

## Londoner 251

### Chapter 251 A Commoner's Life

~ Hyola ~

It was late afternoon of the second day of their journey, and Feroy, who was sitting next to her in the front wagon, had just told her that they should be able to see the palisade wall of Kirnos just after the next bend in the road. Initially, Yufim had wanted to sit next to her, so that he could challenge her to see who shot more bandits in case they were ambushed, but Feroy had immediately denied it, and said there should be one archer or crossbow-woman in each wagon. That meant Feroy and her were sitting on the seat of the first wagon, with two other guards sitting on the oil cloth which was covering their cargo kept on the wagon bed. In the second wagon Yufim, Tesyb and another two guards were sitting in a similar arrangement.

Looking around the road, it was easy to see that the snow had mostly melted this far west from the Arakin mountains. As they reached closer and closer to their destination, she saw many farmers working in the nearby fields on both sides of the road. The sun was also visible ahead of them, and while it didn't hold much warmth, she felt glad to see that the harsh winter was nearly over now. Just a couple months ago at the quarry, she was bracing herself to see a cold corpse of another stonecutter next to her when she woke up in the morning in one of those huts, knowing that at least some of them wouldn't be lucky enough to see the spring again. However, being in Tiranat, that possibility had become so remote, that she simply didn't have to worry about seeing her friends from the quarry dead from cold or hunger anymore.

Before they reached the bend in the road, Feroy ordered two guards from each wagon to get off and hide in the nearby forests, assuring them that he didn't plan to stay inside the walls for the night, and that he would return to pick them up tonight. It wasn't a good idea to enter this village with eight guards in tow, which would make the local guards feel threatened and they might be asked to turn over their weapons. Feroy also told her to give the crossbow and the quiver of bolts to one of the guards staying outside, so nobody would get a glimpse of it inside Kirnos. Once that was done, they started moving again.

Soon, their wagon reached the bend in the road, and she saw her first glimpse of Kirnos. After living in a shabby hut at the limestone quarry for most of her life, any place which was better than the poor conditions at the quarry should have looked great to her, and probably should have made her want to live here. However, after living in Tiranat for the past couple of months, and seeing how much their baron took care of everyone, she knew that no other place would ever feel like home to her other than Tiranat.

It did help that Tiranat had taller walls to protect the village compared to Kirnos, even though they were both made of logs. While she hadn't done anything to help in building the wall, for some reason, knowing that Tiranat had better and stronger walls made her proud of her home village.

Before long, they had reached the gates, and Feroy had to bribe the guards before they allowed them to enter. As the wooden gates opened, the small caravan of two wagons went rumbling inside the dirt roads of the coastal village. However, Feroy raised a hand to stop the wagon when he saw a location where there wasn't anyone nearby.

Calling Tesyb over, the ex-mercenary ordered, "Lead the wagons to the marketplace and park them where we had done it last time, and stay put right there. I'll join you all within an hour."

Hyola was confused. "Why are you leaving? Shouldn't we try to sell coal now?"

Feroy nodded. "I'll try to ask around but most likely, only the baron has enough gold these days to buy it in enough quantity for us to sell all our stock. I also need to take care of a side mission first, and I'll need to ask around about how it's going with the young master. He can't be pleased to see us here again, so it would be better to get a lay of the land first."

Now Hyola was confused about what was the side mission, but before she thought to ask about it, Feroy had already jogged into a side alley and was gone from her sight before long. Tesyb took the seat next to her in the front wagon this time, and touching the whip to the horses, he began moving their caravan ahead.

Soon, they had reached the marketplace of Kirnos, which had a cobblestone ground - just like in the dream where she had seen herself eating some freshly roasted meat sticks along with Calubo. Looking ahead towards the west, she also got her first glimpse of the largest expanse of water she had ever seen in her life. She really wanted to walk to the coast and touch that water, but Feroy had told them all to stay put where they were, so they kept waiting for a while.

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It had been close to an hour since the ex-mercenary had gone away, and by now she was starting to get worried if something had happened to him. To distract her mind, she asked about that side mission from Tesyb, who explained that Lord Kivamus wanted to get more immigrants, so they would get more

workers in Tiranat. That's why Feroz was spreading rumours about the good conditions there, while also helping out anyone who was sick with their unique medicine powder.

As she thought about it, she suddenly saw a commotion near the southern entrance of the marketplace. Immediately, Tesyb looked at the guards. "That must be the bastard Lanidas, son of the Baron of Kirnos. Make sure to bow deeply to him when he reaches here."

Hyola and the other guards nodded, while she wished Feroz would arrive soon, since none of the others would be able to deal with a noble, nor they had any experience in it. Just as she was thinking about it, she saw the man quickly jogging towards them, making her sigh in relief.

Reaching there, Feroz whispered, "The news is both good and bad. I've heard many rumours of some slaves leaving Kirnos to do some work in the fields, but never to be seen again. Most likely they must have started travelling east towards Tiranat. It will take time for them to arrive there on foot, but it means our tactic is working. These slaves were people living inside the walls, but as that news travels around, many people who must be living in nearby farms in the winter - likely very cold and starving by now - would also start moving east soon, including slaves and free people."

Hyola wasn't sure if it was a good idea to bring more people to Tiranat. What would that many people even do in that village? Did they even have enough food to feed all of them, or enough jobs so they can earn that food without begging? She had no idea, but she trusted Lord Kivamus, and he must know what he was doing. That meant she would do her best to support his orders.

She looked at the ex-mercenary. "Lord Kivamus wants both men and women to move to Tiranat, right?" Getting a nod in reply, she added, "Then I'll help you with this. You are a man, so however well you talk to the locals, many local women here simply wouldn't trust anything you say - especially those who are living alone. So when you are going to spread the news again, tell me what to say, and I'll try to talk to them. This way we should be able to get some women to move to Tiranat as well."

Feroz looked at her for a moment, before he nodded. "That's a good idea." Jerking his head towards the commotion in the marketplace, he added, "The bad news is that the young master doesn't seem to be happy these days, as you can guess. His thugs - I mean his guards - are doing their best to extort as much coin as they can from the locals and the merchants these days, and nobody is happy about that."

Soon, they saw a group of five men slowly riding on horses taking a look in the marketplace. Along with four guards wearing fur coats, the portly Lanidas was sitting on the leading horse in luxurious looking

clothes with an ornately decorated sword on his side. As the group turned towards them, Lanidas raised a hand to stop his guards, before looking down at them.

Immediately, Feroy, Hyola and the other guards gave a deep bow to him, while Yufim needed to be bopped on the head once before he bowed as well.

"You..." the young master glared at Feroy. "So you are back again! Don't think you can fool me again!" Then he looked at their group and his eyes got stuck at Hyola. "Oh, what is this I am seeing... a woman in a guard's armor! Hah! None of you can be stupid enough to think that she can fight equally against a swordsman..."

Lanidas squinted at the ex-mercenary for a moment before his eyes went wide. "Oh, you must have brought her to keep you warm at night!" Then he nodded while grinning. "It was smart giving her a leather armour like you all, so nobody would suspect anything. Makes others think that she is a guard, while only you all know the truth."

Hyola was only seeing red by now. How dare he say that she was only here to warm the bed of guards! Let this bastard meet her in single combat if he dared, and she would put him in his place easily enough! She had barely taken a step towards that bastard in her anger, before Tesyb held her arm in an iron grip and pulled her back. She gritted her teeth in frustration, but Tesyb looked her in the eyes and just shook his head.

That moment was enough to make her remember what she had been thinking of doing... This was a highborn noble, not just another bandit of Nokozal. Even her trying to threaten this bastard - no matter how much he deserved it - would make his guards kill her on the spot. She took a deep breath to calm her mind and bring her anger under control, instead of just throwing her dagger at this bastard's neck.

This was how a commoner's life was. Especially that of a woman. It wasn't like she didn't know it already. She had heard more than enough stories from others in Tiranat about how their previous baron treated everyone, including beating young maids and what not. She had to keep in mind that not every noble was kind and benevolent like Lord Kivamus. This world was full of bastards like this, who thought they were better than others just because they were born in a noble's house. She exhaled again, although her fists were still clenched.

Thankfully, her reaction seemed to have gone unnoticed by the young master, who had been looking at Feroy until now, before he turned to leer at her, staring at her from her head to her toes, making her blood boil again.

Lanidas licked his lips. "Perhaps I should sample the goods as well..."

Hyola had never wanted to kill anyone more than she did right now. Her hand slowly inched towards the dagger hidden on her side, and as her fingers touched the cold metal, she took a deep breath and glared at the young bastard.

#### Chapter 252 Anger

At the same time, Tesyb must have noticed her hand, and with an easy expertise, he moved a single step towards Hyola while making sure her leg got hit by his own, making her stumble and nearly fall to the ground.

She glared at him, as he supported her from her shoulder, like someone who was just trying to help someone up. Moving his head close to her ear, Tesyb hissed in a barely audible voice, "Calm down, you idiot! Or you will get all of us killed right here! Just ignore whatever that bastard says, it doesn't harm you to listen to his nonsense. Be assured, no matter what he says, we won't let him lay a hand on you! That's a promise."

With a single look at his eyes, she knew that he meant it. She took a deep breath, and gave a curt nod. This wasn't the limestone quarry, and these men weren't like the bandits who lived there, with every man looking out only for himself. Tesyb was a trusted guard of Lord Kivamus. As were the other guards. These were her partners and her comrades. She knew she could trust them.

