

Londoner 311

Chapter 311 Threats

Hudan immediately stood up with his hand on the hilt of his sword. "What is this!"

Tesyb, who seemed to be leading the guards, looked around the hall like he was searching for a threat, before his gaze moved to Kivamus with relief. "Thank the goddess you are fine, milord. I thought you'd be dead already."

Hearing that made Kivamus' heart start beating faster and he stood up as well, forgetting about his fears of his secret being out. "What are you talking about?"

Tuilas stood up in all his plate armor's glory, his hand also on the pommel of his sword. "Who's trying to kill the baron?"

"Just a moment, milord." Tesyb looked at the other guards who had come with him. "You all, go and surround the manor, and keep a lookout for Dosol. If anyone suspicious is seen, capture them immediately."

Finally, Tesyb called up a guard wearing chainmail with shaggy hair and a long beard and pushed him ahead. "This guy reported that one of the guards who had come with the tax collector might be trying to kill the baron. I don't know if he's a part of it, so I brought him here as well so I can keep an eye on him."

"I'm innocent!" the man protested immediately.

Kivamus looked at the bearded young man. He couldn't remember seeing his face before today, and looking at his chainmail, the man certainly seemed to be one of the guards who came with Tuilas, since they didn't own even one chainmail for the manor guards.

The knight walked closer to them, and glared at the bearded man. "Aren't you one of the count's guards?"

The man had barely given a nod, before Hudan's towering form moved closer to him, and he thundered, "Tell me everything. Right now!"

The bearded young man looked hesitant for a moment before he started explaining. "I was just walking around earlier in the day when I heard Dosol talking with some servants and asking about the layout of the manor house. At the time I thought he only wanted to protect the tax collector from any attack, so I didn't think much about it."

He continued, "Later, when I went to the servants' hall for dinner, he wasn't there, even though he must also be hungry, since none of us had eaten anything after breakfast. He had to know that if the stock of dinner was consumed by others, it won't be made again for just a single guy who forgot to eat. That felt odd in itself, but when I remembered that he was asking about the layout, I realised that he must be trying to enter the manor house to kill someone."

"But how would you know that he's out to kill Lord Kivamus?" Hudan frowned. "There are many people who will live here."

"The only other possible targets would be the tax collector and Sir Tuilas," the young man explained, "and Dosol has no reason to try to kill them here, when he would get a much better opportunity when we are back on the road tomorrow. That means he had to be out for the baron's head."

"Shit!" Hudan spat, before he started to look around again, scanning for any threats.

However, Kivamus was still observing the young man. There was something in this guy which felt a little familiar to him. Perhaps it was something in his way of speaking, or maybe his posture... He wasn't sure, but for some reason, he felt like he had seen this guard before. But that didn't make any sense, since he had never been to the count's mansion, which is where all of the count's guards must be living.

That's when the outer door opened again, making Hudan move ahead of Kivamus as a precaution. However, this time it was Feroy, who was dragging another man by his collar, with two other manor guards walking next to them.

The bearded young man immediately pointed at the newcomer. "That's him! That's Dosol!"

Feroy took a glance at everyone in the manor hall, before he pushed the caught man on his knees, who already had his hands tied behind him, and was bleeding from a shoulder wound. "I found him trying to

climb the manor house, right below the window of Lord Kivamus' personal room. He has hardly said a single word since then, but there is no good explanation he can give for it."

"Weren't there two men on patrol around the house?" Hudan frowned. "How did he even get a chance to try that?"

Feroy shook his head. "One of the patrolling guards had gone to the servants' hall to bring food for both of them, saying they'd been too hungry since they hadn't gotten anything to eat since breakfast, and this guy, Dosol, must have taken the chance when the remaining guard was on the other side."

"We'll need to tell them the proper meaning of discipline," the guard captain growled, "but that's for later." He looked at the man who was on his knees. "Dosol, that's your name isn't it? Anything to say in your defense?"

Dosol glared at the bearded young man for a moment, before his eyes moved to others around him. "What's the point? Ya'll kill me anyway."

Kivamus shook his head, his heart starting to slow down only now. Another assassin? Just who was behind it this time? At least he felt glad that the bearded young man had told them about it on time, although he didn't think there was a real danger to him right now, with Hudan and two other guards already present in the room. "Who sent you?"

