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Chapter 261 Aftermath

It didn't take too long to make sure that the basic treatment of others was done as well. Once all the cuts had been bandaged, Feroy stood up and looked around. "Did any of you see that bastard Joric during the fight? He better be dead already, or it won't end well for him..."

Hyola also looked around but didn't see him anywhere. "Maybe he ran away? He didn't seem like a bandit though, and I don't think I saw him in the fight."

"Hmm..." The ex-mercenary gazed to the west, where the sun had dipped behind the trees a while ago, and had likely already set by now. "We will need to move soon. It's already getting dark and we don't want to be here at night. The smell of so much blood and flesh will attract way too many predators here. We need to get a good distance away from this place before we make a camp for the night."

Feroy looked around for a moment at the nearly dark surroundings. "We need to hurry now. Tesyb, take two men and start stripping the dead bodies of anything useful. It doesn't seem like there is anyone else nearby to ambush us again - not humans anyway - but still, look out for any dangers and try to see if you can find Joric amongst the dead. Hyola, you and I will keep an eye on our surroundings until they are done."

Tesyb nodded and jogged to the first body, and started checking the pockets and removing the leather armors which weren't too damaged from the bodies. The other guards had also begun picking up the fallen swords from the dead bandits' hands, some of which still had bits of flesh stuck on them. Hyola grimaced seeing the grisly work, but knew that they couldn't afford to leave anything valuable here.

Before long, they had gathered whatever they could find from the bodies of the dead bandits - although they didn't find any coins on any of them - and had started tying the loot on the sides of the wagons, when they heard a loud howl from somewhere in the forest. Hyola had already fought with an adzee once, and wouldn't ever forget the sound of its howls, and she was pretty sure there was at least one adzee nearby, if not even more, since they usually roamed in packs.

"Hurry up! We need to leave right now!" Feroy barked.

Everyone began rushing to complete their tasks, and soon they all were sitting on the wagons. The two lightly injured guards were ordered to sit on different wagons so that each group would have some

fighting capability intact, while the man who had lost his arm was already asleep on one of the wagon beds next to the smoked fish barrels after taking the losuvil powder. Hyola was glad that they had something like that with them, otherwise she wasn't sure what would have happened to him.

Immediately, Feroy whipped the horses, which began cantering once again, and their small caravan of two wagons started moving towards their home.

As Hyola looked at the passing bodies of the bandits, for a moment she wished they had time to bury them, since that was the only way that people were supposed to get any salvation after dying, but then she remembered what kind of men they were and what they planned to do to her and the others. If the guards hadn't been able to kill these bastards, then some of the guards would have been killed mercilessly, while others would have been sold into slavery. Her fate would have been even worse, and she didn't even want to think about it... So maybe it was better that these bastards became the dinner of some wild beasts tonight, since that was exactly what lowlifes like them deserved.

They had only moved a short distance, when one of the guards pointed towards the left of the road and shouted. "There is somebody out there!"

Hyola immediately picked up the crossbow she had already kept loaded, while some of the other guards removed their sword from their scabbards, in case there was another ambush. She squinted towards where the guard had pointed, before she saw a man running towards them.

"Don't stop moving," Feroy ordered, while whipping the horses once again to make them move faster, as risky as it was to do it when it was nearly dark by now.

She quickly brought the crossbow sight in front of her eyes to kill the man, and was about to pull the trigger when somebody shouted, "Wait! Isn't that Joric?"

Hyola brought the crossbow down and looked carefully, and saw that it was indeed the bastard who had made them stop for the ambush, and he was running with both of his hands raised high instead of holding a sword or another weapon. She looked at the other side of the wagons but there wasn't anyone else running at them. The guards on the second wagon reported the same.

She gave a loud exhale trying to slow down her heart. At least they didn't have to deal with another ambush so soon, and with nearly half of them already injured, but she still didn't like the sight of this bastard. He could only be bad news for them.

"We really should kill him," she muttered.

The ex-mercenary, who had been looking all around them, focused back towards Joric and gently pulled the reins to slow down the horses. "I might very well do it later, but we need to see what he has to say first."

By now the running man was close enough that they could hear what he was shouting.

"Wait! Wait! Please stop! Don't leave me here!" Joric kept shouting as he reached close to them. "I am not a bandit! I swear!"

Feroy had to stop the wagon when Joric stopped right in front of them with a pleading face, before the ex-mercenary immediately jumped down and ran towards the man, with Tesyb following him there.

"Cover me," Feroy ordered, as he began to check if Joric had any weapons on him. Once he was satisfied, he glared at Joric. "Tell me why I shouldn't kill you right now. You only have a few moments before I leave or we all will become adzee food tonight."

Joric's eyes were darting around in fear. "But... But it wasn't my fault! If I hadn't done what they asked they would have killed me!" He continued hurriedly, "I really was a merchant before I sold myself into slavery so my family in Kirnos could remain safe. And... and I can tell you about them. I can tell you everything I know about Torhan and his compound!"

"Torhan?" Tesyb repeated in surprise. "I thought that bastard Nokozal had found more lackeys to order around and ambush us. But these were really Torhan's men?"

Joric nodded quickly.

"That bastard!" Tesyb cursed before looking at Feroy. "He was the one who burned half our village in the autumn. We need to take this man with us so he can tell us more about this Torhan."

Feroy seemed to be thinking for a moment, before he ordered, "Hop on, Joric. It seems it's your lucky day today. You didn't die during the ambush and now you are getting a free ride to Tiranat."

"Really?" Joric's eyes were wide in surprise. "I can come with you? Thank you! Thank you so much!"

Feroy quickly took his place on the seat beside her, while he told Joric to sit on the wagon bed behind them next to the barrels. Tesyb ran back to the second wagon, and immediately they started moving again. Just in time, it seemed, since she heard another loud howl of adzee from somewhere behind them.

"Hyola, keep an eye out," Feroy ordered before handing over the reins to her and turning around on his seat. "Joric, you are only alive because I can tell that you aren't a bandit and likely haven't killed anyone in your life."

"I really haven't!" Joric protested. "And I am not a bandit! I have never even held a sword in my hands in my life!"

Feroy nodded. "Start speaking now. If I don't like what you have to say then we might just drop you on our way. And don't even think about lying. The first hint that you aren't speaking the complete truth and you won't get to see another sunrise."

Joric gulped in unease but didn't take long to explain his full story. He told them how he used to be a merchant selling clothes in the marketplace of Kirnos until the previous autumn when he had to agree to become a slave of Torhan so he could pay off all the debt for his family. He had been working as a clay miner as a slave of Torhan since then and was only brought here today so he could find out if the caravan was worth looting, since the guards would never have agreed to stop if it was a scarred bandit with mismatched teeth asking for help, since nobody would ever accept them as a farmer asking for help.

While Hyola was still angry at this man, since the guards wouldn't have gotten injured and one of them wouldn't have lost his arm if this man hadn't tried to stop them for the ambush, but she also felt respect

for him in a way, since unlike most of the men in this world, he had sold himself as a slave instead of his wife or children. That must have taken a whole lot of courage, which most men just didn't possess.

Chapter 262 Worry

Joric explained, "Some of the bandits were still doubtful of attacking you when they saw that there were double the number of guards they had expected - rather than only two guards along with a merchant and a woman - as told to them by an informer in Kirnos, but Nokozal forced them to attack. I'm just glad you killed those bastards!"

"How many men did the bandits have?" Feroy asked. "We counted seven bodies."

"Then you must have killed all of Torhan's men, including his deputy who looked after his compound at the clay mine, but I saw Nokozal running away so that giant must still be alive..."

"If I find that anything is a lie in your story," Feroy warned again, "then it is not going to end well for you."

"I have no reason to lie!" Joric protested. "Not for these bastards!"

"It better be so, or we can just hand you over to the guards in Kirnos next time. With how much influence Torhan seems to have there, I am sure he will be happy to find a lost slave."

"No! I can't go to that compound again..." Joric whimpered. "They'll kill me immediately when they find out only I remain alive from that ambush group. I can't even enter Kirnos to find my family, because like you said, Torhan has informers there and will find out immediately. My slave contract is for decades so the baron's guards won't stop him either! If the bandits do take me to the clay mine again, they will take my head for one reason or another!"

Feroy kept staring at the man before he nodded. "I believe you. For now. We will take you to Tiranat with us and Lord Kivamus will decide what to do with you."

Joric bowed his head low enough that it touched the floor of the wagon bed. "Thank you! Thank you so much!"

Feroy grinned. "We still have a long journey ahead of us. In the meantime, why don't you tell us everything you know about Torhan and his clay mines. If your information is good enough, I might just be able to ask Lord Kivamus to give you a permanent place in Tiranat. Maybe your family can join you too."

Hyola glanced back from the corner of her eyes, and saw the tears flowing freely on Joric's face. Even without all the information he was going to give which would be helpful to Lord Kivamus, this man didn't seem like a criminal to her. Perhaps it was a good decision to take him on after all.

She turned to the front once again, looking for a suitable place for a camp tonight, before it turned into night completely. With the delay because of the ambush, they wouldn't be able to reach Tiranat by tomorrow evening as was the earlier plan, but thankfully they did have barrels full of smoked fish that spending another half a day on the road wouldn't be too much of a problem. The journey might even be tasty!