She looked at Lanidas. Despite how much she wanted to kill this flabby excuse of a noble, a single glance behind him reminded her that his guards were right there, and if she even tried to kill this bastard, no matter how much he deserved it, that would be her last action in this world. There was another fact that Feroys had told her to give the crossbow to the guards staying outside the walls before they had entered inside Kirnos, so that nobody here would guess that they possessed something which was usually only found with the Duke's army. That meant she only had a pair of daggers with her right now, and it would be difficult to kill this bastard with them anyway.

She exhaled once again. It wasn't her responsibility to get rid of people like these from the world. The Goddess would be watching from the heavens, and she would make sure he got what he deserved. More importantly, trying to kill him would mean she would never be able to meet Calubo again, and that was something she could never accept.

It took all her will power and some more, but somehow, Hyola kept herself in control instead of killing this young master right where he stood. Or sat on the horse. Whatever.

Barely a few moments had passed while all these thoughts ran through her head. Right now she was being helped by Tesyb to stand up, when he spoke loudly, "Don't just go falling down so easily. You are embarrassing us!"

Hyola knew he didn't mean it, and was only trying to take attention away from her, so she kept her mouth shut instead of retorting back.

In the meantime, Feroy had taken a step towards the baron with his head bowed low. "She is still new, milord," he spoke towards the young master. "It will be a long time before she becomes a capable guard like the rest of us."

Huh... what? Hyola looked at the ex-mercenary in surprise, but kept her mouth shut for now. What was he even saying? It was like he wanted the young master to think that she wasn't really a guard!

Lanidas looked at him again and laughed loudly. "You're smarter than I thought, aren't ya? Eh... it's alright, you don't need to admit it. I guess I'll leave her with you for now."

Feroy grinned while looking up at the young master. "You are so kind and understanding, milord!" He continued, "I am only here to make sure there is no shortage of coal in Kirnos in the winter. There shouldn't be shortcomings in your comfort level at the manor because of the winter, you know?" He shrugged. "Us commoners can survive anywhere, no matter whether it is too cold or too hot, but for important nobles like you, who have the responsibility of taking care of such a big village like Kirnos, it is the duty of us commoners to make sure of your comfort."

Lanidas stared at them for a moment before grinning. "At least you know your place! And yes, it is indeed your duty to make sure that your betters always remain comfortable. It's a pity that my father's decision of tripling the entry taxes for any merchant coming from outside Kirnos is still there, or I would have given you a discount on it."

Hyola barely managed not to show surprise on her face. She knew that Feroy was basically an expert in manipulating people, but this was something else. She had been scared that angering the son of a baron in the last trip must mean that he must be ready to whip them or something this time, before she had

gotten angry at what the young master had implied about her presence here, but somehow Feroy had managed to flatter the young master well enough that he was grinning and talking about giving them discounts! She still had to talk to the ex-mercenary later about why he didn't make it completely clear that she really was a guard.

Even so, she had been told by Feroy earlier that he had found out that the tripling of taxes was something that the young master had done by himself to earn some extra coin on the side, with his father likely not knowing anything about it. That meant right now Lanidas was lying through his teeth saying that it was his father's decision.

She took a deep breath to calm herself so she wouldn't get angry at this young bastard again. So this is how most nobles were! Even a nest of poisonous vipers could be trusted more than them!

Feroy smiled at the young master. "You are indeed so kind, milord. A discount on the taxes would have helped me a lot!"

Lanidas shrugged. "The baron's decision is out of my hands, but you know what, I will still ask father to buy all your coal once again."

"Oh, you are generous, milord!" Feroy grinned with a bow. "I'll take all my full stock of coal to the manor immediately. I was thinking of selling it to some merchants here, but who cares about them when the nobility need it more! My first priority is to make sure that the manor doesn't have any shortage of coal."

The young master smirked. "That's exactly how it should be." Then he bent a little lower, while still sitting on his horse, and spoke in a low voice, "You've come from the east, right? Probably passing through Tiranat?" Once Feroy nodded, he asked, "What's this I am hearing that some locals of Kirnos - especially some slaves - haven't been seen in the past few days? I've heard rumours that they are looking to run away, maybe to that good-for-nothing village of Tiranat. You wouldn't know anything about it would you?"

"I'm just a small merchant, milord," Feroy gave a shrug. "I only stay at a place long enough to make my sales and buy goods for the next journey. Hmm... It must only be a wild rumour. Why would anyone from Kirnos - whether a free man or a slave - even think about running away from here? Especially to that pitiful village? They won't find a more generous Lord than you anywhere else, will they?"

Lanidas laughed loudly at that, his pot belly jiggling along with him. "You are right, of course. It must only be a rumour that the slaves are escaping to Tiranat. But I still have heard reports of some slaves not turning up for duty, so maybe they are thinking of running away into the forests and hiding there, now that the snow has mostly melted." He waved his hands. "Eh... No matter, they can't run away from me. When my guards find them, oh... I will enjoy that day!" The young master sat straighter and looked around at the marketplace for a moment. "I'll be leaving now. Make sure to get the coal to the manor by tonight."

"Of course, milord," Fery bowed again. "I'll leave for the manor immediately."

The young master gave a nod, and spurred his horse and started moving ahead, his retinue of guards following close behind him.

Once all of them were out of earshot, Hyola looked at the ex-mercenary. "Why would the young master help us to sell the coal? I thought he would disallow it completely."

Fery gazed at the retreating back of the noble. "Don't trust a single word coming out of his mouth. He knows very well that his father's manor must be running low on coal by now, so they are going to buy it from us anyway, since we are the only source of coal in this place. Lanidas said that to make us grateful to him by letting us think that he is the reason we are able to sell our coal when it was going to happen anyway, since his Father is the one who decides whether to allow or disallow a sale in his manor."

"Oh..." Tesyb muttered from nearby.

Fery shrugged. "The important point is what will be the selling price of coal this time. It was easy to see in Lanidas' eyes that he remembers very well the scolding he got from his father last time for making a deal to buy it at double the usual price, so this time he will do his best to make us sell at as low a price as we can in order to make up to his father for his mistake. Of course, I'll still try to sell at a similar price as last time."

"But I didn't notice that in his expression at all..." Hyola wondered. "I thought he looked happy when talking to you..."

"That's a highborn noble for you," the ex-mercenary chuckled. "Their mouth says one thing, their face says another thing - if you know how to look for it - and often, they mean something completely

different from both of those things. To recognise what it is, you need a good deal of experience dealing with all kinds of people to guess what that could be. It's your first time dealing with a noble, so it would be difficult to find the hidden meaning behind their words, but you will learn in time."

"I guess so..." Hyola muttered before glaring at Feroy, "But why didn't you correct that bastard fully, when he said that I wasn't really a guard?"

Chapter 253 A Landowner

The ex-mercenary tilted his head. "I did say to him that you were a guard, although a new one - which you are."

"Yeah, but when he said that he would leave me here with you, he didn't seem to think that I was a guard at all! He thought that you were just pretending that I was a guard!"

Feroy exhaled. "Look around us, Hyola. We are not in Tiranat. What do you think would have happened if I kept insisting that you were a guard? At the very best he might have asked you to prove it by having a sword fighting duel with one of his guards, which you had no chance of winning. Even if you didn't get heavily injured in that, it would only have proved to him that you are not a guard, since we don't want anyone here to know about our crossbows, and that's where you specialize."

"Anyway, one thing you should learn from today is that you should never correct a noble's assumptions." He added, "Lord Kivamus is an exception, and he has told us many times to give him our true opinions, but if you are dealing with any other noble, no matter if you are right or wrong, you simply don't go and correct him, or it will be your hide on the line. If you are right and he is wrong, he will lose face in front of his people and will somehow find a way to punish you for making him look bad, and if you are wrong, then he could simply put you in jail for lying to a noble. This is even more important when we are acting as merchants."

Feroy shrugged, "That's why I didn't correct him even when he thought I was only a merchant passing through Tiranat. As long as he doesn't think that we are residents from Tiranat itself, he is more likely to keep buying our coal, otherwise there might be some more calculations going in his mind before deciding to trade with someone belonging from a neighbouring barony like Tiranat, which is a natural competitor of Kirnos just by its presence there."

"I didn't think about any of that..." Hyola muttered.

"Like I said, you are new, and you'll learn in time. For now we need to leave for the manor." Feroy glanced at all of them for a moment before frowning. "Where the heck is Yufim?"

Everyone looked around for him, before Hyola pointed to a clothing shop nearby, just inside a small alley exiting the market place. "There, he is talking to a local woman."

Feroy exhaled loudly. "Bring him here right now!"

"That moron... I told him to stay close to everyone!" Tesyb muttered, before jogging towards the blonde archer.

Hyola looked where Yufim was standing, and saw that the woman he was talking to seemed to be crying. What was wrong with this idiot? How could he make a woman cry within moments of meeting her?

Soon Tesyb had dragged the archer towards them.

Feroy frowned at him. "Can't you follow even simple orders? I told you to stay together with others!"

"I didn't even want to go!" Yufim protested, "but I saw that she was crying... So I had to go and ask her what's wrong!" The archer grinned. "I think you'll be interested in the news I found out."

"We'll see," Feroy muttered. "What did you learn?"

"The woman... she was married until recently," the archer explained, "she still is, actually. But a couple of months ago, her husband sold himself into slavery so he could pay off the debt he had taken to feed his family and buy that clothing shop from the baron, who obviously owns everything here."

