

Herald 451

Chapter 451 Making It Home

There were of course some strategic questions that Alexander had refused to answer some questions, such as inquiries regarding the crossbow and how they were made and used.

But in return, he did reveal some of his inventions, showing them things such as paper and sugar, which were close at hand.

All of which the nobles were very impressed by.

Finally, at one point the meeting came to an end, when a messenger at last got impatient enough to intrude into the tent and inform Alexander that the army had been waiting for hours in stand by, growing impatient by the minute as they were eager to march home, but were still waiting for him to give the order.

"Ah, yes, yes," Alexander too was surprised by how quickly the hours had slipped by, as only now he realized it was already midday and thus decided to end the meeting there.

"My lords, we can discuss more once we get inside the city. Please excuse me," Alexander cordially finished saying.

"Of course, of course. We will also instruct our men to hand over their arms so they can enter the city with you," Lord Prantik replied, effectively handing his safety over to Alexander.

And hence, the order soon came, the camp was dismantled to its last tent, the outer, wooden wall was dislodged, the perimeter ditches filled, and the victorious army quickly made their way into the city under the thunderous cheering of the crowds.

It appeared that the entire population of the city had crowded themselves around the gate, throwing flowers, drinking, singing, and dancing with the soldiers, as the long line slowly entered the gates.

First entered the cavalry, holding the blue flower standard of Alexander's house, as they paraded their strong war horse dressed in blue, heavy armor.

This was followed by Alexander and his bodyguards, his gaudily dressed horse drawing all the attention.

Then came the crossbowmen, each man holding their crossbow in ways that bought the best exposure to it.

The citizenry had never really seen this new weapon before and so were most drawn by it, while the soldiers took the opportunity to show it off.

They told the crowd about the weapon, mimicked how it worked by showing the loading, shooting, and reloading mechanism, and then retold their glorious individual contributions to the battle.

All highly embellished and exaggerated of course.

"There was once three archers shooting at me. But I leaped out of my pavis, steadied by crossbow, and bang- one down. Right through his heart."

"And then quickly reloading, another went through the throat... there was blood all over, hahaha...and then another through the temple- three in three breathes,' One man was heard proudly recounting his kills to his audience, who looked at him with awe and reverence.

And such cooked-up stories were being peddled by most of the soldiers, which if were true would have ended the battle in a matter of minutes, not hours.

While lastly, some crossbowmen were even seen trying to court the roadside girls using their weapons, engaging in talks that could only be described as corny, such as 'I have a bigger weapon in my home that I can show you.'

And many of the girls even agreed to this, most not because they were that gullible, but because they wanted simply wanted to sleep with a man that won a war and test his virility.

They even thought that it would even make for a nice story when they met their friends.

The crossbowmen were also not the only ones getting the glory, as the cavalrymen recounted their fight with the camels, vividly describing the strange animal to an enthralled audience, while all the infantrymen portrayed themselves as the ones who had run in front of the charging horses swinging the flaming chains.

In this way, the crowd released all the tension of the last two months and made the victory procession last almost till dusk.

For those had been truly grueling times, with nothing but work, work, work, and so everyone tried to relax and let off some steam, as they enjoyed the fruits of their labor, their victory.

Alexander and others too took part in the revelries, making him appear just as one of the people, and only returned to his manor when the crowd started to rescind at around nightfall.

"Welcome back," Cambyses was there to greet him by the door, as were the others, including the Queen mother and Mikaya.

And seeing his new bride's smiling face, Alexander could not help but say to himself,

'If I lost the day before yesterday, today would be so much different. Describing everyone's fate as tragic would have been an understatement.'

And this realization made him truly value the victory, which was much closer than he would have liked.

If Faruq had played the game a bit better, then things would be very, very different right now.

The prime example of which would be if Faruq had reinforced Ural's flanking attack with some of his Jahal mercenaries.

Alexander would have certainly lost the battle then.

But life did not have 'ifs and buts'.

And looking at Cambyses's smiling face, he was relieved at that.

"Haha, it seems the gods really do favor you Pasha Alexander. Your victory will inspire the entire country against Amenheraft," From the side, the Queen Mother did not forget to make it seem as if Alexander's fight was really a proxy war against Ptolomy and Amenheraft, even though it was nothing of the sort.

The former had even declined to lend any material help to him, which Alexander was still ticked about. But he decided now was not the time or place to make a scene, not in front of so many people. "Yes! It is only by the grace and goodwill of His Majesty that we were able to win. Long live King Ptolomy!" So he put on a humble facade, portraying himself as an obedient vassal.

"Long live King Ptolomy!" Came an almost spontaneous reply.

Alexander then turned to the twins and particularly Mikaya, as he spread his arms as if encompassing the heavens and grandly said, "My dear lady, we have won. The Jahal mercenaries had been defeated!"

Many did not understand the significance of saying this to a lady, but those in the know knew how near the days leading up to the battle, Mikaya had almost eaten his ear off going on about the deadliness and lethality of those cut-throat mercenaries, urging him again and again to escape to save his life.

'There is no way to defeat them in open combat. And we cannot last a siege,' She had said.

And having faced the ten thousand (10,000) in battle, Alexander would indeed give them the due they deserved, and even agree that Mikaya was right about their fearsomeness.

These men could be counted as among the best cavalry in the world at the time, as even after taking two heavy charges head-on and losing their commander, they did not break and run.

But at the end of the day, they ultimately still lost.

And that was what really mattered.

"Perhaps there is some truth to what some of the things they say about you!" Mikaya only smirked the reply, alluding to his open secret status as Gaia's chosen.

This was a sensitive topic, and Alexander did not like talking about it so openly, so Mikaya saying it meant that temporarily the once-warm relationship between the two had frosted a bit.

And this was not just due to the Jahal mercenaries, but the following reason that Alexander revealed.

He was not willing to be outdone by Mikaya, and so he also similarly smirked and then sarcastically said,

"Perhaps then your father will have the time to send me all the things I ordered. Hopefully, by now the weather will have cleared up, or the guilds will have the goods, or the ships will have the proper rigging, or the slaves will not be sick, or some other misfortune."

This was alluding to the fact that Pasha Farzah had yet to deliver him the goods Alexander had purchased from him, which amounted to around 300 million ropals, and which were past their due delivery date by a month.

And how every time Alexander would ask Mikaya about it, she would come up with various excuses.

He could have really used that 20,000 slaves if they had come in time.

And so, Alexander's sarcastic voice had a very real undercurrent of anger and frustration as he said this, as evidenced by how he had said this at the very front of the doors, in front of a large crowd, which went on to show how aggrieved Alexander was really by this fact.

He had even already paid in full for the goods, particularly because he did not want to carry all the extra gold when he left for Zanzan back in October, and because he trusted that Pasha Farzah would not swindle one of his only two allies.

"My father will visit Zanzan personally to compensate the lord for this," Mikaya only replied this to the accusation, which mellowed Alexander quite a bit.

In fact, the letter regarding the battle had already been sent to Ptolomy and Farzah by Seelima, and Mikaya the day prior, where the former requested Pasha Farzah to personally visit Zanzan for she had correctly foreseen Alexander's frustration at being left hanging out of dry by his allies in his time of need.

And thus, with this, Zanzan finally survived its first real battle.

Chapter 452 Amenheraft's And Ptolomy's Reaction

Alexander held massive feasts the following three days, as he entertained himself and the four nobles, stuffing themselves with various types of meat cooked in many different ways- stewed, smoked barbequed, etc, many cuts of fish which were boiled, steamed, grilled, and seasonal vegetables sauteed in butter.

But the star of the show was definitely the dessert dishes, which included a few types of cakes, some pastries, and puddings.

"My lord, this is amazing! How much of this sugar can we buy?"

One of the nobles even forgot the etiquette about not talking about business during such formal feasts, as he got distracted by the creamy, sweet delights,

For someone who had never tasted sugar, this new sensation was truly irresistible.

While Alexander and the city as a whole relaxed for a few days, the two other sides were really in the completely opposite side of the spectrum- one enjoying grief, the other side surprise and a bit of dread for not helping on time.

Firstly, there was Pasha Djose, and by extension Amenheraft's side, who were completely shell-shocked by the news of the loss.

They had never considered the possibility of a loss, much less a crushing one like this.

For them, the worst outcome would be if Alexander was somehow able to outlast in a siege.

And even if that had happened, then they had planned to destroy the countryside, plundering the about-to-ripen spring harvest and leave the usurper destitute.

But they failed to do even this, caused by poor morale, the possibility of taking further losses by Alexander's skirmishers if they went out of the safety of their camp, and the delay of the initial start of the invasion, which made many nobles want to return to their fiefdom as soon as possible.

Thus instead of inflicting heavy losses on Alexander, it was them that suffered crippling blows, losing 20,000 of their troops as killed or captured, with a few further thousand injured.

