

Londoner 271

Chapter 271 Hope

When the crowd had calmed down a little, the baron started something else which surprised him once again. The older man next to him offered a small piece of metal tied around a thin rope to the baron, who called out the names of the guards who had gone on the trip to Kirnos. Joric couldn't understand any reason for this, so he tapped the shoulder of a guard standing nearby.

"What's the baron doing? What is that square piece of metal for?"

The guard gazed at him from up to down for a moment. "Ya look like you're new here. The baron is givin' medals to the guards for their bravery. He is giving the Baron's Medal of Sacrifice to the three guards who got injured in the line of duty, while the rest 'f the five guards will get Baron's Medal of Courage for risking their lives for the village."

Joric frowned while glancing at the baron putting a medal around the neck of another guard. He wasn't really sure what these medals were meant to do, but he had heard from someone in the past that there were some prizes given by the Count and the Duke to their knights and the people who had pleased them, although they were supposedly made of gold and silver. He looked at the guard again with confusion. "But what's the point of these medals anyway? It's not even made of gold!"

The guard glared at him. "Are ya kidding me? Wearing a medal marks you as someone who is the best of the best! All the guards hope to get a medal from the baron one day! Of course, those who get a medal also get around a month's wages as a bonus, not that they would even need it anymore..." He grinned. "All they need to do is to take a seat in an alehouse or tavern and start telling their stories to get enough free meals and ale for themselves for a long, long time."

Joric nodded slowly. As a former merchant, he could certainly understand that getting some extra gold would be a good incentive for any guard to do better, but he still couldn't really understand the charm of getting a medal.

As the baron called out the name of another guard before putting a medal around his neck, all the guards started cheering loudly for him, including the man standing next to him.

The guard who had got a medal gave a huge grin and jumped down from the bench, when the man standing next to Joric looked at him from up to down. "Ya know what? Ya look like you got some good

muscles on ya. Why don't ya join up as a guard? I'm not sure 'bout it, but I think even the former slaves can join up as a guard."

"Haha, no, no..." Joric shook his head vehemently. "I feel like I'd wet my pants whenever I see a man with a sword running towards me. Fighting is not for me." Suddenly, his brain realized something the guard had said which didn't make sense. "Wait! What do you mean by the former slaves? Did the baron free some of his slaves recently?"

The guard looked at him like he was a naive child. "Oh, I forgot you're new here. There is no slavery allowed in Tiranat."

Joric nodded, remembering how nobles were always so greedy. "So the baron keeps all the slaves in the village for himself? He doesn't even allow the local merchants and craftsmen to own slaves?"

The guard laughed loudly. "No, I meant there are no slaves in Tiranat at all. Even Lord Kivamus doesn't own any slaves, and he has told everyone clearly that he will punish anyone who tries to buy, trade or own a human being. Believe it or not, everyone is free here, and everyone earns a wage... or at least some food in return for their work. Did you see that tall redhead Hyola who just got a Baron's Medal of Courage? She used to be a slave working under that bandit Nokozal in the past. But now she is a regular guard here and respected by everyone for her skills with a crossbow."

"Wait, what? Hyola used to be a slave?" Joric couldn't even think about how the rugged woman could have been owned by Nokozal. "I never could have imagined it..."

"Hah..." the guard chuckled. "You have a lot to learn about life in Tiranat."

"But... but what if someone has a big debt to pay? Wouldn't the baron have to take the person as a slave in that case?"

The guard shrugged. "I'm way too low in the food chain to know all the details, but all I know is that the baron will never allow slavery here. I think if someone had a big enough debt, they would just have to pay for it by working harder. And not by selling themselves or their children."

Joric was thinking about how difficult life had been for him in the past few months, so he tried to imagine how pleasant life could have been here in Tiranat. He wished he had been born in this village...

"You better not wish that," the guard retorted, making Joric realise that he had spoken it out loud. "Life was never easy for us people before Lord Kivamus arrived here. It hasn't even been half a year since then, but he has already changed this village in so many ways, making it better than it ever was."

"I can see that..." Joric muttered, while he thought about the implications of what he had just found out.

The guard turned around to cheer for the next one who was going to get a medal, while Joric's mind was working furiously. If there were no slaves allowed in this village, did that mean he was also a free man? Until now he had been thinking that his ownership would just be transferred to this baron now, instead of Torhan, and he would still have to complete his duty for the coming three decades before he got free and got a chance to see his family. But now...? Assuming he really was free, all kinds of possibilities were open to him now. If he didn't have to live here as a slave, could he return to his family once again?

No, that would never work. The guards in Kirnos would hand him over to Torhan immediately. Perhaps he could just visit his home secretly to meet them? What if he found a way to bring his family here? He hadn't even been here for a day, but he could already tell that life in this village was going to be a lot better for his family in so many ways.

He had to think more about this and soon. If Nokozal had realised that he had run away at the beginning of the fight, and told Torhan about that, what if that bastard took it out on his family? No, the Baron of Kirnos was as greedy as any other noble, but he was still fair - unlike his son. So Lord Farodas wouldn't allow Torhan to take his family as slaves in exchange, now that he had escaped. Right? Right...?

No! He had to stop thinking about the bad outcomes, and plan a way to help his family. Maybe he could even petition Lord Kivamus for his help? No, that would be asking too much, not that the baron would ever agree to that anyway. If the baron had really made him a free man here, that was already more than he could ever have wished. He didn't even remember when was the last time he felt so much hope for getting to live a good life in the future, maybe even with his family right next to him in this unusual village.

As he watched the next guard climb on the bench to get a medal, his mind just couldn't stop working, wishing he would find a way to reunite with his family. This time... in Tiranat.

~ Levalas ~

~ Count Ebirtas' Mansion, Cinran ~

Levalas gratefully took the bucket of water which a maid had just pulled out of the well, and thanked her. Pouring some water from the bucket onto his grimy hands, he washed them as well as he could, before using some water to wash his face as well. Working as a groom for the horses was dirty work, and he had to try to make himself a little more presentable before he would be allowed to enter the Count's mansion to visit that fat bastard Zoricus.

The last few months of the winter had been mostly peaceful for him, with Zoricus only ordering him to take the usual monthly kickbacks from the merchants of the town, instead of ordering him to do another assassination or something. Some of the merchants had even begged him to give them some extra time just yesterday, claiming that they were barely able to sell anything these days in the marketplace, but as much as he disliked acting like an attack dog of the fat bastard, it's not like he had any other choice of work available for him. Unless he found a more powerful benefactor whom the fat bastard couldn't touch, Zoricus would make sure he never got out of his clutches, one way or another.

So Levalas had simply shrugged and told them frankly that unless they gave the monthly bribes to the baron, Zoricus would just send someone to kidnap a member of the merchant family for a ransom. Simply put, Zoricus would get his money, one way or another, so it was better if the merchant just gave it peacefully. That being said, he had already handed over all of this month's kickbacks from the merchants to the fat bastard just yesterday, so he didn't know why he had been called to see the baron once again.

He stood up straight and after drying his hands and face with a somewhat clean cloth he found nearby, he turned around and started walking towards the mansion of the Count of Cinran. The sun had already dipped below the walls of the mansion, nearly ready to set by now, which meant the fat bastard should have been busy fulfilling his insatiable appetite of anything greasy that he could find, instead of calling Levalas to meet him at this hour. That's why he was getting a foreboding feeling that this time it wouldn't be something pleasant which the baron would ask from him.

Chapter 272 Scheming

Levalas wished there was a way for him to escape this pitiful life, having had more than enough of doing the dirty work of the gluttonous baron. That was why he had even dared to take an assassination mission on the new baron of Tiranat before the winter, not that he had any idea at the time that Baron

Kivamus was actually a Ralokaar, a son of the Duke. But despite failing in it, he had still continued to serve Zoricus after that - even with his heart saying that if he continued on this path the Goddess would make sure he would end up in the deepest pits of hell - just because he still hoped that one day he would be able to scrounge up enough coin to buy a passage on a ship going far away from Cilaria... and yet, here he was, even today. It was like the goddess didn't want him to leave Southern Reslinor at all!

Soon, he reached the outer door of the elaborate mansion, and thankfully he didn't have to introduce himself, since the guards recognised him by now as a regular visitor to Baron Zoricus. Giving the guards a nod of thanks, he walked through the wooden floored corridor, with paintings hanging on both sides, until he reached the door he was dreading. Another pair of guards standing there gave him entry after verifying who he was, and he entered the room.

As expected, Zoricus had a mountainload of food kept in front of him on the table, with the man busy eating with both of his hands, one after another. Like the food would fly away if he wasted time in stuffing it into his mouth! A servant was standing nearby with a carafe of wine, ready to fill the wine glass on the table when it emptied. The other servants and grooms in the mansion, including Levalas himself had never eaten such a luxurious meal - knowing they were lowly commoners - and yet, seeing this bastard eat such a huge amount of food without a worry, when some people inside Cinran were nearly starving these days was making him angry. The fact that he hadn't eaten anything since the morning wasn't helping either.

The baron glanced at him, and gestured to him to wait with a hand dripping with gravy, as he chewed on a slice of delicious looking meat. Levalas had to wait for quite a while, before Zoricus began with a smirk, "You are on time for once, Levalo."

Levalas simmered inside on hearing himself being called by the commoner's name Levalo, but kept his mouth shut for now. The baron still held all the power here, and saying something to anger the fat bastard wouldn't end well for him.

"Now listen, the Count is going to send his tax collector with some knights and guards to Tiranat in a day or two. You will join the group as a guard as well." Just as Levalas opened his mouth to protest, Zoricus lifted his hand to stop him. "Don't worry, I've talked with the knight commander," he added with a smirk, "and he gratefully agreed that I could send one of my guards to ease the load on his men. That will be you."

Levalas was already getting a bad feeling about this, but waited for the baron to finish.

