

Herald 391

Chapter 391 Seelima's Rage (Part-2)

Alexander did not feel like explaining himself why he killed the nobles.

The real reason why he did so was so that he could take over their lands without any contending, or at least strong contending claims against him.

While Ptolomy might have preferred these nobles because they would be more loyal to him than

Alexander, which was the cause of Seelima's displeasure.

And as for killing Maizdy, not to mention his rotten nature, Alexander had already snatched Muazz's most precious son from him, the city of Zanzan.

This made the two men unable to live under the same sky, so why be lenient now?

Hence, Alexander simply decided to move on, and got down to remind the table of the real problem here,

"The nobles said that a 40,000-50,000 army which has 10,000 Jahal mercenaries will be attacking Zanzan. And they seemed pretty scared of this unit. So do My Ladies know anything about them?"

Alexander posed this question particularly to Mikaya.

Because he remembered that Pasha DJose's wife was probably her sister or aunt (Pasha Farzah's sister), though he could not exactly remember which.

But it seemed that there was no need for Mikaya to answer.

"The Jahal mercenaries are DJose's personal elite troops! I knew this would happen when you two id...you two killed Fatrak," The frustration and anger in the Queen mother's voice was palpable as she could barely stop herself from calling Alexander an idiot.

When initially she had learned of what Ptolomy had done, she had spent a good two hours lambasting him in her private chambers, calling him some very choice words.

"Haha, well I guess there is no point crying over spilled milk,' But Alexander appeared unaffected by their rage, chuckling the reply.

Which appeared to incense Seelima more, as she shouted out, "No point crying over spilled milk? No point crying over spilled milk, you say? You didn't spill milk just once, you spilled it many times!"

She then proceeded to list the number of times Alexander spilled the milk,

"You looted the Grand Temple and killed its priests, you killed all the nobles in Adhan, then you killed more on the battlefield, after that you killed more priests from the Zanzan temple, and now your latest achievement was destroying Jabel and its nobles."

"And all that was in the last three months! Give you a year and Adhania will likely have nothing have peasants!" Seelima's tirade went on to show just how angry she was with some of Alexander's actions.

And she barely stopped herself from saying, 'The only thing you seem to not like killing are the peasants, you peasant living scum of the earth.'

'Hahaha, well that is the plan,' Alexander lightly chuckled at the harangue, thinking Adhania would certainly be a better place without the nobles.

While outwardly he put out a light smile, showing no remorse for his actions, for he did what he thought would be best for him and his family.

"....." Seelima's vituperation had brought the feast to a screeching halt, as everyone looked across the table with fear and trepidation.

The atmosphere was certainly not what you would call merry.

And it was Mikaya, who had the best relationship with the Queen mother who tried to soothe her, "Okay, okay, whatever done is done. Let us now focus on the problem at hand. We can discuss whose fault it was later."

But Seelima's flames were not to be smoldered just yet as she even hissed at her good friend, "Discuss that? We already know whose fault it was. If he had not killed so many people, if so many nobles have not banded together to get revenge, would such a large army even be possible?"

The Queen mother at last massaged her wrinkled temple as she finished with a sigh, "By this point, I'm not even sure DJose has anything to do with it! Because if those idiots pool whatever they have, even if they are broke, together they might get the coin to hire the Jahal mercenaries."

"....." The room entered an awkward silence at Seelima's frank revelation.

To say that the current course of events had nothing to do with Alexander would be grossly inaccurate as expressed by Seelima's half-opinion that the army about to attack them was actually Alexander's fault.

Even Cambyses had blushed a bit when Seelima tallied Alexander's achievement of the last three months, silently saying in her heart, 'This is what swinging your sword left and right mindlessly gets you.'

While Alexander said to himself, 'Perhaps I was a bit too eager to resort to the sword in some circumstances.'

Finally, as time passed The Queen mother calmed down after her screed, taking a large gulp of diluted wine to cool her smoldering temper in the process.

'I wonder if its that time of the month for her? Or if she's just pent up,' Alexander rolled his eyes at the furious woman one last time, before turning to Mikaya and asking some real question, "I would like to know about the Jahal mercenaries. They seem to be famous."

And Mikaya recounted mostly the same thing as the nobles did, except for one very important thing, "They are expert raiders, using their camel and expert archery to wreak havoc and destruction!"

"Camel archers? Are you sure?" Alexander's eyes widened upon hearing this.

Camels were bad news.

"Yes. The Jahal mercenaries famously use camels," Mikaya said with a nod, adding, "In fact, camels are not native to Kuleef. But Pasha DJose imports them from Abu Hamam as he has good relations with the Pasha there. He does it because he says camels scare off horses in battles and that they are easier to train and maintain."

Well the Pasha was indeed right that camels scared off horses in battle.

Their bigger size frightened horses, and their smell made the horse irritated and not want to obey commands.

With the few downsides to camels being one- they preferred dry climate, be it hot or cold, and generally did not deal with humidity too well.

And two, they did not hooves.

Instead, a soft layer of skin protected their soft legs, which made them deploying them on hard surfaces difficult, for the beasts preferred sand.

But these disadvantages could be made up in certain conditions, such as with Alexander, who had a coastal city with sprawling sandy beaches and since it was winter, humidity was naturally low.

'Fuck, that means my cavalry is mostly useless,' Alexander's original plan was to have his much more heavily armored cavalry with their lances and greater lance smash into the enemy cavalry and destroy them head-on.

But now it seemed that he would now have to find a new way to neutralize this threat.

"Thank you, your information was most helpful," Alexander politely thanked Mikaya with a smile, while cursing the nobles for leaving this vital information out.

If he had learned this only after his scouts reported it to him, Alexander might not have had enough time to prepare countermeasures.

"No problem," Mikaya sweetly returned the gesture, before asking, "So, what do we do now?"

As she asked, both she and Alexander turned to the most experienced woman in the room, The Queen mother, who had finally gotten her nerves together.

She would frankly admit she had lost her calm a while back.

".....We can write a letter to the king, informing him of this. Then hopefully he can put some diplomatic pressure on Amenheraft." Seelima answered after a bit of thinking, adding, "The remunerations of the treaty have not been paid yet after all. Perhaps this way the war can be avoided."

And though she posed this proposal, even the twins picked up on the uncertainty, commenting, "Grand..Aunt does not sound too hopeful."

By relation, Seelima was their step- grandmother, but the young thirty-two-year-old hated that word, much more preferring to be called Mother or Aunt.

"..." Seelima remained silent, as Mikaya for once decided to play the role of an aunt and explained, "Because so many nobles have been killed, there is likely there is no way to stop the war."

She then expounded, "If they have been only captured, then it might have been possible. We could have used them as leverage, and maybe even have some of them testify, thus putting more pressure on the other side.

"But just that paper alone will not get us much further. Because they could easily say it was forged. Or worse, since this paper is a new invention, if shameless enough, they could even say the thing written on it does not count. And that only statements written on papyrus matters." The fact that Mikaya could even consider this unlikely play so quickly went to show the Matrak princess's intellect.

If she had been born a boy, she could have easily fought her father for influence in the royal court.

And now this intelligent girl was also in the same boat as Seelima, thinking Alexander killing so many useful nobles as a great waste.

They would have been much more useful alive.

"That's not fair! They are the ones planning to attack. And Alex was just defending himself. So why should the treaty protect them and not Alex?" At last, Cambyses cried out in indignation.

But Mikaya simply said, "Of course, it is not. But given that so many nobles have died Amenheraft is unable to stop his men even if the treaty is at risk of shattering."

"And there is also the chance that he, thinking that Alexander is unable to get reinforcement, might just double down and attack anyway when he was the upper hand,"

"So, this war is inevitable!" Mikaya finally declared.

Chapter 392 Confession Revelation

Mikaya's assessment of the war situation was accurate.

They were in a weaker position, so Amenheraft could unfairly take advantage of the treaty.

"Bad man, did you really have to kill the nobles? Couldn't you have taken them hostages?" The disadvantage of the nobles dying was apparent to even the military nobody Azira, who chided him.

But what was done was done.

And Alexander decided it was best to learn from this mistake and focus on the future rather than moan about the past.

So he turned to ask, "Lady Mikaya, I remember you saying that your brother will be coming late this month. Would be able to arrive with some reinforcement? Because we might have some extra time before the attack, as Maizdy, who was supposed to lead the army is dead. And they will surely spend a while finding a new commander." Alexander hypothesized.

"If you had kept Maizdy alive you would not have needed any reinforcement!" Mikaya gnashed her teeth at this shameless request, adding, "Pa...Muazz must have sent that idiot to get some battlefield prestige thinking it will be an easy victory. That fatso alone would have done more harm to the army than a thousand men could."

It appeared that Mikaya knew quite a lot about Maizdy.

This was in part due to the Maizdy's military records, which though spectacular on paper, were abysmal in reality.

This was a fact that Mikaya's brother had relayed to his sister after he found out about it when he participated in a joint campaign with Matrak and Zanzan against the northern barbarians.

The short story was that Pasha Muazz, being interested in allying himself with Matrak, wanted to arrange a marriage alliance between Maizdy and Mikaya.

And so had traveled to Matrak with a small personal army, intent on showing off his son's martial prowess in a battle against the various tribes north of Matrak as a way to gain Farzah's blessing.