Furthermore, the famed Jahal mercenaries had lost more men in a single battle than in any other battle in their whole illustrious history, and which even included their legendary commander, while there was the destruction of Matbar (Marquiss) Uzak's elite units, that had effectively rendered him unable to undertake a similar kind of attack for at least a few years.

Then there was the loss of an illustrious Jamider (Earl) house, which had the former, the current, and new head of the house killed and the entirety of its military strength destroyed- 3,000 chariots, 6,000 men, and 6,000 horses.

This type of loss would be grievous even to Amenheraft at his prime as the king, not to mention a relatively small house.

Thus it was almost given that this house would be unable to affect Adhnaia's politics for decades to come, if at all, as it was very much possible the house would cease to exist due to infighting between the next line of succession at risk, which were now not at all clear, or by the outright annexation by nearby nobles.

The latter would be possible due to the current weak state of the royal authority, providing the opportunistic people the sweet ability to annex these weak, defenseless, delicious territories without much backlash.

An opportunity many would be foolish to not capitalize on.

But all these mishappenings, all these deaths and losses, were not the worst of it.

No, that would be the loss of prestige and credibility dealt to Amenheraft's camp.

Amenheraft had gone from the invincible god king incapable of losing battles to losing three consecutive ones, all to the same person nonetheless, and it greatly hurt morale and confidence on his side.

He had already lost a large base in the battle to retake Adhan, and now with even more losses, Amenheraft lost enough staunch allies that many were starting to see him as unreliable, and not the encompassing juggernaut he portrayed himself as.

Hence the previous phenomenon where factions were slowly budding in his court finally cemented itself, each led by a strongman who wanted to do things their way and supported by a group who sought them as protectors to take shelter under.

Thus it seemed that soon Ptolomy would not be the only rival to Amenheraft, but a few more hopeful candidates would add their names to the draw, the two most probable were his two other brothers.

As mentioned previously, though Amenehraft had a lot of step-brothers, other than Ptolomy and DJose, only two others possessed any real power to oppose him.

These men, one a very accomplished military veteran, the other a renowned scholar, and politician, through marriage basically controlled their wife's respective Matbar (Marquiss) families, courtesy of the former king's machinations.

And though they had stayed neutral up until now, it was certainly possible they would choose to join the fray now sensing Amenheraft's weakness.

For even if they had no desire to fight for the throne, the underlings under them might want them to, in order to acquire more opportunities for themselves.

In fact, there was already a shadow war going on between Amenheraft and Ptolomy regarding this, the latter trying to break up Amenheraft's power base using monetary, military, and political rhetoric.

'What kind of a god is so broke that he cannot pay bereavement payment?'

'What kind of a god loses having such overwhelming numbers?'

'What kind of god breaks treaties?'

Ptolomy had sent these messages following Alexander's victory, portraying Amenheraft as someone abandoned by the gods, and setting himself up as the rightful king.

And like before, he proposed another round of monetary rewards for those who defect, while rescinding all rewards from those nobles responsible for the attack.

And this time, the response to Ptolomy's call was much more resounding than the previous time, as many noble houses flipped bolstered by Alexander's win.

While the man himself, Amenheraft certainly aware of all this felt as if the ground under his being slowly dug out.

But there was little he could do aside from reassuring his allies.

'Darn those bows,' Amenheraft would constantly murmur this, even in his sleep, to the point his wife one day even ask him what he was talking about.

Amenheraft of course was referring to the crossbow, and his mind constantly recalled the recount of the battle and how it was said that it was those bows that had managed to pin the mercenaries, their trump card.

And knowing that if they were unable to find a counter to that new weapon, future fights would be very difficult, came the worrisome murmur.

While Amenheraft racked his brains over the challenges posed from multiple fronts, Ptolomy too faced challenges of his own.

Particularly placating his victorious general.

While the king was ecstatic that his ally had won such a huge victory, evidenced by how he even declared a three day feast when he first heard the good news, still, even the somewhat slow king understood Alexander was angry as the latter had yet to send any letter about his victory.

In fact, there was no official information from Alexander's side regarding the situation, with the only communique being between Adhan and Seelima.

And though Ptolomy would have felt slighted before, the Queen mother had strictly ordered him to appear cordial in front of Alexander.

'Someone who can beat the Jahal mercenaries head-on is not someone we can afford to lose now. We need a general like that,' She had written to Ptolomy.

"Farzah, you go to Zanzan and meet with Alexander. Show him our sincerity," Hence Ptolomy ordered.

And Pasha Farzah, being also interested to know about the details of the battle, accepted.

"Haha, who knew that brat was such a good commander?" He chuckled heartily.

He was really in a good mood knowing his promising ally was safe.

This shrewd politician had also coasted on Alexander's success to strengthen his factions quite a bit, as it was he who put Alexander on a pedestal of magnificence and paraded him as Amenheraft's kryptonite, showcasing his military prowess.

Not to mention how he had also taken advantage of DJose's attack to expand Ptolomy's control around Adhan.

'Surrender, or be charged with treason,' This was the choice many nobles living close to Adhan who were loyal to Amenheraft had found themselves, as Pasha Farzah's son led a huge army to attack these virtually defenseless towns and cities.

And even when these nobles sent for help, Amenheraft ignored them, as he had no real troops under him to come to their rescue, and he knew this was Ptolomy's way of retaliation.

"My men will soon come to your rescue. Hold on," Amenheraft had hence replied with this kind of vague promise, really intending to liberate these settlements once he won the battle.

But given that he lost, these nobles obediently flipped, with most even coughing up the ropals they were paid.

Thus Ptolomy's control had expanded a few times following Alexander's win.

Pasha Farzah had also been informed by Mikaya about Alexander's displeasure at not getting his goods in time, and the man could only let out a wry smile.

But he did not regret it, as back then he had taken that precaution thinking it was the best, based on the then circumstances.

"Well, guess, I will have to give him a discount," He casually shrugged, as this was not his first time dealing with such circumstances.

Delaying or stooping deliveries to allies or enemies depending on how the future develops was a tactic as old as time.

And he was sure if Alexander was in his place, he would have done the same.

Thus, with these thoughts, the old man set about organizing a 'congratulatory gift basket' for his much younger peer.

Chapter 453 Alexander's Spoils

A few days later Alexander got letters via pigeon from both Ptolomy and Pasha Farzah, the first congratulating him on his success and the other additionally promising to come visit him by May.

Which was two months from now.

It seemed the old man needed some time to prepare all the gifts.

Or more specifically, he needed to re-order and re-purchase almost all of Alexander's inventory.

This was because he had sold most of those goods almost a month ago, and so having to reacquire them in the short time span, in the enormous volume needed, meant that he would have to pay a premium among premiums.

The pasha even risked losing money in the transaction, as opposed to the enormous potential profits it originally would have been.

But still, even knowing this, Pasha Farzah decided to acquire these items through any means necessary and simply chalked up the loss as compensation for his wrong judgment.

The veteran politician was not going to let such a, in his eyes, mundane thing bother him.

While Pasha Farzah endeavored to rectify his poor choice and urged his son to renegotiate deals with the guilds to rebuy the goods, Alexander on the other hand was busy celebrating by counting his spoils- which include prisoners and horses.

First came the prisoners, which, after the four nobles had their pick of their men, left him with around 9,000 slaves, all strong and strapping young men.

Alexander's eyes had glowed with glee when he saw these men, as they were just the kind of laborers he needed, fit, healthy, and able to be worked to the bones.

Hence he planned to put them mainly in the fields and mines- the places most in need of hard laborers.

Alexander very much appreciated this injection of work force into the economy, especially given that if he were to buy them on the market, they would have carried quite the price.

Normally a slave went for two thousand to four thousand ropals (2,000-4,000) depending on his or her physical characteristics.

But these prime specimens would have gone for at least 5,0000 ropals, possibly even reaching upward of 6,000 in some cases.

So, this meant that Alexander had gained around 45 to 54 million ropals just from this stash alone, which was very impressive just by itself.

And this did not even take into account the fact that among these 9,000, there were also 4,000 men who were even of relatively high descent.

These were of course all the charioteers, all of whom belonged to Jamider (Earl) Nibraz's house.

Their high status was a given as they were allowed to ride the prestigious chariots, meaning they were either of nobility, being related to the house in ways such as cousins, nephews, or even illegitimate sons.

Or they were close servants and loyal soldiers who served the house.

Which meant their prices would be much, much higher, even reaching as high as a hundred thousand ropal for some select ones.

And though Alexander had yet to receive any ransom offers, he was sure they would come, and one which he intended to refuse as he had done before unless they switched sides.

Hence, if Alexander truly had ransomed his prisoners, his gains would have easily eclipsed 60 million.

Then came the 5,000 horses, which Alexander actually valued even more than slaves.

For these were no regular draft horses but horses bred for war.

Even better they were bred by a famous family with a long history of raising such animals, meaning their breed and quality of training was unquestioned.

So Alexander estimated their cost to be around 10,000 ropals per animal, giving his loot a value of 50 million.

