

Londoner 111

Chapter 111. Unexpected Changes

Kivamus couldn't help but laugh at that vision, while others joined in it as well.

After a moment, when everyone's laughter had calmed down, he looked at Madam Helga. "I held you back because I want you to coordinate with Madam Nerida regarding this. It won't be easy to prepare food for so many villagers within the manor, while maintaining quality and taste in it. But you already have experience preparing food in a large quantity in an inn, so you should be able to help her in that. And you can use the help of any off-duty servants or guards in the preparation of food as well."

"It's not going to be easy, just like you said," Helga replied, "but we will have to manage somehow. I can imagine how good that feast will feel to the villagers, since my family was in exactly the villagers' hopeless situation before we arrived here with you. Having a baron who cares for them is like a Goddess' blessing. So don't worry, Milord, I'll make sure to do it well. Getting enough raw food is always the difficult part. Cooking it for people after that is no trouble at all."

"Good!" Kivamus added, "We also have some cheese and butter which Pydaso has brought for us, so we should also provide some of that to the villagers as well, along with the vegetables."

Duvas interrupted, "But we don't have enough of those to feed all the villagers, my Lord! I understand that those would be good things in a feast - things which most of the villagers rarely get to taste but our remaining cheese and butter would end within a few days if we provided it to everyone."

"No, no," Kivamus interrupted. "I know that we didn't buy that much of it. What I meant is that we can provide a small amount of cheese and butter just for tonight - for the feast." He looked at Madam Helga. "You and Madam Nerida will be making a lot of bread for tonight anyway, so it will be good to provide something to add more flavor to the feast. But, like duvas said, we don't have enough of it and it doesn't come cheap either. So make sure to provide only a small amount of it to everyone."

At Helga's nod, he added, "But you know what, while you should keep the quantities small, you can provide a second helping to the children if they want. It's not something we can provide to the villagers regularly, but this is a feast, so I want everyone to know the taste of those. Especially the children."

Madam Helga gave a warm smile. "Don't worry milord, I will manage it properly so that everyone gets a taste of cheese and butter, while still keeping our food stores intact."

"Perfect!" Kivamus said with a nod. "The villagers have gone through a very bad time in the recent months. So I want to provide them at least a single day of happiness before the harsh winter is upon us."

~ Calubo ~

~ Somewhere inside the forests surrounding Tiranat ~

After a long journey, the group of bandits had finally arrived near Tiranat sometime this morning. Nokozal had kept their two remaining horses for his own use so he wouldn't have to walk much, while the rest of them had to keep trudging through the continuously gathering snow on the road.

The journey had been tiring even before the snow had started on the road, but after that, the weather had turned way too cold on the road and it became exhausting to keep walking. At least Nokozal had allowed them to make a fire whenever they stopped for the night - where they also cooked whatever little prey they caught in the forest as food - since without that fire to heat up their bodies after walking in the snow all day, they might have just frozen on the road.

However, as they came closer to the village, the snowfall had stopped. Or more likely, looking at the dry ground here, snowfall hadn't started here yet, but it wouldn't be long before it did.

Calubo had been cursing the bandits and his useless luck for everything he was going through, but when he got the first look at the village he had lived in for nearly all his life after being away from it for so long, he couldn't help but become emotional at the sight. Although he couldn't see much from where they were hiding in the forest in the north-west of the village, just the sight of those run-down wooden houses was enough to remind him that whatever its flaws, it was home.

He had immediately wanted to run to the village after that, and for a moment he had nearly started running, before he realized that his hands were still tied behind him, and he would be shot down by one of the archers of the bandits immediately before he even reached the village. So somehow, he had controlled his urge to run to the village with teary eyes. Of course, he didn't let any other bandits notice that his eyes were wet or they would find a way to use even that against him.

Although they did have a small rabbit to eat yesterday night, it wasn't enough to feed everyone, and of course Calubo got the smallest portion of the food. By now the small amount of dried meat that they had brought with them from the quarry had also run out, so even after the fatso's continuous complaints to try to hunt something else since he was too hungry, Nokozal had scolded the fatso and told everyone that they had to hold on for today, since they were too close to the village now, and they couldn't afford anyone in the village to spot a fire.

That had led the bandits to start grumbling, but nobody had dared to go against the orders of the bandit chief. And since then, they all had been hiding under bushes and shrubs, waiting for the runt to report to them.

Immediately after they had arrived here, the bandits had gone closer to take a look into the condition of the small village called Tiranat, while dragging Calubo along with them, as always. After they went closer, he had seen a lot of people near the village doing one thing or another - far more than he had expected, particularly in this near-freezing weather. He also saw what was perhaps a huge barn being constructed ahead of the last houses of the village, for which a new roof was being put up now by a few people who had climbed above it.

Another noticeable thing was that there was a tall wall being built around the village! For sure, he could easily see that those were being built by wooden stakes, unlike the mighty stone walls of Cinran, but still, he had never expected that one day there would be a wall around the whole village of Tiranat! At this point only a small part of the wall was completed in the north, and he couldn't see what was the status of the walls on the other side of the village, but the fact that there was a wall being built at all was completely unexpected to him in the first place. It must have been the doing of the new baron as well, just like it had to be him who had thought of that ruse for the caravan.

Even other than the wall and that huge barn, he saw a flurry of activity everywhere - of people running here and there while carrying something, of a log being pulled by a pair of horses and some kind of wooden contraption with giant wheels, while near the tree line, there were many people who were either sawing the upright trees or chopping branches from already fallen trees.

The few villagers who looked idle were huddled around a few burning braziers - perhaps trying to heat up their bodies before they returned to do whatever they all were doing there. He heard other bandits grumbling at the sight of the villagers having a fire to draw heat from, while they were freezing here. However, Calubo was confused about something after seeing those braziers. Who provided the coal for the villagers to use there anyway? He didn't think any villagers could afford to buy it themselves. And what about those iron braziers? Those couldn't be cheap at all!

At one point he thought he saw a man pulling some weirdly shaped cart, but uh... it had a single wheel only...? But how could a cart work with only a single wheel anyway? Since there was no way a man could pull what would normally need a horse for it! He had shaken his head after that, thinking that he had started to imagine such things because of his constant hunger.

But whether that weird cart really existed or it was just his imagination, there was way too much activity in the village. And he had no idea why so many people were doing whatever they were doing in the cold - shouldn't they be working in the coal mines?

Or were those coal mines still flooded with water? But even then, why were so many people outside their homes in this near-freezing weather anyway? He didn't understand any of it.

Soon, Nokozal told them with a frown that they had seen enough, and ordered everyone to move further back into the forests. Once they had retreated to a far enough distance away from the village, a bandit muttered with his voice full of surprise "What the hell has happened here?"

The fatso asked, "Isn't that a boundary wall we saw being constructed? I know that it is far from complete right now, but why are the villagers making it now when they were fine without a boundary wall for years! If we had come here after a few weeks, we might not have been able to attack the village at all with that huge wall in place!"

Nokozal didn't reply for a while, then he said, "It doesn't change anything for us, since that wall is still not complete anyway."

"But milord," another bandit asked, "you certainly saw that the village has too much activity right now. Shouldn't we wait here for a few days to scout them further before we attack?"

Nokozal glared at him. "And waste even more days stuck here in the cold while being hungry as well? Who knows if those idiots at the quarry still have a hold of my slaves or not! No, we can't afford to wait anymore."

"But still, milord," the fatso interrupted, "you have seen that a lot of area right outside the village has been cleared of trees, so we wouldn't have any cover for that distance, and there were a lot of villagers moving around everywhere, so we would be spotted long before we reached the first houses."

Nokozal nodded slowly. "It's true that there is no point in attacking them in broad daylight, so we will wait for the night. Those villagers would have gone back by then and we would have the benefit of darkness, especially since the skies are cloudy, so there would be no moonlight as well at that time."

He looked around the place for a moment, then pointed to a group of shrubs further away from the village. "That is a good hiding spot. Since there isn't any good cover closer to the village, we will hunker down under those bushes until it gets dark. I had already told the runt that we will wait for him in the northwest of the village. After he reports to me about what he has scouted, our plan will be to raid the village tonight."

Chapter 112. Doubts

By the time the bandits moved under those shrubs, Calubo hated them enough that he really wanted the bandits to be crushed by the village guards, but he had also seen the reality of the caravan's defense earlier.

Even though that ruse of presenting untrained villagers as seasoned guards had worked - and it had to be a ploy by the new baron of Tiranat, whoever it was, since only the baron had the authority to do such a thing - and the bandits had left the caravan alone on the road, but now that Nokozal had come here to the village with everyone to raid it, he didn't know what would happen to the village now. Those coal miners might be able to hold their own in a brawl in an alehouse, but they would be cut down immediately by these ruthless bandits. He couldn't see a way out of it right now, but he had to hope that the goddess would take care of the village.

It was around noon now, and soon they heard the crunching of leaves nearby. Immediately all of them got alert with their swords ready, while still hiding under the shrubs, but after they heard a series of bird whistles, the bandits relaxed, and started to get out from their hiding spots. Calubo was allowed to get up as well, and he saw that it was the runt, with his horse tied a little distance away.

Nokozal and others gathered together to see what the runt had found.

Coming closer, the runt reported with a frown, "Something isn't right, milord. But I don't understand any of it..."

"What do you mean?" Nokoza! asked.

