

Londoner 141

Chapter 141. A Heartfelt Plea

Kivamus gave a smile. "Of course, you have earned more than a favor by giving us the information about the raid on time and helping us to kill the bandits. Tell me, what do you want? Is it coins? Or maybe good food? I will try to fulfill your demand as long as it is reasonable."

"It's... not that," Calubo muttered. "I don't want coins or any other reward for myself. But..." he took a deep breath again. "The stonecutters - the other slaves who worked at that quarry along with me, are not in a good condition. The bandits barely gave us anything to eat, since Nokozal said that he couldn't afford to buy any more grain at the high prices now, and the rare small game which they hunted there went mostly to the bandits, and the stonecutters only got the scraps."

Kivamus gave an understanding nod. In the frantic hours after the raid yesterday, he had forgotten about that quarry and the people who still lived there. With the winter already here, and with barely anything to eat... he shook his head slowly. He already knew that this world was a cruel place, and it was very difficult for commoners to survive here, not to mention those who were slaves. But what could he even do about it?

Calubo continued, "A thunderstorm a couple of months ago had caused flooding in the quarry, and since then everyone had been living in temporary huts there - which were far from enough to protect them from even the mild weather of late autumn." He had a far away look in his eyes, which had started to look a little wet by now. "And when the snow starts falling there, most of them won't survive the winter..."

Calubo looked directly at Kivamus, and gave a deep bow. "Milord, I beg you to save those people by giving them some food. I have friends there, people who cared for me when the bandits beat me up again and again. If they don't get something to eat soon, I will never be able to see them again." He added with his voice full of emotion, "Please don't let them die..."

Kivamus took a deep breath as he thought about this. "Calubo, you have been out of the village for a while, but you already know the current situation of the village. Tiranat barely has enough food stored for us to survive the winter. I'm not sure if we can afford to feed any more people."

Calubo bowed even lower, and spoke with tears falling from his eyes. "But they are also people, milord! They don't deserve to die of starvation and cold in that desolate quarry. Just allow me to take two sacks

of wheat to the quarry. No, even a single sack of wheat would be enough! I know Tiranat can barely afford it, but I saw the caravans full of grain coming from Cinran."

He stood straight with his eyes still tearful, and continued, "I beg you, milord. Just provide me with a single sack, and I will be in your debt for life. And I will... I will even pay for it. I will borrow money from the other guards and some friends in the village, and I'll pay you for that sack of wheat. So please grant me this boon!" He spoke in a loud voice, with his tears flowing freely now, "I beg you, milord! I beg you..." and then he openly broke into sobs and bowed again.

Kivamus was already feeling uncomfortable after knowing what was happening to the people in that quarry, but seeing the scene in front of him with Calubo begging him to save their lives... it was tugging at his heartstrings. This guard, who had already gone through so much, was willing to borrow money to feed that many people, even though he couldn't afford it, and Kivamus was going to just keep watching?

And the guard wasn't even asking anything for himself. He only wanted him to save the lives of others. Although... it couldn't be that Calubo was lying about everything and he just wanted to ride away with that sack of wheat for himself, could it?

As he looked in the eyes of the former guard, he realized that no, it wasn't like that. Calubo's eyes only held the truth in them.

Kivamus took a deep breath, thinking about the quarry. Could he really do nothing about the stonecutters, knowing what their fate would be in the harsh winter days? Would he be able to look himself in the eye if those stonecutters died from hunger, if he knew that he could have saved those people?

He exhaled and looked at the former guard. "You can stand up now, Calubo. I need to discuss this with others. I'll let you know about my decision soon. For now, you should go and get something to eat from the kitchen in the servants' hall. You need that food."

Calubo stood up straighter and wiped his eyes with his still dirty and torn sleeves. He looked Kivamus in the eyes. "How can I eat anything, Milord, when I know that Hyola and others are starving there?"

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That proved it. Now Kivamus didn't have any doubt about Calubo or any of his story. This was not someone who would try to take advantage of the village or anyone else.

"You can only save them if you have enough energy to save yourself, right?" Kivamus asked. "Even if I give you a sack of grain, what if you just pass out from hunger on the way, because you didn't eat anything? So go on and get something to eat first."

He looked at the ex-mercenary. "Feroy, take him to the servants hall and make sure he eats something."

Feroy gave an understanding nod, and held Calubo with one of his arms and slowly began to walk with him towards the outer door.

"You can't save everyone, milord!" Duvas said agitatedly, "You just can't! This kingdom is way too big for that, and you are only a baron, with all due respect. And your treasury is already empty, even without any more people to feed!"

"I know that money is important, but human lives are even more important!" Kivamus retorted back. "And anyway, I'm not trying to save everyone. They are just a couple of dozen slaves who don't have anyone to look after them."

Duvas snorted. "Yeah, they are slaves - but not your slaves. Whoever bought them is the only one responsible for them."

"Right," Kivamus scoffed. "So we should wait for their slave-master Nokozaal to reach the quarry then. After his raid failed, he must have bought a few sacks of grain from Cinran to give a feast to the stonecutters, right?"

Duvas raised both of his hands up in frustration. "No, but those aren't even your people! They live on the land of Baron Zoricus! I know that Nokozaal isn't going to feed them, but even then the responsibility lies on Baron Zoricus, not you! We can barely afford to feed the village, and you want to bring even more mouths to feed?"

"Yeah, the slaves do live on the land of that Zoricus," Kivamus countered, "but tell me, how many of them live there by choice? None of them! They were taken there by the bandits who feed them scraps and plan to use them as work animals until they die, and then they would buy more slaves for cheap."

He continued, "And the bandits feeding them scraps would only have been the case if they had been successful in raiding our village and taken back some grain with them, but the raid certainly didn't go Nokozal's way, did it? So what do you think would happen to the slaves in the winter with barely any food? And that's assuming they survive the cold of winter, which is far from likely."

Before Duvas replied anything, Gorsazo gave his opinion as well. "Feroy had told me earlier that it is common for the bandits and mercenaries to steal slaves from others. And we know that Nokozal's group is not big enough now to prevent the stealing of their slaves by another group."

"Hear that?" Kivamus asked the majordomo. "And if a bigger bandit gang like the Torhan's group takes those slaves away, they might never see the light of day again. Many of them would die on that journey itself, while others wouldn't even last the whole winter."

Feroy, who had returned after taking Calubo to the servants' hall, had been sitting quietly during their discussion until now, but he spoke up too. "It is also possible that when Nokozal sees that he can't keep his slaves for himself, he will just kill them instead of letting someone else take them from him."

That immediately shut up everyone else, including Duvas who was going to say something again.

After taking a moment to digest that news, Kivamus asked the ex-mercenary. "That's... inhuman. Does that really happen though? Would Nokozal really kill those slaves in cold blood just because he can't keep them himself?"

Feroy gave a nod. "I have even seen that happen myself. In the past, when I was with a group of mercenaries, they had gone to raid another group's hideout, and when the leader of that group saw that he wasn't going to win, he immediately killed the two slaves he had - including a woman - so that no one else could own those slaves other than him."

The ex-mercenary added, "Of course, I don't know Nokozal personally, but from what I've heard about him from Calubo and Sejkil, the bandit chief wouldn't hesitate for a moment in doing something like that."

Everyone was quiet for a while after that.

After some time, Kivamus looked at everyone in the face, and began speaking. "I've made my decision, and it is final."

At the same time, the outer door of the manor hall opened and Hudan walked inside with Calubo following him.

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The guard captain jerked a thumb at the former guard, "I found him waiting outside the door. He told me that he had eaten enough so he wanted to hear your decision now." Hudan asked curiously, "What is that about?"

Kivamus gestured to them to take seats as well. "It's good that you all are here now. I was going to call the two of you anyway."

Chapter 142. An eye for an eye

Kivamus looked at Calubo and began, "After a lot of discussion with my advisors, I have come to a decision." He added with a smile, "I have decided to support you."

Immediately, Calubo's eyes widened in surprise like he couldn't believe what was happening.

Gorsazo looked at him and gave a nod in support, while Feroy remained silent with his usual inscrutable expression.

Kivamus continued speaking to the former guard. "But before I explain further, you should know that it wasn't easy to come to this decision. The village's food situation is precarious at best, but I can't leave those stonecutters to starve after knowing that there isn't anyone else to look after them anymore - not after our guards have already killed most of the bandits."

"I..." Calubo faltered as he tried to speak. "I... I can't thank you enough for this! I will forever be in your debt, milord!" He continued with happiness etched on his face, "So will I get a full sack of grain?"

He carried on without waiting for Kivamus to respond. "But can I also get a horse to carry that sack to the quarry? That would make it much easier, but I'll even carry it on my back if you can't spare a horse right now. Although the snow is going to start falling soon, but..."

"Slow down, Calubo," Kivamus interrupted him. "Take a deep breath and let me speak first."

Calubo nodded quickly while holding his knees with his hands to stop them from shaking in nervous excitement. "I'm sorry, milord. Please carry on."

Kivamus nodded. "I am not going to give you a sack of grain to carry to the quarry. Looking at you right now, even if you travel on a horse, you might just keel over on the way."

"But... but..." Calubo stammered with surprise.

"Let me finish first," Kivamus stopped him again. "Knowing how Nokozal is going to treat those slaves when he reaches there - especially since his raid has failed and he wouldn't have enough food even for himself - I have decided to rescue those stonecutters. Or you can say, we'll liberate them from the bandits."

Calubo seemed lost for words. "But... how?"

Hudan, who hadn't been present for the earlier discussion, also looked surprised by his decision, but he had a habit of following the orders of his superiors even if he didn't support them, and remained quiet.

However, Duvas interrupted them and said, "Are you really sure about this, my Lord? There is still an option to just send them a sack of grain."

"We talked about this, Duvas." Kivamus added, "You already know that even if we handed over a sackful of wheat to the bandits - and I'm not sure if I'm willing to do that - most likely they will just keep that grain for themselves, and the stonecutters will continue to starve."

"But... I still don't think that you need to do this..." Duvas said with a shake of his head.

Kivamus took a deep breath. "Do you really prefer the alternative then?" He asked the majordomo again, "Do you really want them to be killed in cold blood by the bandits if they can't afford to feed them, or if another bandit group tries to steal the slaves? Even when we could have saved their lives so easily?"

Duvas just sighed and shook his head slowly.

"Just think of them as getting more laborers for the village," he tried to persuade the majordomo. "They are trained workers, and once they get some good meals in them, they will help us a lot to finish all the construction on time."

He continued, "And luckily, the caravan was able to go on a third trip - which means we still have enough grain to feed everyone throughout the winter, even after including those stonecutters. That will certainly mean that we will be short on seeds for sowing in the next spring, but we can still buy more seeds after the winter." He added, "It will cost us for sure, but I think that's a small price to pay for saving so many lives. And all our guards are already back from the caravan trips, so we can also start sending hunting parties soon. That will give us an extra source of food, and it'll reduce our consumption of wheat. It's certainly not going to be easy, but I believe it's doable."

