

Herald 401

Chapter 401 Seelima And Mikaya's Persuasion

Ptolomy's suggestion made Pasha Farzah give a very quick and frank answer.

"If Your Majesty does this, please let me prepare the army"

Meaning it would be war.

And Ptolomy knew that hence the pursed lips, for the religious significance of the pilgrimage was too sensitive to touch.

He would not only be Amenheraft's enemy then, but of the common populace.

"Then we should do nothing? And let Alexander die?" Though Ptolomy did not exactly like Alexander, it was not to the point he wanted him dead.

Sure that man cheated and swindled a lot of gold and land from him.

But that man was still useful.

He was a resourceful general no doubt about it, and in times like this, Ptolomy was grossly short of good generals.

And a good general was worth more than ten cities.

Because ancient warfare really depended on individual leadership.

Furthermore, Alexander had even proved to be a skilled administrator in the short time he was in Adhan, impressing Ptolomy.

So much so that the young mercenary had been even offered the position of prime minister, which, the man had foolishly turned down, according to Ptolomy's recounts.

And even when putting aside his personal capabilities, the city that he controlled was also quite important.

Zanzan served as a bulwark against Tibias, weakened Amenheraft by denying him such a large and productive port city under him, and in a crude way, even acted as a beacon drawing aggro away from Adhan and Matrak.

So both Ptolomy and Farzah were reluctant to see the city fall and Alexander die.

"Your Majesty, perhaps you could write to him. Make him see reason. Offer him good land and a large peerage like Jamider (Earl)," Pasha Farzah thus advised Ptolomy to entice Alexander to abandon Zanzan and return to Adhan.

This was certainly not the best option, as the first thing it would ruin about be their 'new religion' plan.

But it was better than dying and that was the most optimal course of action Farzah could think about.

"Seelima already tried that." But Ptolomy reacted with an exasperated breath, swinging his arms and saying, "But the fool only said to her, and here let me read you the quote," Ptolomy picked up the letter to read the line, "His Majesty tasked me to defend Zanza. And I will do it to my death." Pasha put on a voice trying to mimic Alexander while saying this aloud.

And then an instant later, he flared up, banging his fist on the table, and snarling, "Bastard! When did I tell him that? I did not even want him to go to Zanzan!"

Ptolomy could clearly tell that this was just Alexander giving a poor excuse.

'Hahaha, so that bastard was directed to Alexander,' While Pasha Farzah finally got his answer to whom Ptolomy was asking right after reading the letter as well as feeling that kind of unyielding, free-spirited speech to be Alexander's style.

He knew the boy did not want to be subordinated to anybody.

This conversation between the Queen mother and Alexander occurred at a later period following her casual offer at the dinner table, when she met again with him to offer the same option formally in his study later, starting the meeting by saying, "My lord Pasha, back at the table, I let my emotions get the better of me. I'm sorry."

And after Alexander laughed it off with the words, "Hahaha, where, where, I have already forgotten about it," the beautiful Queen mother got to the real topic, urging him to leave Zanzan for Adhan by saying, "There is no shame in doing this. You took over the plague-infested Zanzan just three months ago, and what you have done in the meantime is already miraculous. But this army is really too big. Let us retreat while you still have the chance. Ptolomy will be more than happy to receive you with open arms."

And if Alexander really did not think he had a chance, he would have certainly taken the offer.

Because only a fool would die defending a city against overwhelming odds when an alternative to live to fight another day existed.

But Alexander did believe he could win.

He was even confident about it.

And so he said in a polite gentlemanly tone, "Your Royal Highness, His Majesty's concerns warm my heart," before giving a grand speech,

"But I believe victory is not decided by numbers. It is decided on the battlefield after the battle."

"So as long as I stay in Zanzan, I believe I have the chance of being the victor. But the day I chose to leave, I will instantly become the loser, without even firing a single shot."

"This I cannot accept. And I have no doubt that with His Majesty's blessings, I can prevail!"

Alexander's speech sounded great, full of zeal, charisma, and chivalry.

It would have been a great rousing speech.

But in reality, it also lacking in any pragmatics or being grounded in reality.

And even Alexander would call large parts of it pure rubbish.

Life was not anime where 'trying your hardest' would get you results.

Overwhelming numbers won an overwhelming number of times.

This was a statistical fact that was hard to argue

And that's why Seelima wanted to shout, 'Bullshit! You think you burned down a defenseless city and some kind of hotshot! Listen to your elders and run, you brat!'

But she ultimately held her tongue and pushed down her anger, as he then patiently further advised, "Your Grace, I can understand your reluctance to leave Zanzan. Though I'm only a bit aware, I have seen how much care and love you have shown this city. This city had never been this likely even in its heyday."

The Queen mother then put her hand on her bountiful chest, and pleaded, "And so please trust me when I say this- Losing Zanzan is only temporary. Once we are powerful enough, Adhan will certainly help you get it back. You will always be the Pasha of Zanzan. And Zanzan City will always be yours. But please, for now, let us retreat."

Finishing her sentence, Seelima looked at Alexander with a gaze verging on becoming puppy dog eyes.

This countance was bought on by the fact that over the last three months of staying with Alexander, it had made her convinced that losing him at such an early stage of the game would be too detrimental to her and Ptolomy.

He had displayed very strong administrative abilities which would be very useful for Ptolomy and also she still needed him to give her all the shiny, new stuff he was cooking up in his backyard.

And lastly, she simply liked the boy.

He was smart, charismatic, and very intelligent,

Nothing like the typical image the words 'a mercenary leader' would conjure up.

He even had a charming air of aloofness that she could not put her finger on.

This was all the same aloofness Cambyses had noticed about her husband all the way in his tent.

And so, deep in her heart, Seelima even had the insane idea to one day kill Ptolomy and marry Alexander if the situation arose to such an event.

Though this was just one of many considerations, not a proper decision.

As the Queen mother tried to sincerely advise Alexander, Alexander was a bit surprised by the frankness of it.

The woman genuinely seemed to care about his life.

He had always assumed this ambitious woman could not wait to see him go underground.

And for a moment he was unsure how to react.

'Should I show the troop numbers and new weapons to reassure her that we have a winning chance?' Alexander considered but did not feel like discussing top-secret military intel with outsiders.

Even if that outsider was very very unlikely to leak it.

But looking at the wheat-kissed charming face of the mature woman, whose eyes appeared to be crying her heart out for his safety, Alexander almost felt hypnotised.

Only now could he appreciate just a tiny bit of the charm that had managed to ensnare a king who had countless women ready to spread their legs between her fingers, and make him so infatuated that he even died under her without noticing it.

'Succubus!' Alexander clenched his teeth and lightly bit his tongue to break himself out of this dreamlike wonderland.

And then ultimately decided not to divulge anything and simply said the words The Queen mother had wrote to Ptolomy.

Though in that letter, The Queen mother had neglected to mention how she had stormed out of Alexander's study with large gaits that was perfectly proportional to her irritation after hearing Alexander's reply.

'Idiot fool. Die for all I care!' Were said between her gnashed teeth.

And the next day, Mikaya tried her luck in persuading the bullish noble, but the conversation was almost a carbon copy of the Queen mother's.

Except the fact that the silver-haired woman had also asked, "Alex, if you really have a way to win, please tell me. I shouldn't have to tell you why I won't tell anyone."

And when Alexander did not budge even afterward, she even said, "Alex, if this is just a bluff, I will be really disappointed in you."

To which Alexander only responded by saying, "I would never bluff with my people or my family's life."

Which could mean either he had a bag of tricks with him, or he was just overly confident.

Causing Mikaya to storm out of the study in a very similar way to the Queen mother.

Chapter 402 Ptolomy And Farzah (Part-2)

"That boy is resourceful. I think he believes he can ...umm...outlast the siege and negotiate a peace settlement, " Trying to give an explanation for Alexander's bravado, Pasha Farzah came up with this theory.

Though even the most optimistic part of him felt ashamed to say-'Alexander thinks he can win', feeling that might exceed optimism and enter the territory of miracles.

Because the Jahal mercenaries they would be facing were no joke.

And the number of the army was also too much.

Such huge numbers were usually wielded by Pashas against one another.

Not against a single city, moreover, one which had been plague-ridden and recovering from a three-year drought.

"Negotiate! After what he has?" Ptolomy did not think Pasha Farzah was so naive to believe that Alexander could talk his way out of this alive if he lost.

"The very first thing they will do when they capture him is cut off his tongue. And then get to working on his other bits" Ptolomy frustratingly commented, knowing Alexander had drawn the popular anger this time.

"I told that bastard to not go killing nobles left and right. I told him repeatedly. *Urggg*, why did I give him the right to kill nobles? I must have had my head kicked in by a donkey."

By now Ptolomy had gotten up from his couch and started to pace around the room in anger and regret.

If only Alexander did not have that privilege, he could not have killed those nobles from Jabel.

And if those nobles were kept alive, given their confession of crimes, this entire fiasco could have been easily mitigated.

Ptolomy could have even helped Alexander increase his fiefdom by confiscating some of those captured nobles' lands as punishment for their crimes.

"But no, that idiot that to go kill them! And what was the point?" Ptolomy shot abuses at Alexander, mixing his inner thoughts with his external bursts.

Ptolomy really could see no benefit in doing what Alexander had done.

Only trouble.

Because after killing so many nobles, their wives, and children, plus his already high kill count from earlier, if Alexander thought there was even a chance in hell that he would have the chance to even utter the words 'negotiate', he was smoking up a unicorn's butt.

