

Londoner 151

Chapter 151. Sketching

Kivamus nodded slowly. "That makes sense. Let them know that until Hudan and the others return, they should keep the hunting trips short and target to return by evening or early night every day. That will also allow them to properly warm up their bodies indoors after enduring the cold throughout the day, since they would get a proper fireplace burning with coal here, unlike in the forest where they might not even be able to light a fire for various reasons."

He continued, "And once we are able to provide them with fur coats - by which time we'll also try to get some sledges made - they can go deeper into the forest on longer trips, along with the sledges to try to hunt and bring back bigger game."

"I'll tell them about this," Feroy replied with a nod. "By that time they would also have some experience of hunting in coordination with the guards, and hopefully, by then they should be able to start catching bigger animals like any isolated wolves or moose. At that time, once they've found a sizable prey, the archers can try to shoot down the beasts from afar, and then the swordsmen would move in up close to make the kill on the already wounded animals."

"That's a good plan," Kivamus commented. He looked at others. "Once we are able to send more hunting parties in the coming weeks, along with raising a good number of rabbits by the summer months, we should regularly start getting a good amount of meat from them. And at that point, we should get enough fur from them that we might be able to provide proper winter clothing to everyone by the next winter. Maybe we could even sell the best quality furs to any visiting merchants or directly to the Cinran's market to get some extra gold."

"I always like hearing about a new source of revenue," Duvas remarked with a grin. "And since the process of making winter coats from fur is much less complicated than making new clothing from wool, Leah should be able to sew up that fur by herself."

"That's true enough," Kivamus observed, "but when it comes to making new clothing, getting that much wool is a much bigger problem. Even if we don't have the proper tools or knowhow to make woolen fabric from it, we can just put that wool directly between two layers of cotton or linen clothing and sew them up to make a decent woolen coat. That would still be much better than the clothing villagers wear these days."

"I understand that," Duvas replied. "But either way, hopefully we will be able to get some extra gold in the future from these projects."

Kivamus nodded. "That being said, with eight guards out on the rescue mission, as well as those who'll go on the hunting trips, we will be a little short on guards again until Hudan and the others return. So getting a few more women to join up as guards soon would be very helpful for us. So I wanted to ask if there is any progress in recruiting any more women, apart from the two we've already hired?"

Duvas gave a reluctant shake of his head. "Not really, my lord. I have already made a few announcements in the village square about this, but they are still reluctant to join us."

Kivamus nodded as he watched Madam Helga take away the cutlery from the long dining table. And that gave him an idea. "You know what, so far only men have made the announcement to recruit women, whether it was done by the guards or you. But that's not likely to work - as we have already seen, since you can't give the perspective of women. So I want you to take a few women with you when you go to the market square to make the announcement next time. And they should give their views about this."

He continued, "Madam Helga can tell about the risks and hazards of living in a dangerous place from her own experience, while Madam Nerida can tell them about the perks and benefits of living inside the manor. Whatever our current financial insufficiencies might be, life inside the manor would still be much more comfortable and safer for the women of the village - especially those who are living alone. And another time, you should take a couple of younger women from the manor to speak at the market square. Even the sisters whom we have already recruited can tell about the training they are going through, the kind of meals they regularly get here and how they are treated in the manor, as well as what they like and dislike about working as the only female guards."

Finally, he added, "Hopefully that should give some motivation to the other woman to join us as guards."

Duvas nodded. "I still say that recruiting female guards might just be a pointless undertaking at best, but I'll do as you say."

"Don't worry about that," Kivamus said with a smile, "you will come around to my viewpoint when we start making crossbows here, which are going to make women just as effective guards as men."

Duvas snorted. "I'll believe it when I see it."

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It had been four days since Hudan and the other guards had left for the quarry, and so far there was no news from them. But Kivamus had expected that it would easily take more than a week for them to return, so hopefully, there was no need to worry about them for now.

The snow had been falling continuously since then, and by now small patches of snow had started to gather on the ground as well. While it wasn't quite a winter wonderland outside, it did mean that it was biting cold all the time. But so far the light amount of snow gathered on the ground wasn't enough to stop any of the construction process or the clearing of forests.

This was Kivamus' first winter in Tiranat, but from what he had learned from the others, it was rare for more than a few inches of snow to gather in this village, except for the years with particularly harsh winters which deposited a lot more snow than usual. Hopefully, this won't be one of those years.

Being motivated by the personal viewpoints of their female guards and the older women from the manor, they had also gotten two more women as recruits. They had also been allotted to live in the upper floor of the servants' hall along with the other maids, where Isomi and Savomi were living as well, and Kerel had slowly started to include them in running and other basic physical exercises and stretches.

The hunting parties had been going out every day, but so far they hadn't been very successful in catching anything sizable. But the small game which they had been bringing in was still a noticeable improvement over the past. Apart from a small amount of meat which they kept for their own use in the manor, most of it was now being added to the stew which was provided to the elderly villagers and the children as free meals every evening.

By now, the hunters had also brought two rabbits which they had been able to catch alive, and they had given it to the maids to keep safely within the manor. It was only a start, but if they were able to catch more of them, they should hopefully be able to start raising rabbits here.

That was the good news. The bad news was that Feroy still hadn't heard anything about who had entered the manor in the dark and killed Sejkil - even if by accident. Whoever the culprits were, they were keeping completely silent instead of bragging about how they had taken revenge against the bandit. But hopefully, Feroy would be able to get some hints in the future from the ample time he spent in the market square and the alehouse of the village.

Apart from that, another undesirable news was that the hunters who had been going to the east of the village hadn't sighted any losuvil vines or any sheep in that region so far. But there was still hope for the future, since they had barely covered a small area, and there was a lot of ground to cover in that direction. Read exclusive content at [My Virtual Library Empire](#)

Kivamus regularly joined the guards in the mornings for some running and light training as well, though he didn't stay there nearly as long as the guards themselves. He had also noticed that the four guards whose blunders had caused Sejkil's death to happen were being run ragged every day in the training.

Right now, it was approaching evening but there was still some time before it got fully dark. And for the past few hours Kivamus had been alone inside the manor hall, which had become his makeshift office in recent weeks. He was leaning over the long dining table, which also doubled as a workbench for him, while sketching on a piece of parchment. Along with the fireplace burning on one side of the hall, a few more braziers had been kept in the corners of the large room, to make it warmer, as well as to give some more light inside for him to work.

Today, he was working on another iteration of a blueprint for the seed drills he wanted to get built here. Once he was done with the sketch, he stood up straight, and gazed at the diagram again, but he still didn't feel satisfied with it. It was only a rudimentary design, which he had sketched keeping in mind the capabilities of the local craftsmen, and it should be able to do the task it was meant for.

But after gazing at the diagram for a few minutes, he shook his head. Something still felt missing to him in the sketch. Giving a loud exhale, he dragged the used parchment to one side to a slowly growing pile, and pulled up a new one to start from scratch.

Right at that moment, the outer door of the manor hall opened and Duvas walked inside with a huge grin.

"There is good news, my lord," the majordomo reported. "The construction of the first longhouse block is finished."

"What?" Kivamus said with surprise. "That's wonderful!"

"It certainly is," Duvas agreed with a smile. "A laborer had just come running to the manor to report it. He told me that Taniok has nailed the last of the bunks to the walls, and with the other things already completed there, the longhouse block is now ready to move in."

"This is certainly good news!" Kivamus echoed. "We should go and take a look at it."

"As you wish," Duvas said with a nod. "I'll tell Feroys to gather a few guards to accompany us."

Kivamus nodded. "Tell Gorsazo to come with us as well. I think he had gone to talk with Madam Helga again."

The majordomo nodded. "I'll send a servant to fetch him."

"Okay, then. I'll meet you at the gates soon," Kivamus said before Duvas exited the outer door.

Kivamus took another look at the parchment where he had just started sketching another design for the seed drill. Eh, it could wait. The longhouse block was the first major project they had embarked on after his arrival in the village, so he was very excited to see it.

He picked up his fur coat where he had draped it above a chair, and tightened it firmly around him. And with that, he exited the outer door as well. The longhouse block awaited him.

Chapter 152. The First Longhouse Block

The setting sun cast long shadows across the clearing as Baron Kivamus Ralokaar approached the newly constructed longhouse block. The air was thick with the smell of burning coal and damp earth, while the rhythmic thud of hammers somewhere in the area punctuated the silence. Smoke curled lazily from a couple of braziers kept in front of the building, where a group of villagers were warming up their hands.

Although the snowfall seemed to have stopped for now, small patches of snow gathered on the ground here and there told him that the temperature still remained below freezing. He believed that most likely it was only a short respite from the snowfall, until the time it would undoubtedly start again later on.

Further ahead in the north, he could see that the new village walls seemed to be standing tall in that direction - along with a gap in the middle for the new gatehouse which would be built there - though he didn't know how far those walls extended yet. It would still take quite a bit of time to complete them.

As he reached closer and stepped over the newly dug drainage ditch using a couple of planks which had been kept there for that purpose, a hush fell over the laborers who had been working nearby. His two guards, faces grim and alert, flanked him, their eyes scanning the small crowd for any signs of trouble.

Kivamus, however, was more interested in the longhouse block itself. It was a sturdy structure, its walls built from rough-hewn logs with their barks removed, and the gaps between them patched over with a blend of mud and straw to prevent the icy winds from entering the building. Its slanted roof built with planks sloped steeply on both sides, and was designed to shed the heavy snowfalls that would inevitably come.

The laborers, a combination of men and women, watched him with awe and apprehension as he scrutinized the construction. He also noticed a small group of children huddled near the entrance, their eyes wide with wonder as they watched the baron approach. He smiled at them, offering a gentle wave. The children, emboldened by his gesture, shyly waved back. It was a small gesture, but Kivamus knew its importance. These children were the future of Tiranat, and it was his duty to ensure that they had a safe and prosperous future.