"At least the guy had the guts to sell himself into slavery instead of selling his wife or children," Feroy commented. "Still, as sad as it is, this is quite a common occurrence everywhere. Let's go."

"Wait, wait!" Yufim held up a hand. "Hear me out first. The husband of the woman sold himself to someone who owns a big clay mine up in the north - a clay mine which is owned by someone named Torhan."

"Wait, what? That bastard Torhan actually owns the clay mine?" Feroy rubbed his small beard. "I thought he'd just be a bandit doing the dirty tasks of someone, like Nokozal was running the limestone quarry owned by Baron Zoricus."

"No, no," the archer shook his head. "I didn't find out much else, because the woman herself doesn't know that much, but according to her, it's well-known that Torhan is a landowner, and owns those clay mines. I thought you'd have found out about it when you went to talk to the locals earlier..."

"Hmm..." Feroy muttered. "No, nobody took his name. I think the locals are way too scared of him." He thought out loud, "But... they shouldn't be that scared of a bandit living that far away when they are staying safe inside a walled village... Hmm... that means this Torhan guy is well connected to the baron... Earlier I thought that the local baron only tolerated the presence of this bandit so Kirnos could keep getting clay, which they can make into pottery and sell to the visiting ships to earn gold, but it seems like their relationship goes deeper than that. I'd ask around more, but I don't think we'll find out anything if people are that scared of him."

The ex-mercenary looked around for a moment. "Well, that's a worry for later. I'll let Lord Kivamus know about it when we return to Tiranat. For now, let's leave for the baron's manor to sell the coal, and then we'll exit Kirnos from the eastern gate. We'll have to camp somewhere in the forests for tonight, then tomorrow morning we'll circle around to the north to meet the merchant who smokes fishes up there. Tesyb, you remember the way to the manor of Baron Farodas, right?"

Tesyb gave a nod.

"Good. Lead both of the wagons there. I'll join you at the manor once I have talked with this merchant and told him that we want to buy smoked fish from him outside these walls to avoid the taxes once again."

"What if we reach the manor before you return?" Hyola asked. "I don't think any of us can deal with the young master or the baron as well as you can."

"In that case just wait outside the gates for me. I'll try to be quick. Go now. It's already evening, and we don't have any time to waste if we want to find a good place to camp in the forests."

With that, the ex-mercenary started walking with fast steps towards the northern gate, where he said the smoked-fish merchant had a storage barn, while Tesyb joined Hyola in the front wagon, and they started moving on the cobblestone road going south towards the baron's manor.

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~ Kivamus ~

He was once again standing near the northern gate with some other people from the manor, while looking at the watchtower. It was evening right now, and today had been noticeably warmer than yesterday, so he felt that snow should start melting any day now. While that was good news in many ways, since they would be able to start sowing wheat and take the first step towards becoming self-sufficient in food, while merchants would also start coming and the manor would be able to start earning at least some revenue after that, it also meant that the threat of bandit attacks would become high once again. Soon, the guards might not even be able to continue hunting at the current rate by sending out four hunting groups, or they would be leaving the village basically defenceless due to a shortage of guards.

One good news was that out of the targeted twelve seed drills he had commissioned to be crafted by the carpenter, ten were already done, which meant it would only be a few more days before Darora could start working on the fourth crossbow. Hopefully they would be able to make a few more of them before any bandit raid happened. Of course it would be even better if no raid happened at all, but that was probably just wishful thinking on his part.

With the grain prices continuing to increase throughout the winter everywhere, as well as a general slowdown of economy because of everyone tightening their belts for the coming year - mainly because of a series of bad harvest in the past few years - it meant that many more people would have left their lives in the towns and cities, and would be roaming around the countryside or in the forests in search of easy money or food. That meant more and more bandits in the kingdom, especially in the southern parts of it where Tiranat was located.

Still, there probably wasn't any point in worrying about it. All he could do was to try his best to make sure everyone in the village was safe and protected.

Before long, while he was still lost in his thoughts, he suddenly noticed that the constant sound of hammering on the watchtower had stopped.

Finally! The moment for which he had been waiting for nearly an hour seemed to have arrived! Looking towards the top of the tower, he saw Taniok leaning over the parapet, and grinning at him.

"That was the very last nail, milord!" the old carpenter boasted. "The first watch tower is complete now! Come on up. You should take a look from the top."

#### Chapter 254 The First Watchtower

Kivamus grinned at Taniok and raised a hand in acknowledgement. Before he climbed, he had to wait for a couple of workers to climb down the ladder, until eventually it was only the bald carpenter standing on top of the tower. Then just as he walked closer to the ladder, Hudan put up a hand to stop him from climbing.

"I'll go first, milord," the guard captain instructed. "I need to make sure all the ladder rungs are secure enough before you climb on it. If they can take my weight without breaking, then they shouldn't pose any problem for you."

Kivamus waved him on to go first, but the old carpenter frowned at the guard captain. "Don't doubt my craftsmanship so easily, lad! I can guarantee that it won't break. I always do my job properly!"

Hudan snorted as he began to climb. "So let me do my job properly as well. It's my duty to verify it's safe before I let Lord Kivamus come here."

Taniok huffed at that but didn't say anything.

Despite his gigantic frame, Hudan's body was pure muscle, and he easily climbed over the ladder and reached the top of the tower, before he called out to him that it was safe.

Kivamus looked at Duvas for a moment, who gave him an encouraging nod, before he began to climb as well. This wasn't the first construction project in the village, but it was still the highest one, and after the palisade walls, it was the most important thing to ensure the safety of the village. As he climbed, he was glad about his recent workouts and training with the guards in the past few months, since they had

toned his body well enough that it wasn't difficult to climb the ladder at all, unlike when he had just arrived in this world - when it might simply have been impossible with his flabby body.

It didn't take him long until he reached near the top, when Hudan moved a hand towards him and helped him to the top. Walking towards the parapet in the front, he just gazed at the surroundings for a long minute. The snow cover was heavier outside the village walls, and the closest trees of the forest were more than five hundred meters away, giving them a clear line of sight for a good distance. The northern road going towards Cinran was easy to recognise despite the snow cover, because of the wagons and all the workers - who were digging fire clay, building the dam, and mining coal - who passed through this road, before it bent towards the east somewhere around eight hundred meters away from the village walls.

He looked all around the surroundings of the village, including the vast amount of land sitting empty there just waiting to be utilised, making him feel a whole lot of satisfaction for his plans in the future. When he used to live in London in his past life, the company where he worked was looking to expand its office space, because they had hired too many people in recent years and didn't have enough space to put them to work. But because of the astronomical prices of acquiring that office space in the downtown area, the company had always kept postponing it. However, today, in this new world, the situation had completely reversed itself. While he was always short on workers and skilled craftsmen in Tiranat, he wasn't going to be short on land for a long, long time.

He walked towards the opposite side of the platform on the watchtower, towards the village, and gazed downwards over the parapet. "Duvas, can you climb the ladder as well? You will love the view from here."

The majordomo hesitated for a moment before he sighed. "Wouldn't I love to... But I can't, milord. Not anymore. My body just doesn't have the strength these days for me to climb a ladder safely."

Kivamus gave an understanding nod, before remembering that Duvas was pushing sixty years of age by now. While the majordomo was more than capable of climbing the stairs in the manor house, pulling his own body weight to climb a vertical ladder seemed to be too much for him. If only they had a lift here... But then again, if they had the technology to make a good quality lift here, then they probably wouldn't even need to rely on a wooden watchtower to protect the village in the first place.

Walking back towards the northern side, he looked at the carpenter. "Well done, Taniok. You always make sure to come through on your promises."

The old carpenter rubbed his bald head in embarrassment. "I'm just doing my job, milord."

Kivamus smiled. "That's true, but you are still doing it quite well. Anyway, there is barely an hour of sunlight left today, so you won't be able to do much before it gets dark, but from tomorrow you should start working on the watchtower near the south-west gate of the village. We open the village gates in these two directions every day, so it's important that we can give them some added cover with a watchtower as soon as possible."

"Of course," the carpenter nodded. "I'll still use the remaining daylight today to transfer more construction materials there."

"That's a good idea," Kivamus praised.

Hudan glanced at him. "This watchtower is going to be very helpful for us. I have already shortlisted a few aged men from the village who have also been cleared by sir Duvas for their trustworthiness. Today, I'll make a schedule for their watch duty, so that one of them is here all times of the day, in two of the three shifts every day."

"Why only in two shifts?"

"Oh, in the night shift, when the danger of a raid is higher, I'll put a woman guard with a crossbow up here. During the day, the older men will still serve as our extra eyes to give us a warning in case of an attack, but no bandit is foolish enough to attack a walled village in daytime, so most likely these older men are only going to warn us about wild beast attacks." He added, "Those beasts aren't going to attack us with a plan in advance, so we can deal with them even without a crossbow-woman up here. But if it's a bandit raid, they will be smart enough to wait for the cover of the night before rushing towards the gates, which is why a trained crossbow-woman will be helpful to cut down their numbers before they reach the walls."

"The bandits will still be able to see that we have a watchtower here while staying in the forest cover," Kivamus commented, "so they wouldn't be stupid enough to attack from this direction..."