The runt continued with an agitated voice, "I don't understand what's wrong with the village. The weather is nearly freezing here, but instead of staying inside their homes - or what's left of it anyway after Torhan's raid - the villagers are out running around the village doing only goddess knows what!"

The runt added, "They seem to be out of their houses throughout the day - logging trees, cutting branches, digging trenches, and Goddess knows what else! And all that activity is not just in the north either. They are doing that in the south as well, at the same scale, while some men are also cutting trees in the east and the west of the village. All around the village there is someone doing something!"

The runt continued after Nokoza!'s nod, "In the day and a half that I've been here, I have never seen any area around the village in any direction being empty during the day. So there is no way we can approach the village in daytime without being seen by someone."

"I noticed that too. But it doesn't matter," Nokoza! said. "I plan to attack around midnight anyway, since that's when their defenses will be at their lowest. Carry on."

The runt nodded. "It is true that in the night we would have a better chance, but there is something weird with that as well. Two nights ago when I arrived here, I didn't see anyone outside the village throughout the night - that was the day the caravan reached here. But yesterday night, I saw regular patrols by a pair of guards all around the village throughout the night!"

"What?" Nokoza! snapped. "I told you to be careful that you were not seen by anyone! How could you be so careless!"

The runt shook his head immediately. "No, milord! I wasn't seen by anyone. I'm sure of it! I never even went close to the village during the day."

Nokoza! growled, "So how do you explain that they started patrolling around the village the day after you arrived here?"

"That's just one of the weird things with the village, milord," the runt replied. "Other than that, I had thought that most of the men would be away from the village working in the coal mines during the

daytime - which I heard to be located in the east when I came here a few years ago - which would have meant that it would be better to raid the village in the day, when barely any able-bodied men would be there to defend their houses. But the men don't go towards the coal mines at all! It's like they have given up on mining any coal! It doesn't make any sense!"

"What are you talking about? Why would they give up on coal mining?" The fatso asked while rubbing his belly which was already making sounds in protest of not getting anything to eat recently.

"I have no damn idea! But didn't you see it while coming here?" The runt asked while gesturing towards the village. "It's like those villagers have gone mad, since they are willingly staying outside their homes in this freezing weather! It's not like their village was flooded like our shacks in the quarry were!"

"That doesn't make any sense..." Nokozal frowned. "Their baron is already dead, so who is even ordering them to do this? Because I know no sane man would go out in this village unless he was ordered to do so by a noble."

"But it's true, milord!" The runt protested. "I have looked at the village from all around it by now, so I know what I'm talking about. Nothing makes sense in the village right now!"

Nokozal didn't reply for a while, as he started pacing back-and-forth while stroking his long beard.

Another bandit suggested, "We really should wait for a few days so that we can scout them further, milord."

The runt suggested, "What if... what if we just waited for the caravan to return back to Cinran?"

"But why would it even go back?" the other bandit asked. "Lord Nokozal told us that the village couldn't have enough money to hire mercenaries, so those had to be the village guards escorting the caravan. Which means they have no reason to go back now."

"I understand that..." the runt added, "but I told you that I have been to this village in the past. And as you saw it's only a small village. There is no way they could afford to buy eight wagons for the village, which means the caravan certainly should have had at least a few wagons which came from Cinran. That means at least those wagons would still have to return back, wouldn't they?"

The other bandit nodded. "Right! So can't we just raid that smaller caravan? If the swordsmen we saw with the caravan were the village guards, they wouldn't accompany the caravan back, would they?"

The runt looked excited now. "That's true! We should still easily be able to kill or capture the few men which would accompany that smaller caravan. We can just ambush them and steal food from those wagons, without having to risk our lives in raiding the village!"

"Are you both idiots or just cowards?" Nokoza growled. "Why do you think those wagons would have food? The village wouldn't have sent a caravan to buy so much grain from Cinran in the first place if they had enough food to sell it there! Everyone knows about the coal mines here, so those wagons will just take coal with them to sell in Cinran - if you are right and they do go back, which is still not certain."

The runt looked red in his face with embarrassment, but he added, "Then we can just steal that coal!"

"And what would we do with that coal?" Nokoza asked with a glare. "What use would it be to us when we can just burn firewood in the quarry? It's not like we have any shortage of it there."

"Then..." the runt suggested, "then... we can sell that coal and those horses in Cinran! Yes, that's exactly what we should do! This way we wouldn't have to fight with a dozen swordsmen of the village, if not more!"

"Shut up!" Nokoza barked. "We don't have any use for coal ourselves and I can't fence that amount of coal anyway. It's not like it is stolen jewelry which I can easily take in my pockets to sell to my contacts in Cinran!"

As the runt began to say something in protest, Nokoza glared at him again. "I told you all that we can't afford to wait here for too long! If Torhan got any hint that my quarry is unprotected, then all my slaves would be stolen by him for sure. And we really need that food! So we have to attack the village anyway! That's the end of this discussion."

The fatso nodded, "I agree that we do have to attack, but you saw that there were people all around the village. How will we approach the village without being seen?"

Nokoza didn't say anything in reply as he began to pace back-and-forth again. After some time, he said, "It doesn't matter. Those villagers still have to go inside their homes for the night. And we already plan to attack around midnight, so the villagers spotting us won't be a problem. The plan remains the same."

"But what about the patrols by guards?" The fatso asked. "They patrol at night too."

Nokoza stopped his pacing. "It's just two men, and there are ten of us. We'll send them to the Goddess if they come in front of us when we go to raid."

He looked back at the runt. "You go back to what you were doing and keep an eye around the village. Then join us here a few hours after night has fallen to tell us if anything else has changed. We will attack soon after that."

The runt asked doubtfully, "But can we even afford to fight that many guards? You saw there were more than a dozen swordsmen just to escort the caravan! That means the village might have even more of them!"

"Stop being a coward!" Nokoza barked. "It doesn't matter how many guards there are in the village, since they would all be hiding inside the manor walls, just like it happened in the previous raid. So they wouldn't be a threat to us as long as we stay clear of the manor."

As the runt began to protest again, Nokoza snarled, "Now shut up. Not one more word about this, or I will have you flayed for being a coward!"

The runt immediately became quiet after that, but he still looked doubtful.

Nokoza glared at all the other bandits. "Is there anyone else here who wants us to keep waiting?"

Chapter 113. Immigration

Nobody made a sound in response.

Nokoza gave a satisfied nod. "Good! That's what I like to hear!"

He continued, "If we raid the village bravely instead of hiding in the quarry like cowards, we will still be able to get what we want from them, no matter how many guards are hiding in the manor! I am not going to leave empty-handed from here after spending this long away from my quarry in the cold!"

For a while he looked towards the village and didn't say anything. Then he gazed at all the other bandits again and grinned. "Just keep following the plans of Lord Nokozal, and the goddess will ensure that we return with a great haul of grain and slaves! We attack at midnight!"

Some of the bandits gave predatory grins in anticipation, while others only gave grunts and nods in acceptance, with nobody daring to cheer or make any other loud sound this close to the village.

Nokozal continued, "For now, a few of you go nearby carefully and see if you can find any berries here for us to eat. After that, two of you will always stay awake in turns to keep an eye around us while the rest of us will take naps so that we are at full energy when we attack."

"As you say, Lord Nokozal!" the bandits replied collectively.

And with that, the plan for raiding the village had begun.

~ Kivamus ~

~ Baron's Manor, Tiranat ~

Kivamus was walking in the manor with others, to see how the preparations for the feast were coming. It was starting to get dark now, with the last rays of the sunset giving the cloudy skies a golden hue. The weather kept getting colder continuously and snowfall was expected to start any day now.

Since his announcement that there would be a feast earlier in the day, all the servants and maids in the manor seemed to have a constant smile on their faces. It was such a rare occasion for everyone, that every person in the manor wanted to give his best to make the feast a roaring success.

As he walked towards the servant hall, Duvas reported, "We have bought some meat from the hunters in the village to use for tonight's feast. Well, actually we bought all of what was available in the village market, since the one hunter that the village still has cannot bring too much meat by himself. And it did cost a little more than I thought..."

"Don't worry about the cost for today," Kivamus reassured him. "It's not like we do this every day. We want everyone in the village to have a memorable dinner tonight."

Duvas nodded. "Of course, my lord." He added, "Earlier in the day, a few servants and guards had gone to the stream in the east to catch fish, so we will have some fish as well in tonight's feast. Apart from that, Madam Helga has brought all the remaining Toloraberries and Rizako mushrooms from where they were found outside the village, although we won't get any more of those for the winter."

He remarked, "By the way, Feroy should be happy to know that he will get to eat Madam Helga's famous Rizako stew tonight, but he seems to be a little off today."

Kivamus looked at Hudan who was walking next to him. "Why is that?" He asked with a frown.

Hudan shrugged. "I can't say. But I'll ask him when I see him."

Kivamus asked, "Is everything okay with the guards otherwise?"

"Of course," Hudan replied. "Now that we have all our guards back, I have even started putting a few of them to patrol around the village every hour of the day."

"Good. And what about asking for volunteers to accompany Pydaso back to Cinran?"

"That wasn't a problem at all," Hudan replied with a snort. "I got more than enough volunteers to accompany him when the guards found out that if chosen, they would earn real coin in the form of hazard pay. So I have selected two of them and they will go along with the merchant tomorrow." He continued, "That being said, the wagon driver of Pydaso had come to meet me earlier."