Zoricus smiled dangerously, and pointed at him. "You probably understand what you need to do already, but I'll still spell it out for you. Make sure that this wannabe baron of that coal mining village doesn't live in this world any longer than he has to. That means he needs to die as soon as you can manage it after reaching there." He glared at Levalas. "Do not miss your task this time, or it really won't end well for you!"

Levalas gulped and gave an uncertain nod, not trusting himself to speak. What was wrong with this bastard? Ordering people to be killed without any remorse! Then again, this was Zoricus, and a single person's life was hardly a moment's thought for him.

But how was he supposed to kill a damned son of the Duke! And right in his own home! It was a different fact when Zoricus had told him that a young man would be travelling alone on the southern road with just an older attendant, without telling him who that man was. Levalas had still hesitated, but it was just another job at that time. However, now that he knew that Baron Kivamus was a son of the Duke of Ulriga, it was a completely different matter altogether!

How could he kill Baron Kivamus and expect to live long in this world? Not that it would be easy at all, now that the new baron has had the whole winter to settle in. If anything, it was more likely that Baron Kivamus had much better connections in Ulriga than Zoricus, and Levalas would probably have had more chances of earning enough coin to escape from Cilaria by working under him. Hah... Like any noble would ever agree to employ someone who tried to kill them!

Apart from all that, he still kept thinking about the fact that Baron Kivamus had spared his life when no other noble would have. It had haunted his mind the whole winter, and by now he was fairly sure that it wasn't because of any preplanned calculations. Most likely, Baron Kivamus was just a really kind and benevolent person - maybe even far too benevolent than he should be - as weird as it sounded for a noble to be.

Why couldn't he have met Baron Kivamus before meeting this fat bastard? Maybe his life would have been much better in that case, and he wouldn't even be thinking of escaping from Cilaria if that was true...

Interrupting his thoughts, Zoricus continued with a full mouth after taking another bite of meat, "Once you have killed that boy Kivamus - and make sure nobody finds out how he died - then the knights who have gone with you would have no choice other than to take command of the barony and hold down the fort - rather, the village." He grinned. "Just to maintain order, of course. Then you should suggest one of the knights to send a guard back here after that to ask for help from the Count, and offer yourself as the messenger. By that time I'll have talked with the Count and will be ready to leave for Tiranat with

my own guards as soon as I get the word of your success. There needs to be a noble there to run a barony, after all!"

"Why would the Count even agree to give you the command of Tiranat?" Levalas blurted out before he could stop himself.

Zoricus grinned. "Why? I'll convince him, of course! With Binpaazi knights getting more and more daring these days, we can't afford to leave any barony without a baron for long. Of course, even without me saying anything, the Count wouldn't want to wait too long this time, which might give another chance to the Duke to send one of his own people as the baron, which would further erode the power of the Count in his men's eyes, and Ebirtas doesn't want that anymore than I would." He smirked. "If everything goes well, I'll add another barony to my land holdings, and you will finally get the hundred gold you were promised in return for this."

Levalas wanted to deny this job immediately, throwing back the promise of that coin back at this bastard's face, but if he really could get a hundred gold, he really might be able to leave Cilaria... But could he even trust this bastard?

Instead of Zoricus rewarding him with gold for something this sensitive - which could make the fat bastard's influence fall sharply if any other nobles found out about it and with the Count even having to punish him heavily in that case - it felt more likely that Zoricus would have already arranged to have him killed by one of the knights or another guard in some kind of accident after he had killed that baron.

It simply meant that most likely, he wasn't ever going to see that hundred gold in his hands, whether he succeeded or not.

"Now leave!" Zoricus ordered before glaring at him. "Do not fail this time!"

Levalas kept his mouth shut and gave a nod, still not knowing what he was going to do, and exited the room. He had a lot to think about.

~ Ustaimo ~

~ Count Ebirtas' Mansion, Cinran ~

Ustaimo looked up from the ledger he had been working on, and stretched his hands in front of him, the cracking sound coming from his fingers and wrist reminding him of his age again. Well, at least he was done with all the tax accounting he had been working diligently on for the past two weeks. If only Tiranat would pay the overdue tax soon, everything would be right in his world, which mostly revolved around making sure all the zeros and decimals were in the right places in that ledger.

He slowly walked to the window and opened it, and welcomed the fresh gust of air inside. Now that all the snow had already melted, the air didn't have that bite in it anymore. Taking a few deep breaths, he turned around and started walking towards the meeting hall of Count Ebirtas. With all the accounting in his tax ledger completed, and the snow fully melted by now, the southern road to Tiranat would be open once again. That meant it was time for a trip, as much as he disliked travelling anywhere outside Cinran. He wasn't young anymore, and all his joints ached after sitting in a bumpy carriage for days at a time.

Thinking about Tiranat reminded Ustaimo of the previous baron of the village, who came every autumn with the taxes due by his village. That was better for Ustaimo since he didn't have to waste time travelling there. But alas, that man was dead now, for reasons better not spoken out loud, and this new baron of Tiranat didn't seem inclined to come to Cinran to pay the taxes, or he already would have. That meant Ustaimo really did have to travel to Tiranat now.

Chapter 273 A Bad Feeling

He walked down a flight of stairs and kept moving through the corridors until he reached the meeting hall of the count. Noticing him, the guard immediately opened the door, and he entered inside.

"Oh, Ustaimo! Come on in," Count Ebirtas gestured towards one of the chairs next to the table.

At the moment only the knight commander was sitting next to him, with the rest of the chairs empty for now. Ustaimo thanked the Goddess that that bastard Zoricus wasn't here. Just looking at his grubby face was usually enough to make his blood boil.

"I've taken care of all the accounts in the taxation ledger," Ustaimo reported as he took a seat, "and only the barony of Tiranat's tax is overdue as of now."

"Good, good," the elderly count nodded. "We were just talking about that. Your escorts are ready and you can leave tomorrow morning."

"Thank you, my lord." Looking at the knight commander, Ustaimo added, "I hope you have given more knights to accompany me this time. We all know the fate of the previous baron of Tiranat, and nobody wants a repeat of that when travelling on the Southern road."

The knight commander - who was sitting in his full armour with only his helmet not in place, being kept on the table in front of him - winced at that. "That won't be possible this time. We simply cannot afford to send any knights away from Cinran right now if there is any chance we can manage without that. For tomorrow, you will leave with one knight along with four other guards - three swordsmen and an archer. That should be enough to protect the gold you'll bring back."

"What? No!" Ustaimo protested, feeling a sudden pang of fear for a journey which was going to be much more dangerous now than what he had thought earlier. "That's not enough at all! Even if you don't give me more knights than usual, at least give me the usual two knights whom I take with me when travelling anywhere outside Cinran for collecting taxes! You know that a single knight will hardly be enough protection when I'm going to be carrying more than a thousand gold...!"

Count Ebirtas grimaced. "You already know that there was another raid by Binpaaz on the eastern farms a few days ago, and this time they put a few orchards on fire and damaged our wheat crops - trampling their horses all over the newly sown fields. Yesterday, we had to dispatch another group of knights to the border to protect the farmers. We really don't have enough reserve knights here to send with you without weakening Cinran's defenses."

"But... this doesn't feel right..." Ustaimo complained again. "A single knight and just four other guards... on that dangerous road going south through the forests."

The knight commander gave a small smile. "You might not know this, but we probably wouldn't even have been able to give you even that many guards. Thankfully, Baron Zoricus offered to help, and has provided us one of his own guards to accompany you. That's the only reason you have four other guards going along with you."

Ustaimo frowned. "Lord Zoricus offered to help me...? That can't be right..."

Count Ebirtas laughed loudly. "There you go thinking he's a bad person once again. He's not. Zoricus is the only reason my domain is still standing. I simply wouldn't be able to run Cinran without all the help he has been providing, whether in terms of guards or in gold."

If only you knew what he wanted in exchange for that... Ustaimo thought with a grimace, but didn't say it out loud. Whatever else Zoricus may be, he was still a noble, and was easily the favourite vassal of the elderly count. Saying anything against the fat bastard openly, especially without any solid proof would only lead to his own undoing, and that was something he couldn't risk. He just had to keep his head down, and keep following the Count's orders in order to secure his own survival.

He gave a nod looking at the count. "I'll leave early tomorrow morning."

"Good!" Ebirtas nodded in return. "Make sure to collect all the overdue taxes. If they can't pay it, bring something else in return, whether coal or slaves. Preferably slaves, now that winter is nearly over and we don't have that big a need for coal anymore."

"Of course, my lord," Ustaimo agreed. "I'll make sure of it."

He gave a quick bow, and turned around to walk towards the door. While he wasn't able to say it openly to the Count, something didn't feel right here. He still couldn't put his finger on exactly what it was, but Zoricus offering to send guards to protect the wagons going to Tiranat for taxes was giving him a bad feeling. Even though he didn't have any proof of it, Ustaimo was fairly sure that the fat bastard was the one behind the demise of the previous baron of Tiranat as well as had a hand in looting all that tax gold of the poor barony - which didn't even have a wall surrounding the village for Goddess' sake! That's why he couldn't understand why Zoricus would offer to send better protection for tomorrow.

As he exited the door and started walking back towards the room which doubled as his workplace as well as his sleeping quarters, he couldn't stop thinking about it. He had no idea what was going to happen on this trip, and if he would even return alive from it, which is why he had to keep his eyes peeled and ears open for anything which didn't feel right. If it came to the worst, he knew that he should be able to count on the knight coming with him, since they only worked on the orders of the knight commander, and would never do any favours for the fat bastard - above board or otherwise. Zoricus' own guards, on the other hand, simply couldn't be trusted with anything.

As he reached the staircase, he gave a sigh. Maybe he was just thinking too much and seeing dangers when there were none. It was very much possible that Zoricus just wanted Cinran to keep standing by

helping to collect all its taxes, if only so the town would still be here for the day when the fat bastard got a chance to take over. That might mean that the fat baron really did want to help.