"Of course," the guard captain nodded. "If an attack happens before all the watchtowers are completed, it will likely happen from a direction where we don't have a tower. Hopefully this situation will only last a few weeks until all the towers are built, but after that, from wherever a raid happens - especially in the

night - these women will be able to take out a few bandits easily enough. It will be even more effective for the first few months, since the bandits wouldn't expect that we have something like a crossbow, which is usually only found in Fort Aragosa with the Duke's army." Hudan added, "I'll also make sure the women guards do some target practice from up here, since they only have experience of shooting from a level ground until now."

"True enough," Kivamus agreed. "Order the fletcher to make a few hundred more bolts, so there is no shortage of them for practice. Keep the iron tipped ones in reserve, for use in case of a real attack, but for regular target practice, the women shouldn't hesitate in using bolts."

Hudan nodded. "We already have a small stockpile of bolts but I'll give another order to the fletcher for this. When we have enough of them, we can even put a quiver or two up here all the time, so that a guard doesn't have to worry about running out of bolts in case of a raid."

"That's a good idea," Kivamus said. "Those fully wooden bolts don't cost us anything apart from the wages of the fletcher, so they can use it freely enough." Thinking more about it, he added, "From tomorrow, you should also start training those older watchmen in the usage of crossbows. Unlike the women guards, they won't be allowed to take away the crossbow to their homes, but in case we aren't able to send a trained female guard to help them in shooting, or during the daytime when they are here alone and a wild beast attacks us, they should still be able to support our swordsmen from up here using the crossbow."

"I was already thinking of that," Hudan replied. "I'll make sure they have a good idea of how to use them."

"One thing is still bugging me though," Kivamus muttered. "Will these older men even be able to climb the ladder safely? Duvas didn't even want to try it."

Hudan chuckled. "There is no worry about that. I am only shortlisting those men who still look strong enough to climb a ladder. That's why I only said that it's a shortlist for now, since I'll finalise them only after they have proven that they can climb on this watchtower by themselves. I'll take those tests tomorrow, and then I'll select the best ones as the watchmen."

"Good, good," Kivamus smiled, grateful that the guard captain had thought of everything.

Soon, he began to climb down from the watchtower along with the other two men. Taniok quickly took his leave along with his apprentices and began using a few hand carts, a couple of wheelbarrows as well as the log-mover which was being pulled by a pair of horses, to start moving the leftover construction material to the southwestern gate. Hudan was talking with the guards on gate duty, to put one of them up on the watchtower for tonight until he brought the older men to replace them from tomorrow.

In the meantime Kivamus looked at the majordomo. "Was Yeden able to install the second sluice gate in the dam yesterday?"

Chapter 255 A Long Wait

"Uh... no. There were some problems with the fitting," Duvass shook his head. "The wooden panels of the sluice gate were a little bigger than they should have been, since one of the new apprentices of Darora hadn't measured it properly. So they had to bring them back from the construction site yesterday, and today Darora will modify them himself to make sure they fit. I think it should still be done by this evening." He added, "One good thing is that Yeden, the foreman of the dam site, didn't waste any time and used those workers who were supposed to install the gate to complete more of the dam structure. I think it should only take another two or three days at most until the dam is fully completed."

"That's really good!" Kivamus grinned. "Snow would start melting any time now, so the completion of the dam by then would help a lot to catch all the meltwater. What about the last mineshaft? Is it cleared of water?"

"Hmm... It should be done by today, I think." Duvass continued, "Should we bring the water wheel back to the village after that? Since it will be some time before we can install it in front of the dam."

"No, tell the workers to send it to the dam when all the water has been removed. There is no point in bringing it to the village and taking it back in the east to the dam in a few days. It's not like there is a risk of anyone stealing the waterwheel or something. Just send it there, and I'll go with Darora to the dam in a few days after he has built all the seed drills, to talk about how we can install the water wheel there and if there are any modifications needed before that."

"I'll let them know." The majordomo looked at the retreating workers for a moment. "What do you want to do about the labourers who are digging clay? I think they have already dug enough of it that we should be able to complete the dam with it without them digging more clay."

"They are the former limestone cutters, right?" Without waiting for a reply, Kivamus added, "There is no point in sending them to mine coal, since they have no experience in it." He thought about it for a moment, before he continued, "There are around two dozen of them working there. From tomorrow,

leave half a dozen of them to continue to dig clay, and send the rest of them to the south to make the fields ready for sowing by removing small stones and such. That doesn't take any specialised skill so they can do it just as well as anyone. The clay we will slowly gather even at that lower rate of digging is going to be helpful to us in the future."

Duvas nodded. "Pinoto has more than enough experience in farming and will guide them through it. That being said, I have already started sending more and more labourers to mine coal as we approached the targeted area of forest clearing, and we just reached that target as well but there are still a lot of them working there, like you wanted. Just over a hundred as of today, I think, including women. I think we should have around a week to ten days before most of the snow has melted, so do you want me to send them to mine coal as well?"

"Hmm... we do need as much coal as we can mine to sell and pay the tax with that income, but I am worried that if enough immigrants and refugees come here, we might get a food shortage once again later this year."

After thinking about it for a while, Kivamus began, "Leave around fifty labourers in the south to continue clearing the forests, including the farmers who came here from Kirnos, and send the remaining workers to mine coal. That should still give us around forty workers who have good experience in cutting trees as well as around a dozen farmers who can help in the simpler tasks. In fact, tell Pinoto to select the best performers among the workers who have been cutting trees in the past few months and only keep them in the south. These people should keep cutting trees and removing them from the fields right until the moment we have completed sowing the seeds. This should help to maximise the area we are farming."

"That's... a good idea." The majordomo added, "It might mean we might become even more short on seeds than we already are, but I guess we'll have to deal with it somehow, especially if the merchants bring some wheat right after the snow has melted."

"That would be helpful for sure." Kivamus looked at the guard captain and the other guards. "Come on, let's return now."

Hudan nodded, and with that they started trudging back over the snow covered ground towards the manor.

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~ Joric ~

It had been four days since he had been sent to this desolate road in the middle of nowhere along with the other bandits. Four damned days! But there was still no sight of any caravan coming or going! Well, he could admit that they had reached this location after dark on the first day, so perhaps he shouldn't be counting that day here, but damn it! What was he supposed to do if these bastards really told him to fight some guards of a caravan! Every passing day was making him more and more nervous that it would be his last day in this world...

He looked around himself for a moment. It was approaching evening by now, and the whole day he and the other bandits had been hiding behind some trees some distance away from the dirt road going east from Kirnos. While the snow had fully melted here - which meant it was actually possible to see where the road was instead of everything just being covered by snow - it also meant that the ground had become muddy from the melted snow, and there wasn't a clean or dry place to sit anywhere. Or even to sleep at night.

He had certainly become more than habitual of getting his whole body dirty and covered by mud after mining clay everyday in the past few months, and knew he would probably never see the dry and comfortable indoors of his shop and home. But still... At least Torhan's compound had covered huts for the slaves to sleep, which remained dry inside, but here, he just had to try to sleep by sitting next to a tree, while resting his back on the rough bark. After doing the same thing for three nights, and that was after walking for nearly two days on foot, he already felt more exhausted than he had ever been in his life.

Apart from him, there were eight bandits here in total, including the giant Nokozal and his lackey, along with the bald and brawny deputy of Torhan. Most of them were hiding away from the road behind one tree or another, while one of them was always some distance away in the west, staying close to the road to keep an eye in case a caravan was approaching. Not that anything had approached here yet. Nothing at all! In fact, they were far enough away from the village of Kirnos that there weren't even any farmers or their farms in sight anywhere. But that was something that the deputy had decided himself, so that nobody would be nearby when they eventually attacked a caravan and looted it.

Thinking about Kirnos reminded him that when their group was looking for a good place for an ambush, as they travelled with two men on each horses, while he had walked all the way from the clay mine, they had passed not far away from the palisade walls of Kirnos, and the deputy had sent one of the bandits inside the village for a few hours, probably to get some information about any visiting caravans.

While near the walls, Joric had barely controlled himself instead of running away to his home. Knowing that his adorable daughter and his beautiful wife were barely a ten minute walk away from him and still being unable to go and meet them had been gut-wrenching for him. The other bandits had gotten down from their horses to give them some rest while they waited for that bandit to return, and had walked towards a copse of trees.

At that time he had started walking slower than others, hoping no one would notice and if he got enough distance from others he would be able to run away, but one of the bandits had seen him lagging behind, and quickly used the pommel of his sword to clobber his head. The splitting headache and the temporary blindness he had gotten from that, along with a strict warning that the next time they would just cut an arm from him had cowed him down thoroughly.

Of course, the bandits had also tied his hands together after that to make it difficult for him to run away, but Joric hadn't found the courage to try it again anyway. Not that he didn't want to, but he knew that if he was caught trying to run away again, he really would become an amputee, and his utility as a slave would diminish sharply at the clay mine. That would mean the penny pinching bastard Torhan might just decide that the cost of feeding him was more than what he gained from his work, so the day he returned to the clay mine again might just become the last day for him in this world. So he had tried to control his urge to try running away again, and kept following the bandits with his heart shattered in pieces while thinking about his family.

Eventually that bandit had returned from Kirnos with a grin, and told something in hushed voices to the deputy and the giant. They had started travelling east once again after that, and the deputy had found a good and desolate place just after a bend in the road to make an ambush.