But though they had won, it was simply using sheer mass to crush a tiny tribe, which did not impress the military veteran.

Furthermore, even that supposedly easy battle had appeared dicey at many points, with the Zanzan forces at risk of routing quite a number of times as observed by Mikaya's brother.

In fact that phrase Mikaya used to describe Maizdy was actually said by her brother, with the tiny alteration being he originally used 'ten thousand' instead of just one thousand to show his frustration.

And so, stating the obvious, after her brother's assessment, the marriage proposal fell through.

Though the fact that Maizdy had attempted to force himself on Mikaya in the middle of a feast and got a kick to his crotch for his trouble might have been the bigger reason.

"Both Adhan and Matrak need the men to defend their own territory. We are sorry! But we can't spare any," The Queen Mother curtly and firmly rejected Alexander's request for help, and even added, "If my lord is not confident in being able to defend, His Majesty's previous offer still stands. The land around river Naher is very fertile and good."

The first sentence was said both because it was true and because Seelima was angry.

While the second sentence was to tempt Alexander to go set up his shop there, for The Queen mother was not blind to the treasures being grown in Alexander's backyard.

In fact, she had tried a few times to have a look for herself but had been firmly stopped by the guards each time.

Even her famous, 'Do you know who I'm?' and 'Do you dare defy the royal family?' sayings, which would almost always get the desired result had failed her this time.

It appeared that Alexander's chastising of the two guards had its intended effect, with the soldiers only mechanically repeating, "Only guests accompanying the Pasha himself are allowed inside. Forgive us."

And this only made Seelima even more convinced of the treasures hidden inside.

So secretly, a tiny part of her even wished that Alexander lost the upcoming battle.

"Couldn't we preemptively attack them? Knock them out one by one? Something like what he did in Jabel?" Ophenia at last decided to join in the conversation with her own suggestion making the seemingly sensible on-the-surface advice.

"I'm afraid not," But Alexander shook his head, being the bearer of bad news, and explained, "You are assuming that the men will be collected from near us."

"But it is likely each of the groups will gather at their own noble's fiefs, before traveling to a port where the Djose's ships will carry them to us. So, these small armies are all many many miles away from us, deep inside their own territory."

Alexander then jokingly added, "And by the time we get there, those men might be already in Zanzan, or might even be returning home after razing Zanzan." before finishing by saying,

"And that's even considering we know where all the troops are coming from. We still don't know who all the participants are."

Alexander's highly expounding explanation made the novice about military affairs Ophenia pick out her flaws, as she nodded and shook her head in enlightenment at having never thought about it like that.

While Cambyses further added, "Also we already have a manpower shortage. So taking a large number of men for a month or months will cripple the city."

"Hence, the best option is to build up our defenses and defend the city. We have thick, high walls, so let's use them for a siege. And we have enough food to last us six months if we ration it properly." She then strategically advised.

Alexander did not say yes or no to this.

He had his own plans and would choose a strategy after discussing it with his generals.

So he smiled, nodded, and just kept his mouth shut for the moment.

Another 'modern' suggestion that might have been made was to attack the forces before they could land.

But contested landings were really a modern thing, where a few machine nests could mow down tens of thousands of defenseless infantry.

In ancient times, if you saw an enemy waiting for you at the beaches, then you simply took your ships to another suitable landing position.

It was not like you needed specialized ports and harbors with deep water to land troops like modern ships.

Mostly any shallows would do.

And then what is the other side goona do?

Ships were the fastest vehicle there was and not even a full cavalry army would be able to follow them for long.

Not to even mention a marching army.

So Alexander's best bet was either a siege or to let them land at Hatamum and have a pitched battle somewhere close.

There was also the option of attacking their ships, but Alexander neither had the number of ships nor the adequate number of sailors, or even the weather on his side.

He would not risk his army drowning.

"Thank you for all the advice. Might I trouble Your Highness Queen mother to at least let His Majesty know of my impending battle? So that he may ask for blessings for me from God Ramuh?" Alexander appeared to have finished this conversation.

"Sure," Seelima did intend to do it anyway, though she held off on the urge to remind Alexander that he did not believe in Ramuh.

"Oh, and also tell His Majesty of this. It might help with the negotiations," And as his last trump card, Alexander bought out a second stack of paper from his coat, before handing a leaf of it over to the Queen mother.

"What's this?" She instinctually asked while taking the stack.

And Alexander was happy to answer.

"I had asked the nobles nicely to reveal all their dark secrets. And that's what they wrote. It's quite the read, haha," He mirthfully chuckled as he handed more of the paper to the others, who eagerly plastered their eyes on the curvy words.

And a quick while later Cambyses was the first to utter a sound of utter disgust, "This..ugggh...these beasts dies too good..uggg,"

She made retching gestures and even felt the consumed feast might come back up to rejoin the table.

"Ale...My lord, is ..is this authentic? Did they really write these?" Even though the Queen mother certainly knew the nobles hid many dark skeletons in their closets, she was still shocked by the revelation,

Because though the crimes were not like a bolt in a clear sky, it was one thing tacitly knowing it, and a whole different thing actually having solid, detailed proof of it.

And the details were particularly alarming for her.

And likewise, Mikaya was similarly affected.

She certainly knew things were bad with nobles in general, but the extent of this was an eye-opener.

Previously, she only thought the nobles' excess was related to only extravagance, indulgence, and promiscuity.

And she even considered herself to be a rotten apple of the bunch.

But it appeared she was a saint when at least compared to the nobles of Zanzan.

And her skin especially crawled when reading about Maizdy, even to the point she had mild panic attacks thinking what her life would have been like if she had married that slimeball.

Perhaps she would not have been outright killed due to her status, but just being miserable might have been a luxury.

"I'm new to this noble thing, so are all nobles like this?" Alexander let off this snarky comment as he observed the various colors appear on the noble women, interested to know their take on this.

Chapter 393 Pre-Battle Preparations

The names, dates, and signatures all left the Queen mother without any doubt that these were no forgery.

And as she read and re-read the papers, she grew increasingly incensed not only at the nobles but that Alexander had killed them.

"If you knew about all these, why did you not capture them? We could have gotten so much from them!" She asked with clenched teeth.

What use was blackmail if there was no person to blackmail with?

"....Like I said, a sudden fire killed them," Alexander played that same broken record, much to the royal lady's exasperation, before backtracking to his previous question,

"Your Highness, you haven't answered my inquiry, 'Are all or even many nobles like that?' I'm curious to know how I should behave in the future."

Alexander's future policies would very much depend on the answer.

"Of course not. We would never do such things," Seelima vehemently spat out, indignant at the accusation, adding, "If we were all like that, the rebellion would have never happened. Alozmer and his father went too far!"

"That's right Alex. Remember that Zanzan has always been a stronghold of Alozmer. And his rotten behavior most spread to here," And Mikaya was there to help The Queen mother.

It seemed that the girl was surprisingly protective of her family's name as she did not mind one bit bad-mouthing the former king, which was also according to them a god.

And her maids joined in too, as Nafia in a rare moment of occurrence spoke up around the dinner, reasoning, "Your Grace, if Master did such horrible things, then he would not have been worried so much about Miss."

"That's right, that's right. Father would also never tolerate this. I'm sure they are doing this behind his back," Even the twins spoke up to defend their rarely-mentioned father.

It appeared that Alexander had stepped on a proverbial tail when he expressed doubt about the integrity of the three men.

"I see. Then I apologize," Alexander only lightly smiled at this, only he knowing how much of this he bought.

Because talk was cheap.

And although it was true both Ptolomy and Amenheraft were relatively clean, it remained to be seen by how much.

After all, everyone had their dark sides.

Alexander then moved on to asking the women how they had been, and other small talk, with the feast ending as such, on a somewhat mercurial note, with happiness, satisfaction, and merriment mixed with equal parts of anger, fear, and trepidation.

For a victory had been achieved but a war was soon over the horizon.

A topic that Alexander again brought up when he met his military and civilian leaders the next morning.

First, Melodias gave a tally of the loot they had collected, which was not much, only about two million ropals.

And that was counting the various stuff looted from the various households.

This was mainly because those poor seven souls really not too well off.

But hey, even mosquito meat was meat, and Alexander's earnings did exceed his cost of the campaign, which was less than fifty thousand (50,000) ropals.

After Melodias, Menes then informed the group of the fate of the killed and casualty.

"The families of the seventeen who have been killed have been paid the appropriate rumination. Those who have families in Zanzan have already received it. And those whose families are in Thesos or are on their way on the ships will be paid when they reach Zanzan."

Alexander's heart shook a bit when he thought about that excited family landing on Zanzan, eager to meet their husband, father, or brother, only to find that he was dead.

He could not imagine that feeling.

"Remember to make sure the widow gets the money. I'm putting you in charge Menes," Alexander thus instructed specifically.

The money of 5,000 ropals, or two year's salary was not much, but would at least help.

"Yes, my lord," Menes very passionately replied, before continuing his report, this time, reporting the casualties.

"Furthermore, twenty-eight men have received various degrees of injuries. Most are expected to rejoin the army with no problem."

"But those who are really crippled will be given a pension, and if possible, a job in the military, such as a logistician, armorer, blacksmith, etc, circumstance permitting.." Menes thus finished his report.

And then the topic made its way to the upcoming war, which the members already knew about beforehand and so the discussion went about the same way as it had done around the dining table.

