

## Londoner 241

### Chapter 244 Taxes

Ustaimo felt a great deal of pleasure seeing the frown on Zoricus' face when the fat bastard heard that the Count wanted to postpone borrowing more gold from him. He suppressed his glee and began, "It's hard to say, milord. Usually we get above a thousand gold from Tiranat every year in the autumn, but my sources have told me that even before the southern road closed due to snow, merchants had already stopped going there because of a risk of bandit attacks. So Tiranat might not have made enough sales of coal by the start of winter to be able to pay even that much. Anyway, I can only tell the final amount we'll get after I have gone through their accounts ledger."

"But that amount was at the previous rate of a fifth of revenue, wasn't it?" Ebirtas frowned. "Wouldn't it be higher at the current rate of one fourth of their revenue as taxes?"

"It certainly will be," Ustaimo agreed. "If we assume they have sold the same amount of coal as last year, we could get nearly 1300 gold from them this year at the new tax rate, but it will likely be lower because of their correspondingly lower revenues in autumn. Whether they will still have the gold to pay it at this point is a different question altogether, since their previous baron was coming with all their taxes in the last autumn when he was killed and all his gold taken from him by the bandits. We are basically asking them to pay double the taxes on the same revenue they earned."

Before the Count could say anything, Zoricus glared at Ustaimo. "So what if the previous baron died? It is hardly our concern! Tiranat has to be made to pay every single copper they owe us, no matter what! What else are we giving you knights for? Use them however you need to, but you have to bring back all the overdue taxes!"

Count Ebirtas gave a quick nod, agreeing with his financial backer. "Not a single copper less than what they owe! We are already doing them a favor by not charging interest for them being late on paying taxes. We should have gotten that gold back in autumn!"

"Exactly," Zoricus grinned before looking at Ustaimo. "Tell them that if they aren't able to pay the full taxes at this time, we will have to charge triple the going rate of interest on the overdue amount, starting from when it was due back in autumn. That will make them fall in line easily enough." He smirked, "They have to follow the same rules as all the other barons living in the domain of Count Cinran - doesn't matter if Tiranat's new baron is a son of the Duke. That boy has to be a good-for-nothing if he was exiled to that place by the Duke, doesn't he?"

Ustaimo was smart enough not to give any answer to the rhetorical question. He never wanted to agree to any statement by Zoricus, but he also wouldn't risk his neck by criticising the Duke's decisions. It just wasn't his place as a commoner to question any nobles.

Zoricus continued with a shrug. "Anyway, you shouldn't have too many problems in recovering the taxes with the knights supporting you. From what I've heard from my sources in Ulriga, most likely that boy Kivamus doesn't care about anything else as long as he gets his regular supply of wine and a few whores to accompany him. Just threaten him that you will take those away if he doesn't pay the gold, and you should be able to recover everything." He smirked again. "Regardless, it's not our problem if they don't have enough gold to pay our taxes. If that's the case, just bring a couple dozen villagers of Tiranat as slaves when you return, and we should be able to recover our overdue taxes by selling them in the marketplace here."

As much as he wanted to, Ustaimo kept quiet and did not point out that it was the Count whose taxes were overdue, not Zoricus'. No matter how much leeway that fat bastard thought he got by giving loans to the Count, as Cinran's tax collector, he did not report to Zoricus! As of now he still worked for the Count. He pointedly looked towards Ebirtas. "It will be as you wish, milord. If you give me three or four knights, I will bring back all the gold, no matter what. Or I'll bring enough slaves to cover for any shortfall."

Zoricus smirked. "That's the way you should be thinking!"

The knight commander frowned. "Do you really need four knights for this?" Looking at the Count, he added worriedly, "With everything that's going on in the east, we don't really have many free knights to spare for anywhere else right now..."

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"I know that," Count Ebirtas nodded, "but this is just as necessary as protecting our borders. Getting that 1300 gold will go a long way to keep paying for the knights and our other armed men." Once the knight commander gave a nod of agreement, the Count looked at Ustaimo and waved him off. "Well, carry on then. You will get the knights to accompany you when you are ready to leave."

Understanding that he had been dismissed, Ustaimo began to get up, while the Count looked towards the knight commander.

"We really need that gold from Tiranat," Ebirtas commented, "it will help us a lot in arming our knights better. Especially in these troubling times."

"Certainly milord," the commander agreed. "Binpaaz is getting bolder and bolder these days. We never know when..."

Ustaimo was walking towards the door while listening to the conversation, but the door opened before he even reached there, and a squire walked inside with a worried look on his face. Ustaimo turned around and looked curiously as the squire quickly walked to the knight commander and whispered something in his ear.

"What did you say!" The commander roared while looking at the squire. "There were a dozen Binpaazi knights seen near the eastern outpost just yesterday?"

The squire nodded weakly. "They had already set a few local huts on fire by the time the scouts at the outpost chased them away, but we still don't know if they returned to their country after that or not."

Ustaimo wanted to stay back and listen to what they decided to do about this, but Zoricus looked towards him with a raised eyebrow. "That will be all, Ustaimo. Close the door on your way out."

Ustaimo simmered inside on being ordered by the money-grubbing baron. He should have already expected that a commoner like him would never be allowed to participate in serious matters, but he did not work for that fat bastard, damn it! How dare Zoricus order him!

However, with the news the squire had brought, he knew that this was no time to protest against his treatment to Count Ebirtas, whose forehead lines and wrinkles around his eyes had gotten even deeper after hearing the news, which just went to show that the Count really was getting too old by now.

Giving a sigh, Ustaimo turned around towards the door and started walking again, not giving any acknowledgement of Zoricus' order. He worked for the Count, not that gluttonous baron. As he exited the hall, he reminded himself that he still had a lot of work to complete before he left for Tiranat, and that's what he should focus on instead of the impudence of that fat bastard.

Taking care of all the accounts and balances of the Count's treasury, as well as recovering the overdue taxes from some merchants in Cinran was only a small part of it. While it was certainly very concerning that a dozen Binpaazi knights had entered Reslinor, that was for the knight commander and the Count to worry about. This was hardly the first time it had happened, but the increasing frequency of such raids did mean that the coming times were not going to be easy for Reslinor. But like he had done for all his life, he would just focus on his own tasks, and keep his head low. That was the only way for a commoner like him to keep surviving in this place.