Still, she couldn't wait to reach Tiranat. Even though it had only been a few months since she had started living there, it was her home now. Of course, there was an added benefit that after she told Calubo about all the dangers she faced on the journey, he just might find the courage to pop the question in the future. She giggled just thinking about it. There was no time to waste since a person's life could be cut short at any moment these days, especially for guards like her and Calubo. It was a dangerous world after all!

~ Kivamus ~

He was sitting inside the manor hall in the morning after breakfast, while waiting for Hudan to arrive. Duvas was working nearby to maintain the tax ledger, while Gorsazo was teaching Syryne at the moment in another free room.

Earlier in the day, he had been working on more blueprints for things they could build in the spring to generate more revenue. With the snow having started to melt since yesterday, it meant the temperature had already risen above freezing point, and spring wouldn't be far away now. From what others had told him, he expected it to take around a week for all the snow to melt here and perhaps a few days longer for it to happen on the northern road going to Cinran. That road would finally become traversable once again after that. That meant merchants should hopefully start arriving in Tiranat within two weeks, and the tax collector wouldn't be far behind them.

However, Feroy still hadn't arrived from Kirnos. While unexpected delays were always possible, he still should have been back by yesterday. Kivamus looked at the majordomo who was sitting in an armchair nearby while scribbling something on his ledger. "Any news of Feroy and the caravan?"

Duvas looked up from the ledger. "Sorry, what?"

"I asked if you heard anything about Feroy," Kivamus repeated. "He is still not back, you know. I can't think of any good reasons for him to be delayed this much."

"You are not wrong," the majordomo agreed with a sigh, "but we can't do anything about it. We simply don't have enough guards right now to send them on the western road to take a look. I just pray the Goddess keeps them safe."

"Let's hope so..." Kivamus muttered when the outer door of the manor hall opened. However, instead of Hudan, it was the carpenter Darora.

"Milord, I just completed the twelfth seed drill," the young carpenter reported with a grin. "I've already brought it here so your servants could put it in a storage barn."

"Well done, Darora. It won't be long before we need to use them. Well, you know what to do next."

The carpenter nodded. "Of course! I'll get started on the fourth crossbow immediately. In the time I spent making the seed drills, Cedoron and my apprentices have already built up a small stockpile of the parts I need to assemble the crossbow. I believe I should be able to make a new one every three or four days until I run out of parts."

"Oh, that's excellent! Go on then."

Darora gave a bow and exited the hall, while the guard captain entered inside not long after.

"We are ready to leave," Hudan reported.

Kivamus stood up and looked at Duvas. "You sure you don't want to come and see the dam?"

The majordomo shook his head, before he hesitated, and then eventually put down the ledger he had been working on and closed it. "Actually, I think I will come with you this time. My mind is going numb after working with numbers for so long, and I still haven't gone to visit the dam site yet."

"That's great. Let's go then. We will take another horse for you."

Duvas nodded and wrapped his fur coat around him. Kivamus was also wearing one of them, although he could have gone without it, but he just didn't want to risk getting sick in this world if he could help it. The path going between the eastern hills could get very windy, and it was still just above freezing. On the other hand, the huge muscles of the guard captain were easily showing where the leather armour wasn't covering him, since he had decided to forgo wearing a fur coat for the last few days.

Soon, they exited the manor, and walked through the muddy courtyard towards the stables, where Hudan told the groom to bring out one of the last two horses there, with the rest of them already being used by Taniok to build the second watch tower in the south-west, as well as by Pinoto to clear more forested land in the south. Two pairs of horses had also gone east to pull the wagons bringing coal every evening from the mines where most of the labourers of Tiranat were already working.

While the groom was bringing the horse, Kivamus looked at Hudan. "Can we really not afford to send even a single guard to the west? I'm worried about Feroy."

"It would be difficult, milord. Three hunting groups are already out at the moment, and eight guards have gone with the caravan to Kirnos. I'm also taking three guards other than me to accompany you to the dam site." Hudan gave a loud exhale while gazing towards the west. "I'm just as worried about him as you are, but it's really not a good idea to send even more guards out of the village at the moment."

Kivamus sighed. "You're right. We have to trust Feroy. I just wish we could recruit more guards soon. Once spring arrives and we start sending caravans to Cinran regularly, we will also need to send guards along with them. I don't think the danger on that road is as high as it was before winter, but we'll still need to send three or four guards with a caravan, just to make sure wild beasts or bears don't mess with them."

"I don't think we need to send guards with every merchant that comes here," Duvas remarked. "They don't hire such protection anyway when they are travelling north of Cinran, since those roads are always well-patrolled by the Duke's knights, so there is no danger of bandit attacks there. Even when coming here, they all know that the road connecting Cinran to Tiranat is dangerous, whether because of bandits or wild beasts, so they always make sure to bring enough protection for themselves, usually by hiring mercenaries from Cinran for the trip to our village and back. After that they can simply let go of those mercenaries, and travel further north with only a couple of men."

"That makes sense," Kivamus commented when he remembered something. "Then why didn't Pydaso bring enough guards with him? Even if we include that assassin Levalo, he had brought just two trained men to protect his three wagons."

Chapter 263 A Visit

"Pydaso is only a small-time merchant," Duvas explained. "That's the reason he risked coming to our village even when the threat was so high. Unlike the bigger merchants, who could afford to wait for the winter without coming to our village, Pydaso must have thought it was a good opportunity to make some money by braving the dangerous road, since he would be able to do a lot of business here which he wouldn't be able to do in normal conditions. Still, he simply couldn't afford to hire enough mercenaries to protect himself and his goods well enough, which is why we had to send guards to accompany him. Of course, you already know that our village was in a very desperate situation at that time, so we needed that grain at any cost or our people would have starved in the winter, so we also had a good incentive to send guards with him."

"That's true enough," Kivamus agreed, "and we aren't going to be in a much better situation until we reap our first harvest this autumn. But that is months away, and we will need to buy grain regularly until then, even at the higher prices. Still, I like Pydaso."

He added with a snort, "Although he does want to make money like any other merchant, we've already had dealings with him, and he seems honest enough. So we'll try to give the bigger and more valuable orders to him, and we'll also provide him with protection, while the other merchants can take care of themselves. This way we will be assured of having at least one merchant whom we can rely on to get us good deals in Cinran, while also being confident that at least one protected caravan will be coming to our village regularly. Although we still need to recruit more guards soon for that."

Duvas nodded, "That's only possible if some immigrants start coming soon."

"Let's hope that goes well," Kivamus agreed.

Before long, the groom had a horse ready and they all mounted their own rides. With that, the small group of Kivamus and Duvas, along with three guards and the guard captain exited the gates of the manor and turned north, so they could exit the village through the northern gate.

Soon, they had reached the northern wall, and Kivamus saw with a lot of satisfaction that an older villager was sitting on top of the watchtower keeping a keen eye outside the walls. One of the guards must have hauled a chair up the watchtower, which meant the older villagers wouldn't have to stand all day for all their shift, which would keep them rested and their mind alert. Of course, this was only a stop gap measure, and eventually they would have to put trained guards up there, even if those were women. When they had more guards to call on, perhaps they could even post two of them on the tower at the same time, which would make it possible for them to keep an eye on a wider area, with both of them making sure that the other wasn't getting sleepy, especially in the nights.

Noticing his gaze, Hudan explained, "I have already selected two of the older villagers who wanted to become watchmen on the towers, and they are each putting up a duty of eight hours every day, with the night watch being taken by a trained female guard. I have also been familiarising both of them in using the crossbow, and now they can hit a human sized stationary target outside the walls eight out of ten times. I think within a week they should be able to hit even a moving target."

"That's good to hear," Kivamus said, as the guards on watch duty opened the northern gate for them.

Hudan added, "The crossbow is also kept up there on the watchtower permanently now, so they will have it handy in case it's needed. But it really would help if we had more of them built."

"Don't I know it..." Kivamus muttered. "My mind keeps going back to Feroy, and I wish we could have given more crossbows to them. Hopefully, next time we will be able to do better."

Their small group exited the gates, but just as they reached the fork in the road to turn east, they saw a group of guards coming towards them from that direction. Two of them were pulling a sledge behind them, with a lot of meat packed with snow kept above it.

Reaching closer, Nurobo - the fat archer who must be the leader of this group and had some good experience in first aid - gave him a bow. "We are just returning after hunting in the eastern hills, milord. We got a good haul this time!"

However, Kivamus was thinking of something else. "You are just in time." He looked at Hudan. "I think we should be able to send a scout to look for the caravan now."

Hudan nodded and looked at the returning hunters. "Nurobo, you guys have been out for a while, so you all can rest for today, but be alert just in case until I come back. One of you run to the manor, and tell Kerel to pick another guard who is off-duty and to send him to ride east to scout on that road. The scout should hopefully be able to spot the caravan today and return back by nightfall, since he will be much faster riding alone on a horse than the caravan, but tell him to pack some supplies for another day in case he is unable to spot the caravan by evening."

The guard captain ordered, "The scout should keep riding west until he sees them, but he should return back as soon as possible to give us the news and to tell us if the caravan needs any help. Maybe it's just a simple problem like the wagon wheels getting damaged, so it would be good to find out soon so we can send them whatever help they need."

Nurobo gave a nod. "As you wish, captain. One of us will take the place of that scout whenever he is due for his next shift." Then he quickly selected one of the guards who looked young, and sent him to run to the manor with those instructions, before the group of hunters continued towards the village.