With a few exceptions of course.

"My lord, as you have asked, we have transferred most of the armorers and swordsmiths into crossbows and arrow makers," Menicus reported as they sat across the table.

This instruction had come in the form of a note which Alexander had sent via a messenger on the very day he had learned of the imminent attack.

The note began with the word, 'Recent discoveries in Jabel have made me decide to that,' before laying out the instructions.

And it was sent to Menicus because he was the most senior council member, as well as being a military veteran.

"Mmm, good. We will need to use the crossbows to counter the camel archers," Alexander flatly laid out.

For the upcoming battle, chainmail or 'super' swords would not be the wonder weapon, but the game-changing crossbows.

The reason for this included ease of use, ease of training on it, comparatively inexpensive ammunition, and the ability to hold a bow at full span for a sustained period, waiting to seize the optimal moment for a shot, while also being much more accurate at the same time as one's arm would not be shaking unlike when drawing a traditional bow.

"We are also preparing the ground outside the city to train ten thousand (10,000) men on the crossbow. The recruits will be mainly from the former Cantagenan slaves and the Adhanian who had fought Amenheraft." Melodias then reported his part.

He was followed up by Diagnosis, who happily informed, "We are also strengthening and thickening the southern wall had leads to the harbor. Most of the cement is being diverted to add height and width to the walls there. And we are confident of doubling the thickness before February."

The southern walls were Zanzan's weak spot, and so Alexander decide that this portion should be especially thickened in case of an amphibious assault.

And at last Uzak informed confidently, "The wooden northern, eastern, and southern gates are all being replaced with solid wrought iron gates, which will be further reinforced with thick steel bars in the back. Nothing will break them!"

The man genuinely seemed to believe that as in this time period steel was considered the strongest metal.

These were the main four directives Alexander had laid out to be completed, and hearing them going smoothly, Alexander let out a smile and an approving nod.

But amongst all this good news, there was one not-so-agreeable, which was uttered by Heliptos, "My lord, some of the city folk are weary of war and destruction. They have been plagued by it for years now. And have gone weary. Some are even grumbling that the peace you promised them was a ...not true,"

The finance minister avoided the strongly negative word lie.

"They dare!" Menes was the one to raise his voice.

He was incensed that even after all they had done, these people were still not grateful.

While Alexander was much more calm, and took the opportunity to say, "Hmmm, indeed the people have suffered. Perhaps a siege might be out of the consideration then."

Alexander had no appetite to sit inside the city with a rumbling stomach, hoping that the enemy starved before him, and so this plan had always been his least favorite one.

And now that the people's morales were low, it was the perfect time to suggest that this tactic would be unviable even before anyone else could suggest it.

For it was very much possible for a starving, angry populace to simply rebel and open the gates to let in the enemy if things got dire enough.

"I agree. We have too little food stockpiled anyway. A siege will not be good for us," Menicus too buttressed Alexander, as the agriculture minister tacitly informed Alexander that Cambyses's estimate of six months was too optimistic.

A fact that she missed as she was not present currently due to a sudden cold.

"Then it will have to be a pitched battle! And I have already sent scouts to map out the area," Grahtos very excitedly said this, eager to find out how his new heavy cavalry would match up against the camel archers.

By Alexander's instruction, he had sent horse riders to the nearby lands, armed with the maps they got from the nobles, and a clear picture of the terrain was expected soon.

Only after that would Alexander then decide exactly what tactic to follow.

And thus, with these preliminary preparations going on, Alexander then spent some more time discussing the upcoming campaign and agreeing on the framework of the upcoming battle, such as asking "How many men can we get in total for total?"

"....About thirty-five to forty thousand (35,000- 40,000) max." Menes had thought about this fact for some time, hence the quick answer.

And he even helped break it down, "We have around sixty thousand (60,000) men. But not all can fight. And some will have to stay behind to guard the city as garrisons, keep order, run the basic things like food distribution, sanitation, and various other things. So 40,000 is our limit."

Chapter 394 Amenheraft's Preparation (Part-1)

Going to battle outnumbered was never a pleasant feeling.

The simple reason for this was with a larger army, one could form a longer battle line, which would allow them to outflank and envelop the opposing small army from both sides.

This meant that in a traditional battle, the smaller force would be forced to match this extended line, resulting in thinner lines, and more prone to breaking.

Hence, all things equal, usually the one with the larger army won.

Which was also why winning with a smaller army was so celebrated and applauded, both in this timeline and in Alexander's previous life.

"Can we expect any reinforcements from our allies? Amenheraft is blatantly breaking the treaty," Heliptos made this request some the third time.

"There will be no reinforcements. We are on our own," And Alexander again very clearly let this be known as he had stated the reasons before, to the disheartenment of many.

"Well, 40,000 against 50,000 is not too bad. It's hard, but not impossible," So Menicus could only make the best of the circumstances, and tried not to sound too pessimistic.

"That's right hahaha. The Lord did say previously that Zanzan will always face outnumbering enemies. This is the norm, haha," And Grahtos joined him, appearing unfazed.

This half-fake, half-real bravado soon infected the whole council, as each of them upped his predecessor with even more absurd claims, until finally it got so ridiculous that Alexander decided to end the meeting, "Well then, we are decided. My lords work hard. Because Gaia willing we will not lose."

"Yes. By the grace of Gaia." The reply came in a chorus, and as usual, the council members all left except Theocles.

The archpriest gave a primary rundown of the temple, and the followers gained in recent days, which Alexander nodded to with pleasure, and then followed it up with a gift, which was a few sheets of paper.

"These are the various crimes the nobles in Jabel confessed to committing. Use this to boost the morale of the people in the city. You can also share it with the Ramuh temple," Alexander gave the short instruction.

And after ending a glancing look at the paper, the smart priest quickly replied, "Yes my lord." with a bow, his heart extremely pleased.

Using this document, he could easily spin the story into 'the devils coming back to harm Zanzan' in his sermons, boosting the people's will to fight.

Thus in this way, Alexander's preparation for the war began in full swing.

While in some other place, far far away from Zanzan, a heated meeting was about to take place regarding the same thing.

"*Bam* I will skin that animal myself. I will rape his women, feed them to the dogs, salt...." These choice words were being uttered by no other Psha Muazz, whose flesh seemed to sizzle with anger and hatred, turning from porcelain white to chilly red, as the portly man paced around the room with short, stubby steps.

While the rest of the people in the room had flat, somewhat frustrated looks on their faces as this episode had played itself quite a few times already.

But nevertheless, the events of Jabel had shocked all of them when they first heard of it.

Hence the meeting.

"*Sigh*, to think there would come a day when us nobles would be killed like that in our own territory. Like some dogs! The heavens are not blind, They will not tolerate Ptolomy!" The deep, remorseful voice came from an aged man.

He was Jamider (Earl) Nibbar's father, and it had been less than five years since the sixty-three-year-old had handed his fief to his apple in his eye, son Nibbar- a capable, wise lord, worthy of carrying on the family name.

That was until two days ago, when, concerned that his son was three days late in making his scheduled contact, the veteran noble sent a scouting party around Jabel, where they finally learned of the disaster that befell their beloved lord.

The scouts had not simply ridden to Jabel at first.

At first they asked around the nearby sparsely populated villages and hamlets about the happenings around Jabel.

And in was there they were promptly informed that a large army had entered the city a few days ago and that afterward, all nearby villages had noticed large, thick plumes of smoke rising from the city across the horizon for several days.

The news of this had made the scouts' hearts drop.

They were smart people and very well understood what this mostly likely entailed.

Because an unknown army and fire equaled bad things.

For if he was not dead, then a messenger would have surely reached them by now, letting them know of his current state, whether it be injured, or captured and thus demanding a ransom.

But since none of that had happened, only the inevitable option remained.

This news made one hot-blooded man particularly distraught, so much so that hearing this, he even struck the old man telling this, killing him on the spot for the crime of delivering such 'foul' news.

But it appeared that such foul news was indeed real.

For when the men entered the abandoned city, the smell of burnt wood, and charred animal and human remains were the first things to greet them, followed by the grotesque sight of corpses sticking out of mangled houses, being feasted upon by birds and animals.

The delicious smell attracted small animals such as mice, cats, and dogs, to even large ones such as foxes which gnawed on the cooked bones while crows and vultures poked and extracted the good, soft bits such as the eyes and the brains, laid bare courtesy of the soldier who used his sword to crack open the skull.

"These animals killed their own people," One of the scouts spat out seeing Alexander's cruelty, disgust for this Pasha of Zanzan sprouting and growing as he assumed all of them killed to be peasants when really they were almost all nobles or related to them in some way.

"I've always said these Thesians are barbarians. They did not even bury the dead. Fucking heathens, *pooo*," And his brothers-in-arms were happy to join him in this act, spitting the bad breathe out.

Burying the dead had great significance in Adhania, not only due to religious reasons but also due to health reasons.

Because, although the Adhanians did not have full knowledge about diseases or what caused them, they did know through experience that burying the dead helped prevent the spread of it.

But, it had to be said that the reason why they believed it so was creative to say the least.

The prevalent germ theory would be discovered much, much in the future, as for now, the people believed that all diseases were caused by supernatural factors.