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~ Kivamus ~

Kivamus was taking a round of the manor around noon while waiting for Hudan and enjoying a rare day where the sun had come out from behind the ever-present clouds of the long winter in Tiranat. Although the sunlight barely held any warmth in it today, it still felt nice for a change after seeing the cloudy sky for so long. It also hadn't snowed for many days by now, and hopefully, it wouldn't be long before the gathered snow on the ground started to melt and merchants from Cinran started coming again.

Feroy had left for Kirnos in the morning with a total of eight guards protecting the caravan, including the ex-mercenary and Hyola. While Duvas had still been frowning when seeing a woman being sent along with the caravan, Hyola had been overjoyed to get the opportunity to show her prowess with a crossbow in case there was a bandit ambush. It was true that protecting the caravan better was certainly the major factor behind Kivamus' decision to order the young woman to be added in the protection detail of the small caravan, but he also wanted the local men to mentally accept women as their equals.

It would go a long way in ensuring gender equality in the future, which was going to be a primary requirement for Tiranat to progress in the future. They just couldn't keep ignoring half the workforce just because they were women, especially when the village already had a serious labour shortage these days.

Anyway, the caravan should reach Kirnos by tomorrow afternoon or evening, and hopefully they would remain safe, despite Duvas' fears that sending a woman out of the village on the dangerous roads was certainly going to be a bad decision.

Chapter 245 Mechanical Advantage

With Hyola out of the village, they only had two crossbows in Tiranat right now, which meant only two of the gates could be protected by them. Ideally, Kivamus knew that he should have asked Darora to work on making another crossbow so they could protect all the gates even when they had to send a crossbow to protect a caravan, but they really needed all the seed drills to be built first, since it was essential to finish sowing on time. That meant crafting another crossbow would have to wait for now. Hopefully, Feroy would be back safely before too long, so the guards should get three crossbows once again to protect the village after that.

As a temporary measure, they had decided to close and bar the southeastern gate until Feroy returned with all the guards, to make it easier on the remaining guards to protect the village. Otherwise they might have had to start pulling twelve hour shifts once again due to a shortage of guards, like they had to do a few times in the past. Right now, only the north-eastern gate and the south-western gate of the village were open, facing the roads going from Tiranat northwards to Cinran, and westwards to Kirnos respectively.

Seeing Hudan talking with the guards on watch duty at the manor gates, Kivamus called him over. "Do you have the guards ready?"

The guard captain nodded. "Of course. The horses are ready as well. We can leave right now."

"Great!" Kivamus smiled. "Let's go then."

Taking over the reins from a guard who had brought the horses from the stables, Kivamus mounted the beast, while the guards climbed on their horses as well. Their small group exited the gates of the manor and started moving north, and before long they reached the north-eastern gate of the village.

Right next to the gate, he saw Taniok hard at work with nearly a dozen other labourers. While the foundations for the watchtowers had already been dug before the ground froze during winter, one of the labourers was using a shovel to clear the pits of the snow which had gathered in them, where the pillars of the watchtowers would be planted after that. At the moment, Taniok was scolding an apprentice nearby who wasn't cutting the planks properly - which would be used to make the parapet and the roof of the tower. Some distance away, another man was guiding a pair of horses which were pulling one of the log-movers behind them, with a long and sturdy fedarus log attached to the primitive machine. Another apprentice was cutting some logs into smaller lengths, which would go on to become the supporting beams for the watchtower.

Noticing him, the old carpenter gave him a quick bow.

However, not wanting to take any time from the carpenter who already had a long list of things to complete, Kivamus waved him off. "You can carry on, Taniok. We need the watchtowers built as soon as we can."

"I'll do my best, milord," Taniok nodded before turning around to scold a pair of workers who had sat down to rest, seeing that their supervisor was busy talking. "Get up, you lazy lot! I swear you can't even work for an hour before needing to rest!"

Leaving the carpenter behind, Kivamus and the other guards kept moving north, before they found the fork in the road and turned east. The under-construction dam awaited them.

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"The dam looks much bigger than I thought it would," Hudan commented.

"That can't be!" Yeden, the foreman of dam construction protested. "I've made sure that the workers are following the plans of Lord Kivamus accurately!"

"Oh, I didn't mean that you aren't doing your job properly," the guard captain placated. "It's just that I am seeing a dam for the first time in my life, even if it is only on this small stream, but now that it is getting close to completion, it just looks enormous to me."

While those two men were talking, Kivamus was trying to visualise where the water wheel should be placed near the dam - behind which water had already started to gather in a growing reservoir.

With the help of the carpenter Darora and his apprentices, they had already made two strong wooden sluice gates on the front of the dam which were attached to a sturdy frame. Those sluice gates could be lifted with the help of a series of pulleys, which were installed around a meter above the frame of the gates, which were fixed securely into the dam. Right now, a labourer was winding a rope around the last of those pulleys above the first sluice gate, while standing on top of the dam, before he threw one end of it to another labourer waiting to catch the rope on the bank.

"I really gotta see how this pulley system works," Yeden commented. "I know you have explained it to us before, but it still sounds incredible if it really works like you said it would."

"Well, you can see the benefits right now," Kivamus grinned. "I think the labourers are done installing the first sluice gate along with its rope."

Yeden nodded and started walking towards the workers.

Hudan was frowning at the labourer standing on the stream's bank with the rope in his hands. "I know that there isn't any water behind those gates right now, so it would be easier to lift the gate today than it would be after the water has risen to the full height of the dam, but the planks of those sluice gates still look very heavy. I don't think even I could lift it by myself."

"You can't," Kivamus shrugged. "Those gates were built to withstand the pressure from a lot of water, so they are a lot thicker and stronger than what we have used as planks in the longhouses. With the size of even a single gate being many times as much as a plank used in the longhouses, that gate easily weighs as much as three men, if not even more. Yeden had told me that it took half a dozen men to lift it properly into place before they could fit it into the frame of the sluice gate."

"I can understand that more men would be needed when trying to fit it into place then they would be if they were just lifting it on a flat ground, but still..." Hudan shook his head. "I don't think that a single labourer can lift it by himself."

Kivamus grinned again. "Well, it's time to see the magic of mechanical advantage."

Reaching close to the dam, Yeden shouted, "Alright, let's check whether it works properly." He pointed at the labourer standing on top of the dam. "You! Stand back." Then he looked at the man holding the rope on the bank. "Come on, start pulling the rope now."