Now for context, a regular pack horse was close to a 1,000 ropals, while a good war horse needed 5,000 ropals.

And the very best of the best, like the one Alexander rode on cost 15,000 ropals.

Thus estimating a middle ground of 10,000 ropals for the well-drilled horses was reasonable.

Though it had to be said that these horses were not the beasts known as destriers that medieval knights rode on, terrorizing the battlefield, but much smaller breeds that were actually much closer to ponies.

But this was the norm of the times, as horse breeding had just started taking off, and it would take decades if not centuries to selectively breed those huge monsters of the battlefield.

Thus Alexander was still very happy, even ecstatic over his catch.

But then, once he thought about it for a while longer, somehow this boon had managed to become somewhat of a problem for him, as though he had a shortage of horses, using such fine specimens on manual labor seemed like such a waste.

This was akin to using a supercar to get the milk.

Perfectly viable, but the gas bill would likely be more than the milk.

Hence, after thinking about it for a while, and reflecting on the painful experience around the battlefield regarding his shortage of cavalry, and then remembering its efficacy even in small numbers, Alexander decided to expand his riders to 3,000 active members, making them as large as half a legionary, much to Grahtos's delight.

"Think of it as a present for a job well done, " Alexander had said to the over-the-moon general, who seemed ready to kiss Alexander's feet any moment now.

Though such a huge increase would likely eat through Alexander's broke pocket even faster.

But Alexander still chose to do so given the inevitable future battles he would face.

In fact, if he had deeper pockets, he would have converted all the horses into cavalry, forming a cavalry legion.

But alas, the estimated cost of maintaining such a force would have likely broke Alexander before the enemy could.

Hence for the rest of the 2000 horses, Alexander planned to breed a few of them, but mostly sell the rest for more usable draft animals.

This way he reckoned he would be able to get at least four, maybe even five pack horses for one equivalent war horse, which would certainly be a better allocation of his resources.

After all, no matter how good a war horse was, it could not do five horses' jobs.

In this way, combining the prisoners and horses, Alexander was calculated to have gained around 100 million ropals out of this war, one that had cost him around 50 million to engage in.

Which meant a 100% return on a two-month investment, or a 600% annual return.

Now compare that to the few percentage savings rates banks provide, the 17% the stock market gives.

Alexander finally had his answer to the question- 'War! What is it good for?'

And it was - 'Lots! It was good for lots if you could win.'

And this was not even the best part.

In fact the money might be the least important of his spoils.

For what truly mattered was how the magnificent victory had boosted his prestige, got him four initial vassals, and secured his city's perimeters.

No one would dare to slight him in the near term future, and Alexander was even confident about seizing much more area than he previously estimated, making him a true overlord of at least southern Zanzan.

And to that effect Alexander had sent messages to every noble household within a 90km radius, asking them to come to his city and meet with him by May.

'You are summoned to Zanzan by the order of its ruler, Pasha Alexander, to explain yourself regarding your involvement in the attack against Zanzan. Many of you were found guilty of participating in it.'

'Failure to do so within the allotted time will be seen as an act of war.'

Alexander had sent this message to about 7 shordars (barons), 3 talukders (viscounts), and 2 Jamiders (Earls), wanting to meet them at around the time Pasha Farzah would be in Zanzan.

Alexander had no fear of retaliation by Amenheraft as the man had already played his card.

So Alexander saw this as a prime opportunity to annex around 12,000 sq km of land, with him choosing the specific number of 90km radius because he figured his army could march that distance in about three days, which he felt was sufficiently quick enough to exert pressure on the nobles there.

And the time period of that annexation he gave himself was 2 months, which he had chosen specifically after much deliberation.

The time was not only out of the generous consideration of travel time for the nobles, or getting ready, but there was also the fact that the spring harvest was here and every noble needed every abled hand to help with the first harvest after the drought,

Even Alexander was extremely busy in this time period, as the peasants and many extra slaves were sent to the field to reap the crops, meaning he simply did not the men to attack these nobles even if he had wanted to.

Also, after the two months, not only Pasha Farzah, the prime minister would be there, but the time period was also long enough to give the nobles enough time to gather enough information regarding Alexander's success, but short enough that any nearby allies would not be able to effectively come to their rescue.

After all, most of Zanzan's anti-Ptolomy faction had just participated in the recent battle and were barely capable enough to defend themselves.

Where would they have the ability to aid others?

Thus in this way, the time span was meant to exert a kind of physiological pressure on the nobles.

Chapter 454 The Spring Planting

Alexander's message was received by surprise, alarm, and even fury by many of the 12 nobles.

This was because most of them knew they had nothing to do with the attack and saw it as Alexander's way of intimidating and encroaching upon their land.

And they were totally right about this, as Alexander really had only found a small portion of the called-up nobility to have actually taken part in the battle.

Thus this was really a way of demanding vassalization, or at least free trade with the powers.

Understanding this, the nobles quickly asked for aid from Amenheraft, but they were destined to be disappointed.

For they would get no real reply, just flowery words and encouragement, followed by a description of the many types of difficulties Amenheraft was currently facing.

Now they were certainly true to an extent, but there was also the fact that Amenheraft had received an offer from Ptolomy, proposing that if Amenheraft looked the other way as Alexander annexed those lands, Ptolomy would not withhold the funds promised to him as a way to retaliate against the recent attack.

This was of course something that Alexander requested and the king was happy to oblige.

While Amenheraft was also happy to accept the offer, both because he needed the money, and also because the time and money needed to defend these small fiefs were not worth it.

Hence, these few men really had no choice but to negotiate with Alexander.

But that fateful meeting was still a bit away, as in the meantime they busied themselves with overseeing the spring harvest and then follow it with a spring planting.

For the window for this was relatively short.

The peasants first had to collect some of the spring crops such as cabbage, onions, and garlic they planted in the winter, and harvest many of the fruits from orchards.

But more importantly, they had to prepare the fields for the winter crops- oats, and barley specifically, which would be the staple food for many of the farmers and their livestock.

They also needed to plant a variety of legumes and vegetables such as peas and beans, onions, and leeks, amounting to around twenty percent (20%) of the total crops, while some would choose to grow cash crops such as flax for making linen that was then used to make clothes, grapes for producing wine, and olives for olive oil.

Thus, as this was the time of planting and due to all of this frantic plowing, the sight of farmers driving their plows powered by horses or oxen with great urgency from sunset to sundown was a common sight to behold.

And this was specifically true in Alexander's fiefdom, which cultivated so much land that the demand for pack animals skyrocketed to the point that the pasha had to even temporarily decrease his industrial production of various materials and temporarily reallocate many of the draft animals used in those sectors to carry materials to the field.

This increase in demand as well as the land cultivated as compared to the winter was fueled by two factors.

One was the large influx of refugees who now were being employed on the farms.

And two because Alexander had decided to capitalize on his win and expanded his area of influence, taking over a huge swath of empty, fertile land around Zanzan, and starting to plant his crops there.

Acquiring this land was relatively easy for him, as the area around Zanzan was originally Pasha Muazz's personal land, the entirety of which was owned and administered by his house.

And since that family had been driven away, the lands naturally fell into Alexander's hands.

Now technically there were men living in those lands who acted as its owners, their origins being that they had been appointed by Pasha Muazz as supervisors to oversee and administer his vast fields, and tasked with managing, controlling, and directing the peasants and slaves who worked there.

And with over close to 8000 sq km of land that Pasha Muazz controlled around Zanzan, there were a lot of such men, who were called by a special name- Neta.

These men were not strictly nobility, but labeling them as servants would also not be correct, as the latter had too low of a connotation.

Perhaps a steward or butler might be a better translation, or an even better approximation would be the medieval knight, who was also not a peerage-holding lord, but a pseudo one.

And similar to how a knight would be a great force in battles, these netas too had a small number of armed men under them, present there to enforce order and discipline on the farmers.

Some of these had chosen to stay in Zanzan even after Pasha Muazz had left, as they saw Alexander as weak and a fool with only a few days on his hand.

Hence, a few of the bold ones had even begun to rule over some of the lands as its lords, erecting fortifications and acting as the leader of their community.

Alexander of course knew about these courtesy of Camius's intelligence, but when he had first gotten here in November, he had not had the manpower or time to deal with them.

And then, when he had finally decided to deal with them, which was also one of the objectives of his Jabel campaign, that originally intended to go north and then turn east to take care of these small fries, things developed in such a way that things stood as they were currently.

The benefit of which was that he did not need to any longer strong arm these little fishes.

He could just send a battalion (600 men) with his coat of arms around and plant the flag down in front of the rudimentary forts, and that would be enough to make all inside fold without question.

These men had certainly heard what Alexander had accomplished and were smart enough to recognize that their paltry garrison of at best a few hundred men would not be able to resist such a juggernaut.

Thus they quickly surrendered when they got the promise of amnesty from Alexander, though not before they were required to hand over all their food and valuables to him.

'Darn it, I should have ran when I had the chance,' These men would then lament regarding their greed and wish they had followed the path of some of their colleagues.