"Let's look at it from the inside as well," he said to the others who had accompanied him from the manor. They gave nods, and walked along with him as he moved towards the entrance.

As he passed through the heavy wooden gates, he found himself in a square courtyard. In the center of the courtyard, a gnarled Bilona tree stood stark against the twilight sky, its thick branches reaching out widely, devoid of leaves in the winter months. There were some small clumps of snow gathered on the ground here as well, but once spring arrived, there was enough space here for the residents to easily cultivate some vegetable patches to add a variety to their diets.

A few laborers were still busy loading some tools - hammers, saws, and chisels - into a waiting wheelbarrow, while Taniok gave orders to some other men and women on one side. When the carpenter noticed them, he said something to the laborers and immediately started walking towards him.

"You are here already, milord!" Taniok exclaimed. "I thought you'd only visit tomorrow. We still have to do some cleaning up here..."

Kivamus chuckled. "I couldn't wait to see the result of your hard work."

The carpenter seemed a little embarrassed at the praise, and rubbed the back of his balding head. He did have a thick wooly hat to cover his pate - unlike most of the laborers - but he was holding it in his other hand for now.

Taniok gestured towards one of the doors there. "Let me show you the insides as well."

Kivamus nodded and followed behind him along with Gorsazo and Feroy, while Duvas stayed behind to talk with some villagers. As he reached closer, he noticed the intricate details - the carefully crafted wooden doors, the small windows, with planks of the wooden floor meticulously attached together like a jigsaw puzzle. There was a series of wooden bunks attached to each side of the building - one above the other - while each pair of bunks was separated from the next two by a vertical section built of planks as well.

As he looked to the other side, these bunks extended to the end of that section - which would have been the first longhouse before he had decided to convert them into a single longhouse block. This single block should still be able to house the majority of the villagers who had been homeless before he arrived here.

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A few laborers had also followed them inside curiously, and they followed behind him as he walked around. He asked a few simple questions to them as well, to make them feel included. The laborers, keen to impress their lord, eagerly answered all his questions, their voices filled with a newfound sense of pride. He was glad to see the people of the previously scared and hungry village coming together and feeling the accomplishment of completing this building.

Soon, he returned outside to the courtyard, and noticed that there was a small crowd gathered near the outer gates, with Duvas standing in the middle of them.

Curiously, he began walking towards them, followed by Feroy and Gorsazo. Once the villagers noticed him, they parted aside, and he saw that a laborer was tying a thin rope to the two sides of the open gate.

Once he reached there, Duvas began with a grin, "My lord, I thought this would be a good time to get this building inaugurated by you. I couldn't find anything like a ribbon here, but you should still cut the rope in front of all the villagers. It's tradition, my Lord."

So that's what the crowd was doing! He wondered how the same tradition had been preserved in this world as that on earth. But he would likely never know the answer to that.

Despite everything, Kivamus was still not habitual of being treated like a big celebrity or politician, and considered himself a normal person like he used to be on earth. But, the fact remained that he was the Baron of Tiranat now, and for the villagers here, he constituted the only real figure of authority in this region. And that meant any events like cutting ribbons to inaugurate the longhouse block fell to him. He was still not sure whether he liked it, but he knew that he didn't dislike it anymore.

He looked at Gorsazo and whispered, "Does this really need to be done by me?"

Gorsazo shrugged. "It will barely take a moment, but it will boost the morale of the villagers to see even a simple event like this. It will make them feel like they have really accomplished something, since it is being inaugurated by their baron - a noble."

Giving an uncertain nod, Kivamus bent down below the rope and walked to the outside of the building, followed by others. This was the first construction project which had been finished under him, and its completion signified that no one would have to sleep in the open anymore. Perhaps it was a good idea to make an event of its inauguration after all.

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He looked around him, and saw that one of the villagers here must have told about his visit to others working in the north, and by now there was a sizable crowd gathered outside the longhouse block. But the immediate area around the gates had been cleared of people by his guards, and only Duvas and Gorsazo were standing next to him, with Feroy keeping an eye on the crowd. A murmur of approval rippled through the crowd as he took a pair of slightly rusty iron scissors from Duvas.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting the clearing in a warm, golden light, Kivamus turned to the villagers. "It is a fine structure," he declared, his voice carrying across the gathering. "You have all worked tirelessly, and the results are truly impressive. Well done!"

The villagers, their faces illuminated by the fading light, beamed with pride. They had built this longhouse, log by log, plank by plank - a symbol of their resilience and their unwavering hope for a better future. And they couldn't be happier to be praised by their baron.

Once Kivamus saw the villagers were all looking at him with cheery anticipation, he grinned as well, and deciding not to make them wait anymore, he walked a step further and cut that thin rope joining the two ends of the open gates, and immediately, the crowd erupted in cheers of joy.

Some of them were clapping in happiness, while others were pumping their fists in the air - likely those laborers who were part of the construction team for this block. The few children who were standing at the front of the crowd had also started jumping in happiness, even though they might not understand too much about the event - but such a rare day of happiness was easily infectious.

Slowly, the cheers started to die down, and the crowd started milling around, hoping to be the first to enter the longhouse block after its formal inauguration. Immediately, his guards surrounded him and cleared the way to a side for him. He and the others moved a little further back from the crowd, letting them enjoy the moment.

Kivamus looked at Duvas. "Although we tried our best, we were still late in completing this before the start of snowfall. So it was a good idea to house the homeless people temporarily with other villagers."

Duvas nodded. "We have to start shifting villagers here from tomorrow, so we have to decide who will move here first, since there still aren't enough bunks for everyone here."

Kivamus agreed with a nod. "My calculation was that there would be one hundred and twenty-four bunks in each longhouse block." He looked at Taniok who had also followed them. "Is that still accurate?"

Chapter 153. Additions

The carpenter nodded. "It is, milord." He added, "And there should be no problem cooking meals for that many people here, since the kitchen and storage room of the longhouse block are also ready."

"That's good to hear." Kivamus looked at Gorsazo. "Calubo told us that there were twenty-six stonecutters at the quarry, so we have to keep that many bunks empty for them. That leaves us with ninety-eight bunks. So we should prioritize shifting those people here first who have been living in the most congested houses, and the other villagers who have only taken in one or two homeless people can keep them for a while longer." Explore new worlds at My Virtual Library Empire

Duvas nodded. "I'll refer to my notes where I had written down the name of every villager who had been housing someone else. I'll sort them according to what you said, and I'll send someone to let those people know that they can start shifting here from the morning." He added, "Also, now we won't have to pay grain and coal to those people who had been housing the homeless until now, so it will ease up the spending of our grain stores on them."

"That's true," Kivamus said, "but make sure to keep providing it to those people who are unable to shift their temporary tenants to the longhouse block for now."

The majordomo gave a nod. "And what should we do about the free meals we distribute after shifting people to the longhouse?"

Kivamus thought about it for a moment. "It's just a small amount, since the laborers are already earning their meals. The only difference will be that their food will now be cooked together in the common kitchen of the longhouse block, instead of them cooking it separately at their homes. But I still think the time is right for us to start scaling down the free meals now."

He continued, "Here is what we'll do. Instead of providing cooked meals directly, we will provide an equivalent amount of wheat and vegetables free of cost to the longhouse block - enough to feed all the elderly and children who are going to live in it. This way that free grain we provide will be added to the stores of each longhouse block, so that they can cook the regular meals in their kitchen for everyone who is living there."

Kivamus added, "Making the elderly and the children walk everyday in such cold weather from the longhouse block to the manor isn't a good idea anyway. So this will help to prevent that as well. This will also ease the pressure on our maids to cook that much food, which will free more of their time for other tasks. However, there will still be some of the elderly and children who are going to be living with other villagers even now, because of a shortage of space in the first longhouse block, so we will still keep cooking a small amount of extra food to provide to them regularly."

"I'll do as you say," Duvas said with a nod. "I'll tell the servants to transfer a few sacks of grain and coal to the longhouse block in the morning. The wheelbarrows would be quite helpful in this."

He added, "I'll also designate a reliable person as the storekeeper for the longhouse's storage room like we discussed earlier - preferably one of the elderly villagers since they don't have to work as a laborer - so they can stay at the block for most of the day. Only he will have the key for that room, so that he can ensure that the grain storeroom of the block will be safe, and he'll also keep a track of what is remaining there, so that they can ask the manor to provide more grain or coal in case the storeroom is getting empty."

"Good!" Kivamus asked, "What about the new braziers I had asked to be made for the block?"

"Cedoron had sent someone to tell me that they'll be ready by tomorrow," Duvas answered. "And as we discussed, these will only use an iron tray with wooden supports, to save on some iron."

Kivamus nodded. At that moment, he saw the old priest of the village with his patched robe ambling slowly towards them. He had put the cowl of his robe on his head to prevent the cold from seeping in, but his long white beard made him recognize the priest easily. Others immediately gave bows of respect to him.

"Bless you all," Father Edric spoke with a raised hand. Reaching closer, he looked at Kivamus and pointed to the inside of the longhouse block which was visible from where they were standing. "You have done a good thing for the villagers. It will ensure everyone has a roof this winter." He added with a grandfatherly smile, "May the Goddess bless you and give you the strength to keep providing for the villagers."

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Kivamus gave a short bow as well in respect. "Thank you, Father Edric. I'll keep trying to do my best for them."

"I know you will, milord, I know you will." Father Edric continued, "Well, I should meet with the other villagers too. May the goddess bless your path in the future." And with that, the old priest slowly walked towards the gates of the longhouse block, with other villagers immediately surrounding him to ask for blessings.

As Kivamus turned around to leave, he saw that standing quite apart from the small crowd gathered around the priest, there was one little girl - probably no older than five - reaching out a hesitant hand to touch the rough bark of the Bilona tree. She might have been homeless in the past, Kivamus thought, with the way she gazed with wonder at the newly constructed building. But then he smiled, knowing that it was now a thing of the past for her.