The labourer nodded and began pulling the rope with a noticeable strain of effort but he still didn't need the help of anyone else, and inch by inch the sluice gate started moving upwards. It was easy to see that the man did have to pull the rope a lot more than the height to which the gate was rising, but that is exactly how it was supposed to be.

Before long, the gate had risen to as high as it was meant to go within the frame, with just that single labourer pulling that rope. Once he was done, the labourer looked confusedly at his arms, as if he was wondering when he had gotten so strong, before he used a loop on the rope and used it to tie the rope around a post dug into the ground to secure the gate in its current position, just like a mooring line which lifted a ship's anchor was placed on a bollard by a dockworker.

A group of other labourers had stopped to look at the process as well, and seeing that their hard work had been successful, a loud cheer went out from them.

"By the goddess, it works!" Hudan breathed.

"Well done everyone!" Yeden praised the workers, which led to another loud roar of success. Once everyone had quieted down, Yeden clapped his hands loudly. "Alright everyone, show's over now. Get back to work!" The labourers nodded while grumbling and started returning to their tasks, while Yeden walked towards Kivamus.

The foreman shook his head in wonder. "It worked exactly as you said it would... It still feels incredible to see that a single labourer had lifted that gate by himself with the help of those pulleys, when it took a lot more men to lift the gate earlier."

"That is the benefit of mechanical advantage, which that system of pulleys provides us here," Kivamus explained. "This particular arrangement of pulleys allows a solo man to pull up that gate by using a force eight times less than its weight, but in return he has to pull the rope eight times as far as the height by which the gate will rise." Noticing that neither of his listeners seem to have much of an interest in a physics lesson right now, he snorted and changed the topic. "Did Darora give you enough pulleys for the second sluice gate yet?"

Chapter 246 The Dam

"Not yet," Yeden replied, "but all the pulleys should be built by this evening, so we will bring them here tomorrow morning. In the morning, the carpenter had said that he had to finish the current seed drill he was working on, before he could give a few hours to make the pulleys."

"That's alright," Kivamus said while looking at the dam. "I can see that the frame of the second sluice gate is already built, so I think you can put the second sluice gate in that frame by evening. That way you should be able to install the second gate sometime tomorrow."

"That's the plan," Yeden agreed. "Of course, we will need a carpenter to come here to attach the pulleys to the frame, but Darora promised me that he will send an apprentice tomorrow morning for that."

"Good," Kivamus gave a nod. "I'm glad to hear that his apprentice can do this by himself, so it wouldn't take any time of Darora who already has way too much on his plate."

Kivamus gazed at the whole structure of the dam for a moment. It was nearly five meters high on the western side which was already completed, while the workers were still piling on clay, rocks and the supporting logs on the other bank of the stream on the eastern side. Still, it looked like it should only be a few more days before the whole structure was completed. If everything went well and the dam was completed on time, they should be able to capture most of the meltwater from the melting snow without it damaging the dam.

The labourers had also made a gentle slope on their side of the dam, with plans for a similar slope on the other side as well, so that anyone could easily walk to the top of the dam, and then to the other bank of the stream easily once the dam was completed. The reason for it was that the sluice gates were built around half a metre below the level of the top of the dam, while the top was meant to remain dry, since any time the water started to rise too high in the reservoir, they could open both the sluice gates to allow the water to flow across the dam into the stream ahead, which would keep the level of water in the reservoir under control.

With the first sluice gate already built and tested, and the second one not far behind, that meant soon it would be time to install the water wheel here. He had gotten the news in the morning that only the last mine shaft of the coal mines remained flooded by now, and that it should be cleared of all standing water by tomorrow, after which the water wheel will be free to be shifted here.

However, while they only had a single water wheel for now, after a lot of thought, he had made the design of the dam in such a way to make two sluice gates here, so that it would be possible to install two different water wheels in front of both the sluice gates. Although in the beginning, he only planned to use the one closer to the western bank where he was standing. Eventually, when the carpenters had more free time, they could install both the water wheels to double their capacity.

This pair of sluice gates would also help to double the rate of water discharge in case there was a sudden surge in the incoming water so that the dam wouldn't be damaged. Apart from that, this way they could close one of the sluice gates in case one of the water wheels needed to be repaired or they just needed to shut it down for some reason, while still keeping the second sluice gate open, which would allow the stream's water to keep flowing normally without causing the reservoir to overflow.

Eventually, he looked at Yeden. "Carry on then. You are doing well here, but it seems like the snow will start melting very soon, so time is of the essence here and you need to encourage the workers to finish everything on time."

"Don't worry about it, milord. I'll make sure of it," Yeden replied confidently, before taking his leave and walking towards a couple of labourers who were talking to each other. "Again, you two! I swear I haven't seen workers this lazy in my life! Get to work!"

Chuckling at the enthusiasm of the foreman, Kivamus looked at the guard captain. "We should return here in a few days when the dam is completed to see the installation of the water wheel properly. That will require Darora to come here as well. Let's go back for now."

"As you wish," Hudan nodded, before looking at the guards standing nearby. "Bring the horses, we are leaving."

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~ Joric ~

~ Somewhere to the northwest of Kirnos ~

Joric was tired, really tired. He had been digging clay with a shovel and putting it into a waiting cart since the morning, but the damned bandits still hadn't told them that today's work day was over. The sun had already set in the west, and it wouldn't be long before it got too dark to see without a burning torch, but all the clay miners were still working as hard as they had all day.

Seeing that the bandit who kept an eye on his section of the mine had walked away to talk to another bandit for now, Joric planted his shovel into the muddy ground, using it as a support to rest his body a little, with most of the other miners near him doing the same. Having seen just over thirty winters by now, he could hardly be called old, and yet his body still wasn't used to this kind of hard work. Just a few months ago before the winter, he used to be a merchant selling clothes and garments to the people of Kirnos. He couldn't help but reminisce about his past life in the coastal town. His wife and his only daughter who had just turned ten had loved him just as much as he loved them, and life was good for all of them.

His family didn't have much, but his wife used to mend and sew damaged clothes for anyone who needed it, and with her income added to his own, they had always been able to earn enough to put food on the table. Looking towards the fading light of the day in the west, he remembered watching the magnificent sunsets every evening with his family, sitting on the sand near the only pier in the marketplace of Kirnos.