And so the natural leap forward after this belief was the thought that the spirits of the unburied bodies roamed the earth, restless and unfulfilled, hence spreading plague and misfortune all around.

In this way, an incorrect reasoning still led to a correct method, something similar to how even a broken clock shows the correct times twice.

While the reason behind Alexander not burying the corpses were a few pragmatic ones.

Firstly, it was because most of the corpses had been already half cremated after being burnt, thus reducing the chance of a plague spreading.

Secondly, it was winter and freezing, so rotting would be almost static.

And thirdly, which was also the most important reason, the news of the war had made Alexander want to return to Zanzan as quickly as possible.

This was also the reason the city had been left abandoned.

Originally, the city was supposed to be abuzz with construction and other activities by now, but all those men were being trained in military drills.

The scouts bore first-hand eye-witness to the havoc Alexander brought upon the city, while they made their way through the dilapidated, muddy streets until finally reached the mansion, the source of the greatest atrocity.

And as they approached the burnt barn, "Argggg," even these seasoned men could not help but hold their noses and step backward at the nauseating, stomach-churning smell.

"*Ugggg*" And one young man even let out his breakfast at the smell and sight of the grotesque mound of flesh, and bones fused together into a small hill, which had started to rot in some places due to the snow which had fallen and then melted around the heated flesh.

"Women! Children! In a barn! Caged! Like animals!" The leader of the scouts said these words one by one, even rage turning to tears.

Not even a hardened man as he could imagine the terror and fear these folks must have felt in their last moments.

How these women must have banged and slammed against the barn door or even the walls, even when the blazing door would have been burning, scalding their fists, and the black air filled the barn.

And this was not to even say about the children, who appeared to be in the center of the hill, as the mothers likely tried to protect their babies for as long as their fleshly earthly bodies could, an ultimately futile attempt in the end.

So just looking at only this, without context, people would find it hard to say that Alexander was any better than the 'beasts' he claimed to have killed.

And with these thoughts, this fury and revenge burning like the sun in each of the men's hearts, they entered the mansion to retrieve their lord's body.

Chapter 395 Amenheraft's Preparation (Part-2)

The scouts did not find Nibbar's body.

Because Melodias had seen to it that all the nobles' bodies were properly cremated before the mansion was looted and burnt.

The soldiers even took their clothes, as they were expensive and fine enough to be used just after patching up the few stab, and arrow holes.

The people of this time were pragmatic as such.

Thus the only thing the aged father of the Jamider (Earl) got was an urn full of presumably his son's ashes.

And such similar scenes were played out in many other noble houses that had sent their own forces to gather news about their loved ones.

In fact, it was not only those who lost their family members that were grieving from the news..

Because there were also many loyal servants and staff from other noble families whose masters had left Jabel but did not have the time or space to evacuate these workers.

The knowledge of the atrocities and the complete eradication of Jabel and its inhabitants shocked all those affected, for they never even imagined such an act of barbaric cruelty would ever be done to them by one of their own, even if Alexander was only nominally counted as a noble of Adhanian.

Hence they convened the meeting as soon as possible, with either all the involved nobles themselves participating or having a nearby representative of theirs do so in their stead.

"This act is not something even Ptolomy can tolerate. We will have to pressure him to execute that Thesian bastard. Adhanians should deal with their own problems by themselves," Amenheraft strongly said the word, half believing his own words, half to placate the crowd in the room.

But it failed to placate one enraged man.

"I don't care what that idiot brother of yours does. I want to tear apart that fucking Jakqum by myself..arggg," The foul-tempered Muazz felt his rage boiling again hearing the mere illusory mention to Alexander, even going as far as to talk rudely to his liege.

"...." And this particular behavior made the crowd draw a long scowl.

They had somewhat empathized with the grieving noble at first, but now he was becoming a nuisance and disturbance.

After all, everyone who had gathered here had lost some loved ones.

But none of them were screaming their lungs out and howling in the air like him.

'Idiot, stop behaving like a woman. Act like a man,' Even Amenheraft was fed up with him.

He had not even planned on bringing this man into the meeting room knowing his mental state, but the large man had somehow gotten wind of the gathering and insisted.

And Amenheraft could not say no.

"That's why we are here. To kill the fool and retake your city. So calm down!" Finally, seeing no one else manage the man, this curt, fearless response laced with frustration came out of a young man in his late twenties.

Dressed in a heavily embroidered black tunic and matching tapered pants, this was Faruq-Djose's most talented son.

And if he had been birthed from the Pasha's main wife, without a doubt it would have been him scheduled to take over his father's fief.

"Yo youu....," Pasha Muazz could hardly stop himself from pouncing on this rude remark.

But held himself back eventually, understanding he was no longer the top dog he once was.

And had to be content with looking at him hatefully.

Pasha Muazz did not only hate Faruq for this slight.

Oh no, for their mutual dislike for each other went far back.

Their two provinces of Zanzan and Kuleef were neighbors and so naturally frictions and disagreements had developed over time, resulting in much bad blood, ranging from trade deals, to banditry to even border skirmishes.

They even had completely different political alignments as Muazz staunchly supported Amenheraft, while Djose until recently leaned towards Ptolomy.

And among all these conflicts, Faruq would be always the negotiator sent from the side of Kuleef to deal with these, while on the Zanzan's side, it would be Pasha Muazz himself.

Hence the personal bad blood.

And this rivalry was ignited very recently when disagreements broke out over who would get to be the leader of the allied army.

Faruq argued that it should be him as his father was footing the biggest bill, but ultimately it went to Muazz's son through some political shenanigans.

But though Muazz had won that battle, it appeared now that victory was moot.

A happy occurrence that Faruq did not forget to very vividly show as he stared back at the hateful gaze with a mirthful, disdaining one.

He could no longer see in any point being courteous to this man.

Sure, when he was a Pasha he might have been a formidable force and one to lend an ear to.

But now he was only a toothless bear with no real power and even a tailless dog with no successor.

So, instead, Faruq focused on what the future held.

'First Fatrak. Now Maizdy. This Alexander must be my lucky star,' This talented, ambitious man happily hummed about how all these thorny obstacles were taken care of by another man, paving the way for his glory and achievements.

As a signal of the start of his glorious rise to power, he would first take charge of the allied army to crush Alexander, use this to secure his position as the Pasha of Kuleef, then retake Adhan to raise his power, and lastly destroy Matrak to become the most powerful man in Adhania.

At least that was the plan.

'Haha, Alexander, to thank you for your efforts, I will be sure to thoroughly destroy you,' The son of DJose heartily laughed at his imminent victory.

While outside his imaginary palace, back in the real world, Amenheraft after being somewhat pleased to see someone put Muazz in his place, and even sending a favorable look toward the young man, said, "Lord Faruq is right. We have all gathered to discuss the upcoming attack. So let us not waste time and get down to it."

This former king then looked around the large table to see who would start the military analysis.

And lo and behold it was Faruq.

"I believe that the preliminary plan is known to all. But to reiterate again, we are here," The man took charge and used a long stick to point to a place on a map that had been laid over the large oval table, as he continued,

"The men from the various areas will march or use the waterways to meet up here, the port city of Mouna. Here they will board my father's ships that are waiting for them and then travel south all the way to this small port called Hatamum. From where we will be just three days march away to Zanzan, where he will crush that scum of the earth.

This rough plan had been already discussed so there was no major point of contention there.

"Mouna has been prepared to accommodate the army. Large fields have been cleared to place the soldiers. And sufficient entertainment has been arranged for all the lords," This was said by the steward whose master was in charge of the port city.

He could not be here in person and had sent this experienced servant of his.

The aged steward then further went on to say, "Also, in the meantime, all three of the city's harbors will be closed to merchant shipping and be solely dedicated to catering to the army. In this way, we hope to finish the entire loading process within five days."

"Five days? Impressive! How many are we?" Another noble from the side commented.

"Close to 55,000," Faruq had calculated this number a few times.

And he even broke it down, reciting out of the top of his memory how many each of the thirty or so nobles had contributed, and then presented the summarized numbers,

"So, in total we have thirty thousand (30,000) infantry, about five thousand (5,000) archers, four thousand (4,000) slingers, three thousand (3,000) chariots, two thousand cavalries (2,000) and ten thousand seven hundred and ninety-two (10,792) camel archers."

The last number was so accurate because it was his own forces.

The attacking force thus consisted of about:

30,000 melee troops,

10,000 projectile troops

5,000 'heavy' cavalry and

10,000 camel archers which also had some light cavalry.

On paper this force appeared very forbiddable, and even in reality, it was no doubt formidable.

But it had its problems.

The biggest and most glaring flaw was the mishmash of various factions,

Different nobles had contributed with various amounts of troops, ranging from a few hundred up to more than ten thousand as in the case of DJose, all with extremely varying degrees of skill and discipline.

And they all wanted a say in how their troops would be used.

To make sure that these would not be wasted for the gain of others.

For as much as they hated Alexander, many of the fellows they shared this room with were a close second.

And this feeling went from big-shot nobles such as Jamider (Earl) Nibbar's father and Pasha DJose who had sent the best of the best, to the lowly smaller nobles that could only afford to send a few raw recruits or lowly peasants.

Because they were nobles.

And getting all of them to work together was a massive challenge, a task even the former prestigious Amenheraft had trouble accomplishing, much less now.

And hence the meeting.