This was the future of Tiranat - these children, full of hope and promise. He had a responsibility to ensure that they had a bright future, a future free from want and despair. Then he got an idea while looking at a worker who was pulling down a rope which had been put on a branch of the bilona tree.

He looked at the carpenter. "You must have a few extra planks remaining with you, right?"

Taniok hesitated. "I had only cut enough planks to complete all the bunks, but there might be a couple of them still lying around. Why, though?"

"I want you to make something else tomorrow," Kivamus replied. "Don't worry, it will barely take any time. Just take a sturdy plank, and after making sure it's smooth and in a good condition, make two holes at each end of it."

He pointed inside the longhouse block. "Then loop two strong ropes around a horizontal branch of the tree, and attach the end of those ropes with that plank to make it a seat. This way children can play with it as a swing." He added, "Most of their parents go to work during the day, so they might get bored otherwise. But this way they will have something to distract them, and it will be a safe play area where the children can be left to their own devices without their parents worrying too much about them."

Taniok nodded slowly. "It's simple enough. I'll build it tomorrow."

Kivamus looked around for a moment, and finding the middle aged foreman for the north, he called him closer.

Yeden jogged towards them slowly, and asked, "What is it, milord?"

Kivamus said, "There is something I want you to do. Tell a few workers to gather some dirt in a wheelbarrow tomorrow morning, then put it around the trunk of the Bilona tree at its base. You should gather enough dirt that it is around two feet high from the ground, and perhaps three feet wide. You can use some smooth stones at its edges to give it strength if needed. This will become a place for the older residents of the longhouse block to sit in the winter and soak in the sun - whenever it does come out."

He added, "And in the summer, when the leaves come back on the tree, this will be a place for them to sit around in the shade, while keeping an eye on the children who will have to stay at home while their parents are out working."

Yeden gave an immediate nod. "I'll do it in the morning, milord. It's easy."

Then Kivamus looked back at the carpenter. "Your next task is to build an isolated jail room in the manor. Duvas will give you the details, but in short, while it only needs to be big enough to hold five or six people at a time, it should be sturdy enough that escaping from it shouldn't be feasible. And you can simply use the logs for this, instead of planks, to finish it quickly."

Taniok frowned. "Are you sure about that, milord? The previous baron wanted everything built only from planks in the manor."

Kivamus chuckled. "Yeah, I am very sure. I don't care about the aesthetics as long as something does what it is meant to do."

Taniok nodded. "While the planks have to be cut either by me or my apprentice, the cutting of logs by other workers hasn't stopped at all. We already have gathered a big pile of them ready to use as the walls for the second longhouse block. So it should be easy enough to move some of them to the manor using the log-mover." He added after a moment of thought, "I think I can build the jail by tomorrow evening, and if not, then certainly by some time next day."

"Good." Kivamus continued, "After that, you have to start working on the second longhouse block. There is no point in building the gatehouses until most of the village wall is already complete."

He looked at the foreman of the north. "How long is that going to take from now?"

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Yeden thought about it for a moment. "Give or take a month, I'd say. By then the wall should be fully completed, apart from the gatehouses."

Kivamus nodded, and continued speaking to the carpenter, "We will postpone the gatehouses until after the wall is finished. For now, you should work on the second longhouse block only. And make sure to keep training a few apprentices along with you, so they can take over building simple things to free up more of your time."

Taniok nodded. "I've already selected one of them and described to him how to build a wheelbarrow tray and its wheels from wood. Assuming he does well - and I believe he will, since he is a talented lad - he should be able to regularly build new wheelbarrows from scratch just by himself, as long as the blacksmith provides him with the few iron parts he will need."

"That's excellent!" Kivamus praised. "And of course, Duvas will let the blacksmith know about it. Getting many more wheelbarrows built cheaply during the winter is going to help us a lot when we start sowing seeds in the spring."

He looked around him again, feeling glad by the villagers' enthusiasm for the new longhouse block, which was also going to be the new home for many of them.

"Let's return then," he said to the others, and started walking back towards the manor.

~ Calubo ~

~ Somewhere in the forests southwest of Cinran ~

Calubo pulled up the reins of his horse to stop it from moving. They had been traveling continuously for four days now, and they still hadn't caught any sight of the quarry. It had been much more difficult than he had thought it would be.

He was the one leading the group of guards, so others stopped behind him as well once he slowed down. He looked around him for a moment trying to see if he recognized anything here. But it wasn't easy in this forest where all the trees without leaves looked similar to him, even though he had come many times to hunt outside the quarry with some other bandits. But even though it was quite cold, at least it wasn't snowing yet, or it would be nearly impossible to find their path if everything looked the same around them after being covered with white snow everywhere.

The fur coats that Lord Kivamus had given to all of them had been very helpful to them, and because of them the guards had been able to keep moving for longer, instead of stopping regularly to light a fire and heat up their bodies. Truthfully, he was still surprised that the baron had given it to them instead of keeping it for himself. Maybe the rumor he had heard from other guards about the baron treating even the commoners under him like humans really was true.

"Do you see anything you recognize?" one of the guards asked in a tired voice.

Calubo just shook his head reluctantly, and prodded the horse to start moving again, with others following behind him after a moment.

It was nearly dark already, so they would have to stop for the night soon. While he knew for sure that they were going in the general direction of the quarry, he still hadn't been able to find something which would give him a reference of the locations.

As they kept moving for a while, he saw something further ahead of them which he thought he recognized. He slowed down, and looked at that small bluff carefully, while turning his horse towards it. As he came closer, he spurred his horse to move around the bluff, and right after he reached behind it, he saw the fedarus tree with a broken branch that he had expected to find there.

Grinning with happiness, he turned to the other guards and pointed at it. "We are very close now. The bandits and I had rested right there a few times when we had come to hunt." He looked around him for a moment, and suddenly the location started to make sense to him. He recognized a clump of trees maybe a hundred feet away from them which they always passed when coming or going from the quarry to this place.

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"We should reach the quarry by the time it gets dark," Calubo told the others. "It's not far away now."

Hudan nodded. "Let's move then." He looked at the other guards. "And be careful from now on, and keep an eye on your surroundings. It's possible that one of the bandits might have come here to hunt again."

The guards nodded in reply, and Calubo turned his horse towards that clump of trees, with others following close behind him.

Before long, he passed around another small bluff, and pulled the reins of his horse again when he saw one side of the quarry just around fifty feet away from him. By this time it was nearly dark, and they were lucky that they had reached here by now, or it would be difficult for them to keep going in the night.

Not making any noise, he held up his hands to stop others behind him, and pointed at it.

Hudan nodded, and gestured to all of them to get off from their horses and to gather closer. All of them had a hand on the hilt of their swords now - just in case.

The guard captain spoke in a hushed voice, "Calubo and I are going to take a look first. You all wait here until then and try not to make any unnecessary sounds."

The other guards nodded, and on Hudan's gesture, Calubo started walking towards the edge of the forest ground surrounding the pit. Soon, he saw the dense thicket of trees at the edge which he was looking for, and pointed towards it to Hudan. The guard captain nodded and both of them dropped down to the ground and started to crawl towards that thicket.

Once they had reached near the edge, they hesitantly put their heads ahead of the edge, and finally saw the bandit camp on the sloping path going to the pit of the quarry.

And the situation didn't look good at all. Although it hadn't snowed here yet, he saw that there was only a small, single fire around which the stonecutters were huddled together on one side, with the bandits sitting on the other side. That was quite unlike the time he used to live here, when they used to burn two big fires to keep the people warm from both sides. It was probably because now there were so few

bandits here that they couldn't afford to send someone to bring much firewood because of a fear of the slaves running away, as well as Nokozal's certain punishment if that happened.

As he looked closer, he noticed with relief that there were only four people wearing the fur coats, which meant that Nokozal and the runt hadn't reached here yet. And that was very good news for them, since that huge bastard was a very dangerous fighter even alone.

He also saw that the two nodors were still there, tied to the huts on one side, along with their two limestone carrying wagons kept nearby. But looking at the state of the people sitting hunched up together near the measly fire in their threadbare clothes, it wouldn't be long before the bandits thought of butchering the poor animals, or burning those wagons as kindling. It seemed the guards had reached there on time, after all.

He was also carefully trying to look for Hyola, hoping she was okay. But he couldn't recognize anyone from this far, especially in the darkness, since all of them were using some cloth to cover most of their heads and faces from the cold. But when he counted them, he was relieved to see that there were still twenty-six slaves, which meant that she had to be here! He just hoped that she was still okay, and the bandits hadn't tried anything.

Soon, Hudan, who had been observing the bandit camp with keen eyes, poked him on his shoulder, and gestured him to return towards the others.

Reaching there, the guard captain gathered all of the guards closer, and explained the situation in a hushed voice, including the fact that there were only four bandits here. Hudan continued, "But we still have to keep watch on the quarry for some time. Our plan will be to attack the bandit camp around an hour before sunrise, when they will be the least prepared for a battle."

One of the guards asked, "But it's already dark now. Shouldn't we just rush towards their camp and surprise them? We can take them with our numbers!"

Hudan grunted. "No, we don't have enough information yet. It's possible that there are more bandits who might have gone outside to hunt or relieve themselves. And we cannot take the risk of them flanking us, especially since it's their home turf. So we need to wait and find out everything about them."

The guard captain looked back at him. "How many people do we need to keep an eye on the area? And is there any other entrance we couldn't see?"

Chapter 155 A Silent Approach

Calubo didn't have to think long before replying. "Two of us should be more than enough. The pit of the quarry is huge, but as you saw, all the huts are located on the path which goes down towards the pit from the surrounding ground of the forest, to prevent them from flooding in case of another thunderstorm. And there is no other entrance to the pit. So we should be fine with just two men."