His 'crimes' even made Ptolomy sometimes want to kill him.

"Then let us pray for a miracle. Ramuh and Gaia are most powerful," Pasha Farzah could also only let out a sigh as he said this.

He knew things were bad for the boy.

'*Sigh*', and I somewhat liked that brat,' Pasha Farzah wistfully sighed.

Ptolomy gave a pause upon hearing this, taking the time to calm himself a bit, and even pouring himself a glass of wine.

Then he posed his next question, "If he dies, what about all those things?" clarifying, "You should know as well as me of the things he has discovered. Clear glass, that sweet thing, and this new papyrus."

Ptolomy showed the letter which was written on paper as he then in a tone of unwillingness asked, "Do we just let all these fall into that 'fallen's' hand?"

Fallen was Ptolomy's official definition for Amenheraft, as in 'Fallen' from power and the grace of the gods.

Though the word was yet to catch on.

This was also the thing that stung Pasha Farzah the most when he thought about Zanzan's potential defeat.

Like The Queen mother, Mikaya too had informed of the happenings of Zanzan, of how the plague was eradicated, of the new soaps, the beautiful glass, the new types of clothes, and everything else Mikaya was privy to.

The girl really left nothing behind to tattle, except that little nightly secret of hers.

And so, after knowing about it all, Farzah could feel his body produce actual pain just thinking about all these wondrous inventions would just fall into Djose's lap just like that soon.

In fact, when Mikaya had written to him in her very first letter about the happenings and change of Zanzan, in being completely truthful in her letters, the contents of it also appeared somewhat fantastical, and if it was not written by his most trusted daughter, Pasha Farzah would have taken it to be the wild imaginations of a drunk.

And even after all the trust he had in Mikaya, he still considered asking in the return letter, 'Are you trying any weird berries in Zanzan?'

Because he felt that there was no way a single man could realistically invent so many things in so little time.

Thus the saying 'Reality is stranger than fiction,' once again manifested in the Pasha's life.

And tempted by all this, in one of his letters to Mikaya, Farzah had even alluded to saying that he considering marrying her off to Alexander.

But his daughter had not addressed this concern in her next address, showing her reluctance.

And Pasha Farzah also knew Alexander might not be interested given his daughter's proclivities, which no doubt the smart boy would have some clue about by this time.

And so in the deepest recesses of his heart, there resided the will to match Azira and Azura with Alexander.

But it was still a fetal plan, something that Pasha Farzah was considering, not deciding.

"Perhaps he is blessed by the gods. And everything will be alright," Again, Pasha Farzah could only give this muddly answer, asking Ptolomy to rest his faith in the gods.

Because that was all they could do now.

While Farzah reasoned to himself that all his actions, achievements, and inventions up until now were too fantastic to be done alone and the agnostic Pasha really hoped just this once the gods were real and that Alexander was really blessed by them.

Because he had a lot riding on Alexander surviving and thriving, for his future and his family's future.

"....." Pasha Farzah answer's made Ptolomy feel an unbearable itch as he turned his head away in frustration.

The itch was caused by the thought of the potential loss of such great inventions and by the fact that if Alexander did by some miracle win, then he would be someone similar to him.

"*Snap*, Perhaps we can write to him," Suddenly, as if hitting on an epiphany Ptolomy snapped his fingers, and elaborated,

"Perhaps we can write to him and say to not let these precious inventions fall into others' hands. Perhaps he should destroy them and kill all the artisans. Or better yet hand those techniques to us. Yes, to us. So we can get revenge for him later," Ptolomy's eyes seemed to sparkle with each passing word, and his octaves appeared to increase with each succeeding sentence.

Ptolomy was genuinely pleased with himself for having figured out the solution.

'At least then some good would come of this total fiasco' He reasoned with himself.

'The naive idiot really thinks it can work,' While Pasha Farzah only rolled his eyes.

This was not because he thought the idea was stupid.

No.

In fact, he felt that the idea was quite good.

A prudent lord might have indeed done that.

If not the artisans, then at least the workshops just in case.

After all, it took Alexander just three months to build.

So, even if everything was destroyed, it would only take him at best that much time.

And likely it will be much less because of the already experienced workforce.

But it missed a critical factor- the words in the letter.

It missed the fact in the letter that Ptolomy just read, Alexander clearly showed his willingness to fight to the last man to defend Zanzan.

And would such a determined man destroy his golden goose?

There was no way.

Pasha Farzah foresaw Alexander bravely fighting with all available men, trying to protect everything until a rout began and everything went to hell.

And then there would be no man to demolish anything.

Because that was the kind of person Alexander struck him as.

"Hmmm, that is a good idea. Perhaps Your Majesty should write it. Who knows maybe he will actually pay heed to this one," Pasha Farzah did not feel like arguing with Ptolomy and so simply told him to go with it.

It couldn't hurt to try anyway.

Ptolomy felt very good about himself hearing Farzah's positive answer.

It was not easy to get the old man's greenlight.

A feeling that quickly evaporated, when Ptolomy suddenly remembered another issue as he jolted his head at his prime minister and cried, "Farzah! There is also all that money he stole from the temple. What about that? Will we just let all that money simply fall into DJose's hand? That can't happen!"

Ptolomy knew Alexander had around 300 to 400 million ropals with him.

And if all that money fell to Kuleef's Pasha, he could easily recoup all his expenses and even make a huge profit.

"Perhaps we can also ask Alexander to dump his coins into the sea," Pasha Farzah matched his joke with Ptolomy's previous method, saying it with a wry smirk.

Because there was nothing else they could do.

Ptolomy did pick up on the sarcasm and understood that his previous suggestion was seen as a joke.

So, he snapped and said in a somewhat regal, deep voice shouted,

"Prime minister! "All you have done up until now is just say no and nothing like they were being given out for free by the roadside!"

"I appointed you to solve problems. Not make jokes. So tell me how can we retaliate!"

It appeared Ptolomy did not like being passive and thrashed upon by his enemies.

Chapter 403 Ptolomy And Farzah (Part-3)

Ptolomy knew Pasha Farzah to be a man of action.

And not the type to take a beating laying down.

"Hehehe," Hearing this assertive demand, at first the aged but strong man gave a little chuckle, confirming he indeed did a plan.

"Well, although we cannot reinforce Alexander, we can certainly take advantage of the situation and make Amenheraft pay. For example, there are a lot of nobles around here who follow Amenheraft. We could 'persuade' them to switch sides." Pasha Farzah made the cunning suggestion.

"Persuade? You mean kill! Revenge for Alexander?" Ptolomy's eyes did not glow with excitement, but wary.

Killing nobles was a bad thing, a very bad thing.

"Of course not. We are not like wild dogs!" And Pasha Farzah seemed to agree as he uncategorically rejected going so extreme.

It would set a catastrophic precedent following which nobles could start killing each other in broad daylight.

No one wanted to see that happen.

So he expounded on what he really meant, "I meant we could use the army to force some of the nobles to swear loyalty to us."

Making one swear loyalty under the sword and then expect them to follow it might sound flawed, but in this time period, swears and promises were similar to binding contracts.

If you sign it, willing or not, you generally had to go through with it, willing or not.

"Oh? Can it be done? Is the army ready?" Ptolomy was certainly interested to erode Amenheraft's influence when it was right next to his base of operations.

But Adhan's army was still in shambles.

Whatever improvements had been made by Alexander, he was sure to demolish it then he left, such as taking a large part of the officer corp with him to Zanzan, and severely crippling the weapon manufacturing capacity of the city.

But even without those the army still would not have been much better as what made that army prevail against Amenheraft's army was the strict discipline and competent officer corp formed by the experienced, veteran mercenaries.

It was those people who maintained the cohesion and morale of the army.

And even they eventually left, the army crumbled into a loose pile of sand.

And given that that battle was just three months ago, naturally Ptolomy had had no time to fix all these glaring issues.

"The army should be adequate. And the peasants have nothing to do anyway," Pasha Farzah reported confidently.

He meant that though the army was in no condition to fight against a peer opponent, it could still take on the small fishes around Adhan.

After all, even a skinny, starving camel was larger than a horse.

And given that it was smack down in the middle of the winter, this skinny camel could be fattened up as a large number of peasants who had nothing to do could be easily gathered to simply overwhelm the other side using sheer mass.

"Then let's. I will choose the nobles to target, and you get the army ready," Ptolomy hence very happily agreed.

"Okay,... let us end here," Pasha Farzah accepted the order with a deep nod as he felt that the meeting was over.

Instead, his thoughts ran back to the army, and who should be appointed to what.

Because currently, the only permanent fighting force was Pasha Farzah's own personal soldiers, who would be now responsible for training the peasants on the bare basics.

Also, as a side note, given that most of the officers were coming from his personal guards, it was pretty evident that Ptolomy's army was actually Pasha Farzah's.

'Well, I will need to send conscription notices all across the city,' Pasha Farzah was already thinking about his next task as he got up from the comfy sofa, the image of distributing messengers around Adhan appearing in his mind.

And accompanying it surfaced the vision of the city itself, Adhan in its all its grandeur.

Adhan was still that city Alexander left it, with beautiful imposing architecture striking up into the horizon, marbled walkways leading up to them, and the magnificent, pink waters of the Life Sea dazzling in the gentle winter sunlight.

But it was also somehow superimposed with the dilapidated, crumbling, and shambling ruined parts of the city, where people still lived miserable lives, in much contrast to those residents of the much more fanciful residences.