On the evenings when he had been too busy trying to sell clothes and couldn't find the time to watch the sunset with them, he still eagerly awaited to see his family again. On those days, he closed his shop located on the bottom floor before going home on the upper floor of their small but cozy two-story wooden house, which was located in one of the side alleys near the coastal marketplace of Kirnos. Smiling happily even on the days he hadn't been able to do much business, he couldn't wait to get a hug from his adorable daughter, as well as his wife - who used to be pursued by so many men in the past for her beauty. Somehow, she had still chosen him, saying that he had the best heart out of all the men vying for her own.

A smile had found its way to his lips as he thought about her while looking at the fading light of the day. Life was never easy for common people like them, but it was still good. However it was around late last summer when Joric began to realise that things weren't looking good for most of the merchants in the marketplace. With the heavy rains and thunderstorms flooding all the farms, the wheat harvest had been as poor as he had ever seen.

The price of food grain and fresh produce had reached sky high, and people were starting to skip buying inessential things like clothing, so his sales had started to go down. He had reluctantly decided to raise his own prices to still be able to buy food for his family, and yet it hadn't helped much. Eventually, he had to take another debt from a moneylender in the marketplace so that his family wouldn't go hungry, and yet the food prices had kept increasing, and slowly the sales of the clothing he used to sell slowed down to nearly nothing.

By the time the season turned to autumn, he had started to become unable to pay the interest on his latest debt, since he couldn't skip paying the interest for the debt he had taken in the past to buy his shop. Before long, the thugs of the moneylender began to roam around his house, eyeing his wife in a way he absolutely hated.

However, he was still thinking that it would eventually get better, when one day young master Lanidas, came smirking towards his shop with his mounted guards and demanded that he either pay all the overdue loan amount of his shop, or move out the place immediately. Or, that bastard had suggested smugly, Joric could hand over his wife to Lanidas, and all his debts would be forgiven. That was the day

when he came closest to shedding a noble's blood, but somehow he had gritted his teeth and controlled himself from doing anything he would later regret, before telling the young master to sod off.

#### Chapter 247 Joric, The Merchant

Lanidas had glared at him for a while but eventually he had walked away, probably to find someone else to harass, allowing Joric a sigh of relief. However he knew it wouldn't be long before the young master was back. All the merchants in the marketplace knew that the guards were employed by Baron Farodas - who was still greedy but fair - quite unlike his unscrupulous son, so Joric knew that he had to do something soon to ensure his family's future remained safe. As long as his family remained in debt, those thugs would never go away, nor would the young master.

After that day, Joric had kept thinking that if he could just somehow find a quick way to pay his debt, the baron's guards would ensure that the thugs remained far away. The young master also wouldn't have any reason to bother his wife too much after that, since in that case someone would surely complain about it to the baron, fearing that it could happen to their own wives or daughters in the future. While the baron would never be able to change the sleazy character of his only son, his guards would still ensure that Lanidas could only harass the women from afar, and wouldn't cross the line, as long as they didn't owe any money to him.

Of course, the baron was getting old now, and in the future it would be the young master who would become the next baron, and only the goddess knew what would happen to the women and people of Kirnos after that. However, he could hardly afford to worry about the future when he couldn't even think of a way to do what he needed to do in the present.

Nonetheless, he was hardly the only one in Kirnos in such a difficult situation. One day he was sitting in his shop wishing he would get a new customer, when he saw a neighbour making a deal to sell his son into slavery. That gave him an idea that he could do something similar, but he would kill himself before he even thought of selling his wife or daughter into slavery. Perhaps that was the result of the good heart that his wife kept claiming he had. Either way, the only way he saw after that was to sell himself into slavery, and to pay the remaining debt with the slave price he would get. Once he had made his decision, he knew he had to do it soon, despite his wife weeping and pleading that he didn't need to do that. It had broken his heart to see her crying like that, but it would kill him if he couldn't pay the debt soon and the thugs did something to her or his daughter, which is why he knew he couldn't change his mind after that.

It hadn't taken long for him to find a contact in the marketplace who assured him that if he agreed to become a slave for the next thirty years to a big clay merchant called Torhan, he would get enough gold in return that he would be able to pay all the remaining debt on his shop, while still having some leftover money. Of course, he had already heard about Torhan, who owned a big clay mine somewhere

in the north of Kirnos. He had also heard more than a few whispers that clay mining wasn't everything that Torhan did, but beggars couldn't be choosers, so he had made a deal within a couple of days.

With the money he had gotten from that, Joric had repaid the loan he had taken from the money lender and also paid all the remaining debt on his shop, ensuring that his family would always have a roof over their heads, with a small amount of gold still remaining which would make sure his family was fed until the times got better for them. Even knowing that he might never see his wife for all his remaining life - since a thirty year slave contract was long enough that one of them might very well die before that - his heart had still been satisfied knowing that now she would always be able to live in the safety of their wooden house.

This way, she would still be able to do sewing and mending to keep earning some coin to pay for food for herself and their daughter, without being harassed by the money lender's thugs or the young master. Eventually the market would get better, and she might even be able to start selling some clothes again, which would ensure a good future for her and their daughter, since they wouldn't have to worry about paying any debt anymore.

Joric had remained awake for the whole of his last night with his family, lying in the embrace of his wife and his daughter, knowing that was the last time he was seeing them. His wife had kept crying all night, while his daughter had thankfully believed that he was just going on a very long trip. Nonetheless, he had tried to assure them that a wagon full of clay came to the marketplace nearly every week from Torhan's clay mines, and maybe he would get lucky and be chosen to drive a wagon in one of those trips, which meant he would be able to see them again. He knew in his heart that it was a lie, just as his wife also realized it, since the men driving the wagons were always the thugs working for Torhan and never the slaves - none of whom had been ever heard from again after they had left Kirnos - but sometimes having some false hope was better than having no hope at all.

The next morning had come sooner than it ever had, and he had found a wagon waiting outside his home after it had delivered clay to some potters in the marketplace the previous day. He never wanted to leave the last embrace with his beautiful wife and adorable daughter while standing in front of his shop, but he knew that it was time to leave.

Before long, he was waving at them with teary eyes from the back of the wagon bed while seeing them sobbing openly, with his heart breaking more and more with each turn of the wheel. As the wagon turned around a bend in the street, he had steeled his heart for what was coming. He had done what he needed to do for his family, like a man was always supposed to do, and now it was time to pay the piper.

