

Londoner 131

Chapter 131. Revenge

For a while, Calubo couldn't stop himself from grinning. The bandits liked to beat up the stonecutters after surrounding them in much higher numbers. That was why he had been beaten so badly the first time he tried to run away from the quarry. But this time, it would be a one on one fight. Let's see who comes out on top this time!

At this point, both he and the archer knew exactly where the other was, but Calubo was still confident about his chances.

When he had seen the shrubs at that moment, he had gauged that those were perhaps little more than a dozen yards away from him. While that was quite a lot closer to the archer compared to his initial position, he was still not at a sword-fighting range. So he needed to get even closer to the archer, somehow. He nodded to himself. Just two short sprints, and he would reach the archer.

However, since he was so close now, he couldn't easily risk running from cover to cover this time, since the archer would be able to see him much more clearly now, and could shoot him down easily. Thinking about what to do, he looked around the tree where he was hiding, and he saw just more trees around him.

No, that wasn't right. Looking at the ground, he saw many small fallen branches, apart from clumps of dirt and even a few small stones scattered around the area. He nodded to himself. He could take advantage of the fact that the archer knew that there were many guards who had come to see the body of fatso.

Since he didn't want to risk leaving the cover of the tree - especially since it was a narrow tree this time - he carefully gripped his sword from its blade and used its cross-guard to pull a few stones and some small wooden sticks towards him. It would have been much easier if he had a scabbard with him right now, but Hudan had given him the same sword with which he had been running towards the village - and when he had looted that sword from the fatso, he hadn't thought of taking the scabbard with him in his hurry of getting away from the bandits.

Before long, he had a small collection of stones and branches ahead of him. After discarding the smaller ones, he found a few stones and branches of just the right size for what he wanted to do. Now he just had to make the bandit think that there was another guard drawing closer to his position.

Picking up one of the stones, he threw it a little distance away from the left side of the tree. Right after he heard the sound of the stone hitting something, he knew that the archer would be looking towards that direction now - thinking that Calubo was running to another tree there - so he immediately threw a stick from the right side of the tree, this time with a lot more force.

That stick flew to some distance, before it thwacked loudly on a tree there. This should make the archer think that there was someone else reaching close to him for certain, but he would still be confused about the direction of the approaching guard.

So, Calubo stood up slowly with his sword in his hand, getting ready to run, and after picking up another wooden stick, he threw it again towards the right, and luckily, the stick broke on contact with a tree - sounding exactly like how it would if someone had stepped on that stick. That should give the archer more reason to think that there was someone approaching him from the right, while he would believe that it was only a wild animal on the left. Discover hidden content at empire

And just as he expected, he heard the sound of an arrow hitting a tree to the right, and since he was ready to run, he used that moment to sprint to a new cover on the left behind another fedarus tree, reaching much closer to the archer. Being much closer now, Calubo knew that the archer would have heard the sound of his feet for sure, but this time, the bandit wouldn't be certain of his exact position - since he would have been looking in the opposite direction, thinking there was another guard there.

Calubo had seen the shrubs again while running, and while he expected that now he was only half a dozen yards away from the archer, this time he simply couldn't risk sticking his neck out to one side to confirm it, or he would immediately get an arrow in his head.

Keeping his ears open to make sure that the archer wasn't running away, he took a few deep breaths to calm himself and to get ready for the coming battle. Then he held his sword tightly in his left hand, and picked up another two sticks from the ground. Then he threw those sticks one by one from the left side of the tree, and while one of them simply hit the ground, the second one loudly hit a tree - hopefully making the archer think that the other guard was circling around him now.

Since he was quite close to the archer this time, he heard the twang of the string just as an arrow left the bow - wherever the archer had shot it. And even before the arrow made a sound of hitting something, he sprinted from the right of the tree with his sword held in front of him, and immediately saw the archer nocking another arrow on the bow just a few yards away from him. It was hard to tell the archer's expression in the night, but it had to be of surprise - after suddenly seeing a guard so close to him.

However, Calubo immediately recognized who the archer was. This was the bastard who kept trying to make moves on Hyola again and again even though she kept telling him no.

The bandits ogling the women from far away was one thing, but a few times Calubo and the other stonecutters even had to pull the archer away from Hyola forcefully, when he was too drunk on Nokozal's cheap ale and didn't want to take no for an answer.

Seething in anger inside, Calubo didn't waste another moment and immediately struck his sword down on the bandit, who had to hold his bow in front of him with both hands to defend himself. As Calubo pulled his sword back for another strike, the bandit used one of his hands to draw a dagger from behind him, holding the bow in only a single hand as a makeshift shield.

Calubo barely paused for a moment, knowing he had the advantage of longer reach over the bandit, and exchanged a few more slashes and strikes from his sword, but the bandit somehow defended all of them with his bow. And the moment Calubo took a step back to catch his breath, the bandit thrust fast towards his neck with the dagger, but he barely reached close to Calubo.

Taking advantage of this opportunity, Calubo quickly held the wrist holding the dagger from his right hand, and stabbed again towards the bandit's chest, who used his bow once again to defend himself. But this time Calubo had jabbed his sword forward, instead of slashing it horizontally like earlier, so the bandit wouldn't be able to stop it easily. And just as he had thought, after grazing slightly across the bow, his sword pierced the archer's chest, making the bandit cry out in shock.

It felt like a very long time, but it was probably only a few moments as Calubo felt the bandit's hand slowly grow limp and saw his life leaving from his eyes. As he pulled his sword back with a grimace, the dagger and the bow fell from the hands of the archer, before he fell to the ground, clutching at his bleeding chest futilely.

Although he knew that the bandit couldn't survive this wound for long, he stabbed once again at the bandit's chest exactly where his heart would be, to be sure of it.

And just before the bandit died, Calubo spat towards him, "This is for Hyola, you bastard! I hope you rot forever in the stomach of a bakkore."

~ Maisy ~

~ Hiding behind Elsie's older brother ~

Maisy was feeling scared. Very scared. For herself, for Timmy, and for all of Mr Kigeir's family. She didn't know how everything had turned bad so fast. Just a short while ago, she had been happily enjoying a feast along with her best friend Elsie, but when Mr Kigeir had told them all to return home, she had been a little sad that she wouldn't be able to eat more, but she had also been happy, because she had still been able to eat a lot, after all. But before they had reached their home, scary looking bandits had stopped them from going further in that dark alley.

Since then, she and Elsie had been hiding behind Leif, while Mr Kigeir was still holding their younger brothers - both of whom were bawling loudly now. Even Elsie had begun to weep silently, but Maisy wasn't crying. This wasn't the first time she had to face bandits, and she knew that it wouldn't be the last time either. Good times rarely lasted for orphans like her, after all.

But she still didn't know what would happen tonight. She had been able to dive into a garbage heap along with Timmy to hide when bandits had come to the village last time, but she couldn't do that now. Would the bandits take Timmy away from her? Would they take both of them to sell them as slaves somewhere? She didn't know, and so she was feeling very scared now.

Earlier, one of the bandits - who was really huge - had been demanding Mr Kigeir to give up all his grain and coin, but after trying to fool the bandits that they didn't have any grain, Mr Kigeir had given up when the bandits had threatened to kill his wife. Then he had taken them towards his home, and after putting down the boys, he had opened up his shop and showed the bandits the little amount of grain he had.

When the bandits had begun to load it in a sack, Mr Kigeir and his wife had begged them to leave some grain for their family, but the huge bandit had simply told the other man to keep loading up everything.

By now, Mr Kigeir's wife had also started crying, while Leif was still trying to hide the girls behind himself. When the bandits had taken everything there, the huge man gazed at all of them for a moment,

then demanded them to give up all their coin. Mr Kigeir quickly showed them an empty box, saying this is where he kept the coins, and there was nothing left anymore.

However, Maisy knew that there was a small pouch of coin buried under the ground behind their house - when she had seen Mr Kigeir putting more coins into it a few days ago - but she certainly wasn't going to say anything about it to the bandits!

It didn't seem like the bandits believed him at first. But then the huge and scary bandit looked at all of them again, his eyes stopping longer on the girls. Maisy didn't like the look in his eyes at that moment, while Elsie began to cry loudly now, clutching Leif's tunic from behind.

After a moment, the huge bandit shrugged his wide shoulders. "In that case, I'll have to take your girls with me instead of the coins. Fair's fair, after all. And I do have to make up my quota of slaves this winter."

Immediately, Mr Kigeir and Leif ran in front to shield the rest of them with their bodies. "You can't do that!" Leif shouted at the huge bandit, while Mr Kigeir began praying to the Goddess to help them. But the huge bandit just scoffed, and gave a backhanded slap to Leif, which threw him away to the ground. Immediately, Elsie clutched Maisy while bawling loudly.

Then Mr Kigeir tried to run at the huge bandit to attack him with his bare hands - even though he barely reached the huge bandit's shoulders in height - but after giving a laugh for a moment, the bandit punched him on his face, making him fall down on the ground with a thump. All this time the other bandit was just watching everything with amusement, while holding the sack full of grain on his back.

Maisy could only watch everything that was happening with teary eyes, and she hated that she couldn't do anything.

As she saw the end of the happy times with her best friend, her heart was beating so fast that it felt like it would fly away from her chest. She clutched back Elsie in fear, while glancing at Timmy - who looked terrified as he gazed back at her with teary eyes - but Maisy still tried to smile at him, hoping he wouldn't lose courage after the bandits took her away.

She also looked at Mr Kigeir and his family for a moment. She had really enjoyed living with them for so long, but she knew good times didn't last for people like her, after all.

This was it, then. This was probably the last time she was seeing her brother - her only family in this world. She didn't know what would happen to her and her best friend if the bandits took them away, but she just hoped that they would leave Timmy alone - so that at least one of them would survive in this cruel world.

As the huge bandit took a step towards them - probably to pick them up - Leif weakly stood up once again. After reaching in front of her and Elsie, he spread his hands wide, trying to shield them from the huge bandit. Was Leif really willing to give his life to save her and Elsie?

The huge bandit just tilted his head a little. "You don't learn your lesson easily, do you?" he taunted Leif, and drew his gleaming sword from his back. "Move!" he roared loudly.