"I'm not saying nothin' !" Dosol spat.

Sir Tuilas walked closer to the man. "Where's your chainmail?"

Dosol just snorted, before the knight slapped him backhanded with his gauntlet-covered hand. "How dare you not give an answer when a knight asks for it!"

Dosol tried futilely to protect his face, but with his hands tied behind him, he fell backwards with the force of another slap from the armored hands of Sir Tuilas. However, Dosol still remained quiet, making the knight move forward to punch him this time.

"Stop it," Hudan grunted. "This isn't the place for it. Fero, take him outside and try to find out everything he knows."

Fero nodded, and gestured to another guard to take the man out of the manor hall.

Tuilas looked at Kivamus. "I know this is your domain, but I'd like to ask him a few things as well, since every guard who came with me on this journey is my responsibility. I have to confirm that he was after your life and not the tax gold or some other thing."

Kivamus nodded, seeing no harm in it. While he was still no fan of Tuilas's behaviour, especially his lecherous tendencies, he didn't think that the knight was after his life anymore. If he could find out more, it could only be helpful. "Go with Fero and find his true motives so we can decide how to deal with him."

With that, Fero and other guards dragged Dosol outside, Tuilas following behind them. Tesyb looked at the bearded young man. "Now come on, our food must be getting cold in the servants' hall."

Kivamus looked at both of them turning to exit the hall before the young man stopped and turned around. "Actually... Would it be possible for me to talk to Lord Kivamus for a moment?"

Hudan frowned. "You've been helpful, and I thank you for that, but I don't see any reason for you to have anything to talk about with him. Move on."

"It's... It's very important!" the guy insisted.

The guard captain was going to say something but Kivamus interrupted him, feeling curious about this man for some reason. "It's fine, Hudan. You and Tesyb are already here along with the usual guards. He can hardly be a threat to me right now."

The young man nodded enthusiastically, before looking at others in the room. "But I'd prefer if there were fewer ears..."

"What?" Hudan glared at him. "I'm not going to leave you alone with Lord Kivamus!"

"No, no, I don't mean that. Any trusted guards can stay here," the bearded young man argued, before looking pointedly at Ustaimo.

Kivamus frowned, wondering what could this man have to talk about which couldn't be heard by the tax collector. Wait, what if this was some insider information, which the young man couldn't afford to be heard by one of the Count's officials, like the tax collector. "Ustaimo, would you mind?"

Ustaimo nodded. "I'll be in my room." The tax collector immediately exited through the inner door after that.

"Speak!" Hudan barked, but the young man still looked uncomfortable, his eyes moving between the remaining two guards.

Kivamus looked around, and apart from him and Duvas, as well as Hudan and Tesyb who were standing next to the young man, there were two other guards in their usual positions in the corners of the hall. Knowing that the information he was going to hear was likely going to be very sensitive, he looked at those guards. "One of you, go to the inner corridor and guard the door from out there." Once one of the guards followed his orders, he looked at the remaining guard. "You, go and stand outside the outer door. Let me know immediately if anyone other than Feroy comes here."

"Are you sure, milord?" Hudan asked with a frown.

Kivamus nodded. "You and Tesyb are our best fighters. There is no way this guy can get away from you both to harm me."

Once the outer door had closed behind the second guard, only Duvas remained in the hall other than him, Hudan and Tesyb. He looked at the bearded young man again. "Speak. You are not going to get a more private audience with me than this."

The bearded man's eyes went to both of the closed doors for a moment, before he looked back at Kivamus and grinned.

Chapter 312 Shenanigans

"I think you'll like what I have to say," the young man began, "but I want mercy in return for saying anything."

Kivamus frowned. "Why would you need to ask for mercy? You have helped to timely catch an assassin in the manor, and have probably saved my life. I don't see anything to forgive you for."

"Trust me, milord, you'll change your mind after you hear everything I have to say. So I'm not opening my mouth until you agree to it."

"How can we agree to anything like that without knowing what you've done!" Hudan growled.

The young man grimaced. "I know that the information I have will be helpful enough for you that I can ask you to trade it for my life. Put me in jail or send me to the mines if you want, but just don't kill me. I can be very useful to you in the future!"