The painful journey had taken more than a day, since apart from his broken heart, his back had also started to ache immediately on the bumpy and muddy road, since that was easily the longest he had ever travelled in a wagon, or outside of his home village Kirnos. The next afternoon he had arrived at what was going to be his home for the next three decades, which he very well knew might be extended to even longer based on the whims of his new owner, Torhan. Of course, it would be just to pay for the damages he would supposedly have caused to the owner's property during his long service as a slave. Nothing illegal about that, after all. He sighed. There was nothing he could do about it after he had made his choice.

Now he just had to hope his family remained safe in their newly owned shop-and-home, so that some day in the future, when he was old and wrinkled and finally became a free man again after serving his time as a slave, he might be able to see them just one more time before he keeled over and finally went to meet the Goddess.

Just thinking about his wife and daughter had made him start to feel wistful, which meant tears wouldn't be far behind, but he couldn't let anyone else see him crying in this place, since showing such a weakness here would mean he would be eaten alive by others. There would be time for that of course - he just missed both of them too much not to cry every day - but that would be later in the night when he was sitting alone behind one of the shacks with nobody nearby to see him weeping. He wiped his face surreptitiously, as if clearing it of some mud so nobody would notice his already wet eyes, and exhaled loudly to focus himself on the present.

Forcefully bringing his mind back to the current surroundings, Joric looked around for a moment at the dozens of men, women, as well as some kids working in the mine, all of whom were slaves of Torhan. This far west from the Arakin Mountains - which he had heard to be located somewhere in the east of Kirnos - the snow had already started melting a week ago. By now there were only some small patches of snow gathered here and there, with the remaining snow having already melted, making the ground muddy and difficult to walk on. Not that it had become any warmer though.

It wasn't difficult to see that the clay mine was huge, and yet he had already heard from someone that the area they were mining was only a very small part of the clay deposits, which meant there was no hope of the clay deposits ending anytime soon and the slaves being sent back to Kirnos. He snorted. Like that would ever happen. Torhan would easily have found some new use for the slaves in that case.

Looking further into the distance, Joric saw the forest which had been cleared to a good distance around the mine, so the bandits would have good visibility in case of an attack on them - either to take revenge on Torhan by one of his rivals, or to steal his slaves. However, from what he had heard from some other slaves who were too chatty, it was unlikely that anyone would even dare to risk attacking Torhan's group, which was said to be one of the most powerful bandit groups in the Southern forests of Reslinor.

That was probably why the baron of Kirnos had such a good relationship with the bastard, since it wouldn't be easy to destroy this bandit group even by the baron. The profits which Torhan certainly must be sharing with the baron in return for being allowed to sell his clay in the markets of Kirnos, wouldn't hurt their relationship either.

Before long, he saw the bandit who had walked away to chat with another of them returning towards the slaves.

#### Chapter 248 The Torhan Compound

The bandit glared at them. "Alright, you cretins, work day is over now. Load up all the clay into the wagons, and don't leave a single tool out here, or it's your hide on the line."

The slaves nodded, and began emptying the carts into the wagon where clay was being deposited, before loading up the empty carts themselves into another waiting wagon meant for that purpose. Soon, the wagons had been tied to the waiting pairs of nodors, which started pulling them up on the inclined slope leading outside the mine. It wasn't his turn today to lead the wagons, so once they had reached the level of the ground, a few slaves started leading the wagons to one of the clay-wagon storage barn on one side, while he and most of the other slaves turned around towards the place which they called their home now. It was still a slog to walk through the muddy path to one of the shacks which he shared with nearly a dozen other clay miners.

However, those shacks were well protected, or at least as well as they could be in these dangerous forests, by a makeshift wall made from branches surrounding the whole living compound. After arriving here, he had been surprised to see that he wasn't just coming to live in a shabby bandit hideout. While these walls were far from the carefully crafted palisade walls surrounding Kirnos, and were instead just thick branches stacked together in a trench and tied with a rope - with the help of slave labour of course - this was still a well-protected walled compound, quite unlike what he had expected to find here.

Soon, he had reached the wooden gate of the compound, and a bandit took the tools from every slave's hands before allowing them to enter. As Joric walked inside the walled compound, he looked around himself and saw the two lines of four shacks each, which was where everyone lived. The first three shacks in the first line were for the enslaved men and boys, while the fourth one was for the women who were slaves.

Further ahead of the four shacks of the slaves, there were four more shacks where the bandits lived a lot more comfortably. At the end, there was a huge and much more elaborate cabin - built of sturdy wooden logs - which was where Torhan, the leader of the clay mine lived.

It wasn't like Joric had ever made an accurate count of the people living here, but being a merchant for most of his life, some things just came naturally to him. Within a few days of living here, he had estimated that there were above forty slaves working here in total, as well as around twenty-five bandits who kept an eye on them and kept the compound secure from any enemies or wild beasts.

Initially, when he had arrived here, he had wondered why there was only a single wagon of clay coming to the markets of Kirnos if there were so many slaves living here, but it hadn't taken him long to realise that this wasn't just a bandit's hideout in the middle of nowhere. It was like a whole scaled-down village managed by its chief Torhan, although it was still much smaller than a place like Kirnos. The reason for it was that on the other side of the eight shacks and the leader's cabin, there were a lot more shacks and wooden buildings.

On the closer side, there was a horse stable which doubled as a nodor stable, as well as a small coop for chicken. A barn near the walls stored hay for animals and food grain for people, while a communal kitchen was located ahead of the barn where food was cooked for all the bandits and slaves by some of the slave women. Near the corner of the walled compound, there was even a small flour mill driven by a nodor inside another shack. There was even a well inside the compound next to the flour mill, for goddess' sake! Although Joric had no idea how that had been dug here. He shook his head in wonder. With all the shacks already being protected by the wall encircling the compound, if this bastard also started farming here, it might just become a whole tiny village of slaves which would basically be self-sufficient in everything!

That was probably the reason why Torhan was said to be a man who valued his profits above everything. He had even heard that in some rare occasions when there was a child born here to one of the slave women, Torhan took the newborn and sold it as a new slave in the marketplace of Kirnos, since the child wouldn't be of any used to him for many years, and from what he knew, Torhan was a man for whom profit reigned supreme. In return, Torhan promised to shave off a few years from the remaining time which the woman still had to serve as a slave, no matter how much the woman pleaded to allow her to be with her child.

Joric sighed. He already knew that this world was a harsh place, especially for commoners and even more so for slaves, but he had still been insulated from a lot of these things while living in a good sector of Kirnos. But after coming here, his eyes had been forcefully opened to how the world really operated.