A key note here would be that Alexander did not deal with these netas personally, for he felt they were too down the pecking order for him to deal with personally.

And so his retainers got the honor of leading the forces to reclaim the lands and decide these men's fate.

Now Alexander had advised against killing them outright as he kind of learned his lesson about killing people left, right, and center.

But then there was the dilemma of turning the loyal servants of one's enemy into regular citizens.

That was out of the question, as this was just waiting for a disaster to happen.

So the netas were offered either the choice of leaving the territory or being turned into farmers employed by the lords, or basically slaves.

And naturally almost all chose the former, as the cushy job of neta made it so that they had grown to most certainly abhor physical work, not to mention work as tiring as farming.

Thus these destitute lackeys made the long, slow march to where Pasha Muazz was temporarily residing, or toward territories that were friendly to them, though many failed to do so, instead dying or worse being captured as slaves by bandits, slavers, and even nobles.

This happened because Alexander had effectively death them a death sentence by forcing them out of his territory with no provisions or mount to speak of, causing them to resort to banditry and thus subsequently being caught by the authorities.

Hence only a small cadre of loyal servants would actually get to join forces with their master.

While Alexander would get himself enough fields that would triple his current lands, going from 36,000 hectares to around 100,000 hectares or from 360 sq km to 1,000sq km.

Which meant that with him practicing a three-crop rotation system, and having already plowed 24,000 hectares in the winter, he would have to plow around another 42,000 hectares of land.

Alexander just barely had the capacity to do this, in no small thanks to the new horses and prisoners, as he employed close to 20,000 men and a few thousand pack animals just for this endeavor alone.

He had to even create several thousand heavy plows for this expansion, which he did by reallocating much of the weapons-grade steel into making the plow head, and then even redirecting much of the military-industrial base into making the wooden body of the tilling device for a time being.

The reason for this being that a large portion of the new land, about one-third or 15,000 hectares to be precise, was to be planted with beetroots, which would be used to make sugar, the economic benefits of which need not be said.

While the other 27,000 hectares would be allotted for grains, vegetables, and other cash crops.

So in this way, farmers all over the country were seen engaged in their craft for the time being, toiling under the heavy hot sun to grow sustenance for themselves and their lords.

While Alexander in the meantime got two very good news.

Chapter 455 The Thesian Family Member (Part-1)

Alexander spent a lot of his time in March inspecting the fields, watching the farmers not just plow and plant seeds but also perform another critical job, which was de-weeding, i.e.- removing the undesirable plants growing on the field.

A task that was seen being performed by both men and women using small sickles, who primarily worked on the wheat seeds that were just waking up from their winter slumber.

It was a tedious process but also very important, for the level of weed removal would affect the final product, thus the men were hard at work trying to kill off these invasive plants as soon as possible.

Alexander also saw the farmers prune many fruit trees, i.e.- cutting parts of the part to encourage growth, a job that required quite expert skills, as too much removal would damage the tree, but too little would have no result, and be a waste of time.

In this way, the month of March nearly ended for Alexander, until one day around the end of it, he got his first good news.

It was around the mid-afternoon of a bright shiny day, and Alexander was simply lazing around in his garden after having a great meal, when suddenly one of his trusted messengers ran up to him and excitedly said, "My lord, good news from the harbor. Mithras is back!"

Mithras was the man Alexander had put in charge of getting the families of the Thesians, most of them Sycarians into Zanzan, and Alexander was truly relieved to hear them finally arrive.

They were due around late February, or early March, and given that they were a month late, Alexander had truly been worried.

He feared they might have been caught up in a storm and completely destroyed, which was quite possible, or more fearfully, get caught up in the blockade and captured.

That would have been Alexander's worst nightmare for if the enemy got to know that the people on the ships were the family members of a lot of Alexander's retainers and high-level personnel, then the amount of damage they could do to him would be sky-shattering.

The lightest he would have gotten away with was paying an astronomical ransom, while it was also likely there would be an internal coup and Zanzan's city gates would have been opened and Alexander and his family handed over to Djose in exchange for the hostages' lives.

Now, Alexander had taken some precautions against this, for he had sent three ships out into the sea before the blockade, their mission being to look for the fleet and then inform them of the current situation.

But even then Alexander had been worried, as he had no direct way to communicate with the people and warn them of the danger. and furthermore feared the scouts would somehow miss them, causing them all to die.

Thus the messenger's report caused great joy in Alexander who had been relaxing in his garden who flashed a large grin and turned to ask, "Really! Are you sure?"

"Yes, the captain sent the reportedly only after he confirmed it." The man replied confidently, before going on to describe the event.

"It is said that some time ago, many of the fishermen spotted a huge fleet carrying our flag approach Zanzan. They quickly told the guards nearby about this, but before we could send any boats, a messenger soon came in a small boat to confirm it was Mithras."

Alexander's question about the veracity of the report was actually largely redutant because no one wanted to be the one to deliver incorrect news to Alexander, the highest person in the city, and so tried very tried to be as sure as possible.

This was even illustrated in this very case, as when the fishermen's report reaches the leader of the city guards posted near the harbor, which was also the most heavily guarded part of the city, the man personally went near the docks to assess the situation for himself.

After all, the recent blockage still lingered on many's minds, and some feared that those might have returned for a round two.

So, it was only after the captain met Mithra's messenger and talked to him, confirming that the ships were friendly and not enemies, did he send a messenger to Alexander's manor informing him of the good news.

"Good, good, let's go right away," Alexander hence quickly got up from his hammock, put down the wine glass, and summoned his bodyguards to escort him to his destination.

And he soon arrived at the docks through the southern gate and found it to be busy as heck.

The harbor had mostly recovered from its brief occupation, with its roads being replaced with concrete and stone, the wooden wharf being replaced with concrete and the wooden cranes being rebuilt.

But what gave the place its vibrancy was actually the people.

The evidence of this was how along the foot of the southern wall, facing the sea, were every kind of small shop one's heart could desire, selling all kinds of things, ranging from food produce such as freshly caught fish, butchered meat, various fruits, and vegetables, to ordinary and exquisite vases and pottery, to various kinds of colored fabric to many types of metal paraphernalia like nails, hammers, etc.

There were even street touts offering to take people to various red-light establishments.

And people clamored around all these stalls setting the air abuzz around the harbor as the hawkers loudly peddled their wares and the customers fiercely haggled the price.

This was currently probably the most thriving part of the city.

And perhaps right now this was true even more than anytime before, as an enormous crowd had gathered along the road that ran adjacent to the sea, all were clamoring to see why there were so many ships approaching them.

The guards had already promised them these were friendlies and as the ships had Alexander's flag, the crowd did not panic and was not fearful to get close.

Among this sea of people gathered at the port, each carried a varied intent, so much so that it covered all types of goals.

There were honest dock workers looking forward to being hired to unload the cargo these ships undoubtedly carried.

There were curious shoppers who just wanted to see why there was a crowd.

There were expectant merchants hoping to sell food, everyday wears such as sandals, hats, snacks, and a million other things to the disembarking people.

There were even unscrupulous crooks looking to steal coin purses, either from the disembarking men or from the gathered crowd.

And lastly, there were the ever-present beggars, flashing their palms for alms.

Alexander did not have any trouble navigating through the crowd, his heavily armored bodyguards and his personal identity making it possible for him to move about effortlessly.

Wherever Alexander walked, the crowd would part like he was Moses, and they were the red sea, making way for him even if it meant they had to push someone else off the wharf into the sea.

After all, touching a noble, never mind a pasha was unthinkable for them.

Seeing this manic obedience, as the crowd scampered on their hands and feet to make way for him, proved to display the power of a title, Alexander again tasted the sweet, addicting taste of power and status.

'So this is the power of nobility?' He murmured, fully understanding now how nobles were able to become tyrants over time.

It was very easy to see obedient people not as people but as sheep to herd, harvest, and exploit.

But as Alexander approached the first docked ship, such philosophical musings were put at the back of his head for now, for there was Mithras to greet him right around where he had gotten off.

The man was originally talking to a crew member, possibly telling him how to unload the cargo, until he spotted Alexander approaching.

"Alexander! It's great to see you, hahaha!" The lean man ran forward to greet the lord with a giant hug.

Mithras had been away for most of the time Alexander had been pasha, and so he forgot that Alexander was actually noble and hence the calling by name.

Alexander for this part did not mind this, as instead, he was just glad to see the man alive.

Mithras was from Alexander's mercenary group and given he had given him such an important job relating to many of his soldiers and retainers' families and one that entitled so much running away around Thesos, it went on to prove just how much Alexander trusted and believed in the capabilities of this man.

And not only that, but the man had been a fisherman before he joined the mercenary group due to his village being burned down by another city-state and at many times had proved himself to be a skilled navigator.

"You too! You too!" Thus Ixx repeated relieved, before having another look at him and worriedly saying, "You have grown thin! And why are they so late?"