"Aah..." he groaned. His head hurt just thinking about it after working so much for the last two weeks. He didn't know what was true and what was not about this new guard arrangement. So he would just have to play it by ear and pray that the Goddess kept him alive. That was his best hope at the moment.

Reaching his room, he thought about how long it would take. Three days to reach Tiranat - two if they really pushed it - then a full day to check their revenue ledger to find out the correct amount of taxes, and around three more days to return to Cinran. Add another day or two, just in case Tiranat didn't have enough gold and he had to find an alternative way to recoup the taxes. Yeah, better to pack for a journey of at least a week. Glancing at the mostly empty room which barely held any belongings which he could call his own, he got to work, not looking forward to the upcoming bumpy carriage ride even a little. May the Goddess save his back from being broken on that bone-jarring road.

~ Kivamus ~

It had been a week since the return of the caravan from Kirnos, and he couldn't have been more glad to see all the progress in the village in the last week. He was walking on the narrow path made from gravel which connected the manor house to the gates and all the buildings in the manor, while the rest of the ground was way too muddy to walk easily. It was morning right now, although the sun had already risen above the Arakin Mountain Range in the east.

Earlier in the morning, he had been standing on top of the manor house and the whole surroundings of the village were easily visible from there, including the newly made watchtowers, making the village feel more secure than it ever had. The third watchtower had been completed in the southeast a couple of days ago by the old carpenter Taniok and his apprentices, while the fourth one in the northwest was already under construction. While their primary purpose for clearing the forest around them was to ensure a good line of sight as well as to clear enough land for farming, he was quite thankful that by now they had gathered so many Fedarus logs that they wouldn't have a shortage of them for a few years at the very least.

With the logs having been kept criss-crossed in various piles while leaving some free space between them, the initially felled logs had already started to become seasoned by now, which is the only reason they were strong enough to construct watchtowers from them. Another good thing was that all the

stockpiles of logs had already been transferred inside the walls, which meant any bandits wouldn't be able to simply put them on fire and make a makeshift pyre to distract the guards in case of a raid. Although all these stockpiles were taking a lot of space - not that they had much of a need of that empty space between the village and the walls at the moment - it had also made it much easier to take the logs to wherever they were needed for construction, while also freeing more space in the south for farming which was earlier occupied by these logs.

They had also managed to hire enough older men to keep an eye on the surroundings from those watchtowers in the daytime, while the female guards did all the watching in the night time. Once the fourth watchtower was also completed in a few more days, they would have a decent way to keep an eye all around the walls. He had also planned to make at least two more watchtowers in the middle of the northern and the southern walls - which were longer than the other two ones - so that the whole surrounding area outside the village could be covered by the watchmen.

Chapter 274 Preparations

Darora had been busy as well, and by yesterday he had handed over two new crossbows, bringing their total number to six. That meant now they had enough of them to keep a crossbow on each of the three watchtowers, while also having three extra ones for the watchtowers which hadn't been built yet. Now that all the seed drills had already been built, Darora had been ordered to keep working to make more crossbows, although the carpenter had told them that he was running out of parts, and would probably only be able to make one more of it from the parts he already had.

The reason for it was that Cedoron had to stop working on the crossbow parts for the moment since he had nearly run out of iron ingots, and the small stock he still had remaining had to be prioritised to repair any coal mining or woodcutting tools which got broken in the coming days. Now that all the snow had melted in the surroundings of the village, hopefully, a merchant would bring a good stock of iron ingots soon, although they would still have to think of a way to find money to buy them, since they certainly didn't have their coffers overflowing with gold these days.

Hudan had also managed to recruit the six guards which had been made reserve guards before the winter, and all of them had happily agreed to join up as new guards. Kerel, Hudan and even Tesyb were giving the new recruits some brutal training in the mornings and evenings, just to bring them up to speed as soon as possible. Yufim and Nurobo had managed to entice some more guards and even a few servants to get some archery training, and they were taking an hour in the mornings and evenings to train them personally, as long as they weren't on watch duty themselves. It won't really make those men excellent archers or anything approaching that, but now that they did have some extra warbows in the manor which were being used by the hunting groups until now, it would be good to have some people who at least had a basic idea of using a bow.

Three of the hunting groups had already returned from their longer trips yesterday, and two of them had brought a good haul of meat with them this time, giving the smokehouse workers a lot more to do, while the third group had also managed to find a couple more sheep and had reported that the snow had nearly melted even in those hills. That meant the losuvil vines should also start putting out new leaves any day now, so the hunters should be able to start bringing some leaves regularly after a couple of weeks. The fourth hunting group, which had been the last one out of the village, had also entered the manor in the morning with a good haul of meat. That meant while they didn't really have any extra meat to fill up their food stores, at least they shouldn't be short on it to feed the village for the coming week.

The guards who had been lightly injured on the Kirnos trip had healed well by now with the help of the losuvil powder, although it was nearly used up by now. On the other hand, the man who had his arm cut-off simply wouldn't be able to work as a swordsman anymore. However, that guard was someone they could implicitly trust, so after some discussion with Hudan and Feroy, Kivamus had decided not to let him go and had kept him on as a guard, although he would only be posted at the manor gates from now on.

Now that the village had a strong palisade wall surrounding it, the primary use of the manor gates was to prevent any unwanted entry by the local villagers, which meant that the disabled guard wouldn't have any problem in working here, unlike the guards being posted at the village gates who would have to fight against wild beasts like adzees or bears, and even bandits in case of a raid. This way, they could continue to post the stronger guards at the village gates, while also having a trustworthy man at the manor gates.

Kivamus had promised in the past that the family of any guard who became unable to work anymore due to a disability or lost his life while on duty would be taken care of, which is why that guard's young wife - who was the only one in his family - would be due to get half the regular wages of a guard without having to work for it in case the man couldn't earn any coin. But the guard hadn't been let go and would continue to earn his regular wages for now, so they wouldn't need to spend any coin for it in this case.

Still, that incident had already demotivated many guards, so when the news spread that there might be an imminent raid on the village - by the same bandit group which had burnt half the village the last time - it had dispirited the atmosphere inside the manor. Many of the guards here were those who had lost their houses and savings during that raid, so there had been an inherent fear in the mind of everyone since last week. What if the bandits did the same this time? What if they killed other guards or their families?

The rumours about an impending raid had also spread in the village, and even the labourers seemed tense these days. Every guard had also had to remain fully alert since that news, and after a week of the continuous tension of remaining ready for an attack at any time had begun to show in their strained

smiles and laughter which ended too early. After the first few days of remaining on continuous alert without much rest, they all had looked ready to snap.

However, the decision to hold back the hunting groups within the village for now, as well as to hire those six reserve guards had been a very good one, even though their coffers would pay dearly for it when the time came to pay everyone directly in coins.

With all the guards from Kirnos' trip already back, along with all of the four hunting groups which were mostly made up of manor guards also present here, it was easy to see that the village had come long way in the past few months from the time of the first raid here and had more than enough trained and ready guards to protect the village.

More importantly, it also meant that for the first time everyone was actually able to see and realize that unlike the time of the previous raid by Torhan, there was no shortage of guards anymore, nor were they the same frail men as in that time. Their training regime over the past few months had meant that every single guard had a fit and muscular body, even including Nurobo who had lost most of his belly fat by now. Unlike the time before he arrived here, when the guards only stayed huddled inside the manor most of the time, by now all of them had gotten some fighting experience, whether that was while accompanying a caravan to Cinran or Kirnos, or when fighting that adzee at the northern gate, or even while they went on hunting.

All the guards - including both men and women - walked more confidently now with full trust in their skills with a sword, a bow or a crossbow, and weren't afraid anymore of venturing outside the manor walls in the night. There were regular patrols by mounted guards inside the village walls - ready to bring the news of any attack to the manor - where even the off-duty guards had been ordered to remain ready to move out at a moment's notice. While some of them had initially protested about it, they had still followed the orders, since everyone realised the consequences of not being ready to defend their homes if bandits attacked. The burnt remains of houses near the market square were readily available proof of it.

However, in the past few days, as more and more guards had returned from the hunting trips and had stayed back instead of going for the another hunting trip, it had meant that for the very first time the manor had a surplus of guards to put on watch duty, and this had allowed Hudan to give full off-days to the guards so they could rest for the whole day, instead of working at least one shift every day which had been the norm until now.

It was a slow process but eventually that time to rest had taken the edge off from the fear of another bandit raid on the horizon, and slowly this extra rest time along with the visible evidence of the

presence of so many guards to the village had managed to lift the morale of everyone in the past few days. By now they looked ready to take on whatever was thrown at them, whether from wild beasts or bandits.

Kivamus looked to the left and saw a group of off-duty guards, both male and female, laughing together at a joke near the door of the servants' hall. Some of the guards and maids were talking together in another group near the well, while a few of them were bringing out some horses from the stables along with Hudan, which was the reason he was walking towards them.

There was no definite date on when an attack would happen, or if it would happen at all, so apart from holding the hunters back, they couldn't afford to stop any of the other work in the village. With the dam already complete and the reservoir approaching its full capacity by now, it was time to install the water wheel in its place. That was why he had decided to visit the dam today along with Darora, despite Hudan's warnings against leaving the manor, although the guard captain had eventually agreed to it, as long as they took enough guards with them. After all, there was no shortage of guards at the moment, and they could afford to take enough of them with them today, including some crossbow-women.

Chapter 275 The Reservoir

As Kivamus waited for the guard captain to bring the horses, he looked around at the ground which was muddy everywhere, now that the snow had fully melted, and was glad that there was at least some gravel put inside the manor connecting the manor house to the gates and the other buildings. Maybe he should see if the whole ground could be covered with gravel in the future.

There were only a small number of horses present in the stable today, since most of them - along with the small number of nodors they had - were being used diligently by Pinoto and the refugee farmers from Kirnos to plough the fields and get them ready for sowing. Another fifty woodcutters had continued felling trees in the south to maximise the sown area as much as they could.