"Oh..." Kivamus muttered. "What did he want?"

Hudan replied, "He wants to stay back here in Tiranat, instead of returning back with Pydaso."

"That's... unexpected," Kivamus said with his eyebrows raised.

Hudan said with a grin, "Actually... it's not, my lord. Although he has been out with the caravan for the previous three weeks, apart from the single day breaks between trips, he said that he found out about everything you are doing for the villagers - including feeding the elderly and the children even if they can't pay for it. He told me that he was an orphan since he was young, and he had to scrounge around for food everyday before he became old enough to get some paying work. He doesn't want his children to go through the same situation in case something happens to him."

"This world isn't easy to live in, that's for sure," Kivamus remarked. "It's even more true for orphans. Then what will happen to his family if he stays back?"

Hudan continued, "Actually, he wants to bring his whole family here from where he lives in a small village west of Cinran. Of course, he would have to return back with Pydaso for now, but he said that when he comes back here in the spring, he wants to bring his children and his wife here as well."

"Hmm..." Kivamus muttered, thinking about it. "And what did you tell him?"

"What's there to say, milord?" Hudan asked. "Before you came here, people died regularly in Tiranat because of the cold in the winter, or because of sickness all year round. And from what I've heard, Tiranat has always accepted more workers here to keep the coal mines operational and fill the positions left empty by those who died."

Duvas interrupted, "That is true enough, my Lord, and we have never sent anyone back who wanted to move to Tiranat. But we had only planned to continue the free meals for the winter! To continue that in the future as well... that would take a lot of coin. Coin which we don't even earn right now."

Kivamus sighed. "I do understand that..." He gazed at the tall trees devoid of any leaves surrounding the village as he thought about it.

Could it be done though? Could he really afford to continuously feed everyone who couldn't work in his village without going bankrupt in the future? It was one thing to do it just for the current population of Tiranat - which was only a small village at best. But if people started to immigrate here in the future because of that, the costs for feeding those people could easily get out of hand.

However... that would also mean more available workers... Workers which he could use to start many kinds of factories and industries here. As of right now, the village population was so small that it would never be more than a coal mining village. But he wanted to make Tiranat a lot more prosperous and secure, for his own safety from his brothers and other nobles who wanted to grab his land, as well as for his people.

No, he didn't just want to do it - he needed to do it! And that would mean continuously letting more workers immigrate here to work in those factories, even though none of them existed yet.

While it was true that if he continued the free meal program for those who couldn't feed themselves, the cost of that program would keep increasing continuously. But on the other hand, if he utilized those workers well, it would also mean a constant increase in the income of the village as well. He thought more about it for a while, then nodded to himself.

"Let's do it then. We will continue the free meal program for the foreseeable future." Seeing that Duvas was going to say something in protest, he added, "I understand your concerns, Duvas. But it's not like the village population is going to double all of a sudden. Even if Pydaso's wagon driver brings his family, that's not even ten more people. And even if we assume that a few more people from his village might accompany him here because of the same reasons, it's still a very slow process, so we will have time to think about how to integrate them into the village and how to feed them."

Duvas seemed to be considering it, but Kivamus continued, "See it this way. More workers would mean more output of coal, which would mean more income for us. And that extra income would easily allow us to continue the free meal program for those who can't feed themselves, while filling our nearly empty coffers at the same time."

That seemed to do the trick for the penny-pinching majordomo, based on the way his expression changed after hearing that they would be making more money.

"That's true enough, my lord," Duvas said after a moment. He shrugged. "More income is always good."

"Can't deny that... milord," Hudan commented with a grin. "So I don't have to say that he can't bring his family here, do I?"

"Not at all." Kivamus added, "In fact, if you meet him again, you can hint to him that others from his village would be welcome here too. But don't say it directly, since we aren't ready to take in a surge of people at once."

Hudan nodded. "As you wish, my Lord."

Kivamus looked back at the majordomo as he continued walking towards the servants hall. "So, is that all we have for the feast tonight?"

Chapter 114. Preparations And A Speech

Duvas replied with a rare smile, "No, my lord, there is also something else. A few laborers had found a single honeycomb a few days ago, further inside the surrounding forests in the east when one of them had wandered too far, and until now we hadn't disturbed it. But Madam Helga ordered a few servants to get some honey from it, and she will use it to make something sweet using those berries, as a dessert of some kind. I think it's called a Toloraberry Pie."

He added, "There won't be much of it, since it was only a single honeycomb and we have left most of it intact for the future, but it will still give everyone something sweet for a change - even if everyone only gets a single bite of it."

"Oh, that's still wonderful!" Kivamus said with a smile. "I can't wait for it!"

It had been a long time since he had tasted anything sweet, apart from the few dried fruits which he had found to be remaining in the manor from the personal stores of the previous baron. He had shared them with others in the manor house, and it had been weeks since then. He really couldn't wait for the Toloraberry Pie.

Duvas continued, "We also needed to invite the villagers for this feast, so I had told a few servants to announce the news in the market square of the village. However, since this is the kind of news which spreads like wildfire, the villagers have already started gathering outside the gates. The food is also going to be ready soon and the feast will start within an hour."

"It's good to hear that everything is going well," Kivamus replied.

As he reached the servants' hall, he noticed something immediately. In the open area outside, a constant wind was blowing, making it feel even colder than it already was, but as he entered inside, the atmosphere felt completely different. Inside the servants' hall, he saw the full hustle and bustle of the ongoing preparations for tonight's feast. All the maids and servants of the manor seemed to be doing one thing or another, while even the off duty guards were helping them wherever needed.

The left side of the servants' hall, which had the beddings for the male servants and guards, was completely empty right now, since everyone was busy doing something. A few braziers were lit nearby within the hall to keep the air warm and to allow those who were coming from outside to heat up their bodies, while the number of fires already burning inside the kitchen for cooking were more than enough to keep it balmy there.

He walked towards the right where the kitchen was located, after taking a moment to warm up his hands from a brazier. Once he entered inside, the maids and servants immediately paused their work and began to stand up in respect, but he gestured to them to keep going. "No, no, just carry on, and don't mind me. I'm only here to take a look."

With quick nods, everyone returned to what they were doing. He took a moment to see everything which was happening inside the kitchen. Some of the maids were busy on one side of the kitchen while peeling potatoes, chopping onions, and even some carrots to put into stews, while the other maids were cooking a variety of food in huge cauldrons on the other side of the kitchen.

There seemed to be a vegetable soup, a meat stew, and some fish recipe as well. He also saw chopped up mushrooms kept on a slab on one side, probably in preparation of making the much vaunted Rizako stew of Madam Helga - even though he had heard it would only be limited to those living in the manor house. Apart from that, there were also some potatoes being boiled in a corner.

A few servants were kneading the wheat flour into dough, while others were taking that dough to the clay oven outside through the back door in the kitchen to make fresh bread for everyone. Some eggs from the small chicken coup in the manor, along with a jug of milk from their two cows were also kept on one side, for use wherever needed.

Since they didn't have cauldrons big enough to prepare food for all the villagers in a single batch, other off-duty guards and servants were transferring the already prepared food into wooden buckets and

putting it into carts to get ready to transport them outside the gates of the manor. That would also empty the cauldrons so the maids could make another batch of food for the villagers.

Madam Nerida was busy in supervising the maids and ensuring that everything was done as smoothly and efficiently as possible, while Madam Helga had a spoon in her hand and she kept taking a sip from every pot and cauldron, and added local herbs where needed to ensure that the taste was to her likings.

Satisfied that everything was going well, he turned to return outside. On the way, he saw a servant pulling their only wheelbarrow towards the kitchen of the servants hall, on which a sack of flour was loaded - likely bringing it back from the miller in the village. The servant looked happy while working, probably because he was the one who had gotten to use the wheelbarrow today. While the initial excitement of getting to use the wheelbarrow had mostly calmed down among the residents of the manor, they still seemed to be drawing straws to be the one who gets to use it.

Truthfully, while he knew how helpful that wheelbarrow would be, he hadn't expected that it would become such a sought after thing amongst the people here. But he was glad to know that it had worked out this way. Cedoron should be providing more wheelbarrows to them in the coming days, which should be quite helpful for transporting goods as well as for the morale of the servants here.

Sometime later, while he was sitting in the manor hall with others, a servant entered the hall.

"Milord, all the preparations for the feast are complete," the servant reported. "You can start the feast now."

Kivamus nodded, and the servant returned back.

"Do I need to say that it is open now?" he asked as he stood up, others rising with him.

Duvas nodded. "At the very least, my Lord. It would be even better if you gave a speech to the villagers, even if only a short one."

"A speech...?" Kivamus repeated as he exited the manor hall and started walking towards the gates of the manor. How was he going to give a speech! While he had more than enough experience of leading his small engineering team in the company he worked at, he had never been good with speaking in public. He asked again, "Do I really have to?"

Duvas shrugged. "You don't need to, of course. But it would be good for the villagers to hear from their new baron for the first time. So far, while many of them have seen you when you have visited the forested areas that we are clearing, I believe it would help everyone's morale if you said something to them as well."

"But what will I even say to them?" Kivamus asked. "You know that I was a bookworm before I came here and I spent most of my time in the library of the Uliga Palace. I have no experience in talking to so many people at once, or in giving speeches..."

"Don't worry too much about it, my lord," Gorsazo reassured him. "Those aren't power hungry nobles standing outside, waiting to pounce the moment they see a weakness. They are just common people - your people - and they just want to see and listen to something from their baron, no matter what it is."