"*Sigh*," First the lean man with a full beard let out a mournful sigh that expressed a thousand emotions, as he only said, "We can talk about that later."

This type of answer worried Alexander, for he understood it had to be bad news, but did not hound the man then and there.

"Okay, okay, whatever it is we can discuss it later. I'm sure we can deal with it later." Alexander thus assured, before tapping the man on the shoulders and saying, "You're tired now. So get some rest."

Chapter 456 The Thesian Family Member (Part-2)

Alexander soon had a few men escort Mithras to his manor so that he could get some much-needed rest.

The journey seemed to have taken a toll on the man.

While Alexander chose to stay behind as he still wanted to oversee the unloading and see that everything go smoothly.

But even more importantly it was so that he could have some talks with a few selected people there.

These included a few Sycarians and other Thesians who had gone with Mithras to help him with the emigration, but more notably it was to greet the fleet captain who commandeered the whole group of ships and invite him to his manor.

The reason for this courtesy was this man was actually a shoulder (baron) working under Lady Inayah, to whom all these ships.

And in fact, the man was quite close to her, as evidenced by him being given the command of such a huge fleet, and hence Alexander was required to treat him with respect.

There was also the additional reason that he was eager to know about their journey, a pique of curiosity that strengthened itself when he heard some of the men who exited the ship which Mithras was on say,

"*Sigh*, this trip has been not bad....but that disaster...ohhh,"

The lamentation on that saying was palpable, for it appeared there was some tragedy and even death along the way.

But Alexander did not press these recently docked men for more information, though he even knew some of them.

Instead, he let them accompany Mithras, as Alexander was of the mind, 'Whatever happened, happened. After all, there was no point in crying over it now.'

'I will know about it soon enough. For whatever it was, at least the fleet is here.' He then patiently said to himself, determining the fact that since so many ships had returned made it back, the disaster could not have been anything too earth-shattering.

He was at least confident on that given the evidence in front of him.

But for Alexander to get to know the details, he would have to wait, for there were a lot of ships but not enough space on the port for all of them to dock at once.

This had been a similar problem even when Alexander first came to Zanzan back in November, for the harbor here could only accommodate about a hundred ships along its crescent-shaped wharf, whereas

Alexander counted just the new fleet having around 80 to 90 ships, never mind that ships and boats already docked there.

"Get these small boats out of here, and let these ships dock first,"

Alexander had also chosen to stay here for this kind of purpose, as seeing a ship traffic jam forming, he issued this command, while also making a note to expand the harbor.

Now, Znazan's harbor was not bad per se, which was one of its few redeeming qualities, as the port had been developed in the past years to accommodate the warships used to launch against Tibias.

And given that this was the poorest part of Adhania where maritime trade was scarce, its facilities were adequate for its time.

Which was also why Pasha Muazz had simply neglected to widen the harbor.

But when Alexander took over, he had completely different policies, ones which emphasized trading and expanding, meaning the current facilities were starting to appear inadequate to deal with his growing needs.

And though the situation was not currently critical, Alexander did not want to wait till it become one.

'Hmmm, looks like I will need to have a talk with Diaogosis,' He thus determined as he waited for the people he wanted to meet to embark.

While in the meantime, Alexander oversaw and observed the sights of people disembarking.

And the bustling movement of men, women, and children flowing out of the ships almost like the dams had been broken was certainly an interesting sight to behold, making it seem almost like there was an osmotic pressure acting on them, which could be represented by how the people behind them pushed the people forward to exit the vessel as soon as possible.

Everyone that exited the ships without exception had something on their hands and sometimes even on their heads, as they lightly and quickly stepped out of the wooden floating structure.

The strong men usually carried the heaviest loads, stuffed inside either leather bags or wooden trunks, while women were seen carrying the lighter stuff such as jewelry, gold coins, food, etc, with lastly the children carting many miscellaneous goods, and something even their younger siblings on their arms.

But not everything could be carried by hand oneself, and so Alexander also noticed many of the passengers negotiating with the dock workers to get some of their heavier cargo out, though the act was made much harder by the fact the two parties chose different languages.

Hence this soon made them resort to sign languages, and Alexander saw firsthand evidence of how money talked.

The Thesians would hold out their chosen amount of coins in front of the dock workers, while the workers would either shake or nod their heads, showing denial or agreement.

And once enough coin would be displayed, these strong, muscular men would finally agree to the commission, before quickly climbing into the ships of their employers to retrieve their desired goods.

These dock workers would most of the time be accompanied by the employer who would follow them to make sure that they got the right cargo, while the ship crew would make sure no one stole another's stuff.

This vigilance was made easier by the fact that these men had gotten to know their passengers quite a bit after so many months of travel.

But still, the owners themselves were usually alert enough to keep an eye on the cargo being unloaded to make sure someone did not make away with their stuff.

In this way, the process of disembarkation continued.

Though it had to be pointed out that it was not as if there were no problems.

There was the usual shuffling as dock workers clashed with one another over commissions.

Many stronger men would push and shove others to get to the front of the customers faster, while others would say something like, 'I will do it for 10 tustas less than him. Come to me,'

This kind of poaching was common but also caused bad blood between the men, which even sometimes escalated to fist fights.

Then there was the general chaos caused by too many dock workers trying to enter and exit the ships at any one time, caused by all the individual hiring.

If the ship's captains were smart enough, they could have avoided such a situation by hiring only a few who would unload everyone's cargo.

That would have been much faster, safer, and easier.

The captains could have even charged each of the passengers a small fee, the aggregate of which could have been used to pay for these workers, so it would not be even any coin out of their purse.

They might have even pocketed the difference.

But they had not, hence there was a jam around nearly every ship.

But these were not by any margin the most problematic thing on the docks.

No for that, by far, would be the fact there were all these confused people there who did not know where to go, and just stood right where they landed and looked around aimlessly, hoping to catch a glimpse of their loved one, the one for whom they had made the perilous journey.

And as these people stood around, coupled with the already gathered crowd, soon the dock became overflowing with people.

If this continued, soon, there would be no place for the remaining people to even disembark.

Alexander of course noticed this, and he was quite alarmed that this was the state even when the disembarkment had not even properly begun now, for the fishing vessels were just leaving the ports, while the new ships were only starting to make port.

"Who is in charge of the port security? Get him to meet me," Alexander hence snapped and quickly displaced one of his bodyguards to find out.

And this armored man had no problem in locating the guard captain, as the former's fully kitted-up gear made it so that he could just walk up to any city guard and ask him for the information.

And so a while later the man in question presented himself in front of Alexander.

"My..my lord, I heard you were asking for me?" The man meekly mewled, looking dartedly at Alexander.

He could not even fathom what gross mistake he had done to earn the ire of such a big shot.

After all why else would he be called in front of the lord?

'He is not going to blame me for not meeting him on him, is he?' The assumed man wildly assumed.

While Alexander, certainly seeing the fear in the shivering man, made him ask if his face was that scary, and felt as if he had become the principal and the man before him was the student.

And then addressed the man for the reasons he called him.

"Take your men, and clear the harbor of every civilian, onlooker, and shopkeeper. Tell them it is the pasha's order."

Chapter 457 The Thesian Family Member (Part-3)

The guard captain had envisioned a lot of things before coming here.

He mostly presumed he was about to get lambasted for the chaos around the docks, to which he had whimpered in his mind,

'Sure the dock is a bit rowdy. But I'm already trying my best. There is little more I can do.'

In fact, the man had been so busy and overwhelmed with dealing with the current situation that he had not even had the time to meet with Alexander even after knowing the leader of the city was there.

And in the few instances in which he thought he had found the opportunity, another crisis would suddenly erupt that required his attention, with the very last one being an order from Alexander himself, which was to clear the docks of the boats.

"Ye..yes, my lord," Hence seeing Alexander let him off without any rebuke, the captain quickly performed a salute, relieved and ecstatic, before quickly excusing himself.

And soon Alexander began to see the group of about a hundred guards blowing their wooden whistles and swinging his sturdy arms, indicating the crowd to disperse.

"*Whistle*, *whistle*, Leave. Leave. The pasha orders you to leave."

"Go on, go on. Why are you simply loitering here? Don't you have jobs to do?"

"Move, move, the people here were invited by Lord Pasha, nothing to see here."

"Make way, make away,"

The guards yelled, shouted, and barked various phrases as they almost herded the crowd out of the harbor.

Even the shops were forced to be closed, with the simple excuse being given that it was Alexander's order.

The guards were surprisingly efficient in their work, as they had managed to mostly clear the entire premises of undesirables within a short time, and with it the congestion.

As this went on, Alexander was posed with another problem.

And that was the problem of where to house all these new men?

Each of the Thesians residing in Zanzan had brought about 6-7 family members, mostly women and children, but some also their younger brothers and sisters, and thus this frailer group could not be left out to the elements.

Alexander had originally thought he would be able to place them in the public house he had planned to build, but that had not worked out due to all the interruptions and material constraints.