'A sick old man dressed in immaculate clothes.' Was the comment Pasha Farzah made about Adhan's current state.

Most of the people were still cold, hungry, and miserable, with the recent hot war settling into a cold war hampering the proper recovery of the economy as Amenheraft's nobles put trade barriers against Adhan.

Some vitality did return to the city after Pasha Farzah started distributing food, but it was nowhere near enough in its scale to be very impactful.

This was because,

One- a lot of the grains were purchased by Alexander.

Two- a lot of it were used for planting, acting as seeds for the spring harvest.

And Three- inefficiency in distributing the food, caused by both incompetence and corruption, something that was almost absent in Alexander's time because of how he used his army to do everything.

Now, to be fair, Alexander could not have done that for too long, as if Pasha Farzah foolishly copied his successful predecessor, he would make the army too powerful, with jurisdiction over both military and civilian aspects of the city.

But whatever the reason, it did not change the fact that because of it people were still lacking the basic necessities to survive, meaning they could not work, meaning they could not afford the basic necessities, meaning no work, meaning....it was a vicious cycle.

So the city hobbled on, fueled by man's innate tenacity to keep on living, even when it was mired in the shadow of the drought, and its residents suffered from its effects.

For the people were hopeful of a better tomorrow, even though they struggled to get through the biting winter without proper provisions.

Whereas in contrast, Zanzan had already forgotten that a drought had happened and was getting stronger and stronger exponentially every day, its people having not a second to catch a breath.

A large part of it was Alexander's food drive to enable the workers to work, the invention of several large industries that sucked up a huge number of laborers, eliminating unemployment, and lastly, Alexander generously dumping tens of millions of ropals out of his own pocket just in the last three months to jump-start the economy.

The last part was something that both Pasha Farzah and Ptolomy could have done but were not willing to.

Pasha Farzah did not because it was not his city.

And Ptolomy did not because one, he was dead broke.

And two, which was the more important reason, because he did not have that economic knowledge.

To him, this was how a city always looked after a disaster, and recovery always took time.

According to him, once the spring harvest came, things would improve, and over the next two to three years, the devastation would fix itself.

And he was true in that, for the grass root people would work to make their lives better even through all the hardship.

But without a coordinated, centralized command, this would take time.

Time in which, the ruler of the city could use the downtrodden, desperate people in their military adventures, almost in a cruel, machiavellian move.

For example, Pasha Farzah had no doubt that when the notices for the levies went out, there would be no shortage of volunteers.

For the poor souls were desperate to earn coin.

And a glut of labor supply meant cheaper wages, which drew a smile on the aged noble's face.

'This war should not cost us a lot,' He was relieved.

But his ruminations were interrupted by Ptolomy's sharp call, "Wait!" as the new king then posed, "Seelima and Hellma! Will they be alright? Djose's men won't do anything to them right?"

The question had panic and fear draped all over it, as Ptolomy cursed himself for forgetting about the most important people in his life in exchange for Alexander.

And the reason for this was not simply forgetfulness or Ptolomy's lower intellect.

It was because of habit.

Because he grew up with the maxim - 'Nobles are never harmed'.

A maxim that Alexander seemed to challenge and even threaten to shatter.

And so he was afraid that once Zanzan was captured, the nobles might harm the royal ladies in revenge for Ptolomy appointing a butcher like Alexander.

And that thought mortified him, as Ptolomy, even without listening to Pasha Farzah's response, attempted to rush to write a letter to the Queen mother, telling her to take a ship out of Zanzan this very second.

"Djose will not harm The Queen mother or the Imperial Princess. Everyone is not like Alexander." But Pasha Farzah was there to placate Ptolomy instantly, saying, "Seelima is still his Imperial mother, and Hellma his sister. So his men will have strict orders to not touch them. Rest assured."

Pasha Farzah was damn sure about this.

Sure Alexander's women would get butchered or worse when Zanzan fell, but nothing would happen to the other noble ladies.

Pasha Farzah knew Djose and knew he would not raise his blades against them.

Because that was not who Djose was.

He was going there to punish Alexander, not the other guest ladies.

And also because doing so would break the 'no killing nobles' contract, risking this civil war escalating to a conflict that destroys Adhania.

Djose would not do that.

Chapter 404 Farzah And Nanazin (Part-1)

"How can you be so sure?" But Ptolomy was still panicked, as he stretched out his arm and said, "Djose could choose to simply lay the blame for the harm on the fact that some soldiers go out of control during seizing the city."

"He could say the tragedy was caused by the fact that no commander could control each and one of his men under him during the chaotic plundering of a captured city." Ptolomy envisioned the worst-case scenario and then pointed asked, "What then?"

'Well it's good to see you are not totally inept. At least you can recognize Djose might choose to harm them as revenge for you killing his son,' Pasha Farzah was half impressed that Ptolomy did not take the royal ladies' safety for granted.

Now only if he put that much thought into governance.

"*Sigh*," Hence giving let out an audible sigh, the Pasha Farzah gave an easy solution, "Then we can ask them to move to the Ramuh temple. Mikaya can be with them too. The soldiers will not dare to blindly harm those in there."

This was why the prime minister was only half impressed with Ptolomy.

Because the king in his panic and fear forgot such a classic technique.

Temples were sacred places that would never be harmed, and this protection extended to those residing inside.

So hiding inside the temple was a pretty safe tactic.

After all, people were rarely madmen like Alexander- one who attacked everything.

Pasha Farzah further added, "And I will ask Azura and Azira not to let Alexander's family take asylum there. This will deny the soldiers any excuse to attack the temple. Will this be enough Your Majesty?"

Pasha Farzah seemed to have considered a lot of the minutiae, as he was pretty sure the Temple of Gaia would be demolished after the city's capture and all its believers killed or enslaved.

Ptolomy gave a bit of pause at this suggestion, but eventually came the affirmative answer, "Yes," though he instantly added, "But I still feel leaving the city will be safer. Farzah, are you not worried about your people?"

To say that Pasha Farzah was not at all concerned would be a lie.

But life was about managing risks.

And in this particular case, the risk of staying in the city was not too great.

At least it outweighed the alternative.

Hence Pasha Farzah replied to Ptolomy, "At this time of the year, the waters around Zanzan are not great for ships. There are frequent storms and strong winds. So, instead of taking the large risk, it will be best for the ladies to take refuge in the temple of Ramuh."

'...I see. Okay then," Ptolomy finally relented to the advice and then decided to end the meeting for today.

And as Pasha Farzah left the king's private study, he soon asked one of his guards to find his son and join him in his private quarters.

He had instructions for him.

"So, that's the whole situation," The aged man first filled his fifth son, aged twenty-seven, on the new developments which the man took some time to digest.

'This rebellion was a mistake,' Contrary to his father, he was much more pessimistic about winning this civil war as he hid his sigh, but could only go with it.

His family identity meant his side was chosen by birth.

He then heard his father task him, "You are to arrange the collection of the peasant levies and then lead the army. It is an easy job, so do it well."

This son of his was always a playboy and letting him lead the army to squash some poor, unprepared nobles was Pasha Farzah's way of giving the man an easy way of earning fame and credit in the court.

"But father, wasn't I supposed to head to Zanzan at the end of the month? To deliver all the material Pasha Alexander bought. The ships are already waiting at Agrinat!" Kayvan reminded Farzah of the previous job he was assigned to.

He could not do both..

To which Farzah just brushed off his hand in exasperation at his son's lack of foresight, "Fool! And who will you deliver those to? Djose?"

Pasha Farzah already considered Alexander a dead man and saw no point in giving free goods to the enemy.

So he commanded, "Order those ships back. Tell the order has been canceled. And then deal with the contract cancellations fees. I don't want to be bothered by those."

Kayvan's lips pursed hearing this, and his eyes already felt droopy thinking of the long, tedious discussion he would have to have with the trade guilds to negotiate and re-negotiate the various

fees for breaking the contract.

Since so many goods have been ordered for Alexander and now they would have to go back unsold, the guilds would have to take huge losses.

And this will undoubtedly sour the mood between them and Pasha Farzah for some time.

Kayvan was not looking forward to those meetings.

But he could only obey his powerful father, and so hiding another sigh he answered affirmatively, "Yes, lord father."

This ended the meeting between the father and son, but Pasha Farzah's adventures for today were not over yet.

Because on his way to the royal dining table, among one of the many hallways, he ran across the queen-Nanazin.

"Good evening, Lord Prime Minister," This curly-haired, beautifully dressed woman bowed toward the man.

But though her actions were graceful, her voice was almost croaked and her countenance ugly.

She seemed to have seemingly lost all her charms and looked haggard and hurt.

"Has he been doing this often?" Seeing Nanazin's state, Pasha Farzah could not help but ask in concern.

Pasha Farzah clearly noticed the bright, red, marks around her neck, as if a rope had been tied to it, that she tried to hide with a high-collared dress but apparently failed, and much more obviously the large, swollen black eye she tried to use powder and make-up to appear more natural.

It appeared Ptolomy was abusing his wife.

"Please do not be concerned, Your Grace. He is the king," Nanazin's throat still hurt from yesterday's ordeal where she had been hanged as various men entertained themselves in rough and barbaric ways, Ptolomy included.

And so she tried to keep her answer as short as possible.

Pasha Farzah could not help but release a sigh inside his mind upon hearing the helpless, forlorn reply.

He had been clued in about Nanazin and her daughters' true status by Ptolomy himself who had once raged, "That slut thinks she was leech off me! Make a cuckold! I will show her! I will kill her!"