Hudan nodded. "Alright. We are going to keep a watch on that entrance of the quarry in turns. Two of us will go closer to the edge of the ground surrounding the pit. That will be Calubo and me in the first shift, since I need to ask more details from him about the terrain of the pit. That leaves six of you here. You all will take our supplies and the horses somewhere nearby and tie them there. But there'll be no fire for us tonight, as you can guess."

Some of the guards grunted in displeasure, but everyone knew the importance of staying undetected here, so none of them opposed the order.

Hudan continued, "You all should eat some dried meat so you will have energy for the battle later. Calubo and I will just eat later on after our shift is over." He added, "And try to take some good rest in turns, with five men sleeping at a time, and one of you awake to keep an eye on the horses as well as your surroundings - just in case there is another bandit who's already outside and wanders there for some reason."

After the guards nodded in reply, the guard captain continued, "We will change our watch shifts after every two hours or so. While we don't have the temple bells to tell time here like in our village, whoever amongst you is going to be awake should just wake up another two men after roughly that time. Then those two of you should come to relieve us so we can get some rest as well."

The guards gave grunts of acknowledgements. After telling them to move on to their tasks, Hudan beckoned Calubo to follow him towards that thicket again. It was going to be a long night.

"Wake up, Calubo."

"Wake up man! You can't keep sleeping now. It's time."

Calubo blinked open his eyes, and saw that it was another guard who was trying to wake him up. He gave a nod in reply, and sat up slowly while trying to look around him. He noticed that it was still completely dark, but it must be getting close to morning now, since that guard was the one who was selected for the last shift to keep an eye on the bandit camp.

Taking a deep breath, he remembered that he had gone to sleep a few hours earlier when his shift was over. He looked around him again and in the faint light of the moon which was still hidden behind the clouds, he saw that all of the guards were already up, and they were checking their weapons and tightening their leather armors to get ready for battle. It seemed he was the last one to wake up.

Rubbing a hand over his cropped black hair, he stood up quickly and looked around for a water skin, since he was already feeling thirsty. Once he had taken a few big gulps, he made the necessary checks for his gear as well. He saw another guard offering pieces of dried meat jerky to others, and with a nod of thanks, he took a few of them as well. Soon he noticed that Hudan was calling up the guards to gather closer, so he walked towards them while chewing on the salted jerky.

"This is the situation," the guard captain began. "All the guards who were on watch have told me that at most three of the bandits are awake at any time, while the last one seems to be sleeping. They also haven't been moving much, and around every hour they just go for a cursory check of their camp, and return back near the fire."

Hudan continued, "The good news is that no other bandit came to the quarry until now, which means we only have to deal with those four bastards. And even if there was another lowlife or Nokozal coming here, they will only start moving after sunrise - which should be around an hour away from now - so we have until then to take the quarry from these lowlives."

The huge guard captain gazed at each of them once before he pointed to a new guard. "You will stay here to keep an eye on the horses. Stay alert."

Once the guard nodded in reply, Hudan gave a savage grin. "Now let's go and send these bastards to the Goddess!"

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One of the guards raised a fist upward, and spoke their newfound rallying cry in a low voice, "For Lord Kivamus we fight!"

Immediately others repeated the same with confident grins, and the rescue plan was in motion.

Hudan beckoned them to follow him towards the quarry again. Once they were closer, he sent a guard to the edge of the pit to see the current state. The guard nodded and crawled towards the edge to take a look.

And before long, he returned back and gave his report. "Nothing's changed so far," the guard described. "One bandit seems to be sleeping near the fire, and most of the stonecutters also seem to be huddled inside those huts for now."

"Good," Hudan nodded. "Let's move then. We don't have time to waste." He looked at Calubo. "Lead us towards the entrance of the pit."

Calubo gave a quick nod, and with his hand on the hilt of his sword, he turned around, trying to remember the terrain from his time in the quarry. But thankfully, he remembered enough that it didn't take him long to lead everyone to the start of that path going down into the pit, while making sure to stop at a place where the bandits couldn't see them yet.

He whispered to others, "We are here. On the right side of this path, which slopes downwards slowly, is the edge of the quarry, and on the left side is the pit itself. Everyone make sure not to slip over on that side."

Hudan gave a nod, and after crouching low, he moved a few steps further. Once he had taken a quick look, he returned back.

"Be mentally ready for an immediate battle," the guard captain ordered, "but keep your sword sheathed for now. The good thing is that we don't have to worry about any archers or being flanked right now since this is the only path here."

Hudan jerked his thumb towards the bandit camp. "And those idiots are staring into the fire right now, so they wouldn't be able to see well in the dark. But even though we outnumber them seven to four, I want to avoid any serious injuries amongst us, so we will crawl on the ground to move undetected as close as we can to them." Then he dropped down to the ground, and after beckoning others to follow him, he started crawling slowly downwards on that path.

This was the moment of truth, Calubo thought as he also started crawling behind the guard captain, with other guards following as well. He just hoped that Hyola would be okay.

Before long, they reached the makeshift barricade which had acted like a gate for the quarry when he lived here, mainly to prevent any wild beasts from going down on that path in the night. But he easily noticed that this barricade looked much smaller than earlier, probably because the bandits had taken some of the branches from here to burn them for heat. It seemed that being so low on manpower here was already working against the bandits before the fight had even started.

He had to wait for a while until Hudan figured out an easy way through that barricade, so they could keep moving without having to move any branches, since that would make unnecessary sounds. But soon, Hudan looked towards them and grinned, while pointing at a gap in the barricade which was big enough for a person to crawl through. Then the guard captain was the first to cross the barricade, and others followed behind him one by one.

Once Calubo reached the other side, he saw that Hudan had stopped maybe a dozen feet ahead of him. Slowly he and the other guards crawled next to the guard captain, who was looking towards the bandits.

When Calubo looked towards the fire, which was not far from the dilapidated huts, he saw that a few stonecutters were still sitting around the fire. The fire was probably just around thirty or forty feet away from them at this point by his estimate.

Hudan looked towards the guards, and gestured to them to stand up, before slowly rising up to a crouch as well and pulling out his sword. But right at that moment, one of the stonecutters who was probably still awake, turned his head and looked directly towards him, making everyone freeze right where they were.

Calubo thought that the stonecutter was going to shout immediately, but he put a finger on his own lips to indicate to him to stay quiet. It was probably only a short moment, but it felt like an eternity to him as he waited for the stonecutter's reaction. If the man alerted the bandits, they might just take someone hostage when they realized they were outnumbered, and he wanted to avoid that possibility.

He didn't know if the stonecutter recognized him as someone who had lived with them, or if he understood that they had come to kill the bandits and not them, but thankfully he kept quiet and the moment passed.

Giving a sigh of relief, he stood up into a crouch as well, and formed up in a broken line with the other guards side-by-side, all of them facing the bandits now. The stonecutter was still looking at them with wide eyes, but he hadn't made any sound so far.

They kept moving quietly towards the bandits with their swords ready in their hands, but as they came closer to within a dozen feet of the fire, suddenly, one of the bandits sneezed loudly. As the man wiped his face on his sleeves, he turned his head towards the guards, and looked directly at them with his eyes opened wide in surprise.

Chapter 156 Wishful Thinking

~ Maisy ~

~ Mr Kigeir's home ~

It should be early morning around now and ten year old Maisy was sleeping. Or at least she was supposed to be. But for some reason, she hadn't been able to get even a little amount of sleep until now.

Yesterday evening, she had been playing outside Mr Kigeir's home with her new best friend Elsie when she heard a villager running through the street while shouting that the first longhouse block was completed. She didn't know what it meant at the time and she had forgotten about it until dinner time. Then Mr Kigeir had told all of them that it was the new building which was being made by the baron of the village at the northern edge of the village. And everyone who was homeless would have to live there now. Including her and Timmy.

She had been so surprised by that news, that she had forgotten to breathe for a moment. She had looked at Elsie who had also been gazing back at her with wet eyes. Would she really have to leave her first and only friend now?

Timmy had also tugged at her sleeves to confirm it from her, and she had reluctantly nodded at him, making him sniffle as well.

She gave a deep sigh which didn't have any place in a ten year old's life. But she already knew that good times didn't last for people like her. At least she had made good memories with her new friend. Perhaps she could even visit her in the future to play... Then she had to blink a few times to stop tears from falling from her eyes too.

Then Elsie had started shouting at her parents that why couldn't they keep living at their home anymore? But Mr Kigeir had explained to them that it was the baron's order. When Maisy glanced at him, it seemed like he didn't want them to go away either. But why would that be? She and Timmy were not his children, and he had already helped them a lot by giving them a roof over their heads. Wouldn't he want to live with his own family from now on? Wouldn't he want to send the orphans away from his home, when he didn't have to keep them there anymore? Then she glanced at Elsie's mother, but she also seemed to have her eyes wet. But how could that be? Why would she be sad? Maisy didn't understand it at all.

Later, when she had gone to sleep in the small room on the upper floor along with her little brother Timmy, she had thought that she would be able to fall asleep easily, just like every day, since she was so tired after playing, and had a belly full of food and a warm place to sleep. But it hadn't worked at all.

Since then she had been continuously thinking about the days when she and Timmy lived on the streets, searching for food in the garbage piles. And how their lives had changed since they had started to live in an actual wooden house. Even her aunt's hut, where they had lived after their parents had died, was only made of mud and sticks, and it wasn't nearly as warm or comfortable as Mr Kigeir's house.

And when the scary bandits had attacked the village a few days ago, Mr Kigeir and his family had tried their best to protect all the children, including Timmy and her. She had been so scared at that time, thinking that the bandits would finally take her away from her home, but it was this family which had tried to protect them, before that huge guard had arrived and chased away the bandits. Couldn't Timmy and her just keep living here...?

But good times didn't last for orphans like them, did they?