"I understand, my lord," Duvas said with a reluctant nod. "It's your decision after all, and I'll do my best to follow it. But I still had to give my opinions against that."

"Of course you should," Kivamus replied to him. "I always want all of you to be completely free in speaking to me and in giving your opinions - even if they go against mine in every respect."

"Alright." He looked at Calubo again. "Here's what we are going to do. We will send a squad of guards to that quarry, accompanied by you to show them the way, and their task will be to kill any bandits they find there and to bring back the slaves to Tiranat. Now that we have decided to rescue those slaves, we just can't allow that bandit camp to continue to exist." He snorted. "So far it has only been Zoricus trying to harm me and my village, but let's see how he likes the taste of his own medicine..." At everyone's blank expressions, he added, "Uh... a bitter herbal remedy."

As Gorsazo began to say something, Kivamus spoke over him. "I know what you are going to say, but it's not like I'm trying to go against him openly. I know very well how influential he is in the court of Count

Cinran. But he has already tried to assassinate me, while his bandits have tried to raid and loot my village. So for us to retaliate in kind by killing every bandit in that quarry is only fair."

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Calubo looked stunned. "But... that's... I didn't expect this, but those bandits certainly deserve it. Thank you so much, milord!"

Feroy gave a fierce grin after that, while Hudan nodded as well.

Kivamus continued, "Doing this will give us one less bandit camp to worry about in this region and it will also deprive Zoricus of any income from that quarry for a while - since those slaves are basically free labor for him and they are giving him a regular profit from that quarry - profit which he is using to hire assassins against me!" He shrugged. "So why should we let Zoricus continue to profit from those bandits? Clearing that quarry of those lowlifes in retaliation is the least we can do."

Gorsazo thought about it for a moment, and said, "I agree with your reasons, but what if someone tells the Count about it? That won't end well for us."

Kivamus smirked and just looked at Feroy, expecting his reaction in advance.

The ex-mercenary grinned from ear to ear. "The bandits won't know what hit them before we send them to meet the Goddess!"

Kivamus laughed. "Exactly! Since none of the bandits would be alive to tell the story of who attacked that quarry, and the stonecutters will already be in Tiranat and are unlikely to say anything against us, Zoricus would never even know what happened in that quarry. So we don't need to worry about him trying to complain to the Count against us, as long as none of the bandits remain alive after our attack."

Hudan grinned. "I'll make sure of it, milord. Those lowlifes deserve that."

Calubo - who was still looking a little surprised at Kivamus' decision to assault the quarry and liberate the slaves - began to speak finally. "I like this plan. I don't see any reason why you should let Nokozal

keep those slaves anymore - not after he has already attacked the village once." Then he gave a nod. "I think it's a good idea for you to take over those slaves for yourself. You will easily gain more than two dozen new slaves this way - for free - and I know that those people will do anything to get out from under the thumb of those bandits. I'll do my best to support you in this!"

Kivamus was going to interrupt him in the middle to tell him that he didn't want the stonecutters as slaves, but he waited to let the former guard finish his sentence. But before he said anything to refute it, the guard captain spoke up.

"You've missed a lot in the time you've been away from Tiranat," Hudan said while grinning and patting the back of Calubo. "There are no slaves here. Not anymore."

Calubo looked confused. "What do you mean by that? I know there were nearly half a dozen slaves under the previous baron!" Then he looked at Kivamus with horror. "Did you... did you kill them all? Because you couldn't afford to feed them anymore?"

"What?" Kivamus was the one to be surprised now. The things which people took as normal behavior for nobles in this world scared him a little. "Of course not! Why would I ever kill innocent people?"

"But then... how?" Calubo asked.

Duvas gave the answer with a tired smile. "Lord Kivamus has made a decree here that there will be no slavery in his domain. And he has freed the slaves which the previous baron used to own."

"You mean... they aren't slaves anymore?" Calubo asked with wonder. Then it seemed like something suddenly clicked in his mind, and he looked straight at Kivamus. "Does that mean... does that mean that those slaves at the quarry... no, those stonecutters... they won't be slaves anymore? They will be free men and women, like us?" [Read latest chapters at My Virtual Library Empire](#)

Kivamus smiled. "Yes, they will be just as free as I am."

"But that... that means..." Calubo looked lost for words once again, but then gave a huge smile. "How can I ever thank you for this, milord?" He stood up immediately, and gave a deep bow. "I will be in your

debt for my life! Anything you need done, even if I have to risk or even sacrifice my life for that, I will do it on your command."

Kivamus was surprised that the former guard would be willing to give his own life for some stonecutters whom he had barely known for a couple of months. But then he remembered that Calubo had taken the name of someone earlier - a woman. He gave a small laugh. Of course, some things never change.

He looked at the former guard. "There is no need for that. And you can sit down now. We have a lot to discuss for this rescue mission."

Hudan asked, "But how will we even transport that many people through the forest? They wouldn't be able to walk the whole way back in their conditions, especially in this freezing weather."

"We can just use our wagons for that," Kivamus replied, "now that they are back from the trip to Cinran."

Calubo interrupted him, "Actually, the bandits already have two wagons there, along with two nodors. They used to have three wagons in the past, but one of them was damaged recently, so they had used its planks to make a temporary hut for themselves, although its axles and wheels should still be there."

"That's... good news." Kivamus continued, "Those small nodors might not be able to pull enough men, but if we send our horses for that, they should be able to pull those wagons easily." He added, "Including the horses we got from the bandits, now we have enough of them that we can easily spare some of them for this rescue mission. Of course, you should bring those nodors back as well, even if they won't be pulling the wagons."

After Hudan nodded in reply, he continued, "Once those wagons are back, it will help us a lot in the construction. Even those spare axles and wheels would be useful for us if Taniok is able to build a third wagon with them, since he doesn't have to build the axles."

"I'm just glad to know that we are getting something from this trip," Duvas commented, "and it's not a complete waste of money."

Kivamus smiled at the thrifty majordomo and gave a nod.

Hudan began, "From what I know, there should be four bandits back at the quarry, not including the two who have escaped." Once Calubo gave a nod in confirmation, he continued, "If we leave on horses from Tiranat, there is no way that the escaped bandits would be able to reach the quarry before us, but we'll still need at least five or six men to take down the four bandits there with ease."

Calubo interrupted, "You might not even need that many guards, since those four bandits have to keep a watch on the stone cutters for all day and night - which means there should be at most two of them awake and ready at any particular time. Even then, they would already be exhausted with barely any rest in the previous week, since Nokozal left the quarry with most of the bandits. And of course, you will have the support of the stonecutters as well, so even four of us in total would be able to kill those bastards."

Hudan gave a slow nod. "That might be true, but there is still a possibility that some bandits from another group might have reached there before us to steal those slaves, and in that case it will be better to have more men to support us."

"Don't worry about it," Kivamus commented. "Now that all the guards are back from the caravan, we have enough men to spare for this rescue mission." He looked at Calubo, "You said there were around two dozen slaves there?"

Chapter 143. Rescue Plans

The former guard nodded. "There were twenty-six stonecutters in total, not including me or any bandits."

Kivamus looked at Duvas. "Will two wagons be enough to carry that many people?"

"They should be," the majordomo replied after thinking about it. "Pydaso's wagons carried ten sacks of grain in each wagon, apart from the weight of the driver and a guard. And each of those sacks weigh nearly double that of an average man here, so two horses pulling a single wagon might be able to carry up to twenty-two average weighing men or women in each." Stay tuned for updates on My Virtual Library Empire

He added, "While there certainly wouldn't be enough space in a single wagon bed for that many people, they should easily be able to seat around half of the stonecutters, that is, thirteen men or women in each wagon bed, apart from the guards who can sit in the driver's seat. And keeping just around thirteen or fourteen men in each wagon instead of up to its full capacity would be helpful for the horses to pull those wagons even through uneven terrain."

"Okay, that's good to hear." Kivamus looked at Hudan. "We will need those wagons to move as fast as possible, and there wouldn't be enough time to rest the horses in the middle of the journey. So you should take spare horses with you as well." After a moment of thought, he added, "While four horses should be enough to pull those two wagons, you should take eight horses with you. That will still leave us with seven horses here including those we got from the bandit, which will be enough for us until you return."

He continued, "To take those eight horses, you will need eight guards as well, and that should be more than enough to take on the bandits easily, even if there are a few more of them there than what we expect. And on the return journey, four guards can ride on four of the horses at a time, which will allow you to hitch the remaining four horses to those wagons. That will give the beasts at least some rest if you alternate between them when you hitch them to the wagons every morning after a night of rest."

Hudan thought about it and nodded. "I agree, milord. Eight men will be more than enough, and having spare horses will also give us something to fall back on in case any of them get injured on the way."

He looked at Feroy. "I'll have to go with the guards as well, since there is a possibility, no matter how small, of Nokozal having reached there before us. And I don't think anyone else can go one on one against that huge bastard. So it'll have to be me. That means you will be in charge of the guards and the security of the village until I return."

Feroy nodded. "Leave it to me."

Hudan looked back at Kivamus, and continued, "This time we will have surprise on our side when we reach the quarry, so even the new guards should be able to hold their own. I'll take four experienced guards including me and Calubo. While we should be able to take on those four bandits by ourselves - the four new recruits in the squad will also be there to support us. This will give them some real experience as well."

Gorsazo asked, "But the merchant told us that snowfall has already started on the northern road, so how will these wagons even travel in that snow?"

Hudan gave the answer. "That's because the snowfall always starts from the east here, since that's where the Arakin mountains are. So we certainly can't go through the northern road this time, since there is a risk of getting stuck there even with the small amount of snow that would have gathered on that road by now. but we should be fine if we go northwest - directly through the forest - since it will take a while for snowfall to start there. And just a week without snowfall there - which is still reasonable - would be enough for us to return."

He explained further, "What I am planning to do is this. Since we are not taking any wagons with us from here, our horses can easily travel through the forest, so we will go along with Calubo to the quarry. It still won't be easy to find a path there, but since we are only on horses we should still be able to reach there on time. And once we have taken care of those bandits, we will load up the stonecutters on the wagons they have, and then we'll travel directly towards the south with them - through whichever wide path we find - since it would be impossible to look for a direct path to Tiranat from there, especially with those wagons which will need enough space between the trees of the forest to move."

The guard captain added, "Our target will be to reach the road connecting Kirnos to Tiranat, and once we've found it, we'll only need to travel east on that road to return here, and that part of the journey will be much faster compared to traveling through the forests. Although, I'm not sure how long it will take us for the whole journey."