"We'll see about that..." Kivamus muttered, "but I'm not making any promises about forgiving you. Now start speaking."

The bearded young man shook his head. "Then at least give me your word that you'll hear me to the end before deciding what to do with me instead of making a rash decision."

Kivamus exhaled. "You are asking for a lot and I don't even know what you want to talk about." He gave a nod. "Fine. I agree not to have you executed immediately after listening to you, but if what you've done is bad enough, I'll still hold a hearing with my advisors later on, and you'll get the judgement your actions deserve. I can't do any more for you."

"That..." the man sighed. "I guess that's the best I'm going to get." He looked around at the people remaining in the hall, his eyes stopping at Tesyb and Duvas for a moment. "Are you sure you can trust these people completely? If any of them blabs about what I'm telling you, you are going to have a lot of problems in the future."

"Is that a threat?" Hudan barked as he took a step ahead.

The man defensively put his hands in front of himself. "No, no! You'll understand after you hear me out."

Kivamus tilted his head. "I trust everyone who is present or they wouldn't be here right now. Now speak! My patience is running thin..."

The young man nodded. "I'll start from the beginning. I was born as the first and the only son of the man who was meant to become the Count of Cinran, which means I was also supposed to inherit the domain of Cinran in the future, but my destiny was stolen from me by Lord Ebirtas, who is the younger brother of my father - my uncle."

"I call bullshit on this!" Hudan spat.

"Boy, are you still drunk or something?" Duvas asked with pity. "I know Sir Tuilas went to the alehouse last night with his guards. Maybe that's where you had a vivid dream where you thought of this incredible story?"

"No! I'm not lying!"

Tesyb put a brawny hand on the young man's shoulder. "Do you want me to throw him out, milord?"

Kivamus raised a hand to stop the others. "Let's hear him out first." An ordinary guard turning out to be a noble in hiding? This did seem interesting, even if it turned out to be a sham later on. "Go on."

The bearded man nodded with relief. "My father was supposed to become the Count around two decades ago, but he was murdered by my uncle Ebirtas when they had gone horse riding together to celebrate my father becoming the next count after my grandfather died." He clenched his fists. "However, while my father was known as an excellent rider, somehow, he was thrown over by the horse and broke his neck, which meant Ebirtas became the Count instead of my father. I've been told that officially it was classified as just an accident, but I know it wasn't! Nobody speaks anything about it anymore to prevent making the count angry at them, so I can't give you any proof about it, but everything I've said is true!"

Kivamus frowned. "This does sound hard to believe... What's your name anyway? Maybe that will jog my memory."

The bearded man flinched. "Let's leave that for the end."

"Fine," Kivamus shrugged, "but how do I even believe that you are the son of the man who was supposed to become the count, and not just some random servant without any noble blood in him who has heard the story and created a good narrative around it to help himself?"

The young man glared at him. "How can anyone prove that they are the son of a person? I hadn't been born then, so I haven't seen my father even once, but I know it's true! Just... Just look at any old portrait of my father in the Count's mansion, and you'll see how much I look like him! I've been in that mansion so many times and Ebirtas has already removed any good paintings of my father, but there are still a couple of them from when both of them were younger and had had a painting drawn of the family along with my grandfather. You can easily compare it to me."

Kivamus nodded slowly, noticing that Duvas seemed to be lost in thoughts. Without access to technology like DNA testing, it wasn't possible to know anything for sure, so a family resemblance would be all that could be used to prove something like this. "If what you are saying is true, why hasn't the count killed you by now? From what I know, he also has a son. Even though that boy is known as a wastrel, he's the only heir your uncle has, which means you pose a threat to him inheriting Cinran from Ebirtas in the future. That's a very good reason for the count to prevent you from breathing any longer."

The man snorted. "He can't kill me if he doesn't know I'm alive! I told you that I hadn't even been born when my father was murdered. My mother was pregnant with me at the time, and she died of shock after the news came that my father had passed away during that horse riding accident." He grimaced. "Perhaps it was uncle Ebirtas who had her murdered, but I can't prove it. Either way, while she died at the time, somehow I was saved, and I've been living as a servant in the Count's mansion since then. As far as my uncle knows, nobody from my father's bloodline has survived."