Since then, she had been tossing and turning while trying to sleep, but sleep hadn't come to her tonight. At all.

To distract her mind, she had even tried to imagine how it would feel to fly on the unicorn which Elsie now claimed lived in the attic of the house, but it hadn't worked either. Not that she had ever seen that unicorn till now, even if Elsie was certain that it lived there.

Timmy had also been having a fitful sleep. He kept waking up again and again, asking if they really had to leave this house. Maisy had tried to console him, but she didn't really know how to do that. And every time her eight year old brother went to sleep, he had clutched her in fear, probably dreaming of the times when they had to hide from the bandits hoping they wouldn't kidnap them. Or maybe he was thinking about the time they had to fight with a dog for the same piece of half-rotten bread which all of them had found in the garbage at the same time.

But she hoped that he would be able to sleep a little, even if she was unable to. He was her only family in the world, and she didn't want to see him crying when they had to leave. He was the only one who mattered to her in this world. But no, that wasn't correct anymore, was it?

Since she had come to live with this family, she had started to enjoy the time playing games with Elsie, or telling about a new word she had learned to Timmy or even to Elsie's little brother. She had even enjoyed the times when Mr Kigeir's older son Leif - who was much older than her and Elsie - used to tell them about how he worked as a laborer in the north and the new plants or bugs he had found there.

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She gazed at the window in the east. It wouldn't be long before the sky started to brighten. That meant it was only a few more hours before they had to leave their only friends as well as the newfound family who had taken care of them for the past month.

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She hugged Timmy close again, hoping that the morning would never come again.

~ Hyola ~

~ Inside the stonecutters' hut at the limestone quarry ~

Hyola was sitting in front of a food stall in the market square of Cinran, while Calubo was standing next to her and talking with the vendor to buy a couple of grilled skewered meat sticks for them. She was looking at him with wonder. How did she ever meet someone caring like him? Once Calubo had paid for the meat, he turned to her with a grin, and offered one of the sticks to her.

She smiled back at him, and after taking the stick from him, she ate the first cube of meat which was covered with some kind of sauce made by the vendor - and it was so juicy and tasty! She couldn't even remember when was the last time she had eaten anything which tasted so good. And she loved eating it, and wanted to have even more of it!

But she simply didn't have the money to buy it. She didn't think that as a slave, she had ever been paid for her labor other than by room and board. Maybe Calubo would have some more money to buy a few more meat sticks. But wait. How would he have the money? He was also a slave like her at the quarry now. Then how were they here in Cinran?

Suddenly she heard the sound of someone shouting in surprise. What was that? She looked around him but only saw the crowd of people with indistinct faces. Who was shouting? And how was she in Cinran? She was supposed to be hungry and cold at the quarry. Right, the quarry!

Someone shouted again in alarm, and right after that, she heard the sound of steel striking steel, with someone else screaming in pain. What was happening? She was starting to get scared now.

Why were people fighting at the market? And why couldn't she see them? She was getting more and more nervous by the moment, but suddenly her eyes opened up. She found herself gazing at the wooden branches and planks from their damaged wagon, which were barely held together by some rope - inside one of the stonecutters hut at the quarry.

Right. That was a dream. A wonderful dream, certainly, but only a dream. Calubo hadn't been at the quarry for more than a week now. She didn't even know if he was still alive or if those bastards had killed him.

Then she heard the sound of steel striking something followed by the sound of someone screaming in pain again, and she realized that something was very wrong. She looked around and saw that by now

the other stonecutters inside the hut had started to wake up as well. They all looked at each other, and it didn't take long for them to realize that there was some fighting going on outside their hut.

Immediately, she stood up, and poked her head outside the loose plank which functioned as the door of the hut. And she saw that near the fire burning outside, there were a lot more bandits wearing heavy fur coats now, but for some reason they seemed to be fighting amongst themselves.

Soon, another woman who was staying in that hut with her, gently pushed her aside, and walked outside the door to see what was happening, with Hyola following behind her.

It was still dark outside, but she knew that sunrise couldn't be far away now. But in the faint light of the moon along with the fire, she saw that there were nearly a dozen bandits at the quarry right now. Did that mean Nokozal had returned? Was Calubo back too? But why were they fighting among themselves?

She tried to look at the bandits' faces, to see if she recognized any of them, but it was very difficult with how much they were moving around. Although she did see one bandit who was huge. That must be Nokozal. She gave a deep sigh. So they were back after all, and the Goddess hadn't listened to her prayers to let a bakkore eat that bastard as an evening snack.

But why were they trying to kill each other? It didn't make any sense! And for some reason they were only fighting among themselves, while ignoring the stonecutters who had gathered around to watch at a safe distance.

Now that she had adjusted to the situation a little, she noticed that one of the bandits was already dead near the fire. It seemed like he was killed while sleeping! Who were these new bandits then? Did they just want to take all the stonecutters as their own slaves now? Or would they turn to kill all of them as well, after they were done with the bandits?

She tried to look carefully to understand what was happening, and saw that three of the bandits - likely the ones who were already at the quarry - were standing right next to each other, while the six other bandits, including the huge guy - who must be the new arrivals - were slowly moving around, probably to surround them. But was that really Nokozal? It was hard to tell in the flickering light of the fire, but the huge guy didn't look like that bastard for some reason.

Right at that moment, she saw one of the original bandits of the quarry look towards the stonecutters. Before she realized what was happening, he ran directly towards her, and putting a sword to her neck, he moved behind her. She screamed loudly in fear, thinking she was going to die immediately, but it seemed like the bandit wasn't interested in killing her, for now anyway.

"Get back!" the bandit with the sword to her neck shouted at the new arrivals from behind her. "Move back, or I will send her to the Goddess right now!"

What was happening? Why was this happening to her? Hyola was scared out of her mind by now, and had started crying in fear. She didn't know what to do or what to even think. Why couldn't she have been in Cinran along with Calubo? Why was her life always like this...? She couldn't help but keep crying, while praying to the Goddess to save her life.

Chapter 157 Reunited

~ Calubo ~

~ Hiding behind a limestone block in the quarry ~

~ A few moments ago ~

Calubo wasn't feeling good to be left out of the fighting. And he really wanted to help in killing those bastards! But Hudan had sent him away just before the attack had begun, saying that the bandits might try to take someone hostage, so there had to be someone to strike from behind the bandits if needed.

So the guard captain had sent him to circle around the camp and ordered him to stay outside of the fight, so he could intervene if that happened, because the guards still had the numbers on their side even with six against four. Calubo had thought of protesting, before realizing that he was the only one who really knew the terrain of the quarry, so he had the most chances of finding someplace good to hide, instead of just tumbling over into the pit and dying.

So in the confusion of the start of the battle, when the bandits were disoriented, Calubo had crouched to the side and following the stone walls of the quarry, he had found one of the limestone blocks which had been already cut on the other side of the fire, close to the stonecutters' hut. Since then, he had been crouching there and biding his time, hoping he got a chance to cut down at least one of these bastards.

He kept looking towards the huts with worry, not knowing if Hyola was okay now. And he really wished he could see her face once more, but it had to wait until after the bandits had been dealt with.

Luckily, he had found a place with a good view of the battle, and he had been watching it with nervous anticipation, hoping the stonecutters stayed inside their huts until it was over. And it shouldn't be long anyway, since the bandit who had been sleeping had barely woken up in surprise before one of the guards had slashed his neck. Now it was six against three, which should be easy enough for Hudan.

Right at that moment, the stonecutters started streaming out of their two huts, probably after being woken up by the sounds of the fight. He gazed there for only a moment, and although the light of the fire was quite faint here, it only took a moment for him to see that surprisingly, the tall woman who came out of their hut after the older woman was Hyola!

He couldn't describe in words how relieved he was to see her. She looked startled by what was happening, but otherwise she seemed okay, if a little gaunt. She also seemed to have chopped off her long reddish hair to a shorter length now, but to him she looked just as beautiful as earlier. His heart had started beating much faster, and he wasn't sure if it was only because of the fight to the death happening nearby.

Suddenly he saw that one of the bandits had noticed the stonecutters coming out, and he ran directly towards the women, and then put his sword to the neck of Hyola, who screamed in fear. That bastard! Was he going to kill her?

Calubo immediately stood up and was going to run towards them, when he heard the bandit shouting at the guards to move back. He paused for a moment, and realized that the bandit only wanted a hostage for now, instead of killing her immediately, just like the guard captain had anticipated. He thanked the goddess that Hyola's life wasn't going to end right at this moment, but he was still seething inside. How dare this bastard put a sword to her neck!

He had been crouching on the side of the huts, so he didn't have a very clear view, but he still saw that Hyola had started crying in fear now. He wanted to immediately run towards them, but he knew how risky that was if the bandit noticed him rushing towards them.

He also remembered everything that the guard captain had kept teaching him on the way, including a few simple hand gestures to indicate something when they couldn't speak openly. Hudan had told him that it was the new baron's idea, and he had already taught it to the guards when training them, but since Calubo hadn't been around for it, the guard captain had taught him as well on the journey here.

Calubo crouched lower and moved in front of that limestone block, trying not to make any sound. Thankfully, Hudan was trying to talk to the bandits in a loud voice to calm down the bandit - who was still shouting at the guards to move back - which helped muffle the sound of his own footsteps. He didn't know if the guard captain was doing it intentionally, but he would take any advantage he got.

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He kept moving closer to that bandit, as fast as he could but without making any sound. It also helped that the ground was mostly dry rock, and there were no leaves here for his boots to crunch on. Once he was less than a dozen feet away, he stopped there, ready to spring at that bastard at any moment.

Earlier, he had put his sword back in his scabbard, and had his dagger ready in his left hand. When Hudan had told him to do that while telling him to circle around, he had been confused by how he was supposed to fight the bandits without a sword, but now he understood.

