to freshen up.

"Did you get hurt," Cambyses asked as Alexander made himself comfortable in the large, custom-made wooden tub, filled with lukewarm water.

He soon planned to install a permanent large, concrete bathtub where he could bathe and play with his girls but had not gotten around to it yet.

"Hahaha, you see, one of the perks of being a noble is that you do not have to fight your own wars. That's what peasants are for," Alexander joked as Cambyses lathered his back with soap, her perky cherries brushing against his back even through the water.

"Ahhh, look it standing it," While Mean was in front, taking care of his little brother, as her tiny hands worked to clean all the grime from the past days.

Alexander had not had a hot bath the entire time during his campaign, and could not help but moan in satisfaction as Mean's soapy hands fondled his sack and caressed his shaft.

"Ahhh, yes," Alexander loved the soothing caresses, as well as the view, for Mean's white bikini had turned transparent in the water, letting Alexander marvel at the red, rising buds.

And as if encouraged by the moan, Mean decided it was time to pull back the foreskin, saying, "There, let's get you all cleaned up."

Alexander's glans twitched at the sensitive part being exposed to the outside cold air, as Mean proceeded to wrap her tiny fingers around the new part, and started wriggling it, cleaning off the smegma.

"Here, let me help too," Shortly later, not wanting to be left out, Cambyses also reached out, transferring her hands from washing the chest and abs to Alexander's little brother, until two pairs of hands were giving Alexander a handjob.

They appeared experienced, as they expertly alternated between taking the top and bottom, bringing Alexander great pleasure.

He could feel the one on top rub against his bulbous head, and scratch his sensitive frenulum, while crushing the hard flesh against their soft palms, as the one on the bottom squeezed and tugged his soft balls, as well as pumping up and down the shaft, coaxing him towards the ultimate release.

And Alexander felt he too should contribute, as his eyes could not help but wander off to Mean's bikini.

"Naughty girl, your nipples can be seen. What kind of clothes did you wear?" He said as he pinched on the delicious sakura buds, eliciting a moan.

Mean's choice of the bikini was an accident, but it appeared that it was a happy accident, for she lustfully moaned as Alexander strongly tugged on the sensitive, nubile organ.

"Mmmnn no," Mean's protest went unheard, as Alexander played with the small breasts, kneading, pinching, and caressing them.

And soon, the stimulation reached its zenith, as the soapy, slimy feeling around his organ and the unceasing four-pronged attack proved too much for Alexander and Mean.

And while Mean had a silent orgasm, Alexander grunted, "Argh, coming."

And the girls placed each of their hands atop the urethra and let their hands be coated with the white sticky fluid.

"Aghh, thick and smelly as always," Cambyses moaned as she licked off the cum, her bright, red tongue eagerly lapping up the reward.

At first, Cambyses had not liked eating this, but now, over time the taste seemed to have grown on her.

And Mean did the same, cleaning one finger after the other like it was honey.

And contrary to her mistress, she had always liked Alexander's taste because it smelled 'manly'.

So she was eager for a second helping soon.

"Well let's move on to the bed," Afterward washed, cleaned, and dried, Alexander finished his bath, and turned to see the girls were not nude, but had changed into exactly the same styled bikinis, minus the wet part.

"We thought it would be more exciting this way," Cambyses cheekily smiled.

She had not forgotten the passion with which Alexander had hailed the bra and panty.

And she was right, as sometimes being clothed was sexier than purely nude.

This was because one, the body usually appeared more beautiful in imagination than in reality.

And two, the clothes wrapped around the body in such a way that it helped to hide all the imperfections on the skin while accentuating the shape.

Alexander matched the cheeky smile, as he asked, "So, how does my dear wifey plan to entertain her hubby further?"

"Hehe, lay down. You will see," Cambyses giggled the answer.

'Lie down? So whose lips am I gonna suck?' Alexander wondered who was going to sit on his face as he obediently laid down, his turgid spear piercing into the sky.

But it appeared he was mistaken in his assumption, for the answer was none.

Instead, the girls had decided to scissor him, as each of them spread their legs before coming at him from opposite directions and then finally meeting.

"Arghh," Alexander let out an involuntary moan as he felt the warm, dampness of the two bikinis hit his cock, and the two pussy lips kiss him through the cloth.

"Hehe, like it?" Cambyses tittered while grinding her lips against the hard organ.

"Arghh, it's so hot, mistress," Mean had too joined in, moving her petite hips up and down the entire shaft.

Alexander had never experienced this before, the feeling of the thin linen brush past his most sensitive organ, it separating the lovely organs of two beautiful women.

And these two women appeared to be very turned on, as they leaked copious amounts of fluids even through the garment, spraying the fleshy spear with warm, lewd water, and making it glistening in the soft candlelight.

This was how one really polished one's spear.

Not with one's hand, but using two bikini-clad, lewd women.

And it was not as if only Alexander was getting off on this.

Because every time the girls moved, they also felt the hot, scalding spear transfer its heat and scent to them, and even their sensitive clit bumped against the veiny shaft.

