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Chapter 30. The Terrain Of Tiranat

Kivamus furrowed his brow, his gaze sweeping across the manor as he contemplated the challenges and opportunities before them. The harsh winter loomed ahead, its icy grip threatening to further isolate Tiranat.

He gazed at Duvas before speaking, while Gorsazo and Hudan stood nearby as well. "Let's consider the situation at hand," he began, his voice laced with quiet contemplation. "Even if we reopened the mines right now," he mused, "selling the coal during winter is not an option we have."

"Indeed, my Lord," Duvas noted. "Every winter, we slowed down the mining once the snow started, since traders from Cinran cannot come in the winter and Kirnos doesn't have as much demand for coal as Cinran, even though the road to Kirnos stays open during the winter. However this year, no trader is coming from Kirnos anyway due to the fear of bandits. So, every year, we kept stockpiling the coal slowly during the winter months, to sell in the spring. Of course, the demand for coal after winter is always lower than that before the snow falls."

Thinking about it for a moment, he continued, "Right now, both of our coal barns are nearly full, so it'll easily take more than a month to sell our existing stock after the winter, even if we didn't reopen the mines during that time." He added, "And I believe by that time, it should have been long enough since the previous baron's murder for traders to start coming regularly."

"That means," Kivamus said, "reopening the coal mines would not be productive. We will postpone it for now." He looked at the vast forests surrounding the manor again. "However," he continued, a hint of a smile gracing his lips, "this presents us with a unique opportunity, wouldn't you agree?"

He allowed his gaze to meet the faces of the others. "Think about it," he elaborated, his voice brimming with newfound energy. "We have a group of skilled miners, men accustomed to hard manual labor. And now, they find themselves unemployed."

He looked around them, trying to see which was the tallest place nearby. He found that it was the manor house itself, with its two-storey construction. He said to others, "Let's move to the roof of the manor house."

Duvas nodded. "As you wish, my Lord."

Kivamus followed Duvas to the manor house, with Gorsazo and Hudan trailing behind them. Once inside, instead of going towards the right into the hall of the manor house, Duvas turned left and started walking up the stairs. They eventually came out on the roof, which gave them a much better view of the surroundings.

Kivamus took a minute to look around them. The lofty trees of the temperate forest were much taller than the manor house and stood towering not far outside around the manor, surrounding it from all sides, except the west. In the east, a few hills were also visible, covered with trees, while the Arakin mountains made up the eastern horizon.

To their west, the sorry state of the village was easy to see in the light of the midday sun. Some of the burnt houses were visible from the roof, along with many other barely-standing shacks and huts of the village. Only a few of the houses were wooden constructions, standing out amidst the now-drying muddy paths snaking between the houses. A few people in the village were also visible from the roof, moving here and there listlessly, while many of them were just sitting at the entrance to their houses, staring into the distance. It wasn't difficult to guess that normally, many of these people would be digging coal inside the mines at this time.

Thinking about it, he asked Duvas, "How far are the coal mines located?"

Duvas answered readily, pointing towards a hill towards the east. "Not very far, my Lord. Less than half an hour walk to the east."

"Hmm..." Kivamus muttered. Only a few kilometers away then, he guessed. He asked, "You mentioned that you have been here since the founding of the village. Tell me, why was the village located here, then? There certainly isn't any river here, which would make this a better place, than closer to the mines."

Duvas replied, "This was the closest location to the coal mines, my Lord, from where the plain ground started. Any further to the east, and it would be difficult to find enough flat ground for a village to be located there."

"And what about the other directions? Are the hills located only in the east or elsewhere as well?" Kivamus asked.

"Although the dense forest surrounding Tiranat has never made it possible to send scouting parties very far, I can safely say that the hills are only located to our east." Pointing towards the hills on the east, Duvas continued, "Those are the foothills which slowly rise in height to give way to the Arakin mountains far in the east, my Lord. However, a few times in the past, I have been to the top of one of those hills, from where we mine our coal. Looking from such a height, it is easy to see that while the forests surrounding us seem endless from there, the ground itself is a flatland on all sides of us, except the east."

Kivamus nodded. "And what about a river? Is there flowing water nearby?"

Duvas nodded. "I wouldn't really call it a river, my Lord, but there is a stream further ahead than the coal mines, which flows southwards between those hills. The miners usually go there to refill their water buckets during the day when they are mining." He added, "Occasionally, they also catch some fish there to add to their limited diets."

"It's not ideal, but it will have to do..." Kivamus muttered. He leaned forward towards the edge of the roof, and put his hands on the wooden guardrails surrounding the roof, as he thought about the terrain here.