It appeared after Ptolomy became the king, he finally let out the rage he felt all those years, venting out all the humiliation he had endured.

Previously, as a weak, sickly prince, he had no way to do anything to his high-status, powerful wife, even if her family had nominally disowned her.

So the only he could do was settle for those humiliating plays.

But now, finally, after eighteen years of suffering, he could make Nanazin endure all his pent anger and frustration.

Completely ignoring the fact he would humiliate her at every chance but even then she was loyal enough to use her body to help her husband's rebellion.

In fact, some could even argue that Ptolomy sat on his throne in no small part to Nanazin, who helped 'convince' a lot of the nobles to join her husband's side.

Or there was the fact that even until now, Nanazin mostly faithfully followed her husband.

And the last great injustice done to her was that she was really just an innocent woman who had no control over life, and the true culprit was her father Matbar (Marquiss) Tareeq, who had promptly disowned her after her grave crime and who hadn't talked to his daughter for almost sixteen years.

But all those did not matter to Ptolomy.

Matbar (Marquiss) Tareeq was too powerful and so he could only vent on Nanazin.

And it manifested by making Nanazin's life very difficult in various ways, both regular and sexual.

As a matter of fact, Ptolomy had initially asked Pasha Farzah's advice about straight-up executing the 'immoral' woman and her three daughters for deceiving the king.

But the Pasha had talked him out of it, saying that such an action should not be taken without Matbar (Marquiss) Tareeq's consideration and also that he had agreed with Alexander to swap the Queen mother with them every year.

And the latter reason was particularly enough to convince Ptolomy to stay his hand, as he was afraid that Alexander might choose to make the two women stay for longer if Nanazin could not be given.

While later, he found that keeping Nanazin was the better alternative, as he could dish out all eighteen years of hurt on her...slowly.

Killing her would end her suffering right then and there.

"Your Grace, it is most fortunate that I got to meet you here. Because I had a favor to *cough*, ask you," Nanazin spoke quickly, so as to grasp the opportunity as fast as possible, even at the cost of straining her throat.

She then pleaded in an almost sobbing tone, "I know that Lord Kyavan is about to set off for Zanzan. Would it be possible for him to take with him my girls? They are innocent, and I fear for them."

The triplets were currently at Agnirat under Lady Inayah's tutelage, and she knew they would face the same if not worse things once they returned.

And she wanted to avoid that at all costs.

Chapter 405 Farzah And Nanazin (Part-2)

Pasha Farzah clearly noticed how the word 'fear' had made Nanazin involuntarily shiver as she said so.

Because only she could imagine what the girls would be made to go through if these innocent doves fell into Ptolomy's hands.

She could not let that happen, and she had to do everything possible to try and make that not happen.

And to her, only Alexander seemed to be the viable option.

Nanazin did not have the opportunity to consider what will happen to her girls after they reach Zanzan, but in her mind, whatever and wherever the girls end up at, it will still be better than what Ptolomy had planned for them.

Of that she was sure.

While Pasha Farzah's heart shook a bit hearing Nanazin's request.

He could easily guess what this powerless queen was trying to achieve and he could only imagine how she would feel knowing about Alexander and more importantly what Ptolomy would do to her now that he would no longer have to consider Alexander.

Perhaps he would directly kill her.

Or more likely just increase the abuse now that he would not have to be sure to keep her alive.

Perhaps the abuse had already started.

'Okay, I will,' Pasha Farzah did not have the heart to tell the fragile woman the truth about the imminent attack on Zanzan or that Alexander might die very soon and simply lied with an affirmative nod, while quickly thinking up an excuse for why the ships to Zanzan will be 'delayed'.

He said, "But the weather around Matrak has been particularly bad this year and we are waiting for a few last-minute orders to reach us. That could take a few weeks. We will immediately set off once we get that."

"That's alright, that's alright *cough*, *cough*," Just the confirmation of her request immediately made Nanazin produce a huge grin as well wiping away all her previous melancholy with pure, unadulterated joy, and even made her forget about her throat, causing her to break into a cough

But this was not enough to stop her from thanking Pasha Farzah further, as she hoarsely said, "*Cough*, *cough*", the girls still have some months in their training. As long as they can leave before. *cough*...that."

Nanazin was over the moon at having her request granted.

This was honestly just a shot in the dark, a move of desperation that she really did not expect to work.

She was fully prepared to hear Pasha Farzah say something along the lines, 'This is for His Majesty to decide,' and reject her.

'Thank goodness. Although I'm already done for, I hope that Afsarah, Afsanah, and Afsahah can get a better life.' She breathed a sigh of relief internally.

This was the love of a mother.

She did not mind going through hell as long as her children could at least live on earth.

"No problem. And rest assured His Majesty will know nothing about this," Pasha Farzah lied through his teeth to comfort this woman, who gave him a beholden look and said in a joyous but still hoarse voice, "Thank you, *cough*. I will be ever grateful. My girls will be *cough* ever grateful."

Even when her throat her hurting like crazy, Nanazin did not forget to thank the man and even looked at Pasha Farzah as if she was gazing at a saint.

A look that quickly changed to rueful acceptance as she heard the aged Pasha say immediately after with a sleazy smirk, "But what will be my reward? Hmmm? I'm taking a lot of risks here after all, hehe."

The innuendo was clear.

And Nanazin accepted it gracefully, as this was the way of the world- equivalent exchange.

You give me something, I give you something.

Curling her lips up and giving her lips a sensual lick with her tongue, she coyly said, "Then Your Grace has never received one of my special oil massages, have you? Perhaps I could visit you tonight? I'm pretty good with my hands."

Even after Ptolomy's deeds, Nanazin was still a very beautiful woman, and the roundabout way she suggested the act made it even more enticing.

And surprisingly she managed to do it without coughing.

Pasha Farzah readily accepted it with a smile, though in a much more direct and open way, "I will ask His Majesty to let you spend the next week with me. I'm sure he won't mind. "

The cultural norms of Adhanian nobility made such a request that would have gotten anywhere else that person's head lopped off somehow appear normal and reasonable.

A solid evidence of the moral decay of Adhania.

"*Nod*," And Nanazin only silently nodded, both because of the finality of the statement and also to spare her throat.

Of course, in actuality, Pasha Farzah had no intention of actually sleeping with Nanazin.

He did this purely out of altruism, just to let Nanazin sleep soundly for the next seven days.

Because he felt bad for the woman and as well feared for well being.

He feared that if Ptolomy was allowed to do whatever he wished with her, the poor woman might not survive for too long.

And this was the only way he could think to help Nanazin survive because there was no way for him to actually make Ptolomy stop his domestic abuse.

Nanazin was not related to him in any way and besides, Ptolomy was the king, and whatever he did with his wife was his domestic affair.

It was extremely rude for another man to lecture a husband on how to treat his wife, much less for a retainer to advise his king.

No matter how powerful that retainer might be.

Hence, the concerned man could only do this, providing a brief respite for the troubled, abused woman.

And the requirement for that much rest was evident that very night.

When Nanazin came to visit him that night, Pasha Farzah made the excuse that he was feeling a bit ill and just wanted to turn in early, as he then casually invited Nanazin to sleep beside him.

And though Nanazin resisted at first, saying she would return to her room and come back another day, once Pasha Farzah insisted, she finally relented.

And as the tired woman laid her mature body on the soft mattress, she was asleep even before properly closing her eyes.

A phenomenon that would repeat itself for all seven of the next days, showing the amount of pressure and stress she was in.

'*Sigh*', brat, I really hope you can survive this,' Pasha Farzah could only pray against hope seeing this, as he tried his best to avoid a tragedy from unfolding right in front of him.

A tragedy that Alexander had no idea was taking place as he was more interested in preparing for the war.

Because according to the original timetable that was only a week away.

And in that spirit, his scouts had, at last, made their way to Hatamum, the presumed site of the fateful landing.

"The maps are a mess. So finally we found the place huh?" The leader of this twenty-men scouting party said gazing at the wooden walls of the place, his voice laced with doubt as he rechecked the map.

This was Laykash, the one who had killed Kefka, and gotten Alexander Adhan, and hence by relation Zanzan and having finally recovered from his injury this was his first deployment.

And right now the boy was looking at the sight in front and then at the map with furrowed eyebrows.

And the reason for his confusion was expressed by another him. "I thought they said Hatamum was a small hamlet? That it was a fishing village of about twenty to thirty families. But this place looks way bigger. Did the map mislead us again?"

Yes, this was not the first 'Hatamum', they came across.

Although they had followed one of the maps looted from the nobles, maps of this time period were inherently inaccurate, used more as a kind of guidebook rather than an accurate representation of the lands.

Hence the confusion.

"Hmm, yeah, you maybe right. No ordinary hamlet has a 10 feet thick wooden wall and a palisade," A third one spoke up nodding his head.

"I see sentries. The place is guarded. Should we return with more men?" A voice from the back advised caution.

"No, there will be no need," But Laykash ignored these concerns, bravely saying, "These are the lord's land. And we can go wherever we want. Who's going to stop us?"

This boy had always had a bit too much courage, something turning it into recklessness and even stupidity.

And this was manifested in the very next second, as right after he said, "Let's go into the town and ask for details," the leader of the group strode his horse forward and drew attention to the guard atop with a loud shout, "Hey, you there! What is this place? And who is master?"

His broken Azhak and weird accent made his identity clear to the few, scantily clad in whatever armor they could get their hands on soldiers, or more aptly peasants as they bolted out of their relaxed posture to quickly come to the front of the wall.