Calubo said, "I think that's a good plan, and I can give an estimate of the time we'll need. It had taken around two days for me and the other bandits to reach the location of the ambush on the northern road from that quarry on foot, and that place is around a two days wagon journey from our village. But we'll only be riding on those horses which won't be pulling any wagons on the first part of the journey, so that should make it faster for us to reach the quarry, especially since we'll be going straight through the forests instead of going a long way through the northern road and then turning towards the west. But on the other hand, traveling through the forest is much slower than riding on a road, so I think we'll need at least three or four days to reach there."

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Hudan nodded. "Then we'll also need a day to scout the location and kill the bandits. That day as well as the night should give some rest to the horses too."

Calubo gazed into the distance to think about it before speaking, "After that, I'd say another three or four days to reach the southern road from there - since we'll know in advance which direction we have

to travel instead of looking for our destination. And finally, it'll only be around a day of journey from there to Tiranat, since Kirnos is less than two days of a wagon journey from here, and we will be joining that road somewhere in the middle of that road."

Duvas gave a nod. "That means you will need at least a week to return." He added, "Although you will certainly see snowfall on the journey, the snow won't get that deep within the forest by that time. So most likely you wouldn't get stuck in the snow, although you'll still be cutting it quite close.

"However," the majordomo asked, "I'm worried about how you will even find that quarry in those huge forests?"

Calubo shrugged. "It won't be easy but I've lived there for more than two months, so I'll be able to recognize the terrain around that area. I already have a general idea of its location, and that huge quarry isn't something we are going to miss even in the middle of those forests."

He stood up and looked at Kivamus. "Milord, I can never thank you enough for this. Please make sure to have enough warm beds and food available for everyone when we return. Those people there... they'll really need that food after what they've been through in the past few months."

"Don't worry, I will tell Madam Nerida about this," Kivamus replied, "and she will make sure to prepare a warm meal for them. By that time the first longhouse will also be completed, and I will leave sufficient bunks for the stonecutters when I start shifting the villagers there."

Calubo gave a grateful nod.

"However," Kivamus added, "you will also need some food for the journey. I think around ten days' rations for eight guards, and around a week's rations for twenty six stonecutters should be sufficient." He thought about it for a moment then looked at Duvas. "Send a servant to tell Madam Nerida to prepare enough bread for them, as well as to pack a sack of crushed wheat so they can easily cook porridge on the journey. Also, tell a maid to pack some butter, hardtack and dried meat as well. We can't let them starve on the way after we are going through this much trouble to bring them here."

"That should be more than enough, milord," Hudan said. "We will still try to hunt some small animals on the way to try to reduce our food consumption."

Duvas exited the hall to give the orders, while Hudan stood up as well and said, "It is already late afternoon by now so there is no point in leaving today, since we would hardly be able to travel much in the remaining sunlight. And there is no point in making a camp just a few hours away from the village and wasting a day's rations."

He continued, "But I'll go and select the guards who'll be leaving with me, so they can check their stuff today and get them ready. We will leave at daybreak tomorrow. This will also give another night of rest to our horses, since they have travelled a lot in the past month with the caravan."

As they began to leave, Kivamus remembered something and called them back.

He looked at Calubo. "You have been missing for months now, so I can't send you with Hudan like this. So before you leave, I formally reinstate you as a guard from today itself. You'll get the same wages and benefits as the others."

Calubo looked surprised for a moment, then gave a bow again, "Thank you for this, milord, and for all your help. I will do my best to protect you and the village."

Kivamus smiled. "I know you will."

Hudan and Calubo gave nods again, and exited the hall.

It was evening now, and Kivamus was standing outside the gates of the manor where a crowd had gathered for their evening meals.

Earlier, the blacksmith had provided them the medals he had ordered to make, and when he was going to call the guards to give them the medals, Gorsazo suggested him to wait for the night so he could do it in front of the crowd waiting for their meal, since that would make the guards feel proud of doing their duty.

It had also taken a long discussion with Duvas to decide on the amount of coin they needed to provide the guards as a reward, but finally they had settled on a month of pay for those who had gotten injured and were getting the Baron's Medal of Sacrifice, and three months pay for those who were getting the Baron's Medal of Courage for extraordinary bravery.

Soon, it was time to distribute the medals, so with a deep breath he started walking towards the makeshift stage in front of the crowd which the guards had hastily built with a few wooden benches.

Chapter 144. A reward For Courage

~ Tesyb ~

~ Outside the baron's manor ~

Tesyb was standing near the makeshift stage outside the gates of the baron's manor while listening to Lord Kivamus give a speech about the bravery of the guards in the defense of the village. It was also quite chilly here, although the burning braziers around the crowd and the gathering of so many people together had meant that the place wasn't as cold as it would be otherwise.

Even so, that cold was increasing the pain in his leg where that huge bastard Nokozal had slashed him with a sword. But at least the cut wasn't too deep, so he would be fine in a few weeks. Still, he felt that even today wasn't a good day for him, since after running around so much to find and kill the bandits yesterday where he barely survived that fight, today he had to stand here for so long in the cold, and that made his leg hurt even more. Damn the bandits! And that bastard Sejkil who was still alive. He should have been executed! What was the baron even thinking?

Well, there was nothing he could do about it. Orders were orders, and he was going to follow his orders, even if he didn't like them. As he felt a sudden pang of pain in his leg, he wondered how long he would have to endure the pain. Hopefully his injury would heal soon.

Coming back to the present, He had recently found out that the baron was even going to give medals to some of the guards after this. Tesyb wondered who would be those lucky guards. In the past, he had heard from his father that once he had been in a ceremony where the Count of Cinran was giving a reward to a knight who had saved someone's life - and it was said to be made of pure silver! - so Tesyb knew what it meant to get a medal - even though he hadn't even seen one yet.

For now, he was keeping an eye on the crowd which had grown to nearly as large as that in the feast yesterday. The news had gotten out about the reward ceremony, so a lot of villagers had gathered here in curiosity. Nearly all of the guards, as well as the servants and maids from the manor were standing close to the stage to see the ceremony, and this was where Tesyb was standing as well.

He even saw his parents standing in the back of the crowd, listening to the baron. Giving a smile at his father's newfound confidence after he began working as a foreman, he looked at Lord Kivamus as well. He listened as the baron praised the hard work of the guards - which was certainly a new experience for them, since he had heard that the previous baron had never treated the guard this well. And then, the baron even promised to give the medal receivers cold hard coins as part of the reward!

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Of course, Lord Kivamus told them that their majordomo would only note their pending reward amount in a ledger for now, and they will receive that coin once they start selling coal again after the winter. It was the same thing though, since Tesyb had no doubt that the baron would come through on his promises.

Before long, it was time to give the medals, and the baron took the name of the first guard who would get the Baron's Medal of Sacrifice - for getting injured in the line of duty. The guard whose name had been taken looked thoroughly surprised as if he couldn't believe what was happening, but when the other guards who were standing nearby started congratulating him and patting him on his back, he gave a huge grin.

Then the guard confidently walked to the stage and Tesyb watched as the baron put a medal around his neck. Immediately, the crowd started cheering for the guard, but the loudest cheers were from Tesyb and the other guards. He was one of their own, after all!

Before long, the guard who had got the medal returned back while grinning from ear to ear, and immediately, the other guards crowded around him to congratulate him again and to see the medal for themselves. Although the medal was only made of iron, and didn't cost too much by itself, it still meant that the man had done something special, and it was seen and recognized in front of everyone in the village. That medal would easily assure him a mug of ale for free in the village alehouse - assuming they were even allowed to visit there anytime soon. As Tesyb thought about how long it had been since he had drunk some ale, he wondered how it would have felt if he had gotten a medal too.

Soon, the baron took the name of another guard who was going to get the same medal, and the same thing repeated again with everyone cheering loudly for him. Even the two new female guards - Isomi and Savomi - were cheering loudly for the guard. Looking at their frail bodies compared to the male guards, Tesyb still felt uncertain about how the women were going to fight against a bandit, but he trusted the baron now, and knew that he must have a plan in his mind.

Before long, it was time for the Baron's Medal of Courage - which Lord Kivamus had described to the crowd as the second best medal that could be awarded, but it was still above the first type of medal. Tesyb wondered which was the highest kind of medal, although the baron had told them earlier that that medal wouldn't be given today.

Soon, the baron took the name of Calubo - the guard thought to have been killed by the bandits in the past, but who had surprisingly come back from the dead and helped them a lot in so many ways. Calubo looked like he didn't believe that his name had been taken, so another guard had to give him a nudge on his back towards the stage. And then Calubo went and took that medal as well, and returned back grinning like an adzee which had spotted an isolated deer.

Then, the baron gazed at the crowd, and said this would be the final medal for tonight. Tesyb tried to guess who would be the one to get this medal, and his best guess was Hudan, since he had been the one to scare away Nokoza. And then the baron's eyes found his own and he took Tesyb's name as the person who'd get the last medal, and his mind went completely blank.

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What was happening? Did the baron really say his name? No, it couldn't be! He had barely done anything in the fight! And it was his overconfidence which had nearly led to the merchant's children getting kidnapped by the bandits. How could he be getting a medal? Perhaps he had started taking a nap while standing, and he was daydreaming now. Yes, that had to be the reason!

Then the guards who were standing next to him started congratulating him and patted him on his back repeatedly. But he still couldn't believe it. Was he really going to get a medal tonight? Along with the coin reward as well? Could it really happen to someone like him?

He had been rooted to his spot for a while now, so Yufim, who had been standing next to him, gave him a gentle push towards the stage, and then someone else did the same, and before long Tesyb was climbing the stairs and walking towards Lord Kivamus, who was still smiling at him. And then as his mind

tried to process what was happening, the baron congratulated him, and put the Baron's Medal of Courage around his neck.

Tesyb could hear in the back of his mind that there was a loud cheer from the crowd, as well as from the guards, but he was still struggling to comprehend this. Then he looked at the crowd and found his parents' faces grinning at him. Tesyb blinked. No, this wasn't a dream. It was real.

Just a few months ago he would never have imagined that such a day would come where the villagers would be cheering for him. Even more than the villagers, it was the vaunted manor guards who were cheering for him!

But now, he was also a manor guard, wasn't he? He grinned and after turning towards the crowd, he raised his hands high, and gave a loud whoop of joy, and the crowd responded back with an even louder cheer! The baron patted him on his back, and he walked back towards Yufim and the other waiting guards, who surrounded him and began asking to see the medal for themselves.

As he gazed around, he noticed that even Isomi and Savomi were clapping for him! Truthfully, he had known the two sisters for years now from the time they used to work outside the coal mines to transfer the coal in small baskets from the coal piles to the wagons, but he had barely ever talked to them, since he was deep inside the mines most of the time. But now they were colleagues - they were comrades, and hearing the two pretty young women clapping for him, he could barely stop a blush from creeping on his face. Immediately he looked at others to distract his mind, and started to thank them for congratulating him.