Chapter 396 Amenheraft's Preparation (Part-3)

The various competing factions were not Amenheraft's only concerns.

For there was also the divergent military thinking factor.

The current times were a season of change for the country, as new technologies, innovations, and battle tactics were sweeping across not only it, but the known world.

This was not orchestrated by Alexander but was the natural evolution of the times.

And this was a change many had difficulty adjusting to.

"I tell you, riding horses to battle is the stupidest thing I have ever heard. Not only are they killed too easily, you cannot even carry any javelins with them," This grumble was uttered by Jamider (Earl) Nibbar's father after Faruq's report, who was just one of the examples of those being left behind in the times.

He was an old-style military veteran and thought that cavalry was a fad that would die away, and would frequently exaggerate its shortcomings.

And in his mind, the reason for doing this was many folds.

He considered chariots to be much more economical as they could be pulled by smaller horses such as ponies and even donkeys.

So they were cheaper to use and maintain and as such, a loss of a pony would also hurt much less than a fowl or mare.

Tactically, he also saw chariots as being easier to use as chariots horses did not need to be trained as much, which also saved money on the training.

Then there was the fact that chariots were at minimum driven by two people. So one of them could concentrate on driving, while the other focused on shooting, be it arrows or javelins.

Whereas a horse rider would have to do both on their own.

Then there was the fact that the solid ground of the chariots enabled the use of bigger, stronger, and more accurate bows than those on horses, with the additional perk of being able to more easily shoot backward.

Whereas horse archers basically could only shoot at one side because the bows of the time were too long to swing over a rider's knees and compact compound bows made of composite materials such as

wood and animal sinew, which were smaller yet stronger were a very recent invention, and had not been widely adopted.

And lastly, the old man was of the mindset, 'If it ain't broke, why fix it?'

Up until now chariots had performed well enough on the battlefields and he saw no reason to change that as evidenced by when chariots managed to defeat the famed Sycarian cavalry thirty years ago in a famous battle.

This was why the three thousand (3,000) chariots came entirety from the old man, and he even insisted, "Faruq, my boy! Those two thousand (2,000) cavalry, turn them into chariots. And their scythes will cut in half that Jakqum. An easy death will be too pleasant for that bastard," The man gnashed with teeth.

"....." Faruq stayed silent at this, as did Matbar (Marquis) Uhmek's son to whom belonged the 2,000 cavalry in addition to five thousand (5,000) peasant levies.

Because this was not the first time he had asked for this.

It had been done multiple times, and he was rejected every time with logic and reason.

Logic and reason that the old man refused to buy.

Because he had too much colored by the battlefield of yesteryear.

The retired Jamider (Earl) saw horses as expensive, exotic animals, difficult to rear and maintain.

Which meant getting a lot of them together to use as effective cavalry was hard.

And if they managed to do it, they felt that it didn't make sense to waste them on a ragtag force of skirmishers and light cavalry that most likely wouldn't have a decisive impact in battle.

Hence they doubled down on the expense, which was making chariots.

For maintaining a fully equipped chariot team—the horses, the chariot made of expensive wood, and a trained crew—was ludicrously extravagant by ancient standards, much contrary to the old Jamider's assumption

But this expense was worth it for its time.

For the major advantage of chariots was their "shock and awe".

Humans who had never seen a wheeled vehicle chugging along toward them at ten miles per hour, being pulled by teams of small horses or donkeys, while warriors aboard chucked spears and arrows were obviously shocked and terrified, dealing them a critical psychological blow.

Plus the lighter infantry units of the time, with their short two-metre spears were unable to pose a major threat to the charging beasts, who could just ram or collide with the formation destroying it.

Hence initially, chariot armies would almost always be superior to non-chariot armies, able to leverage their greater mobility and ability to attack the vulnerable flanks of opposing armies and crush them.

And over time, this gave rise to the creation of military elites in a similar way to knights in Medieval Europe, where kings would either fund a standing force of professional charioteers or else parcel out land or tax receipts to vassals in return for them maintaining a chariot.

Which during wartime could be called upon to become the core of his army, with each chariot supported by infantry levies thus forming a warrior-aristocracy.

In this way, chariots in that time would be as much a weapon as a status symbol, with each chariot on the battlefield unique in its embellishments and decoration.

And Jamider (Earl) Nibbar's family was one of the first members of this aristocracy, with more than six hundred years of chariot warfare under their belt and a collection of antique chariots rivaling anyone in the world to prove that.

They had started off as one of the king's charioteers, before slowly moving up the rank until they became a Jamider (Earl), which also made this family about twice as old as the current royal family and one of the oldest noble families of Adhania.

And it was this distinguished identity, of the 'sacred status of the chariot' that played another big role in the aged Jamider's (Earl) reluctance to adapt to the times.

Because as Matbar (Marquiss) Ulmek saw, times were indeed changing.

Firstly, the 'shock and awe' factor of the chariots were no longer there.

Chariots might have worked when the bulk of the force were levies and blue-eyed peasants.

But as the fighting force become more professionalize and they got used to seeing this weapon, the fear lessened.

And with developments in new ways to counter the threat being discovered every day, it was evident that the chariot would quickly become irrelevant.

For example, it was widely known that chariots needed good flat terrain to work.

This was not a problem during its inception as battles of that time would occur in designated places and times.

This meant that the two forces would decide on a time and place where they would meet, which would almost be always in an open battlefield, and then duke it out mano a mano.

This was because battles and wars were seen in an idealized light, where individual nobles would fight one another for glory and fame, and any employment of 'tactics' and cunningness was looked down upon as dishonorable and shameless.

While was also why Agapios's last maneuver was so brilliant.

Because no one had expected it.

But as time went on, such as now, those few visionaries accurately noticed that military organization was shifting away from the heroic clash of elites and towards well-trained soldiers acting as a unit.

Talented Generals of the last century preferred to have a drilled force of light cavalry that could conduct coordinated maneuvers in support of the infantry core of the army, rather than a bunch of glory-seeking toffs careening around the battlefield haphazardly in insanely expensive deathtraps.

And these men would cleverly use their soldiers in a variety of terrains not all of which were conducive to the chariots.

There were problems with particularly the wheels, which would have trouble in rocky or wet terrain, skidding in mud, and bumping on hills.

Furthermore, horse breeding had come a long way to the point large, strong breeds were available, enabling them to be mounted and used in battles.

These horses had a much smaller turning circle than chariots and only needed one rider as opposed to two or more.

Cavalry also took up far less space than chariots meaning easier transport and more effectiveness on the battlefield as more force could be concentrated on one area.

On top of that cavalry was much faster meaning they could outflank chariots.

And lastly, newer horse breeding techniques meant that cavalry was showing the trend of actually becoming much cheaper than chariots.

This was why the general trend among Adhanians was a shift towards the cavalry.

And Pasha Djose, in a kind of 4D chess move, even went as far as to get camels from the deserts of Abu Hamam as a way to counter this cavalry threat, displaying the man's military foresight.

And all these had been recited over and over to the bullish Jamider (Earl).

But he refused to see reason.

Only saying 'the scythes of the chariots can mow down men like you brats have never seen'. While not minding the fact that those chariots might not even be able to get close to the infantry before being skewered by the phalanx or other spear formations.

And thus he was left to his own devices, the cavalry divided, as Faruq moved on to the most

difficult topic of the meeting, and the main reason they were here, "So Your Majesty, have you chosen who will command the forces?"

Chapter 397 Amenheraft' S Preperation (Part-4)

Faruq's question created a headache for Amenheraft.

Or rather it bought back his migraine as it reminded him of the previous episode that had occurred discussing the same topic.

"I vote that it be Archpriest Manuk. Remember, he is the one who killed Agapois," Pasha Muazz was the first and loudest voice, impassionately making the case for his 'dear colleague' to the point of even distorting the truth-Manuk had not killed Agapois.

And to some listening, it would appear that Muazz and Manuk were the best of pals, the former looking after the latter.

But this cry of recommendation generalled eye rolls all across the room, even including in Amenheraft.

Because initially, it was Muazz who was the biggest critic of Mauk, vehemently protesting this priest's appointment in favor of his son.

'He is the criminal who lost Adhan. His incompetence was the thing that ruined so many families,' He had impassionately cried, blaming everything currently wrong at the priest.

And his cries had worked, as some of the powerful men in the faction then pressured Amenheraft to remove the archpriest's candidacy.

After that the fat noble manipulated Amenheraft into handing over the control of the army to his son instead of Faruq with the logic, "Zanzan is mine. And my son should be the one to get it back."

Furthermore, he poisonously added, "If Your Majesty lets DJose get Zanzan, he will surely get even more powerful!"

If the first sentence moved Amenheraft, then the second sentence convinced him.

Amenheraft was still skeptical about DJose's loyalty, and would far prefer to see Zanzan recover than see Kuleef prosper.

Hence, even when DJose contributed so much to the effort and Muazz so little, Amenheraft quashed any objections as he pushed aside Faruq for Maizdy.

And that was the end of it.

Or so he thought.

For he did not think Maizdy would die at such an inopportune point.

And because of this he was now in a bind.

Amenheraft had used up a lot of his political clouts to influence the previous position of army general, which meant that he had less to spend now.

And that likely meant that it would be very difficult to form a unified army with a single person in charge as there was unlikely to be an unanimous choice.