But even then, Leif kept standing in front of them, although Maisy could see his arms shaking in fear. Leif's mother was screaming in fear now, telling them to stop, while Mr Kigeir was still on the ground - probably because he was still passed out after that blow to his head.

As Leif still didn't move, the huge bandit just shook his head slowly, and raised his sword high in the air, ready to cut him down.

Chapter 132. Confidence

~ Tesyb ~

~ Somewhere in the village of Tiranat ~

Tesyb had been running for a while now, but he didn't feel tired at all. If anything, he had never felt more alive in his life. This was the first time he had been able to use his newfound sword fighting skills and he loved every moment of it! He grinned thinking about Yufim, who must be grumbling that he was stuck within the manor, and hadn't been able to fight any bandits. Well, that's what he got for becoming an archer instead of a great swordsman like him!

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After separating from the others, he and the other guard had already killed one bandit. While the other guard had been the one to deal the finishing blow, Tesyb had given more than his fair share in the fight.

And truthfully, that fight had been easy. Perhaps, too easy. But it was also true that the bandit had been alone, so they had the advantage of numbers on their side, and even then, they had been able to surprise the bandit who had been holding a woman hostage while her husband brought all their grain and coin to him. That had led to the other guard being able to injure the bandit heavily in his arm - his sword fighting arm - in the first strike, and it hadn't taken long to finish him up after that.

And now, they were running again to see if there was another bandit nearby. And Tesyb couldn't wait for it! He had never thought he would be saying something like this before he became a guard, but as it turned out, he loved fighting! Before he was recruited, all he ever did which could be counted as fighting was to break up a few brawls between other coal miners in the alehouse. He had always been bigger than most of the other miners, and that had helped him a lot in his life. But as it turned out, he also had a knack for fighting with a sword, and he had even defeated a few guards in their mock fights! That proved that he was already very good with a sword!

Suddenly, they heard the sound of a woman screaming in fear from somewhere nearby. The other guard looked at him, and he quickly nodded in reply, before they changed their direction and started to run as fast as they could towards the sound.

While he knew that this was far from a good time for the villagers - like the one whose voice he'd heard - Tesyb couldn't wait to fight again! He couldn't help but grin, since he knew the coming fight wouldn't be too difficult anyway, since he was an expert swordsman now. The earlier victory over that bandit had even proved it!

Before long, they turned a corner and it didn't take more than a moment for Tesyb to understand was happening. There were two bandits here - one of them being a really huge guy - who were threatening a big family, and he had reached there just at the moment when that bandit was going to strike down a young guy - who was probably still a boy, since he looked only around sixteen years old or so - while he was bravely trying to protect two little girls hiding behind him.

Seeing that scene enraged him thoroughly, and with a roar, he ran towards that bandit, and tried to jab him with his sword. The bandit was surprised for a moment, but he recovered easily, and he turned his sword away from trying to kill that kid to defend himself, and both of their swords struck with a loud clang.

Tesyb took advantage of the fact that he had surprised the huge bandit, and quickly slashed his sword towards him again. Once again, the bandit had to scramble to defend himself, moving back a step in the process. He grinned once again. This was going to be just as easy as he had thought!

He took a moment to quickly look around him, and he saw that the other guard had already engaged the second bandit - who had dropped a sack he was carrying - and they were also striking each other rapidly, the sound of their swords ringing loudly in the night. The rest of the people had gathered together on one side, next to some villager's shack - where an older man had fallen on the ground. Hopefully, he wasn't dead, but he couldn't really tell for sure.

Apart from the boy who was protecting the girls, there were two other much younger boys who were crying loudly in fear, while an older woman - probably their mother - was holding them close. For a moment, he thought that he should recognize the man who had fallen on the ground, but then he blinked and looked towards the towering bandit. Right now, the most important thing was for him to kill this bastard.

With more than enough confidence, he pulled his sword back and jabbed towards the huge bandit again, but this time the bandit was more than ready for him, and easily deflected his sword away, and struck back towards him swiftly.

Tesyb barely managed to prevent that sword from taking his head off by holding his sword in the way, but that strike shook his arms so much that his sword nearly fell from his hands - such was the power behind the bandit's strike. Taking a quick breath, he held his sword in front of him once again, and slowly circled around the bandit, who was also ready with his sword, but looked far more confident now.

That made him frown. Why was the bandit looking so confident now? Wasn't he able to glean Tesyb's sword fighting prowess from those few strikes? He had to know that he wouldn't survive for long, right?

Or was the bandit an even better fighter than him? No, that wasn't possible. Tesyb snorted. This was a bandit - who lived in the forest like an animal! It's not like the bandit would have gotten training as a Count's knight! He was worrying for nothing.

Shaking his head quickly to remove those weird thoughts from his head, he focused again on the huge bandit in front of him. And right at the moment when both of them took the next step while circling each other, Tesyb quickly lunged forward with his sword pointing at the bandit's neck, hoping to end his life quickly.

But the bandit scoffed, and easily struck his sword to the side with his own blade, and slashed back towards his chest. Tesyb immediately bent backwards to protect himself - with the bandit's sword just scraping his well-used leather armor - but he lost his balance, and fell backwards on the ground.

Instantly, the bandit grinned and taking a quick step towards him, he jabbed his sword directly towards Tesyb's chest.

For a moment, Tesyb was so surprised about the fact that he was on the defense now, that he didn't know what to do. But the recent training with Hudan and other guards came in handy, and his body rolled to the side just before the sword hit him.

He quickly jumped back to his feet and found that thankfully, his sword was still in his hand. But why was this happening? Why did he even have to defend? The bandit should be dead by now! How was it that his skills seemed useless in front of this huge bastard?

He exhaled once, and tried to focus on the moment. Once again, both of them started circling each other, with the bandit looking quite confident now, while Tesyb grimaced thinking about what was happening.

He took the initiative once more, and taking a quick step to the right to feint a strike from that side, he quickly pivoted back towards the left and jabbed his sword ahead. But once again, the bandit easily slashed his strike sideways with his sword, and kicked him directly in his chest with his huge boots, making him fall down again, while losing his sword in the process.

Now his mind was in full panic, and he didn't know what to do. The bandit took a step forward, and instead of ending his life immediately, he gloated, "So this is your best, huh? I'm disappointed. For a moment, I'd thought that I'd get a real fight after years! But you are just as useless as everyone else!"

Wishing that he still had his sword in his hands, Tesyb looked to his right where it had fallen barely a yard away from him. He slowly inched his hand towards his sword, hoping he'd be able to grab it again while the bandit was talking. Further ahead in that direction, the children had become quiet, probably exhausted after crying so much, but they were still looking towards the fight with wide eyes. The rest of that family was also looking in their direction with fear, knowing what would happen to them if he died here.

Tesyb didn't know how the other fight was going, but from the bandit's grin, it couldn't be too good for the village.

The bandit bragged again instead of dealing the finishing blow. "But you know, there is no shame in losing to me. You still did good. And before I send you to the goddess, you should be glad to know that you were defeated by the mighty Lord Nokozal."

And then the huge bandit held that sword vertically in both of his hands, ready to pierce his chest in a single strike.

Tesyb's whole life flashed in front of him at that moment. His parents would lose their only son tonight. He would never be able to show Isuha that he worked as a manor guard now. He would never be able to prove to the new baron that he was really good with his skills. That he could be trusted to hold his own in a fight...

Was this it then? Was this the end of his life as a manor guard? But why? He thought he was really good at sword fighting! He had even been able to disarm other guards when fighting with a wooden sword! Or had the euphoria of that earlier victory with that outnumbered bandit simply distorted his perspective? Had he become just too confident in his skills, even though he didn't have any experience to back it up?

He gave a resigned sigh. Well, it didn't matter anymore, since he didn't see how he could survive this. He just hoped that the bandits would spare his parents and the baron would take care of them just as he had promised when recruiting him as a guard. He also hoped that this bastard called Nokozal ended his life in a single strike instead of making it too painful for him.

But as he saw the end of his life right in front of him, he knew that he still had regrets. If only he had another chance to prove himself... If only he had practiced more with his sword before coming here tonight... If only he hadn't been overconfident about his completely untested sword-fighting skills...

And then the moment of contemplation had passed, and he saw Nokozal's sword descending towards him, with only moments remaining before he left this world with so many regrets.

Chapter 133. Uncertainty

~ Calubo ~

~ Approaching Tiranat ~

After taking care of the archer, Calubo was running towards the village with the other guards in tow. It had taken him a while to look for the others in the darkness - since he couldn't make too much sound, just in case there was another bandit still there - but after they had reunited, they had decided to run to the village as fast as they could to help others there.

He couldn't help but remember the face of the dead archer with satisfaction. Hyola would have been overjoyed if she knew about this. But would it ever happen now? Would he even be able to see Hyola again?

Now that he was free from the bandits, they couldn't force him to go back to that quarry, and he also couldn't desert the village alone, if he ever wanted to work as a guard in the manor again. Maybe... maybe, if he requested the new baron to allow him to go and see Hyola again, would it be possible for him to see her again? He could ask the baron to grant him this boon as a reward for his help in giving them the warning about bandits' attack.

And if the baron really allowed this, he would even be able to take some food with him for her and the other stonecutters! But how much food could he even carry by himself? Maybe the baron would also allow him to use a horse? That way he could take much more grain than he could carry by himself. Of course, it's not like he had any coin with him to buy even a single meal at the alehouse.

But he could still ask the other guards to lend him some money. Perhaps he could even ask the baron for an advance on his wages? That should hopefully give him enough coin to buy a full sack of grain. That grain would go a long way in helping the stonecutters to survive the winter. He nodded to himself. Yes, that was the solution. And he had to do this.

As he started to become happy imagining the day when he would see Hyola's overjoyed face again at the good news, he realized that he had forgotten something. What would he do about the other bandits who were still there? That easily put a chill on his mood. Even if he gave all that grain to those bandits so they would feed the slaves more, it's not like they would give much of it to Hyola and the stonecutters.