And soon Cambyses cried, "Ahh, I'm close. I'm gonna cum."

"Yea, me too," Alexander too had his sensitive spots caressed for long enough that he approached release, and thus with a twin scream, the couple reached the apex.

Cambyses achieved it a bit sooner, and as her warm, jet of squirt drenched the hot spear, the sensation of being bathed in his wife's lewd water and the lustful smell accompanying it was too much for Alexander, and soon he too came, shooting multiple globules of the cloudy liquids high up into the sky, before it fell down on the tummy of the girls.

"Agghh, so hot," Mean moaned as she imagined being scalded by this white magma.

Alexander soon recovered from this release, and the third round commenced immediately afterward.

And it was a beautiful round.

For Mean lay atop Cambyses, their faces touching, lips smooching, and with both girls providing access to their two secret places to Alexander.

These places were currently being guarded by white and red panties respectively, making the color contrast appear beautiful and heavenly.

"*Sniff*, so beautiful," Alexander ran his nose against Mean's white panties, feeling the raw hunger, and causing Mean to groan, "Ahh, don't tease me anymore. Stick it in."

She had not come unlike Cambyses previously and desperately wanted something to fill her up.

Alexander too was eager to taste these two after so long, and so without further ado, he pushed past the clothes, revealing the bare, drooling pussy, and then jammed his whole organ in one mighty thrust.

"And yes," Mean let out an ear-splitting howl as she felt her walls being stretched and shortly after her cervix being pounded by the thick ram before her mouth was soon conquered by her mistress, french kissing her.

Pah, *Pah*, *Pah*,

Chuu, *Chuu*, *Chuu*,

And soon the sound of copulation, of flesh hitting flesh, of flesh kissing flesh reverberated across the room as Alexander expanded Mean's tunnel and Cambyses tasted her maid and sister.

"Cumming," And once Alexander was done with her, filling the tunnel with his healthy juice, he moved on to his next prey, Cambyses.

"Let's try the butt," He wanted to taste this forbidden hole, as he thrust in, the hole being already drenched by the dew from the top.

"Argh," Cambyses did groan slightly in pain at this sudden insertion but soon felt nothing but pleasure.

The strong rubbery walls squeezed Alexander lovingly, while Mean returned the favor, even cheekily saying, "Ahh, mistress's face is so lewd. Does it feel so nice to be fucked in the butt? You know you can make babies there, hehe."

While Cambyses could answer in half pants, "Hah, ha, yes. It feels too good. The way Alex's dick scraps my butt, turning it inside out feels too good. Do me more, ahhhh."

In this way, Alexander celebrated his return, only going to sleep near dawn.

Chapter 390 Seelima's Rage (Part-1)

Morning came the next day and Alexander completely missed it.

The day was overcast and biting cold, which meant it was the perfect environment to laze on the bed the entire day.

So, he only managed to drag his body out of the warm quilt at around lunch.

And that too was only because Cambyses had poked and prodded him to get ready for the feast arranged for him.

So after having a warm bath and putting something decent on, Alexander finally joined the small gathering.

And found it consisting of him and the usual girls, and taking place inside the private dining room they always had their meals.

The only difference was that the meals and ingredients were much fancier, even for him.

There was egg benedict, jam and muffins, various pasta dishes, bird tongue soup, a whole roasted peacock, various cakes, puddings, and much more.

"We thought we would celebrate the whole day. So since you missed breakfast, here's your breakfast and lunch together." Cambyses explained the slightly weird menu, as Mean heaped the food on his place.

While Mikaya skipped all the savory dishes and got to eating her strawberry cake and pudding straightaway.

The girl had a surprising sweet tooth, and she had fallen in love with this 'cake' dish.

"Alex, I really missed your cooking these days. So delish,"

And it seemed that she had no problem equating Alexander with a cook, something he was gotten used to by now as he cut into the perfectly poached egg.

It appeared to be a harmonious table, as the guests all began to enjoy the various rich, flavorful dishes.

Until The Queen Mother spoke up.

"This feast is a great and luxurious one. Has Your Grace considered whether he might be able to have one again?" The thirty-two-year-old curtly asked across the table.

Her displeasure was clear to all.

In fact, she had been furious when she learned of the Jabel offensive a day after it was launched.

She had rudely barged into Cambyses's chamber and demanded to be escorted to Jabel, and when Cambyses declined saying, "I have no way to arrange that," the enraged woman wanted to send a letter to Ptolomy immediately, for which she wanted access to the messenger birds.

This too was declined, as instructed by Alexander who had foreseen this, with the words, "Alex, will be back in two to three days. And he will personally explain his action then. So, until then please trust us."

So now that Alexander had returned, Seelima was very eager to hear his excuse.

In fact, she was so eager that barely slept the night prior.

The matter of the treaty and what will be Amenheraft's reaction hearing about Alexander's attack kept her eyes from resting, as evidenced by the dark circles under her eyes.

So she spent the entire night coming up with the speech she would blast Alexander with if he could not provide her with a sufficient reason for razing and killing so many nobles so recent to the treaty.