Kivamus nodded. "That does make sense if it's true, but there's a hole in your story. If you were just an infant when all this happened, and nobody talks about it anymore - for good reason, I'd say - then how would you have known about all this, with both your father and mother already dead and no siblings either to tell you the story."

The young man grimaced. "That bastard Zoricus! Who else? He was the one to tell me all this, including the fact that he had saved my life when my mother died. That's why I have been working for him all my life behind the scenes, even though technically I am employed as a servant for the count."

Kivamus steepled his hands, thinking about it. "It's very much possible that Zoricus had just picked up an infant - you - from somewhere and created this story so you'd think that you were the true heir of Cinran, so he'd get a good pawn in his hands to use against Ebirtas in the future."

"I told you that you can easily see in that portrait that I look just like my father when he was young!" The man protested. "I've seen that portrait myself! I am not lying!"

Kivamus looked at the majordomo. "What are you thinking about? You know anything about this?"

Duvas scratched his short white beard. "It's been a long time, and my memory is hazy about it, but I do remember that there was a short power struggle in Cinran, soon after Tiranat was founded around two decades ago. Well, it wasn't much of a power struggle - but more like a power grab. When I moved here after Tiranat was founded, the previous count - the father of Lord Ebirtas - had just died after living for a very long time, and his older son was the heir - who was in his forties already. From what I remember, the older son didn't have any children by then, but it's still possible that his wife was pregnant with a son at the time. I have no idea if the older son was a good rider or not, but everyone had heard that he died in an accident when he supposedly fell from his horse, so Lord Ebirtas became the count instead of him."

"See?" The young man pointed out with relief. "I told you it wasn't an accident! Ebirtas must have done something to the saddle straps to make them too loose or easy to break! There's no way my father just fell to his death!"

Duvas shook his head. "It really might have been an accident. Nobody can say for sure at this point."

Kivamus nodded, looking at the majordomo. "Certainly, but it might not have been Ebirtas behind this at all. After hearing that Zoricus had secretly saved the infant son of the older brother who was supposed to become the count, it sounds like he had a lot to do with this incident. So it may have been him who caused all this to happen and the real heir to die - assuming it wasn't just an accident."

He shrugged. "Still, this elaborate plan to save the child of the real heir makes sense if Zoricus wants to use him to basically take over Cinran in the future by using this kid as a puppet while he rules the town

from the background. But knowing how rich he is, why couldn't Zoricus have just worked with the older brother? There was no point in taking this much risk."

Chapter 313 Confession

Duvas snorted. "Because when I lived in Cinran, I'd heard that Zoricus had always been close to Lord Ebirtas, while the older brother was known to be far more shrewd, and wanted nothing to do with the baron. As for Zoricus being rich, he was just an ordinary baron before Lord Ebirtas became the count two decades ago. But after that? His fortunes started increasing at an astonishing rate, and now he is easily far richer than the Count."

"Hmm... that makes a lot of sense..." Kivamus muttered. "Zoricus must always have been ambitious, so after the previous count died, and he realized that the perceptive older brother was going to become the next count, he must have had him murdered while disguising it as an accident, so the more gullible younger brother would come to power. Knowing about Zoricus' fortunes today, it certainly has worked, and when eventually Ebirtas is too deep in debt, he won't be able to resist when Zoricus starts asking for things like giving him more official powers to write off some of that debt."

"I am not quite sure how that would play out," Duvas said, "but you are probably right."

The young man looked at both of them with hope. "So you believe me, right?"

Kivamus scratched his chin. "I'll still have to see one of those portraits to confirm that you look like Ebirtas' older brother, although I can't find any more holes in your story. But I still don't get why you wanted to tell me all this. I already had suspicions that Zoricus was after my village for its coal mines, just like he keeps trying to gain more land and more gold for himself. While it was interesting to know how all that started, you telling me about it doesn't help me in any way."

The young man grimaced. "I've told you that I've worked all my life for Zoricus, right? Not all of those things were above board. I am the one whom he sent whenever he needed to threaten a merchant to hand over the deeds to his shop if he couldn't pay back his debt, or when someone was late for the monthly protection money they owed Zoricus, among other things."