Unless of course, Amenheraft wanted to lead which would simplify a lot of the matter.

But it was an opinion neither he nor the nobles wanted to see come true.

Him because after two near-death experiences in the last three months, his appetite for on-battlefield presence had largely dried up.

Followed by his consideration that it would be too brazen to appear in the battlefield personally and that Ptolomy might use this to, if not break the treaty, at least use this as an excuse to hold back on the 'loans', something Amenheraft was in very much need of.

After all, the goal of the campaign was to destroy Alexander before the other side could react and then simply feign ignorance.

While on the other side of the coin, the nobles simply wanted to gain glory for themselves and felt that Amenheraft participation would rob them of that.

And hence the dilemma.

"Manuk is occupied praying for the nobles who died under his command. So he will not be available till Ramuh forgive him. Any others?" Amenheraft did not appear too enthusiastic about the suggestion, as he made up this excuse, before inquiring about alternate names.

Besides Muazz only recommended that name because he did not want Faruq to get the job.

"Perhaps it can be Lord Nibraz. He is the most experienced of the group," A small-stature noble recommended Jamider (Earl) Nibbar's father.

But the man was old-fashioned and also simply old.

So he was rejected as displayed by the nobles keeping quiet and not showing any enthusiasm.

Then came Matbar (Marquiss) Ulmer's son, followed by a few more recommendations, all of whom had some flaws in someone's eyes.

Be it age, experience, not good military record, not contributing enough, etc, etc.

It appeared everyone wanted to have a go.

But they also seemed to cleverly avoid the most obvious one.

A phenomenon that arose because outside the great contributors such as DJose and Nibraz and Ulmer, and the lowly nameless one, there was the third group of opportunists and uncommitted, who only wanted to fish for advantages but not put themselves at any disadvantage.

They committed the least or the worst of their troops to simply made up the numbers but had the largest voices.

Such as Pasha Muazz.

And they were the ones seen bickered over everything.

From big things like deciding who would be the army leader and which noble would get to direct which front of the army, to the smallest things, such as trying to shoe in this relative in that officer position, and that cousin of a friend in that leading position.

And this went on until Amenheraft was of the mind to very much clap their traps up.

But he was currently dependent on them, so he endured.

But one who did not endure was Faruq, who had reached the end of his patience with this game of cat and mouse and very simply loudly spoke out, "If I'm not made the general of the army, I will take my armies and ships and go home!"

"....." The murmurs, whispers, and chaos of the room came to a screeching halt at these words as all eyes gathered on the young man.

Faruq appeared like that kid in the playground who says that if he is not made the captain, he is gonna take his ball and go elsewhere.

"The army is not your's boy. It's your father's," Not only the nobles but even Amenheraft appeared offended by this threat which he expressed in this exasperated tone.

One because of the obvious rude comment.

And two, more importantly, because it was DJose who had pushed for this offensive.

Amenheraft had not even wanted this attack in the first place, saying it was too early, and urged the Pasha to wait till he got his first ransom in the name of loan from Ptolomy.

But DJose was too impatient, saying that it would take a few years and he could not wait that long.

Instead, he insisted that now would be the best time to strike using the same logic Alexander had used- 'It is so early and the other side is so weak, they won't dare to break the treaty.'

And when Amenheraft did not buy it, DJose bribed and coerced his retainers to pressure him into saying yes.

So now, after all the levies had been gathered, all the supplies stockpiled, all the plans made, and all the sacrifices made indirectly because of this, DJose's representative had the nerve to say he would fuck off if things were not done his way?

Where did he get the guts?

Where was there such an easy meal?

Hence the temperature in the room quickie rose a few degrees, as all the nobles cast very angry gazes on the impetuous young man.

But Faruq did not care.

He saw this battle as his ticket to glory and there was no way he was going to hand the position over to anyone other than Amenheraft himself.

He could get the position or die trying.

So in a brave, bravado-filled voice, Farqu brushed aside Amenheraft's threat, saying, "I will deal with my father." and adding, "Given what I've seen, I'm sure my father would be happy that he did not commit his creme of the crop soldiers in such a haphazard way."

Though the reality was that if Faruq really returned home, DJose would probably skin him alive.

Because few knew how much he loved Fatrak deep down and how much he hated Alexander.

But Faruq bluffed and then went on begin his address to the crowd to bolster the bluff, "Remember gentlemen, almost the entire cost of the campaign is being footed by us."

"We are the ones giving the ships, taking them out of their usual merchant role to serve as transport vehicles."

"We are the ones paying for all the supplies. We are employing entirely of our most feared cavalry."

"And all those men you have hired, it is Kuleef that will pay their wages and even their death remuneration."

"So, the least thing you could do was stop these scheming and bickering nonsense and hand the command to the most contributing!"

"....." There were many points the nobles could contend with Faruq.

But the fierceness of the tirade left many shocked, and even more angry.

'This is not how you talked to a noble.' They thought, wanting to then resume the quarrel.

But Amenheraft did not share the thought.

He knew Faruq by reputation even before meeting him, as he had won a few battles against some rebelling nobles during the rebellion.

And now the forceful speech impressed him.

'If groomed properly, he might be useful in suppressing the nobles,' Amenheraft thought of using this young general to cower the rapidly growing in ambition noble faction.

Hence he slapped the table with a loud *Bam* and decisively declared, "I have decided- There will be no one commander for this battle. Instead, all nobles below Jamider (Earl), will be subordinated to Faruq, while those equal to or above will control their own forces and take action in conjunction with others after consulting one another."

This was a neither-here nor-there solution that tried to get the best of both worlds but achieved none, but it was a compromise.

And that would have to do for now.

Chapter 398 Amenheraft's Preparations (Part-5)

As a single general for the campaign could not be agreed upon because of the fragmented and fractious nature of the nobles, Amenheraft's proposed method seemed to be the best possible solution.

This compromised command structure did not fully please any group, but at least placated most, even Faruq, who viewed his given authority as being adequate.

And as for the obvious question of 'why Maizdy could be chosen' but 'not Muazz', ignoring the mindset he was in, unqualified to even lead a village of peasants, nevermind a full army,

it was because -

One-Muazz had his chance once and chose his son as the general,

Two- he was a terrible commander,

And three, most importantly, the nobles did not want to see this man use their army to get his city back.

They wanted to be the ones to retake Zanzan, and then metaphorically slaughter the fat Pasha in exchange for it, using absurd trade deals, huge land reallocation, peerage increases, and even just a huge lump sum of money.

Muazz knew this very well, which was why he tried at the very beginning to get Manuk to be the leader, who would be subordinated to Amenheraft, and one who would likely deal him the most generous terms.

But as it could be seen, that did not happen, much to Muazz's disappointment.

Anyway, it was what it was.

And with this heavy topic out of the way, the talk about transportation came up.

"These fifty-five thousand (55,000) men...we will need about 600 ships to carry all of them and the accompanying supplies. Can that small port handle so many ships?" A noble raised his concern.

"Also, will that port even be usable? The nobles who were supposed to make that sure are all dead," Another chimed in.

"Or safe? One or two of the cowards might have talked," A third noble hypothesized.

All these were valid concerns that if were true could seriously hamper the campaign.

But Faruq boisterously brushed these off, waving his arm and saying, "None of those are of much concern. I have been to Hatamum, and its water can handle fifteen to twenty ships at a time. So we will be fully unloaded in two to three days."

He then further added, "And even if Hatamum is occupied, it will not be too big a problem. I have been to Zanzan a lot of times due to work and know its coastline very well. There are many shallows close around which will do the job just fine."

Faruq sounded very confident about the disembarkment.

After all, the ships of this time did not need deep water harbors to port.

Only some coastline not infested with coral was adequate.

Faruq's confident speech affected and convinced most, who praised, "Ohh, then that's good. We are relieved."

But one of the particularly detail-oriented nobles raised the query, "I remember that the waters around Zanzan got dangerous in this season. So if it's not Hatamum, but some other place, will it be safe? How will be the weather?"

These were very good questions, but the person to whom this was posed was very weird.

Because it was done not to the experienced Faruq but to Amenheraft!

And Amenheraft very assertively responded, "The oracles say of dreaming about a rooster being there to greet us when we land. So the weather is predicted to be sunny and the skies crystal clear. God Ramuh is with us."

These oracles were priestesses, preferably virgins who would be presented with a question, usually from the king or a high-level noble or even regular folk for a fee, who would then ingest various psychedelic flora or fauna such as particular mushrooms or wild berries or inhale fumes of sulfur or such, to get first high and wasted.

Then they would ramble about whatever crazy hallucinations their minds would conjure up in that state, which would be taken as 'visions and messages from the Gods' that could be then interpreted by specialized priests to give an answer in the form of a prediction.

And as anyone half smart could guess, these predictions would be 99% garbage.

But, like how even a broken clock shows the correct time twice, they would get lucky in that 1%.

Which would be then used as evidence to defend against anyone daring to bring up the ludicrousness of it all.

Or there was always the simple and time-tested excuse of, 'If the prediction failed, then you must have misread the signs. Do not blame the gods. Blame yourself for your shortcomings.'

After all, these 'signs' and 'dreams' and 'ramblings' were not clear-cut answers.

You could interpret them in any way you wanted.

And this was an art the priests and soothsayers had mastered over generations.

Take this very rooster prediction for example.