"Who goes there?" One of the older men shouted the redundant question.

"The soldiers of the lord of Zanzan, Alexander. In his name, open the door," Laykash fearlessly shouted back, his rear by this time reinforced by many of his men.

While all the guards' hearts shook hearing the name and seeing the twenty strong men on horses, fully armored, with shields, spears, and bows.

Chapter 406 Hatamum

The guards above the wall were village peasants, not hardened warriors.

And their will to resist without a noble present was very low.

Particularly when they were being menacingly started by twenty men in Corinthian helmets, their eyes glowing like the predatory gaze of a wolf.

"Wh..what now? Lord Haytai's orders were not to let anyone in or out," One of the youngest men, almost a boy whispered out, this voice spreadly slowly to his nearby comrades.

"Fool! You want to die, go die! Don't drag us into it!" And his loyalty to his lord was rewarded by a barked scolding from the oldest man of the group, who clenched his teeth at the thought that the boy's voice would be heard by the soldiers down below.

This man had seen enough of life to know that the Lord had buggered off and left them to die.

And he was not gonna die for a lord that had tucked his tail and left.

A sentiment that was shared by many of the more sensible men, one of whom whispered,

"That's right. Remember what they did to Jabel. So don't antagonize them. They worship the devil,"

This man was prudent enough to keep his voice down.

"Mmm, Doga said well," The eldest man nodded, and then ordered first to the young boy, "So Kisha, you go tell the village head to come as quickly as he can."

And the boy immediately ran off after receiving the order with a silent nod

The old man then turned to the middle-aged man, Doga, and said, "Doga, you go speak with them. Make talks. Drag it out till the village chief gets here.

The fact that the old man did not go out and expose his own neck showed his cunning.

"Wha..why me?" Doga was naturally resistant to follow this, as the old man was not his superior and more importantly because it was bloody dangerous.

Who knew when one of the impatient men would shoot an arrow through his head?

"Because I said so. Now go!" But the forceful, angry voice of the old man made Doga unable to disobey it, and after a slow nod, he stepped forward to near the ramparts of the wall and spoke out to Laykash, "We have long heard of the great Lord Alexander. And hold great respect for him. But our lord is Haytai. And he has ordered us to hold the gate."

It appeared as if the guards wanted to open gates but were not being allowed to.

Laykash did not know who this Haytai was, and neither did he care.

"Open the gate. We are the messengers of our lord. And we want to talk to Lord Haytai." Laykash again demanded, his arms swinging impatiently.

"Our lord is not in the village at the moment. But you would try the nearby manor over there," And Doga in response pointed towards the horizon to the east, in a clever attempt to get rid of the soldiers.

But no dice.

Because Laykash had no intention of meeting the lord.

"We are here to visit Hatamum. This is Hatamum, right? So stop wasting our time and open the gates!" A colleague of Laykash barked this out, striding his horse forward in a menacing posture.

It conveyed to the guards that these men were getting irritated.

"..." Doga could only look back at the old man to signal for help.

Until now this 'making talk' was not going well.

Seeing his 'protege' fail, the old man grumbled, "These young ones nowadays are useless," as he himself strode towards the rampart.

"Esteemed sirs, our gates are currently locked and we are fetching the key from our elder. We pray that you hold your patient for only a slightly longer, hehe." Clearly the old man knew the art of buttering up, as his choice of words was far more articulate than Doga's.

"Locked? When are gates like these locked by lock and key?" One of the impatient soldiers whispered to his comrades.

For doors such as these, there was no lock big enough.

So all city gates would be locked using braces and bars, not lock and key.

"This is just them telling us to wait for their elder to come and decide. So let us wait a while," The most senior man in that scouting party spoke up to educate these youngsters, and advised patience.

"But how long?" But the impatient ones in the group seemed eager for a fight.

"If it's too long, you can be the first to shoot an arrow through their head," And knowing this, the senior soldier gave this allowance, thus placating the hot-blooded men.

And fortunately for them, they did not have to wait too long, as they soon saw the gate open and an old leading a group of men came up to greet them.

"Greetings of great messengers of Lord Alexander, ruler of Zanzan. I'm Jaylim, this tiny village's leader put in charge by Lord Haytai," This village elder was quick to let who was backing him as he performed a formal bow.

And then asked, "May we inquire why sirs are here?"

"Is this Hatamum?" Laykash wanted to confirm that first and foremost.

"Yes, it is," Jaylim gave a quick reply.

"I have heard Hatamum was a small hamlet. A fishing village. So what is all this?" Came the next question.

"Oh! It was all Lord Haiyan's order. A month or so ago he bought a lot of men and started crazily building houses and cabins here. Gave us no reason though," Nobles did not need a reason to do anything and Jaylim was not brave enough to ask.

Nobles ordered and you obeyed.

Those were the rules of the game.

"How many men? Where are they now? Where's this Lord Haiyan," Came the natural next questions.

"There were about a thousand men (1,000) men. But now we are down to six hundred (600). As for Lord Haiyan, he said he was going to Jabel. And then we have never heard from him," Jaylim sang like a canary to any question asked.

This man was no thickhead.

"Did we kill him?" Laykash whispered almost inaudibly in Thesian to his men.

The grass root soldiers naturally did not know the name of all the nobles slain in Jabel.

"When did your lord leave for Jabel?" Another soldier hence asked in an attempt to use the timeline to figure that out.

"About three weeks ago. I forgot the exact day," But that did not help as the time was close enough that he could have been at Jabel or just 'missed' the massacre.

"Your lord Haiyan, who is he? Where is his fief?" Laskash at last asked this.

A stray noble was a very tasty treat, as they had received instruction from Alexander to hunt and kill any if the opportunity presented himself, promising them lucrative monetary rewards in return.

It seemed that even after everything, Alexander still had not learned his lesson about not killing nobles.

"It's over there. The Yasman area," Jaylam pointed in the same direction as Daga had, and Laykash would go visit the manor later to find it unsurprisingly completely abandoned.

Because the lord of this estate had either been killed in Jabel or had fled for safer pastures.

But for now Laskash only mental note and asked the next question, "Since your lord is gone, why are you here? And what are you doing? How are you surviving? How do have food?"

It appeared Laykash had a tendency to bombard his interrogee with questions, making them unsure which one to answer.

"The lord gave us house-building quotas to fulfill before he left. Said he will be back from Jabel soon to check up on us. Does sire know anything about Jabel?" The village elder with an innocent look asked.

To which many of the scouts only sneered.

Who was this old man kidding?

What happened to Jabel had spread to all nearby settlements.

Burning an entire city tended to do that.

So the patient man in the scouts spoke first in a deep, solemn voice, simply saying, "Follow our instructions, and nothing like Jabel will happen to Hatamum."

"..." Jaylim's face went hard for a while as he then turned his back to look at the crowd of peasants standing a bit behind the village gate, wielding makeshift weaponry of all kinds, from spears to clubs to scythes to various other esoteric weapons.

And the scouts did too, understanding this was a precaution for if they killed the village chief and wanted to breach the gates.

Seeing the men ready to defend their village, Jaylam then felt he that the backing needed to finally say,

"We are Lord Haiyan's people. We are permitted to only follow him. So, please...."

Which was saying that the scouts should find and convince their lord before giving them orders.

But the old man was very quick in continuing his speech, as he said without giving the soldiers a chance to flare up, "But if is the instruction of Lord Alexander, we will follow as long as our bones allow it."

Which in easier English meant they would consider the command even without Haiyan's permission if it was reasonable.

And so Laykash gave them the naked truth in as succinct a manner as possible.

"There is an army of 50,000 men coming to attack Zanzan, And they intend to make landfall in Hatamum. Those houses you were building are actually lodgings for enemy soldiers. And we are here to destroy them!"

"..." Jaylam was so shocked that he had no idea if the man was serious or just bullshitting.

Chapter 407 Prelude To The War (Part-1)

Laykash did not need to twist the arm of the old man after saying his piece

Helping the enemy forces was a capital offense and so after screaming the villagers knew nothing, the village chief quickly convinced his people to migrate to Zanzan.

This would have been pretty easy to do even without the threats as no one wanted to live in a place where tens of thousands of soldiers were going to be landfall.

Because soldiers were basically bandits with legal immunity, laying their claws on the general population's food, homes, and women.

So the villagers quickly packed up whatever clothes and small pots and pans they could fit in their carts, their surprisingly well-stocked food rations which they had managed to swindle off their lord, and with a melancholic face set off on foot for Zanzan.

But not before they were ordered to set alight the village, destroying all the houses, filling up all the wells, demolishing the port, and dismantling all the defensive structures.

"*Sigh*, and they were so well made too," One of the scouts could not help but regretfully sigh looking at the burning village.

Hatamum was no dilapidated village as they had expected, but a fully-fledged small town in the making, with many houses, marketplaces, butchers, and all other everyday necessities.

So seeing it all go and knowing that Alexander had promised to pay for their reconstruction saddened the soldier's heart.

But it was what it was.

"This is not the only place. Lord Alexander has ordered all the lands around Zanzan to be scorched. The invaders must not have any food or shelter." Hearing the lament, Laykash reminded his subordinate of their reason for doing this.

"Couldn't we have ambushed them here? You know, hide and then attack them the moment they land," His reasoning was challenged by another young man who asked eagerly, feeling like it was a missed opportunity.

To which the middle-aged patient man in the group simply replied, "Leave the planning to the higher-ups. You focus on your task."