Kivamus frowned. "I get that you haven't led an easy life, especially knowing that you were probably meant to live a comfortable life as a high noble like the count, instead of living as a servant who does the dirty work of that greedy bastard. It still doesn't explain why you are here." He tilted his head. "You haven't even told me why you think you need forgiving from me. From what I see, you've been dealt a very bad hand in life, but there is nothing I need to forgive you for. It's more like you are still hiding something. You haven't even told me your name yet."

The young man looked down, seemingly resigned to his fate. "No, I mean..." He exhaled deeply. "You are right, and I haven't, because I know you'd want to kill me immediately if I had told you earlier. But I did tell you about Dosol, right? I didn't have any proof, but I was right, and he really was out to kill you."

Kivamus nodded, a suspicion growing in his mind by now. "The tax collector had told me that one of his guards was from Zoricus, but he didn't know for sure which guard. Doesn't this mean that Zoricus had sent two men here, including you? Why do you think that is?"

The bearded man flinched. "Because... because he had also sent me with the same task. To make sure to kill you..."

"What did you say?" Hudan thundered, pushing the man to his knees and bringing his sword out immediately before he put it at the man's neck. Tesyb also had his sword in his hand by now, ready to separate the man's head from his body at a moment's notice.

However, the young man didn't even try to protest at that treatment, while still gazing downwards. "I only found out today about Dosol being sent by Zoricus. I'm sure that that bastard had told Dosol to kill me if I succeeded, so there wouldn't be any links tying the assassination to him." He shook his head slowly. "It seems there really is no way ahead for me... Zoricus had clearly told me that if I failed again, there wouldn't be any place for me in Cinran anymore, and so it seems here..."

"Again?" Kivamus asked, his intuition screaming that he really had seen this man before. "What do you mean again?"

The bearded man finally looked up at him. "My name is Levalas, but you might know me better by the commoner version of my name, Levalo."

"Levalo?" Hudan growled, his sword drawing a thin line of blood on Levalas' neck. "That's the guy who tried to poison Lord Kivamus before the winter! I should end your life right now!"

"No, wait!" Levalas protested. "You had promised me not to kill me tonight! This is not..."

Kivamus nodded and held up a hand to stop the guard captain, as he finally remembered where he had seen this man. That dark night when the young maid Clarisa had nearly died from poisoning. The night when he came so close to dying again, just one day after being ambushed at Madam Helga's inn on the road to Tiranat.

Now that he knew the reality, he could see the resemblance in the facial features, but the bearded man in front of him with long, shaggy hair looked way too different from the kid who had tried to poison him and had still looked like a teenager with short cropped hair and no beard to speak of.

However, while he expected to feel angry at Levalas after seeing him alive again, he was surprised to find that there was no rage left in his heart. Not anymore. He only held pity for this kid whose parents had been murdered by the crafty duo of Zoricus and Ebirtas, and he'd been forced to live a life of a thug and assassin.

"Anything else you have left to say before I decide what to do with you?"

Levalas nodded eagerly. "I surrendered to you knowing that I probably wouldn't see the next sunrise, but I know that I can be useful to you! If you want," the young man continued in a hurry, "I'm even willing to give my testimony that Zoricus had sent me to kill you in the Count's court. That's a good reason to keep me alive, right?"

Kivamus shook his head. "For that you'll have to reveal to everyone that you are the son of Ebirtas' older brother, which would brand you as a rival of the present Count for ruling the domain of Cinran, and that's a good enough reason for others to think that you are lying through your teeth. And that is if Ebirtas even allows you to come in front of the court and doesn't have you killed before that."

"Then... then I'll be a witness in the Duke's court in Ulriga! He's your father, right? Wouldn't he believe me? He has the will and the power to punish Zoricus for trying to kill another baron, right?"

Kivamus snorted. "My father is sick and way too detached from the day-to-day happenings of his court to deal with petty matters like this, and as for my brothers... Let's just say they are not going to help either of us."

"But... but..." Levalas looked at everyone's faces in fear. "I... I don't..."

Kivamus interrupted him. "Putting aside the question of your usefulness, I'm still confused why you even surrendered to me... Even if you didn't get a chance to kill me, none of us had recognised you here, so you could have just returned with the tax collector and gone back to your life."