The half a dozen paper makers working in the east of the manor had continued making new sheets and by now they had a small stack of paper ready to sell to the merchants to generate some more gold. With most of the labourers working to mine coal again, their coal barn already had a small stock of it ready to sell, although it still wasn't a big amount. More importantly, they didn't know how much of a demand of coal there would be at this point, since everyone in southern Reslinor would be prioritising buying food instead of coal, now that winter was nearly over. Of course, visiting merchants continued to buy coal even in the summer, with blacksmiths' forges and bloomeries in Cinran and Ulriga being their regular customers, but that demand would likely be lower this year with the food prices so high. Still, he would get a good idea about that when the first travelling merchant came from the north.

The new mushroom barn they had made in the south of the village was being managed well by Madam Helga, and she had recently replanted the first crop of it to cover a larger area of the barn using more sawdust and old logs as the base. Yesterday, she had mentioned that after the next growth cycle of the Rizako mushrooms in around a month, she would replant a new crop once again, and by that time she would be able to cover the full area of the barn. That meant any new mushrooms grown after that could finally be used to feed the villagers, which would add another source of food and protein in their diets.

Before long, he saw the guard captain walking towards him, with other guards bringing the last two horses available in the manor out from the stables. They couldn't afford to keep horses idle at this time to maximise the ploughed area before sowing, so they were using nearly all of them in the south. That meant it would be a much longer journey today sitting on a wagon.

Soon, the guards hitched the horses to a wagon, and two of them took places on the bench which made the driver's seat.

Hudan glanced at the wagon for a moment. "We are ready to leave, my lord. Darora will meet us on the way."

Kivamus nodded and climbed on the wagon bed first and sat on a folded piece of burlap cloth which was the only piece of cushioning they could afford for now. Hudan followed behind him and sat in front of him directly on the wagon bed, while two other swordsmen as well as two crossbow-women climbed on the wagon after them. That meant for the first time there were seven guards accompanying him, including the female guards.

Looking at everyone's serious expressions in light of the impending raid, coupled with the fact that he was sitting on a wagon instead of riding a horse as usual, for a moment he felt like he was going to a distant medieval war along with some battle hardened soldiers instead of just going to visit the nearby dam, before he remembered that most of the people in this world - including his guards - travelled exactly like this when they went on trading journeys to Kirnos or Cinran. They simply didn't have enough horses for everyone to ride on them, after all.

"Let's go!" he ordered, and the wagon lurched into motion

Kivamus was standing on top of the dam, looking at the vast amount of water gathered in the upstream reservoir, which was nearly two-thirds full at the time. The weather was still a little chilly, but with the sun up in the sky, it didn't really feel cold. The sound of water falling through the small gap in the dam near the eastern bank was also giving a musical background to this serene natural scene.

Quite a few trout-like fish were easily visible here as well, which were called Sorjun fish by the locals, many of which were already using the fish ladder on the eastern side of the dam to travel downstream from the reservoir to the stream going further. From what he had gathered from the locals, these fish went upstream to lay eggs before the winter, while every spring those of them which had grown big enough in the past year or two swam downstream. Such a newly created huge water body like the reservoir would certainly cause some changes in their habitats, but getting availability of more water would only help them to breed more. It would likely take at least a few months before enough fish started living in this reservoir for them to begin fishing regularly, but they were certainly on the right track.

Soon, he saw Darora walking towards him.

"I just checked the measurements again, and the foundations for the waterwheel were built correctly," the carpenter reported. "The foreman Yeden did well here although I don't see him here today."

"He is supervising cutting of trees in the south of the village these days, now that Pinoto is busy overseeing the ploughing of the new fields," Kivamus replied. "Yeden even managed to cover all the sides of the reservoir with clay in time, but right now we need him in the south to motivate the workers to clear as much of the forest as they can before the sowing is done." He gazed at the wooden foundation by leaning towards the downstream side of the dam. "What do you think about this?"

Darora shrugged. "I have never seen a water wheel working in combination with a dam, but what you have mentioned sounds simple enough since we already have the water wheel parts. I should be able to install it here by the evening, I think. The tricky part is connecting the log-axle to it. We are using a sturdy core of a log cut from a Fedarus trunk for it, and fedarus wood is well known to be used to make ships in the capital, so I know it wouldn't rot with water either. But we will have to use another ball bearing from the wagon axle which we had liberated from the limestone quarry to give support to the log-axle on the side of the bank."

"I am just glad we didn't need to buy new bearings for this," Kivamus agreed, feeling happy that at least that expense was spared. "The supporting frame for the axle was already built on the bank by Yeden's workers, so you will just have to be careful while fixing the axle on both sides, and make sure it can

rotate freely with the motion of the water wheel. We can't risk any problems after the water starts flowing from the sluice gates."

"I'll double check it myself," Darora nodded. "Still, I am thankful that you decided to postpone making the gears for the axle on the bank for later. Even after I saw your blueprint for that, it still looks complex enough that I'll need more than a few tries to get it right."

Kivamus shrugged. "Making the gears will need a good amount of iron-cladding, and it'll only be useful when we are able to make the trip hammer - which will also need iron-cladding - as well as a new sawmill here, but we can't build any of that until we buy a lot more iron for Cedoron to forge the required parts, which will take at least week after the merchants arrive with new ingots. For now, just make sure that the axle rotates freely. If that is done without any problems, installing the gears on the axle can be done at any point in the future, without a deadline of the reservoir getting full in a couple of days."

Once the carpenter gave a nod in understanding, Kivamus continued, "Once you've made sure that everything works well here, in the near future you will have to build another water wheel at the closest point of the stream to the village, which should be somewhere downstream of here, and that will be used to lift the water from this stream to a new canal which will take the water to the farms, although that is only needed after we have dug that canal - which will take a while. In the future, we will also install another water wheel under the second sluice gate as well, but that will only be useful once we are using the first one at full capacity, which will again take some time. For now, just make sure to install the first water wheel and the axle by evening, then return to making the next crossbow from tomorrow."

Darora nodded. "As you wish, milord. I think two or three more days should be enough to finish the next crossbow, but after that I won't have enough parts to make more of them."

"That's okay," Kivamus said. "The fields in the south should be ready to start sowing by then, so after that you will be needed there anyway to make sure any problems in the seed drills are taken care of immediately."

"I'll get to work then," Darora said before walking off to start installing the water wheel in front of the first sluice gate - this time permanently - instead of keeping it modular to shift to another mineshaft like they were doing until now.

Kivamus glanced once more at the surroundings, and saw no snow in sight, apart from at the peaks of the Arakin mountains in the east. The guards were waiting on the western bank of the river, keeping an

eye around the place, while Hudan was the only one who had accompanied him to the top of the dam. A few workers were standing on the eastern bank of the river to patch up the small gap in the dam as the water level kept rising, while the carpenter and his apprentice had already reached the location where they had to install the waterwheel.

"Let's return now," Kivamus ordered, and the guard captain started walking along with him, although he had been looking a little fidgety for a while.

"What is it?" Kivamus asked curiously, having never seen the guard captain hesitate in something before, after making sure that nobody else was in earshot.

Hudan glanced at the guards once, before shaking his head. "It's... it's nothing, milord."

Kivamus looked around and noticed the relaxed posture of the other guards. It didn't seem like they were in any danger, but he was still getting worried about it. "Come on, out with it. Whatever it is, we'll find a solution."

Chapter 276 Two Weeks

Hudan glanced at the surroundings for a moment, before he stopped walking.

Kivamus came to a stop as well and waited for the muscular man to gather courage, which was a rare sight in itself.

The guard captain looked around them once again, but there was nobody nearby to hear anything, especially with the constant sound of water falling through that small gap in the dam. Eventually, the huge man took a deep breath and looked at him. "It's... It's just something I've been hearing the guards talking about during their meal times."

Kivamus nodded encouragingly. "What is it?"

"It's... it's about payment. I mean, their wages. Now that winter is basically over, some of them were wondering when they will start getting coins as their wages instead of the grain and coal which you provide to them." Hudan hesitated for a moment. "A couple of them were even grumbling that maybe you had lied to them about it, and didn't ever plan to pay them in coins."

As Kivamus' eyebrows rose in surprise on hearing that, Hudan quickly continued, "I mean, I know you have no plans of doing anything like that. I also understand that you have to save every copper right now to pay the tax collector, so I know why you haven't started it yet. But when some of them asked me about when they will get to see real coins in their hands, I just didn't have any answer for them." He shrugged. "It's just that... with everyone worried about a raid these days, some of them were wondering that after working for the whole winter as a guard for you, whether they would ever get to see a single copper in their hands from this job, in case they are killed by a bandit in a raid. In tense times like now, usually fighting men like us would go and drown our fears in the alehouse which would have taken the edge off their complaints, but the guards can't do that without any coin in their hands, not that I would even allow anyone to drink when we have to worry about that raid."

Kivamus exhaled loudly. "Yeah... I guess I should have expected some complaints coming about it by now, but like you said, we simply can't do it until we have managed to pay the taxes and the merchants have started coming regularly."

Hudan glanced at the guards once again, who seemed to be busy whispering to each other on the western bank. "What should I tell them?"

Kivamus thought about it for a moment. It was true that they were really short on gold these days, and couldn't really afford any expenses they could do without, but it was also true that the whole safety of the village depended on the guards doing their best and their morale being high instead of thinking about desertion or mutiny. That was a real possibility if he kept postponing giving them their long overdue wages. The same went for the servants, grooms and maids doing their best in their tasks, not to mention all the labourers of the village working without any pay for months.

Not looking forward to the upcoming conversation with Duvas about their finances, he began, "Give me a couple of weeks. We should have managed to deal with the tax collector by then, and the merchants should also start coming regularly by that time. We should be able to do something about paying wages by then."