#### Chapter 256 Planning

However, it seemed that either the insider information that the bandit had brought was not accurate, or the caravan had decided not to return at all. Not that he had even been told that there was a caravan there, but it seemed likely with the way they all had been hiding in the forest for the past few days. Either way, it was their fourth day hiding here, and by now their food supplies were already running low, which meant he barely got anything to eat while the deputy and Nokozal nearly had a feast every day after it got dark.

Coming back to the present, Joric looked around him for a moment, while moving a hand over his recently cropped black hair which one of the other clay miners had done when he had asked to make them shorter. The sun was already approaching the top of the trees in the west, so it seemed like today would also be a waste. For the bandits anyway. As for him, he just wished he wouldn't have to fight. Not that he really could, since he hadn't been given any weapons by the bandits. Just how were they expecting him to fight the guards anyway?

Suddenly, he heard his name being called out from nearby. Turning around, he saw the bald deputy beckoning him towards where the horses had been tied further inside the forests. Giving a nod, he jogged towards them, being glad that at least his hands were not tied now and saw that Nokozal the giant was also present there.

"Our informer in Kirnos had told us that a caravan was already present there," the heavily scarred deputy explained, "and that it would take a few days for them to return. I think they would approach this place either today or tomorrow. Now here is what you are going to do. When our scout in the west sees a caravan coming on the road, he will give a long whistle followed by two short whistles. That's the signal for you to walk to the road, pretending that you were injured."

"But why?" Joric frowned, his heart starting to beat faster after hearing that he was being sent to face the caravan guards from up close. "I'm not injured..."

"Just shut up and listen," Nokozal growled, "or I'll make it such that you don't have to pretend it!"

Joric gulped and gave an uncertain nod. "I'll do as you say, but why did you even bring me here for this? One of you could have done this much better than me without getting scared! I might just wet myself in fear doing this..."

The deputy tilted his head. "That is kind of the point..." He added, "Have you not seen the other men we brought with us? None of them looks like a farm owner who would be stranded on a road. They are all brutes, and they look the part. They can't act like a rich farmer if their life depended on it!" He jerked his head towards Nokozal. "Nobody would confuse this giant for a farmer, and I have more scars on my body than I can count. If one of us tries that, the caravan guards will easily find out that it's an ambush and will be prepared for us. That's the reason we brought you here."

Joric just gave a quiet nod while looking at his muddy feet and clothes. "I don't think the wagon guards will think that I am a rich farm owner..."

"Who else but a rich farmer would own a horse!" the bald deputy answered before glaring at him. "Now stop asking stupid questions and just listen!" He continued, "You will go to ask for help from the coming wagons, and tell them that you had come out from Kirnos to visit your farm nearby, but your horse broke its leg on a pothole in the road, so after putting it out of its misery in the forest, you need someone to give you a ride to Kirnos."

Joric frowned. "Wouldn't the wagons be going away from Kirnos? I don't think they would agree to turn around just to take me back there..."

"That's not the point, and you aren't actually going to take a ride with them!" The deputy glared at him. "Your task is to ask them what they are carrying and where, like you are just making some small talk, so you can find out if their wagons have a good amount of food in them or not. If they tell you that even one of their wagons is full of food - either wheat or smoked fish - then you will raise both of your hands above and stretch them for a good time while interlocking them. That will be our signal to start the attack."

Joric knew that this was going to put him right in the middle of armed swordsmen trying to kill each other, and it was already making him feel more nervous than he had ever felt in his life, but he knew this was no time to mention that, especially with that giant Nokozal standing right in front of him. "What if they aren't carrying any food? What if the wagons are empty, or if they are carrying something other than food?"

"In that case you will just say that you wish they were going towards Kirnos, but you can't ask them to turn around just for yourself." The deputy added, "That should satisfy the wagon guards and the merchant leading them, and they will just move on while leaving you behind. You will sit on the side of the road for a while until the wagons are out of sight, before returning to us."

"If you even think of running away at that time..." Nokozal barked, "I'll make sure you can't run away ever again."

Ignoring the giant, the deputy continued, "While we were lucky to arrive when we did, since a caravan had just entered Kirnos when we passed the village, our informer had told us that at that time the wagons were still full of coal. But he had recognised a few men as the same ones who had arrived there around a month ago, and they had carried half a wagon of smoked fish before leaving. I believe they should be buying the same this time as well, so it's unlikely that the wagons wouldn't be carrying any food at all, but we need to be sure about it before attacking, since Chief Torhan doesn't want to risk his men for nothing."

Joric took a moment to think about his task. He knew that he had no other choice than to follow their orders so he could continue living at the clay mine with all his limbs intact, but this was going to be the closest he had come in his life to a group of people trying to kill each other, and that was something which was already making him jittery.

What if the wagons weren't carrying any food but the bandits didn't believe his words later on and punished him anyway? What if the caravan was carrying food but the merchant was smart enough not to open his mouth about it? What would he do then? What if the guards recognised what he was trying to do and killed him right there?

He didn't want to die yet, dammit! He wanted to see his family again instead of following these bastards who were sending him to die!

Another bandit who was listening from nearby, walked over to them. "How long are we supposed to keep waiting here, boss? All the bread we had brought with us is gone now. Who even knows if that caravan is even coming..."

"Shut up!" Nokoza barked. "We'll stay here as long as we need to, even if we have to hunt for food or stay hungry. I'm not returning to that crazy bastard Torhan with an empty hand or it will be our hides!"

The bandit grumbled but started walking back, making Joric wish that they had agreed to return back. He thought of trying another tactic. "What if there are too many guards to protect the caravan? There are only eight of you. Wouldn't it be better to return in that case?"

"That's none of your concern," the giant growled. "I can take on half a dozen men by myself!"

The deputy stared at Joric for a moment. "You ask too many questions, you know that?" Before Joric could say anything, he added, "Our informer in Kirnos told us that there were only four people in total accompanying the caravan there. One of them must be a merchant who wouldn't know how to fight, and another one was a woman. I don't know how that merchant could be that much of a fool to think a woman would be able to protect his goods, but if it's true, this will be the easiest ambush I have ever made in my life!"

"A woman, you say?" Nokoza repeated with a grin. "Why didn't you tell me earlier...? We don't even need your men in that case. I can kill the remaining two guards by myself!"

"You can't always trust these informers though..." the deputy muttered while moving a hand over his bald head. "They might not have counted all the men correctly, or they might not have seen all the guards at the same time. That woman might not even be a guard... but in that case it's likely that she is a

daughter or a sister of the merchant who owns the wagons. Hmm... But in that case he really should have brought more guards... something doesn't feel right."

"Doesn't matter!" Nokozal boasted. "There are eight of us, so we can easily take a dozen of them with me here!"

"Perhaps..." the deputy muttered. "Maybe the informer didn't see properly and that woman was just someone the merchant had picked up in the village for some time...?"

Joric was listening to them talk while trying to think of a way to say that he couldn't do it, when he heard a long whistle from the west followed by two short ones. Immediately he looked at the others in surprise.

"Huh..." the deputy muttered as he peered towards the west. "I thought they would come by tomorrow... Well, good for us anyway."

At the same time, Nokozal grinned and removed his sword. Raising it high in the air, he shouted, "Come on lads, it's time to get some loot!"

#### Chapter 257 Musings

"Be quiet, you moron," the deputy scolded the giant, before calling up the other bandits and starting to explain where everyone should be positioned.

Joric was still hesitating, while he glanced towards the road. Would he be able to do what these bastards were asking of him? Would he be able to pretend well enough for this?

No... he couldn't! His heart was beating so fast that it seemed ready to jump out of his chest. He turned around and looked at the deputy, ready to beg him not to send him there, but Nokozal gave him a big shove.

"Time to earn your keep, merchant," the giant smirked. "Get ready to walk towards the road, unless you don't want to walk ever again..."

"But... but I..." Joric was interrupted again, this time by the deputy.

"I've been easy on you so far since a rich farmer isn't supposed to have bruises all over. Don't make me change my mind that you have lost your use to us." The bald deputy added, "Now as soon as we see the sight of the first wagon turning around that bend in the road, you'll slowly start walking towards them and will do exactly as I told you to."

Joric looked at that deputy's scarred face for a moment, and saw in his eyes that he meant it. If he didn't go and do what he had been told, that bastard might really kill him right here. Giving an uncertain nod, he took a deep breath and turned around to wait for the wagon.

It didn't take long until they started to hear the usual creaking sound of wagon wheels. As the first wagon turned around the bend, Joric easily saw that there were two people sitting on the driver's bench in the front, with two more of them sitting behind on the wagon bed.

Huh... Why were all four guards sitting on the same wagon? Did they leave their other wagon back in Kirnos?

Just after that, he saw another wagon being pulled by a pair of horses turning around the bend. So there were two wagons after all...

However, to his and others' surprise, the second wagon also had two men sitting on the driver's bench, with another two sitting on the wagon bed. By now it was easy to see that all eight of them were wearing leather armors, and all of them - including the woman in the leading wagon - had the sharp eyes of an alert guard. Huh... Where was the merchant who was supposed to be the owner of the caravan? Why did he send the woman along with the other guards if he stayed back in Kirnos?

Wait... Maybe the merchant was smart and had bought leather armor for himself as well, just in case they were ambushed sometime. That had to be it!

"How are there so many of them..." one of the bandits muttered from his hiding place nearby behind a thick tree.

"Are you blind?" Nokozal growled. "This is our lucky day. We can easily take them with eight of us!"