First of all, seeing a wild rooster in the countryside or around the shore was nothing uncommon.

So the choice of bird was ingenious for the oracle.

Then came the interpreting it.

And it could be read any way you liked.

It could be interpreted as there being a bird on the beaches calling out to signal the rise of the sun, hence the clear weather prediction.

Or conversely, it could be read as the rooster warning the ships to stay away because of bad weather.

So which one was it?

And who decided that?

Well, your answer would be good as mine.

But as a guideline, it depended on the particular priest's interpretation, his status, as a higher priest could unilaterally throw his lesser's prediction out, and most importantly of all, on who was asking the question.

For example, if it was a king looking for the blessing of the gods to start his next campaign, and he had just donated a large amount of gold to your temple, you did not say no.

And vice versa, holding back on a prediction or using its results to fleece coin out of the king was a time-honored tradition.

And an entire industry had grown out of this scamming art, with the oracles even getting lectures on what to say in their dream-like state.

"Haha, good, good. Then there will be no problem. God is with us, God is with us," The issue about the weather was laid to rest with just Amenehrat's prediction.

Because for the nobles, that was sufficient.

This took care of the transportation, and going by sequence, the next question would be regarding the battle and the tactics to be employed.

But there were too many variables involved, and without knowing the terrain and the opposing force, it would be too hard to talk about.

Besides, most figured there would be no large-scale battle, but that the cowardly Alexander would choose to hole himself up inside Zanzan and start a siege.

Hence the next question raised was the capture of the city.

"My lords, have we decided we are going to retake the city? Will there be a siege?"

This query was laced with unwillingness as if the nobles did not prefer a lengthy siege.

"*Sigh*, it is too bad that this attack could not be kept a secret. It would have been so much easier to take the city then," A lament of regret unconsciously flowed out from one of the nobles immediately hearing this.

They were sure that if they had managed to get the jump on Alexander, leaving him with only two to three days to prepare his defenses rather than the two to three weeks, getting Zanzan would have been a cinch.

But as the nobles assumed that some, if not all of the information regarding the attack had been leaked given Maizdy's big mouth, that would likely not be possible.

And though they underestimated Maizdy in this respect, they were right in their conclusion.

The loss of stealth was a bit of a downer for many, who had assumed they could just waltz up to the walls unimpeded.

And now that that opinion was gone, the question raised was, "So how are we going to take it? Do we need Siege towers? Because I remember Pasha Muazz bragging how thick and formidable his city's walls were."

As well as posing this inquiry, that particular noble did not forget to have a poke at the 'downtrodden' Pasha Muazz.

Because Pasha Muazz could not deny his claims in fear of losing face, but also not brag about it because it will be their soldiers who will be dying under those very same walls.

But though clever, that particular noble had underestimated this former Pasha's shamelessness.

"Hahaha, indeed Zanzan's walls were formidable under me. Because it had 100,000 people ready to defend it."

"But now it's a ghost city with less than 20,000. And even that is made of the weak, infirm, and plague-ridden wastes. Those walls are nothing!" Muazz waved his flabby arms in a display of strength and masculinity.

Only god knew where Pasha Muazz got his information from, but as the Pasha of Zanzan, his intelligence was assumed to be right and accurate by all.

"Hahaha, yes, yes. After all, the greatest walls are nothing if not manned. We will be able to simply scale it like a child crawls up to his mother's lap, hehe," One of Muazz's lackeys was there to be his boss's wingman.

"Fifty-five thousand men (55,000) to take a city of twenty thousand (20,000). That should be enough," Matbar (Marquis) Ulmek's son Ural commented while tracing the stubble on his chin, feeling a simple ladder rush would be enough to overwhelm the defenders.

Chapter 399 Amenheraft's Preparations (Part-6)

Ural estimated that they would face around ten thousand (10,000) Zanzan defenders atop the wall.

This halved number came because typically in a siege, about half the population would be children, the old and weak, and the women, who would be used in logistics like bringing stones and weapons up to the walls, distributing food and water, taking care of the injured, and many more things other than directly participating in the fighting.

And to deal with the ten thousand (10,000) men, a force of fifty-five thousand (55,000) had been gathered, showing the determination of the noble side, and particularly of Djose.

And this ten thousand (10,000) number was gathered primarily relying on Pasha Muazz's intelligence regarding the city, who initially asked for fifty thousand (50,000) but surprisingly got even more.

Pasha Muazz in turn had gotten his information from the nobles who fled Zanzan some three months ago, and by also extrapolating on the disastrous state he had left the city in, dirty, vacant and with no food or jobs.

This meant that Muazz had no idea of the twenty thousand (20,000) extra people Alexander had bought with him when he moved to Zanzan, or that the twenty thousand (20,000) Zanzanians he had lost in battle were recovered by Alexander and returned to their native land.

Neither did he deem it necessary to find out that about fifty thousand (50,000) refugees had moved to Zanzan after Alexander opened its gates the city gates to them.

This was mainly because of shoddy intelligence gathering on his part, thinking nothing significant could have changed in just three months.

Which was partly arrogant on his part, but also partly true for his time period.

Three months were really too short to do anything meaningful to a city, especially if that city was called Zanzan and stories about it were true.

The fleeing nobles had bought back with them horrifying tales of plague and disease, describing the city as a graveyard, a tomb, and the cursed plans, so much to the point that Muazz in some twisted way was actually glad that they had lost the battle with Alexander, for he did not want to go back to that city right now.

He imagined it to be a corpse-ridden, disease-filled, hell hole where men and women beggars roamed the streets like shambling zombies, fighting like animals, and sometimes with animals over scraps of food, not having anything to eat, not having anywhere to go in this biting cold, and not having any way to earn money.

A hell on earth.

And while he thought of it, most times while in his bed, instead of feeling sorry for his people, the sadist would smile in glee, saying 'Those garages deserve it. If they had served me properly, they would not be in this situation. Suffer! Suffer even more!'

After all, everything wrong in his life was always everyone else's fault except his.

And then he would drift into his sweet dreams, content in the image of that bimbo Alexander not even knowing where to begin fixing this city.

And truthfully, Muazz himself doubted he could fix the Zanzan of his imagination.

Even if he could get the required food, where would be the medicine, the jobs, the economy, or the housing?

Pasha Muazz had no answer for that.

But he did not need to.

At least not right now.

And when the time came, he planned to simply dump it into the defeated shoulders of Alexander, saying that it was all his fault.

And then claim that now that the city has returned to its rightful owner's hand, everything will be alright.

But when will it be alright you ask?

Well, be patient lost lamb, and let Pasha Muazz handle everything.

It was the perfect plan.

Hence, in a way, even if Muazz got the correct information, it would be almost impossible for him to believe it.

And he might even discard it thinking that the agent had been bought or capitulated.

For the transformation Zanzan had undergone in the short three months was truly extraordinary and had to be seen to be believed.

Due to Alexander's actions, it had recovered from its plague-ridden, filthy, smelly state to becoming a bustling city center, clean, vibrant, and with clean water running in almost the blink of an eye, where men did not simply have the time to stay idle begging and loitering as Muazz imagined, but had more work than they could complete.

And their biggest complaint was not about their basic necessities- food, medicine, housing, or clothing, but that though the new young lord paid a generous wage, he also sometimes set long hours.

Which was true to a degree.

But this complaint was more of the innocent grumbling of any worker rather than an actual grievance.

Muazz's information blindspot was further created when Alexander simply killed almost all his informants, i.e- the street rats and gang leaders, using the devil excuse, crushing his intelligence network almost overnight.

In fact, the speed and lethality with which this young man had acted made Muazz up until now still not appreciate the full gravity of it all, hence another reason for his gross blunder.

And lastly, there were the dead nobles who would have been more up-to-date with the ins and goings of Zanzan and could have helped them make a more informed decision.

They had certainly noticed the hustle and bustle of the city, and though even they did not have the full picture, they certainly knew that Zanzan was no ghost city, a concern Kyamin had raised with Jamider (Earl) Nibbar.

A concern that sadly went to the underworld without reaching its destination.

Hence came Muazz's famous saying regarding the city defense, "My lords, I've credible reports that most of the people in the city are ready to rebel. And they are being only kept in line only under the threat of sharp swords."

"So, all we will need to do is show up, and the city will be ours, hahaha."

The rotund Pasha laughed so gleefully that one would think he had already gotten his city back, the report being pulled out of his rear.

But though he was wrong to the point it would be hard to be more wrong, his confidence and re-telling of the conditions of Zanzan convinced almost all.

Even Faruq and Ulmek's son Ural were happy by this news.

While Nibraz, Nibbar's father showed off his military insight by asking, "If it is going to be a siege, why would we need cavalry? Horses use up five times the food, and last time I checked, they can't climb walls."

He was very correct in this.

Horses were pretty much useless in sieges, as charging against stone walls was generally ill-advised.

And so, during such an event, the rider would have to ditch his companion and climb up the wall all by himself.

Which made the horse useless baggage.

"That's right. I believe that I'm correct in saying that the current strategy is to impose a naval blockade and then have the walls scaled using our infantry. So why do we need so many horses?" Amenheraft too posed.

"....." Faruq and Ural could only exchange glances.

Because they knew the simple reason behind this course of action was not militaristic but purely political.

Because DJose simply wanted to use his elite cavalry to crush his son's murderer.