Hudan smiled. "I'll tell them they can expect at least some payment in fifteen to twenty days, just so you don't have to postpone it again in case there are any problems. As long as the guards have a definite date to look forward to, they wouldn't complain about it. Not too much anyway."

"That's probably even better. We need everyone's morale to be high to deal with an attack by Torhan." Glancing at the surroundings once again, and wishing he would be able to show his newfound sister Astela this scene of pristine natural beauty in the future, he looked back at the guard captain. "Let's go now. It's only the afternoon, but I need to get back and talk with Duvas about some things."

"As you wish, milord," Hudan nodded and they started walking again towards the western bank.

~ Hyola ~

Hyola was sitting on top of the watchtower in the southeast of the village, gazing at the dark surroundings ahead of her. It was a half moon night, with the moon hanging somewhere directly upwards in the sky. With the snow season over, the skies were clear these days, which meant there was nothing to stop the light of the moon coming down, but she still wished it was brighter here.

Looking at the location of the moon, she estimated that it must be approaching midnight by now, which meant she still had more than half of her watch duty still remaining. She sighed. What she really wanted was to be asleep on the upper floor of the servants hall with other female guards at this time, since going out to the eastern stream and that newly built dam along with Lord Kivamus earlier in the day meant that she was feeling the tiredness in her bones by now. Still, it wasn't like she was going to complain about it. Being chosen as one of the personal protectors of the silver-haired baron - even for a single day - was a privilege, and it was the first time she had ever sat on the same wagon bed with a noble. Hah! She imagined what her past self living at the limestone quarry would think if she saw how far she had come from the hungry and fearful person she used to be there.

She thought about the baron of the village. Lord Kivamus had been... different. She had seen him from afar and he had even talked with him once in the past, but sitting on a wagon for an hour-long journey along with him and the other guards meant that they got a lot more chance to interact with him today. She had expected him to stay broody and complain that he had to sit on the same wagon as lowly guards, but he hadn't spoken about that at all. He had spent most of the time watching their surroundings, with who knows what going on in his head, while the rest of the time he had been talking to the guards, asking if they needed anything, and looking for their opinions on how to improve the village's defences.

She had immediately suggested that if guards were posted in pairs on top of the watchtowers, with both of them having crossbows, it would make it much easier to stay awake in the night and to deal better with any attack. He had agreed to it, but right now they simply didn't have enough guards for that, especially since three more watchtowers would be built in the coming weeks, and then it would be difficult just to man them with a single guard for all three shifts. Still, she had been happy to see that her opinion was valued by the lord of their village.

The dam had been a surprise as well. She had never seen something that big which had been made by humans, nor had she expected to see such a large amount of water in one place, apart from the ocean in the west, of course. It had immediately made her want to swim in that reservoir for some reason, not that she even knew how to swim.

Coming back to the present, she looked ahead of her from the watchtower platform, and wished there was a way to see in the dark, which would make it easier to spot any approaching wild beasts, or even any bandits. Hah! Like she was an owl!

Feeling a sudden pang of loneliness, she turned around and looked at the village, which was nearly as dark as the surrounding forest in the light of the half moon, with only a few flickering fires burning in braziers in some places to give light.

Turning around to look at the forests once again, she wished Calubo was here. She grumbled thinking about that idiot, wishing he would man up one of these days. He still hadn't popped the question, dammit! If anything, he seemed to be avoiding her these days. It couldn't be that he had found someone else, had he?

Nah... that wasn't very likely. He knew very well that if he even thought of cheating on her, she would stab him with his own dagger. No, it couldn't be that. Maybe he was just too scared to ask her to marry him? Aargh... she growled. It wasn't like she could ask him the question herself, damn it! She was a woman and it had to be him who asked her! That's how it worked!

Grumbling about scaredy-cat guards, Hyola turned her gaze to the right, and what she saw there sent a sudden chill down her spine. Immediately, she stood up with her loaded crossbow in her hands, and walked closer to the outer parapet to check if she had imagined it or if there really were some people hiding in the forests there. She squinted in that direction for a moment, feeling glad that there was no fire burning up here to silhouette her and make her an easy target for any archers. She didn't have to wait long before she saw the glint of metal reflecting in the moonlight.

That had to be a bandit! And there were many of them out there. Her heart started beating faster expecting a raid of the village, and she quickly looked down to confirm that the crossbow was loaded.

Wishing she had a horn right up here as well, but understanding why it couldn't be so, since unless there were two guards on the watchtowers, Kerel didn't want to risk the lone guard being taken out by an

archer and not being able to blow the horn. That's why the horn was always kept with the night guards who sat safely inside the gates, and couldn't be taken out by a single arrow. She still thought it was a foolish order. In this case they should keep a horn in both places! Leaving the thought of whether they even had enough horns for that, she focused on the present and saw some more movement towards those trees under the moonlight.

Immediately, she walked to the other side of the watchtower platform, and leaning over the parapet, gave a quick whistle in a low voice, not wanting to speak any more than she had to, so she wouldn't become a target of the approaching bandits. Without wasting a moment, the guard sitting on duty just inside the barred south-eastern gates jumped from his chair and looked at her. She made a certain gesture from her hands - which the guard captain had taught everyone to describe there was danger nearby in case they couldn't speak openly - and then jerked her thumbs towards the direction where she had seen the reflections.

The guard nodded, and immediately picked up the horn which was kept hanging right next to the gates, and blew loudly on it. Knowing she barely had a moment before the bandits realised they had been spotted, she quickly walked to the other side of the tower platform and squatted down, with only her head and her crossbow visible above the parapet. Of course, the bandits would have heard that horn as well, but by now she was well prepared for arrows coming towards her, while the village had also been alerted. Now she just had to hope that help came fast.

Chapter 277 Raid

Hyola knew that the other two watchtowers had a crossbow-woman on each of them, but by a stroke of bad luck, both of their good archers - Yufim and Nurobo - had been on duty during the day, which meant none of them would be available immediately.

She peered over the parapets, and saw a small group of bandits rushing towards the walls. Hmm... Forget about the archers. She was good enough to kill these bastards herself with the crossbow by her side!

As she brought up the crossbow to target the leading one, she counted the bandits as her mind worked in overdrive. Huh... That was just half a dozen bandits in total. Wasn't Torhan's group supposed to be much bigger than this? More importantly, was that bastard Nokozal with them? She hoped he was, since he wouldn't be leaving alive again. She would make sure of it.

Wait, what if these low numbers were because they were attacking the village from the other sides as well? How had they even reached Tiranat that fast! They weren't supposed to be here for at least another week!

Putting those questions for later, she found her target in a tall man who was leading the bandit group, and gently squeezed the trigger, letting the crossbow bolt fly at speeds unimaginable for humans to dodge. Within a moment, she pumped her fist in victory as the bolt found its target in the bandit's chest and the man stumbled backward with a cry of pain before falling down. Yay for her! Just like another day at the shooting range for target practice!

She quickly picked up the goat's foot lever to start loading the crossbow once again, while keeping an eye on the bandits, who had surrounded the dead man in surprise before they started looking all around them warily. They must certainly have seen that there was a watchtower inside the walls, but it seemed like they hadn't yet realised that the bolt had come from up here. Good for her. Knowing that the surprise wouldn't last long, she finished loading her crossbow quickly and putting a broadhead bolt in its groove this time, she brought another man in the crossbow sights.

By now, some of them were looking directly towards the top of the watchtower, probably having guessed how their partner had died, but they were still bunched together. Perfect! Without wasting a moment, she quickly shot the bolt which easily hit another bandit, going by a sudden shriek of pain coming from the group.

Awesome! Hyola two, bandits zero! She glanced at the wonderful object in her hands and grinned in triumph. She loved her crossbow!

As the man stumbled backwards with the force of the broadhead bolt, there was some muffled shouting from the other bandits, before they immediately ran some distance away from the dead man. Soon, one of them pointed directly at the watchtower while yelling something, while another of them seemed to be gesturing at the forests for some reason.

She ducked below the parapets as she began loading the crossbow again, feeling glad that these bandits hadn't brought an archer with them here. However, in the very same moment when she was thinking about it, an arrow struck the outer parapet of the watchtower with a loud thwack. Shit! There was an archer out there!

She quickly scurried to the far side of the platform, her heart beating faster than ever. If the arrow had hit her, she would have already died! Taking a moment to slow down her breathing, she glanced around her for the offending arrow. While it wasn't bright enough to be completely sure, she still didn't see any arrowhead poking inside the parapets at a quick glance.

She grinned. Way to go, Taniok! It seemed that the old carpenter had made the double-walled parapets thick enough that they couldn't be breached by an arrow! Perfect!

She quickly finished loading her crossbow again, but this time she knew that the archer would be waiting for her. So, she also waited for an opportunity, while hearing the sounds of bandits rushing towards the gates, before they started ramming the gates with their shoulders. Hah! Those idiots. Those gates were sturdy enough that even charging warhorses wouldn't be able to break them!

Taking another deep breath to calm down her racing heart, she slowly crawled to the far edge of the platform again. Keeping her head below the platform, she gently raised the loaded crossbow in a single arm, and pointed it towards the general direction of the bandits at the gate, going only by her gut feelings. She knew it was very unlikely that she would hit any of them this time, but she didn't want to risk her head being split open by an arrow, and maybe she would get lucky. She looked at the quiver of bolts kept in the corner. It wasn't like she had to worry about running out of bolts any time soon.

She squeezed the trigger and immediately felt the force of the bolt flying away, but with no shouts of pain coming, it seemed only struck the ground this time. However, the bolt must have passed close enough to the bandits, since the ramming of the gates seemed to have stopped abruptly. That meant she was successful in what she wanted - which was to delay them and keep them worrying about a bolt killing them from above.

As she began to load her crossbow once again, she heard some raised voices coming from the north and gave a deep exhale in relief. Reinforcements had arrived.