As he approached the first houses of the village, he kept thinking about it. What if he approached the quarry secretly, and asked the stonecutters to overthrow those bandits' rule? But would those poorly fed people even be able to fight with those bandits, even with the advantage of numbers on their side?

Then... What if he asked Lord Kivamus for help in this? For him to send more guards with him to take some grain to the stonecutters and to kill the remaining bandits there. But... Why would the baron ever risk his guards for this? And Calubo was even hoping that the baron would give up his precious grain right before winter? He scoffed. No noble was that generous.

He shook his head. It didn't matter. Even if he had to go to the quarry alone, somehow he would make it work. He had to, or Hyola would be stuck with those bandits for all her life. But then he thought of another problem. Even if the stonecutters could somehow win against the bandits with his help, where would they even go after that? Especially in this winter, which would make it very difficult to travel anywhere - not to mention most of them had brands on their bodies clearly marking them as slaves, so escaping to a distant city and making a new life there wasn't really feasible either. And that was assuming they could even reach there through those dense forests full of dangerous wild beasts.

He sighed again. What other option did they even have? They certainly wouldn't be able to survive there in the snow, would they? With no nearby shrubs providing edible berries in the winter - and same for the fruit giving trees - what would they even eat there? Even his single sack of grain was unlikely to be enough to feed all the stonecutters for the winter.

But... What if there were even more bandits there now? Nokozal had been worried that Torhan's group might steal his slaves if he found out that the quarry was nearly undefended. What if that group had already taken Hyola and the others to Goddess knows where? What if...

He forcefully stopped his mind from racing further and thinking of even more problems. He couldn't afford to think about it right now. There were too many holes in his plan to take grain to the quarry. He would think about it when the current problems were dealt with. For now, he had to focus on the present.

As they reached the alley between the first two houses of the village, he spoke to the other guards, somehow trying to take his mind away from the image of Hyola hungry and freezing in the snow.

"There are four of us," he said, "so let's divide in two groups, and search for the other bandits." At the others' nod, he spoke to the first group, "You two will go towards the manor to help them - in case the bandits are already attacking there." He pointed to the remaining guard and himself. "The two of us will go into the village to search for them. We can't allow them to steal any grain or kill any villagers!"

Once others nodded in acceptance, he forced a grin on his face, even though he was certainly not feeling happy, "Let's kill those bastards!"

~ Kivamus ~

~ On the roof of the manor house ~

Kivamus had been waiting on the roof for a while, but there still wasn't any news. He had started pacing from one side of the roof to the other, hoping someone just told him what was happening outside, but there was nothing. Such moments were the ones when he really missed his life on earth.

As he reached towards the side where Yufim was waiting with a bow, he saw a servant running towards the manor house from the direction of the main gates in the west. As the servant reached towards the door, he called out to him, knowing that the door was barred from the inside.

"Up here! Is there any news?" he asked. Hearing his voice, Gorsazo also came to stand next to him.

The panting servant looked upwards, searching for the source of the voice, and then quickly found him. "Milord, Hudan and the other guards are back from the forests."

"Oh, that's really good to hear. But how do you know that?"

"I just saw one of them running in front of the manor gates," the servant reported. "Feroy asked them about it and then told me to give the news to you."

"Well, did they find the bandits there?" Gorsazo asked worriedly.

"Not really, milord." The servant added, "There was only one of the archers of the bandits there, keeping an eye on the body of the dead bandit. So Hudan left four guards there to take care of him, and then entered the village with the rest of the guards to find the rest of the bandits."

"So that means four of the guards are still outside?" Kivamus asked with a frown.

"I think so, milord," the servant replied with an uncertain voice.

Kivamus nodded. "Well, you should go back to the gates now. And let me know if there is any other news."

"Of course, milord," the servant said and jogged back towards the gates.

Turning around, Kivamus walked towards a brazier which a servant had brought to the roof some time ago. It wouldn't do too much to protect them from the cold in the open, but at least they had a way to warm up their hands. He had even told the other guards to carry the brazier to their positions in turns for heating.

As he put his hands next to the smoldering fire, he looked at Gorsazo. "What do you think about this? I don't like it that our guards had to divide again."

"Well, at least it wasn't an ambush there," Gorsazo observed with a relieved voice. "We didn't know for sure where Calubo would have taken our guards."

"No, Duvas said that he trusted him, so I wasn't too worried about it." Kivamus added, "But now that Hudan is already here, let's hope for the best results."

Gorsazo nodded. "I just hope that the bandits don't find a way to put fire to the houses in frustration, if they find out that they can't steal any grain outside the manor."

Kivamus gave a nod but didn't say anything. He didn't even want to think about such a thing happening in the village. Before long, he returned back to his pacing, hoping he got some good news soon.

~ Maisy ~

~ Hiding behind Leif ~

~ A short while ago ~

Maisy had been clutching Elsie with fear for a while, but she still had no idea if they would survive for long, or if they would be taken away by the bandits to be sold as slaves. Their younger brothers had been holding Mr Kigeir's wife for some time, while she was trying to wake up the still passed out merchant. Leif still hadn't left his place standing watchfully in front of them, and for Elsie and her, he seemed like the only one protecting them from the huge and scary bandits.

When the two guards had come right at the moment the bandit was going to kill Leif, she had been overjoyed for a while, thinking that everything would be fine now. Their younger brother had even started cheering for the guard, but it hadn't taken long for the huge bandit to start winning the sword fight. The young guard had even looked very scared after falling down on the ground. The other guard wasn't doing too well either in his fight with the other bandit.

That worried Maisy a lot. If even this guard died, what would happen to them? There wasn't anybody else to protect her and others here. Would the bandits really take her and Elsie away tonight?
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Then she saw the guard stand up, and start to fight with the bandit again. She became really excited for a moment, hoping the guard would kill the bandit, but before long, the bandit managed to make him fall again with a huge kick, and the guard also lost his sword! But instead of killing him immediately, the bandit began to speak about something, but Maisy wasn't listening to him.

She was looking intensely at the guard, who was trying to get a hold of his sword which had fallen a little away from him. She really hoped he got it, even though the huge bandit had kept his boot on the guard's chest. For a moment she thought of going there and helping him to get the sword. But would the guard be able to win even with his sword in his hands? And she was still too scared to go near that huge bandit!

But before she made up her mind, the bandit held his sword in both of his hands, and began to bring it downwards, trying to kill the guard! Was this it, then? Would she and Elsie be taken by the bandits after all? Would the bandits win even though two guards had come to fight with them?

Chapter 134. Retreat

And right at the moment when that huge bandit was going to kill the guard who had fallen down, someone else ran towards the bandit and tackled him with full force! And that man was also a guard! And he was huge too!

Maisy couldn't hide her happiness as she saw the two huge men wrestle with each other, which gave enough time for the fallen guard to get up and pick up his sword. She couldn't help but cheer in support of him, and soon Elsie joined her as well. And before long, their younger brothers also started cheering for the guards.

The huge bandit - who was even bigger than the guard who had arrived, somehow threw over the guard, and quickly stood back up. But this time, there were two guards standing ready in front of him - and both of them had their swords in their hands now!

Slowly, the two guards walked around to both sides of the bandit, and then they started fighting again! Their swords were flashing this way and that way - making ringing sounds again and again, but she couldn't really understand what was happening in that fight - especially in the darkness, with only the moon's faint light there. But then, one of them cried out with pain, and stumbled a few steps back, and she saw that it was the huge bandit, who was holding his left arm while looking really angry.

In that moment when they had stopped fighting, she also saw that the other guard was still fighting with the second bandit some distance ahead.

Soon, the two guards and the huge bandit started fighting again and their swords started making clanging sounds - but that bandit was still not defeated! How?

And then she heard someone howl in pain, and when they stepped back away from each other, she saw that it was the earlier guard this time and he was holding his thigh with pain! Oh no! But the huge bandit was still outnumbered. That should mean they would win, right?

At that moment their younger brothers started to cheer for the guards again, but a single glare from the huge bandit was enough to make them all shut up.

Then she saw that the bandit lunged forward towards that injured guard. However, the bigger guard managed to slash his sword away, but instead of attacking again, that huge bandit looked around him

for a moment, and after saying some things she really shouldn't repeat, he ran away towards a nearby alley!

"I'll go after him," the huge guard said to the other one, "you go and help him." And then he ran towards that alley, and soon he was out of their sights. And only now did she recognize who that huge guard was. He was the one who had helped her and Timmy to get to the children's line, when they were going to get the free meal for the first time.

Slowly, the injured guard - who was still clutching his thigh in pain - looked towards them for a moment, and slowly ran towards the other guard who was still fighting with the second bandit.

"Ahh... What happened here?" She heard someone's tired voice from behind him, and looking there, she saw that Mr Kigeir was awake!

His wife started explaining everything to him, while Leif was still standing in front of them protectively. Mr Kigeir slowly stood up, and after looking towards the guards who were fighting some distance away, he walked towards them with heavy steps. "Are you all okay?" he asked them.

Elsie just nodded, while Maisy replied, "We are. Are you okay too?"

Mr Kigeir smiled, and before he said something, Timmy shouted, "Look! The guards are going to win!"

But as Maisy turned her head towards the guards - seeing that the bandit had fallen down on the ground - and one of the guards had his sword held high in the air, Mr Kigeir put his hands on her and Elsie's eyes to cover them. He told Leif to do the same for their younger brothers, and said, "This isn't something you children should see yet."

Maisy was still curious about the guards, and she really wanted to see them win! But she also didn't want to go against Mr Kigeir's orders. So she kept listening carefully, and then she heard someone cry out in pain from that direction.

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Then Mr Kigeir removed his hands, and she saw that one of the guards was jogging towards them. He looked really tired and exhausted now, and when he reached here, he said, "You all should go to your home now. It is still not safe outside." Then he looked at Mr Kigeir and asked, "Can you walk?" Seeing his nod, he added, "Good! Now I have to go to find the other bandits. Keep your home locked for the night."

And then without waiting for any reply, that injured guard jogged towards the other guard, and both of them ran into a nearby alley.