As the scouts practiced a scorched earth policy around Zanzan, removing all people, feedstock, and animals from falling into the enemy's hands, and destroying all the wells, Alexander was busy making last-minute preparations.

In particular, he was busy splitting his time with Faziz in charge of crossbows, and the military workshop in the eastern district which officially supplied the military with all its gear.

"My lord, 2 million crossbow bolts will be impossible to make before February. We will need at least two more weeks. I'm sorry that's the best I can do..." This blacksmith had dark, concentric circles below his eyes as he said, his voice low, weak, and regretful.

Clearly Faziz had been pushing himself to meet the quota.

"...Hmmm. Okay, try your best to make as much as possible," Knowing this Alexander did not scold the man, but only encouraged him with a pat on the shoulder.

2 million bolts was a mammoth target given the extremely limited time window of just two weeks.

But why 2 million exactly?

Because Alexander calculated that since in the Battle of Agincourt, 5,000 English longbowmen were given a million arrows, for 10,000 crossbowmen, it should be double.

Of course, crossbows and longbows could never be a one-to-one ratio, simply given the difference in the rate of fire.

But Alexander ordered 2 million bolts nevertheless to be on the safe side.

His workshop was already capable of making 25,000 bolts a day, which had been reportedly boosted to 60,000 bolts a day by the additional personnel added.

But it appeared this was the absolute limit of the production chain.

The surprising reason for it was that there were no more expert fletchers to tie the feathers to the arrows.

Yes, of all things, this was the bottleneck, tying feathers to the arrows.

There were already around half a million crossbow bolts already in storage made before the Jabel offensive, thus simple math said that making the other one and a-half million would take about a month

And there was no way around it.

For the workers were already up working as hard as they could as long as they could, starting at the crack of dawn, and only finishing once the last glimmer of sunlight faded out.

And many times their work would be illuminated by the soft glow of candlelight as the sleepy, wintery sun might not even choose to show itself on some days.

Alexander toured the crossbow bolt-making plant, which had been expanded massively to get him his 2 million arrows, and observed the manufacturing process, while also listening to the needs and wants of the workers.

Many said there were not enough blacksmiths, some complained of the lack of light, but most smiled and said everything was alright.

Alexander smiled, nodded, and encouraged the workers to keep up the hard work for just a while longer while knowing himself, there was really nothing he could do to improve the situation in the short time.

Because he was already his best, as he had switched the economy to a complete war economy.

This meant that he had hollowed out a lot of the other sectors in order to transfer the required personnel for the war effort, and making any improvements would need time and manpower.

Both of which he was sorely lacking.

In fact so much manpower had been siphoned off the other industries, that they come to a screeching halt.

For instance, the 'luxury' workshops such as the paper, soap, sugar, and glass were all making arrow shafts, while the lingerie shop was busy spinning out yarn for the thread that would tie the feathers to the shaft.

The blast furnace had halted its production of iron ore because there was enough stockpile of the stuff and only a skeleton crew was stationed there, to guard the place and also to make sure the fire did not go out as it would make restarting the furnace very hard.

And most of its workers were sent elsewhere.

The specialists such as the blacksmiths and other artisans were sent to their work in their respective fields, mostly helping with weapons and armors manufacturing, while the regular people were relegated to either helping with the construction effort such as strengthening the southern walls, or digging a ditch around the city so that the enemy soldiers could not simply run up to the wall and put their ladders against it or to be trained as an infantryman, a garrison militia, etc.

And this type of reallocation occurred in all the industries, brick, salt, road making, etc, except for the cement industry because that was the very thing being used to strengthen the outer walls.

Alexander's siphoning even extended to shops and businesses to the point that most shops were closed and their people relocated to other projects.

And Alexander had also reintroduced daily food rations instead of the weekly ones to save on food, in case of a siege.

The long hours, fewer portions of food, and mostly closing of the taverns had drawn some grumbling in the populace, who complained that they could not even get a good drink after a hard day's labor.

Which promoted Alexander to promise that this was only temporary and everything would go back to normal before March.

And this placated the citizenry enough to go back to work.

Finished with his examination of the arrow factory, Alexander next went to visit the eastern military district weapons workshop, which was responsible for making the actual crossbows.

There he saw all the blacksmiths, carpenters, and mostly regular folk hard at work making the stock and bow individually, before merging it together with hemp ropes.

Nest to there was another shop, dedicated to making ten thousand pavises.

A pavise was an oblong shield large enough to cover the entire body that was used by archers and crossbowmen to safely shoot behind from.

Alexander's pavises were just the shields the infantrymen would carry, except it had a spike at the bottom to drive it into the ground so that archers and crossbowmen could crouch behind them to shelter against incoming missile attacks when they were reloading their weapons,

This weapon was nothing new, as many times the soldiers would hold their shields above their comrades' heads while he was shooting, and this was simply a different way of employing the same technique.

And Alexander knew this structure would be critical for protecting his archers from the camel archers' fire.

And lastly, Alexander checked out the last workshop there, one which employed only blacksmiths.

And they were busy preparing a very special weapon.

A weapon that would scare off the camel lancers.

Yes, the Jahal mercenaries were not just archers.

They also carried light spears and shields to engage close quarters, thus acting as light cavalry.

And Alexander's special weapon was designed to prevent any cavalry charge, be it camel or horse from simply smashing into his relatively squishy longbowmen and destroying them.

"My lord, will this work?" One of the blacksmiths asked as he showed Alexander the piece, concern, and doubt bubbling out.

The solution seemed too simple.

"Let's see," And Alexander could only hope that his theory would work.

In this way, the preparations continued, until finally on the thirteenth of February, Alexander's scouts spotted a large contingent of men make landfall at multiple points along the long shoreline of Zanzan and were reportedly marching to link up with each other before presumably heading for Zanzan city.

"They are late," Alexander gave a confident smile as he received the report.

Chapter 408 Prelude To War (Part-2)

"So they did know about Hatamum," Above one of the ships, far to the east of Zanzan, Ural mused hearing his scout's report.

The report confirmed the complete desertion of any and all villages around them, Hatamum being one of them.

"Yes, it was prudent to listen to Lord Faruq's suggestion and send a scouting party ahead of us," Jamider (Earl) Nibras sounded impressed.

When Faruq noticed little to no lights at night coming from the shore, much as opposed to the other times he came to Zanzan, indicating there were no people living there, he suggested letting a few cavalymen check out the surrounding area before they all blindly sailed their ships right up to that port.

"They could be waiting for us at Hatamum. Intending to launch an attack just after we have disembarked and have not gotten to set up our camps. So I want us to disembark here," From the side, the soft, but authoritative voice of Faruq spoke up.

"It's still about 60 km from Zanzan. Shouldn't we get a bit closer?" Ural a bit groaned from the side at this suggestion.

What this man really wanted to do was sail right onto Zanzan's footsteps, and lay a siege there.

But that appeared to be not an option.

So he wanted to get as close as possible.

Even if they could as far as Hatamum, which was 40 km from Zanzan, he could save himself a day's march.

For the comfort-loving nobleman's son that was precious.

But Faruq seemed adamant, as in a hardened tone he almost barked,

"No! The water is already getting quite choppy. And it will get even more so as we get closer. The rotten weather we have faced in the last few days is already proof of that."

Faruq really wanted to get off this wooden death coffin on water as soon as possible and insisted they make landfall right now.

"But the weather has cleared. And we are already running later. I say we stay close to the shore and push on," But Ural wanted to sail further.

And he was right in saying they were running late.

Instead of the ten days, they had taken almost two weeks to get ready, and then the stormy seas delayed them even further.

So sailing really would save them some time.

"...." But Faruq was not convinced and only turned his head pursing his lips.

"Then let us disembark in stages." Seeing the two youngsters at an impasse, Lord Nibras decided to play the middleman, as he gave off a large smile and explained, "With so many ships, it will take a long time to disembark at one place."

"So rather than doing that, let Lord Faruq disembark here. And we can land a bit further. Then we can all link up before marching toward Zanzan."

"How does that sound?" The old clapped his hand as he finished his suggestion.

And this compromise seemed to satisfy both parties.

"Sure. Let's do it Lord Nibras's way." Faruq was quick to agree to this, followed by Ural, and the matter was settled.

So soon the group split itself into three and made landfall in three different locations separated by a few hours of sailing.

Faruq's group landed on the furthest and without any port facilities, had the most difficulty unloading.

"We are sorry, Young Master. But camels don't like ships," The commander of the Jahal mercenaries named Azab spoke to Faruq in a small, but hard voice.

Of course, his hard voice was not meant to be disrespectful, but it was just his natural voice.

And the thing he was apologizing for was the delay caused by unloading the camels.

Usually camels, and horses were loaded into ships by cranes.

There would stalls were erected on the hold of the ships and the animals would be hoisted directly from the quayside up over the gunwale of the ship using cranes, pulleys, and holsters and directly down through the open loading hatch and into the hold.

But since there was no crane there, huge gangway planks had to be placed on the ports of the ships, so that the camels could disembark one by one.

And given that these beasts did not want to get on or off the ships, a variety of techniques had to be used to get them down, which included slowly coaxing them, forcibly tugging them down and even beating them to get them off the ship.

To do this for 10,000 beasts would take time.

"I understand. The animals must also be seasick. Do it gently. We have time," Faruq hence gently let Azab do his thing at his own pace.

And over in the distance, Ural and Nibrax were facing the same problem, albeit lesser ones due to their smaller numbers.

As this unloading continued, this report was soon fed to Alexander.