He added, "If you don't know what to say, you can just talk about what you have done for the villagers so far. It would be good to tell them the updates about the progress of the longhouse blocks, as well as the fact that we have been able to buy enough grain to feed everyone over the winter. It wouldn't just be a rumor if the baron himself was telling them about that."

Kivamus gave a hesitant nod as he reached the gates of the manor, the clamor of the villagers rising in volume. He still wasn't sure how he was going to give a speech in front of so many people, but it was also true that he wasn't just a common person on modern earth anymore. He was a noble now, and his people looked up to him. So he had to act like a noble as well, as strange as it felt to him.

Reaching outside, he realized how crowded it was there, even though the guards were doing their best to organize the crowd. He saw that the area right outside the gates had been barricaded by a rope, with the villagers standing outside it in mostly haphazard lines, with wooden plates and bowls in their hands, while the servants and maids were ready to serve them from the huge buckets of a variety of foodstuffs which they had brought here in carts.

He saw that there was a small wooden bench kept near the gates which was surrounded by guards, and that's where Duvas was pointing him to go. But as soon as the crowd realized that he had come outside, they all started looking at him, making him feel even more nervous.

Hesitatingly, he climbed on the bench and gazed at the veritable sea of humanity looking back at him. It seemed that most if not all of the villagers were already here. And he had to give a speech in front of all of them...

He shook his head to clear his mind. He had to do this. At least there was a consolation that the villagers were not expecting a long speech, based on the hungry looks they kept giving the buckets of food.

Trying to calm his nerves again, he raised his hands above him, making a hush fall on the crowd. Swallowing once again, and after clearing his throat, he steeled himself and started to speak in the loudest voice he could muster. "My dear villagers. It hasn't been long since I arrived here, and yet it feels like we have been together for ages. When I arrived here a month ago, I realized how poor the situation of the village was. But it wasn't your fault at all. Because of the whims and greediness of nobles, you and your children didn't even have enough to eat!"

Seeing that many of the villagers gave nods at that, he continued, "But no more! That situation will never be repeated here as long as I am the baron of this village!"

Immediately the villagers started cheering happily. After giving them a moment, he raised his hands again to silence the crowd. "I know you all must still be worried that the village has a new baron. You must be thinking about how he will turn out to be? Will he care for us? Or will he do his best to empty our pockets of the little coin we have?"

Chapter 115. The Feast

~ Kigeir ~

~ Outside the gates of the Baron's Manor ~

Kigeir watched as the young baron climbed on a bench and began to speak to everyone. His pale skin and highly unusual silver hair had made him noticeable easily when a group of people had come outside of the manor, and it had caused a hush to fall over the villagers.

As he listened to Lord Kivamus continue to speak, he thought about the day's event with wonder.

Today had started out like any other day, with him clearing his shop of the dust it gathered regularly, even though he rarely got any customers these days. However, while he was unable to work as a manual laborer with his ever-present knee ache getting even worse in the cold weather, his older son, who had seen seventeen winters by now, had gone off to join the laborers to work in the north of the village. His younger son and daughter, who were the same ages as the orphans he had taken in, stayed at the upper floor of his house while playing one game or another, as always.

But then someone had gone running through the streets, yelling that the baron's guards had an announcement to make at the market square. Being curious about it, he had told his wife to watch the shop, which was located on the lower floor of his own house, and he had gone to listen to the announcement. And it had turned out to be far from anything he could have expected!

The baron was going to provide a feast tonight! And it would be open to every single villager! That was something which had never happened in this village in the past... The guards had also assured them that the baron would put his guards to patrol the village so that nobody got any thoughts of trying to steal from the unoccupied houses of the villagers - so that they could enjoy the feast without any worries.

However, the news that there would be a feast for everyone had been so unexpected that the villagers standing there had started to ask the guards again and again if it was really true. And as it turned out later, it was...

Returning back home, he had given the good news to everyone there, with his wife and the children overjoyed to hear that they would get to eat so many things tonight. His older son wasn't there at the time, but surely, he would also get the news along with other laborers since this was the kind of news which didn't take long to reach everyone's ears.

In the evening, he had taken everyone in his family along with him to the empty area outside the gates of the manor, and they had been waiting there with other villagers for a while. The weather was nearly freezing, but a lot of braziers had been lit up all around the empty area to keep it warm, while someone had recently swept the area clean of any dust as well. He knew that the snowfall would start any day now, but at least it seemed like they would be able to enjoy the feast without any snow.

Before long, he had seen the preparations for the feast start in earnest, as some of the servants of the manor began to carry empty wooden tables there, while others began pushing carts full of steaming buckets to outside the gates in an area they had previously separated with a rope. The baron's guards were already there trying to make the villagers stand in lines, assuring them that there was enough for everyone, so they should stay in their lines and wait for their turns. But despite their assurances, nobody wanted to be the last one in line and be told that there was no more food remaining for them.

That had even led to many scuffles between villagers who said that they were the ones who had reached the line first. One of those arguments even resulted in a brawl which had to be broken up by the guards. But then the guard captain, who was a huge man - someone who made others obey him just by being present there - simply told them in a calm voice that no one would get any food at all if there was even one more fight like that. That had calmed down the villagers, and after that they began to agree immediately to whatever the guards were ordering them to do.

Soon, after he and his family had taken a place in one of the lines as well, he saw that the servants had unloaded many buckets of food within that area bound by a rope, and sent the carts back in the manor, probably to bring more food. That was when the new baron had arrived there, and began giving his speech. Since this was the first time when the baron was speaking to all the villagers, they all had been listening attentively to him.

Coming back to the present, he heard the baron telling them about all the measures that had been taken for the well-being of the villagers. He told them that the feast had been organized in celebration of procuring enough grain for the villagers to feed them for the whole winter - and from the next week, vegetables would also be included in the weekly grain rations of everyone! That had led to a chorus of happy cheers erupting from the villagers. The baron had given the crowd a moment to enjoy the announcement, before he raised both of his hands to make the crowd quiet again.

Lord Kivamus also told them about the approaching completion of the first longhouse block. That had given Kigeir a bittersweet taste in his mouth, since it would mean that Maisy and Timmy would move there as well. With the way he saw Elsie chattering continuously with Maisy, he knew that his daughter would miss them a lot. Even now, as they were standing in a separate line for the children, they seemed inseparable, even though Elsie seemed to be the one doing most of the talking.

The baron also mentioned his unexpected policy that there would be no slavery allowed under his rule from now on. The villagers had certainly heard rumors about that - including the gossip that the girl whom the village blacksmith now lived with, also used to be a slave under the previous baron, and that she had been given her freedom by Lord Kivamus.

But rumors had a way of getting out of hand, so he didn't know if there was any truth in that gossip. However, to hear the baron proclaim that himself had made it set in stone. He wasn't sure if such a news would be welcomed by other nobles - especially since the southern nobles of Reslinor were well known to keep a lot of slaves - but he would let his betters worry about that. He had more than enough worries anyway.

Before long, the baron's speech came to a close, and he announced the feast to be open! The villagers immediately started yelling praises for the new baron, while chanting 'All hail Lord Kivamus, long may he reign' again and again. Although other than being taught about how to count numbers properly from his father, Kigeir didn't have any other education, but even he knew that only kings and queens reigned, not barons, but who was he to fault the villagers in their rare times of happiness and enjoyment. Once more, the baron stood up on the bench and raised his hands, putting an end to the chants, and told the villagers to enjoy the feast.

Immediately after that, the servants and maids of the manor began ladling out whatever they were serving, and the various lines of villagers began to move forward. Rising up on his toes to look at the front where the food was being served, he saw that the wooden tables had been kept parallel to the manor walls, with a few buckets and a lot of wooden bowls or plates kept on the tables.

For each group of three tables which were put together, the guards had organized the villagers to stand in a line in front of the leftmost table, and from there every person moved right to be served from the next serving stall on the right. There were a few other such lines in parallel to his own line, but they all would be served the same food, wouldn't they? He shook his head. There he went worrying again.

The line of villagers was still moving slowly, and he was getting really curious about what they would get to eat because of the variety of delicious smells that were wafting in his direction. As he waited impatiently for his turn, he saw the village priest, father Edric - with his ever growing white beard - talking to the majordomo Mr Duvas, before the young baron and others returned back inside the gates of the manor.

In another line, he even saw Dalaar and his cronies standing patiently for their turn. He couldn't help but snort at the sight of the young troublemakers diligently following the guards' instructions to stand properly in the line. Free food was free food, after all, no matter what anyone thought about their rulers - especially if it seemed like it would be a feast fit for nobles.

As the line kept moving further, it was his turn soon.

Chapter 116. A Meal For Nobility

After Kigeir put his wooden plate in front of him when he reached the first serving stall, the maid standing behind the table put a generous helping of a meat stew in a bowl and after putting it on his plate, she gestured him to move further to the next serving stall on the right. Giving a thankful nod, he walked to the next stall, where another maid gave him mashed potatoes and pointed him to the right again.

All that rich smell was making his stomach growl in hunger, but with not a small amount of willpower, he controlled himself to not start eating right there, and waited for everything to be served before he began to eat the wonderful meal. On reaching the next stall, he was provided a medium sized part from a loaf of freshly baked bread, and then it was a walk to the next stall.