"We will kill as many of them as we need to," the scarred deputy agreed, "and take the rest of them as slaves. But all of you, make sure not to kill the woman. It will be fun tonight!"

The nearby bandit looked at the deputy in surprise.

The bald deputy grinned. "Chief Torhan doesn't let us have any fun with the female slaves in his compound, claiming that he doesn't want us to damage his property, while he always keeps a couple of them in his own cabin! But that two-faced bastard is not here to stop us tonight, is he? As long as everyone keeps their mouth shut about it, we can have all the fun we want tonight!"

The giant smirked at Joric. "You do well out there, and we might even let you enjoy a little."

Joric barely controlled his disgust hearing them talk like this about a woman. He already knew that none of them had a real family, and had never known the meaning of love or loyalty, nor they ever would. But he would die before forcing himself on a woman, even if he wasn't already married and loved his wife more than his own life.

Before he could retort anything, the deputy raised a hand. "Now be quiet all of you, they are getting close." Then he looked at Joric. "Start walking right now, and do what I asked. We'll wait for you to stretch your hands above as the signal to begin."

Joric gave a shaky nod, not daring to mention the fact that it wasn't in his hand whether the caravan was carrying food or not. The wagons were getting close now, so he started walking with a faked limp in his right leg, to make it easier to believe that he had fallen off his horse and injured it.

Taking a deep breath, he kept walking towards the dirt road, but with each step he took, his fear continued to increase, with his heart beating louder than it ever had and his hands already shaking.

Could he really do this...? Could he really pretend to be a rich farmer stranded on the road, when all he really was, was just a slave who didn't even have the ownership of his own life?

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~ Hyola ~

It had been a longer journey than she had expected, but now they were finally on the road, with their home only a day and a half journey away from here. Earlier in the day they had loaded up both of their wagons up to the brim with smoked fish when visiting the fish merchant in the north of Kirnos, while Feroy had paid the amount that was already overdue and bought today's fish on credit. However, it had taken a whole day to convince the merchant to sell them some more fish on credit, which is why they had wasted yesterday just for that and had to stay near the smokehouses last night.

She didn't know what was the exact amount which had been traded for the fish, but she did know that it was a lot of gold. More gold than she had ever seen in her life. In fact, she hadn't ever held even a single gold coin in her hand until now since she still hadn't been paid in coin for working as a guard, just like the others.

She did realize that the situation of the village was not great and Lord Kivamus was doing his best to make sure everyone had some work to do and had food in their bellies, but she still couldn't wait for the day when she would finally be paid her wages. Even the thought of having just a single gold coin in her hands was enough to make her heart giddy with excitement.

By that time more shops and vendors in the marketplace of Tiranat should be open once again, while new merchants were also supposed to start coming from Cinran - from what she had heard from others. That would mean she really would be able to buy something for herself for the first time in her life, with money which she had earned by her own hard work! With Calubo also earning the same wages, they might just have enough coin to put together to maybe become a family...

She huffed while glancing at the trees passing on both sides of the road. Of course, it wasn't like that idiot had asked her to marry yet! She didn't even know if they would even be allowed to live together in the manor. Likely not, she mused, since the male servants and guards lived on the lower floor of the servants' hall, while the maids and female guards lived on the upper floor. There just wasn't any other place to live in the manor where they could stay together.

She knew that some of the other guards were already married, with their families living outside the manor, and that they used to stay with them after their watch duties were over. But that was when their families lived in shacks in the village - which was before the longhouses had been made and their families had been shifted there so they wouldn't freeze to death in the winter.

Since all the longhouse blocks were already at full capacity, those guards had reluctantly started staying in the servants hall as well since there simply wasn't any more space for them in the blocks for them to live together with their families. Although it did mean that once the weather became warmer, those families would be able to return back to their shacks, and the married guards would be able to live together with them when they weren't on duty.

Hmm... Maybe that wasn't such a bad idea after all. She could also live in one of those shacks, couldn't she? Although she didn't even have any saved money so she could buy a shack. Wait... Were people even allowed to buy shacks in Tiranat? Likely not. But didn't that mean people could just build a new one and start living there? That could work, but it would take a lot of hard work to build a shack from scratch. She would have to talk with Calubo about it to see what he thought, but that wasn't going to happen until that idiot found the courage to ask her to marry!

She snorted once again thinking about that and absentmindedly gazed to the right towards the trees in the forest, musing about what it would be like to live together with Calubo in their own shack when she thought she saw some movement there.

"Did you see that?" she whispered to Feroy while pointing towards that direction.

Chapter 258 Premonition

The ex-mercenary, who had been sitting on the bench next to her, immediately became alert. "What did you see?"

Hyola pointed towards the right. "I think... I think I saw someone between those trees. But I'm not really sure..."

Feroy peered into that direction for a few moments, before he suddenly gave three short whistles, which was their pre-agreed signal to prepare for a possible ambush on the road. Immediately, Hyola brought the crossbow which had been put under the seat, and started loading it using the goat's foot lever, with a bunch of crossbow bolts kept ready next to her.

A single glance to the back told her that the guards sitting on the wagon beds had also picked up their swords, although it was still inside their scabbards. The second wagon behind them, on which Tesyb and Yufim were sitting had also become alert and Yufim already had his bow held tightly in one of his hands with an arrow in his other one.

However, there still wasn't any real reason for them to stop in the middle of the road so they continued moving, when they saw a man stumbling out of the forest towards them.

Hyola's heart began to beat faster thinking there was an ambush, but no one else came out of the forest. The young man with haphazardly cropped black hair was walking with an easily noticeable limp in his right leg, and looking towards them, he raised his hand to stop them. Most of his clothes were muddy and looked to be heavily repaired, and he seemed like he hadn't gotten to eat well in weeks.

Feroy sharply looked around them for a few moments, before he pulled the reins gently to slow down the horses when they reached near the man who was close to the muddy road by now. Finally, the ex-mercenary stopped the wagon completely, with their other wagon following them to a halt. Hyola had also been looking around and didn't see any other person nearby, so perhaps it really wasn't an ambush after all.

She looked carefully at the unknown man. Why was he here? There wasn't any other wagon in sight, so he couldn't be another travelling merchant. With his dirty and damaged clothes, he also didn't look rich enough to be a merchant anyway. As the man reached the road, she saw that his hands seemed to be shaking a little. Maybe he was just feeling too cold? It was still quite chilly after all.

The man slowly limped close to their wagon, and looked at them with pleading eyes. "Kind sir, my name is Joric. I would... I would like your help to return back to Kirnos. Would you be... be kind enough... to take me back there?"

Hyola frowned looking at the man who was favoring his right leg while standing. Why was he talking like that? Nobody spoke like that these days. The man was certainly in a bad position here, and wouldn't be able to reach Kirnos easily on his injured leg, but he was still acting way too polite... She thought of asking this Joric a few things about that, but on the ex-mercenary's gesture, she kept quiet and let him do the talking.

Feroy looked at the man from up to down. "Firstly tell me what happened to you? Why are you standing here alone in the middle of nowhere?"

"You see..." Joric hesitated while glancing to the left from where he had come from. "I am a farmer... Yes, a rich farmer!"

"A rich farmer?" The ex-mercenary repeated with his eyebrows raised high. "I don't see any farms around here, do you?"

Joric glanced to the side once again, where there were only the tall fedarus trees around them, with no plowed fields in sight. "Uh... it's a... a new farm! Yes!" He pointed to the side with a shaking hand. "It's... It's some distance away... That way."

Hyola was starting to get a feeling that something wasn't right, but this man didn't look like a bandit at all. What would he be able to do by himself against the eight of them anyway? He wasn't even carrying a sword, for Goddess' sake! Maybe she was just overthinking it when there was nothing to worry about and this was just a desperate man who needed some help to get back to his home.

Feroy stared at the man for a moment. "A new farm you say... How did you even get here from Kirnos?"

"Oh, did I forget to tell you, kind sir?" Joric gave a nervous laugh. "You see, I had a horse. Yeah, a real good horse! But it broke its leg, and I badly injured mine too when I fell down. Then I had to put down the beast in the forest and now I can't walk back on my own..." The man glanced to the left once again before looking at their wagon beds. "Actually, what are you carrying there?"

The ex-mercenary tilted his head, while his eyes had started to look around at their surroundings again. "What concern would that be of yours, Joric?"

"Ah... well, haha," Joric gave a skittish laugh once again while shifting his weight to the other leg. "Oh, you know... I would have to sit on the wagon bed, wouldn't I? And if you are carrying any food, I wouldn't want to squish it by sitting over it."

Feroy frowned at the man, with his sheathed sword already in his hand. "You are forgetting that I haven't even agreed to let you join us, not that we have any reason to go back to Kirnos again."

Hyola was also confused. Why would this man care about damaging their food at the moment, when he should only be thinking of how to get a ride back to his home? It would be very difficult for him to walk there with his leg injured. Wait! Wasn't it his right leg which was injured? Then why was he putting more weight on that one now...? Maybe the guy was just confused about which leg he had hurt? No, that wasn't likely, unless he wasn't really injured at all...

She looked carefully at his face and noticed that his eyes were still darting around, just like a deer which was being chased by an adzee and was scared for its life. But why would this man be scared right now? And from whom? Their two wagons were the only thing in the vicinity with any other humans, and Joric had willingly come to them to ask for help. It wasn't like there was anyone else nearby whom he would be scared of, right? Right...?