With that done, Kivamus and his group started riding to the east again, with his mind more at ease now, since they should hopefully be able to get some news about the caravan by evening.

They had been slowly riding the horses between the hills for nearly an hour when Kivamus saw the familiar bend in the path which led to the stream. The snow had started melting here even between the hills, although the tall peaks of the Arakin mountains far in the east still looked just as white as they had throughout the winter.

On their way here, they had passed through the narrow valley where half a dozen former stonecutters were still digging clay, and had also seen the pair of wagons parked outside the coal mines, where the labourers must have been busy mining coal inside the mine shafts, now that all of them had been cleared of all standing water.

As they turned around the bend, he saw the dam not far in the distance to their left. They kept moving towards it, and before long he was standing in front of the biggest man-made structure in the barony of Tiranat. It was way, way too small compared to any modern dam on earth, but for the people of Tiranat, it was still a marvel.

On the left bank of the stream where they were standing, the disassembled parts of the water wheel were kept safely on the side, while many laborers were hard at work on the far side of the dam.

"This is... astonishing..." Duvas muttered from nearby. "I didn't expect it to be this big... I think that the dam I saw on the Romasi river near Risalis in the north was much bigger than this, but this dam is still eye-opening."

"That is a big river," Kivamus remarked as he got off his horse, "from what you told me. We simply can't build a bigger dam on such a small stream as this."

Duvas had to take the help of Hudan to dismount, while a pair of guards took their horses to the side. He looked at Kivamus as they started walking towards the dam, "I've been to this stream so many times over the past two decades I've lived in Tiranat but I never thought I'd ever see the stream blocked like this."

Kivamus pointed at the small trickle of water passing over it on the far side of the dam, even if the stream didn't have much water on this side. "It's not completely blocked, as you can see. Come on, let's move to the top of the dam, and I'll show you how it works."

They started walking upwards on the slope that had been built for just this purpose, with Hudan and another guard following behind them. Before long, they had reached the top of the dam structure, but they kept walking until they were close to the other end of it. Reaching there, Kivamus pointed at a small gap in the structure of the dam, where water was passing over it easily. Some water had already started gathering in the new reservoir created upstream of the dam because of the melting snow, but the water level was not nearly high enough for it to flow over the full height of the dam, or even through the sluice gates.

Chapter 264 Fish Ladder

"You see this gap?" Kivamus explained while he gestured at it. "The foreman Yeden and I had decided to keep this small gap of around a foot of width in the dam structure right from the beginning, so that it could be patched up again and again as the water level keeps rising. This way, the flow of the stream wouldn't be stopped completely, otherwise it'd be disastrous for any fish or wildlife depending on this

water downstream of us until the reservoir fills up completely. Even the sluice gates we have made are higher than the current water level, so we can't use them for this either."

Duvas nodded after watching it for a while. "That was a good idea, my lord. How long do you think it will take for this reservoir to fill up completely?"

Kivamus looked at the higher than normal flow of the water in the stream north of them. "It's hard to say for sure, but as more of the snow in these hills melts in the coming week, the water flow will keep increasing. I think maybe two weeks would be quite enough for it to fill up."

Yeden, who had been scolding an idling labour on the other bank, had noticed them by now, so he started walking upward on the slope on the side of the dam, while ordering the workers to keep working.

Reaching towards them, he gave a bow. "It's nearly done now, milord! The workers are just finishing up the slope we'd made for the fish ladder. I'll have to keep a few workers here to keep patching up this small gap we have left as the water level rises, but apart from that we can shift back most of these workers from tomorrow to another place."

"That's really good to hear," Kivamus praised. "Send them to the coal mines from tomorrow. We need them to dig as much coal as they can in the coming week."

Yeden gave a nod. "As you say, milord."

Hudan, who had been looking around with curiosity, turned towards them. "Where is that fish ladder anyway? I don't see any ladder here."

Kivamus grinned and pointed ahead of them. "It's not really a ladder, as you can see. You see that staircase-like slope ahead of us where Yeden just climbed up? Just before it is a much gradual slope, which also has steps like a staircase."

"Yeah, I noticed that," Hudan nodded. "I thought it was also for us humans."

"It's not," Kivamus explained while pointing ahead. "There is a similar foot-wide gap at the top of the dam where the fish ladder connects with it, and it will always remain a little lower than the top of the dam." He continued, "For now the slope of the fish ladder is still dry since the water level is still not close to the top of the dam. However, once the reservoir has filled up, while most of the water will pass through the two sluice gates in the dam, a small amount of water will continue flowing through that small gap at the top of the dam. This way, fish will be able to jump up to each step of the fish-ladder one by one until they reach that gap and swim over to the reservoir, while even being able to rest in the small puddles dug in each step of the fish ladder. This way they will be able to pass the dam without too much difficulty."

"I think I get what you mean..." the guard captain muttered, "but I'll have to see it again when the fish are already jumping and uh... climbing on a ladder. That'd be a sight to see!"

Kivamus laughed hearing that. "Of course, we will have to visit here again when the dam is full to check the working of the water wheel." He looked at Duvas and pointed at the wooden gates installed in the side of the dam. "Come here and take a look. These are the sluice gates."

As Duvas walked closer to the edge of the top of the dam, Hudan called out, "Watch out! Be careful that you don't slip or fall over."

The majordomo snorted. "I'm old, not blind."

Kivamus chuckled. "Of course. Anyway, as you can see, this is the first gate and the other one is closer to the western bank where we came from. When the water has filled up in the reservoir close to this level, even a single worker will be able to lift the gate to change the water flow using these ropes you see here. We already tested it last time I visited."

The majordomo nodded. "That will be helpful, since we won't have to keep too many workers here to manage the dam but shouldn't we install the water wheel now? It would be difficult to do it when the water is already falling from these sluice gates."

"You're right, but like I said, it will take a couple of weeks for the reservoir to fill up, and the Sluice gates won't work before that anyway. That's why I told Darora to work on making more crossbows for now, since that is a much higher priority for us right now with the snow already melting." Kivamus continued, "Anyway, when the water level has reached high enough, I will come here again with the carpenter so he can install it properly, which should only take a single day. Of course, we have already planned to dig

the foundation for the water wheel stand before that." He looked at Yeden. "Make sure that the holes for that foundation are aligned properly ahead of the sluice gates. We don't want any mistakes in that."

"Don't worry about it, milord," Yeden assured him. "We've already marked the places where we have to dig based on the measurements which Darora had pointed out to me the last time he visited. The labourers who will stay here to keep patching the gap will be able to dig the foundations by tomorrow."

"Good, good." Kivamus looked at the surrounding hills on the other side of the reservoir where water was already gathering slowly. "You know what, hold back the workers here for a few more days. We already have a good amount of fire clay in stock with the diggers who are still working. Bring a few wagon loads of it here, and line the sides of the reservoir up to the height of the dam with that clay. That will make the sides of the reservoir more impervious and will slow down water seeping through it."

Yeden squinted looking at the reservoir. "We just need to slap the clay over the sides?"

"Basically, yeah. Just make sure to cover the full height of the reservoir."

"That should be easy enough. We'll bring a few wagon loads of clay tomorrow morning, and will get to it right after." Yeden gazed at the reservoir for a moment. "If I use all the workers which are working here, I think it should be done in two or three days."

"That's good enough. Once it is done, send them to the coal mines like we planned."

"Of course," Yeden nodded while taking a look towards the labourers on the other bank, some of whom were talking to each other with their shovels idling in their hands. "These lazy idiots... I'll take my leave now, milord, or these slackers will never finish the dam."

Kivamus waved off the bald foreman, who quickly marched towards the workers. "The moment I take my eyes away from you lot, you find a way to start slacking. Get to work right now!" The labourers immediately returned to what they were doing, with Yeden standing right next to them with his arms crossed.

Grinning at the enthusiasm of the foreman, Kivamus turned around. "Let's return now."

Duvas nodded and started walking next to him, while Hudan led ahead of them.

"I am glad that you decided to make more crossbows first," the guard captain commented. "I can't tell you how important those are right now for the village. With just three of them in total, we couldn't even afford to bring it with us here, so I can't wait until we have more of them. I think Darora may be able to make two or even three new crossbows before he has to work on the water wheel."

"That's assuming he has enough parts already stocked for that many of them, but you are right." Kivamus added, "I want to equip every hunting group with at least a single crossbow as well. I'm not sure how long it will take for us to have enough of them, but they are certainly one of the highest priority items for us right now."

As they walked down the slope on the western bank of the stream, Duvas asked, "I know that you said there would be clay under the hills since there were coal mines here, but how long will they even last at the rate we are using them? I know that there are enough coal seams in these hills that it will easily last for decades, but is there really enough clay as well?"

"Of course not, we were lucky to find as much clay as we did. If we look around in the nearby hills of where the clay diggers are working, we should still be able to find enough of it to last us a few more months at the current rate of usage, or maybe even a year, since we aren't going to make a new dam every day which needs hell of a lot of clay. That should be enough for the few projects I have in my mind to build this summer, but the clay deposits will still be exhausted soon enough, that's for sure. From what I know, this kind of clay is only found in a very thin bed under the ground near coal seams, so these fire clay deposits simply aren't deep enough to last very long. Eventually we will have to find another source of it if we want to continue using clay."