And when DJose sent his Jahal mercenaries, Matbar (Marquiss) Ulmek went with the flow and sent some of his cavalries, which could act as scouts and foil ambushes, while seeing this trend Jamider (Earl) Nibbar gave his chariots which were his family tradition.

Thus posed with the query from the king, these two clever two people quickly racked their brains to come up with an answer.

An answer they quickly found out when they cast their minds to the tragedy of Jabel.

"My lords, from the speed at which Jabel was taken, we can be reasonably certain that Alexander has some good forces under him. He was a mercenary leader after all. These horses are there to deal with such uncertainties. After all, who knows, god willing, that young fool might be brash enough to attack us head-on, hahaha," Faruq really hoped that was the case.

Then he would not have to worry about the casualty heavy ladder rush.

While the gathered nobles focused on how Faruq addressed Alexander, not with disdain and mockery, but with neutral respect.

This was because the Pasha's son had no quarrel with Alexander.

As a matter of fact, he was even thankful for all the help he had provided, intentionally or not.

But such observations of the nobles were quickly cut short by Ural, who also joined on this made-up excuse, "That's right. Also remember my lords, since our plans have been leaked, reinforcements from Adhan or Matrak might be there. We should best prepare ourselves for any type of surprise."

This was very unlikely given the short time window, but the possibility was there.

"Hmmm, now that you mention it, has there been any official letter from the other side regarding this? If the news got out, we should at least expect a letter deterring us..." Another Jamider (Earl) present there asked.

"That's right. If I was in such a position, that's what I would have done," A second voice supported the inquiry.

"No. Not last time I checked," But Ameneheraft denied receiving any such communique.

Which immediately raised the hopeful voice, "So, does that mean our offensive is a secret? That nobody talked?"

The amount of hope in that question was palpable.

Chapter 400 Ptolomy And Farzah (Part-1)

Hope was a dangerous thing to count on.

And something that Nibraz refused to buy into.

"That is unlikely. I do not believe it." The old man flatly said, reasoning, "The more likely explanation is that the letter has not arrived yet. After all, it takes some time to get word from Zanzan to Adhan, and then to us."

And then menacingly added, "If you can wait a month, I can get you another ten thousand (10,000) men. I want to make sure those bastards burn."

The old man was planning to go all out to avenge his son.

"No! A month is too long!" But he was decisively struck down by a noble, who reasoned, "We are already cutting it too close to the spring harvest. And we will need our man back by April at the latest. Or all our crops will go to waste."

And he was soon joined by a few liked ones, "That's right. Even if this campaign goes perfectly according to schedule, and only last a month, it will still end by late February at the latest. And then it will take another month to get the men back. We are already cutting it too close. We can't wait any longer."

There was no way the nobles could afford to miss the first spring harvest, especially when it was after a three-year drought.

"Will Lord Maizdy and the others' unfortunate absence disturb the schedule?" Amenheraft then asked the question to Faruq.

"...Yes." After pausing to think if he should lie about it and push the campaign forward anyway, Faruq decided not to.

Because telling the truth would not put his skin at risk, but lying would.

So he said, "There were a lot of things Lord Maizdy prepared according to his needs. And now we will have to reorganize them. One such is the appointing of new officers, and then we will need to assume there will not be appropriate accommodations in Hatamum, so more winter clothing, more rations, and even more pleasure women. Further..."

"How long do you need?" Ameneheraft raised his voice to curtly cut off the reciting young man.

This campaign had bought him nothing but headaches and the irritation in his voice was palpable.

"Three weeks," Faruq gave the short answer,

"You have ten days," And got one and a half weeks from Amenheraft.

But this did not mean the returning time was pushed back.

Meaning there was even less time to finish the campaign and no time for a lengthy siege.

But it was what it was.

So with all the major sections covered, Amenheraft decided to give his closing speech as a way to conclude this meeting.

It was short and to the point, "As all my lords can see, this campaign is quite time constrained. But also very important. So I hope all of you will strive to the hardest of your abilities and not let factionalism divide us. Glory to Ramuh!"

"Glory to Ramuh!" A roaring cheer followed the king's speech followed by the raising of the wine cups, signaling the end of this meeting.

And thus finalized the mammoth task of capturing Zanzan by the end of February, a time frame set up by the nobles themselves.

And though they did not believe it would be easy, they also did not think it would be too hard or that the siege would last too long given their overwhelming number.

And so each of the nobles got down to performing their task with purpose but also relaxed tranquility.

A feeling that was very much missing with the pair in another part of the country.

"*Bam*, that bastard! How dare he?" Ptolomy slammed his fist against the hard mahogany table as he his eyes looked wrathfully at the letter Pasha Farzah had bought to him.

'Does he mean Amenheraft or Alexander?' Sitting across the strapping, muscular Pasha Farzah mused in a slouched, relaxed posture.

His body showed no discomfort as if the world was under his thumb while he reminisced about the contents of the letter.

It had been addressed both to him and Ptolomy and though it was convention to always let the king read the letter, Pasha Farzah did not care.

Ptolomy barely had the intellect and more importantly, the will to be of any help to him, and so it him who did the real work.

And hence he had the first look to determine if it was worth letting Ptolomy know.

And oh boy it was.

The letter was quite long, but basically detailed the events of Jabel and the incoming attack, with the urging by Alexander to diplomatically pressure the other side to back down.

"What do you think?" Finally finished reading and re-reading the letter, and after regaining his composure, Ptolomy posed.

Because he had no idea what to do.

"...*tap*...*tap*...*tap*..." Pasha Farzah did not immediately give the answer, but scanned Ptolomy's reaction, producing his signature tapping on the table.

To see how he would react to this sudden news.

Until finally he answered, "I think killing Fatrak was stupid. Alexander might not have known Fatrak. But you knew. And even then you killed him. And this is the result..... That's what I think."

The sarcasm and snarkiness are dripped very heavily over the very open and even rude comment, to the point of calling one's liege 'stupid' to his face.

"He insulted me! He insulted the king! He said 'you' were greater than me! You think I should have let him go? Or do you think you are greater than me?" Ptolomy immediately flared up hearing such words, looking at the silver-bearded man with reddened eyes and shaking fists.

One liked being called stupid to their face, even if they really were one.

While Farzah only placidly looked back, his mind commenting, 'The moment you became king, your attitude changed. You have become childish, throwing a tantrum the moment things don't go your way. You think that just because you sit on that throne and I call you king, you are any different? Heh, an idiot is an idiot no matter what's his title.'

The fact that Ptolomy was never a good candidate for king was known to all, especially to his retainers.

And he was initially chosen because of some of those particularly bad traits as it made him easier to be manipulated.

Traits that were becoming problematic now that he had actually become king.

"I think that killing Fatrak has caused Djose, who could have been our ally into becoming hostile for as long as he lives. And now he going to launch his attack on one of our allies. Which we are left having to deal with it. That's what I think," Pasha Farzah kept a calm, cool voice as he answered the accusation, not getting baited into starting an argument with Ptolomy.

"We will simply not give them the promised money. Or the goods. Or better yet, access during the Jaatama. They broke the treaty after all," Ptolomy ranted off a few potent suggestions.

Suggestions which were all shot down by the knowledgeable Pasha, "Not giving the money might not matter. Djose should have enough in his coffers to not care, and even reimburse those nobles Your Majesty might deny."

"What! He has that much?" Ptolomy was genuinely shocked.

The amount of money they were talking about was not peanuts.

It reached close to a billion, a huge sum by any stretch of the definition.

"Do not underestimate Kuleef, Your Highness" But Pasha Farzah in a deep tone advised, saying, "Though it is said it is the third richest province after Adhan and Matrak, I have always suspected otherwise. DJose should have more."

"Hmm, why do you say so?" Ptolomy was curious.

Adhania's three biggest provinces had the following.

Adhan had its salt, its agriculture, its precious minerals, and an annual tithe that all the temples of Ramuh across the nation paid it, making it the richest province.

Matrak had timber, precious gemstones, a thriving slave trade due to the barbarians it bordered in the north, quite a few very popular horse breeds coupled with an advanced animal husbandry industry, some very fertile plains, and a fishery industry.

And Kuleef had a thriving port, a glass industry, and its real gem, its flatlands, giving it the nickname the bread basket of Adhania.

Because the Naher River, which run through Adhania very similarly to the Nile River, met the sea at Kuleef.

And just like the Nile delta produced a patch of ridiculously fertile land at its mouth, so did the Naher.

"Just the crops produced around the Naher delta should have made Kuleef the richest province. The fact that it is not is based partly because DJose pockets a lot of the bill of Pasha Sharif (Pasha of Abu Hamam) due to complicated reasons and partly because he wants to hide it." Pasha Farzah hypothesized and finished by saying, "Well, that's my thoughts anyway."

Ptolomy's eyes narrowed upon hearing this, regret welling up for being so brash back them and losing such a valuable ally.

He trusted this analysis because he knew once upon a time Pasha Farzah and his eldest brother DJose were quite close, though the relationship seemed to have cooled a bit in recent years.

The first time was when DJose refused to back Farzah openly and directly during the rebellion. And then after Ptolomy's ill-fated swing of the sword.

"So, money is no longer an option. What about the Jaatama?" Ptolomy hence moved to the next option, posing the question with pursed lips,