And then the reward ceremony ended, and the crowd started to disperse. Apart from those villagers who were staying back for their free meal, others began to return to their homes, after a rare day of entertainment for them.

As he looked at his medal closely, he saw that it was a circular shaped piece of iron connected to two thin bars of metal, with some space between them for a ribbon - which was only a thicker thread in his case - to pass through it. On one side there were a few words written in the common tongue - although he couldn't read any of it - and on the other side there were two symbols engraved on it. One of them was a sword, but he wasn't sure about the other thing, which looked mostly like a long stick which was a little wider on one end. He was curious about it for sure, but he shrugged for now. He would ask someone about it later.

He turned back towards the manor gates and thought that although he hadn't gotten the coin reward for now, he couldn't wait for that day! Three months wages as bonus? And now that his father was also getting a good wage after he became a foreman, he didn't need to support his parents anymore. What would he even do with that much money? Three months wages would be... more than ten gold coins! That was... a lot of money!

Then he thought of his only sister who was living in Cinran. Yes, he should buy something good for Isuha the next time he visits her. She had mentioned the last time that the food situation was getting worse there, so maybe, for a change, he could even take her to one of the fancy restaurants in the town where they served various meat dishes and sweet tasting pies everyday! Maybe a place where the rich merchants and even some of the minor nobles ate. It certainly wouldn't be cheap, but he could splurge for a single meal, right?

He snorted. There he went getting daydreams again. Even with the much improved situation of the village, his family was still in no situation to waste money like that, since all their savings had been stolen by the bandits in the previous raid. So he couldn't waste the reward money like that.

He nodded to himself, while thanking another guard who was congratulating him. Apart from keeping a small portion of the reward to foot the bill when the guards eventually asked him to pay for their ale in celebration - whenever it would be - he would give the rest of that money to Isuha when he visited Cinran, so at least it would be helpful to her to buy food in case the shop owner couldn't pay her any wages for a while.

He thought about the amount of gold he would get in the future. It was three months pay for a manor guard - which was even higher than that of a manual laborer - so even with the higher prices of everything in the bigger towns and cities, she should still be able to afford at least a month of living expenses in Cinran with that money, and perhaps for even two months.

Yes, that was a much better idea than eating a noble's meal for a single day, and then not being able to afford food later. He didn't even want to imagine what many people, and especially women, must have had to do to earn even a single meal in the bigger towns like Cinran these days. So he was immensely thankful to the Goddess that at least Isuha had found an honest job there.

Yes, that hardened his resolve to give her the reward money, so she wouldn't even have to think about such things to buy food in case things got tough there. But he still wished that she would just come to Tiranat so he wouldn't have to constantly worry about her. Although that was out of his hands, he would still try to convince her of it again when he met her next time.

However, all that was for after the winter, since he would only get that coin after the winter ended and they started selling coal again, and he couldn't travel to Cinran before that anyway. But for now, he was going to enjoy this rare occasion. And maybe, if the guard captain allowed it, tonight he'd even buy a mug of ale for the others to celebrate!

Suddenly, he realized that in the hustle and bustle of the reward ceremony, he had forgotten about the pain in his leg. Hah! He didn't think that he would be able to get rid of that pain for weeks, but it had still happened - even if only for a short time - and he had gotten a medal as well. And he was also going to get bonus wages as a reward! So as it turned out, today was a good day, after all!

Chapter 145. Satisfaction And Surprise

~ Kivamus ~

~ Baron's Manor, Tiranat ~

As he entered inside the gates of the manor, Kivamus was feeling quite satisfied now, since everything was going so well after a long time. The bandit raid had been repelled successfully, and apart from a few injuries, nobody had died in that raid either. All their grain stores were intact as well - apart from a small pack of grain that Nokozal had robbed from a villager when running away - but it was only a small amount, and would barely make a dent in their remaining food stores for the winter months.

The enthusiasm and happiness of the villagers during the award ceremony had affected him as well, and he was feeling just as happy as the guards who had gotten the medals. Who knows, maybe Hudan would be able to get rid of that bandit camp completely, and then he would even get two dozen trained workers for free! He couldn't wait to bring those workers here to increase the construction speed of everything!

Right now, he was leisurely walking back towards the manor house with others - all of whom looked satisfied and had smiles on their faces - except for Duvas who was still grumbling about the unnecessary expenses of paying rewards and feeding the stonecutters. But that was fine. Kivamus knew that the old man would come around to his point of view eventually.

And now that there was no imminent threat of a bandit attack, they could focus fully on completing everything that they were building.

"What is the progress of our first longhouse?" he asked Duvas.

"It is nearly ready, milord," the majordomo replied. "All the walls and its roof had already been completed a few days ago, and since then the carpenter has been putting up the wooden floor and the bunks inside the longhouse. He also had to cut up new planks for those bunks, apart from making the smaller gate which Hudan wanted as a second exit, so the completion would be a little later than what we expected. But, as of today around half of the bunks are already fixed in place, so assuming no other problems crop up there, I think the longhouse should be ready to live in a few more days."

"That's wonderful news!" Kivamus praised. "And what about the other things?"

Duvas continued, "A few days ago, Pinoto had told the workers to start digging up the pond in the South so that there would be at least a small ditch where the water from the melting snow can gather after the winter." He added, "Of course, he will have to stop the digging once the snowfall starts, but that will still allow the new drainage system in the village to start working after the winter. And when the digging work is stopped because of snow, he will put those laborers to clear more of the forest in the South. The women are already picking up the small stones and the fallen branches from the cleared area, so that we can start plowing them for sowing seeds in those fields right after the snow melts."

Kivamus nodded. "We will still have to try to save as much wheat as we can, so that we can at least begin planting after winter, since it will take a while to buy all the wheat we need to complete the sowing. And what about the north?"

"Well, they are also clearing the forests," Duvas replied, "although many of the laborers in the north are busy sharpening and putting up the stakes for the new village walls. That will take quite a bit of time though, since those walls are going to be quite long including all four sides of the village."

"At least the construction of the walls is progressing now," Hudan commented. "If we already had walls here, those bandits wouldn't have been able to enter the village at all. But at least they will provide us good protection from any future raids."

"That's true." Kivamus thought about the new order he had given the blacksmith to make. "What about the wheelbarrows?"

Duvas replied again, "We did get one more wheelbarrow earlier today, and another one should be ready by tomorrow evening. That will give us a total of three wheelbarrows, although having even a single one has been very helpful to move things around in the manor." He added, "But before making more of them, Cedoron wanted me to ask you again if you still wanted to spend that much iron on them."

"I think three iron wheelbarrows should be enough for now," Kivamus replied after a moment.

"I'll let him know," Duvas nodded. "That being said, I'm still curious about why you wanted to use iron to make the wheelbarrows?"

"We needed a few of them as soon as possible to speed up the construction of the longhouses, and Taniok didn't have any free time to make them from wood since he's already way too busy in cutting up the planks and building the longhouse." Kivamus continued with a shrug, "So the only way I saw to make them quickly was to order the blacksmith to make them from iron, even though I knew it would make them quite costly."

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"Those wheelbarrows are costly enough, that's for sure," Feroy remarked with a snort.

"I realize that," Kivamus said, "but most of our order for new tools was already completed by the blacksmith, so he could easily spare the time to make the wheelbarrows, unlike the carpenter. And Cedoron could hardly have made them using wood!"

"That's true enough," Duvas observed. "He's not a carpenter anyway."

Feroy said, "Still, I'd say it was a good idea to only allow the manor servants to use them, since if you had given them to the laborers, they might have just stolen them for their iron."

"Perhaps," Duvas commented. "But anyway, now that everyone has seen how useful it is, they all are claiming that they should be the ones to get the next wheelbarrow."

Kivamus chuckled. "That's good to know." The log-mover and the wheelbarrow were such simple things, and yet he was glad to see that they were helpful to the villagers already.

Duvas explained further, "I have already allocated the first wheelbarrow for Taniok's use during the day for any work in the longhouse construction, while the manor servants use it in the nights after they get it back to transport coal to the braziers." He continued, "However, Pinoto wanted the second wheelbarrow since he claimed that they would allow the laborers in the South to move the stones and small branches from the fields much more easily and quickly, while Yeden wanted it in the north for help in transporting the tools to build the village walls."

"You just said there are two new wheelbarrows which will be made by tomorrow, right?" Kivamus asked. "So just give one to each of them."

Duvas nodded. "That's a simple enough solution for now, and I was already going to do that, but I just don't think that just three wheelbarrows would be enough for the whole village. We need a lot more of them, especially in the south and the north."

Kivamus gave a nod. "Yes, we do. But we can't afford to make them from iron anymore. So everyone will have to wait until Taniok and his apprentice get some free time - however long it would take - and then you can tell him to make more of them using wood. Those will still need a small amount of iron, but it would be a lot less than what was used in the first three wheelbarrows, since we made their whole trays from iron. And those wooden wheelbarrows wouldn't be very costly anyway, so we can even allow the villagers to keep them wherever they are needed, instead of bringing all of them inside the manor every night."

"I'm not sure when Taniok is going to get enough free time for that," Duvas commented, "since he has to start working on the second longhouse after this, and then he will have to make the gates for the walls, as well as the new watchtowers we plan to make. And you have also mentioned some other things as well. Having more carpenters here would have helped us a lot."

Kivamus snorted. "Well it's not like I can produce a new carpenter out of thin air! But those workers who are helping Taniok in making the longhouses would still be getting a lot of experience in woodworking. And I have already told Taniok to keep an eye out for those of them who show good talent for it, so that he can take them on as permanent apprentices later on."

"It will take some time for sure," he continued, "but by the time all that work you mentioned is over, we should have more people who are capable of doing some basic woodworking. And at that time we can

tell Taniok to teach them how to make a wheelbarrow from wood, so that they can keep making more of them on an ongoing basis. And once we have enough for our construction tasks, we can even start selling them to the village merchants or whoever wants to buy them from us."

"Well, we can only hope that that time will come soon," Duvas muttered.

Kivamus nodded. "Once the wooden wheelbarrows are available in good numbers, we can reuse the metal in the three iron wheelbarrows to make something else from them. We can even do that for the iron stands of the braziers, since we had to get everything built from iron to produce them quickly."

"That's... actually an excellent idea," Duvas said with a rare grin.

"Well... it's good to know that saving money still makes you happy," Kivamus muttered. "At least I don't have to worry about you emptying my treasury with unnecessary spending any time soon."

Everyone laughed at that statement, while Duvas just looked proud of his money management.

Still chuckling about it in his mind, Kivamus kept walking towards the manor house along with others, with satisfaction in everyone's hearts that everything was finally going so smoothly.