He looked closely as finally, Hudan put up an open hand to gesture to the guards to hold back, who gave nods, and took a few steps back with their swords still ready in their hands. The bastard who had taken Hyola hostage, seemed to get more confident at that, and gloated to the guards, while gesturing to the other bandits to move towards him as well. Probably to take more hostages.

Calubo really didn't want to wait even a single moment more, but he had been looking carefully at Hudan for his signal. And within a few moments, the guard captain spoke something to the other two bandits who had been moving towards that bastard, making them turn around to face the guards. And at the same time, Hudan started clenching and unclenching his left fist again and again. Right! That was the signal they had agreed on!

Immediately, he moved forward with silent steps until he was only a few feet behind the bandit, who was using his right hand to hold his sword around the neck of Hyola.

Calubo took a deep breath, and stood up to his full height. It seemed that being left-handed was going to be helpful to him for once. He then quickly rushed just behind the bandit, and used his right hand to hold the bandit's sword arm and pulled it away from Hyola, who moved a few steps further in surprise. The bandit immediately turned his head to the right to see who had clutched his arm from that side, but right at that moment, Calubo used the dagger to slash at the bastard's neck from the left, while the bandit was busy trying to wrestle his sword free from him.

The bandit screamed in pain, and dropped his sword on the ground to start clutching at his neck which was openly spraying blood now, but Calubo did not allow him to move even a little bit. This bastard didn't deserve to live anymore. Right at the moment, he heard Hudan shout something, and from the corner of his eye he saw the guards rushing towards the other bandits.

The dying bandit in his hands slowly grew limp, and within a few moments his body slumped to the ground, while Hyola who looked white with fear seemed to recognize him suddenly, and jumped in his arms while sobbing loudly. He moved his bloody arm with the dagger away from her, before letting the blade fall down and hugged her back.

He patted her on the back to console her, but it took a while for her to calm down. As he looked around them towards the fire, he saw the guards were finishing up the last bandit, with the others already dead.

The other stonecutters still seemed to be in a daze about what was happening, but since none of the guards were trying to kill or threaten them, they didn't seem as edgy as they would have been otherwise. And even in the faint pre-dawn light, it wasn't difficult to see that the stonecutters looked even more gaunt than they did when he had lived here. It was obvious that the little food they might have been hunting or gathering here was mainly going to the bastards who were dead now.

Soon, Hyola took a step back and looked at him from up to down with glistening eyes. "How are you here?" She asked, but carried on without waiting for his reply. "I thought the bandits had killed you! And why are you wearing fur coats like them? Did you join another bandit gang? And what happened to Nokozal and the other bandits?"

"Slow down..." Calubo tried to reassure her with a smile. "I didn't join a new bandit group. You know me better than that..."

"Yeah, I do, don't I..." Hyola looked down for a moment in embarrassment before gazing at him again. "Then how?"

"It's a long story, and I'll tell you everything about it after we are done here," Calubo replied, "but for now, just know that the dark days for you and the other stonecutters are over now. Lord Kivamus, the Baron of Tiranat has sent us to liberate you all from these bandits."

Hyola looked confused but before she said anything, Hudan, who had been ordering the guards to check out the rest of the quarry to make sure that there weren't any other bandits or wild beasts left here, called him up. "Calubo, come here and help us! You can talk with her later."

Calubo gave him a quick nod, and looked at Hyola. "I'll be back soon, okay? You don't need to worry about anything now."

Hyola gave an uncertain nod.

But after he turned around to go towards the guards, she hugged him from the back again and mumbled, "Don't leave me again, Calubo..."

Calubo couldn't help but beam with happiness as he held her frail hands on his chest. "Never again..."

Chapter 158. Parting of the ways

Kivamus shook his head. "No, there has to be a chain of command here, otherwise you will just get bogged down with those requests all day and won't have time left for anything else, especially once we have constructed more longhouse blocks."

He explained, "The simple reason is that the majority of the complaints from those people are likely to be petty ones, maybe something like a person wanting to change their bunk from the upper one to the lower one for some reason, while someone would prefer the upper bunk only, and these can easily lead to arguments between them. So, this way, the administrator or the supervisor of the block can solve most of the problems himself or herself, and you won't have to be worried about such things. And if there is something that really needs your attention, then the administrator can come to talk to you once a day."

Kivamus continued, "The more these blocks run themselves, the easier it will be for us, and by following a proper chain of command, this system of longhouses can be scaled up very easily. This way, even if we have a dozen such longhouse blocks in the future, you'll still be able to solve their complaints within an hour, since you will only have to meet with their administrators, instead of hundreds of people who want to have their complaints heard." He added, "So basically, these four supervisors will have the task of running the longhouse blocks smoothly by themselves. But tell them that these are unpaid tasks and this is being done just to make the longhouse blocks organize themselves better." He snorted, "And if someone still complains about the absence of wages, just tell them that their compensation for that work is getting to live rent free in that block."

Duvas laughed and gave a nod. "I think I understand your reasons, so I'll find people for all those tasks by afternoon. That's three people in charge for now including the overall administrator, and maybe another one in the future once they start growing vegetable patches. But still, why would we ever build a dozen longhouse blocks? Even if we wanted to shift the whole population of the village into such blocks for some reason, they all can probably be shifted into just three or four such blocks. So why would we need any more of them?"

Kivamus chuckled, dreaming about the day when a series of factories would be running in Tiranat, giving him an opportunity to help his people by giving them proper employment so they would never have to see their children starving and they wouldn't have to depend on charity from anyone. And at the same time, he wanted to earn enough profits through it to ensure the proper safety of his village as well as of himself from the growing list of people who wanted to see him dead.

They had been lucky that they had basically gotten off scot-free from the recent bandit raid because Calubo's information reached them on time, but he knew very well that it wouldn't be the last raid. And those were just the outlaws in these forests. What if one of the nearby nobles, or that bastard Zoricus - who had enough resources to probably buy a whole army of mercenaries - decided that they were done with sending assassins in secret or nudging the bandit groups to attack his village, and brought their own guards or that so called army to ransack his village? He had no intention of giving them any chance for that. To prevent that, and perhaps to do anything at all in this world, he needed money. A lot of it.

And to achieve that, he needed a veritable army of workers to earn those profits for him while making goods for Tiranat to consume and export. He wasn't going to be a robber baron like those in earth's past, and he had every intention to provide proper working conditions and good wages to everyone who worked for him. But he also couldn't sit passively and let those greedy nobles steal what little he and his villagers had here.

He frowned for a moment. He was thinking more like an expansionist CEO these days instead of like a mid-level mechanical engineer that he used to be. But then he chuckled to himself. It seemed like he was going to get the results of that promotion after all - the one which he had barely gotten on Earth when he was torn from his life as Steven to become Kivamus. But instead of getting just a single promotion, it was like he had been propelled all the way to the very top, where he was in charge of taking care of everyone under him. The only difference was that instead of owning a company on Earth, he owned a barony in the Kingdom of Reslinor.

He glanced at Gorsazo for a moment and grinned - who must have understood that he had gotten another one of ideas from Earth in his mind - before he looked back at the majordomo. "Never say never, Duvas. Who knows, we might just need to house a lot more people in the future..."

Duvas gave a slow nod. "As you say, my Lord. Perhaps I'll understand those reasons in the future. Apart from that, I wanted to tell you that Taniok has already started working on the jail room we wanted to build here."

Kivamus nodded. "Let's see how long it takes. We have a lot of stuff we need him to do." He gazed towards the distance and muttered, "I really wish we had more trained carpenters here."

"We can't really do anything about that right now," Duvas remarked. "Anyway, I should go to the longhouse block now to see that everything is going properly. And I also need to allot the administrator and the other supervisors there."

Kivamus gave a nod, and the majordomo exited the manor hall.

Taking a deep breath, he gazed towards the long dining table where a few parchments were rolled up with half finished drawings. It was time to work.

~ Maisy ~

~ Mr Kigeir's home ~

The narrative has been illicitly obtained; should you discover it on Amazon, report the violation.

It was afternoon now, and it was finally time for them to leave now. Earlier, Elsie's mother had plainly told Mr Kigeir that she simply wouldn't allow them to leave in the cold of the morning. That meant she and Timmy had gotten a few more hours to play with their only friends in this world - Elsie and her little brother - apart from a tasty meal as an early lunch for them. But she had to keep blinking while eating so her tears wouldn't start falling down.

But now they really had to go. Mr Kigeir had even closed up his shop - which rarely got any customers these days, from what she had seen - to take her and Timmy to the longhouse block himself, with his

family accompanying them. Leif had to go to work as a laborer earlier in the morning, so he had already said his goodbye to them.

She didn't have anything to pack anyway, apart from a new pair of clothing that she and Timmy had been given by Elsie's mother, once she had seen that their old clothes were too damaged. They had also been given a patched up blanket by Elsie' mom today, which was actually one of the best the family had.

Stepping outside, she held the hand of Timmy, trying to put on a brave face, even though she really just wanted to hide and cry in a corner. Elsie had also been sobbing earlier, but now she was just quiet, completely unlike her usual bubbly self.

It was certainly cold outside, but she was mostly used to it from her time living in the streets. But still, she already missed the warmth of the house she was leaving now. There was already some snow gathered on the ground, and in the morning, she had tried to make some snowballs to fight with others, but her heart wasn't in it, so she had given it up when Elsie had just looked at her with wet eyes instead of throwing a snowball back at her.

As they started moving through the narrow streets, she tried looking around her to distract her mind, and saw a lot of other villagers moving in the same direction as them. Many of them were carrying some patched up sacks and wooden bowls, and a few of them even had separate clothing on their shoulders, while some of them were holding a big pack over their heads, with a few pieces of dried straw poking outside from the holes. Was that a straw mattress like the ones in Mr Kigeir's house?

She kept looking around as they walked, and before long, they were walking over a piece of plank kept over a long ditch, with the huge longhouse block looming in front of them. She stopped to look at it for a moment. Just how big was that building? It could probably hold dozens of houses like the one she was leaving behind!