After Mr Kigeir thanked the guard and the Goddess - even though neither of them could really hear him, right? - he and his wife held the hands of all the children and started walking towards their home, while Leif walked ahead of them.

So they had won, after all! She looked at Elsie for a moment, but she still looked lost in thoughts and wasn't saying anything - quite unlike her - so she also didn't say anything to her for now. However, their younger brothers seemed really excited now. But weren't they crying just a while ago? How did children even change their mood so quickly!

As they all walked towards their home while feeling tired, exhausted, and yet with a full belly - even though the feast seemed to have happened a lifetime ago - nearly all of them were quiet, lost in their thoughts, except for the two younger boys.

"Did you see that last move by the bigger guard?" Timmy asked. "Wasn't he amazing?" Enjoy new adventures from My Virtual Library Empire

"He was!" Elsie's younger brother replied with enthusiasm. "But the other guard was better! He rolled out so quickly from under the sword of the bandit! I wish I could do that too!"

"Yeah, me too!" Timmy added. "But I want to be like that huge guard! He was better!"

"No he wasn't! The other guard was better! He was very brave!"

Maisy tuned them out after that. How were the kids so excited after they all barely survived? Couldn't they be a little more mature? She scoffed. Children!

~ Kivamus ~

~ Baron's manor ~

It was quite late in the night now, but Kivamus was sitting in the manor hall again along with the others - all of whom had a smile on their faces.

Just a few minutes ago when he was still on the roof, a servant had come running towards the manor house, and told him that the guards had killed most of the bandits. He also said that Hudan was already back at the gates organizing the guards there, and he would be coming to talk to him soon.

Once that servant had returned, Lucem and the archers at the top of the roof had given a whoop of joy, and he and Gorsazo hadn't been able to hide their happiness either. That sound had led to the door to the stairs opening, and Syryne had asked them about what had happened. But before he replied anything, Lucem quickly started explaining it to her, and he had left the siblings alone after that.

After that, he had sent all the archers to meet with Feroy or Hudan to take new orders from them. They all knew that the servant had said that the guards had killed most of the bandits - but not all of them. That meant the other bandits might still be out there, so they still had to stay vigilant. The archers had nodded, and quickly jogged to the stairs and then to outside of the manor house, while the rest of them had returned to the manor hall.

Since then, he had been waiting for the guard captain to arrive. Madam Helga had left for the kitchen a while ago to cook up something quick for them - since Lucem had been saying that he had gotten hungry by now. Kivamus couldn't deny that it had been a while since he had to stay awake till so late, so he had also added his name to those who wanted a late night bite to eat. Syryne and Clarisa had followed Madam Helga to the kitchen as well to help her, along with Lucem - who just wanted to be closer to the kitchen so he would be the first to get something to eat when the food was ready.

And now, it was just him along with Gorsazo and Duvas in the manor hall.

Soon, the outer door of the manor hall opened, and Hudan walked inside. In the light of the fireplace - which was still burning brightly - Kivamus saw that his clothes were muddied, his leather armor looked torn in some places, and exhaustion was easily visible on the guard captain's face.

Taking a place on an empty armchair near the fire, Hudan picked up the waiting jug of water and drank directly from it for a while. Once he was done, he exhaled loudly.

"Madam Helga is making a quick meal for us," Kivamus said, "and I gave yours and Feroy's name as well, since I knew you both would be hungry."

Hudan gave a grateful nod. "Now that you have mentioned it, I really am feeling hungry. I don't know when Feroy will be back, but thank you for that, milord."

Kivamus gave a smile in response. "So how did it go?" he asked the guard captain. "A servant told me that most of the bandits were dead, but not all of them. What did he mean by that?"

Hudan sighed for a moment, and then he began to explain.

Chapter 135. The Aftermath - Part I

The guard captain began, "As you know, milord, there were ten bandits in total."

Gorsazo interrupted, "But are you really sure that there were only ten bandits? What if there are more of them still waiting to attack us?"

Hudan shrugged. "Everything Calubo had told us has been true so far and I have found no holes in his story, so I have no reason to doubt his claim about there being only ten bandits in total. Even so, all the guards are still alert and ready to defend the manor if there is a need."

He continued, "Now, amongst those ten bandits, one of them was already killed by Calubo when he escaped - which I have confirmed myself - and then he also killed the bandit archer who was hiding near that body to keep us occupied there. The other three guards there have confirmed that. Apart from those two, the guards have reported that they've found five other bodies of bandits. These are the ones who came inside the village to loot grain and take slaves. Although I wish that one of them had survived for us to interrogate."

"I guess we can't help it now." Kivamus remarked. "But why didn't any of you try to keep one of them alive?"

Hudan shrugged again. "The usual procedure for any outlaws which have been caught is to hand them over to the Count, and he is the one who gives them a suitable punishment - which often includes maiming them and selling them into slavery somewhere far away - usually away from Cilaria, so they wouldn't have a way to escape to their old hidey-holes. The bandits would have known about that for sure, so I think that's why most of them were willing to fight to the death. The few who might have been willing to surrender were probably the ones who died of injuries. Even so, I did try to capture one of them without killing him, but I couldn't really do anything about it, my Lord, not when he simply didn't want to surrender."

Kivamus looked at Duvass for confirmation.

The majordomo gave a nod. "It's true, my lord. That's what we did as well. Whenever we caught any bandits or other wrongdoers in the past, we used to hand them over to the Count. I can't say what happened to them after that, but Hudan seems to have the right idea in general."

Kivamus nodded with a grimace. So that's what went as the criminal rehabilitation system in this world. If the caught thieves or outlaws didn't have hands anymore, they wouldn't be able to steal anything or kill anyone, would they?

He shook his head to get his mind away from the barbaric thoughts, and looked at the guard captain. "But that only adds up to a total of seven dead bandits. It still leaves three bandits who are unaccounted for."

Hudan grimaced. "One of those is my fault in a way. There was a bandit - a huge one - whom Tesyb and I were fighting earlier, when he was trying to kidnap the children of a village merchant. I found out later that he was the leader of the bandits, called Nokozal. That bastard was so big that it wouldn't have been easy to defeat him even without Tesyb's injury, and we also had to make sure that he didn't take one of those children hostage, which prevented us from fighting at our best."

"What happened to him then?" Duvass asked with worry.

"He managed to run away from us during that fight after he got injured in his arm," Hudan replied, "although I still went after him. But on the way I saw another bandit threatening a woman, so I had to stop to help her, and I am not proud to admit it, but during that time, that huge bastard slipped away from me. Thankfully that woman is safe now, and the other bandit wouldn't see the light of the day again."

He continued, "Since none of the other guards saw Nokozal again, we have to assume that he ran away from the village. There are two more bandits whose location we have no idea about. They must have run away as well when they realized that the raid had failed."

"But the raid did fail, right?" Duvas asked.

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"It's safe to say that it did," Hudan replied with a tired smile. "It will take a while to gather up those bodies and ask about everything from the villagers, but only three of the bandits managed to survive, so they couldn't have taken much with them, even if they managed to loot something."

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"Thank Goddess that they weren't able to loot much!" Duvas said while looking upwards.

"And what are the injuries on our side?" Kivamus asked, not knowing what to expect about it.

"We didn't come out unscathed for sure," Hudan answered, "but it could have been much worse. One of our guards got an arrow in his arm, so he won't be of use in a sword fight any time soon, but he can still keep watch where needed. Other than him there were two more guards including Tesyb who've got some light injuries, but they should be fine after a week or two of taking it easy."

"That's better than I thought," Gorsazo observed.

Hudan nodded. "It really helped that the villagers had a high morale because of the feast earlier. That meant they were more willing to defend their homes and fight for the village than they would have been

a few months ago. While the reports are still coming in from the guards who are out on patrol now, I have already heard two instances where the villagers who had some training with a machete helped to defend their neighbors. They couldn't really fight with a bandit equally, but when a couple of villagers are ready with machetes to defend their families, the bandits - who were roaming either alone or in pairs of two, since they had to spread out throughout the village to loot as much as they could - just moved on to find easier targets elsewhere."

He continued, "Of course, the villagers outnumbered the bandits even in the previous raid, but it's all a question of morale. The last time the locals were hungry, weak and dejected after losing their coal mining jobs. So when the bandits came riding on their horses - with the guards only staying inside the manor instead of protecting them - most of the people just gave up after that. At that time even if some of the villagers had a few machetes with them, they still wouldn't have been able to stand their ground in front of the bandits."

Then he added with a satisfied smile, "But this time, the villagers know that there is a baron who looks out for them - with most of the villagers having seen a guard running here or there to fight with a bandit - not to mention that they were just coming from a feast, which most of them wouldn't have seen in their lives. That kind of treatment makes the people want to fight to protect their privileges and lifestyles. There is also the fact that even the little amount of training that we were able to give to those villagers gave them the confidence to stand their ground in front of the bandits, instead of just running away in fear."

Duvas gave a slow nod and looked at Kivamus. "I wasn't sure earlier if splurging so much of our food stores on a feast right before the winter would be a good idea, but after hearing about what happened tonight, I am glad that you suggested this feast, milord."

Kivamus smiled. "There is an old saying I've heard before - An army marches on its stomach. While the villagers are far from an organized army, having the satisfaction of eating a good meal regularly really helps the morale of people." He shrugged before adding, "I certainly didn't know that there was going to be a bandit attack when I announced the feast, but I do know that keeping your people well fed is much better than keeping them hungry - even at our own expense."

After a moment, he continued, "That reminds me, I thought all the iron tools were returned to the manor in the evening after the day's work was done. So how did those villagers still have those machetes with them? You certainly couldn't have searched for them in the night to provide them with those makeshift weapons after we got to know about the imminent bandit raid."

"That was Feroy's idea," Hudan replied with a proud smile. "While all of our tools are indeed returned to the manor for safekeeping in the nights, he suggested that it would be a good idea to give those machetes permanently to those villagers whom we were giving some basic training, since it would allow them to familiarize themselves even more with their blade."

He continued, "This way, they could even practice whenever they wanted - since many of them are those people who wanted to become manor guards, but weren't selected in the recruitment - so they still would like to become a guard in the future. And it doesn't really eat up our stocks of tools, since there are barely half a dozen villagers to whom we gave the machetes, and they report to work with those same machetes every day."