As he reached closer to the manor house, suddenly, he heard a huge commotion from the storage barn on the left side of the manor, near the stables and the cattle shed. In the light of a brazier which was burning there, he saw that many servants and maids had gathered there. But why? There wasn't even anything precious kept in that barn, except for some feed for the horses and their cattle.

He looked at Hudan, who was walking next to him as well. "What's happening there?"

"Give me a moment and I'll find out." Hudan started walking faster towards that barn, but before he went too far, a servant came running towards them with panic on his face.

Immediately, Kivamus and others jogged towards that servant as well, who had stopped to catch his breath for a moment.

The young servant looked completely shocked, and he glanced at Kivamus for a moment with fearful eyes, then looked back at Hudan, then eventually settled back to looking at Kivamus' face again.

"What is it?" Hudan bellowed. "Tell me!" Stay tuned to My Virtual Library Empire

The servant pointed towards that barn with a shaking hand, and spoke in a stuttering voice. "He's... he's dead..."

"What?" Kivamus asked with shock. "Who's dead?"

Chapter 146. Gut Instincts

The servant swallowed hard. "The... the bandit. He's dead!"

"You mean Sejkil?" Hudan asked with surprise.

The servant quickly nodded. "Yes, I was going to get some hay for the horses from that barn, but... but the door was already open, and Sejkil looked to be in a bad way. And when I went to check on him, I saw that he wasn't even breathing!" The young servant's eyes were wide with fear as he continued, "There was nobody else inside the barn at the time, but... but the bandit had a lot of bruises, like he had been beaten up. I think... someone killed him..."

Within a moment, Hudan looked at Kivamus. "Milord, you need to get inside the manor house, right now! It's not safe for you here until we find out everything." Then he looked at the ex-mercenary. "You go and take a look at the body, and find out what happened. There might be more people who might have gotten injured or Goddess forbid, dead. I will get the guards ready in case there is another attack on the village happening."

Feroy nodded, and immediately started jogging towards that barn with that servant in tow.

"I'll go and take a look as well," Duvas said, and started walking towards the barn.

Gorsazo looked around them for a moment, then held one of Kivamus' arms, and spoke to Hudan. "I'll take him to the manor house."

Hudan held up his hand. "No, wait a moment. You also need someone trustworthy who can fight." The guard captain looked around, and seeing someone, he called him up.

Kivamus saw that it was Kerel - one of the experienced guards who had long iron grey hair - who came jogging towards them.

Hudan quickly explained the situation to the guard, who immediately gave a nod and put a hand on the hilt of his sword, looking around them with alertness.

The guard captain looked back at him. "I'll be back to update you about the situation once I find out more." After he gestured to Kerel to take him towards the manor house, the guard captain jogged towards the gates of the manor.

Kivamus was still so surprised by everything, that he didn't think of protesting when Gorsazo and Kerel surrounded him from both sides to shield him with their own bodies, and started walking with him to the manor house. And before long, he was inside the manor hall, with the door firmly shut and barred.

Gorsazo gently guided him towards a chair to sit, while Kerel had taken a position right next to the door, just in case. But Kivamus didn't feel like he could sit calmly right now. So he removed Gorsazo's hand from his arm, and started to pace inside the manor hall.

What had happened here? Everything was going so well until now, but then this happens. His mind was still reeling with the news that a man had been murdered by someone within the manor. Could it be that the village was under another bandit attack? Or had the two escaped bandits returned again and got inside the manor while most of the guards were watching the award ceremony? Or was it another assassin sent by someone to kill him?

He didn't know anything at the moment. But the fact remained that once again, he had to hide inside the manor hall because someone dangerous had managed to infiltrate the manor. Again.

He didn't like it. He didn't like this feeling at all.

After some time, which was probably only half an hour in reality, but felt more like an eternity to him, there was a knock on the outer door. Once Kerel confirmed who it was, he opened the door and Hudan walked inside, looking angry as a raging bull. Duvas followed him inside as well, his tired face showing all his years.

"Did you find out anything?" Kivamus asked.

The guard captain took a deep breath and gave a nod. "Kerel, you go and keep an eye on everything outside." Then he looked at Kivamus. "It was just one death - of Sejkil, the bandit who had surrendered. Nobody else is dead or even injured." He took another breath and added, "The good news is that the village is not under attack, and there are no other bandits in sight."

"And what's the bad news? Gorsazo asked with worry.

"We still have no idea who killed him," Hudan replied.

"But why wasn't someone watching him?" Kivamus asked with frustration. "This wouldn't have happened if there was a guard keeping an eye on him."

"We only wanted to prevent him from running away," Hudan replied, "and with the way Feroy had tied him up, there was no chance of him escaping. We just couldn't afford to keep a guard there in all three shifts of the day. We simply don't have enough guards for that."

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The outer door opened again and Feroy entered the hall.

Hudan looked at the ex-mercenary. "Did you find anything new?"

Feroy gave a nod. "At first glance, it looks like an act of revenge to me. While I don't yet know who did it, what I can tell you is that the bandit didn't die an easy death, that's for sure."

Kivamus shuddered thinking about what that usually meant in this medieval world. He shook his head to get rid of that imagery. "Anything else you can tell about how he died?"

Feroy thought for a moment. "I wouldn't exactly say that Sejkil was tortured, but the bruises on his body told me that whoever did this certainly wanted to hurt him and make him feel pain. However, my best guess is that it was an amateur, or maybe a small group of amateurs who did this, and I believe that they only wanted to make the bandit suffer instead of killing him."

"Why is that?" Kivamus asked.

Feroy pointed his hand to the back of his head and explained, "The cause of death seems to be an injury to the back of the head, around here, and I think it happened when someone pushed Sejkil, making him fall backwards. But since his hands were still tied, Sejkil was unable to control his fall, and he shattered his skull when it hit a sharp corner on the base of the wooden post, on which he had been tied earlier." He added, "It was still fairly dark inside the barn when I looked at it in the light of a few burning torches, but I saw enough blood and bits of brain on that post to make me confident that I was right."

He explained, "Before I had noticed the blood on the wooden post, I was thinking that someone had hit the back of his head with something hard, but I know that's not the case, since whoever was hitting Sejkil, wanted him to feel that pain while looking at his face, since most of the injuries on Sejkil's body are in the front part of his body. It was like someone was trying to interrogate him, although I can't say why."

Feroy continued after a moment, "So my best guess is that while the culprit certainly wanted to hurt him, the actual death was only a mistake, or rather, an accident." He shrugged. "Of course, all of this is only a speculation, because it's not like we can go into the past and watch what happened."

That immediately reminded Kivamus of the ever-present CCTVs on modern earth. If they had such a thing here, they could have easily found out everything. But there was no point in wishful thinking.

He asked, "But if the culprits didn't go there just to kill Sejkil immediately, then it must have taken time while they were hitting him. So why didn't anyone see or hear anything?"

Feroy shook his head reluctantly. "You already know that apart from the few guards at both our gates, nearly all of the servants and guards were outside to watch the award ceremony. And nobody thought

Sejkil would be able to run away, so there wasn't anyone to keep an eye on him, not that we can afford to put a guard there all the time."

"Hudan told me about that. But still, do you have any idea who could have done this?" Kivamus asked. He hesitated for a moment, but then asked, "You said that it looked like an act of revenge... and our guards were the ones whom the bandits had tried to kill. They are the only ones who got injured in the raid on the village. So could it be one of our guards who did this in revenge?"

Duvas immediately shook his head. "That's not possible, milord. Apart from Hudan and Feroy, I have known all of our guards for at least a decade. None of them could murder someone in cold blood, or even do something like this."

Kivamus gave a nod, but he knew that Duvas had a soft spot for the residents of the manor. So he asked Feroy, "Do you think so as well?"

Feroy shrugged. "I know that many of the guards were grumbling about your decision to keep Sejkil alive, but I'm fairly sure that it wasn't done by any of our guards."

"You are only fairly sure?" Kivamus asked with a frown.

Hudan snorted. "That usually means he is completely sure, since he is never going to trust anyone completely. And I think so as well. It wasn't one of our guards."

Kivamus nodded. "Alright. Then who else could have done this? If it wasn't a guard, then I am assuming that none of our servants or maids could have done this either."

Duvas nodded. "I trust all of them. It wasn't one of them."

"Then the only possibility which remains is that it was someone from outside the manor," Feroy replied.

"But that means they would have had to climb over the manor walls," Hudan said with a frown, "and while it's not impossible, it certainly wouldn't be an easy task, especially if they didn't know what they

are going to find inside and where they are going to land - assuming they tried to jump over the walls using a ladder."

Feroy snorted at the guard captain. "You are leaving the possibility that they might have just walked through the gates."

"What? But both of our gates have at least two guards at all times," Hudan countered.

"There are certainly supposed to be," Feroy muttered. "But that's what my gut tells me."

Right at that moment, the outer door opened again and Kerel walked inside. "Milord, you need to hear this."

"What is it now?" Hudan growled.

Kerel jerked his thumb towards the doors. "I found out that two of our guards who were supposed to be on watch duty at the eastern gates earlier, had left their posts without telling anyone. So I've brought them outside." Experience tales at My Virtual Library Empire

Hudan looked at Feroy with surprise, who just grinned and gave a shrug.

Kivamus shook his head at the ex-mercenary's gut instincts which had been spot-on once again, and then walked towards the doors with others.

Outside, there were two guards - both of them new recruits - who were standing there while gazing downwards in resignation, while there were around half a dozen other guards gathered around as well.

"What made you think you could leave your post in the middle of your shift?" Hudan growled at them.

Chapter 147: Satisfaction And Surprise

~ Kivamus ~

~ Baron's Manor, Tiranat ~

As he entered inside the gates of the manor, Kivamus was feeling quite satisfied now, since everything was going so well after a long time. The bandit raid had been repelled successfully, and apart from a few injuries, nobody had died in that raid either. All their grain stores were intact as well - apart from a small pack of grain that Nokozal had robbed from a villager when running away - but it was only a small amount, and would barely make a dent in their remaining food stores for the winter months.

The enthusiasm and happiness of the villagers during the award ceremony had affected him as well, and he was feeling just as happy as the guards who had gotten the medals. Who knows, maybe Hudan would be able to get rid of that bandit camp completely, and then he would even get two dozen trained workers for free! He couldn't wait to bring those workers here to increase the construction speed of everything!

Right now, he was leisurely walking back towards the manor house with others - all of whom looked satisfied and had smiles on their faces - except for Duvas who was still grumbling about the unnecessary expenses of paying rewards and feeding the stonecutters. But that was fine. Kivamus knew that the old man would come around to his point of view eventually.

And now that there was no imminent threat of a bandit attack, they could focus fully on completing everything that they were building.