"Shouldn't we try to conserve it then?" the majordomo asked.

"We don't really have an option to do that," Kivamus replied with a shrug as they reached the ground after walking down the western slope of the dam. "It's not like we will get another chance to line the sides of the reservoir with clay once the water has already filled up."

"Well, that's true enough," Duvas muttered.

Kivamus gestured to the guards who had been keeping an eye on the horses to bring the beasts closer, when he noticed a small crowd of people coming out from around the bend which went towards the village. "Who are they?"

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As the guards brought the horses to their group, Hudan repeated the question to them.

"Oh, these people are coal miners," the guard replied. "I've heard from a friend in the village that these days they often come here during their lunch hour to see the dam."

"Hmm... I didn't know that," Kivamus muttered.

"They've always been coming here for lunch, even in the past," Duvas reminded him. "I did tell you that they used to come to fish here, even though the previous baron didn't exactly allow it."

"Right, right... you had mentioned that, but everyone was huddling in the village during the winter or working nearby to clear the forests so I had forgotten about it."

"Of course. Nobody wanted to travel here in the middle of winter," the majordomo shrugged, "but now that we have started coal mining again, it only takes around a quarter of an hour to walk here from the coal mines. With the dam nearly complete now, that must also be adding to the charm of eating their lunch here."

"You're right," Kivamus nodded. Like he had been thinking earlier, this dam was easily the biggest structure in this region anyway which would make people come here to visit and see it. "Anyway, in the future we will have to keep some workers here permanently to manage the water wheel and whatever machinery we run from it. We might even need to put up some temporary housing here, in case the weather gets too hot or too cold, or if it is raining. I'm not yet sure what we can do about it, but we might even need to build a better road connecting the village to the coal mine and then further to this dam to make it easier for the wagons."

"That's a good idea," Duvas agreed, "since these parts often get very muddy during the rainy season after summer."

"Well, that's one more task to add to the never ending to-do list."

As their small group mounted their horses, Kivamus glanced at the coal miners who had begun to sit near the slope of the dam as one of them opened the large wooden container they had brought with them for lunch, before he began to serve others in their bowls. The labourers working on the other bank of the stream had also started walking to this bank to have their afternoon meal, with Yeden following behind them.

Seeing such a normal scene of people taking a lunch break while finding a place with a nice view to sit and eat - just like it was common on modern earth, even though it was a very different locale - brought a smile to his face. This scene was already a far cry from the desperate village he had arrived at before the winter. While there was still a long way to go for Tiranat, he was glad to see that the village was on the right track now.

"Come on, let's return now," he called out. With that, the small group of Duvas, Hudan and the three guards started riding back towards their small but growing village of Tiranat.

In the evening Kivamus was pacing inside the manor hall. Feroy had still not returned nor had the scout arrived with any news. Right now, Duvas was once again scribbling something on the tax ledger, while Hudan was out to give the daily evening training to the guards. Gorsazo had gone to the longhouse blocks to teach, while Madam Helga was busy preparing their dinner, with Stryne helping them. Lucem and Clarisa had also been out for a while, likely gathering sawdust to give to the wood press workers to get the first rank in their daily competition of all the village kids, before Gorsazo announced it there. However, constant worry about Feroy and the others was still gnawing at him.

Giving a sigh, he slumped on an armchair. "Did something really bad happen to the caravan? I knew I should have sent even more guards with them..."

Duvas gazed upwards from the ledger. "There is still time, my lord. They might simply be running late. I do have to say that I had cautioned you against sending Hyola with them. If we had sent a male guard instead of her, he would have been able to use a sword in case they didn't get enough time to use the crossbow, and would have been a lot more help if Feroy had to deal with a beast attack or something. Hyola would only be a liability if a fight turned into a melee, and I don't even want to think about what could happen to her in case they were ambushed by bandits and were defeated..."

Kivamus glared at him. "You're back to that again? I'm telling you, that was our smartest decision! If we could have sent a few more guards with crossbows, I would have sent them willingly, even if they were women! Those crossbows are going to be our secret advantage in the coming months against all kinds of attacks. If we somehow afford to build enough of them, nobody will be able to touch us or our people! Of course," he muttered in a low voice, "if we had actual guns here... then it would be a whole 'nother story."

"What was that?" Duvas asked.

"Nothing..."

He kept waiting impatiently for some news while Duvas had returned to his ledger when the outer door opened. Hudan - his face looking quite troubled - walked inside along with another guard and pointed at the man. "He's the one we had sent to scout the western road and he just returned, so I brought him here immediately so he can give the report directly to you."

Duvas put his quill on the table to hear, while Kivamus immediately focused on the guard. "Tell me! What did you find? Are they all alive?"

The guard hesitated for a moment. "Uh... there is both good news and bad news, but yes, all the guards are alive."

"Thank the goddess for that!" Duvas prompted, "Tell us the good news first."

"Well... while returning back from Kirnos, Feroy saw a small group of people huddled around a small fire on the side of the road. They turned out to be refugees wanting to come live in Tiranat."

"That's indeed great news!" Kivamus grinned.

"They weren't free people though," the guard continued. "Apart from a few men, all of them were escaped slaves. Feroy said that they were barely being given to eat anything by their owners, so when they heard rumours that Tiranat would provide them food, work and shelter - whether they were a slave or not - they all decided to risk escaping from Kirnos, even knowing that if they were caught the punishment for them would be severe, including maiming them."

Kivamus grimaced thinking about the cruelty which slaves had to suffer under the hands of rich people and nobles. "I don't care if they are slaves or free people. Whoever wants to work is welcome in my village."

"That's what Feroth thought you'd say," the guard reported, "and that's why he decided to slow down the caravan so the refugees could walk together with them. They didn't have enough space on the wagon beds to let them sit there, since fully packed barrels of smoked fish were already kept there. That's the other good news."

Kivamus smiled. "At least we don't have to worry about our people starving in the coming week without us touching the seeds we have kept aside for sowing."

Duvas looked at Kivamus. "That's certainly good to hear but if the news gets out that we are sheltering runaway slaves from other barons - and it certainly will get out in due time - it won't be easy to explain it away. It might even lead to clashes between us and Kirnos."

"You already know that we'll have to deal with it one way or another. Kirnos has been collaborating with Torhan anyway, and they both must have shared the loot from the raid on Tiranat in autumn. That means they haven't needed any reason to attack us in the past, so giving shelter to their slaves is only going to benefit us by providing us more workers." He shrugged, "Nobody can say what will happen in the future, but they already see us as a weak target since they raided us so easily and without any punishment from us. That's why I've already been anticipating another raid by Torhan's bandits after the winter, maybe even supported by Kirnos. "

"That's what the bad news concerns about," the guard added hesitantly. "Before the caravan met the slaves, it was ambushed by a group of bandits, including Nokozal."

"That bastard is still alive?" Hudan growled. "We really shouldn't have left him alive last time... That bastard even managed to round up more lowlifes to attack us!"

The guard nodded. "Nokozal is still alive, but they weren't his men. It was the deputy commander of Torhan who was leading the bandits."

"Wait, what? It was Torhan again?" Kivamus clenched his fists. "What wrong have we done to him that he keeps attacking my village and my people! I'm not going to leave that bastard alive if I get my hands on him!"

"Let's hear him out first," Hudan interrupted before looking at the guard. "Carry on. You said everyone was alive? Does that mean they killed all the bandits?"

The guard nodded. "All but Nokozal. The giant ran off after the battle, but the rest of the bandits were wiped out."

"That's still an excellent result," Kivamus said while glancing at Duvas. "I told you that sending Hyola was a good idea. What are the injuries on our side?"

"Most of them are okay and escaped with minor scratches and such, but two men have moderate injuries including a man who was stabbed in his leg." The guard continued with a wince, "Apart from them, one man also had his sword arm cut off completely when he was fighting with Nokozal."

"I'll kill that damned bastard!" Hudan growled, before he asked in a softer voice, "How was that injured man looking when you last saw him?"

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The guard grimaced after hearing about the cut-off arm. "Feroy had already done cauterization of the wound soon after moving away from the ambush site, but the man was still out of it when I last saw him."

Kivamus didn't have to see that amputated guard to imagine how much pain he must be in. It wouldn't be just physical pain either. "Duvas, after we have heard everything here, go and tell Sryne to confirm that we have enough Losuvil powder remaining. Hudan, you tell Nurobo to be ready to check the injuries whenever the caravan returns. He is an archer but he is the closest one we have to a surgeon here."

"A surgeon?" Hudan repeated.

"I mean someone who has experience in dealing with serious injuries. We really do need to find someone with more experience in it in the future, but at least everyone is alive this time. It could have

been much worse." Kivamus looked at the guard. "Carry on. What was the state of the refugees? How many of them are there?"

"There were fourteen men and women - twelve of them slaves - and they looked like they had barely eaten for weeks. Feroy had already used up the rations they had taken with them since the trip had lasted longer than expected, so he told me that he would be using some of the smoked fish to feed the refugees and the guards even though he hadn't taken your permission for it."

Kivamus waved it off, wishing he had a way to contact Feroy directly and tell him that. "That's nothing to worry about. The fish is for feeding our people anyway. Is that all?"

The guard gave a nod, so Kivamus allowed him to return and rest for now.