"It was indeed a good idea," Kivamus remarked with a nod. "I am glad that Feroy thought of it."

Changing the subject, he spoke to the guard captain again. "Make sure to give a few days off to the injured guards. The man with an arm injury must be in enough pain that he wouldn't be too useful in keeping a watch anyway, even if he doesn't have to move around for it."

Hudan nodded. "Of course. And I have already requested Syryne to bring the few Losuvil leaves she had brought in the morning for your experiment to preserve them - but she didn't get a chance to do anything with them because everyone had to help to prepare for the feast. Those leaves would be very helpful for those guards tonight."

"That's certainly true enough. But where is Feroy?" Kivamus asked. "I thought he would be back by now."

Hudan looked towards the outer doors of the manor hall with a frown. "I'm not sure milord. He was talking with other guards near the gates when I came here. Let me check."

Chapter 136. The Aftermath - Part II

But right after he stood up, the outer door opened, and Feroy walked inside. Unlike the guard captain who had actually fought a battle and had more than a few scratches on his body and clothes, the ex-mercenary didn't look any worse for wear, likely because he had only been waiting to defend the manor from an attack. Lucem also wandered to the manor hall to listen to them, perhaps because he had gotten bored waiting in the kitchen for a late night snack.

"Speak of the vesorian..." Hudan muttered looking at the ex-mercenary as he took his seat again, "and it shall appear."

"I'm hardly the size of a vesorian, you know?" Feroy snorted as he took a seat in an empty armchair.

"Uh... You're hardly the size of what?" Kivamus asked with confusion.

"Oh... he meant a vesorian," Duvas replied. "You might not have heard of it up north in Ulriga, but it's a dangerous creature found in the wastelands south of the Nisador mountain range." He explained, "It is huge - nearly as tall as a fully grown human - and perhaps twice as wide as that, not to mention that it has huge pincers as well."

Duvas added, "There is probably no truth to these sayings, but legends say that when you are traveling in that region and you talk about a vesorian, it will appear soon after that to kill you and eat your corpse."

Lucem looked scared after hearing that, and immediately ran away towards the kitchen.

Seeing the worried look on Kivamus' face, the majordomo waved his hand, and added with a smirk, "I'm sure there is nothing to it, milord. Old people like me just remember a lot of myths and legends."

So it was like a car-sized crab preying on travelers in that wasteland, Kivamus thought. Just how many dangerous beasts did this world even have? He shook his head in exasperation. He wasn't supposed to have been transported to the Jurassic era of this planet, was he?

"Yeah, let's not talk about that... vesorian, shall we?" Kivamus muttered. He looked at the ex-mercenary. "And where have you been?"

"I am actually here with an important piece of news, Milord," Feroy replied with a serious face, although somehow it seemed like he had recently been laughing a lot.

"I was just talking with the other guards to set them up on a new watch schedule for tonight," Feroy added, "just to make sure those bandits who have escaped don't return again in the night, you know?"

Then a guard who was out patrolling in the village came running to tell me that one of the bandits we had thought to have escaped is still here, and alive." He snorted before adding, "Well... mostly alive."

"What do you even mean by that?" Kivamus asked with confusion.

"Well, I'm still waiting for the guards to bring that bandit here so I can interrogate him," Feroy replied with a snort, "but from what I think it shouldn't be too difficult now, especially after what that bandit has gone through." He added, "Earlier, I was wondering how a bandit is still alive and why he didn't try to run away, but the story that the guard told me is as intriguing as it is funny."

"Come on!" Hudan grumbled. "Just tell us about it already!"

Feroy gave a quick laugh, then he began to explain. "You should have heard that story directly from that guard who reported it to me, I couldn't stop laughing for a long time after it!"

He continued, "So it happened like this. Earlier during the raid, when the bandits were spread throughout the village to loot grain and coin, one of them somehow stumbled on to the village blacksmith's shop." Feroy snorted before adding, "He must have thought that he got access to the Duke's treasury after seeing so many iron weapons and tools just ready for taking, you know? Since all he saw was that there was just a frail young woman there in the shop to defend it."

Feroy continued the story, "So the bandit didn't take long to gather up all the ready-to-use tools and weapons in a sack, and when he was done, he took another look at the young woman - who was described to me as prettier than most women - and he thought why not take her with him as well, since Nokozal - the leader of the bandits - did want to take some new slaves from Tiranat. So he began to drag her away from the shop, but obviously the woman didn't go quietly."

Then Feroy's gaze went to the waiting jug of water kept on the table, and he quickly picked it up and began to drink from it.

Being engrossed in the tale now, Kivamus asked, "And what happened after that?"

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Feroy gave a contented sigh and put the now-empty wooden jug back on the table. He gave a grin as he added, "The blacksmith who owns that shop, Cedoron - the same guy who's built like a Goddess damned adzee - heard her cries of help, and immediately came running back from where he had gone to help other villagers nearby. And when he saw the scene of the bandit dragging away the young woman - he got so mad with rage that even though the bandit was holding a naked sword, the blacksmith just picked up a wooden stick from the ground and began to beat up the bandit - badly."

"But didn't the bandit still have a sword?" Gorsazo asked with a frown.

Feroy snorted. "He surely did, not that it helped him even a little bit." He continued after a quick laugh, "I can't deny that other than Hudan there isn't anyone to rival the blacksmith in his build, but even then, the bandit had a sword! How could he lose so easily!"

The ex-mercenary laughed and clapped his thigh loudly as he added, "I mean... I mean... the blacksmith just had a stick in his hand, while the bandit had a sword on him! But man, the way that Cedoron beat him up with just a stick..." And immediately, Feroy began to guffaw at his own story.

Others couldn't help but laugh as well after hearing the story.

"That poor bandit..." Hudan chuckled. "I bet he wouldn't be able to look anyone in the eye for a while."

After some time, when Feroy had calmed down from his repeated bouts of laughter, he continued, "A few other villagers had also come there after hearing the woman's shouts for help, but as you can guess, they didn't really need to help the blacksmith at all." Experience new stories with My Virtual Library Empire

He added with a snort, "And the fight ended when seeing the man's rage, the bandit just gave up and dropped his sword aside, but it didn't stop Cedoron at all! No, milord. He was so mad with rage that someone threatened that girl that he just kept beating up the bandit with that stick until it broke in two pieces! Then he tied up that bandit, and was going to start punching him with rage - and that guy's punches carry a lot of power, I can assure you of that - but the rest of the villagers somehow stopped him, and convinced him to hand over the bandit to us."

Hudan gave a laugh again. "Now I see why you looked like you were enjoying yourself so much when you came in. I mean... beating up a bandit who had a sword with just a wooden stick!" The guard captain started laughing again, and then all of them couldn't help but join him once more.

As Kivamus wiped his eyes, which had started to tear because of laughing so much, he realized that it felt really good to laugh, since he didn't even remember when was the last time he had done that in this world. It was also a good thing to take away the mind of everyone from the bandit raid for a few minutes at least.

Suddenly, he remembered who that young woman must be. "Wasn't Leah the name of that young woman - who's also one of our maids?"

Feroy nodded. "I believe so, but I was just so surprised by the story of the fight when that guard was describing it to me, that I forgot to ask about it." After a moment, he added, "There is some good news as well. We have gotten three more horses now. The bandits had tied them up close to where they were hiding, so they could escape on them after the raid. So Calubo and a few other guards went back for them and found those horses nearby and brought them to us."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Duvas exclaimed. "It's going to help us a lot when we start farming after winter."

Kivamus gave a nod as well. While those horses certainly wouldn't be as useful as modern tractors for farming, every little bit would help them in making sure the village had enough to eat in the coming year.

Eventually, Feroy stood up from his chair. "The guards should have brought that bandit back by now. I should go and interrogate him."

"Alright," Kivamus said. "But don't forget that Madam Helga is preparing something to eat for us."

"I don't really have an appetite right now after laughing so much," Feroy replied with a snort, "but maybe later. Anyway, I'll be back soon with everything the bandit knows. It will also help to confirm what Calubo had told us." Then he gave a nod, and left the hall.

After some time, when Kivamus had finished off the stew that Helga had made for them, along with some leftover bread from the feast earlier, he wanted to know what the time was. He knew that it was certainly after midnight, but there wasn't any way to tell time more accurately here, not in the night anyway.

Father Edric and his followers... or were they called acolytes? He wasn't sure, but either way, the local temple of the Goddess rang hourly bells in the daytime which were easily audible throughout the village, and that worked well enough to tell time during the day. But it would certainly be helpful if there was a way to tell time accurately - or nearly so - even in the night. Could he do something about that?

Or perhaps there was already a way to tell time in the night in the temple, but the old priest didn't ring the bells in the night so he wouldn't disturb the villagers' sleep? He would have to visit the temple soon to find out.

As he was contemplating about medieval timekeeping, the outer door of the manor hall opened and Feroy walked back inside.

The ex-mercenary looked at the plates of those who were still eating and immediately spoke up, "Madam Helga, I would love some of that stew now if it's still left."

"Of course it's left," Helga gave a laugh. "Just give me a moment and I will warm it up for you."

Feroy nodded gratefully and took a seat as well.

"So what did you find out?" Kivamus asked.

Chapter 137. Sejkil

Feroy began, "Before anything else, I asked a few things from that bandit while I was alone with him, and it confirmed everything Calubo had told us about the quarry. So it does seem like our previously lost guard is a trustworthy man."

"Didn't I..." Duvas took a tired yawn, before he quipped, "Didn't I already tell you that?"

"Sure you did, Sir Duvas," the ex-mercenary replied. "But it's always better to confirm a person's story from another source before believing him."

Duvas gave a slow nod. "I can't deny the usefulness of that, but you are still more paranoid than anyone else I've met."

Feroy shrugged. "Being paranoid has saved my life countless times." He looked back at Kivamus. "Anyway, once I had confirmed Calubo's story, I called him up as well so I could ask the bandit about those things which Calubo would know more about, since he's already been at that quarry, you know?"