Reaching close to the gates, they paused for a moment to let a small crowd of villagers pass through the gates first. And immediately, the thought that she was leaving behind her only friend along with the family who had taken care of her and her brother returned back to her mind, making her blink back her tears.

She turned around and found Elsie looking directly at her as tears fell from her best friend's eyes. Would she even be able to talk with Elsie anymore? What would happen to their dreams of becoming maids in the baron's manor together after they had grown up? Would their little brothers ever be able to do their mock sword fights with sticks from now on?

Maisy looked down, not wanting to think about it anymore. It hurt too much.

But suddenly, Elsie ran up to her father and with her hands on her waist, she asked angrily, "Why can't they stay here? Why are you sending them away!"

Mr Kigeir looked at Maisy and her brother for a moment, before he replied in a tired voice. "I already told you Elsie, I don't want to see them go either, but I simply won't be able to feed everyone if we all stay here."

"But the baron is providing free meals to all of us children every day!" Elsie retorted.

Mr Kigeir shook his head slowly. "Not anymore, Elsie. Now that the longhouse block has been built, he will stop providing those free meals. From today the food will be cooked within the longhouse for those who live there. That means there won't be any more free meals for either you or Maisy, or for your brothers."

Elsie gazed back at her, but Maisy just looked downwards again, not knowing what to say.

Her best friend turned back to her father again and glared at him. "Then she can eat half of my food!" She begged again, "Please don't leave them here, papa..."

Mr Kigeir looked at them with resignation and spoke in a soft voice, "That won't work for too long, Elsie, not when our shop barely gets any customers these days. Believe me, I have already thought of eating only half my meals for this, but such a thing isn't sustainable for our already big family..."

Maisy looked at him in surprise. Why would he say that? Why would he skip his own meals for orphans like them?

Maisy glanced towards Timmy who had been crying silently, and it hurt her more than anything else. Not wanting to prolong their suffering any longer, she took a deep breath. It was time.

Holding her little brother's hands, she started walking towards the gate of the longhouse block. And as much as she wanted to, she didn't look back, or everyone would be able to see what a big crybaby she was. Elsie was shouting her name from behind, and she just wanted to turn around and run to her. But she couldn't.

Maisy sighed while holding back her tears. She had really enjoyed spending time with her best friend and her family, but she knew it wasn't going to last. Good things never lasted for people like her, after all...

Reaching at the tall gates, she wiped her eyes with her sleeves again, and stepped inside the place which was going to be their new home. Or at least, their new shelter, since there was only one home she had known after her parents had passed away, and the residents of that home were now standing outside, and they were probably going to enjoy their own lives without two helpless orphans disturbing them. Elsie would also be able to find a new best friend now soon enough with her cheerful personality and would easily forget about her...

She blinked her watery eyes, already knowing in her heart that it wasn't true or that family wouldn't have taken them into their home anyway. She knew it was just a silly lie she was trying to make up for herself... But she still had to make her heart believe it, or it would hurt too much.

She forced herself to keep walking further while holding Timmy's little hand, instead of turning around and running back to the only family they had known in their short lives. Tears kept falling from her eyes as she kept walking. It wouldn't be long before they all would forget about her and Timmy anyway, right?

Right...?

Chapter 159. A New Home?

~ Kigeir ~

~ Outside the new longhouse block ~

With a heavy heart, Kigeir looked at the orphans trudging slowly towards the gates of the newly built longhouse block. Elsie was hugging his side while sniffing, while his youngest had been picked up by his wife to make him stop crying. And he was already getting worried about Maisy and Timmy. Would they even have enough food to eat there? Would there be enough coal to keep the place warm?

Why had it come to this? Was there really nothing he could have done to prevent this?

Suddenly, his wife asked with glossy eyes, "What if... what if we asked the baron to give us that grain directly?"

Kigeir looked at her in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," his wife explained in a hurried voice, "the baron is already going to provide the food for the children here, so he's already using his own grain stores for them. So can't you ask him to just give that directly to us to feed them? That way we would be able to keep them within our house. It breaks my heart to see them go away from us..."

Kigeir thought about it for a moment, a sliver of hope blooming in his mind. "I think... it may be possible, but it's very difficult to get an audience with the baron. I wanted to ask the previous baron for permission for something in the past, but I never even got to meet him. But yes, I will try. I have to try."

He handed over Elsie to her, and started walking towards the gates to check if the baron had come there as well. He even planned to go to his manor if he couldn't find the baron here.

As he looked around, he hugged his arms around himself. Although the snowfall had paused for now, it was still just as cold outside. But at least he didn't have to worry about a shortage of coal this winter.

He gazed south towards the village once he couldn't find the baron or his retinue anywhere, but there he saw the old majordomo walking towards the longhouse slowly, while wearing his fur coat. Right! He could ask Sir Duvas as well.

Walking quickly to him, even though his bad knee was aching a lot in this weather, he asked that question to the majordomo, who was only accompanied by a single guard of the manor, making it easy to approach him.

Sir Duvas looked surprised by his question. "I had already sent someone to announce it at the market square. Didn't you hear? We won't be able to shift everyone in the first block itself."

Kigeir was quite surprised by that. "I thought... I thought it was our last day with the children we had taken in, so I didn't go to hear at the market square yesterday when I heard that there was going to be an announcement there, since my family wanted to spend our last time with them together. And I forgot to ask about it from my neighbors later on, with my mind constantly worried about those children. But it's such a huge building so I thought every homeless person would have to shift here by today."

"No, no," Sir Duvas shook his head. "It is certainly huge, but it still won't be enough. That's why we'll start the construction of the second block from tomorrow. We also have some more people arriving here in the coming days who will also need more bunks anyway." At his curious expression, the majordomo waved it off. "You don't need to worry about it right now."

Kigeir nodded, thinking what it meant. "So does it mean that there will be at least a few people who have to be left outside of this block until the second longhouse is built?"

The majordomo gave a nod while looking at him curiously. "Do you want to keep the orphans at your home?"

"Yes!" Kigeir nodded immediately. "Yes, they are like my family now. And yesterday, my wife was already threatening me to find a way to keep them at home, or she would stop cooking food for everyone."

Sir Duvas laughed loudly at that. "It's good to hear that she cares so much about the children."

Kigeir asked after a moment, "So will the baron allow that?"

Sir Duvas smiled and gave a nod. "Of course. He would prefer it if the children live with a family who cares for them instead of making them stay in such a crowd here."

"That's so nice to hear!" Kigeir said with a rare grin. "Please thank Lord Kivamus for this! But can I request you for something else too?"

On Duvas' nod, he added, "These days it's so cold outside that I don't want the children - all four of them - to walk in the snow every day to the manor for food. Would it be possible for us to get that grain directly so we can cook meals for all of them at our home?"

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Sir Duvas gave a satisfied smile. "Of course. The baron had already anticipated that some people would want to keep living in the houses of neighbors instead of moving to the longhouse immediately. So at least for this winter, he will continue to provide free meals to the elderly and children who are still staying outside of the block for now." He added, "But even if we provide you the raw grain instead of providing the cooked meals for the children, now it will have to go to feed them instead of adding it to your winter stores, like it was until now in return of giving them a place to live."

Kigeir thought about it and nodded. "That is still better than what I expected."

The majordomo continued, "You'll still have to send someone to pick it up from the manor every week. I won't be able to send the grain personally to everyone who wants to let the previously homeless people stay with them from now on."

"That works just fine for me, Sir Duvas." Kigeir added, "I'll send my older son Leif to pick it up." He gave a grateful nod. "Please thank the baron for this. My children have been so happy these days to have someone else to play with, unlike the days before the arrival of Lord Kivamus, when they looked worried about the food shortage even at their young ages. And I would like to keep housing those two children with my family as long as I can afford it."

Then Kigeir thought about how it would feel if he had to let Maisy and Timmy move to another place after these kids had lived with his family for even longer.

No. He didn't even want to think about it. He looked at the majordomo and grinned. "Actually, I don't think I can let them go away from my family ever again. It seems I have five kids now."

Sir Duvas smiled at him in response and patted his shoulder. "You're a good man, Kigeir."

Kigeir nodded gratefully. "I'll take my leave then," he said to the old majordomo. "I have to give the good news to my family now." He smiled and added, "To my newly-expanded family."

He turned around, and started walking quickly to where his family was waiting. He had to find Maisy and Timmy too. He grinned again, thinking about how happy everyone would be to hear this news.

~ Maisy ~

~ In the courtyard of the longhouse block ~

Timmy was gazing downwards while sitting on one of the swings which they had found in the courtyard of the longhouse block, while Maisy had been half-heartedly pushing him from behind, so at least he would be distracted and wouldn't be scared anymore.

When they had reached inside that courtyard earlier, she had also been scared by that big crowd inside, while Timmy was clutching her from the side. They had no idea where they were supposed to go, or where they would even get food here. Would it really be a new home for them? Or would it be the same as the time when they lived on the streets? Would they have to look for and steal food from here as well? She didn't know.

She had kept moving further without knowing whether to go, but then they had seen that swing after coming inside. Timmy had become happy and had run directly to its empty seat, asking her to help him in swinging, but that happiness hadn't lasted long. Maisy didn't even have the heart to sit in it. What would be the point? How would she enjoy it without her only friend by her side?

Since then, she had been observing everyone around her to see where all the villagers were going. It seemed that in the courtyard, there were three doors on the three sides of the block where people were going with their belongings - that had to be where they would sleep - apart from another two doors on the fourth side of the block on the left of the gate, whose purpose she had no idea of. But earlier, she had seen a woman taking a big cauldron there, likely for cooking. Maybe that's where she would have to steal food from?