Eventually, he had gotten everything that was being given, and he found an empty place where he sat with his wife and his older son, while waiting for the children to arrive back from their own separate line. Looking at his plate which was full of so many types of food, he tried to remember when was the last time he had eaten something like this, and it turned out to be... never.

He had visited an inn in Cinran once in the past, and that was the last time where he had seen so many kinds of foods being served, but that day he had been unable to buy more than a simple bread and soup. But it seemed he would finally get to taste the meals for nobility tonight, since only nobles could possibly afford something like this!

In his plate, there were three kinds of soup and stew, two kinds of bread, some mashed potatoes, and there was even a small amount of butter and cheese! But it didn't end there - at the last serving stall, he had been given a very small part of something called a Toloraberry Pie, which the maid had advised him to eat after he had finished everything else. That was the only thing which smelled sweet, and with the villagers nearly never getting to eat anything like that, he had really wanted to devour the small part of pie immediately, but somehow he had told himself that he should do what the maid said. She was the one providing the food after all.

However, he saw that the children were still some time away from the front of their line, and being unable to wait, he took a wooden spoon and took a sip of the fish stew, and it tasted out of this world! Next, he tried the mashed potatoes, and it was slightly salty and buttery - just like it was supposed to be!

Then he tried the other things one by one, all of which tasted better than anything else he had ever eaten. As he took a moment to look around him in the light of burning braziers in the nearly freezing weather, he saw that nearly every villager - including his family sitting next to him - were doing their best to savor the taste of the unexpected bounty as long as they could. Who knew if they would ever get to eat something like this ever again in their lives? They had to try their best to remember this night, when Lord Kivamus hosted a feast and provided them food which must only be eaten by nobility!

Giving a happy smile to his wife and elder son, he delightfully took another spoonful of the meat stew, and closed his eyes in wonder at the marvelous taste of it. Thank goddess for sending Lord Kivamus as the new baron of the village!

Kigeir chuckled as even he couldn't stop himself from wishing the young baron's reign to be long and prosperous!

~ Kivamus ~

~ Outside the gates of the Baron's Manor ~

Wiping his forehead of the sweat which had gathered there after he gave a speech in front of so many people for the first time, Kivamus climbed down from the bench and walked towards the gates of the manor. At least it had gone well enough, he thought. It was a daunting task for him to speak in front of that many people, and he wasn't sure how he had accomplished it.

"That was a good speech, my Lord," Duvas complimented with a smile.

"Indeed. You did well," Gorsazo said. "The speech was neither too short nor too long." He smirked, "Although you won't be defeating any seasoned statesman in a debate anytime soon."

Kivamus laughed. "I don't have a lifetime experience of teaching and speaking to a lot of people like you have, Gorsazo. I'm just glad that it's over."

He looked back towards the crowd of people, and saw that the lines had already started moving. After getting the meal on their plates, it seemed like some of the villagers had closed their eyes in enjoyment of what they were eating at the time. He smiled looking at the satisfying scene.

However, he noticed an old man walking slowly towards him, his long white beard noticeable immediately. He had expected the guards to stop anyone from approaching him, but when he saw a guard bow to the old man, he became curious about it. As he looked carefully, he saw that the old man was wearing a white robe of some kind, with a thin rope serving as a belt around his waist, although it must have been years since that robe could have been called new.

As the man came closer into the light of a brazier burning nearby, Kivamus realized that the robe was already patched over in many places. There was also some kind of loose cowl or a hood on the robe, but the old man wasn't using it right now. The man seemed to be older than even Duvus, who was probably approaching sixty years himself.

Stopping in front of Kivamus, the old man gave a nod to him. "I'm glad to finally meet you, Lord Kivamus."

Kivamus gave a nod as well, but raised his eyebrows in confusion at the person whom he hadn't seen before.

"My apologies milord, I should have introduced myself first," the old man said, his long wide beard moving as he spoke. "I'm Father Edric, and I have been the ordained priest of the goddess' temple for this village since Tiranat was founded."

"Oh!" Kivamus exclaimed. "I've heard about you. You were the one who took care of the orphans and the elderly in the village, when no one else did."

"I am just doing the goddess' work," Father Edric said with a grandfatherly smile. "But please don't fault the villagers for not helping them, since most people here could barely afford to feed themselves."

The old priest continued, "The recent times haven't been good for the village. Although I tried my best, my efforts weren't nearly enough for the villagers. But it does seem like the goddess has finally heard our prayers, since she sent someone like you here." He added with a smile, "I also heard your speech earlier, and I could tell that you were neither lying nor boasting about having enough grain for everyone this winter. And probably for the first time since this village was founded, I am fairly sure that no one will die of the cold or hunger this winter. So I thank you for that, milord."

Kivamus shook his head. "No, no, I'm not doing anything special. This is simply what any noble should do for his people."

Father Edric nodded sagely. "That's certainly true enough. And yet, what you are doing is not common at all."

He gestured towards the villagers, every one of whom seemed to have a rarely seen smile on their face. "Just look at them, milord. I have probably never seen the villagers this happy in the past few years. Believe me, milord, you are doing Goddess' work here." Then Father Edric gave a bow to him, his snow-white beard nearly touching the ground in the process, before he added, "You have my sincere gratitude for easing our work to take care of those at the bottom of the society."

Kivamus wasn't sure what to reply to that, since he didn't know anything about the beliefs of the goddess' followers. So rather than saying something odd and upsetting the priest and others, he just returned a short bow as well.

After standing straight again, Father Edric added, "I won't take any more of your busy time, milord. May the goddess bless your path in the future." And with that, the elderly priest turned back and returned towards the crowd of villagers.

Kivamus smiled looking at everything going so smoothly. "It was a good idea to give the feast, wasn't it?" He asked no one in particular, as he and others started walking back inside the manor, the clamor of the villagers fading slowly.

Gorsazo nodded. "I'd say so, my Lord. It would certainly boost the villagers morale a lot. And it will give them a reason to keep working hard even in this freezing weather."

"That's true," Duvas said, while stroking his short beard. "I think the most important announcement for them was when you said that now we have enough grain to feed everyone for the winter. That has basically never happened in Tiranat."

The majordomo continued, "While in some good years, the manor did have more than enough grain to feed every villager in the winter, the previous baron never allowed us to give it for free to those who couldn't afford to buy it. But this year the villagers know that they and their children won't go hungry, whether they can afford to buy any grain or not. I think that fact will keep the villagers' morale high throughout the winter."

"Let's hope so..." Kivamus muttered, while thinking about the miserly bastard who ruled this village as the baron before him. Shaking his head, he said, "I will do my best to ensure that it remains so in the future as well."

Looking towards the kitchen of the servants hall, he saw that the servants were loading another cart with steaming buckets - likely containing the next batch of food from the kitchen, before starting to push it towards the gates of the manor. A couple of maids were also following the cart with ladles in their hands to serve the villagers. But even more importantly, all of them seem to have a smile on their faces.

As he walked further, he noticed that the manor looked nearly empty from inside, since nearly all of the servants and off-duty guards were outside the gates to either serve the villagers in the feast, or to help in controlling the crowd. It was rare to see the manor so empty, but it was for a good reason so he didn't really mind it.

He reached towards the manor house with others, eagerly waiting for his own meal from the feast - which would also include the Madam Helga's much vaunted Rizako stew, unlike the villagers' feast - not to mention the Toloraberry pie which he couldn't wait to try. Thinking of the Rizako stew, he remembered that Feroy, who really liked it, should be able to enjoy it as well tonight, since he was unable to eat the Rizako stew the last time when he was out with the caravan.

Looking around, he tried to see where the ex-mercenary was, but he couldn't find him. Thinking about it, he realized that he hadn't seen Feroy since the morning.

"Where is Feroy?" he asked others.

Chapter 117. Instincts

Gorsazo and Duvas looked around as well, but Feroy was still nowhere to be found.

"I'm not sure, my Lord," Duvas replied. "I think the last time I saw him was in the evening, but I haven't seen him since then." He asked, "Should we ask Hudan? He is outside the gates keeping an eye on the feast, but he should still know where Feroy is."

Kivamus nodded. "Actually, yes. Ask him to come here. You were telling me earlier that Feroy seems off today, and now we can't find him anywhere. It's getting me worried."

Giving a nod Duvas walked towards the servants' hall and after calling a servant, he told him to bring Hudan.

Experience tales at empire

Kivamus and others waited for Hudan outside the manor house, though it felt very cold here, since there were no braziers nearby.

"Is Madam Helga still outside?" he asked.

Duvas nodded. "No, she returned back to the kitchen to check the taste of the next batch of food, although Sryne is still helping out the other maids to serve food."

Before long, they saw the huge build of Hudan jogging towards them. Reaching nearby, he said, "You asked for me, milord?"

Kivamus nodded. "Where is Feroy? None of us have seen him since the evening."

"Oh..." Hudan muttered with a frown. "He is out in the village for a patrol."

"Alone?" Kivamus asked. "But why?"

"He had been saying since the morning that everything was going so well, that something didn't feel right to him - even though he couldn't tell what he felt might be wrong." Hudan continued with a shrug, "I think he was getting edgy for no reason, probably because he had spent the last three weeks out with the caravan, while constantly worried about an ambush. So I told him to relax, but he said that he trusted his instincts and something just felt off to him. So even though there were two guards already out on patrol, he went for a patrol around the village himself."