Kivamus nodded and gestured to him to keep speaking.

Feroy continued, "So the bandit is called Sejkil and he is in his late twenties. He is a small guy and doesn't have any other family. Anyway, he used to be a work-hand for a shopkeeper in Yanzuri a few years ago, until one day he got too greedy and stole some gold from the merchant's strongbox in the night." He snorted. "Of course, Sejkil thought he'd never be caught, like every first time thief believes."

"Uh... in Yanzuri?" Kivamus asked, then remembered from the original Kivamus' memories that it was a logging town located a few days' journey away from Ulriga towards the northeast.

Feroy nodded. "Aye, milord, he's from that far." He gave a chuckle. "And of course, the merchant found out the very next day. So after booting him out from the job, he reported the guy to the Count of Yanzuri, but before the knights could seize him, Sejkil ran away from there and ended up in Cinran. Once he'd spent all that gold, he was drifting around, surviving on petty theft here and there, when Nokozal found him and recruited him to keep an eye on the stonecutters in that limestone quarry."

"Truthfully, he didn't seem to have any real experience in sword fighting," Feroy added, "apart from his time with the bandits."

Hudan observed, "It makes sense." He chuckled before adding, "That must be why he gave up so easily when he saw a huge guy starting to beat him up, even if it was with just a stick."

"Well, did you find out anything about Nokozal's arrangement at the quarry?" Kivamus asked the ex-mercenary. "I am still curious about that."

Feroy gave a quick laugh before he added, "Of course I did. Sejkil was singing like a canary so he wouldn't get executed by us." He continued, "From what I understand, in return for getting to manage that quarry, Nokozal had to pay a fixed quota of coins every month to a baron called Zoricus, up in Cinran - somewhere around thirty gold or so - even though that was most of the revenue that the bandits got from selling the limestone."

He added, "Zoricus does seem like a greedy bastard, from what I can tell. The land on which that quarry is located is also owned by him, and he still took most of what Nokozal earned from that quarry."

"Again that Baron Zoricus..." Gorsazo muttered. "He seems to have his fingers in every pie."

"It does seem so," Kivamus commented. He looked at Feroy. "And the demand for limestone must also have been bad in the past year, because of the high grain prices in the region, isn't it?"

"It's just like you said," Feroy replied with a nod, "so Nokozal had started turning to banditry and looting to meet up his monthly quota, otherwise the baron would have easily replaced him and found another man to run the quarry."

Kivamus looked at Duvas. "Didn't you once say that Baron Zoricus owns huge tracts of land in the west of Cinran?"

"He does, my Lord," Duvas replied, "which is why it's surprising that he is even using those bandits. I think he must already have enough coin that he didn't really need to hire bandits for cheap to run that quarry."

"He must be an ambitious man, that's for sure," Gorsazo remarked. "He doesn't seem to be satisfied with what he has, since he had already sent that farm kid Levalo to try to kill Lord Kivamus - most likely to try and capture the barony of Tiranat - and who knows what he'll do in the future to achieve that."

Kivamus took a deep breath remembering that night. "We'll simply have to be more careful in the future. He's just one of the many enemies I seem to have in the duchy." He asked Feroy, "Was there anything else the bandit told you?"

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"Nothing else of importance," the ex-mercenary replied. "So what should we do with him? My suggestion is to execute him tonight."

Kivamus shook his head. The barbaric justice of this world...

"From what I understand," he said, "Sejkil didn't kill anyone in the raid, and peacefully surrendered later - even if only to save his own life from the blacksmith. So I don't think we should execute him. Keep him locked up in the barn for now, and we'll decide what to do with him later."

"There is still an option to send him to the Count," Duvas suggested, "like we used to do in the past."

"That may be true," Kivamus spoke after thinking about it for a moment, "but I am in no mood to do Count Ebirtas any favors if he can't even keep a check on the barons under him. Giving the bandit to him would be like rewarding him for that - since Sejkil would be a free slave whom he can sell for profit after the... punishment."

He continued, "Baron Zoricus - who's also under the Count's rule - has already sent an assassin to kill me, and these bandits were also under his control, even if indirectly, so sending the captured bandit there might just be the same as setting him free, since that baron seems to have a lot of influence in Cinran."

"You may be right, milord," Hudan commented. "And there's another reason not to hand him over. While two of the bandits have escaped for sure, they still might not go back to Cinran any time soon, if only for a fear of punishment by that baron. Most likely they'd go back to that quarry. But if we give Sejkil to the Count, it might be the same as giving that Baron all the information about our defenses. Who knows what he'll try the next time if he knows how unprepared we really are to defend against any serious attack - with our walls still incomplete and half of our guards with barely any training."

Feroy added with a shrug, "That's why I still think that executing him is the best idea. One less problem to worry about."

"Perhaps," Kivamus said, "but I don't want to set the precedent of executing even those men who have surrendered to us. If he hadn't laid down his sword then it would be a completely different matter, and you would be justified in killing him - just like with the other bandits. But if someone surrenders to us, it is with the hope of mercy. And he didn't kill anyone either. So I don't believe that executing him would be fair." He commented, "While I certainly don't believe in giving a third chance to anyone, I think that most people deserve a second chance in their lives."

He continued after a moment of thought, "Actually, there is a lot of construction work to finish in the village and we already have a shortage of labour for that, even though the coal mines are still closed. And once those are opened again, we will need as many workers as we can get." He looked at the ex-mercenary. "You are a good judge of character. What do you think about that... Sejkil? If we keep him here, is he going to try to steal things from other villagers? Or do something even worse?"

Feroy took a moment before replying. "You can never be sure about a person, but I don't think he has it in him - and Calubo told me the same as well, based on his experience with the bandits there. It seems to me that Sejkil and the other bandits did a lot of things under the pressure of Nokozal - their chief."

The ex-mercenary continued, "He used to be a decent worker in the past, but lost his way after a single moment of greed. And I know from personal experience that drifting around from here to there teaches a man a lot about the importance of having a regular wage and a place to call home. So, I don't think there would be any such risk - at least in the short term, since he is already quite scared because of the beat down from the blacksmith." He added with a shrug, "But after a while, nobody knows."

Kivamus thought about it and nodded. "That will have to be good enough for now. Let him stay locked up inside a barn for a week. That will give him enough time to contemplate on his life, then go and make him an offer to work as a laborer here in exchange for food and lodging - but no coin. He'll have to work without any wages for at least a few years. We will reconsider what to do with him after that based on his conduct during this time."

He added, "Even if he accepts, although I believe he will - since his only other option is for him to be maimed by the Count and being sold into slavery - there is always a possibility of him trying to steal something before escaping. But he won't be able to go far in the winter, especially with his tracks visible in the snow which will start falling soon enough, and in that case you can show him what punishment really means."

Feroy gave a nod. "I'll do as you say. I still don't like it, but I'll keep an eye on him."

"Good." Kivamus continued, "That reminds me that we still need a jail in Tiranat. It seems to be a basic requirement here with the rate we regularly need to lock people up."

Feroy snorted but didn't say anything.

Hudan suggested, "Once the carpenter is free, we can tell him to make a small isolated room - with very strong walls - within the manor grounds to act as a jail. That will allow us to keep an eye on anyone we need to lock up in the future without worrying about them escaping, since our barns certainly weren't designed with that purpose in mind." Explore more stories at My Virtual Library Empire

Kivamus nodded. "I'll add that to the ever-growing list of things I need to get built here."

His gaze fell at the scratches on the leather armor of Hudan. "Before I forget, let me say that you and the other guards have done their jobs very well in defending the village. Tiranat came out nearly unscathed, and we didn't lose anything from our precious grain stores. Well done!"

Hudan smiled at the praise. "I am only doing my duty, my lord."

"And you are doing it excellently," Kivamus commended him.

He asked after a moment, "What about the bodies of the bandits who have died? What are you going to do with them?"

Chapter 138. Spoils Of War

"For now we are only gathering them up outside the manor in the east", the guard captain replied. "Once we have stripped the bodies of anything useful - including their weapons, and any usable leather armor or fur coats - we will bury them next to the hills in the east. Of course, if any of the bandits had any coins, they would go to the one who finds them." Continue reading stories on My Virtual Library Empire

"That's..." Kivamus was going to reprimand him for allowing the guards to openly rob the bandits, but exhaled loudly when he remembered that all this must be the standard in this era in this world. Looting the bodies of the dead after a battle was something that had happened for most of history even on earth. But it was also true that in their current situation, they couldn't let anything go to waste, whether

it was the bandits' fur coats, or their weapons - if only to get the iron, even if those weapons weren't in good condition.

However, looting the bodies to steal any coin from them was something which would be completely unprofessional if he ever wanted these guards to have the mental fortitude to defend against a serious attack. Discipline was one of the most important things in all of the successful armies on Earth, and even if he wasn't building an army here, he wanted his guards to be professional instead of acting like part-time bandits themselves.

He looked at the guard captain. "I can't deny that we need all those things, so you can tell the guard to strip the bodies of anything useful, including any coins, but tell them very strictly that they are not to loot anything from those bodies for themselves - including coins."

Hudan began to say something in protest but Kivamus spoke over him. "Listen to me! We can't have our guards act the same as those bandits... like they are plunderers as well! Tell them very strictly that anything and everything they confiscate from the dead bandits will go to the manor stores - and not to themselves! Whether it is armor, sword or coin. None of it! I will not tolerate it."

Hudan looked reluctant now, but gave a nod and kept listening.

Kivamus continued, "The guards have done well in defending the village - but they are doing their duty - something for which they are already being paid. However, to encourage those guards who have discharged their duties well, I will reward them personally from my own treasury. If any of them deserve it, they will even get a medal from me. But I will not have them act as looters! Make sure to tell them about this very clearly. And tell them that anyone who goes against these orders will be severely punished."

"But..." Hudan asked with confusion, "if you take those coins from those bandits for your treasury, and then give it back to them, then isn't it the same thing anyway? What's the point of making it so complicated?"