"My lord, should we attack them now that they are divided?" The usually cautious Melodias seemed unusually adventurous as he suggested this.

Prvong either he was really eager for a fight, or more likely the pressure of the fight was getting to him.

Alexander had noticed this sense of reckless urgency even before, particularly when he would go to check up on the training.

"My lord, we need more crossbow bolts. These green ones can barely shoot straight and need more practice," Melodias would plead to Alexander every time he would see him, saying they needed more practice

To which Alexander would reply, "You cry for more arrows. Faziz cries he can't make more. Who do I listen to?"

And then would instruct, "Make the soldiers reuse the shot bolts. We will need every single bolt for the offensive."

They were already doing that and so Melodias would half mumble, half grumble, before ultimately obeying.

This was relatively normal, but today's suggestion seemed overly dangerous.

So Alexander gave a reasonable answer, "By the time we have gotten our report, they must have already sorted everything out."

"And by the time we get ready to attack, they will have already set up camp," From the side, Menes additionally commented, making Melodias go quiet.

"Have they sent any demands?" From the back, Heliptos asked this and received a shake of the head from the group.

Usually, some kind of diplomatic effort would be made by both sides before a battle to give the appearance they tried to peacefully settle this.

This was rarely done in good faith, but mostly for the domestic audience.

To show that they had tried talking, but the other side was unreasonable, and hence fighting was the only way to go.

"Should we send a messenger? See what they are up to?" Then Menicus asked Alexander, which might be seen as a way for boosting morale.

And this got the young Pasha thinking, "Hmmm, maybe we should. He might be able to see their camp's interior."

Alexander mused out aloud and looked at his retainers for their thoughts.

"We could try. In Adhania messengers are strictly protected from being harmed. So there is no harm in trying," And Heliptos the hopeful expressed his desire for so.

"Okay, then you can go," And an instant later Alexander lightly smiled at his potential messenger.

Which the greedy-for-life economy minister quickly implored Alexander to rescind, "M..my lord, I'm not that good...good with speech...so umm...."

He did not want to enter the enemy's den under any circumstances.

"Hmm, I guess your stammer will indeed get in the way," Alexander joked with a smirk, as he then turned to Menes and said, "Choose one among the officers. Tell him to pay more attention to the camp than what he says."

"Yes, my lord," Menes nodded.

Alexander then turned to his retainers as he finalized the battle plan.

He began by informing them of their situation, "As you know, there are almost no great hills or large rivers from here to Hatamum. Meaning no defensible terrains. So we will have to fight on the open field."

Then he laid out his final plan.

"Which is why I have decided to fight about five kilometers from Zanzan. That way, they cannot use their ships and cavalry to somehow get behind us and cut off our supply route and simply starve us out." Alexander reasoned.

And this was a huge reason why Alexander had not set off to meet the attackers.

"The lord makes sense," Menicus approved of this, and along with him all the other military leaders.

Hence the military strategy of waiting for the enemy was chosen.

Because every day they waited, their peasant levies could be better trained, and more arrows could be manufactured.

In fact, if Faruq waited long enough, Alexander even had the intention to swell his army to 60,000 and attack himself.

"My lord, should we use the cavalry to harass? Like we did in Adhan. We could also use the instant bow?" After the decision to wait was made, Grahtos proposed some harassing techniques, as he was itching to try out his new toy.

"Against 10,000 trained horse archers? Has your head turned to shit?" And was promptly shut down by this harsh bark, said by Menicus, whose gruff voice made Grahtos's face sink.

He was quickly reminded that no matter how good his men were, they simply could not go against a 10 to 1-disadvantage.

Hence the cavalry was relegated to only scouting and reconnaissance.

And finally, after two weeks they made landfall, at last Alexander's scouts reported to him that the army of fifty-five to sixty thousand (55,000 - 60,000) men and horses were just fifteen kilometers away from the city.

The battle was imminent.

Chapter 409 Prelude To The War (Part-3)

"We should be ready to assault Zanzan the day after tomorrow," As dusk fell, Faruq grandly stated to his council, indicating for them to prepare themselves.

Because they were just 15 km from their target.

"We were already behind when we set off. And we are now even more behind. Almost a month behind. *Sigh*, when will this end," But many of the nobles did not seem to share Faruq's enthusiasm and grumbled about the timetable.

After they had landed and met up, Faruq had declared, "My camels and riders are seasick. I will need a week to treat them."

And Faruq's stance was so ironclad that no amount of cajoling and reasoning worked.

And since the offensive could not begin without him, the army could only set up camp near Hatamum, and simply wait.

In the meantime, the soldiers spent idle time as they had nothing to do in the cold, whirling it away gambling, and playing various dice games.

While the officers and nobles enjoyed themselves with the wine and women they bought with themselves.

"The siege of the city will not take...." Faruq attempted to placate many of the discontent voices, but did not get to finish for a scout shouted from outside the tent, "My lords, I bear great news! May I enter?"

He seemed both excited and a bit fearful.

The voice made all the commanders inside the tent instinctively turn their heads at the tent flaps to locate the source of the noise, before Faruq answered in a deep voice, "Come in."

He wondered what could it be.

'Has Alexander come to surrender?' He smirked at the thought, thinking it would be far better for the man to commit suicide than fall under his captivity.

For Djose planned to not let Alexander off so easily.

While the other lords had more realistic expectations.

'Has the city rebelled?' They hoped such so that their campaigns could be cut short.

And this was not too far-fetched an idea.

Many times a city, when faced with a huge opposing army and the prospect of a lengthy siege and starvation, would choose to simply surrender or even rebel against their masters.

But it appeared that was not the case.

"My lords, we have noticed ongoing earthworks close to Zanzan. It seems the Zanzans have sallied out to meet us in the open!" The scout blurted out the moment he entered the tent.

"What!" And hearing this, a noble not good with keeping his emotions in check immediately shot back.

But his voice did not show shock.

But joy.

Surprise and joy.

Because this likely meant they could a lengthy siege.

"Give us the details," Compared to this noble's outburst, Jamider (Earl) Nibras appeared much more reserved, much more cool.

It appeared the closer this old man was coming to his son's murderer, the more cool headed he was becoming.

"Yes," The scouts responded to the order before taking out a scroll and reading it aloud, "Our cavalry scouts have observed a camp set being up about 5 kilometres from Zanzan city. Initial observation places the enemy forces at around 30,000. But it might be more given that we had to return quickly because it was getting dark."

"30,000? Weren't we said their entire population was less than that?" Ural raised his eyebrow at the report.

"They must have gathered some more from the surrounding villages. Remember how we found all the villages and manor deserted?" And Faruq helped him come up with a plausible reason.

And it was a pretty good guess.

"Then they must have had also some time to train them... given that we are a month late," Ural sent a glancing look and did not forget to poke at Faruq with a sour note.

A jab that the young man ignored with a straight face.

Instead Faruq addressed the scout, "Okay, you can go now. We will conduct a thorough reconnaissance tomorrow morning to see what Alexander is really planning."

The prudent commander did not want to jump to conclusions and wanted to get a better look at the enemy's composition during prime daylight hours to determine if it was a trap, a feint, or a genuine threat.

And he urged his military council to do the same before he decided to dismiss his war council.

But just as he was about to, another herald came to him with the report, "My lord, a messenger from Zanzan is here bearing news from Lord Alexander and wants to meet you. Shall I let him in?"

"Me? Did he ask for me by name?" Faruq asked specifically.

He wanted to figure out how much the opposite side knew about them.

"No, he just said he wanted to meet the commander. Didn't say why either. Said it was a message from his lord to my lord." The messenger answered.

"..." Faruq then turned to give an inquisitive look at his retainers, seeking their advice but only received curious looks himself.

It seemed they wanted to see how Faruq would handle this.

Because to many, Faruq seemed unusually respectful to Alexander during their conversation.

Which they did not like.

Getting no answer from any of his advisers, Faruq hence made the decision himself, and said to the messenger., "Okay, let him in."

And soon a military officer to the Zanzan army entered the tent.

"Greetings great lords, I am Vespay," The tall man appeared polite but not subservient as he bowed to the lords.

He was a clever and intelligent man, and someone favored by Menes.

"What does the great lord of Zanzan have to say to us?" Faruq got straight to the point, adding a heavy dose of sarcasm with it.

"...My lord wonders why is there such a large army marching towards his city when all of you signed the treaty? Are you not afraid of the gods?" Seeing his reception, Vespay did not sugarcoat anything.

"Your lord exactly knows why we are here. Leave!" Faruq curtly shot back, thus ending possibly the shortest negotiation.

And this trip also proved to be the last for Vespay, as when he was leaving the camp, he was captured by the soldiers under Faruq's orders and tortured the whole night for information regarding Alexander's battle plans.

It appeared the 'messenger immunity' did not work on Vespay as Faruq did not see Alexander as a noble.

But Vespay was not an easy man to make talk, and given the short time window they had, the Jahal mercenaries had to resort to some pretty brutal tactics to make him talk and make him talk fast.

But even then they only managed to get some pretty basic information from him before he died from his injuries, and his head was placed on a pike.

Still the next morning Faruq did learn what he wanted to know the most, that Alexander was indeed planning to have a showdown in the open fields.

And he even got to know his enemy's force composition- 30,000 infantrymen, 10,000 archers, and 1,000 cavalry.

Of course, the word archer was a mistranslation because crossbow was a new word.

The mercenaries had also asked Vespay for additional intel such as Alexander's battle plans, the commander's names, and most importantly the city's defenses, and garrison strength.