Hudan took a seat nearby. "Where are we going to house these new slaves, or uh... refugees?"

"Maybe we can put them in some of the abandoned shacks in the village since it's not that cold now," the majordomo suggested.

Kivamus glanced at the fireplace burning near them. "That's the only option we have anyway, even though it's still plenty cold despite the weather being above freezing now. Still, send someone to the longhouse blocks and tell the people that we need them to volunteer half a dozen huts for others."

"Do we even need to ask the villagers for this?" Hudan raised his eyebrows. "You own all the land here, and the material the huts are made from barely counts for anything."

Kivamus shook his head. "That's not the point. I don't want to turn into a tyrant who just takes people's homes away on his whims, like Feroy had told us to be happening in Kirnos these days. If these runaway slaves start to think that I'm the same as other nobles whom they are running from, they'd have no reason to stay here either."

"I'll send a servant to the blocks later this evening to ask them." Duvas added, "In that case do you also want to pay the shack owners something for this? Like we were doing when we asked people to take in the homeless people temporarily before winter?"

Kivamus snorted. "We don't have any money to pay for it even if we wanted to. Anyway, like Hudan said, I do own this land and the villagers had neither taken any permission to build their huts nor bought that land from the previous baron, so we have no obligation to pay them anything. But asking people for this in advance will still make them feel like I value them, even if they were planning to stay in the longhouse blocks in the near future with their shacks sitting empty anyway."

He continued, "That being said, it's easy to pack so many people in the longhouse blocks when it is winter, but it won't be feasible in the summer." He tried to remember if Gorsazo had ever mentioned how warm the summers were here, but couldn't think of anything. "How hot does it get in the summers anyway?"

"Oh, it gets plenty hot," Duvas replied. "It's certainly not going to be as scorching as it would get south of the Nisador mountain range in the arid wastelands there, but Tiranat is still located in the southern part of Cilaria so the weather always becomes sweltering for a few months in summer. That's because the frigid winds of Cilaria which blow from a north-easterly direction in the winter months and make Tiranat so cold in that season, start to reverse direction every spring and blow from the south-west for the summer months. You already know that there is an ocean not far away from us in the west, which is where Kirnos is located, and these south-westerly winds bring in moisture from the ocean which makes it very humid in the summers apart from being hot."

Kivamus grimaced thinking about living in sweltering and muggy weather in the summer, after already dealing with subzero temperatures in the winter here. It explained another reason as to why Tiranat and maybe even Kirnos were such undesirable places for any nobles, apart from being one of the most dangerous places in the Duchy of Ulriga.

"Well, that decides it," he muttered. "We really can't afford to keep people stuffed in the longhouse blocks like they are right now for too long. We will need to start building new housing as well as more longhouse blocks as soon as we have enough workers for that."

"Couldn't the villagers just return to their shacks for the summer where they lived before?" Hudan asked. "It's not like they will freeze to death in the summer living in those huts."

"You are forgetting that we are doing everything in our power to get more immigrants here, and that means if it goes well, we will always have a shortage of living space." Kivamus added, "Even if we send all the villagers to live in their old shacks in the summer, and keep the new arrivals in the longhouse blocks for now, it is still going to get overcrowded eventually. And when winter comes again, we will be in the same situation as last autumn, where at least some people are going to freeze to death if they

keep living in those poorly insulated huts. At that point, we wouldn't even have an option to shift them to the longhouse blocks again which would already be full."

"That's true enough," Duvas agreed. "You don't know how glad I am to see that nobody died this winter from cold or hunger. We have to make sure that everyone has a warm place to live before the next winter."

Kivamus nodded. "Of course. Anyway, for now we have to focus on mining enough coal to pay the taxes on time, and then we have to complete the sowing in the newly cleared forests. We will also have to return most of the workers to keep mining coal after the sowing so we can afford to buy enough grain to feed the village until the harvest time in autumn. That means we aren't going to have a labour surplus anytime soon. Still, we will have to manage somehow with the workers we have, and hopefully with more immigrants."

"Can we even afford to send enough labourers to start making individual houses right now?" Duvas asked. "We only get a surplus of labourers in the winter, and I know we built a lot more stuff in this winter than any year since the time Tiranat was founded. But now that the snow has nearly melted, we'll have to keep most of the labourers in the village occupied to mine coal until the northern road gets blocked before the next winter."

Kivamus exhaled. "We still have to try... even though new housing is hardly the only thing we have to build. We also have to make some big storage barns to store the wheat we will harvest in autumn, although we have some time for that. Another thing that we'll have to prioritise before all that is to dig a canal connecting the eastern stream to the farms, as well as a way to lift the water from the level of the stream to the farms so that they can be irrigated properly, probably using a new waterwheel. These are the things we need to do just for the bare minimum of survival. It doesn't cover some new projects which I want to start in Tiranat to diversify our revenue streams."

Seeing the blank look on Hudan's face, he explained, "I mean I don't want to let our village be dependent on mining coal forever. It's not very profitable, and we can't earn anything in the winters from that anyway. So I want to create more ways of earning gold, but that will only happen if our neighbouring barons and nearby bandits leave us in peace, which is not very likely, is it? So we will also have to take measures to secure our village more. After the first four watchtowers are built at the corners of the village walls, we have to make a few more of them to cover the walls better to make the village more secure, while also digging a small trench all around the village walls with sharpened stakes in it."

He continued, "Of course, we will have to recruit more guards and train them once we have more immigrants, while also working to make new equipment like better swords, spears and shields for them, apart from more crossbows which are going to be even more important. We'd already planned to make a new barracks in the east of the manor as well as a dedicated new training area for the guards there, which will become important in the future once we have more guards."

"All that will cost a lot though..." Duvas interrupted. "Paying the wages of so many guards as well as the craftsmen building those buildings will take a lot of gold. You had also planned to start paying everyone in coins instead of grain and coal after the winter, so I'm not sure we can do all that with our limited funds. Not that I think we can keep postponing that for too long, otherwise the villagers might just refuse to work. They can only keep working for so long in exchange for grain and coal before they start demanding ale as a part of their weekly rations."

Kivamus snorted. "That's why I said that I want to generate new ways of earning gold. Anyway, that's for the future. For now, send someone to the longhouse blocks to ask who is willing to give up their huts."

Duvas nodded. "I'll do it right now. The labourers must have returned from work by now, so it is a good time for that. We'll also have to feed those refugees, so I'll ask the head maid Madam Nerida to cook something for them tomorrow until we can think of a more permanent way to feed them. You don't know how glad I am that Feroy has managed to negotiate buying more smoked fish from that merchant in Kirnos, otherwise we simply wouldn't be able to feed everyone right now."

"Let's just hope that we still have enough seeds left for sowing after feeding everyone," Kivamus muttered.

Chapter 267 Homecoming

It was the afternoon of the next day when a servant came running with the news that the caravan had returned from Kirnos. Immediately, Kivamus and Hudan exited the manor hall to visit the new arrivals, with Duvas following behind them.

Reaching close towards the gate, he saw that the pair of wagons had just been brought to an empty shed where a group of servants had already started loading up the smoked fish barrels on wheelbarrows, while some of the guards were supporting a man who seemed to have trouble walking because of a leg wound. Tesyb was helping the man whose cut-off arm was bound in thick bandages to climb down from the wagon. At the same time, Nurobo came running towards the group, reassuring the injured men that he would take care of him. There was also an unknown man with cropped black hair with downcast eyes who was looking around at everyone with a tinge of fear.

As Kivamus reached next to them, Feroy, the redhead Hyola, and the other guards immediately bowed to him.

"It is my fault, milord," the ex-mercenary apologised. "I should have done better to make sure nobody got hurt."

Hyola glanced at the wounded guards before looking back at him. "No, it is on me. If only I had been of more help to everyone... I don't deserve to be a guard."

Tesyb was just gazing downwards, along with the other guards who had returned.

Kivamus took a deep breath. "Stand straight you all. None of you are at fault. I know you all must have done everything you could have. Torhan and that bastard Nokozal are the ones who caused this, not you. And those bastards will get exactly what is coming to them, one way or another."

"But..." Hyola protested.

Kivamus raised a hand to stop her. "No buts! It is not your fault. I'm just glad that everyone is alive. Now you all have been through a difficult journey and must be tired, so just take some rest for today. Feroy, you stay back here for a moment. Hyola, go and meet with Madam Nerida in the servants hall and tell her to start distributing food for every returning guard."

"Of course, milord!" The redhead immediately jogged towards the servant hall.

"Nurobo, you already have some experience in treating injured guards, so make sure to do everything you can for them. Tesyb, you go and help the injured guards to an empty sleeping spot in the servant hall. There will be food waiting for you all there. Eat well and get some good rest. Duvas will also send Sryne with some more Losuvil powder for anyone who needs it."

One by one, the guards started trudging towards the servant hall, with the injured ones being supported by others. Behind them, the servants were hard at work and had already removed most of the barrels from the wagons, while the grooms had unhitched the horses and were taking them to the stables for some water and hay.

"Where are those refugees you brought?" He asked the ex-mercenary. Looking at his arm which had a bandage wrapped around it, he added, "Are you injured too?"

"It's just a few scratches, milord," Feroy replied. He pointed at the man who looked out of place between the guards, "Apart from Joric here, who was recently enslaved by Torhan, the rest of the slaves are waiting outside the manor walls. I didn't want to bring them inside since we don't know anything about them, and the jail here is already full from the escaped farmers who had come here in the past."