Joric quickly glanced to his left once again, before looking nervously at Feroy. "Uh... Because... That is..." Then he began fidgeting once again and didn't give any answer.

Hyola's heart had started beating fast by now. Something didn't feel right... What if there really was someone else here...? She clenched the crossbow tighter in her hand and started looking carefully at the treeline on the right side of the road, from where this so-called farmer had come from.

However, she had to glance back at Joric when she noticed that he had suddenly raised both of his shaking hands above himself and interlocked them together, while looking even more scared now.

What? Why was he trying to stretch his arms right now? Huh... She suddenly had a premonition that something bad was going to happen. She immediately looked back towards the forest once again and thought that she saw a glint of metal behind a tree in the light of the setting sun on their backs.

It had only taken a few moments for her brain to process all this, when she realised that she must have seen the reflection from a sword and this had to be an ambush! She was going to scream about it to warn others but before she could open her mouth, Feroy pulled his sword out of the scabbard and yelled loudly.

"Ambush!! Take cover!"

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~ Torhan's Deputy ~

~ A few moments ago ~

"Why is this idiot walking so slowly?" NokozaI growled from nearby.

"Be quiet," he scolded, before turning around to look at the approaching wagons. "Joric is meant to be walking slowly, remember? Since he's supposed to have injured a leg?"

The giant grumbled but didn't reply.

Soon they saw Joric reach the wagons, which slowly came to a stop near him.

He was still very surprised to see that there were eight people with the wagon. From what their informer in Kirnos had told them, they were supposed to have four people in total. One of them should have been a merchant and another an unarmed woman, which meant the caravan was only supposed to have two real guards to defend them. That had seemed so easy, but somehow, there were eight people on the wagon right now, all in leather armor. It meant there were at least six guards with them, even if the merchant and the woman couldn't fight. He wondered how the informer had gotten it so wrong. It couldn't be that the informer had lied to them knowingly, could it?

He had been working for chief Torhan for nearly a decade by now, so he knew very well how bad his relationship was with the young master Lanidas. The Baron of Kirnos favoured his chief a lot for some reason, and he was why they had such good access to the village, but Farodas was getting old now, and more and more of the village was being run by Lanidas these days. It couldn't be that the young master had bribed their informant to give them false news, could it? He could certainly see it happening with the chubby face of Lanidas laughing at them right now.

He gazed at Joric who seemed to be busy talking with the man sitting in the leading wagon and still hadn't raised his arms above him to give them the signal to attack. Did the wagons not have any food at all?

"What is taking him so long?" NokozaI snarled before looking at him. "I'm telling you, we should attack right now!"

"You will stay right where you are until I give the order to attack!" he scolded NokozaI. "I am not going to risk my men unless we know we are going to get good loot from the caravan!"

Nokoza clenched his fists and glared at him for a moment, reminding him of an angry bear, before he raised his sword a little higher in anger, making him fear for his life thinking the giant was going to attack him, but thankfully, the huge bastard turned to look towards the caravan once again.

#### Chapter 259 Ambushed

Giving a sigh of relief, he looked towards the caravan as well and noticed for the first time that the woman sitting on the leading wagon seemed to be holding something weird in her hands. It looked kind of like a small bow, but it was hard to say for sure from this distance. Hmm... It did make sense that she would have a bow with her. The merchant must have given it to her as a kind of protection, and of course being a woman, she wouldn't be able to use a full sized hunting bow, so perhaps that's why he had bought a smaller one for her. He put the woman out of his mind for now. There would be time to think a lot more about her, but that would come after they had won the coming battle.

Still, he knew it wasn't going to be as easy dealing with the caravan now, as it would have been if they had just two guards, but with Nokoza on their side, he was still pretty sure that they could take on their six guards without too much difficulty. He would still have to make sure to keep one of the guards or the merchant alive. He really needed to find out how the informer had gotten it so wrong. Chief Torhan would want to know about it for sure - especially if young master Lanidas had anything to do with it - and the chief might even reward him with some gold for this information.

He grinned thinking about that gold, and the pleasures he could buy using it in Kirnos, not that there was much available in a village. Hmm... Maybe he could even ask for a leave to travel to Cinran in the future. If the chief was happy enough with him, he might just get the permission as well. He grinned even more while running a hand over his hairless pate, getting giddy just thinking about how he was going to spend that gold.

Suddenly he noticed Joric glancing towards them for a quick moment, before he slowly raised both of his hands up and interlocked them. Perfect! So the wagons were indeed carrying food! Just as he was going to call everyone to start the attack, starting with the archer they had brought, Nokoza gave a loud roar and began running to the caravan at full tilt.

Shit! This damned idiot! He should have waited for the archer to shoot first!

Reminding himself to make sure that the giant got a good scolding after the fight, he quickly gave a long whistle, and immediately saw their archer shoot towards the wagons.

"Attack!" he yelled loudly to signal the rest of their swordsmen, and with a loud war cry he and the others began running to the caravan with their swords raised high in the air. It was time to take what they deserved. New slaves, the food, and the woman. All of it!

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~ Hyola ~

As soon as Feroy had shouted the warning, she and the others immediately jumped out of the wagon. Just like they had planned earlier about what to do in case of an ambush after leaving Tiranat, she and Yufim quickly ran to the small space between the wagons, which had been parked in parallel, so the archers would be better protected from any swordsmen. Feroy and two guards were standing on the right side of the wagons, looking to their front and right with their swords ready, while Tesyb and the remaining two guards had adopted a similar position on the left side, and were looking there in case they were attacked from that direction as well. This way, with the archers standing in the middle of the wagons to support others from a safe place, the swordsmen would be able to cover all the directions around them. At least, that was the plan.

However, they had barely taken their positions when she felt an arrow whistling close to her head. Shit! That could have killed her! Her heart started beating so loudly after that near miss that it felt like it was going to jump out of her chest.

"There!" One of the guards shouted while pointing to their right. She turned to look and froze in fear when she saw a huge guy running towards them with his sword raised high. It was like seeing a huge, angry bear which wanted nothing more in its life than to send them to the goddess and make them its dinner tonight. Or at least, to separate their heads from their bodies. Wait, she knew who that was!

"That's the bastard Nokozal!" Tesyb shouted, just before they saw two more bandits coming out of the forest from behind the giant, one of them being a heavily muscular bald guy. At the same time, three bandits started running at them from the other side of the road, with another one coming at them from the west, behind them. Just how many of them were there! These bandits would reach here in moments!

The primal sight of so many people coming at her to kill her froze her completely. Instead of shooting at them with her crossbow, her hands were hanging limp on her sides in fear. Would she and the others even be able to defeat and kill them? What if she died here? What if the others died as well? What if she

never got to see Calubo again? What if Nokozal captured her and took her to the quarry once again? What if...

Hyola's mind was feeling so overwhelmed that it took a bop to her head from Yufim to bring her mind to the present. "Start shooting you idiot! There is no time to waste!"

She blinked and realised that barely a moment had passed while she was lost in her thoughts. She took a deep breath and steeled her mind. This was no time for self-doubts. She could do this. She knew it! She brought the crossbow in front of her eyes, thankful that it was already loaded, and targeted the giant running towards them.

She shot the bolt at his chest, hoping to kill him first, but Nokozal somehow moved at the last moment and the bolt narrowly glanced away from his huge biceps, barely affecting his run.

Shit! She quickly began loading the crossbow again, hoping she wouldn't be too late to help. At the same time, she noticed from the corner of her eyes that Yufim had also shot an arrow at the lone bandit coming at them from the west, but his aim was much better, and his arrow hit the bandit directly in his head, killing him before his body even hit the ground.

Suddenly another arrow struck the side of a wagon with a thwack, but thankfully no one was hit by it. She was pretty sure it came from their right, but there was no way to find the archer and kill him quickly from this far.

Knowing that she would get only one more chance before the bandits were upon them, she quickly finished loading it with a broadhead bolt, and shot again, this time at a bandit on their left side, so Tesyb and the other guards on that side wouldn't get overwhelmed.

Whether by luck or skill, or perhaps simply because the bandit was barely a dozen feet away by now, the iron-tipped broadhead bolt hit directly on his chest, spraying blood and gore all around. However, it didn't stop there. The bolt simply kept moving ahead and ahead until barely an inch of it was left outside the bandit's chest. The sight of the bandit's eyes opened wide in fear as he fell over in his tracks was captured in her eyes forever, and she froze once again.

She had just taken the life of a man for the first time. A real breathing human being, who must have had dreams and hopes of the future. How could she have done something like this? The goddess would never forgive her for this...

However, the sound of iron striking iron from close behind her brought her to the present. Turning around, she saw two guards barely defending their lives against Nokoza's powerful strikes. Feroy was already in a battle with the muscular bald man, while she saw the body of another bandit on their right with an arrow sticking out of his chest, whom Yufim must have killed before he reached them. On their left side, Tesyb and two other guards were fighting with two bandits now, since she had already killed the third one.

Suddenly she saw another bandit running towards them from the right. This must be the archer, who must have realised that he couldn't help others from far away in this melee without risking killing his own men. But how would he even use his bow even from up close? She aimed her crossbow to target him and shot the recently loaded bolt, but the sudden sound of a sword hitting the side of a wagon distracted her and the bolt went wide.

Noticing her movement, Nokoza looked directly at her, and roared in anger, while still easily dealing with the two guards. "You! I know you! You ran away from the quarry! You are coming back with me today!"