But the man had gritted his teeth even when he was being flayed alive.

But Faruq did not care what happened to that mongrel.

Because Alexander and all his followers would soon follow, he was sure of that.

Instead, he said, "To think that he could have gotten so many men," as he praised the numbers.

Faruq had been skeptical of the number 30,000 thinking it was too large.

But it appeared the actual army was much larger.

Because this was not a small army in any conflict.

In fact, it was quite a respectable number regardless of the context.

And for one city to manage this, it was in fact a gigantic army.

Of course, Faruq did not swallow Vespay's number just like that.

He had also sent his scouts to verify the situation and the two reports seemed to match.

"There must be not one man manning the walls, haha," When Faruq gave this report, this was the first thing one of the nobles smirked.

And made Ural even nod and say, "Yes, you may be right." before suggesting, "How about attacking the port? We are already blockading it May we can try an attack there?"

And as soon as he said this, the idea seemed to gain some traction from even Lord Nibraz, who joined the young lord, "Hmm. we could try that. Leave the camp with a skeleton crew to Fool the Zanzans we are still. But actually board the ships to back through the back. That's not a bad idea actually."

The old lord repeatedly nodded his head to show his approval.

But though the plan sounded very good on paper, Faruq could not believe there were idiots this big with him.

"Who said the port was undefended?" He simply asked, reminding all of them that this was simply a conjecture said by a jubilant noble in the heat of the moment.

A claim the man had nothing to back him up with.

And this realization caused many to flush in shame and the entire room to become silent as a coffin

An opportunity that Faruq decided to seize to cement his leadership, "The heavens have given us a prime opportunity here. Alexander, for whatever misguided reason has chosen to meet us head on, instead of a siege. Let us not waste that. We march tomorrow at dawn!"

Chapter 410 Prelude To The War (Part-4)

Faruq's declaration made all the commanders wake up to the facts.

And Lord Nibras was the first to speak up in support of it.

"Lord Faruq is right. Even if the harbor is defended by a herd of pigs, it does not matter. We should not give Alexander any chance to correct his mistake. For if he goes back to his city, with forty-one thousand (41,000) men to defend the walls, the resulting siege will be impossible for us to win any time soon."

That would be their worst-case scenario.

And so all the nobles quickly bought into Faruq's head-on offensive.

"That's right. The idiot has made such a huge mistake. We should capitalize on it. And besides, we have 15,000 cavalry with us! What are we afraid of facing, hahaha?" They all pumped themselves up.

In Adhania, it was considered that the side with more cavalry would win most of the time, and hence the nobles felt pretty good about themselves.

Thus the military order that they would march tomorrow at dawn and meet the enemy in the morning was spread throughout the ranks of the nobles' army, and everyone got down to preparing themselves.

Particularly, the officers were barred from sleeping with women tonight.

While the enemy was making the very last of their preparations, simultaneously, Alexander was having his soldier put up the last finishing touches around their camp.

They had dug ditches, and planted stakes, and the battlefield was set for the showdown tomorrow.

While the pasha himself was enjoying some last-minute quality time with his newly-wed wife inside Zanzan itself..

"How many do you think there are?" Cambyses asked her husband with worry and fear wrapping around the question as she gazed at the enemy.

But she was not actually not asking about the number of the soldiers.

No, she was asking about the ships as the pair stood on the southern walls, gazing into the harbor.

From there, as Cambyses laid her eyes upon the sea, her heart slightly trembled as she noticed the once blue, shimmering water of the port become blanketed by the huge, unfurled, white sails of Kuleef's fleet, their numbers appearing to drown the very sun itself and cast an ominous shadow on the now deserted port.

The fleet seemed endless of many of the citizenry and their appearance had caused everyone who worked in the dock, the dockworkers, fishermen, and the various small and big merchants had retreated to behind the safety of the walls, giving the once most bustling part of the city a forlorn feeling, one which made Cambyses's heart ache.

"The scouts presumably counted up to three hundred before losing track. But I would say maybe five hundred," Alexander gave his estimate.

This was based on the calculation that as an average ship could carry 100 men and their supplies, so 50,000 people would need around 500 ships.

"Will they attack the harbor?" Cambyses then posed turning her head to her husband.

Such a large force would not be easy to repulse.

"Unlikely. They would have done so already if they wanted to," Alexander answered confidently to reassure his wife.

This was based on both the interrogated reports he had received and also from his reconnaissance scouts who confirmed that the bulk of the army was still camped 15km from Zanzan.

"We should build a navy. Being blockaded does not feel good. Feels like I'm a rat," Cambyses then sourly said, looking at the ship with hatred and tasking her husband with his next project.

A navy would not only be able to prevent a blockade but also protect the trade routes that Alexander no doubt wanted to build.

To which Alexander surprisingly answered negatively, "Maintaining a navy costs too much. And it needs a lot of good sailors. So maybe in a few years."

Alexander had no immediate plans for a navy.

For the navy he did have, the few ships he had gotten from Pasha Muazz's legacy had all been set alight and burned under his order to prevent them from falling into the enemy's hand.

Hence Alexander's ports had no friendly vessels.

And given his manpower and budget shortage, he intended to let it stay that way, and use his large southern walls to defend this weak point, while in the meantime he planned to just let the merchants protect their own merchandise.

Cambyses knew Alexander's condition, and so could only flatten her lips together at the reply, and change the topic to a more encouraging subject.

"Alex, you go fight without worry. I have 20,000 garrisoned men and a million arrows. The walls will not fall. I swear," She reassured him, her eyes blazing with determination.

Though she really did not need to put on such a martyr-like look as the extra month had allowed Alexander to greatly bolster his defenses, training a surplus of troops and even drawing a surplus of arrows from a predicted deficit.

And though these men were not yet fit to fight with the army, they were adequate to hold the walls.

"Mmm, I will be counting on you," Alexander lightly nodded.

As the city lord's wife, and more importantly, as the city guard chief, Cambyses was put in charge of the city defenses with Bartholomew as her deputy.

And they would be the ones responsible for guarding the walls.

And with 20,000 defenders, Alexander was confident that no matter the strategic genius of the opposing side, they would not be able to overcome that number any time soon.

At least not before he would be able to return to assist.

This way, Alexander could fight without the worry of getting his city sniped from right under his nose.

"The guest ladies have also moved to the Temple of Ramuh. The Queen mother even urged me to seek refuge there if things get too bad," Cambyses then informed her husband of another development.

"Hmm, scheming bitch." To which Alexander only snubbed, disdain at this 'act' of compassion.

Because it was an act as Alexander explained to Cambyses, "She did this because in this way, if I win, she can just say she was always looking out for us. And if I lose...well dead men tell no tales. And her promises need not matter, hmph!"

Alexander made his disdain very vocally known.

And Cambyses was a bit surprised by this amount of acridness.

It was not like the Queen mother had not tried to convince Alexander.

And given she was so adamantly rejected, the attitude she displayed was quite normal.

"Is this only because of her attitude? Or because of something else?" Cambyses suspected that Alexander was likely vexed by something else and hence asked.

And Alexander did not hide the real reason from his main wife.

"Over the past two months, I repeatedly asked for some kind of reinforcement from Ptolomy. Anything! But was always given the same excuse, 'No time and no spare men. 'We have lost too many men in the drought and rebellion,' Ptolomy wrote the same line six times in one letter. I counted," Alexander first vented.

And then gave the actual reason behind his sourness, "But Camius's contact in Adhan tells him that the king is arranging levies for a winter offensive. Says it's a direct command from Ptolomy and is being overseen by Farzah."

This information was given by Goruk, who was a kingpin in Adhan's underworld and Camius's lackey.

When Alexander read this information, he clearly understood what was going on which he now explained to Cambyses,

"They don't have men to help me, but have the time to raise an army? Motherfuc*ers are using this attack as an excuse to annex their nearby noble territories. F*ck!"

Alexander seemed unusually crass and crude today, launching himself into a tirade at the slightest provocation.

'Seems like the pressure of the last two months has gotten to him. He's cranky,' Understanding this, like a faithful wife, Cambyses smiled and nodded at her husband's complaint, showing her support for him.

And occasionally she would join with a hum and a yes.

Though internally she actually understood Ptolomy's actions and even approved of it.

He was just taking advantage of the situation that had arisen, nothing more, nothing less.

Just like Alexander would have if their positions were switched.

"Alex, why don't you stay the night tonight here? Get some rest?" After Alexander finished his diatribe, Cambyses politely asked.

For the past few days, Alexander had been going to sleep in the camp at night among the soldiers to boost morale.

And Alexander made the same excuse, "No, the enemy might attack any day. I need to be with the men."

The morale in the camp would drop too greatly if Alexander was not present.

But Cambyses felt Alexander was pushing himself too hard and knew he was not getting his needed sleep at the camp.

So she got up to first wrap her hands around her man's broad shoulders, and said, "If they wanted to attack, they would have done so already today. So just stay the night. You leave even before dawn breaks. Come."

That last word was so soft and inviting, that Alexander felt his bones turn soft and putty.

He could not even remember the last time he had slept with his wife after this ordeal started and sorely wanted that warmth.

But still he was hesitant.

"But if I'm not there when they attack...," He tried to find an excuse.

But Cambyses softly whispered, "The camp is just 5 kilometers away. You can reach it in 10 minutes on the horse. Nobody will even know."

Under Cambyses's urging, Alexander was soon lulled to a fantastic sleep and only woke up at dawn when a messenger came to inform him that the opposing forces were seen marching towards Zanzan.

War had finally come.