Looking at the storage barn, he had immediately realised that even after the other tasks being performed by the slaves to keep this bandit compound up and running, Torhan was still mining more clay than he sold in the markets. Joric had realised the reason for that when he remembered that the clay wagons had been coming to Kirnos even in the winter, when the ground should have been too

frozen to dig easily. That's where the clay storage barns located just outside the walled compound would have been used.

Even if Torhan couldn't mine any clay in the winter, he must have wanted to keep selling clay even during that time, and for that, he needed to have a good amount of it stored by mining more clay in the summer months so he could sell them in the winter. Of course, Joric realised, this way Torhan could calculate exactly how much clay he should send to Kirnos so that the price would still remain high instead of flooding the market with all his stored clay at once, which would make the prices fall, and would decrease his profits. It was like this bandit chief operated more like a merchant than a bandit!

Soon, he had reached the series of shacks where the slaves lived, but he was surprised to see a bandit standing outside one of them. Wondering what it could be about, he began to enter the shack where he slept, when he heard his name being called from the outside. Frowning at that, he exited the shack and saw that it was the bandit who had called his name once again, while a slave nearby was pointing at him.

His heart had already started beating fast, thinking he had done something wrong and was going to be punished by being whipped which was the usual punishment here. Reaching closer, he looked at the bandit. "You called for me?"

The bandit jerked his head towards the shack of Torhan. "The chief is asking for you. Follow me." With that the bandit turned around and started walking towards that huge shack.

"But... but why? I didn't do anything wrong!" Joric protested.

The bandit gave a shrug without looking back. "Beats me. Guess you'll find out there."

Fearing that he was going to be whipped tonight, while wondering what he might have done which required him to be called to Torhan's cabin, Joric started following behind the bandit with slow steps to delay the inevitable. However, they had reached the cabin of the bandit leader far too soon for his heart to calm down.

"Chief, I brought the guy you wanted," the bandit spoke loudly after knocking on the wooden door.

"Send him in," Joric heard someone replying from the inside.

The bandit opened the door, and gestured to him to walk inside. With his heart beating loudly, Joric took tentative steps inside the cabin, and realized that this cabin really was different from the shacks where the slaves lived. There was a small fire burning on one corner above which a cooking pot was being managed by a woman - likely a slave as well - which meant the leader didn't eat from the food prepared for everyone else. A stack of swords and bows was kept in another corner of the cabin, along with only a few quivers - perhaps because some bandits must have been out hunting at the time. An elaborate collection of luxurious-looking rugs was kept in another corner, which is where the chief must have slept in the night.

Focusing his attention on the last corner, he saw three men sitting on chairs while talking. Noticing him, a lanky man who looked to be in his early thirties with a good head of blonde hair gestured to him to walk towards them. Joric immediately recognised the man as Torhan, the leader of this little slave village, who was also the chief of one of the most powerful bandit groups in Southern Reslinor, according to what some of the slaves claimed. Without any noticeable scars or battle wounds on Torhan's body, and wearing a luxurious fur coat with an ornate scabbard holding a sword kept on his side, that man wouldn't look out of place in the court of a noble! If anything, with his steady and unwavering gaze, Torhan had the serious demeanor of a man well-accustomed to command, which made him look more like a noble than the young master Lanidas ever did. Joric wondered how Torhan had even become a bandit. Maybe he was a bastard son of some faraway noble?

Sitting next to the leader was his deputy, a bald and muscular thug who had countless scars all over his arms and face. This was the man who Joric had often seen giving out the orders of the chief to others in the compound. However the third man was someone he had only seen once in the compound, and from a distance, so he hadn't given him much of a thought. But looking at him from here, it surprised him for a moment to see how a man could be that big! This guy was just huge, and the brawny deputy of Torhan looked tiny sitting next to him. While the third guy didn't have overly bulging muscles like the deputy, Joric had no doubt this giant of a man could snap someone like him in two with barely any effort.

Focusing back on the leader, Joric gave him a bow, like he had seen the other slaves doing, even though this was his first time meeting the man in person. "You called for me, chief Torhan?"

#### Chapter 249 Distraction

Torhan just stared at him for a moment, like he was peering into his very soul, before speaking in a gentle, yet commanding voice. "You'll be leaving tomorrow with Nokozal and some of my men to the road going east from Kirnos."

"Uh... what?" Joric was thoroughly surprised. "But why?"

Torhan kept quiet while still staring at him, so his deputy gave the answer after taking a glance at his chief. "Our scouts had seen a caravan leaving Kirnos a few weeks ago, likely with a good amount of food. It's rare for a caravan to come to Kirnos, so this is a great chance for us, in case they come again. So we'll be setting an ambush on the road going east from there, and if it goes well, we'll be able to grab enough food to last us a couple of months, while also getting some new slaves for free."

Joric's mind was running rapidly. Did these bandits really want him to fight against some caravan guards? He thought he would just be digging clay here! If he really had to fight against trained guards, he would most likely die in his first fight, which meant he would never be able to see his family again! He looked directly at the chief with pleading eyes. "But why me...?" he protested. "I can't fight at all! I've never even held a sword in my hands!"

"You aren't going there to fight," the deputy replied. "We need to know in advance how valuable that caravan is before deciding to attack. You were a merchant, so you will help us to find out more about it before we decide whether we should ambush them or let them go. We aren't going to risk our men for a meager loot."

"But..." Joric hesitated. He knew it wouldn't be a good idea to say no to the chief, not that he even had any choice in the matter as a slave, but how was he supposed to find that out in the first place?

The giant man, who was called Nokozal, gave a huff and crossed his huge arms. "I still say we don't need him! Just give me some of your men, and I'll bring you all the loot of that caravan!"

"Just like you looted the caravan going south to Tiranat a few months ago?" the deputy retorted. "The runt who came with you told us all about your great feats, getting nearly all your men killed and your slaves stolen. We don't operate like you here, going to ambush or attack without a good plan."

"That little bastard..." Nokozal muttered. "I'll wring his neck..." The giant man glared at the deputy. "That was different! Those men were useless and couldn't fight for shit! This time I know I..."

Torhan looked at the giant man and spoke in his usual gentle voice. "Shut up, Nokozal."