Kivamus felt that there was a story behind Joric, but skipped asking about it for now. "We have decided to house them in those huts in the village which are in better condition. It would be good for them to see a familiar face again, so go towards the market square with Duvass and he will show you which of the huts to accommodate them in. Madam Nerida should have made some food for them as well, so they can just eat and rest for today. Tell them that from tomorrow, apart from those who are sick or injured, they are expected to start working at whichever place suits them best based on their skills, and we'll start giving them weekly rations in return so they can cook their own food in their huts for now."

Feroy nodded. "I'll return right after showing them to the huts. Hudan, keep an eye on Joric. He's harmless, but we still need to ask him more questions first."

Hudan walked towards the former slave named Joric, and put his giant hand on his shoulder, making the man stumble from the weight.

As the ex-mercenary jogged towards the gates along with Duvass, Kivamus looked at the barrels of smoked fish being transferred to the food storage barn. This was still unpaid food, but at least they had managed to buy enough of it that they should be able to sow the majority of the cleared land with the seeds they already had. The temperature was already rising and around half of the snow had melted by now, which meant it would only be less than a week before all of it had turned into water, making the ground muddy everywhere. Well, even more than it already was.

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At least all the seed drills were ready by now, so they should be able to complete the sowing with a fraction of the number of people which would be needed if doing it manually. While they had already tested it once, he really wanted to see them in action soon. If everything went well, then this would be the last year when Tiranat was so desperate for buying food from outside. He didn't think that they would be able to go on without buying any wheat at all from Cinran, especially if new immigrants kept

arriving in Tiranat as was planned, but it should still be able to cover the majority of their food grain requirements. Leaving that for later, he turned towards the manor hall to wait there for Feroy. There was something even more important to consider before food security.

After a while, Feroy entered the manor hall and took a seat. "I've put the refugees into the shacks like you asked. A few servants are already taking a cartload of porridge to the market square to feed them."

"It's good to hear that they are settled in, but we seem to have a bigger worry right now." Kivamus looked at Hudan and Duvas who were sitting nearby, before returning his gaze to the ex-mercenary. "Our scout told us that it were Torhan's men who ambushed you."

Feroy nodded. "They were. Apart from Nokozal who escaped at the end of the fight, we couldn't keep any of those men alive for questioning, but Joric - the man you saw outside - has confirmed that they were all bandits working under Torhan."

"What's this man's story anyway?" Hudan asked.

The ex-mercenary explained how the man had sold himself into slavery to make sure his family would stay safe, and that he had been forced by the bandits to participate in the ambush and had begged them after the battle to take him with them.

"Hmm..." Kivamus nodded. "He doesn't sound like a bandit, like you said. Still, make sure to find out everything he knows about Torhan."

"Of course, I'll keep grilling him until I find out everything," Feroy agreed, "but from what he already told me on the way, it doesn't look good for us. Torhan isn't a small-time bandit like Nokozal or others. This man is smart, and has good connections in Kirnos, likely with Baron Farodas there. Although he does seem to have an ongoing rivalry with Lanidas, son of the baron. Based on what Joric says, Torhan basically runs a small village by himself around the clay mines. Including the men we already killed, he used to have more than twenty-five bandits working for him. That doesn't count the fifty or more slaves working under him."

"That sounds bad for us, especially if this Torhan decides that he wants revenge on us for killing all his men..." Hudan muttered.

"How would he even find out that all his men were killed?" Duvas asked. "Dead men tell no tales, after all."

"You are forgetting that that giant bastard Nokozal is still alive," Kivamus answered, "and we can be pretty sure he is going to run back to his new sponsor Torhan. Still," he asked while looking at Fero, "unless Nokozal recognised you and the other guards, would Torhan even know it was us?"

"Oh, he recognised us alright," Fero snorted. "Tesyb fought with him one on one for a while, just like he had done when Nokozal had raided us, and the giant also recognised Hyola from the limestone quarry. I have no doubt that Torhan is going to find out exactly who killed his men."

"Of course he will..." Kivamus muttered. What else was he expecting with the way everything was going in this world since he had arrived...

"Why are we even arguing about it like this?" Hudan frowned. "Shouldn't there be a way for us to complain to the higher authorities like the Count or the Duke? We shouldn't have to worry about a Goddess-damned bandit group wanting revenge on us just for trying to protect our people from them!"

"If it were some other bandit group," Fero answered, "they would be happy just to know that there are no knights here to go after them to wipe them out. But in Torhan's case, he seems to have the second largest fighting force in this region of southern Reslinor after the baron of Kirnos, and with that power comes the ego and the capability to want revenge."

"You are also forgetting where you are, Hudan," Duvas remarked. "This is not Cinran or Ulriga where the rule of law is the mightiest. Frankly, as long as they keep getting taxes from us and Kirnos on time, they won't give a copper about what happens to us, forget about sending their valuable knights to keep an eye on the roads here. If anything, Zoricus might even prefer it if we are overrun by bandits and Lord Kivamus is killed by them, not to mention his brothers in Ulriga would be more than happy to hear that news."

"It's not just that..." the majordomo continued with a frown. "We have no way to be sure about it, but it kind of sounds like Torhan could be an illegitimate son of Baron Farodas... I can think of no other reason

why the crafty old baron of Kirnos would allow such a strong bandit group to exist so close to his village and even allow his men entry in his village, unless there were familial ties between them. That would also explain why the young master Lanidas doesn't have good relations with Torhan, unlike his father, since the young master would be seeing the bandit leader as a rival for his inheritance of the barony."

Hudan smirked. "So this Torhan might actually be a bastard then..."

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Feroy snorted. "Yeah, he might be. Anyway, assuming Torhan had 25 men to fight for him until now, then even if he wasn't related to the baron of Kirnos, the baron simply wouldn't have enough men to get rid of this bandit group. From what I estimated after visiting Kirnos - which is maybe one and a half times the size of Tiranat - their baron must have around thirty to forty guards working under him at most. That is simply not a big enough number to wipe out the bandits in their own home without taking very heavy losses themselves."

Hudan nodded. "Yeah, that makes sense. But what if he really is a bastard of the baron?"

"If he is, then that basically makes him a noble..." Duvas muttered. "I simply don't see a noble of this kingdom not wanting revenge for his men being killed by us."

"If that's true," Feroy said, "we can be pretty sure that the Baron of Kirnos will also support Torhan in some way if - or rather, when - he decides that he wants revenge on us. Even if the Baron of Kirnos doesn't send his own men with the bandits, they might still supply them with weapons and horses to make it easier for Torhan to raid us. Kirnos would be getting its own share of the spoils from that raid as well, which is already a good enough reason for them to support the bandits in an attack as long as they are confident of raiding us successfully."

"Yeah... but our village is not the same as it was last autumn, is it?" Kivamus asked with a smirk. "That time the guards had to huddle inside the manor to protect themselves, leaving the village ripe for plunder. But before he actually comes here, Torhan has no way of knowing that we have a strong palisade wall surrounding the whole village now - taller than the one in Kirnos, from what Feroy mentioned last time. We also have a lot more trained guards now. I think you had what... a dozen guards during that raid?"

Duvas nodded. "Yeah, eleven men apart from Kerel who was acting as an interim guard captain. We used to have around 20 men in the past, but the remaining guards were killed during the ambush on the previous baron. As sad as it is, I'm glad we are in a much better situation now."

"Of course," Kivamus agreed. "After hiring more guards late last autumn, we have twenty four guards apart from Hudan and Feroy - and that was before we started hiring women. While the female guards can't do much with a sword, we have 38 guards in total including them. No... 37 now, since the man who got his arm cut-off wouldn't be able to fight anymore. The other guard who had a leg injury also wouldn't be able to fight for a few weeks. That should give Torhan a nasty surprise if he dares to attack us!"

"But we don't have that many guards in the village at the same time..." Hudan reminded them. "We have three to four hunting groups out at any particular time, which means usually we have around 10 to 14 guards out of the village for hunting, apart from the hunters of the village. Since we can't send the women to fight with a sword, and we still don't have enough crossbows even to let them support the swordsmen from a range, it leaves just 14 male guards, including two archers, to protect the manor and the village. Of course, the watch towers will give us a decided advantage here in defence, since the women guards, or even the older watchman we are keeping there can use a single crossbow to take out some bandits by themselves with the height advantage of the tower."

Kivamus looked at Duvas. "What is the status of the watchtowers?"

"The second one next to the southwestern gate should be completed today," the majordomo reported. "Taniok will start working on the third one in the southeast from tomorrow."

"Okay, that's good news, but it still means we won't even have four watchtowers in a week to ten days time, since that's how long it should take for Torhan to decide to attack us. Isn't that right?"

Feroy nodded. "That's the very minimum, but it will probably take longer, since Nokozal likely won't have horses to ride back to the clay mine. I wanted to bring those horses with us after killing the bandits but we just couldn't risk staying there when we started hearing the howls of adzees. Most likely, those horses wouldn't have survived the night, since they must have been tied to trees by the bandits, and in that case even a single adzee would be more than enough to kill them. Although from what I heard, I believe it was a whole pack of them."

"Who knows, we might have gotten lucky and that giant bastard would have been eaten by an adzee..." Hudan snorted.