And then, much to her chagrin, morning came but no Alexander.

She was told he was soundly sleeping, while she could not get a wink, which added to her sour mood.

And thus she was in no mood to make house around the dinner table.

"*Smile*," Alexander gave a light smile hearing this impatient tone for the first time.

He had assumed this woman to be rock solid.

'Should I tell her the truth? That I attacked only because I felt that Amenheraft would not dare break the truce and that she should trust me,' Alexander half-joked.

He knew that if he really said so, The Queen Mother might really annul their alliance then and there.

And so he decided not to poke this fuming tigress.

"The reason we attacked Jabel is a long one. Perhaps it would be better to wait after the feast," Alexander politely asked.

"I think now would be best. Because I'm unable to enjoy the feast otherwise," The Queen mother was truly impatient.

Worry had made everything she had eaten in the last few days taste like ash and she really needed the reason.

Because as an insider, she knew exactly how much Ptolomy needed that treaty and respite.

"Mmmm, we are not hungry. So tell us," And Mikaya too, in a rare show of solidarity supported her.

It appeared even she was worried about Alexander's little excursion, though the way she was stuffing her mouth with cake and cream went quite a long way to hide it.

So Alexander detailed, "We attacked Jable because we heard credible talks of an impending attack against us prepared from there. And decided to launch a preemptive strike against it. But we were wrong in that...."

Alexander paused abruptly to see the reaction and was surprised and even a bit disappointed to see that The Queen mother had not lashed out at him.

"..." The veteran court woman only kept looking with a silent nonchalant facade, as if to say, 'Go on, tell me more. Because if that's all that you have to say, then we are done.'

It seemed that Seelima was storing all her rage to explode at once and she decided that if this was the only case, she would not only simply storm out of this dining room but even out of Zanzan.

'Patient woman,' Alexander praised seeing this and then deciding this was not the time to play such mind games, added.

"We were wrong in thinking that the attack was going to come from the Jabel. Or that its scale would be limited to the native nobles..."

"What!" The Queen Mother finally could not hold back her surprise.

If this was true, then it would be huge.

"Alex, why do you say that?" Even Mikaya was moved, as she asked for proof.

And Alexander was happy to provide them, as he brought up a stack of paper from his thick coat, and passed them to not only The Queen Mother, and Mikaya, but also the twins and Cambyses and the girls to review.

He knew this topic would come up sooner and later, and had come prepared as he introduced the paper, "When we attacked Jabel, by luck we managed to also capture Pasha Muazz's eldest son Maizdy along with the other nobles. And then under coercion, one of the nobles then let slip that this big fish was there to lead an army from Kuleef which would be later this month. It's all there."

Alexander's nonchalant way of delivering this bombastic news did not in any way detract from its potency.

Both the Queen Mother and Mikaya's hearts skipped a beat hearing the name Maizdy, and they were shocked to hear that an army from Kuleef would be coming in around twenty days.

So they read and carefully re-read the piece to confirm the news, while also looking for any obvious discrepancy that would reveal that this paper was forged.

Because oh, how they wished this was a forgery.

For the truth would really be too inconvenient.

"....where...where is Maizdy," This was the Queen mother's first concern, and she asked the question with a slight shake of the voice.

She knew very well how much Muazz spoiled his son, and had even met the rotten brat a few times.

Which was also why she was afraid of what would the Pasha's reaction be if he found his favorite son was killed.

"...Unfortunately he perished in a sudden freak fire that engulfed the mansion right after our talk. We had no time to save him. Or any of the nobles still trapped in there," Alexander gave the memorized shameless answer.

"...Your Azhak has gotten pretty good," Seelima could only spit this out through her clenched teeth in frustration.

She had guessed the answer even before she asked it.

Because if Alexander had captured such a high-profile target, he would be most likely be dining with them.

"Why did you kill a noble? Why did you not ransom him?" This innocent question was posed by Azira.

Who was joined by her Azura, who said, "That's right, that's right," with strong nods of her head, and piously adding, "Don't you believe in the teaching of Ramuh? It's clearly said, 'It is sinful for anyone to kill a noble outside of combat. One who does so, is as if he has turned himself from a man to a beast!'"

'Should I say that I don't believe in Ramuh's faith? Or that this was written by the nobles to control the peasants?' Alexander jokingly commented in his heart looking at the somewhat angry twins, before actually saying,

"Ahh..hahaha, yes, yes, Your Highnesses are right. I'm still new to the teachings and seems I forgot. Would it be possible to forgive me?"

Alexander even placed his palms together as a sign of sincere apology.

And it worked, as Azira stammered out, "We..well if you are truly repentant.. then we guess it's alright..just once."

And Azura quickly emphasized this, "That's right! Remember it will be just this once. We won't forgive you again, hmm."

"Thank you, thank you," Alexander exaggeratedly praised, while the rest of the table watched this play with dispassionate gazes.

And as Alexander returned to his meal, he particularly felt The Queen Mother's gaze, which seemed to be smoldering.

It appeared Alexander was again being asked to explain his actions.