Joric had thought that the huge man would protest, but immediately, the huge bandit shut his mouth, and gave a quick nod. Joric was thoroughly surprised by that... So even that giant was scared of the soft-

speaking Torhan. That made the decision easy for him, knowing he'd better agree soon or he'd be risking his life anyway even without participating in the ambush. Looking at the chief, he gave a short bow, "I'll do whatever you order, but I still don't know how I'll be able to tell what the caravan is carrying while looking from a distance."

The deputy snorted. "Who said you'll be looking from a distance?"

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~ Kivamus ~

He was standing near the north gate of the village, along with Duvas, Hudan and another few guards, looking at the watchtower under construction. The four main wooden pillars had already been put in place, and right now Taniok was working along with some apprentices to attach the last crossbeam to the pillars. Another apprentice was busy cutting planks nearby, and there was already a small stack of them ready to use in the watchtower.

It was approaching noon right now, but he still had to stand near the burning brazier kept here for the workers. While snow hadn't fallen for more than a week by now, the temperature still remained below freezing, and the gathered snow on the ground was just as ever-present as always. However, one relief was that sunlight had become more frequent these days, with the cloudy skies opening up more often than not. There was barely any warmth in it, and yet the sight of the sun always lifted his spirits.

Days like this were when he missed his life in London the most. What he wouldn't give to have access to some freshly brewed coffee right now! Or like he did sometimes after coming from his office, to open up a football match on the TV and to just relax. Alas, none of those things were possible here at the moment.

Coming back to the present, he looked at the workers while thinking about the other projects active in the village. The paper making project was going well, and by now they had started to gather a small stack of those primitive paper sheets in the manor hall, allowing him to keep working on more blueprint and ideas, while still giving one of the paper sheets made every day to the classes being run by Gorsazo in the longhouse blocks - so the people there - especially the children and kids - would get used to it. If they could sell it to a merchant in time, it might help to get them some valuable gold to pay the taxes, even though the amount they would gain from it was going to be very small in comparison to what they needed.

He looked at the majordomo. "It has been a few days since the mushroom barn was completed. What is the progress of the replanting?"

"Oh, it was already completed yesterday," Duvas replied. "Madam Helga told me that unlike the shed where we had preserved the Rizako mushrooms until now, this barn is a lot bigger, and has a lot of surface area on the inside where we can grow mushrooms, including the upper floor, so it will take a long time before we can grow enough mushroom to even fill this barn. Only then, we would be able to use it as food." He continued, "She told me that it takes around three to four weeks for them to be ready to harvest - or to replant - after planting a new batch. That means it will take a few months until we can fill the whole barn with it."

Kivamus exhaled. "I had expected something like that. Since we want it to become a regular source of food for the village, it would be better not to harvest anything from the barn until it is reaching close to its capacity, or we would be delaying the time when we can harvest it regularly." He sighed. "It was a good idea to send Feroy to buy more smoked fish to help us feed the villagers in the next few weeks. Of course, these mushrooms will still help us in such a pinch in the next few months, but we will have to make sure not to use them unless there is no other way."

He asked, "That reminds me, is the losuvil powder still working well?"

Hudan gave the answer. "It is. I just used some of it in the morning to give to a guard who wasn't paying attention in the mock fights today, so he kept getting hit many times. I had to take him out of the training today, and told him to rest after giving him the medicine for the cuts he had gotten."

"Oh, that's unusual," Kivamus commented. "Usually the guards pay close attention to you in the training. Who was it?"

"It was Calubo," the guard captain replied. "You remember that we sent Hyola to Kirnos yesterday morning?"

"Of course I remember," Kivamus snorted. "I was the one who pushed for her to accompany the caravan."

"Well, Calubo had taken a liking to that redhead during the time he was living at the limestone quarry after being captured by Nokozal. So it seems like he was worrying too much about her and just couldn't focus well in the training fights because of that."

"Hmm..." Kivamus muttered. "It's good to see that he cares, but we can't have any guards distracted right now, especially with the spring approaching soon. A distracted guard is a dead guard in case we are attacked. Give him a warning that he has to focus on his duties and not to worry too much about her. Fero and the other guards with the caravan are more than capable enough of defending themselves and each other."

Hudan nodded. "I already gave him a scolding for it, but I'll make sure he understands."

Kivamus looked at the majordomo. "Did you shift more labourers to the coal mines today?"

Duvas nodded. "Of course. As we are getting close to the total area of the forest we need to clear, I am transferring some workers to the coal mines every day. By today there are above fifty men working in the coal mines. That being said, since the forest clearing is coming to completion, by now there are way too many log piles scattered around the village. But I guess it's a good thing since we will have no shortage of any construction material for a long time."

"While it's good in general," Hudan warned, "if it is too close to the walls it can give a hiding place to any bandits, and it would make it difficult for us to target them even from the watchtowers."

Kivamus nodded slowly. "That's true enough. Now that most of the forest clearing is done, both of the log-movers are free for most of the day, especially with us sending more and more workers to other places now. So why don't we bring those log piles inside the walls? Until now the workers were piling them criss-crossed to air them close to where they were felled, but we can take a dozen or two workers and tell them to use both the log-movers and a couple of sledges to bring all the logs inside the walls."

He added, "Leaving the logs out there also gives a good opportunity for a bandit to set them on fire, thus destroying our future construction material and also distracting the guards in case of an attack." He shrugged, "Anyway, nearly all the construction we start in the future will also happen inside the village walls, which means we won't have to waste time dragging the logs inside at that time, and it's much easier to do it when the ground is snowed over, like right now."

Chapter 250 Discovery

"Yeah, bringing the logs inside is a good idea," Hudan agreed. "If we do this then it would be easy for our guards on the watchtowers to spot any bandits outside the walls since their field of view will remain clear."

"Alright then," Duvas gave a nod. "It will take time to bring all the logs inside, but it's better to start early and to finish before the roads get safe to travel and risk of bandit attack increases. I will put workers on it today itself." He continued, "Apart from that, I was also told that Darora has given all the pulleys to the dam construction site, so Yeden should be able to fix the second sluice gate by this evening with the help of some apprentices of the carpenter."

"Good, good!" Kivamus nodded, as he saw Taniok and his apprentices climbing down the ladder on the watchtower.

"The frame of the first tower is complete, milord," the old carpenter reported. "I'm going to start making the platform now. That should be done by evening, so tomorrow we can work on the parapets and the roof of the tower. So if there aren't any major problems it should be completed by tomorrow evening."