"The point is discipline!" Kivamus exclaimed while slamming his hands on the armrests. "If there is a bigger attack on the village in the future, and their focus is only on trying to select the most juicy target so they can loot it for themselves, then a professional army will crush them in a moment! There is a right way to do things and a wrong way to do things. And for my guards... my soldiers... to act the same as any bandits would - that is simply not acceptable."

He continued, "There is a lot of work for them to do tonight, but by tomorrow, you and Feroy will tell me if any of them have done exceedingly well - those who have gone above and beyond their... call of duty. And once you have verified their stories from any villagers who were nearby - then in the evening I will reward them personally. Is that understood?"

Hudan sighed. "I can see your reasons for this, but the guards still won't like it." He took a deep breath. "But an order is an order. I will make sure that every single one of them follows it, no matter what."

Kivamus smiled. "Good!"

Gorsazo commented, "This is the first time that the guards have fought under you, so it would also help their morale to reward the best amongst them. I support this idea."

"I think that giving them medals is fine," Duvas said, "but to give them some money as reward too? I'm not sure if we can really afford it right now."

"It will be fine, Duvas," Kivamus reassured him. "We need them to stop their habit of acting as looters - since it will be very beneficial in the long term, and it still won't even cost us that much anyway. We can afford to give a reward to those who are risking their lives for us."

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Duvas nodded after a moment. "As you wish then."

Hudan stood up from his chair. "By your permission, milord, I should leave now to keep an eye on those guards. I also have to make sure that there are regular patrols around the village throughout the night."

"Alright then, you can leave," Kivamus replied.

Feroy glanced at the guard captain. "I'll be there soon after I get something to eat, and I'll join the guards on one of those patrols. You are the one who saw all the action, and I was only waiting here in

the manor." He smirked while putting his hand on the scabbard of his sword. "And who knows? Maybe I'll get lucky and one of those bandits will decide to return here."

Hudan just shook his head and laughed. "So you are a bloodthirsty vesorion, after all. Or perhaps an ale-thirsty vesorion?"

Feroy just laughed loudly in reply. "Oh, don't even remind me... How I miss my ale! But alas, we can't allow any guard to drink until the threat of the bandits has passed completely." He shrugged. "That means I can't drink either."

Duvas snorted. "That time will come, don't you worry. You are the one who made us spend our limited coin on a full barrel of ale."

Feroy laughed. "What can I say, Sir Duvas, us guards live on ale as much as we live on food."

Everyone laughed at that image for a while, and then with a nod, the guard captain exited the hall.

Kivamus stood up while looking at the others. "Well, it's been a long night. Let's get some rest now."

Duvas stood up as well and nodded. "I'll leave too. My old bones need some sleep before I start managing the laborers in the morning."

And with that, the fateful day of the first feast organized in the village and of the successfully repelled bandit raid was over.

It was early morning now, and Kivamus had come down near the gates of the manor to see off the traveling merchant. Although there was no wind, the skies were completely cloudy, and it was nearly freezing. He tied his fur coat tighter around him, and warmed his hands above a brazier burning near the gate.

Earlier, the two guards who were on duty at the gates had thanked him for those braziers once again. In their opinion, the previous baron had never even thought of doing something like that for them, but Kivamus had assured them that there was more than enough coal for it. Tiranat was a coal mining village after all.

As he looked around him, a small caravan of four wagons was standing there, getting ready for its final departure from Tiranat before the winter. Pydaso was checking up on something in their leading wagon, while his own guard as well as two other guards that Hudan had provided him for the journey, were making sure that all the knots were tight and the wagon beds were fully covered with oilcloth for the journey. He had also provided two extra horses to the leaving caravan, so that the guards would be able to ride back on them. The three horses which they had gotten from the bandits had certainly made it much easier to do it, without slowing down the construction work here because of the absence of those horses.

Nearby, the guard captain was talking with those guards who were leaving with the merchant, while Duvas was managing the allotting of laborers to both the foremen - Yeden in the north, and Pinoto in the south. Gorsazo and Feroy were also standing next to him near the same brazier.

"As much as I like traveling, I'm glad that I don't have to leave for Cinran once again," Feroy commented while rubbing his hands together after warming them above the brazier. "It gets tiring, you know? Not to mention that it'd be so cold on the journey this time, since it had already started snowing there when we arrived."

Kivamus nodded. "At least there shouldn't be any serious danger of bandits on this journey. Only two of them have escaped from Nokozal's group, and it's unlikely that another big group is waiting for an ambush on the road to Cinran."

He added, "That reminds me, did you find out who was the other bandit who escaped?"

Feroy nodded. "Yeah, I asked the guards about that. Calubo told me that they hadn't found the body of a small guy he only knew as the runt. So he must be the one who survived along with Nokozal." He snorted, "Of course, there is also Sejkil - the bandit who surrendered yesterday - but he isn't going anywhere else for a while." He continued, "Also, Calubo wanted to talk with you about something yesterday. It seemed important to him."

"Alright. Where is he?" Kivamus asked.

"Must still be sleeping I think," Feroy answered. "The poor guy had barely eaten anything in the past few weeks, and he seemed as tired as a deer running away from an adzee all night. So after he had eaten yesterday's meal, I'd told the other guards not to wake him up for now, so he could get some rest in the servants' hall."

"That was a good idea," Kivamus said. "You can bring him to me whenever he is ready to talk."

Soon, Hudan and Pydaso came walking towards them.

Chapter 139. Baron's Medal of Sacrifice

"We are ready to leave, milord," the merchant said. He added with a smile, "It's been really good doing business with you. I hope to come back right after the snow melts on the road after winter."

Kivamus smiled as well. "I will wait for your return. And don't forget to buy the maps!"

"I'll certainly try, milord, but no promises about it," Pydaso replied. "By your leave, we should depart now. And thank you, once again, for providing me with those guards for the journey."

Kivamus waved it off. "It's nothing."

Pydaso smiled. "Even so, having another two well armed men next to me on that road certainly reassures my mind. I'll make sure to reward them well for their help."

And with that, the merchant returned to the leading wagon, and with a quick whip on the horses, the small caravan lurched into motion. The creaking of wagon axles was the only sound they heard for a while as the wagons exited the manor gates one by one, and before long, all of them had turned into a nearby alley, moving away from their sights.

"So there goes the last caravan..." Gorsazo commented. "At least we were able to buy enough grain for the village to survive through the winter."

"That's true enough," Kivamus nodded, "but we'll still be short on wheat to complete the sowing in the full area that we are planning to farm. But yes, it's certainly a start."

He looked at the guard captain. "Did you find out about any guards who did their duties well enough to reward them with a medal?"

Hudan thought about it for a moment. "I think so. Calubo has to be one of them for sure, since he was the one who risked his life to escape from the bandits and gave us early warning about the raid. I don't know what would be the result if we hadn't gotten that warning in time. He also killed two of the bandits as well, just by himself. So if anyone should get a medal for bravery, it should be him."

"Alright," Kivamus said. "Who else?"

"Other than him," Hudan continued, "most of the other guards worked in pairs to kill the bandits, so I'm not sure if they would qualify for bravery if they had an advantage of two against one. However, having fought against Nokozal myself, I know how tough it would be for anyone to even survive against that huge bastard - not to mention defeating him. So, Tesyb can also be given a medal, since he managed to hold on against Nokozal by himself while protecting the merchant's family at the same time, until I reached there to help him."

"Okay, I think Tesyb deserves it for protecting the merchant's family. That makes two of them." Kivamus asked, "Didn't you mention that another two guards had gotten injured?"

"They did," Hudan replied, "although neither of their injuries are that serious. The losuvil paste was a lot of help for them yesterday, although I think there aren't many more leaves left now. But should even those men get rewarded?"

"We can certainly choose not to give them anything," Kivamus replied, "but I think it's a good idea to show some form of appreciation for those who have risked their lives for others and gotten injured in the process. See it like this, most likely they wouldn't have gotten wounded if they weren't working as a guard, would they?"

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Hudan nodded slowly. "I can see the logic in that." He added, "Alright, that's two more guards then. Then should we give the same medal to them? Although, we don't even have any medals right now anyway. From what I know, the previous baron never gave any such thing to anyone here. Only those of

a higher station than him, like the Count or even the Duke are the ones who usually give any kind of reward to their people."

"Well, I have no intention of following in the path of the previous baron, that's for sure." Kivamus looked at Gorsazo. "But before we decide on that, do you know if I am even allowed to give medals?"

"There are no rules against that from what I know," Gorsazo replied, "and I have read most of the books in the library in Ulriga Palace about the regulations for nobles. So there is nothing stopping you from rewarding someone who works for you. What you choose to call those rewards or medals is completely your choice, as long as you don't try to give the same name to those rewards as something which can only be awarded by the Duke or maybe the King."

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"That makes sense. Then it should be fine if I call them baron's medals." Kivamus added, "I think two types of medals would be good for now. We can give the Baron's Medal of Courage to those who have risked their lives in their service to the village and shown extraordinary bravery. Tesyb and Calubo would qualify for that." He continued, "Other than that, I will also make a Baron's Medal of Sacrifice for those who were injured while carrying out their duty. That can be given to the two other guards who were injured yesterday."

Planning to give a vague excuse, he looked at Gorsazo - who just gave a short nod, knowing that he was giving an excuse - and added, "This is the first time that I'm going to be giving any medals. But from what I have read in some obscure books, there is also another medal which is given to the families of those who have died in combat while on duty. But thankfully, we don't have to give that medal for now. And of course, there will also be a monetary reward in the form of coins to anyone who gets a medal."

Hudan seemed to be thinking about it for a moment before he replied. "I'm still not completely sure if preventing the guards from looting the bodies was a good idea or not, since it was difficult to explain it to them last night and most of them are still disgruntled about it. But if we are still going to give some reward - at least to those guards who have performed very well in their duties - I think that should mostly satisfy them."

He looked at Feroy with a smirk. "But based on the above three classifications, our resident vesorian wouldn't get any medal, would he?"

The ex-mercenary laughed. "I hardly got to do anything yesterday since you made me stay in the manor to defend, so I don't need any medals. But I would certainly love a mug of ale in the evening to compensate for that."