She gave a dejected sigh completely unsuited for a ten year old, and gazed at the ground with wet eyes, forgetting to keep pushing Timmy from behind. Why did everybody keep leaving her? First their parents died and left her, then their only aunt died, leaving them alone again, and then this family who had been caring for them had also left her and Timmy...

Why? Why!

After a moment, her brother turned around in confusion and looked at her face. What's wrong, Maisy? Why are you crying?

Maisy shook her head slowly and smiled at him after wiping her eyes with her sleeves. No. She couldn't keep crying. She had to be strong for him.

"Don't worry about it kiddo," she tried to reassure him. "Now let's look for a place to sleep, 'kay?"

Timmy gave an uncertain nod in reply and stood up from the seat of the swing. Taking his hand in her own, Maisy steeled herself and looked around them at the crowd milling about in the courtyard. How was she supposed to find where to go?

Right at that moment, she thought someone was calling her name. She looked around in confusion, but saw nobody she recognized. Right. Who would know about them anyway at this place? She must be hearing things.

She took her little brother's hand and started walking towards one of the doors in the courtyard, trying to make space between those giant people. Perhaps they could even find an empty corner inside near the fireplace. But would there even be a fireplace here? At least they had that thin blanket with them now which she had been carrying on her shoulders, which was a lot better than the time they lived on the streets. Hopefully, it would be enough to prevent them from freezing to death like their parents in a past winter.

Once she reached closer, she thought that someone had called her name once again, making her look around in confusion.

Timmy stopped as well, looking towards her, but he looked confused too after she heard someone calling his name as well. What was happening? Were they both hearing things now?

But then Timmy started urgently pulling her arm, and pointed behind her. "Maisy! Look, look!"

"What is it?" Maisy asked in confusion, as she turned around as well. And then she saw a sight she had never expected to see.

Chapter 160. Orphans No More

She saw that the whole family of Mr Kigeir was quickly walking towards them, looking quite happy, with Elsie and her younger brother in the lead, who started running when they saw her and Timmy.

But why? Why were they here again? Maisy was confused. They looked happy as well. Didn't they already forget about her and Timmy? Then why were they coming here?

But then Elsie reached closer and ran towards her and hugged her tightly, with Maisy barely managing to keep standing from the force.

"Maisy!" her best friend bawled into her shoulder. "You can come back with us!"

"What?" Maisy looked around in confusion, and saw that the two younger kids also seemed to be crying while trying to punch each other at the same time... Perhaps it was a way of showing how much they cared about each other?

Elsie took a step back and looked at her face. "You can live with us now! Papa asked some bigwig and he allowed it!"

Maisy blinked in surprise, her heart beating loudly. Was that really possible? Could she and Timmy really go back to live with them again? Elsie wouldn't joke about that, right?

Then she looked behind Elsie, and saw Mr Kigeir and his wife also reaching there with wet eyes and huge smiles on their faces. Were they crying as well? But why?

Reaching closer, Elsie's mom bent down and pulled all four children closer and hugged them, while starting to cry openly.

After a moment, Elsie's mom looked at her. "I am sorry, Maisy! I am so sorry that we let you both go away from us! Please forgive us! I will never let that happen again!"

What was happening? Maisy didn't know what to think about, although her eyes had also started tearing up without her permission.

Was it really true? Was this really happening or had she fallen asleep near the swing and started dreaming?

After a while, Elsie's mom stood up, while still holding her and Timmy, and looked at them in the same way that she looked at her own children. "You can come live with us now," she said. "Both of you."

Maisy's mind had seemed to have stopped working by now and she couldn't think properly. Her heart had realized what was happening, but her brain still refused to accept it. She tried to say something but her voice had stopped working too. And all the time Elsie had been clutching her from her side, while Timmy was still holding her hand.

She felt a lump in her throat, but then swallowed to get her voice working again. "Is it," she whispered, "is it really true? You are not leaving us here?"

Elsie's mom started crying again, and bent down again to clutch all the children once more. "Yes it's true! And don't you worry, I will never let you go away again! You both are also my children from today." She looked at her and Timmy for a moment and grinned with teary eyes. "You both have a mother and father too from today."

Maisy blinked her eyes, trying to clear them at least a little bit, and looked at Mr Kigeir, who had been standing nearby while rubbing his eyes. When he noticed the question in her eyes, he gave a smile and nodded.

At this point, Maisy's brain simply gave up any more protests, and she began crying openly as well while holding Elsie's mom tightly. And before long, Timmy and other children joined her as well in another group hug.

She didn't know how long it took for all of them to calm down, but eventually she wiped her eyes and saw that Elsie's mom - no! her mom! - was looking at all of them lovingly. Then she looked at Mr Kigeir - no, she looked at papa! - who gave a nod.

He wiped his eyes as well, and gazed at all four children for a moment with a smile. Then he grinned. "Come on children. Let's go home!" He held the hands of both boys, while Elsie's mom - no! her mom! - held the hands of the girls, and they started walking towards the gates of the longhouse block.

Maisy's heart was still beating too fast. Even though she had realized by now that it wasn't a dream, she was still surprised that somebody would even care about orphans like her, whom nobody used to give a second glance in the past, even if they were hungry or homeless. But it seemed like things were finally changing for them now, since they weren't really orphans anymore, were they? It still felt weird for her to think of that, but perhaps good things could really happen to people like her and Timmy in this village...

As they exited the gates and turned towards the village to go to their home - to her home - she looked back at the huge building, and couldn't stop tears from falling from her eyes again. This place had been her home for less than an hour, but it was always going to be one of her most favorite places in the village, no matter where she lived.

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This was where she had found her new parents, after all.

~ Kivamus ~

~ Baron's manor ~

It was late evening now, and it had been two days since the longhouse block had been completed. Thankfully the shifting of villagers had gone without any major incident yesterday. There were still a few scuffles about the choice of bunks, as well as the decision about who would have to stay on the floor, but Duvas had been able to resolve it by himself. They had also transferred a decent amount of grain and coal to the storeroom of the block, as an advance on the weekly grain quota they were giving the laborers.

This meant that apart from a few exceptions, they also wouldn't have to pay any extra grain to those who had been acting as temporary innkeepers by taking in the previously homeless people. The amount of food that the maids had to cook had also gone down significantly, with the meals of the majority of the elderly and children being prepared in the kitchen of the longhouse block from yesterday.

Earlier today, the jail room had also been completed by Taniok and a few other laborers with the help of the log-mover. It was a simple enough room made of logs, with wooden bars on its only window, and a way to securely lock the doors from the outside, so any prisoners wouldn't be able to escape this time. Hopefully, Feroy would be able to find the culprit of Sejkil's death soon, and the jail wouldn't have to stay empty for too long.

He took a deep breath. The completion of the longhouse block was a good start for all the construction he wanted to do in the village. But it was only a start. There was still a lot to do.

As he gazed at the others sitting inside the manor hall with a satisfactory smile on everyone's faces, he remembered something. He wanted to see a line of factories running in this village in the future, but that simply won't work if basically every single worker was illiterate. Even if it might not be feasible to make them as knowledgeable as an employable college graduate on Earth, the villagers still needed to know a lot more than what they did currently.

He looked at others. "Duvas, I have been thinking about something for a while, and I think now we have a good opportunity to act on it."

"What is it, my Lord?" the majordomo asked.

Gorsazo and Feroy looked at him curiously as well.

"How many people would you say are literate in the village?" Kivamus asked.

Duvas thought about it for a moment. "I haven't personally asked every villager about this, but I don't think there are more than a handful of them - mainly the merchants and shopkeepers - who can do some basic reading and writing. Apart from them, the rest of the villagers won't be able to even write their own name."

"That's mostly what I expected," Kivamus muttered. He gazed at everyone. "But this is something that I want to change from now. I want to start a part-time school..." Seeing the confused look on the faces of Fero and Duvas, he elaborated, "uh, a place where everyone will be taught about reading and writing in the longhouse block. It wasn't feasible earlier, but now we have a place where a lot of villagers will be gathered together, so this will be a good chance for us to start educating them." He added, "And I don't mean educating just the children. I also want the adults to get educated, no matter how old they are."

"But... why?" Duvas asked with a frown. "What would the villagers even do with that knowledge? Shouldn't they be using that time to work and earn for their families? And only noble's children get educated anyway. What use would a commoner have for such knowledge anyway? They don't need to be able to read to cut a tree or do any farming work."

"I agree with him, milord," Fero commented. He added with a snort, "I can't differentiate my own written name from a bear's scratch marks on a fedarus bark, but that hasn't stopped me from slitting a bandit's throat whenever I've needed to, you know?" Then he scoffed, "And why would anyone choose to get educated? I wouldn't want to stare at a Goddess' damned parchment for hours if my life depended on it!"

Gorsazo remained quiet, but he was looking at Kivamus with a knowing glance. While his old teacher still barely knew anything about life on earth, he was always curious to learn more from him, and Kivamus kept telling him stories about the kind of wonders which people took for granted on earth. And he had always emphasized to Gorsazo that more and more people getting educated had been one of the major catalysts of all the inventions and improvements on Earth.

It was certainly true that only a very small percentage of people had been the ones who had invented the majority of things in the very beginning of the Earth's industrial revolution, but you could never know who would turn out to be that kind of genius. For any of that to happen, they needed at least the very basics of knowledge and education. And that's what he wanted to provide here. So he knew that he could count on Gorsazo's support in this for certain.

He explained, "I don't want this village to be dependent just on selling coal in the future. It is simply not a very reliable source of income, not to mention it is barely profitable, seeing the state of the village when I arrived here."

Duvas nodded on hearing about the low profitability of coal mining, but didn't say anything.

Kivamus continued, "And I have a lot of plans to change that in the future after we have managed to grow our own grain from next year. But for that, I will need a much better educated workforce, or at least one where the workers are not completely illiterate."

Seeing that the majordomo still looked unconvinced, he asked, "Tell me Duvas, how did you become the majordomo of this manor?"