~ Tesyb ~

~ A few moments ago ~

Just a short while ago, Tesyb had been sitting relaxed near the gates of the manor while talking with a couple of guards there. His watch shift had already ended a few hours ago, and truthfully he should have been asleep at this time, but as much as he had tried, sleep still wasn't coming. Not with so many guards present in the manor - which had the floor of the servants hall feeling way too overcrowded these days -

not to mention they had been ordered to sleep in their leather armors over their usual tunics with their swords and shields kept by their sides.

Most of the other guards had also been just sitting with their backs to the walls and talking with others instead of sleeping. Only a few lucky ones, who had reached the servants' hall early in the evening and claimed a full straw mattress to their names, were the only ones to have enough space to be able to sleep in this atmosphere.

After turning and tossing for nearly an hour, he had decided to take a walk to clear his mind. He had reached the manor gates where he was talking with the gate guards, when he heard the sound of a horn blowing from the southeast. His heart thudding heavily in his chest, he immediately ran towards the servants hall, and shouted loudly to wake everyone up. However, he didn't have to repeat his warning since half of them were already awake and tying their scabbards to their waists, while the rest of them only blinked their eyes for a few moments before they realised what was happening and began doing the same.

Once it looked like everyone was awake, he sent a servant to the manor house to wake up their superiors there. Hudan should be sleeping there at this time after checking each guard post one after the other from morning to night, while who knew where the ex-mercenary Feroy was. That man was like a ghost, and seemed to be awake at all hours and appeared whenever or wherever there was trouble brewing. Kerel was also away on duty somewhere tonight, so Tesyb knew that he had to take the lead here for now.

It was the middle of night, so deciding that there was no point in waiting to bring horses from the stables, he quickly gathered nearly half a dozen men behind him who were ready to go, and started running towards the southeast, since that's where the horn had sounded from. When the other guards claimed that they also wanted to come, he told them to wait for orders from their superiors, in case they needed to be sent to another side of the village.

Reaching the manor gates, he passed the alert guards and turning left, they kept running until they reached the southeastern gates of the village wall. The two guards already on duty here seemed to be getting more and more worried at every new thump sounding from the gates while holding their naked swords in that direction, their shields held protectively in front of them. Hearing their footsteps, the gate guards turned around and their faces broke out in relief, but Tesyb didn't want to wait too long.

"What's the condition here?" he shouted.

Before the gate guards could open their mouths, he saw Hyola leaning over from the parapet on the watchtower. Right... He had forgotten about the crossbow-women on duty up there. Hah! The bandits must have gotten a nasty surprise already!

Hyola pointed towards the gate, leaning over the inner parapet. "Six swordsmen attacked. Already killed two. Four ramming the gates now. At least one archer out there."

Tesyb nodded. "Stay away from the outer side, but support us if you can." Not waiting for a reply, he looked around himself and gave a savage grin. There were eight of them, and just four bandits outside the gate. It was going to be fun!

"We have a two-to-one advantage now!" He yelled with a grin, with the other guards giving similar grins in return. "Come on! Let's put these bastards in the ground for daring to attack us!"

"For Lord Kivamus!" The guards roared back, before two of them jogged to the gates to remove the thick wooden beam barring the gates, while the six of them stood ready just inside, taking a reverse wedge formation on his command. Hudan had been teaching them some interesting formations in the last few days, and this was one of them which he found suited this condition best.

The moment the wooden beam had been lifted from its hook, there was another loud thump on the gate from the outside. But this time, the gates easily moved inwards instead of staying in their place, which caused the bandits to stumble inside from surprise.

Not wasting a moment, Tesyb jabbed his sword into the chest of the leading bandit, while the other guards slashed the others from the sides. The two guards who had opened the gates moved behind the bandits with their swords and shields, removing any path for the attackers to run away.

The leading bandit wasn't a very big guy, but he was quick, and rolled to the side barely avoiding his sword. However, with their advantage in numbers, it meant there were two guards to attack every bandit. Immediately, another guard thrust his sword downwards towards the bandit, who was too late in realising that he was being double teamed. He barely had any time to move from the surprise attack, but somehow he still managed to avoid the sword from thrusting into his chest, while getting a nasty gash in his arm in return. Quickly jumping to his feet, the bandit was trying to look at both of his opponents at the same time, with Tesyb and the other guard standing on opposite sides of the bandit.

With the ringing sound of metal striking metal and the loud thwacks of swords hitting wooden shields in the background, Tesyb waited for another opportunity, and found it before too long. As the bandit turned his head around to look at the other guard in the light of a brazier burning nearby, there was a loud cry of pain from somewhere nearby, which distracted the bandit, who turned his head to look towards the new sound.

Tesyb didn't waste a moment and quickly slashed his sword with all his power, the blade hitting the bandit's side and making a spurt of blood flow outwards from the new wound on the side of the man's stomach. The bandit screamed in pain, one of his hands going down to clutch his stomach, but it seemed like it wasn't a fatal wound just yet. The man glared at Tesyb and yelled loudly with rage, before he angrily jabbed his sword towards him.

Tesyb jumped back to avoid it while putting his shield in front of him just in case, but grinned as he saw the other guard looking ready for an opportunity just like this. The guard immediately rammed his sword into the chest of the bandit from behind, the point of his blade exiting out on the other side.

The bandit howled in pain and thrashed around, with his sword swinging wildly in front of him, but it took only a few moments before he lost all his strength and slumped to the ground, his body slipping away from the sword of the other guard.

Chapter 278 Hide and Seek

Tesyb quickly looked around and saw that one more bandit was already dead, while the last two were surrounded by six guards at the moment. He quickly moved to join the melee, gesturing to his partnered guard to do the same.

The remaining two bandits looked around in fear, while trying to stay alive despite being outnumbered four to one by now.

"Fall back!" One of the bandits shouted, probably realising how futile fighting against eight guards was, just before he got a sudden slash to his thigh from one of the guards, making him stumble to the ground. Another guard saw the opportunity and jabbed his sword into the bandit's heart, ending his life immediately. The last bandit looked around for a moment, before throwing his sword to the ground.

"I yield! I give up!" He shouted while falling to his knees and raising both his shaking hands high above him. "Please! Spare my life!"

One of the guards still went to finish him off, but Tesyb called out, "Stop! Don't kill him yet."

"But he tried to kill us!" The guard retorted in anger.

"It's up to the guard captain to decide what to do with him. Tie him up for now," Tesyb ordered, his eyes looking out of the gates, just in case there were more bandits out there.

As two of the guards dragged the bandit away towards a pillar of the watchtower and started tying him there, Tesyb looked up at the platform of the watchtower. "Hyola! You fine up there?"

The redhead poked her face out over the parapet. "I'm good for now, but there's still an archer out there. I can't even climb down until you take him out."

Tesyb nodded as he walked towards the gates, noticing that the bandit had already been tied up securely to one of the watchtower pillars. "Five of you, follow me. The remaining two stay here and bar the gates until we return."

Immediately, five of the guards started jogging behind him with their swords in their hands and shields in front of them as he moved out of the gates doing the same.

Getting outside, Tesyb raised his sword hand up to make the others stop behind him, and looked around the dark cleared land in front of him, which stretched farther than his eyes could track towards the south. Seeing two bodies fallen not far from him, he gestured to everyone to follow behind him, just in case any of them were alive. Reaching there, he saw that the first man had a bolt sticking out of his chest, his body sprawled on the ground. With four of the guards covering the group with their shields in case an arrow was shot towards them, and another guard pointing his sword to the fallen man's neck, just in case, Tesyb bent down and checked the bandit's pulse. Not breathing.

"He's dead."

He stood up and jogged to the other body, but this time he didn't even have to check. There was a large gaping wound on the chest of the man, a bolt sticking out of it. Huh... Must be the work of a broadhead bolt. Grimacing at the sight, he turned around and looked at their surroundings.

Their current location was near the south-east of the village, so it wasn't likely that the archer had gone to hide in the forests towards the south-west. That meant he had to be hiding somewhere in the distant treeline in the south east.

He pointed directly in that direction. "The archer should be there. Follow me!"

As he started running towards the forest, he realised that it probably wasn't a great idea to enter the forest to search a single man in this darkness. Still, this wasn't like the ambush location near Kirnos, where there could be more bandits, bears or even adzees hiding there. This was home territory for them, and the guards going on their mounted patrols of the village surroundings in the evening had confirmed that no dangerous wild beasts were sighted today. That meant the only thing they had to fear was more bandits, but if there were more swordsmen out here, they would have already attacked the gate with the others. That meant it was very likely that the archer was alone. Good for them.

He grinned as he approached the tree line, remembering a kind of deadly hide and seek game which Nokozal's lone archer had played with him in the very first raid on the village in the north-western forests. But it was different now. Today, he wasn't the green recruit of that time, and all the guards with him were far better trained by now. He knew that none of them would freeze in case they found a boar or even a bear in front of them, like it had happened with some of them on the very first journey to Cinran before the winter. He had no doubt that he could trust every single guard to watch his back in case they met some bigger danger, and he was more than confident that with six armed and trained men here they could take out nearly anything.

As he and the other guards entered the treeline, they slowed down and walked with their shields held high in front of them, anticipating an arrow coming towards them at any moment. While the moon wasn't giving that much light, the trees had barely started to get new leaves again, so there wasn't any canopy above them to stop the light. This was also familiar ground to him, since Feroy sometimes brought the guards to train them in the forested hills in the east, so they would have practice defending and attacking in a different terrain as well. Only a week ago they had trained in this very region of the forest. It wasn't like he remembered the exact landscape, but he knew that there was a small hill not far away from them. That had to be where the archer had run off to, so he would have a height advantage over any pursuers, since he hadn't even tried to attack the guards by now.

He slowed down further as they approached the hill. "Stay alert. He should be up ahead."

Not waiting for any reply, he kept moving further, when he suddenly noticed some movement behind a tree only a short distance away from them.