So, given that was not an option, after considering it for a while, he decided to move them to the eastern district and let them stay near the barracks.

There were a lot of empty buildings there, and also, letting the newly arrived people stay close to their loved one would help ease them into this foreign land.

A land that was so different from their home.

"Hemicus, get the Sycarians out of the barracks to meet their family members. And also tell Menes I'm looking for ihm." Alexander thus ordered.

While he got in front of the nervous crowd to address them.

Since they had just gotten here Alexander was of the mind to make a good first impression.

"Gentlemen, I'm the lord of this place, Alexander. And I'm very glad you have made it here safe and sound." Alexander loudly proclaimed, drawing almost all pairs of eyes on him.

This happened not only because of his identity or his entourage but because he had spoken Thesian.

And seeing that the ruler of the city was one of them and had actually come to meet them in person, it calmed many agitated hearts and bloomed favorable feelings towards him.

While Alexander, seeing he got their attention continued, "I'm sure all of you had a long journey. But rest assured you will be well taken care of here."

"Your loved ones have been already informed, they should be arriving shortly."

"And as a personal present to you from your lord, I will bear the cost of unloading all the cargo for all of you."

The last one got a loud cheer from the crowd who saw Alexander was being a generous man, and then quickly many started to demand the money they had given to the dock workers.

While the dock workers, as they did not speak Thesian, did not understand what Alexander had said and simply looked at the people demanding his money back like they were an idiot.

"All workers will be paid 10 ropals for loading the cargo from ships. Now give back the money you have taken," So Alexander helped clarify the situation in Azhak, which got a second cheer, this time from the dock workers.

This amount of money was usually earned by them working for the whole day, not just the few hours they would have to work as dusk was settling in.

Hence the dock workers were seen quickly giving back the money, and then returning to their work with even more enthusiasm.

Alexander had done this primarily to help boost his image, while also solving the problem of congestion around the ships, thus solving two problems with one stone.

After all, he had already spend around 30 million ropals to get these men here, so a few additional thousand was of little consequence.

But Alexander's little economic package did have results in other areas, as the dock workers, without having to haggle prices could work much more efficiently.

Thus even before dusk could arrive, about 60 ships had been unloaded and emptied.

Money truly could solve most problems.

In the meantime, the Sycarians and other Thesians had also managed to present themselves to the harbor, and the group then quickly fanned out, as each man started to look for his family.

The total number of Thesians in Zanzan was around 10,000.

But not everyone had family in Thesos, as about half of this population were freed slaves and servants, and these people either had their families with them or had lost connection with them a long time ago.

This only left the other 4,000 to 5,000, and it was them who were present there.

And soon, these people began to meet their intended loved ones, which was a heartwarming moment to witness, as when they would finally spot them, the men would rush up to hug and greet them.

The men would rejoice at having finally reconnected with their family, laughing and kissing their children, while the women and kids would many times even cry tears of relief at having met the person they were here for.

Many had been terrified that they would be told that their man had died and they would find themselves all alone in this foreign land after coming all the way.

And unfortunately, this nightmare was the reality for some, as seen by a very few who stood around the wharf and dartedly looked around in all directions, even craning their necks to spot their man.

An endeavor they were destined to fail at.

And a while later Alexander even spotted a few women and children let out mournful cries, most likely because they got to know about their husband or father or brother's fate from other neighboring soldiers.

For them it felt like the sky had crashed, as now not only were they all alone, but many would not be able to get back to Thesos even if they wanted to.

For a lot of them had come to Zanzan after selling all their land back in Thesos.

Hence, many envisioned begging as their only future.

Seeing this certainly made Alexander a bit sad, perhaps more so because he felt that they were his men and as their supreme commander it was his responsibility to get his men safely to their home.

But on the contrary, he had lost quite a few Thesians in his two battles, especially with the latest one where the fight had been brutal, making him lose around 94 Thesians killed and 265 wounded.

"Have these people take residence in the eastern district. And then reassure the widows they will be given a stipend every month." Alexander ordered Menes.

He had thought about these problems before, and even allocated separate funding to deal with them,

"Yes, my lord," Menes readily replied as he then instructed his men to quickly arrange the living quarters for all these people.

In the meantime, the unloading continued unabated even when dusk had settled, much to the surprise of the dock workers who had assumed they had gotten a quick payday.

Instead, they heard Alexander say,

"Use large torches. I want the unloading finished by today."

And since the lord wanted to have the unloading done by today, by jolly god he would have his unloading by today.

Hence quickly huge blazing brazers were set up, and the workers worked without even having the time to release a breath finally the entire docks were cleared before midnight.

The workers were gonna feel that tomorrow.

But at least they were paid in full and on time.

So the workers left pretty happy.

While Alexander stayed until the entire thing had been finished, most of the time meeting with the families of his retainers.

This occurred as almost all of Alexander's military leaders, such as Grahtos, Menicus, Melodias, and Heliptos had come to retrieve their families from the dock, after which they took them to Alexander to introduce them.

Then there were some captains to took the same this opportunity, followed by even some of his bodyguards who brought their families.

Alexander made small talks with each of them until finally, he got to meet the man he had been truly waiting for, the captain of the fleet- Shordar Karvish.

Chapter 458 First Loss At Sea

Alexander for the first time got to know the families of his retainers as he oversaw the disembarkment around the docks.

For instance, he found that Grahtos had a wife and five kids.

Melodias's wife had died and was left with six daughters and three sons.

While Heliptos surprisingly had a few mistresses and many children.

But the most impressive would have to be certainly Menicus, who did not disappoint as the most senior of the group by having thirteen sons!

Yes, enough to form a football team, a referee, and even an audience.

While what truly moved Alexander was his wife's luck at winning the gender chance so many times.

Menicus's sons ranged across the whole age spectrum, going from middle-aged men with their own impressive families rivaling their father's, down to teens who were just starting to enter puberty.

It seemed that Menicus was old but not cold.

And lastly, it was Hemicus who introduced his wife, young son, and two teen daughters to Alexander, a smile hanging on the usually stoic man's face.

Alexander paid attention to entertain all these men and their misses, after finishing which he finally managed to meet the captain of the ship.

It appeared that the man had stayed on his ship until every other ship had docked, making him one of the last ones to get off.

"It is a pleasure to meet again Lord Lord Karvish. I can see your journey has been safe and successful!" Alexander cheerfully greeted the man who had also gotten him here from Adhan the first time.

"Ahhh...safe, I guess you could say so. Being alive is being good after all," The old man with a gruff voice replied, sounding somewhat rueful.

To which Alexander only nodded and said, "Yes, Mithras did mention some kind of disaster, although he did not elaborate," before lightly adding,

"But so many ships are here, right? That means it can't have been that bad. So let us please rest first."

Alexander could wait to hear the bad news.

"Yes, I guess," Was the somewhat tired reply as the men then at last returned to Alexander's manor.

And thus the unloading and placement of all the people was finished in a day.

The next day, due to working until midnight the day prior, Alexander skipped breakfast and directly woke up at around lunchtime.

Since it was a holiday anyway as many of the council members were taking a day off to spend time with their families, it was no big deal anyway.

So, Alexander lazily woke up, got refreshed, and only after a grand feast with the guests that he finally got down to asking about their journey and what had happened.

"So, what is it you guys are so down about?" Alexander said the question in his study, where Mithras and Lord Karvish sat on a coach, slipping a cold milkshake flavored with strawberry, Alexander's latest invention

Summer was knocking at the doorsteps, and the temperature was already causing some discomfort, hence the advent of this item.

Hearing the question, Mithras quickly removed the metal straw from the mouth, and in a said tone reported,

"Because we had to collect people from so many places, we had decided to split our fleet into many groups, each given in charge of an area."

"And in one of those areas, there was a sudden storm that sunk all the ships. We lost around 10 ships and 3,000 to 4,000 men."

Alexander had long expected such news, both from reading between the lines and more so because he had counted about 90 ships when he had clearly sent around a 100.

He had even double-checked to make sure he was not wrong.

So took the report with a nod, solemnly saying, "That is indeed a tragedy. But that is the risk of sailing, for the weather at sea is in the hands of the gods. Let us pray they will be let into Elysium." as he then pious clasped his hands like as he saying a prayer.

Alexander's reverence towards the gods might have been fake, but he did genuinely feel bad about those people, both for the drowned and those still living in Zanzan who had lost everyone they knew.

But that was the inherent risk associated with sailing these days and it was even something people had somewhat grown to expect.

So Alexander could only thank his lucky stars that the people who died were not anyone related to people he was close to, like his retainers.

"That is not the worst thing." After Mithras, Lord Karvish quickly spoke up in his gruff tone, adding, "Unfortunately those ships also carried a lot of our gold. We planned to use it to pay the ports there and also bribe the officials to get some seals that would let us easier access to the subsequent ports."

"All that went down too." Lord Karvish again produced that rueful voice.

"Yes, and after that, we debated whether to turn back." Mithras picked up the conversation, saying, "But knowing why you sent us there, decided to continue. Captain Lord Karvish even decided to forego the salaries of him and his crew to enable us."