Hudan added, "I did tell him to take another guard with him, but he said that we needed our guards to keep the villagers' crowd in control, and that he would be fine by himself. And since the evening, he's been out of the manor, and hasn't returned back yet."

Kivamus frowned after listening to that. "What do you think about it? Could he be right?"

"I haven't the foggiest idea," Hudan replied. "After he went out, I did ask the guards who were out on patrol in the previous shift whether they had seen anything suspicious, but there was nothing to be concerned about." After a moment, he added with a shrug, "Although I can't deny that Feroy's instincts are often right, and without trusting his instincts, he wouldn't have survived long while living with mercenaries, but it's not like he's living between such cutthroat bastards here."

Kivamus still wasn't sure what to think about it. On one hand, there was no basis for him to be worried, especially since Hudan had confirmed with the guards who were previously on patrol. But on the other hand, it seemed like Feroy did trust his instincts, so there could still be something there.

"I'm sure it's nothing, milord," Hudan reassured him. "Don't worry about it, and just enjoy your meal. I'll keep an eye on everything outside, and I'll come back to report to you after the feast has ended and the villagers have returned to their homes."

~ Maisy ~

~ In the middle of a feast! ~

Ten-year-old Maisy was waiting in line for her turn to get food along with Elsie. Her little brother Timmy and Elsie's younger brother were standing behind them, talking about a neighbor of Mr Kigeir who had become a manor guard. Did they really want to become guards? It didn't matter right now, since tonight, she would get to enjoy eating at a feast!

She didn't even know what a feast was before tonight, but as it turned out, she loved feasts! Although it was very crowded here, the villagers were standing properly in lines now, and there was no more shoving to get ahead in the lines anymore. It was a different matter that she hadn't even eaten anything from that feast yet... But she already really, really, liked feasts! But the line still wasn't moving!

Well, that wasn't true. The line of children in which they were standing was still moving, but it was moving so slowly! And she was hungry!

"When will our turn come?" Elsie whined from her place behind Maisy.

Maisy shrugged. "I don't know..."

Elsie pointed towards the front of the line, and whispered, "I think that fat boy there is taking too much food. That's why the line isn't moving!"

Maisy grinned. "You don't know that. Because you can't see there! Because you are still too short!"

"No, I'm not! And I'm still taller than you, shortie!" Elsie retorted, and looked away while sulking, but Maisy knew that her bad mood wouldn't last long.

Before long, Elsie asked again, "When will our turn come... I'm hungry!"

"Stop nagging!" Maisy chided. Elsie looked away with a huff and began playing with her long blonde ponytail.

To be truthful, Maisy still didn't know what a pony was, and how its tail could look like a girl's hair, but Elsie had told her so, so she had believed her. Mostly. But she still hadn't found any unicorns in the village - even though Elsie still kept claiming they lived in Tiranat - so she knew that she couldn't believe everything Elsie said.

As she looked at her friends' hair, she thought that maybe... in the future, she would also keep a ponytail like Elsie. Maybe... She wasn't sure how it would look on her black hair, but it had to be better than the haphazard way she had chopped it off a few months ago so it wouldn't get in her face.

As she waited in the line, she saw that there was also a barrel full of water kept near the tables, from which a man - who was probably a servant in the manor - was pouring water with a wooden ladle for another man to drink. Looking at the small amount of steam rising from the barrel, she was glad that it wasn't cold water or Timmy wouldn't be able to drink it at all.

She wistfully looked at the maids who were serving the food. Would she also be able to become a maid in the manor in the future? She knew that for now, Mr Kigeir and the baron of the village were providing food for children like her, but eventually she realized that she would have to take care of herself and her

brother and provide food for themselves. But was it even possible for an orphan like her to get such an important job in the village?

Even Elsie - who was a merchant's daughter - wanted to become a maid in the manor so she could earn coin by herself, unlike Elsie's older brother who wanted to become a merchant like Mr Kigeir, while their younger brothers still weren't sure - although they spent most of the day talking about manor guards or doing mock battles between themselves with wooden sticks.

A short while ago, she thought that she had seen a maid earlier who looked to be only a few years older than her, but although she kept craning her neck to look ahead, she hadn't seen her again. Maisy realized that she was too young to become a maid right now, and Elsie had even told her that there was a lot of competition to become a maid in the baron's manor. But she still hoped that in the future, she would be hired as a maid of the manor. Maybe Elsie could also become a maid there! Then both of them would be maids in the manor! And she wouldn't be bored at all and they could be friends forever!

They kept waiting as the line moved further, and after a very, very long time, her turn came, and the pretty maid behind the table who had short red hair put an empty plate in front of her.

Elsie giggled from behind her, "Awesome! You didn't get anything, which means more for me!"

"Shut up," Maisy retorted, "or I will take your food too!"

"I won't let you!" Elsie said with a grin.

Maisy just laughed at their banter - which was another new word that she had learnt recently - and waited as the maid began giving small portions of so many kinds of food on that wooden plate. When it was full, the pretty maid handed her the plate with a smile, and told her to eat the small sweet smelling thing only at the end - something which she called a tulora... no, uh... toloba, no! uh... a toloraberry pie! Yes! That's what it was called! And finally, the maid told her to enjoy it and sent her away.

She saw that as she moved away, Elsie grinned and walked to the front of the line, playfully shoving her on the way, but Maisy managed to prevent anything from falling off her plate. She moved a little away to the side as she waited for Elsie and their brothers to get their food too, and finally she looked carefully at her plate.

And she couldn't recognize what most of those things were... It seemed like there were three kinds of soups but she didn't know what kind, along with two kinds of bread. But what was the difference? She would have to wait for the food expert Elsie to come and tell her. There were also many other things as well, which she didn't recognise.

After a very long time - time she spent wondering what all those bowls of food on her plate contained - all of them had got a plate full of food in their hands, and then they marched to where Mr Kigeir and his family were sitting. They all took a seat next to them, but she noticed that Mr Kigeir and others had already eaten half of their food - which was a lot more than what was given to children in their much smaller plates, but eh... it didn't matter. She couldn't eat that much anyway.

She poked Elsie, who was sitting next to her, and asked her about what those whitish things were on their plates. She saw in the light of a brazier which was burning nearby, that it was nearly milky in color, but there were two such things.

Elsie nodded and sagely pointed at one of those things. "This is butter." But she kept looking at the other thing with a frown. Eventually, she asked Mr Kigeir, "Papa, what is this?"

Chapter 118. Cheese And Butter

"Oh, that's cheese," Mr Kigeir replied with a smile. "You can eat the cheese and butter along with bread, but not both of them together. Just take some of that cheese with your finger, and put it on the bread before eating - just like you do with butter. And don't forget to thank the maids if you go for another helping of those."

Elsie nodded, and took some butter on her fingers before tasting it.

Maisy couldn't miss this opportunity to tease her new best friend. "You said you had already eaten cheese in the past, but you didn't even recognize it! Weren't you lying earlier?"

"No, I wasn't!" Elsie retorted, before she took a sip of soup - probably while she thought of an excuse. Suddenly, she looked at Mr Kigeir with wide eyes, "We can get more of these?"

"Yup," Mr Kigeir nodded. "You kiddos are lucky. We adults were only given one helping, but children are allowed to go for seconds. Although I don't think you will get any more pie, since there was so little of it, but you should be able to get most of the other things again."

"Awesome!" Elsie looked at Maisy and grinned. "I'll finish my food first, and I'll take whatever is left on the tables!"

"No, you won't!" Maisy retorted back, and quickly took a sip from one of her soup bowls, but Elsie saw her, and lifted a bowl in each of her hands, and quickly began drinking from them one by one, to be the first one to go for a second helping.

"Slow down, both of you!" Mr Kigeir's wife scolded them. "You won't get to eat a feast like this again any time soon. So you should savor and enjoy it instead of trying to race with each other."

Elsie gave a reluctant nod. "Yes, ma."

Maisy nodded as well. She was smiling as she picked up a piece of bread to eat along with butter, thinking their competition was over, but suddenly Elsie pointed at her and complained, "But ma, she was the one who started it!"

"No, I didn't!" Maisy replied immediately.

Elsie was going to retort again, but Mr Kigeir spoke to both of them. "It doesn't matter who started it! Just slow down and enjoy your food." He pointed at Timmy and his younger son. "They are eating more properly than you all, even though you both are older."

Chastised properly, both of them gave nods, and skipping the competition for now, they began to savor each bite.

It was only now that Maisy got a chance to put some butter on bread, and when she tasted it, it felt so... smooth and yummy! The soup and stews were good, but butter was better! And it even rhymed! She giggled to herself thinking about it, before she focused on her food again.

This was the first time she had ever tasted butter, and it was as good as Elsie had claimed it would be. After that, she took a small piece of cheese and took a bite of it without any bread, and it tasted amazing! By now, she was completely sure that she hadn't eaten anything better tasting than cheese or butter! They both tasted amazing!

Then she took a small piece of bread, and looked at the cheese and butter waiting on her plate. Now she was confused. Which of those should she eat first?

Suddenly, she laughed at herself. Looking at Timmy, who had closed his eyes in enjoyment as he ate something, she realized how much things had changed for them... Only a few weeks ago, she didn't know how she would find any food for her brother and herself. She had scrounged through all of the garbage piles in the village, and there wasn't anything left anywhere. But today... Today she was confused if she should eat butter or cheese first!