"What is the progress of our first longhouse?" he asked Duvas.

"It is nearly ready, milord," the majordomo replied. "All the walls and its roof had already been completed a few days ago, and since then the carpenter has been putting up the wooden floor and the bunks inside the longhouse. He also had to cut up new planks for those bunks, apart from making the smaller gate which Hudan wanted as a second exit, so the completion would be a little later than what we expected. But, as of today around half of the bunks are already fixed in place, so assuming no other problems crop up there, I think the longhouse should be ready to live in a few more days."

"That's wonderful news!" Kivamus praised. "And what about the other things?"

Duvas continued, "A few days ago, Pinoto had told the workers to start digging up the pond in the South so that there would be at least a small ditch where the water from the melting snow can gather after

the winter." He added, "Of course, he will have to stop the digging once the snowfall starts, but that will still allow the new drainage system in the village to start working after the winter. And when the digging work is stopped because of snow, he will put those laborers to clear more of the forest in the South. The women are already picking up the small stones and the fallen branches from the cleared area, so that we can start plowing them for sowing seeds in those fields right after the snow melts."

Kivamus nodded. "We will still have to try to save as much wheat as we can, so that we can at least begin planting after winter, since it will take a while to buy all the wheat we need to complete the sowing. And what about the north?"

"Well, they are also clearing the forests," Duvas replied, "although many of the laborers in the north are busy sharpening and putting up the stakes for the new village walls. That will take quite a bit of time though, since those walls are going to be quite long including all four sides of the village."

"At least the construction of the walls is progressing now," Hudan commented. "If we already had walls here, those bandits wouldn't have been able to enter the village at all. But at least they will provide us good protection from any future raids."

"That's true." Kivamus thought about the new order he had given the blacksmith to make. "What about the wheelbarrows?"

Duvas replied again, "We did get one more wheelbarrow earlier today, and another one should be ready by tomorrow evening. That will give us a total of three wheelbarrows, although having even a single one has been very helpful to move things around in the manor." He added, "But before making more of them, Cedoron wanted me to ask you again if you still wanted to spend that much iron on them."

"I think three iron wheelbarrows should be enough for now," Kivamus replied after a moment.

"I'll let him know," Duvas nodded. "That being said, I'm still curious about why you wanted to use iron to make the wheelbarrows?"

"We needed a few of them as soon as possible to speed up the construction of the longhouses, and Taniok didn't have any free time to make them from wood since he's already way too busy in cutting up the planks and building the longhouse." Kivamus continued with a shrug, "So the only way I saw to make

them quickly was to order the blacksmith to make them from iron, even though I knew it would make them quite costly."

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"Those wheelbarrows are costly enough, that's for sure," Feroy remarked with a snort.

"I realize that," Kivamus said, "but most of our order for new tools was already completed by the blacksmith, so he could easily spare the time to make the wheelbarrows, unlike the carpenter. And Cedoron could hardly have made them using wood!"

"That's true enough," Duvas observed. "He's not a carpenter anyway."

Feroy said, "Still, I'd say it was a good idea to only allow the manor servants to use them, since if you had given them to the laborers, they might have just stolen them for their iron."

"Perhaps," Duvas commented. "But anyway, now that everyone has seen how useful it is, they all are claiming that they should be the ones to get the next wheelbarrow."

Kivamus chuckled. "That's good to know." The log-mover and the wheelbarrow were such simple things, and yet he was glad to see that they were helpful to the villagers already.

Duvas explained further, "I have already allocated the first wheelbarrow for Taniok's use during the day for any work in the longhouse construction, while the manor servants use it in the nights after they get it back to transport coal to the braziers." He continued, "However, Pinoto wanted the second wheelbarrow since he claimed that they would allow the laborers in the South to move the stones and small branches from the fields much more easily and quickly, while Yeden wanted it in the north for help in transporting the tools to build the village walls."

"You just said there are two new wheelbarrows which will be made by tomorrow, right?" Kivamus asked. "So just give one to each of them."

Duvas nodded. "That's a simple enough solution for now, and I was already going to do that, but I just don't think that just three wheelbarrows would be enough for the whole village. We need a lot more of them, especially in the south and the north."

Kivamus gave a nod. "Yes, we do. But we can't afford to make them from iron anymore. So everyone will have to wait until Taniok and his apprentice get some free time - however long it would take - and then you can tell him to make more of them using wood. Those will still need a small amount of iron, but it would be a lot less than what was used in the first three wheelbarrows, since we made their whole trays from iron. And those wooden wheelbarrows wouldn't be very costly anyway, so we can even allow the villagers to keep them wherever they are needed, instead of bringing all of them inside the manor every night."

"I'm not sure when Taniok is going to get enough free time for that," Duvas commented, "since he has to start working on the second longhouse after this, and then he will have to make the gates for the walls, as well as the new watchtowers we plan to make. And you have also mentioned some other things as well. Having more carpenters here would have helped us a lot."

Kivamus snorted. "Well it's not like I can produce a new carpenter out of thin air! But those workers who are helping Taniok in making the longhouses would still be getting a lot of experience in woodworking. And I have already told Taniok to keep an eye out for those of them who show good talent for it, so that he can take them on as permanent apprentices later on."

"It will take some time for sure," he continued, "but by the time all that work you mentioned is over, we should have more people who are capable of doing some basic woodworking. And at that time we can tell Taniok to teach them how to make a wheelbarrow from wood, so that they can keep making more of them on an ongoing basis. And once we have enough for our construction tasks, we can even start selling them to the village merchants or whoever wants to buy them from us."

"Well, we can only hope that that time will come soon," Duvas muttered.

Kivamus nodded. "Once the wooden wheelbarrows are available in good numbers, we can reuse the metal in the three iron wheelbarrows to make something else from them. We can even do that for the iron stands of the braziers, since we had to get everything built from iron to produce them quickly."

"That's... actually an excellent idea," Duvas said with a rare grin.

"Well... it's good to know that saving money still makes you happy," Kivamus muttered. "At least I don't have to worry about you emptying my treasury with unnecessary spending any time soon."

Everyone laughed at that statement, while Duvas just looked proud of his money management.

Still chuckling about it in his mind, Kivamus kept walking towards the manor house along with others, with satisfaction in everyone's hearts that everything was finally going so smoothly.

As he reached closer to the manor house, suddenly, he heard a huge commotion from the storage barn on the left side of the manor, near the stables and the cattle shed. In the light of a brazier which was burning there, he saw that many servants and maids had gathered there. But why? There wasn't even anything precious kept in that barn, except for some feed for the horses and their cattle.

He looked at Hudan, who was walking next to him as well. "What's happening there?"

"Give me a moment and I'll find out." Hudan started walking faster towards that barn, but before he went too far, a servant came running towards them with panic on his face.

Immediately, Kivamus and others jogged towards that servant as well, who had stopped to catch his breath for a moment.

The young servant looked completely shocked, and he glanced at Kivamus for a moment with fearful eyes, then looked back at Hudan, then eventually settled back to looking at Kivamus' face again.

"What is it?" Hudan bellowed. "Tell me!" Stay tuned to NovelBin.Côm

The servant pointed towards that barn with a shaking hand, and spoke in a stuttering voice. "He's... he's dead..."

"What?" Kivamus asked with shock. "Who's dead?"

Chapter 148. Gut Instincts

The servant swallowed hard. "The... the bandit. He's dead!"

"You mean Sejkil?" Hudan asked with surprise.

The servant quickly nodded. "Yes, I was going to get some hay for the horses from that barn, but... but the door was already open, and Sejkil looked to be in a bad way. And when I went to check on him, I saw that he wasn't even breathing!" The young servant's eyes were wide with fear as he continued, "There was nobody else inside the barn at the time, but... but the bandit had a lot of bruises, like he had been beaten up. I think... someone killed him..."

Within a moment, Hudan looked at Kivamus. "Milord, you need to get inside the manor house, right now! It's not safe for you here until we find out everything." Then he looked at the ex-mercenary. "You go and take a look at the body, and find out what happened. There might be more people who might have gotten injured or Goddess forbid, dead. I will get the guards ready in case there is another attack on the village happening."

Feroy nodded, and immediately started jogging towards that barn with that servant in tow.

"I'll go and take a look as well," Duvas said, and started walking towards the barn.

Gorsazo looked around them for a moment, then held one of Kivamus' arms, and spoke to Hudan. "I'll take him to the manor house."

Hudan held up his hand. "No, wait a moment. You also need someone trustworthy who can fight." The guard captain looked around, and seeing someone, he called him up.

Kivamus saw that it was Kerel - one of the experienced guards who had long iron grey hair - who came jogging towards them.

Hudan quickly explained the situation to the guard, who immediately gave a nod and put a hand on the hilt of his sword, looking around them with alertness.

The guard captain looked back at him. "I'll be back to update you about the situation once I find out more." After he gestured to Kerel to take him towards the manor house, the guard captain jogged towards the gates of the manor.

Kivamus was still so surprised by everything, that he didn't think of protesting when Gorsazo and Kerel surrounded him from both sides to shield him with their own bodies, and started walking with him to the manor house. And before long, he was inside the manor hall, with the door firmly shut and barred.

Gorsazo gently guided him towards a chair to sit, while Kerel had taken a position right next to the door, just in case. But Kivamus didn't feel like he could sit calmly right now. So he removed Gorsazo's hand from his arm, and started to pace inside the manor hall.

What had happened here? Everything was going so well until now, but then this happens. His mind was still reeling with the news that a man had been murdered by someone within the manor. Could it be that the village was under another bandit attack? Or had the two escaped bandits returned again and got inside the manor while most of the guards were watching the award ceremony? Or was it another assassin sent by someone to kill him?

He didn't know anything at the moment. But the fact remained that once again, he had to hide inside the manor hall because someone dangerous had managed to infiltrate the manor. Again.

He didn't like it. He didn't like this feeling at all.

After some time, which was probably only half an hour in reality, but felt more like an eternity to him, there was a knock on the outer door. Once Kerel confirmed who it was, he opened the door and Hudan walked inside, looking angry as a raging bull. Dugas followed him inside as well, his tired face showing all his years.

"Did you find out anything?" Kivamus asked.

The guard captain took a deep breath and gave a nod. "Kerel, you go and keep an eye on everything outside." Then he looked at Kivamus. "It was just one death - of Sejkil, the bandit who had surrendered. Nobody else is dead or even injured." He took another breath and added, "The good news is that the village is not under attack, and there are no other bandits in sight."

"And what's the bad news? Gorsazo asked with worry.

"We still have no idea who killed him," Hudan replied.

"But why wasn't someone watching him?" Kivamus asked with frustration. "This wouldn't have happened if there was a guard keeping an eye on him."