"And by the grace of the gods we somehow managed to shoehorn the finance of the trip by asking the various families to contribute. Thank Opkus!"

The ending of that sentence both had relief and also a hint of expectation.

"But you promised everyone I would pay them back?" Alexander easily understood where they were angling, and produced a knowing look.

He also kind of understood that unusually loud cheer yesterday when he had promised to pay for the dock workers.

It seemed that the people that came here were really penniless.

And he got a positive, sheepish nod in return.

Alexander then flattened his lips at this, not understanding who he should be angry towards, Mithras and Lord Karvish for losing the ships, or the storm for being there.

But ultimately Alexander knew he would have to just suck it up.

This might be the first time he lost some ships, but it would certainly not be the last.

Not if wanted to have a maritime trade network.

"So much how did you lose?" Alexander thus placidly asked.

And Mithras put in head down and lowly squeaked the astronomical number, "Ten million."

This huge number cause Alexander to instantly exclaim in fright, ".....what! I gave you 15 million ropals, and you lost two-thirds! Why did you put so much into a few ships?"

Alexander had of course foreseen the dangers at sea, which was why he had told them to distribute the money among many ships.

"We did that because the ships were reaching port, and we intended to buy lots of grains from there for Zanzan," Mithras could only mewl out his excuse.

He knew this was a blunder he could be held culpable for, for the money he had lost was truly huge.

10 million ropals was equivalent to 200 kg of gold, or two whole Alexanders.

"....." Alexander silently kept his lips pursed for a while, a long, long while hearing the excuse, until finally letting out a sigh and saying,

"Fine, I will pay for everything. The ships lost, the due salaries, and the coin spent. You will all be reimbursed."

Alexander could only take the L here.

"Hahaha, the lord is understanding. Excellent! Excellent!" And as soon as Alexander had said this, Lord Karvish's mood relaxed tenfold, as he slouched back and even started sipping his beverage.

It seemed the real reason why he was so sad and tense was not because of the dead men, but because of the lost money.

While Alexander worked on his next economic package inside his head.

Out of the 1 billion ropals he originally had, he had traded with Ptolomy and Pasha Farzah goods worth 600 million ropals.

Then he spent another 70 million paying the salaries of his men and developing Zanzan, introducing ropals into the economy when it originally had almost none.

And now lastly he was going to have to spend around another 30 million on the Thesians and their transport fare.

Meaning Alexander had already burned through 70% of his savings in just five months.

For context, this was an amount even the top 0.1% of the top 0.1% of the world would never get to own.

And if this spending spree went on as usual, Alexander would be broke within the next two months.

'*Sigh*', I really hope I know what I'm doing,' Faced with this statistic, even Alexander felt apprehensive and really hoped Zanzan would be able to pay for itself.

And pay for itself soon enough or he would be broke.

But even with this potential bankruptcy on the horizon, Alxx knew he would have to cough up the aid, be it to help the Thesian get up on their feet, boost the economy, or placate Shordar Karvish, who answered to Lady Inayah, and one who was a powerful ally for now.

So the next day Alexander announced 5 million to the ship crews, and 10 million to the Thesians as compensation, pleasing everyone but himself.

But Alexander would soon get to please himself with some good news, and it was good news about money nevertheless.

For the second good news had come in the form of Harold, the rich merchant from Sybarsis.

Chapter 459 Food Shortages

In the past one and a half month after winning the battle, Alexander was starting to go through some pretty tough times.

Sure he had won a great victory and secured his borders as well as gaining four new followers, who as a side note had left after only three days after swearing their fealty in an informal setting due to time constraints, promising to come back in May when all the nobles were asked to answer Alexander's call for a more formal swearing.

But after the initial success of the great win, Alexander was made to face some serious challenges.

And that was not only with money but actually the food.

In fact, that was the much bigger problem as there was Alexander began to genuinely concern himself that Zanzan might soon start to starve.

For the 20,000 tons of grains he had bought with him from Adhan was starting to graze the bottom of the barrel.

Eating 20,000 tons of grain in less than 6 months might sound like a lot, but once you did the math, you would find it really not that much.

For instance, the average person consumed around 500 grams of floor each day, with another 500g to 700g consisting of vegetables and fruits.

Alexander would not usually provide the latter, instead letting the people have their pick of the side, which in this drought-ridden pit hole consisted of mainly wild berries, mushrooms, and if they were lucky garden vegetables such as peas and beans that the people would have managed to grow in their backyards.

Alexander would sometimes give smoked meat and fish, usually about twice weekly, while the rest of the days the people would need to depend on the fishmonger for some protein, as meat was really non-existence due to scarcity of suitable domestic animals.

Whatever cow, horse and ox the people had had long been cooked, digested, and ejected, while anyone still possessing one would rather use it to plow the fields.

And as for birds like chickens, ducks and fowl, they were similarly a rare breed, with meat almost as expensive as gold, and just one egg costing 2 ropals.

Hence, as Alexander only handed out grain to the 150,000 population, his stockpiles were enough to last a bit less than 9 months, 6 of which he had unfortunately already spent.

And this was not to mention the grains he had used to plant the crops, which required around 150 kg of seed per hectare.

This meant that with 27,000 hectares of grain planted, Alexander in total had already used up about 16,000 tons of grains.

And now with the addition of around 20,000 to 25,000 new mouths of feed, it meant that Alexander had only about a month and a half left till the stocks were completely empty, i.e.- until the end of May.

This was also why Alexander was so vehemently opposed to fighting a siege, and pushed for an open battle.

Now, this food situation was not a surprise to Alexander.

He had done the math even prior to coming to Zanzan, and knew his limits very well.

This was precisely why he had asked Pasha Farzah for an additional 30,000 tons of food.

A shipment that had been promised to him within 4 months and that should have been here months ago.

Alexander had been even prudent enough to compensate that Pasha Farzah might be delayed or face other problems by stocking up on three times the grain amount, enabling him to theoretically reach 13 months, though that was based on assuming the population would be a maximum of 100,000, not touch 200,000.

But Alexander had only allowed the numbers to rise that high because Pasha Farzah constantly reassured him that there would be no delays with the shipment, which was also why Alexander had relaxed the rationing and sponsored generous food programs.

Even his wedding was conducted based on that promise.

A promise that lasted until the war broke.

After which Pasha Farzah began to suddenly have a million other problems.

Thus Alexander was now left with mostly praying that Pasha Farzah came to Zanzan by May and had the necessary grain with him.

And this situation had even made Alexander a bit reproach himself for acting like the tough guy and not maintaining cordial relations with such a critical ally.

'They are bigger, stronger, and better than you. For now remember that,' Alexander told to himself, taking note to keep warm relations with others even if they don't always reciprocate back equally.

At least for now, where he needed them much more than they needed him.

Now it had to be said that it was not like Alexander was without options when it really came down to it.

This was also why he had not throttled the food supply yet, even when Menicus was ringing alarm bells.

Because Alexander would do any of the following things.

He could simply re-introduce the rationing, and decrease the per-head consumption by 20%, giving out 400g of flour rather than the usual 500g per capita.

This might be unpopular, but the people would likely suck it up as Alexander would still be giving out food.

Plus, Alexander would not even need to publicly admit it as the rationing that he had initiated when the city had gone to war production mode was still in place.

So he could just make the portion smaller.

And even if the people noticed, Alexander could simply say this was the new portion, take it or leave it.

Then there was the second option-food reallocation.

Alexander had noticed that the Thesians had bought quite a kind of good with them, about 50 to 80 kg of flour for their family and he contemplated buying that food for gold, though the sale might not be voluntary.

Sure the total food would not be large, maybe roundabout 500 tons at best, but in a starving situation, every morsel mattered.

But though Alexander had contemplated it, he was very very unlikely to implement this even in the direst situation because then what he would be doing was taking sustenance from the families of his soldiers.

The very men that fought, died, and protected him.

If Alexander really did that then he would not be able to do a more stupid thing even if he tried.

So, Alexander was in fact of the mind that if push really came to shove he might even do the opposite and keep his army well-fed and happy.

So this meant Alexander would have to move to his next consideration.

Which proposed doing a similar thing Amenheraft had done when Adhania started experiencing drought.

And that was attacking your neighbor for food.

For Amenheraft that was Tibias, and for Alexander that would be the surrounding nobles.

And Alexander was pretty sure he would be able to squeeze out quite a bit of fat from these currently defenseless sheep.

Though the risk associated with that and the chance of the situation quickly escalating to unimaginable heights was all too real.

And still, it was this and the first option was the combination that Alexander was most leaning towards, though he was of the mind to wait till the last possible minute and really hope that Pasha Farzah arrived on time.

Alexander really did not risk starting another war.

And then lastly there was the worst-case scenario where everything had failed.

Meaning no food left, and no hope of getting more anytime soon.

And though this might sound apocalyptic, even then everything would most likely not come crashing down.