She realized that it was a rare feast, and choosing between butter and cheese wouldn't be a problem for her any time soon in the future. But for tonight, she couldn't help but look at the sky in thankfulness. Maybe the goddess was watching over them after all.

After she was done with all of the food, she looked at the last thing remaining on her plate. And it was the Toloraberry Pie. She lifted it up carefully, and gently took a very small bite of it. And for a moment, she couldn't understand the taste even though it felt really nice... It was only then that she realized that it was sweet tasting!

Yes! That's what a sweet taste meant! The Toloraberry Pie was what something sweet really tasted like! Now she had a new favorite food, along with butter and cheese!

As she thought more about it, she suddenly realized that until now, she had thought that the porridge which the children got served to them every day as the free meal tasted sweet, but that porridge wasn't really sweet at all!

As she took another small bite of the pie, her eyes started getting a little wet. Once again, she took another small bite, and even though she hadn't eaten something that sweet ever in her life, she found that she liked the sweet taste of a pie. A lot.

Finally, she saw that only one small part of the pie was remaining, and she decided that she wanted to savor it slowly. Or maybe she could hide it in her pocket to taste it tomorrow... But then she noticed that Elsie - who had eaten her own serving of pie before other things - kept eyeing that last piece of pie on her plate.

Recognising the danger immediately, she quickly snatched that last piece of Toloraberry pie from her plate and put it in her mouth, and then grinned at Elsie, who just huffed in response, and began to eat her own food again.

Soon, she stood up with her plate to get a second helping of everything, but Elsie - who had still not finished her food - noticed her, and after immediately gobbling up whatever was left on her plate, she started to walk quickly towards the tables where the maids were still serving to the children, and quickly overtook her, so she would be the first one to get the second helpings. Maisy also started walking faster, until both of them were running towards the tables.

However, instead of worrying about who would win the race, Maisy laughed at both of their antics, and after Elsie noticed it, she joined her in laughing as well, even though neither of them stopped running.

Their rivalry wouldn't stop any time soon, it seemed. But Maisy didn't mind it at all. It was the first time she had gotten a best friend, and she loved every moment of it, even if half of it was spent in bickering between her and Elsie. Giving a shake of her head, she happily let Elsie take the lead, and followed behind her best friend. Cheese and butter were waiting for her, after all!

~ Calubo ~ Enjoy more content from empire

~ Somewhere inside the forests surrounding Tiranat ~

Night had already fallen and the icy winds had picked up, making it too cold to stay anywhere in the open, especially without a fire nearby. But the bandits didn't really care about that, and most of them were snoring under whichever bush they had chosen as their bed.

It seemed like a full moon night, but because of the dense clouds, the visibility was quite low, though it was still enough that he could barely make out Nokozal and another bandit sitting next to each other maybe a dozen feet away. They were the ones keeping watch right now, and they seemed to be whispering something together - probably planning how to attack tonight.

Calubo couldn't help but give a sigh. Because of a continuous worry about what was going to happen to Tiranat tonight, Calubo had been wide awake since the morning. Would these bandits also put the village to fire, just like Torhan's group of bandits had done around a month ago? Would the village's food supply also be looted by these bastards, making the villagers starve in the winter? Would his cousin Nurobo even stay alive after tonight? He didn't know. So he hadn't stopped praying to the goddess for a moment, since that was all he could do right now to help the village.

A little while ago, he had heard some kind of cheers from the direction of the village, but he didn't know why that would be. The last time he was in the village, the villagers didn't have anything to cheer about anyway. But perhaps the new baron had done something about it? At the very least, the village should have quite a bit of grain now, based on the two caravans he had observed coming to the village. If only he were in the village as well...

The fatso, who had been deemed his caretaker by Nokozal, had tied both of his hands together, as always, and had tied the other end of the rope to his own hand. However, despite the continuously growling stomach of the fatso, he was fast asleep right now, a few feet away from Calubo with seemingly no worries at all, making him hate the fat bandit even more.

Soon, he heard the crunching of leaves from nearby - a sound which felt even louder in the night - making Nokozal and the other bandit on watch duty stand up slowly with their swords ready. But immediately after that, he heard a series of bird whistles from the same direction, making the bandits relax. Before long, he saw someone walking towards the bandit chief, and while he couldn't see the newcomer clearly, it had to be the runt based on his small build.

"So, what news have you brought?" Nokozal asked the runt in a low voice - a sound which still carried over well enough in the night for Calubo to hear without much difficulty.

Chapter 119. Reports And Attempts

"There is a feast tonight, milord!" The runt reported with an animated voice.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Nokozal growled. He gestured at the darkness surrounding them, with no food in sight anywhere. "Are you a damned idiot?"

"I meant in the village, milord," the runt replied. "The villagers are having a feast right now, while we are nearly starving here!"

"You've got to be kidding me!" Nokoza barked. But since the runt did not refute him, the bandit chief gave a scornful laugh, before asking with surprise, "There is really a goddess damned feast in the village tonight...?"

"It's true, milord!" The runt confirmed again. "I saw it myself! Of course, I couldn't go too close, but I saw that just outside the walls of the baron's manor, there was a huge crowd, and there seemed to be so many tables full of food kept next to those walls! What else could it be, if not a feast?"

As Calubo listened to the runt describe the feast, it seemed like the runt was salivating at the thought. But a feast? It didn't make sense to Calubo either. Why would the village be having a feast? And who could even afford to give a feast in the village in the first place?

Did the new baron come with a lot of gold crowns with him? Since only a rich noble could afford to give a feast in these difficult times, when most people couldn't even afford to buy two meals a day for their families. But even if he had, why would the baron give a feast to the village? It had never happened before in Tiranat. The previous baron hadn't even given a feast to those who lived in the manor - not even once! So the whole village having a feast tonight didn't make any sense at all!

The runt continued in an agitated voice, "I even climbed a tree in the east to see it clearly. And you wouldn't believe what I saw there! There had to be a dozen tables kept right outside the walls - all of them loaded with a variety of food! And many people - probably servants or maids of the manor - were serving the villagers from there. I had never even seen so much food in one place in my life before tonight!"

The other bandit, who was keeping watch along with Nokoza, muttered, "Now I wish I had gone to scout the village..."

Nokoza grunted and didn't say anything for a while. Eventually, he scoffed. "Well, so what? It doesn't matter to us if the village is having a feast, since all their food will be ours anyway after tonight!" He added after a moment, "In fact, it's better for us this way. We will give a couple of hours for the villagers to get full of food and ale, and for them to go to sleep in their homes. That's when we'll attack - when they'd be sleeping defenseless after that damned feast!" Find adventures at empire

The runt added, "But I did see a lot of guards out in that crowd, probably keeping an eye on the villagers so they wouldn't steal anything!"

The other bandit asked, "Doesn't that mean that the guards do come out of the manor? What if they attack us when we are raiding the village?"

"Are you an idiot?" NokozaI chided. "It's a damned feast! Of course the guards would come out so they could eat as well! How could those greedy bastards give up on a free meal?" He scoffed, "You talk like you have never met any guards of nobles! They are the first ones to ask for bribes just to allow us to enter the damned gates of a town!"

The bandit chief continued, "So when we raid the village, and if the guards hear about it, they will be the first ones to run inside the gates of the manor before shutting them from inside, just like it happened when Torhan's group raided them! Those cowards wouldn't dare to come out and face us in battle!"

The other bandit sounded unsure as he said, "I hope so, milord."

"Don't you worry, lad. You all just keep following my orders," NokozaI said confidently, "and the goddess will give us a huge haul of grain tonight! She already made the village have a feast tonight, which would make it easier for us to attack later. Don't you see? She is already favoring us!"

After a moment, NokozaI added, "Well, we've been awake for a while now, so let's take our turn to rest. You," he ordered the other bandit, "go and wake two other men to keep watch until it's time for the raid."

While the bandit chief and others found a shrub to sleep under, Calubo was worried sick about the fate of the village tonight. Why did the goddess make NokozaI bring him here, if he couldn't even do anything to help the village? Was it just to make him see the demise of the village - the place he had lived in for nearly all his life? Was that what all his prayers amounted to?

Soon, the bandits settled down to rest, and as it turned out, it was the fatso along with another bandit who got the watch duty for the next few hours.

"Let's walk a little further from others," the fatso said to the other bandit, "so we wouldn't wake them by talking."

"Why do we even need to talk right now?" the other bandit asked curiously. "Sound carries far in the night, so we should just keep a watch on the surroundings."

"Because I am hungry! And being hungry makes me sleepy!" the fatso grumbled. "I won't be able to keep watch tonight if there isn't someone to talk with me." He tilted his head towards Calubo. "And I have nothing to talk about with this idiot, who is the only other person who's awake right now."

The other bandit sniggered, and gave a nod. "I agree with you there."

Calubo just let them have their fun at his expense. There was no point in provoking them right now.

Since it was the fatso who had gotten the duty to keep an eye over Calubo, so instead of leaving him with the other sleeping bandits, he tugged the rope tying Calubo's hands, and pulled him along as well. The fatso walked a little further away from the other sleeping bandits to a wide fedarus tree, where he lazily settled down on the ground with his back to the tree, while facing away from the direction of the sleeping bandits. Calubo sat near them as well, while thinking about the coming raid.

The other bandit had also followed them, and he sat with his back to another tree nearby. Both of the bandits had also removed their swords from their backs and kept them next to themselves on the ground, so they would be more comfortable when leaning against the tree.