"We only wanted to prevent him from running away," Hudan replied, "and with the way Feroy had tied him up, there was no chance of him escaping. We just couldn't afford to keep a guard there in all three shifts of the day. We simply don't have enough guards for that."

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The outer door opened again and Feroy entered the hall.

Hudan looked at the ex-mercenary. "Did you find anything new?"

Feroy gave a nod. "At first glance, it looks like an act of revenge to me. While I don't yet know who did it, what I can tell you is that the bandit didn't die an easy death, that's for sure."

Kivamus shuddered thinking about what that usually meant in this medieval world. He shook his head to get rid of that imagery. "Anything else you can tell about how he died?"

Feroy thought for a moment. "I wouldn't exactly say that Sejkil was tortured, but the bruises on his body told me that whoever did this certainly wanted to hurt him and make him feel pain. However, my best guess is that it was an amateur, or maybe a small group of amateurs who did this, and I believe that they only wanted to make the bandit suffer instead of killing him."

"Why is that?" Kivamus asked.

Feroy pointed his hand to the back of his head and explained, "The cause of death seems to be an injury to the back of the head, around here, and I think it happened when someone pushed Sejkil, making him

fall backwards. But since his hands were still tied, Sejkil was unable to control his fall, and he shattered his skull when it hit a sharp corner on the base of the wooden post, on which he had been tied earlier." He added, "It was still fairly dark inside the barn when I looked at it in the light of a few burning torches, but I saw enough blood and bits of brain on that post to make me confident that I was right."

He explained, "Before I had noticed the blood on the wooden post, I was thinking that someone had hit the back of his head with something hard, but I know that's not the case, since whoever was hitting Sejkil, wanted him to feel that pain while looking at his face, since most of the injuries on Sejkil's body are in the front part of his body. It was like someone was trying to interrogate him, although I can't say why."

Feroy continued after a moment, "So my best guess is that while the culprit certainly wanted to hurt him, the actual death was only a mistake, or rather, an accident." He shrugged. "Of course, all of this is only a speculation, because it's not like we can go into the past and watch what happened."

That immediately reminded Kivamus of the ever-present CCTVs on modern earth. If they had such a thing here, they could have easily found out everything. But there was no point in wishful thinking.

He asked, "But if the culprits didn't go there just to kill Sejkil immediately, then it must have taken time while they were hitting him. So why didn't anyone see or hear anything?"

Feroy shook his head reluctantly. "You already know that apart from the few guards at both our gates, nearly all of the servants and guards were outside to watch the award ceremony. And nobody thought Sejkil would be able to run away, so there wasn't anyone to keep an eye on him, not that we can afford to put a guard there all the time."

"Hudan told me about that. But still, do you have any idea who could have done this?" Kivamus asked. He hesitated for a moment, but then asked, "You said that it looked like an act of revenge... and our guards were the ones whom the bandits had tried to kill. They are the only ones who got injured in the raid on the village. So could it be one of our guards who did this in revenge?"

Duvas immediately shook his head. "That's not possible, milord. Apart from Hudan and Feroy, I have known all of our guards for at least a decade. None of them could murder someone in cold blood, or even do something like this."

Kivamus gave a nod, but he knew that Duvas had a soft spot for the residents of the manor. So he asked Feroy, "Do you think so as well?"

Feroy shrugged. "I know that many of the guards were grumbling about your decision to keep Sejkil alive, but I'm fairly sure that it wasn't done by any of our guards."

"You are only fairly sure?" Kivamus asked with a frown.

Hudan snorted. "That usually means he is completely sure, since he is never going to trust anyone completely. And I think so as well. It wasn't one of our guards."

Kivamus nodded. "Alright. Then who else could have done this? If it wasn't a guard, then I am assuming that none of our servants or maids could have done this either."

Duvas nodded. "I trust all of them. It wasn't one of them."

"Then the only possibility which remains is that it was someone from outside the manor," Feroy replied.

"But that means they would have had to climb over the manor walls," Hudan said with a frown, "and while it's not impossible, it certainly wouldn't be an easy task, especially if they didn't know what they are going to find inside and where they are going to land - assuming they tried to jump over the walls using a ladder."

Feroy snorted at the guard captain. "You are leaving the possibility that they might have just walked through the gates."

"What? But both of our gates have at least two guards at all times," Hudan countered.

"There are certainly supposed to be," Feroy muttered. "But that's what my gut tells me."

Right at that moment, the outer door opened again and Kerel walked inside. "Milord, you need to hear this."

"What is it now?" Hudan growled.

Kerel jerked his thumb towards the doors. "I found out that two of our guards who were supposed to be on watch duty at the eastern gates earlier, had left their posts without telling anyone. So I've brought them outside." Experience tales at NovelBin.Côm

Hudan looked at Feroy with surprise, who just grinned and gave a shrug.

Kivamus shook his head at the ex-mercenary's gut instincts which had been spot-on once again, and then walked towards the doors with others.

Outside, there were two guards - both of them new recruits - who were standing there while gazing downwards in resignation, while there were around half a dozen other guards gathered around as well.

"What made you think you could leave your post in the middle of your shift?" Hudan growled at them.

Chapter 149. Incompetence

The guards uneasily looked at each other. The taller one gazed at Kivamus and spoke in a low voice, "We also wanted to see the medal ceremony, milord!"

Hudan glared at him. "Then you should have asked someone else to take your place!"

The other guard protested, "But we weren't even supposed to be on duty at this time. The senior guards who were on duty called us over and told us to watch the gates while they went to watch the award ceremony."

Hudan gazed at Kerel. "Find out who it was and bring them here. I'll deal with them after this."

Kerel nodded, and jogged away from them.

Hudan asked the guards again. "But why did you just leave the gates open?"

"No, sir!" The shorter guard gave a reluctant answer, "We barred the eastern manor gates from inside, and then we went to watch the ceremony as well. This was the first time that medals were being given to someone in the village, and we really didn't want to miss it."

The tall guard added, "We thought it wouldn't do any harm. Those gates are hardly used these days since the coal mining has stopped. But we did bar them from the inside!"

"No you didn't," Feroy remarked. "If you had really barred those gates then whoever killed Sejkil would never have gotten inside the manor."

"But we did!" Then the taller guard hesitated and looked at the other one, "You did lock them, right?"

Feroy tilted his head. "And why are you asking him? Weren't you there as well?"

"I really had to take a leak at that time..." the tall guard mumbled, "so I left first, and told him to lock the gates."

Hudan frowned at them. "Shouldn't you both have closed it together? The hinges of those gates are old, and it takes two men to close and bar those heavy gates."

The taller guard looked surprised. After a moment, he muttered, "I didn't know that it couldn't be locked by one person... Those gates are only barred by the guards who get the night shifts, and we have never gotten that duty since we were recruited." He looked at the other guard. "Did you know about this?"

The shorter guard just shook his head and sighed. "You know that I'd have stopped you from leaving if I had known."

"So were you really able to bar the gates from inside just by yourself?" Feroy asked the shorter guard.

"I did close the gates, but when I tried to bar them from inside," the guard mumbled, "it got stuck in a position and I couldn't put the iron bar in place. I also heard the sound of cheering from the ceremony at

that time, and I really didn't want to be the only one to miss it! And when I still couldn't do it after trying many times, I just put the bar on the side and went to see the medal ceremony..." He added in a low voice, "I thought nobody would even find out from outside the gates that it wasn't barred, since the gates would still seem locked from the outside."

"You are an idiot!" Hudan growled at them after hearing their stories. "Both of you! You left your post in the middle of duty, and then went to watch the ceremony for your entertainment without even locking the gates properly!" He angrily looked at the other guards who had been watching quietly. "Didn't any of you think of reporting to me that the gates were already open, when we found out that Sejkil had been murdered?"

Most of the guards just gazed downwards, while one of them protested, "But the gates are supposed to be open at this time!" He pointed at the two guards who were being questioned until now. "And those two were already back at the gates when I found them to be open, so I didn't think it was anything odd that the gates were still open at this time."

Hudan stared back at the two earlier guards and growled, "I'll show you what it means to leave your post! I'm going to..."

As Kivamus listened to the guard captain berate the guards while threatening to train them until they fell down from exhaustion, he realized that these guards were not really corrupt or even complicit in the death of Sejkil - just like Duvas was telling him earlier - but their actions certainly showed gross incompetence by them. Hopefully some serious disciplinary training in the future should instill in them the importance of following their orders and not leaving their posts in the middle of their watch duties.

Then he remembered something and looked at the guards. "I was told that Sejkil didn't die an easy death, which means he must have screamed a lot. Didn't any of you hear anything?"

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Most of the guards just shook their heads, while a few muttered that they hadn't heard anything, since there was a lot of sound because of the crowd for the medal giving ceremony.

However, one of the guards, whom Kivamus had given a medal for getting injured in the line of duty, was looking to the side hesitantly.

Hudan barked at him. "What is it that you are hiding?"

The guard looked towards them with indecision. Then he muttered in a low voice, "After I had gotten my medal, I was feeling thirsty so I came to the well to get some water to drink, and I did hear some sounds from that barn."

Hudan took a step towards the guard in anger, but Kivamus put a hand on his arm to hold him back. The guard captain - who resembled a raging bull more than a human right now - took a deep breath to calm himself and stopped. Then he growled at that guard in a voice seething with fury. "You didn't think of trying to take a look and see what was happening? What if it was something even worse? What if someone was trying to harm or kill one of our maids? "

The guard looked down with shame. "I didn't think about that... But I knew that Sejkil had been tied up inside that barn, so I just thought it must be one of the guards roughing him up a little. But I never thought he would die! And I didn't even do anything myself! I didn't even go inside that barn!"

"Even if you thought it was Sejkil," Feroy asked him, "you still should have gone to take a look. Or at least you should have reported it to someone!"

"But I thought..." The guard's face showed anger for a moment before he controlled his expression. "That bastard Sejkil and the other bandits had tried to kill us! I thought it was only fair to rough him up in return. And I didn't even do anything to him myself! I just didn't think it was worth reporting."

That response surprised Kivamus. Did the guards really hold that much fury against the bandits? But then he immediately realized that he was being foolish. Of course they would be furious at the bandits! He had been sitting safe inside the manor, but the guards had risked their lives against the lowlifes. Some of them had gotten injured and had barely returned alive, so of course they would want to take revenge against the bandits.

He sighed. His modern mindset was habitual of a fair justice system and he just hadn't been able to execute either Sejkil or Levalo without a proper trial and judgement, so he had given a second chance to them after giving them some time to contemplate on their life choices - hoping they would change their

habits and try to live a good life. But since there was no permanent prison here, his order had basically meant forgiving the bandits for raiding the village and trying to kill people of Tiranat. His people.

He looked in the eyes of the guards standing there, and he thought he saw resentment there, as if they had felt betrayed by his decision to essentially forgive Sejkil without any punishment, but perhaps it was only his imagination.