This was because the people had had their spring harvest, where they collected around 12,000 hectares of vegetables amounting to about 10,000 tons of various produce which they could subsist on until August to September when the wheat be ready to harvest.

Alexander additionally also had close to 15,000 draft animals he could slaughter in a do-or-die case.

And lastly, he could simply buy more food from others in the open market.

Now this last option had not been on the cards until Mithras and Lord Karvish arrived, because Alexander had burnt all his sea-worthy ships, and was not left with anything bigger than a fishing vessel.

And since Tibias would not trade with him due to the recent wars, that only left him with Sybarsis.

And luckily for Alexander, that was quite feasible, for though mainland Sybarsis was quite far away, they also controlled the island of Galosos which was just 1600 km southwest of Zanzan.

It would take about 14 days to reach them by ship.

Now originally due to bad blood, trade between Adhania and Sybarsis was banned.

Or else Adhania could have rode the drought and barely anyone would have noticed.

But since Ptolomy took office, though the decree had not been repelled, it was tacitly agreed to turn a blind eye to anyone dealing with them, especially someone like Alexander who had special privileges.

Thus Alexander was currently of the mind to convince Lord Karvish to make the trip.

And since just the travel time of a round trip would take about a month, never mind actually buying and loading the stuff into the ships, Alexander wanted to start the talks right away, even though he knew the shorder would ask for a premium.

But fortunately for him, Alexander was spared that, for the stout merchant Harold announced himself two days after the Thesians had landed.

And he had bought with him 20 ships, filled to the brim with food, slaves, and animals.

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Chapter 460 Guests From Sybarsis (Part-1)

"Is this Zanzan? What happened to it?" As Harold's ship approved the harbor, this question was asked by an elder Caucasian man standing next to him.

And though the question was phrased like something bad had taken place, it actually represented surprise and exclamation.

Because from the bow of the ship, the man was given a clear view of how busy the crescent-shaped harbor was.

Particularly the elder gentleman focused his eyes on the wharf (the place where ships docked), and was astounded to see that was it was so full that only a tiny portion of it was actually available for docking and disembarking.

And though the size of the dock was not that big and amount of ships not that much when compared to the one in his city, it was quite impressive for Zanzan.

A comparison he could make because the man was a long-time navigator and had come to Zanzan several times in the past.

And in all those visits he had rarely seen the harbor so full.

Perhaps maybe during war times when the ships would be used to transport troops.

'When did Zanzan become such a huge trading hub?' He hence wondered as he gazed at the huge number of ships.

Now, the man had made a mistake here.

Because the ships he was seeing were all of Lady Inayah's transport ships that had brought the Thesians.

And not cargo vessels of trade.

But even then it was undeniable that Zanzan was growing at a rapid rate, attracting farmers and merchants from all the nearby villages.

"Indeed, my lord. I too am surprised. It was not nearly as busy when I first came here, haha" Harold had a toady smile as he quite reverentially answered the man, with the words 'my lord' being a huge clue why.

The portly man was also happy with seeing the harbor busy because it showed all the hype he had spread about Alexander with the nobility was true.

"I see. It seems it is like you said. Unlike Pasha Muazz, this city lord values trade very much,"

Came the impressed response, just as Harold had hoped.

But then the old man put his chin and changed his tone to a light childling voice, "But even I never thought that this city lord would be rich enough to construct his harbor with marble! *Tsk*, *Tsk*, *Tsk*, it seems looting the Grand Temple has spoiled the little boy."

The aged man who had a pressed white beard was now speaking like an elder dictating to a naughty child.

"Hahaha, yes, yes, you are correct my lord." And Harold was there to butter the man up, adding, "I have personally verified that all the rumors about this city lord being young and previously a small mercenary leader as true. So it's no wonder he would choose to squander his money like this, hehehe."

"That's not marble. Don't talk like you know marble when you have never seen it,"

Suddenly, the pink, amicable atmosphere between the two men was shattered by this high, pitched sarcastic feminine voice, whose owner swaggered behind the men.

And both men instantly whirled around to greet her.

Their eyes met a curvy, mature lady in her early twenties, with sharp eyes, thin red lips, and a pointed face.

Her powdered face radiated an authoritative aura. and her expensive gold and diamond jewelry meshed perfectly with her lavish green gown to show off her status.

But those were not her most distinguishing features.

For that would be expressed by the following words,

"My lady, you should be careful. The doctors said too much moving is harmful to the child," The older gentleman said this laced with caution, for the woman was visibly very pregnant.

"I wanted to get some fresh air. And besides, we have arrived, haven't we?" The lady brushed off the concerns and spoke in a tone that seemed to suggest she was the person in charge there.

'Ahh, yes, Your Grace. We should be docking anytime now. Within a bit," Harold quickly endeavored to answer with a nod.

And then quickly ordered the crew to prepare the ship to dock and anchor.

Soon these were done and after Harold quickly finished registering his ships with the authorities, that fortunately did not take too long as Alexander had given Harold a special pass to cut through all the red tape, and the two nobles were ready to disembark.

"It really is not marble," The elder gentleman exclaimed in surprise as he tapped his foot onto the concrete harbor, and when looked at Harold inquisitively, asking if the merchant could give some insight.

"I'm sorry Lord Junus, but the harbor was made of stone when I came in January. So I have no idea," But Harold could only ruefully shake his head.

After the battle, Alexander had decided to give the harbor a thin layer of concrete as there were a lot of holes, while also making it very nice to look at, with the intent to impress new merchants coming to Zanzan.

And the evidence of its efficacy seemed to present itself.

"Whatever it is made of can wait. Let us meet the city lord for now," This sharp tone again belonged to the noble lady, who said so the moment her feet landed on the docks, seeming to not want to waste a moment of her time.

And she urged the two men to not dilly-dally either and pushed them to move faster.

"Yes, yes, Lady Miranda. The city guards have promised to hire a carriage for us. It is coming right away," Harold then quickly spoke to placate this current in a foul mood lady, and so until the carriage could make it through the huge crowd, the trio was required to wait.

"This port is not half bad," Lord Junus half-mindfully commented as he took in the sights, observing how the white cement floor glowed like marble under the summer sun, and people from all walks of life appeared to be flowing from one side to the other like busy bees, with dock workers tirelessly working, hawkers peddling their produce, and customers buying goods.

While Lady Miranda was more concerned about her purchasing list.

"Harold, are you sure the city lord will be able to sell us the iron we need? In that quantity?" She asked, for that was the main thing she was here to buy.

"The city lord has admitted he has that much iron. But he was not willing to sell it then because he said he wanted to equip his army and did not have enough stocks. So if my lady can convince him now, I can guarantee we can get the iron we need," Harold repeated the answer he had given probably a million times by now.

A subtle point to note here could be them addressing Alexander as city lord and not pasha, which was simply because they did not recognize him as such for the territory he controlled was too small, around the area a small Jamider (Earl) controlled.

"You said he had asked for food, slaves, and animals from you. So we bought seven ships of all those things. Why would he not sell?" Lady Miranda posed this not as a question but as a way to bolster her spirit, as they were really desperate for iron.

And with this hope in her heart, she boarded the carriage.

This carriage would not take her not directly to Alexander's mansion, but to one of the many noble residences Alexander had remolded as personal villas for his guests to stay and rest, until Alexander could clear his schedule and was able to make an appointment.

This Alexander did the moment a messenger came to him to inform of the merchant's arrival, as was he currently in his study, in the midst of lamenting that Mithras had not bought any food with him.

So quickly, only a bit later, Alexander was greeting the finely dressed merchant in his outer hall, moving his arms animatedly and smiling, "Mister Harold, it is a pleasure to see to again. How are you?"

The man seemed as large and portly as ever, with his stubby, fleshy fingers decorated with gemmed rings holding a milkshake.

"Ahhh, my lord, greetings. I'm honored that you decided to meet us so quickly." The man quickly got up to give a full bow, while Junus and Miranda gave a polite nod.

After which Harold quickly got to introducing them, gesturing with his palms and saying,

"My lord, let me introduce you."

'This is Baron Junus. He leads the fleet of the Margrave family."

"And this is Earl Miranda, now the eldest daughter of the Margrave family."

"Their fiefdom is in Galosos and have ruled there for three hundred years."

Alexander was certainly surprised by the arrival of such relative bigshots, for he did not think people would come so quickly.

And had both a good and a bad feeling toward it.

Good because of more business, bad because of fear of attracting jealous eyes.

But whatever the reason, he remembered to present himself as cordially as possible, giving a large smile and joyously saying, "It is a pleasure to meet you, my lord, and my lady. This is my first time meeting nobles from Sybaris. Honored, I'm honored."

"Hahaha, Lord Alexander is too courteous. In fact, it is we who should be honored," Lord Junus replied equally humbly, saying,

"After all, you winning against Pasha Djose's Jahal mercenaries makes us stand in the presence of a legend. Hahaha."

It seemed news of his victory had even crossed the seas.