The other bandit muttered to the fatso, "Now that you have mentioned it, I am feeling hungry too. Those handful of berries we found earlier were barely enough for all of us to eat." He looked at the fatso. "I kept telling you yesterday to save the last pieces of the dried meat we had brought with us from the quarry. But you said no, we will find more meat tomorrow! And look at us now, having nothing to eat!"

"What was I supposed to do about it?" The fatso grumbled. "I was hungry, so how could I not eat something which was right in front of me?"

The other bandit snorted. "You still should have saved some for today, you damned fatso."

"I'm not fat!" the fatso retorted immediately.

"Of course you aren't!" The other bandit sniggered. "But why are you hungry all the time anyway?"

"Hell if I know," the fatso answered with a lazy shrug, as he adjusted his position to get more comfortable, with his back still to the tree. "I've always been hungry."

As Calubo tuned out their banter, he thought that if only there was a way to separate these two bandits, maybe he could even find an opportunity to run away from them. He eyed the sword lying next to the fatso, and wished he could get his hands on it...

But the fatso had still kept his arm on that sword, so it wasn't very likely that he would get it. And even if he could snatch that sword - which wouldn't be easy at all, since it was kept on the other side of the fatso - the other bandit would immediately cut him down after that, especially with both of his hands still tied together with a rope.

As the bandits became quiet after their recent topic died down, Calubo tried to think of a way to separate them.

"Shouldn't one of you be sitting on the other side of the camp to keep an eye on both sides of us?" Calubo asked both of the bandits. "What if the knights of Count Cinran come and attack the rest of you while they are still sleeping?"

Chapter 120. Conjectures

"Shut up!" the bandit snapped at him. "I didn't ask for your opinion."

The fatso sniggered as he taunted Calubo, "Like you would know anything about the count's knights! You were only a manor guard in this pitiful little village, not a knight in the count's retinue!"

Immediately the other bandit started to laugh as well. "The count's knights coming to these forests in the middle of the night? And on the same day we are here? Don't make me laugh! So you are an idiot after all."

Calubo sighed. There went that plan of separating them. Trying to salvage his attempt to separate them, he said with a shrug, "The knights might still come... you can never know..."

"Yeah, I can!" the fatso boasted. "I have actually been to the count's mansion in Cinran - unlike you - so what would you know? Anyway, shut up now unless you want to get a beating."

Calubo didn't say anything after that. He had tried his best to separate them, hadn't he?

But he still felt guilty. It was his mistake of telling Nokoza that the manor guards might not leave the walls of the manor if a raid happened, and because of that, these bastards were going to raid Tiranat. They'd probably even burn the houses and kill many villagers during that attack. So he still felt responsible about it, since it had all started with his own mistake. And yet, there still wasn't anything he could do to help the village, damn it!

As the other bandit started telling the fatso about the feast in the village, with even more exaggeration than what the runt had told them, the fatso's stomach growled loudly.

"Dammit! I'm really hungry now!" The fatso grumbled again as he sat up straighter. "And being so hungry is already making me sleepy. Why did the chief have to put me on watch duty right now?"

The other bandit shrugged. "Doesn't matter, man. The chief said that we'd get to eat as much as we want after tonight! So just hold on for now."

The fatso grumbled something again, then settled down with his back to the tree again, while the other bandit continued his tale of the feast.

~ Kivamus ~

~ Baron's Manor, Tiranat ~

Kivamus and others had just finished their own feast, and while Clarisa and Sryne cleared the wooden plates and cups from the long dining table, he moved to sit in front of the roaring fire in a comfortable armchair, with others following him as well. The feast was a rare change from their regular meals, and

while they couldn't afford it frequently, it still made him happy that he was able to eat something like that in this world.

"That was a wonderful meal, Madam Helga," he praised the former innkeeper. Remembering the taste of the only sweet thing he had tasted in the past few weeks, he said, "I particularly liked the Toloraberry Pie! It's a pity that we won't be able to have more of it until after the winter, when those shrubs begin to give fruit again. But still, it was a delicious feast."

"Thank you, milord!" Madam Helga replied with a smile, as she picked up another empty plate from the table to take it away.

"I'd love to have more of the Rizako stew, though," Feroy said as he leaned back further on an armchair. He had returned to the manor an hour ago while looking a little edgy, but after seeing the feast in front of him, he had seemingly focused only on the food. The ex-mercenary added, "Nothing beats the taste of that!"

Madam Helga laughed. "You were the one who grabbed the cauldron of the Rizako stew for yourself, so you could soak up any leftover broth with bread! So you know that there isn't any more of it left, Feroy!"

Everyone laughed remembering that, while Feroy looked unabashed. He just shrugged. "What can I say, it was just that delicious."

"I am glad to hear that. And don't worry, you'll be the first one to eat the Rizako stew whenever I make it the next time, assuming we are able to replant the mushrooms again in new barns," Madam Helga replied, before she walked away with Clarisa with the empty plates in her hands.

Feroy grinned. "I can't wait!"

Kivamus smiled seeing the rare smile on the face of the ex-mercenary. It was good to see that everything was going so well.

"How is the meal for the villagers going?" he asked the majordomo.

Duvas replied, "The feast is nearly over now, and the villagers have started returning back. But there is still a small crowd remaining in front of the gates, mainly of those children who are still finishing their second helping of food, along with their families who are keeping an eye on them."

"Hmm... I am glad that we were able to provide the children something tasty," Kivamus said with a smile.

"Certainly," Gorsazo said with a nod. "The winter months were already difficult for commoners even in Ulriga - where it didn't snow that much - but here in Tiranat, they would be much more severe and with a lot of snowfall. So the rare experience of eating in a feast would be something that will keep the villagers' morale high, instead of them just trying to survive the bleak winter days."

Kivamus nodded. "That's true enough."

Hudan stood up from his armchair. "I should go and take a look again at the feast, to make sure that everything is going well."

Before Kivamus agreed to him, Feroz interrupted with a serious expression, "Wait here for a moment, Hudan. I have something I need to talk about."

"What is it?" Kivamus asked curiously.

"I didn't mention it earlier while we were eating since I didn't want to spoil the mood," Feroz said, "but you all still need to know about it." He added with a shrug, "You can certainly call me paranoid, but I am usually right about such things."

Hudan's expression became serious as he retook his seat. "What are you talking about?"

"I've been feeling that something is off since the past few days, you know?" the ex-mercenary began, "and after what I found out today, I don't think I was wrong."

Duvas looked concerned, while Kivamus and others listened carefully.

Feroy continued, "I asked around with the guards who were on watch duty in the previous few days - including those who went to patrol around the village in the night - but they hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary. So, earlier in the evening, I took a look around the village myself, but I didn't find anything unusual either."

"I told you there was nothing," Hudan said with a frown. "I asked them exactly the same thing earlier and got the same answer. So why are you still worried about it?"

Feroy raised one of his hands to placate Hudan. "Just hear me out." He continued, "Something still didn't feel right to me, so just before I came here for the dinner, I went outside to where the feast was being held. I thought that it was a good opportunity for me to ask around, since all the villagers had gathered in the same place. Otherwise it would be too difficult to go from house to house and look for those people whom I wanted to ask about it, you know?"

At Kivamus' nod, the ex-mercenary continued, "So I searched for those villagers who were cutting the trees - since they are the ones who are working the farthest from the village, and if there was anything suspicious in the forest around us, they would be the first ones to know about it." He added, "There were a lot of people who work as woodcutters away from the village, but for each direction of the village, I made sure to find someone who has been working in that direction, and then asked them if they had seen anything unusual."

"Alright," Kivamus nodded. "So did you find anything?"

"I think so, but there isn't anything I can say for sure, you know?" Feroy explained.

"That's okay," Kivamus reassured him. "Just tell us what you found."

Feroy nodded. "In the evening, one of the villagers who was in the group which is working to build the village walls in the north, had gone further away in that direction to relieve himself, and he thought that he saw someone further ahead in the forests. But it was just him at the time, so he wasn't very sure about it."

Hudan frowned on hearing that. "Then why didn't he report it to a guard? I would have sent a few men to check it out immediately if he had told us. It's already been a few hours since then, so we wouldn't find anything even if I did send guards now."

"I asked him that as well," Feroy replied. "But he told me that it was already getting dark by that time, so he thought it might be just shadows of a branch moving from the wind, or maybe it was just some other laborer who had gone further ahead. So he didn't think it was worth mentioning it to anyone."

"But he still should have gone further ahead and taken a look himself," Gorsazo said. "At least he could have made sure that it wasn't someone he didn't recognize."

Feroy nodded. "He probably should have, but like I told you, he was alone at that time. And people in the village don't like to go too far into the forest alone, especially in the dark."

Kivamus wasn't sure what it meant, and if it was something to be really concerned about, so he gestured to Feroy to keep speaking. "Carry on."

The ex-mercenary nodded. "Having said that, it wouldn't normally be much cause for concern, since it could just have been some wild animals there. Or like that laborer thought, it might be another villager who had gone further ahead, or maybe it was just some branches moving from the wind. We simply can't be sure about it."

Feroy continued, "However, I have just been back from three separate journeys with the caravan and travelled through those same forests. While Hudan said earlier that it was just my nerves which were making me too paranoid, but I don't think so. Not anymore."

"Could it be possible that the news about the caravan got out while you were in Cinran?" Kivamus asked.