He shook his head. Maybe... just maybe, he had been too forgiving. And perhaps it was a mistake for him to give a second chance to Sejkil to work as a laborer here, without even giving him any serious punishment. He did have his reasons for that - since they didn't have a proper prison at the time - but more importantly, he was just happy that an extra worker would help to get the longhouses and other buildings made even faster, which would mean that the villagers wouldn't have to live in cramped conditions with their neighbors for too long. But perhaps it was a mistake for him to not consider the other aspects of that decision.

More importantly, could he really have ordered someone to be executed? He knew that the bandit deserved to be punished as severely as possible, but that was the task of trained judges who knew the law, but he was just an engineer dammit! How was he supposed to give an order to end someone's life? Did he even have the right to do something like that?

He took a deep breath. Despite everything that had happened, he still believed that a human life was precious - no matter what the standards were in this cut-throat medieval world - and shouldn't be extinguished without being completely sure that the person didn't deserve to live anymore.

No matter what the nobles used as a form of justice in this world, and even if the majority of villagers would have supported him executing someone immediately - either for entertainment or revenge - he would try his best to stick to his principles of morality. But still, this incident had made him realize that he couldn't continue to behave like he was living in twenty-first century Earth. Just like others were adapting to his views and ideals, he would also have to try to adapt to this world as well.

That meant while he still wasn't going to order his guards to execute someone without a due process - something which wasn't feasible here without a well-written book of law as well as trained judges who were experienced in diligently carrying out that law - something still had to be done to punish criminals and lawbreakers.

Earlier, he had thought of postponing making the jail for the future, after the more important construction projects were completed. But it seemed like he couldn't do that anymore. This was still a

harsh medieval world, and while he would do his best to stick to his values and ideals of justice, the people needed a way to see that the wrongdoers would be punished, even if it was just locking them up for a long time. Despite the fact that feeding a prisoner for a long time without them working for it would be an extra load on their food stores which they didn't really need, it was a price he had to pay if he didn't want something like this to repeat again.

Of course, there was always the option of immediate execution if such a thing happened again in the future, but he'd keep that as the very last resort, and it would be done only after he had consulted with all his advisors on what the best punishment would be. A life would only be taken if and only if there really was no better way left, but he did have to keep that option open in the future, despite all his qualms against it.

He nodded to himself, his resolve strengthened. Then he looked at the small crowd gathered around him and began to speak.

Chapter 150. Discipline and Departure

"Listen everyone," he began. "I had good reasons for keeping Sejkil alive, but I also understand your concerns. I know you all had risked your life to fight with the bandits, so I realize that you may have felt that I was too lenient in giving out punishments. But the fact remains that we simply do not have a jail in the village right now, nor do we have a permanent prison here."

In the light of the brazier burning nearby, he saw that many servants and maids had also started to gather there, and they began listening to him as well. Someone being murdered inside the manor had rattled all of them, and they looked very eager to know what he was going to do about it. It hardened his resolve to do his best to protect these people.

Everyone listened carefully as he continued, "That's why I have made a decision to build a jail here as soon as we can. Once the first longhouse is completed in a few days, I will tell the carpenter to start working on it immediately. This will be an isolated room within the manor where we can lock up someone who needs to be punished for anything which he has done wrong - up to and including life imprisonment for the most heinous crimes."

The guards looked a little surprised by now, either by the fact that their baron was even talking to them about such a thing, or perhaps because he had not mentioned killing by execution in response to a crime. Kivamus exhaled. He wasn't going to start executing people unless he had a very, very good reason for it, but at the same time, as much as he hated it, he knew that it was probably a necessary evil in this world.

He swallowed before steeling himself and added, "Of course, there is still an option to simply execute someone who has done something unforgivable like murder or treason. But that will be considered on a case by case basis, and will only be decided once we are completely sure that that person is irredeemable."

Immediately, many of the guards including Feroy and Hudan gave nods in reply, while Gorsazo gazed at him with understanding, perhaps knowing that he was unused to saying such a thing.

Kivamus continued, "But that is for the future. Now, about Sejkil's death, Feroy has told me that the actual death was most likely an accident, but the fact remains that some unknown person still did something like this. So our immediate concern is to find out who did this and to give him a fitting punishment. It's not going to be easy to identify that person, but Feroy will be in charge of that, and he will do his best to find the criminal."

The gathered crowd looked a little relieved to hear that something was being done about it, but many of them were still glancing left and right, probably worried that the murderer was amongst them.

To assuage those concerns, he added further, "Also, let me assure you that after investigating it, we have come to the conclusion that it wasn't a resident of the manor who did this, but rather someone else from the village. So you can still trust everyone here completely."

Immediately, the small crowd gave sighs of relief, like a heavy weight had been removed from their shoulders.

"Now to address the reason why something like this had happened in the first place." He looked at the two guards who had left their posts. "While the two of you were not directly involved with the death of Sejkil, it was still your fault that you left your posts at the gates without telling anyone else, and without even locking the gates properly. We can only be glad that it was a bandit who died, because it could very well have been one of us instead of Sejkil."

The two guards immediately looked down with shame.

"Please forgive us, milord!" The taller one bowed low and begged. "We just thought that the bandit raid had already been repelled, so there would be no harm in just watching the reward ceremony for a while. Please don't lay us off!"

The shorter guard appealed to him as well with a bow. "We won't let anything like this happen ever again! We promise!"

Kivamus gazed at their expressions which looked genuine enough to him. However, if the village's situation was any better, he might really have fired them, but as of now they needed as many guards as they could. And while this was still a grievous error by those guards, they were still new recruits, and they weren't corrupt or disloyal. So getting them more disciplined should take care that such a thing would never be repeated in the future.

"Stand straight." As the two guards looked up, he continued, "Don't worry, I am not going to discharge you two from the manor. For now." He stared at them for a moment, making them squirm, then gazed at all the guards present there. "But I never want to see such a mistake being made by anyone else in the future. You can rest assured that next time I won't be so forgiving."

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Immediately the two guards gave deep bows again, while saying, "Thank you milord! Thank you so much!" They repeated it again and again, until he put up a hand to stop them.

However, even though he had gone easy on them for their mistakes, Kivamus had also learned his lesson to be strict when needed.

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"That being said," he continued, "I still can't let you go without punishment. So the both of you will be docked one month's wages for indiscipline and dereliction of duty. We are not paying you in coins for now, but Duvass will note it down and will deduct it from your wages when we do start it in the future."

The guards looked miserable on hearing that, but reluctantly, they gave nods of acceptance. "We understand, milord," the shorter one mumbled.

Kivamus looked at the other guards now. "Also, the experienced guards who left their posts and put you two at the gates - even though it was your rest time - will also lose a month's wages for this."

He continued, "You simply cannot leave your post in the middle of duty. That is the lesson you all need to learn. And that's why there are always at least two men at each gate. If there is an emergency and you really do need to leave, one of you should go and tell your superior first, so he can send a replacement for you. And only then can you leave your post."

He added with a firm voice, "Such a thing can never be allowed to take place again, or the results might be much worse. So I won't tolerate any lack of discipline in the future."

The guards gave nods of understanding.

Then Kivamus looked at the anxious maids and servants and smiled. "Don't worry. Something like this won't ever happen again. I'll make sure of it."

After they all had returned inside the manor hall, Feroy began, "Hudan will only leave tomorrow morning, so for now, I'll go and try to see if I can find something about this in the village square or the alehouse. Maybe someone will blab something about this, you know?"

"I'll leave it to you," Kivamus said.

He looked at the guard captain. "Hudan, it is up to you to instill discipline in our new recruits as well as the experienced guards. Although not getting a month's wages should remind them of the consequences if any of them thinks of doing something like this again, you'll need to do more so they won't forget this lesson." He added, "For today, just make those four guards keep running laps around the manor until they can't walk anymore, and tell Kerel to continue this for them for at least a few weeks. This will also serve as a punishment for them, but at the same time their levels of fitness and endurance will keep increasing by this."

Hudan nodded with a serious expression. "Don't worry, I'll make them train so hard that those guards won't forget about their mistake for years."

Kivamus gave a nod and asked, "Have you already selected the guards whom you are taking with you tomorrow?"

"I have," the guard captain replied. "As much as I wanted to give some rest to Calubo after everything he's been through, I still need to take him with me to show the way, as well as to show a familiar face to the stone cutters, otherwise they might just consider us as new slave-masters and refuse to come with us even if we do kill the bandits. I've also notified the other guards who'll be coming with me and they are sharpening their weapons and preparing their armors right now."

"That's good." Kivamus added, "Let's just hope those two escaped bandits don't reach the quarry before you."

He looked at Duvas. "Had you told Leah to start working on the fur coats we had gotten from the bandits?"

"Of course," the majordomo replied. "I had also told Madam Nerida not to give her any other tasks for now, and then I ordered Leah to prioritize the fur coats. She's been working on them continuously, and she'd already repaired a few of them during the day, but I told her to work on them as late as she could for tonight, even using the light of the braziers and the fireplace to repair more of them."

Kivamus nodded. "Hopefully we will have enough of them by tomorrow morning."

It was early morning right now, and the sun had barely started rising. Kivamus and the others were standing near the gates of the manor watching the guards get ready to leave. Although there was a brazier kept near the gates which he was using to warm his hands a little, it didn't really help much, even in the absence of any wind. The weather seemed to be at freezing temperature right now, and the heavy cloud cover hadn't reduced even a little bit.

Earlier in the morning, he had been told that Leah had managed to sew seven usable fur coats from the eight damaged ones they had taken from the bandits, with the last one being sacrificed to make patches for the less damaged fur coats. But they were sending eight guards on this rescue mission, so he had added one fur coat from the manor house so that all the guards would be able to wear one of them.

As he saw one of the guards load a small pack of food on one of the horses, suddenly he noticed that snowflakes were falling down. He looked up with surprise, and soon, he saw snow start to fall gently all around him.

He held one of his hands ahead of him, and saw some of the snow start to gather in his palms. This was the first snow he was seeing in this world, and it marked the start of the harsh winters near the region of the Arakin mountains. He looked around, and saw that he wasn't alone in gazing at the snow. Everyone had stopped what they were doing and were looking at the first snowfall of the season.

But soon, the guards continued loading up the horses with many different packs of food and waterskins which had been divided on multiple horses, so they wouldn't lose all their food supply in case they lost one of the packs for some reason.

Madam Nerida had come through as well, and she had provided enough bread, hardtack and dried meat, along with some butter for the guards to sustain the journey with ease. They were also taking half a sack of crushed wheat with them to feed the stonecutters on the return journey, which was divided into multiple packs as well for safekeeping.

Before long, Hudan walked towards him while tightening his newly received fur coat around him.