"Fuck you!" She yelled at him, and quickly began loading the crossbow again. To hell with this bastard! There was no way she would go with him again! There would be nothing good in store for her if she got captured, and that meant she had to try her best to kill him.

At this point, she knew that the goddess would certainly forgive her for getting rid of a lowlife like him. The giant and all his bandits didn't deserve to live in this world and she wasn't doing anything wrong by killing them. If anything, she was doing all the women in the world a favour!

That archer who had arrived last turned out to have a sword with him, and joined Nokoza, making it a fight of three against three on the right side of the wagons, with Feroy fighting the baldy, and the giant and the archer fighting with two guards. She glanced to see where that bastard Joric was, hoping to kill him as well, since he was the reason they had been caught in this ambush, but she couldn't find him anywhere. Perhaps he had already been hit by a sword and had died. Good riddance! The horses were also neighing loudly in fear, but thankfully the fight had been away from them so far, so they hadn't started running away with the wagons still hitched to them.

By now, she had loaded the crossbow once again, but everyone was moving around so much right now that she knew that there probably wouldn't be a chance for her to help anymore, since there would be a risk of hitting a guard just as much as killing a bandit. She also couldn't just jump in the scuffle with her dagger, since she would only be a liability there. Yufim already had another arrow nocked on his bow, but he also seemed to be looking for a good opportunity right now so he wouldn't hit their own men.

However, the giant was enraged now, and with a huge roar, he kicked one of the guards back, and slashed his sword at him, easily cutting off the guard's sword arm from his elbow. The man screamed in pain and fell backwards, his falling sword clattering on the ground with his cut-off hand still clutching it.

As angry as Hyola was at Nokozal for doing this, her heart broke on seeing the guard like that. She had even served on watch duty with him many times!

She immediately targeted her crossbow towards the giant, waiting for an opening to kill the bastard, but it just wasn't coming. The remaining guard was now finding it more and more difficult even to protect his life against Nokozal by himself, while the injured guard had slowly crawled back under the wagons to protect himself, until he was also in the small space between the wagons, right next to her and Yufim.

#### Chapter 260 Melee

Hyola quickly bent down and snatched a piece of cloth from the wagon, and helped the guard to tie it tightly just above his stubbed arm to stop the blood flow. She glanced on the left side, and saw that Tesyb and the other two guards had already injured one of the two bandits with their advantage in numbers, although the shorter guard seemed to be moving with a limp. But there were still three guards against two bandits here, while on their right, a guard was fighting against Nokozal and the bandit archer alone, which wouldn't last long.

"Tesyb, they need help on the other side," she yelled.

Tesyb quickly nodded, and ran to help against Nokozal, leaving the other two guards to deal with the two bandits there. Cursing at her inability to help, Hyola quickly completed tying the tourniquet and stood up, while watching in frustration as Fero's quick attacks against the bald guy were getting nowhere. However Tesyb had arrived to help at just the right time, and right now it was him and the other guard against Nokozal and the archer.

Suddenly, Fero glanced backwards towards her and Yufim, and giving a small nod, he turned around towards the baldy once again. Recognising that it was a signal, Hyola brought her crossbow up and waited for an opportunity. Just as she expected, Fero made a quick feint, drawing the man in, then kicked at him harshly, pushing the man a few feet back.

Immediately, Hyola targeted the chest of that man and shot her bolt, but the man turned out to be lucky, and stumbled on the rough ground just as she shot, making him fall down. She cursed as her bolt missed him completely, but Feroy took the opportunity and immediately slashed his sword at him. The baldy tried to defend himself with his free hand, but screamed in pain as some of those fingers were separated from his hand by Feroy. However the man quickly jumped to his feet with his sword, and then it was a stalemate once again.

She began loading her crossbow once again, while glancing towards Tesyb, where he had managed to keep the giant at bay, but still hadn't been able to injure him. However, the bandit archer, who was somehow also a swordsman, had gotten quite a few cuts in his fight with the other guard, while injuring the guard just as much. If only she had been able to do more...

On the other side, the last two guards were still fighting with two bandits, when she saw one of them making a huge thrust at the injured bandit. The bandit immediately jumped back to save his life and prevent being skewered by the sword, but it just made him open to an arrow from Yufim, who had been waiting for exactly such an opportunity. With the kind of expertise Yufim had in archery, there was no chance of his arrow missing from this close. Immediately, the bandit's head snapped back with an arrow sticking out of his head, and his lifeless body toppled to the already bloody ground.

The last bandit on this side was outnumbered now, and he was barely defending himself against the two guards there. Yufim quickly ordered one of them to run to the other side, leaving the last guard to fight against the sole bandit.

Immediately that guard ran around to help others, and now it was Nokozal and the archer on one side, with Tesyb and two other guards opposing them, while Feroy was at a standstill with the bald guy even now. However, the addition of this new guard meant while Tesyb fought with Nokozal, the remaining guards could go two versus one against the bandit archer, and that was enough to make the bandit keep moving back just to save his life. However, just as she expected, the archer wasn't that good with a sword, and she saw with satisfaction as one of the guards slashed at him from the left, making the archer jump back, but the other guard was ready and immediately thrust at his chest, killing the archer easily.

They quickly moved to help Tesyb against the giant, who looked angry as a bull now, and started cursing everyone. She picked up her already loaded crossbow and waited for a good chance to put an end to this bastard.

The baldy who was fighting with Feroy, made a huge swing at him, which made the ex-mercenary jump back. That gave the baldy just enough time to take a look to his side where Nokozal was dealing with three men against him now, while the last bandit was still fighting with a guard on the other side of the wagon. That meant now there were only three bandits remaining to fight against five guards with swords, with Yufim and her supporting them from range, although that wasn't easy because it was nearly dark by now.

"Fuck it!" The baldy shouted. "Nokozal, we can't win this. We need to run!"

However the giant just roared in response and made a huge swing with his sword making Tesyb and the other guards jump back to avoid being cut in two parts. "We can still win!" the giant barked back.

The baldy slowly circled around Feroy who was watching him warily, before he yelled, "Forget it, I'm leaving! Stay here if you want to die!" The baldy made a big lunge with his sword, towards Feroy, who stepped back to protect himself, and that gave just enough of an opening for the baldy to turn around and start running. However, instead of pursuing him, Feroy ran towards the giant.

Nokozal must have noticed the baldy running away, since he bellowed loudly, "Damn you, you coward!"

Hyola had been waiting for such a good opportunity, and bringing her loaded crossbow in front of her eyes again, she shot at the retreating baldy who was running away on the uneven ground. This time she didn't miss completely, although she still couldn't hit his chest or the head like she wanted. Her bolt struck the baldy on one of his legs, which didn't stop him completely, but it was still enough to make him pitch to the ground.

The baldy started to get up again as she began to load her crossbow, but Yufim, who was also ready with his bow, immediately shot an arrow, and unlike her, he struck the man directly in the chest, making him slump down again, this time permanently.

"Damn it!" Nokozal roared, as he also noticed the fate of the baldy. "Damn it all!"

The giant made a huge swing with his sword around him to make all the guards move back, before calling out the name of the last bandit. "Cover me!" Without waiting for a response, the giant started sprinting towards the forest as well.

Tesyb and two of the guards immediately began running to follow Nokozal, while Feroz stayed back to coordinate.

"Fuck you!" the last bandit yelled, before he turned around and started running as well to the other side of the road. Hyola was still loading her crossbow, but Yufim, who was covering their left side, hit the back of the running bandit easily, killing him in his tracks.

Hyola finally finished loading her crossbow, and immediately shot a bolt towards the giant, but the bolt barely missed his head, and Nokozal kept running towards the treeline which was very close by now.

By now Yufim had nocked another arrow, and shot it towards Nokozal, but the giant had just entered the tree line, and the arrow only struck a tree, and the giant vanished in the already dark forest.

Immediately, Feroz gave a yell. "Tesyb! Come back here! All of you!"

"But we can kill him now!" Tesyb shouted back, but followed the order as he and the other guards jogged back to the wagons.

Once all the guards had arrived, Feroz still kept looking around warily, "It's already dark and it would take too long to find a man in those forests. Three of us are also injured, so we need everyone here in case a wild beast comes here smelling the blood. Stay right here and keep an eye in case a bear or an adzee is lurking around."

Giving a nod, Tesyb and the other two uninjured guards took positions around the wagon, making sure they wouldn't be surprised again.

Was the fight already over? Hyola knew in her mind that they had won, but her heart refused to believe it and was beating just as fast as earlier.

She took a few long breaths to force herself to calm down and thanked the goddess that none of them had died, but the pitiful sight of the still weeping man who had his arm cut off, didn't make it feel like it was a win. Another guard had just sat down on the ground with his back to a wagon wheel, and was clutching his leg, while a third one was bleeding from multiple cuts from all over his body, although none of those seemed life-threatening.

"You did good to stop the blood," Feroy complimented her when he saw the tourniquet around the amputee before he pointed at the guard who had many small cuts, "Help him out as well." He gestured to the guard who was clutching his leg, "I'll take care of him."

Glad that she and Feroy hadn't given all the losuivil powder to people in Kirnos this time, she gave a pinch of it to the guards who were injured lightly, while giving a double dose to the guard with his arm cut-off, after applying a paste of it on his stub and then she tied another clean cloth to cover the stubbed arm completely. That would have to do until they returned to Tiranat. That man was already starting to nod off, so two of the guards helped to make him lie down on the sitting bench of a wagon.