"We can certainly hope so, but it's not very likely..." Feroy muttered. "That slimy bastard has a way of getting out of situations where he might die. We have to assume that he survived, and probably even managed to take a horse to ride. In that case it should still take him around a week just to find a way to the clay mine, since he used to operate in a different region of these huge forests and he wouldn't have a good idea of how to find the mine without someone from Torhan's group to show him the way. Assuming Torhan decides to attack us immediately after getting the news, he will likely try to get an audience with Baron Farodas in Kirnos to ask for his help, and then it will take a couple of days for them to ride here. That means we should have around ten days before we get raided by Torhan, and probably even two weeks or more in case Nokozal couldn't find a horse."

"Isn't that around the same time when we are expecting the tax collector to arrive from Cinran?" Kivamus asked. "Can't we ask them to stay here for a few more days and help us in case of a raid? How many men do they come with anyway?"

"Unless there is a delay, the tax collector should arrive in around a week," Duvas answered, "since the Count wouldn't want to delay getting taxes any more than he already has. It's been a while since the tax collector of Cinran had to come here, since our previous baron preferred to go to Cinran himself to pay the taxes, but when the last time Count Cinran's tax collector Ustaimo had come to Tiranat, he came with a couple of knights, their squires, and a few swordsmen and archers."

"They would be very helpful if they agreed to help..." Hudan said. "I trained as a squire for many years in Cinran, so I might even know one of them."

Duvas shook his head reluctantly. "Unless a raid happens at the same time they are in Tiranat, I don't believe they will stay here for a single day longer than they have to. That means most likely the tax collector will be long gone by the time Torhan raids our village."

Feroy looked at the others for a moment. "You all are also forgetting that Baron Zoricus in Cinran might even have bribed one of those squires or swordsmen to try to assassinate Lord Kivamus again. I don't think we can trust them any more than we can trust the bandits."

Kivamus clenched his fists, trying not to think about how Levalo had tried to feed him poisoned soup, and had nearly killed the young maid Clarisa in the process. "Alright, let's stop thinking about what-ifs. There is no point in that. I agree that we can't trust any armed men from Cinran to protect us, which means we have to do it ourselves. What I want more than anything is to go and attack Torhan right in his clay mine and kill him right there, so he can't threaten us ever again, but I don't think it is feasible. Even if we sent every single guard we have for this - which we certainly cannot afford to do - we still won't have enough men to be able to kill all his bandits without losing our own people, and that is if Baron Farodas didn't outright help him against us."

"You are right," Hudan agreed. "Joric said Torhan had at least 25 trained men, but Feroy and the others already killed seven of them. That means he should still have around 18 to 20 men now, and to wipe them out fully we will need at least a double advantage in numbers, which means we will need to send at least 40 men, and that is after leaving enough men here to protect the village. That is simply not possible right now."

"Indeed," Kivamus nodded. "Which means we will just have to make sure to protect the village from them. Alright. The walls are completed, so that's good. The second watch tower will be built by today, and a third one will be done in another 4 to 5 days. That means even if we just get around 10 days before a raid on us, we might even be able to build a fourth watchtower by then. Darora should also be able to provide us with at least two, and maybe even three new crossbows by then. We already have a good stock of bolts, so that wouldn't be a problem either."

He looked at the guard captain. "Hudan, select more older men and women who are willing to keep a watch on the towers, and continue giving them some basic training with the crossbow, just in case. However, when the time for a raid is coming close, we will send our women guards up there, since they are already well-trained in using the crossbows." Once Hudan nodded, he asked while looking at Feroy, "That reminds me, how helpful was Hyola with the crossbow during the ambush?"

"She did much better than I expected," the ex-mercenary replied. "The redhead killed two bandits and injured a couple of others, and this was her first time facing bandits coming to kill her. The other guards did good as well, including Tesyb who managed to hold out against Nokozaal alone for a while. I would recommend all of the guards to be given a medal, including Hyola."

Kivamus grinned, especially after noticing how Duvas' mouth didn't even close for a while in surprise after hearing about Hyola.

Chapter 269 Defense - II

Kivamus began, "I agree that the guards acted bravely against the bandits and we'll give them the medals later today. Still, crossbows are usually better when used as a defensive weapon, like when the person using them is standing in the safety of a watch tower, so they can keep shooting at the attackers without risking themselves. But they can also be used effectively in offensive situations, although that will only happen when we have enough of them to shoot the bolts in bulk."

He glanced at Duvas before adding, "Just imagine how the ambush would have gone if all eight of the guards had a loaded crossbow with them at the beginning of the ambush. Even an archer like Yufim could have used it once to shoot a bolt before returning to use his bow after that. In that case, with

eight crossbow bolts being shot out immediately after the guards recognised an ambush - even assuming half of them missed completely - they still would have injured or killed four of them."

Feroy interrupted him before he said any more. "Actually, I saw that Hyola had just enough time to load the crossbow one more time before the bandits reached too close. In that case, we could have shot another eight bolts. That might have completely removed the threat, since even if the bandits didn't die, only a few of them would have been left uninjured enough to keep attacking us. And that's the best case scenario for the bandits. Sixteen crossbow bolts being shot at them in two waves could very well mean that all of the bandits might have died before they even reached the wagons."

Duvas shook his head in wonder. "I had expected that the crossbow might come as a surprise to any bandits... but to think that the guards wouldn't even have to lift their swords to wipe out all the bandits if they just had more crossbows...?" He sighed before looking at Kivamus. "You were right, my lord. In such a case, it wouldn't even matter if all the eight guards were men or women if the crossbows could finish that many bandits before they even reached in sword-fighting range..."

Hudan also looked surprised. "I have already seen how effective a crossbow can be in the fight with the adzee a month ago, but to hear about them being so useful even in a sudden battle with armed bandits... Huh... At this rate, the guards might as well stop training with a sword altogether and start learning how to use a crossbow better!"

Kivamus grinned again, not mentioning that this was exactly the eventual result which had happened on earth after the invention of guns, which worked on a very similar principle to crossbows, due to the fact that they could be used by anyone without any prior training. "That's why I keep insisting that crossbows are going to be our secret advantage in the short to medium term. Anyway, now that we have gotten fourteen more refugees, we can afford to hire a few more guards. Hudan, you had given some basic training to half a dozen villagers with machetes a few months ago and we had decided to keep them as reserve guards. This is the time to give them an offer to join us permanently."

Duvas interrupted, "You are raising our expenses again and again, my lord, without worrying about the consequences. We can't keep spending gold like this!"

"There is no point in keeping any gold if there are no people to use it!" Kivamus retorted. "Let me worry about how we will finance it."

"I'll ask them today when they return from work," Hudan said.

"Good. I think they all should agree easily enough, which will give us another six guards, even though they won't be on the same level as the other guards for a while."

Thinking about the estimate Feroy had given them, Kivamus added, "We should have at least a week on the minimum before a raid from Torhan. That means it should be okay to send the hunting groups out on one more trip, but once they return from it, hold them back so we can protect the village better. Extra meat won't help us if you don't have people to feed them to. With the two wagon loads of smoked fish we got today, we now have more than enough food to feed everyone for the coming week, even without the guards going hunting for a while. Even if we somehow run out of stored food supplies, we will just have to use some of the seeds to feed the people. This might lead to a smaller harvest, but that is still better than losing our people to a raid or getting our village burnt by bandits."

"I'll let the hunting guards know about it," Hudan replied. "In fact, they usually stay out for three to four days at a time, so I'll tell them to take longer on their next trip to get as much meat as they can. That way we will still have all the guards in the village within a week, and we will get more meat to eat or smoke as well."

Duvas looked at Kivamus and gave a sigh. "I know you are doing your best to keep us all safe, but your ideas just seem too irrational sometimes for me to agree to them immediately. But doing all this might just help us to get out of a raid better than I could have imagined a few months ago."

"I agree," Feroy said. "It's not like Torhan can even bring every single bandit from his clay mine to attack us. He has to keep some of them right there to keep an eye on the slaves. With every single guard in the village ready with a sword, along with the archers and crossbow-women keeping a watch sitting on top of the towers and with us also having some men in reserve with these six new guards... we might just be able to deal with Torhan without much losses, if at all."

Kivamus look at everyone's faces and gave a dangerous smile. "As much as I want it, we might not be able to go and punish that bastard Torhan right in his home, but if he does dare to attack us here, he won't know what hit him!"

"That reminds me," Duvas interrupted, "just like Feroy had hidden the crossbows when he went to Kirnos, we also have to hide the existence of crossbows from any visiting knights or the tax collector, since it is prohibited for anyone to have them outside of Duke's army in Fort Aragosa."

Kivamus nodded. "That's a good idea. I don't want to let any other nobles know that we have them, or that we also have the capability and designs to craft them here. I don't want to see Darora being taken away by those knights for that. Anyway, those men are only going to stay here for a couple of days at most, so we can just keep those crossbows out of sight for the time being when they arrive. It will make us a little vulnerable without the crossbows on the watchtowers, but the knights will also be present here within the manor for that time. In case of a raid, they will have to help us at least a little bit... to protect their own lives, if nothing else. That should still help us enough for us to deal with the rest of the bandits."