"There!" He whispered. Holding his sword arm up to stop the others behind him, he rotated the arm in a full circle once, then stood facing towards that same tree with his shield held in front of him. The others immediately took his lead and took a defensive circular formation, their shields held outward, and their backs to each other.

Confident that they were safe from any surprise attack from another side whether by bandits or a wild beast, he spoke up, "Step!" and took a single step towards the hill, with every other guard following behind him while maintaining the circular shield wall. "Once more. Step!"

Others followed behind him again but he was surprised by the sound of a bird coming from somewhere ahead of him. Huh... That bird shouldn't be making any sound at this time. The moment he was thinking that, there were too similar short whistles, followed by another long whistle.

"Wait!" That was the signal Feroy had taught them to identify friendlies in case they couldn't see each other.

He returned the answering whistle which had been taught to them, hoping - but not really believing that there was another guard out here. There should only be the bandit archer here! It couldn't be that one of the guards was helping the bandits, right? Either way, he couldn't rest easy just yet. "Hold the formation!" He ordered the others, before squinting towards the hill.

"Who's there?" He shouted loudly, his shield held ready in front of him, and his sword poking slightly outwards from the side of the shield.

There was a rustling sound ahead of them, before he saw someone slowly walking towards them with his hands held high. His heart beating loudly, he tensed his considerable muscles and got ready to attack, when the man called out, "It's me, Feroy. Calm down you all!"

Tesyb took a breath of relief, but waited for the man to come closer, and didn't give the order to break the defensive formation to the guards, just in case it was a trap of some kind. However, the man kept walking slowly towards them and before long he was close enough for him to confirm that it was indeed the ex-mercenary, who also had a warbow and a quiver slung around his shoulder.

"What the heck are you doing here?" Tesyb asked in surprise, his heart only slowing down now.

Feroy gave an approving nod seeing that the guards were still holding their formation. "There are no other bandits here. Come on! Let's jog to the village. They might need help."

Tesyb nodded, and the other guards started following behind the ex-mercenary who had already started running slowly.

"I was out to take a walk in the forests," Feroy explained as they kept jogging. "When I heard the horn being blown, I stayed out here just in case there were any stragglers coming back, and that's how I found the archer, who is biting the dust now. We'll send someone here tomorrow to take care of the body."

Tesyb nodded, glad that the archer was taken care of. "But why were you taking a walk out here anyway? How did you even know that bandits were going to attack tonight for you to wait for the archer here?"

The ex-mercenary snorted. "How the hell would I know that! I've been out here every night, waiting for the day when Torhan's group attacks us. That's a damned big group, and they might have the numbers to hold a full siege around the village if Baron of Kirnos provides more men to them, so any intel which I can bring from out here would help us a lot in dealing with that raid."

Tesyb gave a nod as he kept running, wondering if this man really was a ghost or something. How did he even have the stamina to stay awake all night? He looked to the man jogging on his side as they approached the gates. "But... but what if there were more men out here? They could have easily killed you!"

Feroy laughed loudly. "I'll be damned if some bandits can find me in the middle of a forest! I've lived in the wilds for more than a decade, ya know? I'll deserve to be killed by them on the very day when I'm spotted in a forest."

Tesyb just shook his head at the insane man, as one of the guards called out for the gates to be opened.

Before long, they were barring the gates from the inside once again, after dragging the bodies of the dead bandits outside the gates for now after stripping them of anything useful. Feroy immediately asked for a full report of what had happened here, and Tesyb recounted everything, making sure to tell Hyola's

contribution of killing two bandits before they even reached the gates, as well as the bandit they had tied up nearby, who was still looking at them in fear, his mouth bound up as well.

Feroy nodded. "Well done, everyone! Lord Kivamus will be proud of you all."

The guards beamed at the praise before the ex-mercenary pointed at the watchtower platform. "Two more of you climb up there for tonight so there are more eyes on the tower to keep a watch around us. The rest of you stay alert in case there is another attack, although I think it will be quiet for tonight, since I don't think this was Torhan's group."

Feroy handed over the warbow and the quiver he had taken from the bandit archer to one of the guards. "Take it with you to the top of the watchtower for now." Gazing at the tied up bandit for a moment, he added, "I'm going to the baron's manor to give the report to Lord Kivamus. I'll send someone to bring this bandit for interrogation later on."

With that, Feroy started jogging towards the north, while the rest of the guards settled in for a long night as they sat with their backs on the pillars of the watchtower. Tesyb ordered two of the men to climb up to the platform with the warbow - one of whom had some practice with a bow - while also sending a mug of water to Hyola from the barrel full of water kept nearby. Once everything was taken care of, Tesyb took his place next to a pillar as well, feeling glad that everything had gone well.

To be fair, he realized that by now, the village was simply not the same place as it was before the arrival of Lord Kivamus. Now they had a strong palisade wall around the village, as well as watchtowers to provide early warning. There were also more than enough trained guards now, and with new crossbows being provided to the guards every week by the carpenter Darora, he was confident they could take on anything! This was a completely new feeling after living in fear of bandits and wild beasts attacking his home in the night for most of his life, but he liked this confident feeling! A lot!

Chapter 279 Reports

~ Kivamus ~

Kivamus had been pacing in the manor hall worriedly for the last hour, having woken up from sleep after hearing the sound of the horn. With Torhan's group of bandits having raided Tiranat much sooner than they expected, they had barely finished any preparations for it. The fourth watchtower in the northwest wasn't even built yet. At least with all the hunting groups back in the village, there would be no shortage of guards this time.

These bandits had also attacked some time after midnight, likely to make it difficult to spot them, but at least that was something the guards were already expecting. It also made protecting the villagers easier, since at this time everyone was already inside the walls. If the bandits had attacked in the day, most of the village people would have been out of the walls working one place or the other, which might have been more difficult to manage.

This was also the very first time they would be dealing with a raid after the construction of the three watch towers, and hopefully it would give them some good advantage in the defence of the village with the crossbow-women sitting ready up there. Still, it would have been much better if there was some way to make it easier for them to spot any approaching bandits instead of just relying on moonlight. Like electric power. He wished they had the capability to install some kind of electrical floodlights on the watchtowers around the village. Just imagine how surprising that would feel to any bandits! He sighed. It was only wishful thinking at the moment. They were a long way away from having the capability to generate electricity or manufacture light bulbs.

Nearby in the manor hall, Duvas had made himself busy checking all the numbers in the revenue and tax ledger once again, saying that he wanted to take his mind away from the raid, while Gorsazo seemed to have gone to talk with Madam Helga in the kitchen as she prepared some kind of midnight snack, with Clarisa and Lucem helping her, so the kids wouldn't have to worry about the raid. Syryne was sitting near the long table as well, since nobody could possibly be relaxed enough to sleep at this time.

He hoped he would get some report of what was happening soon, when the outer door opened and the ex-mercenary walked inside.

"Feroy!" He exclaimed. "How's it going? Why are you back here already when there are dozens of bandits out there? Where's Hudan?"

The ex-mercenary pointed towards the north. "He has gone to support the guards at the northern gate, but I've brought both good news and bad news with me."

"Out with it! Don't make me wait!"

"We were able to kill all the attacking bandits in the southeast, and even took one of them captive. We also haven't heard any horns from the other directions, so there can't be too many bandits out there, although Hudan and the others will be able to take care of them easily now that we are alert. The village should be safe enough for tonight. That's the good news," Feroy added with a wince. "As for the bad

news, I'll interrogate the bandit properly after giving the full report to you, but I'm fairly sure that these bandits have nothing to do with Torhan."

"Wait, what?" Duvas asked. "I thought it was Torhan's men who had managed to reach here quickly."

The ex-mercenary shook his head. "For better or for worse, they haven't. Nokozal must not have found the clay mine compound that easily."

"What if he already met Torhan," Sryne asked, "but they decided not to attack us? We've managed to repel Nokozal's men twice already!"

"That's not very likely. Someone like Torhan with noble blood in him - bastard or otherwise - isn't someone who'll let his men be killed without taking revenge or he'll risk losing his standing amongst his own men." Feroy continued, "I'm quite sure that a raid is still coming, and we won't be able to rest easy until we have dealt with that bastard."

Kivamus sighed as he took a seat. "Just how many bandit groups are there in these forests..."

"More than you'd care to count," Feroy replied with a shrug. "They might not be as big or well organised as Torhan's group, but with a lot of people having lost their livelihood in the past year or two, many of them have resorted to banditry, and we must seem like the easiest target to them in this region of southern Reslinor. At least until they find out about the newly constructed walls and the watch towers."

"We really will have to continue increasing our guard force as we get more immigrants in the future," Kivamus said, "if we want to keep sending hunters out while maintaining the village's protection. It may be fine to keep all the guards here for now, but we really can't go too long without them hunting and bringing meat to supplement our diets."

The outer door opened once again and this time it was the guard captain who walked inside, looking no worse for wear.

"We found eight men lurking in the forest outside the gates in the north-east after the female guard on the watchtower reported seeing some moonlight reflecting from something there," Hudan reported without being prompted. "So I sent enough guards mounted on horses up there. Two of the bandits died

in the skirmish before the others gave up their swords. The guards are bringing them here for now. Still, it was easy enough to find them since everyone was already alert after the horn was blown in the southeast, although I don't understand how Torhan reached here so fast."

"It wasn't him," Kivamus told him with a grimace. "These were some other bandits, and Torhan must still be coming."

Hudan exhaled before smirking. "Don't worry, my lord. We'll show him what happens to anyone who dares to attack us." He looked at Feroy. "How did it go in the southeast? You standing here means the bandits must have already been dealt with, right?"

The ex-mercenary grinned. "Tesyb and the other guards killed six and took one captive, with barely any injuries."

Hudan laughed loudly. "Well, my horsemen did much better then. We caught eight of 'em alive! But we didn't get to see how effective the watchtower would be since we caught them far from the crossbow-woman's range. Not sure how well they could have done in the dark anyway."