He continued, his voice taking on an air of determination, "If we were to clear a significant portion of the surrounding forest," he proposed, gesturing outwards, "we could create a viable space for cultivating crops. And within a few months, a fertile farmland could be created where these trees stand today."

While others were mulling over the concept, Duvas added, "This idea has occurred to me in the past, of course. But with the previous baron's disinterest in this village and a regular shortage of manpower, it was difficult to even seriously consider farming. But yes, with all the miners unemployed right now, this is indeed a good opportunity to do this."

Gorsazo seized upon the idea as well. "I was thinking the same thing, my Lord," he said. "If everything goes well, we should be well-stocked with enough grain for the winter, in a couple of weeks. We might even have enough seeds left over to begin planting after the ground thaws at the end of winter. And even if our reserves are not enough for that," he conceded, "by that time, the route to Cinran will be open again, and we'd easily be able to purchase more seeds from the visiting merchants."

A thoughtful frown creased his brow. "However," he added, "to ensure success in this, we'll need someone at the helm with a far deeper understanding of farming than any of us possess."

Duvas replied to that question. "I think that many of the older miners would have at least some experience with farming. Before they migrated to Tiranat when it was founded, not all of them would have been miners after all. I will make an announcement in the village that people who have any experience with farming should report to us by evening. There wouldn't be many of them, but we should be able to get enough experienced farmers who can supervise the other villagers in farming."

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

Hudan chimed in, "Clearing the surrounding woods would not only provide us with arable land, but it would also offer a significant security advantage. With a clear line of sight stretching outwards from the village," he pointed out, "we'd be able to detect any approaching bandits much sooner, giving us more time to prepare our defenses."

"Indeed." Kivamus nodded. "While we will need to clear the forest in the east as well for good visibility all around the village, I think we should leave the cleared area empty in the east. As Duvas said, the terrain becomes hilly on that side, so it would be difficult for farming anyway. As for how much land we need to clear to grow enough crops to feed the village for a full year, we will need to ask those people who have experience in farming."

He looked at Duvas. "Select those people with the most experience in farming, and bring them to meet us all by the evening. After getting a better idea of how much land we need for that, we will finalize it."

Hudan added, "We should clear more area than just the farms, my Lord. I'd say we need at least five hundred paces of empty space all around the village, if not more, to be sure to detect any attack in advance."

Kivamus gave a nod. "As Duvas said, in the east there is a stream near the hills, which flows southwards. As long as the land in the south of the village is suitable for planting, it would be much better to start farming in that direction, since it would give us a ready source of water for irrigation."

Without access to any fertilizers and modern agricultural machinery, the yields of the crops were not going to be great, and they would need a much larger area dedicated to farming to get the same

amount of grain, than they would have needed if they had such equipment. That did give him a few ideas on some very basic devices, like a seed drill, that he could try to design and build here, even with the materials they already had available in this village. It should help to improve the productivity of farms by a decent amount, but he put it into the back of his mind, to reconsider once the immediate concerns were taken care of.

Thinking about cutting forests on this scale and all the deforestation they were going to cause, Kivamus gave a wry chuckle. It was far from ideal, and it would never be tolerated on Earth, and for good reason, but their situation was desperate enough that they had no choice but to clear the forests, or the villagers would continue to starve. And that was not acceptable to him.

After taking a minute to think, he added, "We also need to think of a way to house the homeless villagers, and we will need logs as well as enough cleared land for it." He pointed towards the north of the village, "Let's say we keep the new housing in the north, which would leave the land in the west empty for other things, like new barns, etc."

Hudan added, "We will need to designate a clear area for that, my Lord, so that we can clear enough trees to have at least five hundred paces of clear land ahead of the new houses."

"True." Kivamus nodded, and asked Duvas, "How many people would you say are homeless right now?"

Taking a moment to think over it, while gazing over the village to their west, Duvas replied, "I can't give an accurate number, my Lord, but I believe the bandits put above a dozen houses on fire, so that means there must be around seventy or eighty people who lost their houses in the bandit attack. Of course, there are some other villagers too, including orphans, who don't have anywhere to live since that thunderstorm damaged or outright destroyed many huts around a month ago."

Gorsazo said, "That's a big number though. We would need to construct fifteen to twenty houses, at least, if we are going to give them a place to live so they don't freeze to death. But I'm not sure we have enough time to do that before the winter hits."

Duvas nodded as well. "Indeed. But it would take much less time if we just constructed bigger halls for them to live in, instead of separate houses."

Kivamus mulled over the idea for a minute. Back on Earth, in some places people lived in longhouses in the past, when building separate houses for everyone was not practical. That seemed like a good option to him in these circumstances. "Why don't we build longhouses then?"

"Long...houses, my Lord?" Hudan asked.