He looked at everyone for a moment. "Well, that's all for now. You all know what to do. Hudan, you have to hire the reserve guards, and talk with the hunters. Feroy, you ask Joric everything he knows about Torhan and his men, then put him to work in the coal mines from tomorrow. Duvas, make sure we have enough medals so we can provide them to the guards in the evening."

The others gave nods before getting up and moving out of the manor hall to complete their tasks. Once he was alone, Kivamus glanced at the shelf with the blueprints. Others were doing what they could to defend the village, so now he also had to do his own part to make sure Tiranat had enough gold to fund everything he had just ordered and the things he planned to do in the future."

~ Joric ~

Joric was feeling confused. No, overwhelmed might be a better word. It hadn't been even half a day since he had arrived in this unconventional village, and he already found it difficult to reconcile the memories of how a village was supposed to be run from what he had seen living in Kirnos against what he was seeing right now in front of his eyes.

Throughout the nearly two day journey from the ambush site near Kirnos to the bustling village of Tiranat, he had been dreading what he was going to find here and what was going to happen to him. Feroy, the leader of the caravan - who acted more like an experienced mercenary than a travelling merchant, or even a lazy village guard - had been asking him all kinds of questions about Torhan and his clay mine. Instead of hiding anything, Joric had told the mercenary everything he knew, just so he wouldn't be thrown away as some adzee food by Feroy, with his throat slit while he was sleeping, but thankfully the mercenary had believed him and left him alive.

Despite the guards acting more or less friendly to him throughout the journey, even after knowing that he was the one who had stopped them for the ambush, Joric had still been fearful of what would happen when he arrived in Tiranat and the baron met him. However, back in the afternoon, when one of the guards had mentioned that Tiranat was only a short distance away now, his heart had started beating faster and faster, fearing the baron would execute him for helping the bandits in the ambush. After all, any noble leading such a poor and destitute village wouldn't have any heart to show him generosity anyway. From what he had heard for most of his life, Tiranat was barely a village, and didn't even have a wall surrounding it, like the mighty palisade walls of Kirnos.

From what others used to say about this poverty-stricken settlement when he lived in his home village of Kirnos, the beggarly villagers of Tiranat just mined coal all day, then drank ale all night, only to go back to mine more coal the next morning and then drank again in the evening. There were no other jobs here, and no new opportunities for people - unlike in Kirnos, where a person could become a farmer, a fisherman, a merchant or could even join a visiting ship as a deckhand if he didn't have any other opportunities. Not that any of those tasks were easy or paid much, but Kirnos still seemed like a much better place to live than Tiranat. Or so he used to think before arriving here.

Chapter 270 Nothing Makes Sense Here!

However, the moment their two wagons had turned around the last bend on the forest road, Joric had seen a vast empty space in front of them ending at some towering walls in the distance. For a while, he had even thought that the guards had lied to him that they were from Tiranat and had somehow brought him to some other unknown place - not that there was even any other major settlement in this region of Southern Reslinor, but it was hard to believe that this was the poor village which supposedly didn't even have a wall around it.

But unless his eyes were lying to him, there was a strong palisade wall stretching into the distance on both sides - easily taller than the ones surrounding Kirnos - and there was even a tall watchtower right inside the walls. Even Kirnos didn't have them! He even saw an alert-looking older man squinting at the wagons from top of the tower, with some weird looking bow in his hands.

Before long, they had stopped near the strong wooden gates, and one of the guards had gone to talk with the gate guards through a small peephole in the walls. He was expecting that the wagons would have to give a bribe here as well, just like it was common when entering Kirnos, but surprisingly, no such thing happened. Immediately, a pair of guards in warm fur coats - who looked ready and alert to defend their home village from any danger - had opened the gates and their two wagons had entered inside.

At that point Joric had to ask a guard to confirm that this really was Tiranat, and he did say it was, but it was still hard to really believe it. This place didn't look at all like a poor, undefended settlement with the usual lazy, corrupt guards like he expected. Was this really Tiranat?

Once they passed the gates, there was some more empty space before the first huts of the village, which looked as dilapidated as he expected from a poor village like Tiranat. As they moved between those huts, he had craned his neck all around but had barely seen anyone there. Was the village abandoned now? He had asked the guards about it, but they had laughed at him and said that the villagers were now living in some really long house, which was so big that more than a hundred people could live there easily. That felt a little hard to believe, but he had accepted that the guards might want to boast about their own village.

Eventually, the group of slaves which had been following behind them had been told to wait outside what turned out to be another walled compound, but he had been taken inside along with the other guards. By this point he had been fearing that his end was near and the baron would immediately order him to be executed. However, the silver haired man who came out from the manor house ahead of them was... quite young - younger than even the young master Lanidas who was a greedy and lecherous wastrel at best. Then how could this young man named Kivamus possibly rule over a whole village? Huh... maybe he was also like Lanidas, and that's why the local people had run away from the village.

However, the young baron had barely looked towards him while he talked with Feroy and a local guard who was nearly as big as Nokozal, along with another bald older man. That was weird though. Why would a baron come out just to meet a few guards returning from a journey? Baron Farodas would never do it in Kirnos just to meet some lowly guards. Before the young baron had sent them to eat, he had talked with the injured guards and told them that they would be taken care of, while also reassuring the guard who had lost his arm that his family would never go hungry in return for the service he had already provided to Tiranat. That... was unexpected. If such a thing had happened in Kirnos, their guard captain would have just gotten rid of the amputee guard and hired another one, instead of telling him that even his family would be taken care of!

As they had talked Joric's heart had kept beating faster and faster, fearing once again that his end was coming near, but before long, Feroy had gone out to tell the escaped slaves where they would live, before entering the manor house to talk with the baron for a long time. In the meantime he had been told that a guard named Tesyb would be keeping an eye on him. He had been wondering where to go, when Tesyb had brought him to a wooden building called the servants' hall, where he had been given warm, freshly baked bread along with some warm porridge and some newly roasted meat. Joric's eyes had teared up seeing such a luxurious meal, after eating weeks old stale bread with some water in Torhan's clay mine.

However, Tesyb had told him to enjoy it, since he would also be living with the escaped slaves from tonight after another interrogation, and would have to earn his meals from tomorrow, probably by working as a coal miner or a woodcutter. Joric would have balked hearing about that a few months ago,

but after working in a clay mine for the last few months, his body was already used to hard work. Anyway, he knew that he was a slave, and would remain so for the next three decades, so he had to work hard until then anyway. Now that this young baron was his owner from today, he had to follow their orders, even if it meant working in the coal mines.

As he had begun eating the delicious food, he had looked around to familiarise himself with his new surroundings. A few maids had been bringing more fresh bread for anyone who needed it. No, for anyone who wanted it. Some other off-duty guards who had been sitting nearby were asking about the journey and wondering how the guards had defeated the bandit group. He had even found out that the tall redhead wasn't the only female guard in this village. For some reason, this baron had hired nearly a dozen women as guards, and many of them had been sitting near the male guards while eating, like they all were long time friends, without the guards resorting to any lechery. It was weird to see that after seeing the bandits at the clay mine doing exactly that with the female slaves. If anything, the whole servants' hall's atmosphere felt like it was the home of a happy, extended family which was meeting after a long time and enjoying their time together. Everything in this village felt... unusual, to say the least.

Joric had been told to rest after that, before he had seen the guards getting out of the servants hall one by one to go to some event. Being curious about it, he had asked for permission to come, and one of the guards had told him to follow along. So he had followed the guards to an empty area just outside the gates of the baron's manor, where a small crowd of villagers was already gathered. That was where he was standing right now.

While the crowd wasn't that big, there were still enough people here that it looked like the village wasn't really abandoned, after all. In fact, he overheard some of the villagers telling about their day to their friends and families. Most of them seemed to have returned from the coal mines, as expected, while some of them had been cutting trees to clear the forests for some reason.

Another few had supposedly been working on a new watchtower, while some seemed to be building something called a dam, which was a new word for Joric. Some of them had been working to make some kind of sawdust cubes, while there was even a woman who was working to make... paper? But why? Apart from them, there were even some who had been working as apprentices of carpenters, of a blacksmith, and of even a fletcher. Hearing about so many opportunities for work was quite surprising to him. Wasn't this supposed to be just a coal mining village? Nothing about this village made any sense to him.

For now, he was standing next to the guards, who had made a loose ring around a pair of benches which had been joined together to make a raised platform just outside the gates. The crowd of villagers was

standing outside that ring, and seemed to be waiting with anticipation for something. Just what was going to happen here?

He waited there for a while, realising that it was already evening now, although the sun hadn't set yet, which meant there was just enough light to look around clearly. Before long, he saw the silver haired Baron of Tiranat walking towards the gates, followed by that giant guard as well as the older man. Soon, Joric was surprised to see that the baron climbed on the benches and began giving a speech to praise the hard work and sacrifice of the guards who had gone on the trip to Kirnos. How was this possible? How was a noble even praising commoners? Such a thing would never ever happen in Kirnos! Hah! It was hard to even imagine the young master praising his guards!

The speech which detailed how the guards had managed to defeat and kill a strong group of bandits didn't last too long, and all the guards and surprisingly even the gathered villagers clapped and cheered loudly for the baron after that. That was also strange to see. How were the villagers so supportive of a noble? From what he knew, all nobles were money-grubbing bastards who only thought for themselves, and didn't give a damn about commoners. Then how could the villagers be cheering such a tyrant...? Nothing made sense here!