Feroy smirked. "You better not say that in front of Hyola. Even with only moonlight to guide her, she took out two bandits before they even reached the walls."

Hudan snorted. "She never stops surprising me." He looked at Kivamus. "After catching the bandits I sent a dozen horsemen on patrol to take a few rounds around the village in case there are any more bandits out there, although I don't think we'll find any."

"That's a good idea," Kivamus agreed, "and a dozen horsemen can take care of any stragglers easily."

The door opened once again and a guard came inside, whispering something in Hudan's ear, who nodded and sent him back.

Hudan turned back towards the others. "The eight bandits we caught alive have been brought to the manor and they've been tied inside a coal barn for now, since the jail is already full with the refugee farmers. The guards checked and none of the captives had any coins with them, but at least we'll get

some good leather armour from them, apart from a pair of warbows and quite a few swords, as rusted as they must be."

"Those swords won't be of any use other than as scrap iron," Kivamus said, "but Cedoron will be happy to get that scrap nonetheless."

"Send someone to bring the bandit who was caught in the southeast as well," Feroys said before looking at Kivamus. "I should go now and grill them. We might find out something interesting."

Kivamus gave a nod and the mercenary exited the manor hall. He looked at others. The mood had improved noticeably in the hall by now since the raid had been dealt with successfully. Duvas had closed the ledger once again, while Syryne also looked relaxed.

"It's good that we won't really need to use much losuvil powder this time, if at all," Hudan said, "since we are running really low on it."

Kivamus nodded. "Unless a guard has serious wounds, it's better to save the remaining medicine for when Torhan attacks. We'll need it then."

"I'll confirm with the guards once, but we should be able to do without it this time."

"The losuvil vines in the eastern hills should already have started getting new leaves by now," Syryne said, "so we can start gathering new leaves within a couple of weeks. It will take me another week after that to prepare more losuvil powder, but after that we shouldn't have any shortage of it until the winter."

"That's good to hear," Kivamus said with a smile. "We will also try to make a much bigger stockpile of it this time, so we don't have any chance of it running out when we need it the most. Of course, we plan to sell some of it to the merchants as well, but that's for later."

"What should we do with the men we caught?" Hudan asked. "We can't even lock them in the jail we built."

Kivamus looked at Duvas, thinking of a solution. "How's it going with the latest refugees who had followed Feroy from Kirnos? We only had the damaged huts and shacks to house them in. It's not that cold anymore with the snow already melted, but it can't be very comfortable for them even in this weather."

Chapter 280 Labour Force

"Oh, the refugees are more than happy just to have a roof over their head," the majordomo replied. "Most of them were homeless when they left Kirnos, so getting regular meals and living indoors - even if it's only in a shack - is something they aren't going to complain about."

"Good. That means now it's time for us to shift those farmers who'd been living in the jail to the damaged shacks. Make sure it's done tomorrow morning before they leave for work, so we can put the new captives in jail."

Duvas nodded. "As you wish, although we'll have to think of a better solution before too long."

"Let's get the sowing completed first," Kivamus said, "then we will have enough free workers to start demolishing these shacks and to make another long house for them."

"That takes care of where we will keep the captives temporarily until they are interrogated," Hudan said, "but we have to think about what to do with them after that. I am pretty sure what Feroy would suggest us to do with them, and I don't think I disagree. I suggest they be executed after the interrogation is completed."

Kivamus grimaced hearing him talk so casually about executing people who had surrendered. It was true that this harsh medieval world had nothing like the Geneva Conventions - probably because they hadn't yet seen the kind of brutality which men could dish out to each other during something like a world war - but it just didn't feel right to him to execute men who had surrendered to him. "Let's wait for Feroy and see what he tells us."

It had been more than an hour since the ex-mercenary had gone while Kivamus and Duvas waited for him to return. Madam Helga had made some baked cookies in the meantime, which Lucem and Clarisa had gladly devoured before going to sleep, with Syryne and their mother accompanying them. Hudan had gone out once again to get the latest report from the guards, while Feroy hadn't returned either.

Soon, the doors opened again and both of the men came inside.

"I just met with the patrolling guards," Hudan reported, "and they didn't see anyone else out there. "It seems we caught all the bandits. If there were any stragglers, they must have already run away from here."

"We can't do anything about that," Kivamus said. "We don't have the manpower to go on a wild goose chase in the night."

Duvas stared at him. "Uh... What do you mean? What is this goose you speak of?"

Kivamus shook his head. Some phrases probably didn't translate well in this new language or maybe goose was known by a different name here. "I meant that it would be futile to try to search any other bandits in these forests right now."

Hudan nodded. "I agree. I've already told the guards to return the horses to the stable so they can rest for a few hours before we send them to the fields for plowing again." He looked at Feroy. "What did you find out?"

"Same as what I expected," the ex-mercenary reported. "Many of them used to be slaves until a year or two ago. Some of them worked as farmers under their owners, but had to run away when their masters barely gave them anything to eat after grain prices started increasing, while others worked odd jobs here and there, before they were let go. They turned to petty stealing when they couldn't find a job to earn coins and eventually moved into the forests to hunt for food there and began targeting small farms and villages to find food." He shrugged. "None of them had heard of the name Torhan before I asked. What do you want to do with them?"

"I already suggested that executing them would be the best idea," the guard captain said. "I am no more fond of taking lives than any other person, but I don't want to post guards just to keep an eye on them when Torhan can attack us any time. Even though we have enough guards right now, usually we always have a shortage of guards anyway and once we start sending hunters out again, we will probably be short on them again. It's not a good idea to waste men just to guard these bandits."

Feroy seemed to be thinking for a moment before he looked at Kivamus. "It is up to you, but these aren't seasoned bandits who have been doing this for so long that they can't make amends for what they've been doing. It might not be the case with Torhan's bandits, or any other organised group which has been doing this for a long time, but from what I've seen, a lot of people who used to do honest jobs had turned into bandits in the past couple of years. Most of them live somewhere in the forests south of Cinran, and we might very well be attacked by them in the future, since they won't dare to attack Cinran and Kirnos is probably too far away to travel for them."

"They are still bandits," Hudan shrugged. "Executing them now would likely save us a lot of trouble in the future."

Kivamus shook his head in exasperation. If all those escaped slaves kept attacking them, then they would need a huge graveyard just to bury them, not to mention he just couldn't bring it in himself to kill people who had surrendered. At this rate he might have to create a local version of Geneva conventions. Huh. Maybe they could call it Tiranat conventions.

He looked at the guard captain. "These people surrendered to us, Hudan. We should never hesitate in keeping our village safe from bandits and such, and I won't stop to think twice about the men we kill while defending our homes, but those who have surrendered to us deserve mercy. You may be right that killing them would probably save us trouble in the future, but these people were just looking for food to eat because nobles like me couldn't ensure that every person in their domain had enough to eat."

Seeing that Hudan still didn't look convinced, he added, "Just consider this. If we execute people who surrender to us, any future attackers would have no reason to put down their swords. That means our guards will have to fight them to the death, which means more casualties on our side as well - since it seems like bandits aren't going to stop attacking us anytime soon in this place. So the best way to keep our village secure and our guards alive is to allow as many bandits to surrender as we can. But that will never happen if we execute everyone who does that."

"I... can see your logic in that. But what should we do then?" Hudan asked with a frown. "We can't just let them go!"

Kivamus thought about it for a while. "I do agree that we can't just keep them in jail and feed them indefinitely. They need to do hard labour to earn their food and pay for their crimes, but that has to be done in a way that they don't have any opportunity to escape. So how about sending them to work in the coal mines, now that they are active again? Their hands can be tied on the way there and back, with the other coal miners keeping an eye on them until they reach the mines, while they simply won't have

any way to escape when they are inside the hills mining coal. This way we get uh... nine more workers to dig more coal - and that will earn us more gold as well."

"I do like hearing that we can get more gold in the future," Duvas said while shaking his head, "but the way you keep changing everything in Tiranat, I don't think we are going to have enough workers in the village any time soon, if ever."

Kivamus snorted. "You have no idea... Either way, we need to keep increasing our labour force."

Feroy began, "I think that can work. After these surrendered bandits have seen that they will be treated like humans here, even if they were slaves in the past, I don't think any of them will have any reason to try to escape, since this is the first time they will know for sure that they are going to get food every day. I'm pretty sure that even as captives, their life in this village will be much better than how they lived as slaves under their previous owners." He added, "Of course, there might still be some who will try to escape, but with more than a hundred reliable men of Tiranat working in the coal mines already, they won't have much chance to run away anyway."

"Good," Kivamus said. "This is what we'll do then. Shift them to the jail tomorrow after the refugees have moved to the old huts and try to find out who amongst these surrendering bandits is likely to cause problems in the future. We can go with Hudan's solution for any troublemakers, while the rest of the captives should become good workers for Tiranat in due time. Eventually we can move them out of the jail if they don't show any signs of causing problems for the village."

Feroy nodded. "I'll find out everything about them tomorrow."

Hudan looked thoughtful for a moment before sighing. "Fine. The guards won't like it, but they'll do as I say. In case any of them become a problem, the guards will know exactly how to take care of them. It's too dark right now, so tomorrow morning, we'll strip the bodies of the dead bandits of anything useful and bury them in the eastern hills." He looked at the ex-mercenary. "You should take some rest now as well, you've been awake for quite a while."

Feroy snorted but agreed. And with that, the mercenary and the guard captain exited the manor hall.

Duvas stood up from his chair as well. "I should get some sleep. The tax collector will arrive any day now, and I need my mind well-rested to deal with him."

The majordomo entered the inner door to go to his room, but Kivamus' mind was too agitated for him to find sleep any time soon. Now that Hyola had proved that the watchtowers were very effective, he wondered what they could do if they had some more powerful weapons here, even if they were not fired by gunpowder.