Kivamus laughed at that. "Of course, I think we will be fairly sure by tonight that the two bandits aren't going to attack again. And even if they do, the guards are ready for it by now, and they can take on the two bandits easily enough. So I think you should give the guards some good rest in turns, and that also includes both you and Hudan. And those who aren't on duty can certainly be allowed a mug of ale. But just a single mug for now, since we can't allow them to get completely wasted - just in case."

"Usually a single mug is good enough for most of us, you know?" Feroy commented. "Well, I'll go and see if Calubo is awake now." And with that, he walked back towards the servants' hall.

Kivamus looked at Gorsazo. "We still need to get those medals made by evening. Of course, we can only afford to give medals made of iron for now. So let's return to the manor hall and draw up a few simple designs on a piece of parchment. Then we'll send a servant to Cedoron and tell him to make a few of them by evening. That's when I'll distribute the medals too."

"Drawing has never been my strong suit," Gorsazo remarked with a laugh, "but I'm willing to give it a try."

At that moment, Duvas came walking towards them, likely because he was done with his tasks.

"By the way," Kivamus asked the guard captain, "what loot did we get from the bandits' bodies yesterday?"

"It was a decent haul," Hudan replied with a grin. "Including Sejkil's stuff, we got eight damaged fur coats and the same number of leather armors from the bandits - of course, most of them also have a few holes in them. Apart from that, we got six swords, two daggers and two heavy warbows - which can also work as hunting bows. Amongst the weapons, the warbows seem to be in a good enough condition to be put to use immediately, but most of the swords will need a good repair, while a couple of them might not be of any other use than scrap iron." He added, "And we already got three horses from them yesterday."

"So those lowlifes were good for something, after all..." Duvas muttered with a scoff. "Although most of that stuff seems to be already damaged."

"Even so," Kivamus asked with a frown, "how do those bandits have that many weapons anyway, especially those made from iron? Even our manor barely has more iron weapons than them." He added, "Iron doesn't come cheap at all, so I thought that most of them would be using sharpened sticks or repurposed tools as their makeshift weapons."

"I can't be completely sure about it, of course," Gorsazo replied, "but by now we have gotten enough hints that these bandits are in some way affiliated to Baron Zoricus, who is easily the richest baron in Count Cinran's domain. He might just be sponsoring them, possibly by giving them the damaged weapons from his own armory."

Kivamus nodded slowly. "It certainly could be. Anyway, those warbows would be very helpful for us to start hunting."

Looking at the guard captain, he said, "As for the swords and daggers, it's up to you to decide which of them are still usable - in which case you should still take them to Cedoron so he can repair them if possible. And just give him the ones which are too damaged, so he can reforge them into other tools."

He looked at Duvas. "But do we have anyone here who can repair the leather armor? It will need some decent stitching and some spare leather to make them usable again."

Chapter 140. Barracks

"Well, we don't have a tanner in the village," the majordomo replied, "since there was never enough animal hide for them to tan into leather - mainly because the previous baron never allowed hunting at a large scale here. But Leah has some experience in repairing our armors when they got damaged in the past. While there wouldn't be much spare leather here, I think she might still be able to stitch together five or six decent armors from the eight damaged ones that we have." He added, "Repairing the fur coats would be easier, since even patching them would allow them to keep a person warm enough."

Kivamus nodded. "Okay, that's good. Tell Madam Nerida not to give her the usual sewing or repairing tasks for now, so she can focus on repairing the armors fully. Even with six new leather armors we still won't have enough of them to properly equip all the new guards, but they will still help a lot."

He looked at Hudan and continued, "As for the fur coats, we already have a few of them in the manor house for our use, so two of the repaired ones can be used by you and Feroy, and you can give the rest of them to those guards who go on patrols in the village, since they will have to stay in the open for hours at a time, and they won't even be able to use the braziers during that time - unlike our guards on gate duties."

"The guards and I will certainly be very thankful for that," Hudan commented, "but are you sure you don't want to keep them for yourself? Perhaps as spares?"

Kivamus laughed. "What will I even do with them? I already have a fur coat for my own use, and just hanging more of them in my room isn't going to make me any warmer. You can keep them in the servants hall and every night you should allot them to those guards who are going on patrols."

Hudan gave a grateful nod.

"That reminds me," Kivamus continued, "when I visited the servants' hall yesterday, I noticed that there just weren't enough sleeping places for all the servants and the guards now."

"It's not really a problem," Hudan said with a shrug, "since at least half of them are on duty somewhere at any particular moment, so there isn't usually any shortage of sleeping space there."

"Perhaps," Kivamus commented. "But we have already started trying to recruit women as guards who will need even more sleeping spaces - even if they are staying on the upper floor with the maids for now. And regardless of that, I believe it would be a good idea in the future to accommodate the guards separately from the servants, since they need to have a lot of camaraderie in each other to be able to trust another guard enough that they would allow them to watch their backs in the middle of a battle."

"Is there really a need to spend our limited coin on making another building though?" Duvas asked.

"Actually, I can see the point in that," Hudan observed. "When I was training with other squires in Cinran to become a knight, our living quarters were also separate from the other manual servants of the knights." He nodded. "So I think it would be a good idea. It would also allow Feroy and I to stay with the other guards all the time to keep an eye on them and to keep them on their toes for any sudden attack on the village."

"Exactly. So in the future," Kivamus continued, "we will make a new barracks in the manor where only the guards will stay. Of course, we will have to make it a two story building, unlike the longhouses, so the male guards can stay on the ground floor, while the female guards can stay on the upper floor."

"But it would cost us a lot to hire the carpenter for that," Duvas observed, "not to mention the cost of the materials for a two story building. And it might take even longer than building a longhouse if you want to make it a two floor building."

"That's true," Kivamus replied, "but like Hudan said, all our guards are still able to stay in the servant hall for now, so it's not like we have any hurry to complete the barracks."

He didn't say it openly, but Kivamus knew that apart from the Baron who had already tried to kill him, his brothers still might not be satisfied after sending him to a remote village in the middle of nowhere. And if they decide to do something to rectify their error, the two dozen guards he had would stand no chance against the Duke's army. But hopefully, they wouldn't think of doing anything like that until the time came closer for succession to the Duke's position by one of the three brothers.

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Their father - who was also his own father in this world - was getting old and got sick occasionally, but he didn't think that the Duke was going to die in the next few years. But when it did happen eventually... only his brothers themselves would know what they must surely be planning to capture the Duke's seat.

Thinking about his brothers made him wonder how his newfound sister was doing. Astela was the only one who supported him against their older brothers, and it had been months since he had heard from her. But it was also true that without any modern communication methods in this world, that was likely a normal duration to talk with people who didn't live in the same city. But hopefully, she was doing okay these days.

Coming back to the present, he looked at others and tried to present the future threats to himself without openly giving his own reasons behind this. He began, "In the future, keeping in mind all the threats against the village, who knows, maybe we'll need to recruit even more guards, so we can just make another two story building after that, and then we could shift the male guards to one building and women to the other, which will double our capacity of housing in the barracks."

Duvas raised his eyebrows. "I don't see how we could afford to recruit any more guards, or why we would even need dozens of guards, but yes, we can leave that decision for the future."

"Of course, I'm not planning to hire more guards any time soon." Kivamus added, "We have already designated the location in the east of the manor between the manor walls and the new village walls as a dedicated training area for the guards. So when the village walls are complete, we can start building a barracks at the same location."

Hudan nodded. "Keeping the barracks within the training ground would be a good idea as well." He added with a smirk, "None of the guards would be able to slack off after that."

Kivamus laughed. "Of course, that's for sure."

He looked around the manor for a moment, and smiled when he saw the servants and maids going about their daily tasks with enthusiasm even in this near freezing weather. With their food stores in the barn having more wheat and vegetables than they have had in months, if not years, they seemed reassured that they weren't going to starve any time soon, and that had worked wonders for their morale.

But it was only a small start. There was still a lot he could do, and would do, to make their lives better.

He looked back at the others, while clutching his fur coat tighter around him. "Well, let's return back to the manor hall. I miss the warmth of the fireplace, and we still need to design those medals."

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With a nod, Gorsazo and Duvas started following him towards the manor house, while Hudan walked over to the guards to talk about something.

Kivamus was sitting in the manor hall near the fireplace while waiting for Feroy and Calubo to discuss whatever the previously lost guard wanted to talk about. The fire was cracking on one end of the hall,

while Madam Helga and Syryne were clearing up the cutlery and utensils from the long dining table on the other side.

Earlier, they had taken a simple breakfast of freshly baked bread and some leftover stew from yesterday, apart from a couple of fried eggs for them. Then he and Gorsazo had drawn up a few designs for the two types of medals with some inputs from Duvas as well, and eventually they had settled on a simple design which would be easy enough for the blacksmith to make and yet something which would look unique and make the guards proud when they received them.

After that, they had sent a servant to Cedoron along with those designs on a parchment, and told him to let the blacksmith know that he needed to make half a dozen of each type of medal in total - just to have some more of them handy for the future, since it would barely use up any iron - although two of each type of medals were needed by evening.

Before long, the servant had returned back and reported that the blacksmith had looked confused in the beginning that the baron wanted him to waste some iron and his precious time which could be used to forge more hinges, hammers and iron nails. But Cedoron had agreed nonetheless, and promised to send a worker back with those medals by evening.

Soon, the door of the manor hall opened and Feroyn walked inside while accompanied by Calubo. The ex-mercenary took a seat while the former guard remained standing.

"What did you want to talk about?" Kivamus asked the former guard.

Calubo hesitated for a moment, then took a deep breath and began speaking. "Milord, I want to thank you for freeing me from those bandits and for getting rid of them - or at least, most of them, since that huge bastard Nokozal and the runt are still alive. The time I spent as their slave was very difficult for me, and I'm glad that those dead bandits would never be able to kidnap anyone again."

Kivamus shrugged. "There is no need to thank me. I am only doing what I need to do to protect the village. And you are the one who escaped and freed yourself from those bandits. I did nothing to help you in that, so you don't need to thank me for that either."

Calubo gazed at him carefully for a moment, then gave a nod. "As you want, milord. But..." he hesitated again. "But I would like to ask a favor from you."