"That's great," Kivamus grinned. "Carry on then, we don't have any time to waste."

He looked at the guard captain. "We had decided that we would post some old and trusted villagers on top of the watchtower to keep an eye on the surroundings. Do you have any of them in mind for this?"

"Well, that was before we had decided to recruit women as guards," Hudan replied, "but it's also true that we are sending out hunting groups which are mostly made up of our guards, so we still can't afford to put our guards on watch duty on the towers, whether men or women. As for your question, I had Feroiy ask around in the village some time ago, and there are more than enough applicants for this. I will finalise a few of them after confirming them with Sir Duvas."

"Of course, I'll help you with that." The majordomo looked at Kivamus. "Do you still want to pay them monthly wages?"

Kivamus nodded. "I do. These are the old men and women who can't do any hard labour, so we are paying them anyway right now - even if it is in the form of food rations. For now even if we say we are paying them, nothing will change and we will just keep giving them the food grains. Eventually, when we start paying everyone in coins after a few weeks, then we can give a reasonable wage to them. If we

don't do this and stop giving the free meals, then most of them will just starve, since they don't have any other way to earn money, apart from begging or stealing, and I don't want that. But this way, by paying them a small amount, they will feel like they are valued in the village, which will make them want to work harder to spot any threats while using that coin to buy themselves food, making them feel self-sufficient."

Hudan grinned. "The fact that this will leave our guards free to put them on duty at the gates is only a bonus."

"It is," Kivamus agreed. "Once we have more crossbows, we can even start giving these men some training in that, since they can use it just as well as the women guards do. Still, the first few weeks after the snow melts will be very dangerous for us, so we will somehow have to manage to post a woman guard with a crossbow on top of each tower. We simply don't have enough of them to put them on duty in all three shifts, but we can still afford to do it at night when the danger of a raid is higher."

"I'll adjust the watch duty schedules for this," Hudan replied. "Still, I wish we would get more crossbows soon. Or even more guards. With so many of them out on hunting trips, we are always short on guard these days."

Kivamus thought about it. "You are not wrong. Apart from wherever we are posting our guards these days, we might also have to provide protection for Pydaso or other merchants when they go to Cinran. It's true that the danger of bandit raids on the northern road is lower now, but it would still be a good idea to protect our valuable goods by making sure we provide the necessary protection ourselves. That means we'll need more guards."

"But we just can't afford to take workers away from other tasks right now!" Duvas complained.

"I'm not saying that we need to do it right now," Kivamus reassured him. "I realise that just as well as you, but hopefully we will start getting some immigrants soon, and at that point we can start to increase our number of guards proportionally."

"That... is a much better idea," Duvas agreed, "but I don't know if it would be a good idea to trust any immigrants enough to make them guards."

Kivamus grinned. "Of course we are not going to hire the immigrants as our guards! We will still only hire those people who have been residents of Tiranat for many years, and to fill the job they are doing right now, we will put the immigrants in their place. This way we will still have trusted men or women as guards, while making sure the immigrants are utilised wherever they are needed."

Hudan gave a smirk. "That's a good idea, milord! I think..."

His words were interrupted with the sound of the northern gate opening close to them. Immediately, Hudan and the other guards took positions on all sides of him with their hands on the hilts of their swords, just in case. But the guards at gate duty knew what they were doing, and as the gates opened fully, Kivamus saw a group of four men wearing fur coats walking inside along with a pair of sledges, with butchered animals stacked on them. This must be the hunting group which had gone to the east in the hills.

However there was a surprising addition to their group. The last guard was also herding a pair of sheep ahead of him.

"Is that...?" Hudan muttered.

The leader of the hunting group nodded. "It is a sheep. They both are. We found them roaming between the hills in the east."

"This is perfect!" Kivamus grinned. "The discovery that there are sheep living in those hills is even more important than the fact you brought two of them here. It's still surprising that none of you found any sheep in those hills until winter was nearly over, but either way, this is very good!"

The guards in the hunting group beamed at the praise.

Kivamus continued, "Make sure to keep an eye out for more sheep in your future trips." Looking at the fluffy animals, he added, "At this time they seem to have a lot of wool on their bodies, and if we can get enough of them we might be able to start making warm clothing for people. Alright, go on inside and take some good rest for a day before you leave again. You deserve it!"

The guards gave a quick bow at that, and started pulling the sledges ahead towards the manor.

Kivamus looked at the majordomo. "Shearing the sheep would be easy enough and can be done by any servant, but do we have anyone who can do any weaving from the wool?"

Duvas seemed to be thinking for a moment. "I don't think so. Leah is very capable of sewing and mending clothes, but she is not a weaver."

"That reminds me," Hudan commented, "Tesyb - who's the son of the southern foreman Pinoto - mentioned something you might like. A few weeks ago, he was telling me about his sister Isuha, who works in Cinran as a seamstress. Wouldn't she know more about sewing?"

Kivamus gave a slow nod. "More than Leah, for sure."

He knew that they would have to diversify their income sources soon, otherwise Tiranat would never get enough funds to become prosperous and secure just by selling coal. Manufacturing clothes was a relatively easy task compared to some others, as proved by the first industrial revolution in northern Europe and England. He had already been working on some ideas for making those machines, but he still needed someone with more practical knowledge of the task to finalise the designs. This seemed like a good opportunity.

He looked at the guard captain. "You know what, we need this girl in Tiranat." Regretting that there was no way for instant communication in this world, he added, "Whenever we send guards to Cinran the next time, make sure to send Tesyb with them."

"As you wish," Hudan nodded. "Although I already send him whenever there is a high threat of an attack, since he is one of our best swordsmen."

"Yeah, you had mentioned that." Kivamus added, "Before that next trip, tell Tesyb to inform his sister that I am offering her a permanent job here. She will be paid at least as much as what she is making as a seamstress in Cinran, and this way she would be able to live closer to her family."

"I'm not sure whether she would agree to move to a small village like ours after living for so long in a town," Hudan said, "but I'll let Tesyb know about it. The rest is up to him."

"That's the best we can do for now anyway," Kivamus muttered, wishing he had a way to just put a new job posting on the internet that he was looking for someone with experience in weaving, like back in London. Coming to the present, he added, "With her expertise we might just be able to move on to the next stage of making our village prosperous."

He took another look at the watchtower, where Taniok and his apprentice had already climbed to the top and were hammering a plank on the crest of the watchtower. "Alright, let's return for now."