Levalas sighed. "There is no life remaining for me in Cinran anymore. Even after I found out back in the past that I should have become the next Count, I realize now that it's a foolish dream at best, and I am not even interested in gaining power anymore, apart from taking revenge someday against whoever killed my parents. That was the only reason I accepted the job to kill you before the winter, since I'd been promised a 100 gold in return by Zoricus, which would have been enough for me to escape this cursed life entirely and make a new life somewhere away from Cilaria."

"Away from Cilaria?" Kivamus repeated.

Levalas shrugged. "Anything would be better than continuing the life I have led till now. I can't keep working for those bastards anymore after knowing that they were the one behind my parents' deaths, not that I would have a long life expectancy if I returned. Zoricus didn't speak it out loud, but it was quite clear that if I failed to kill you again, I wouldn't get to return to my usual life as a servant in the count's mansion. Most likely, he would have killed me before too long, even if it meant losing a pawn from his hands."

Kivamus shook his head. "This only explains why you wanted to get away from Cinran. You still had a good option to run away from the tax collector's wagon while on the road and try to find some other job in another region of the kingdom. You seem to be pretty good at changing your appearance, so I'm sure you could have lived a long life without Zoricus ever finding out about you. So why did you even confess to everything here, knowing you might be executed for it?"

Chapter 314 Sentencing

"Because you spared my life..." Levalas breathed. "Even after I tried to poison you, you didn't have me executed immediately, like every other noble would have. I have been thinking about that all winter and that's the main reason I accepted to come to Tiranat again despite all the risks. I just wanted to meet you again, and know more about how a person could be so kind... Trust me, milord, I've met all kinds of people in my life, whether they were a commoner or a noble, but nobody has a heart like you. I even asked around about you in this village, and I didn't hear a single word against you! From the old priest in the goddess' temple, to a grain merchant I met, as well as other guards and even former slaves... They all only had praises for you... That is why I decided to surrender to you."

Levalas smiled. "Even if it meant that I might be executed, I would rather take that risk for the small chance that you would forgive me and I'd get a chance to serve you, instead of going back to those bastards in Cinran. My life is in your hands now, and if you decide that I need to be sent to the goddess

tonight, then so be it. I haven't lived a great life, but being executed at your hands is still better than threatening and killing innocent people for that bastard Zoricus." He looked straight in Kivamus' eyes. "But I still ask for mercy. I have learned a lot of skills in my short life of 19 years, and if you decide to let me live, I promise to spend the rest of my life serving you and your ideals. There is no other way for me to make up for what I had to do to continue surviving under Zoricus' boot."

Kivamus took a deep breath. This was a lot to take in, and he would need some time to think it over before deciding anything. "I don't know what I'm going to do with you, but I did give you my word that I wouldn't punish you tonight, so for now I have to put you in the jail. Don't even try to escape."

Levalas, who was already on his knees, bowed deeply until his head touched the floor. "Thank you, milord, for even considering to forgive me. And no, I'm not going to run. I am ready to accept whatever you decide for me."

"Good. You can stand up now." Kivamus looked at the guard captain. "Take him to the jail, and give him some food too. With only two meals a day, he hasn't eaten anything since breakfast. Whatever we decide to do with him later on, he deserves this much for telling us about Dosol."

Levalas gave another bow. "Thank you, milord. You really are too kind."

Hudan looked doubtful for a moment, before he nodded, and exited the hall along with Levalas. Tesyb looked uncertain about what to do, before Kivamus gestured to him to bring the other two guards inside.

Kivamus looked at the majordomo to ask for his opinion. "What do you think about..."

However he was interrupted by the outer door opening again, with Feroy and Sir Tuilas walking inside. It seemed the decision about Levalas' future would have to wait. "What did you find out?"

The ex-mercenary exhaled. "That other guard who reported about Dosol was right. You should thank him for telling us about the assassin, not that I think Dosol would have been able to do much harm to you here. Where is he anyway?"

"He went back with Hudan," Kivamus replied, not wanting to talk about him in front of the knight, before he silently mouthed, "Later."

Feroy gave a nod, taking the hint.

"So Dosol really was after Lord Kivamus' life then?" Duvas asked. "Did he accept it?"

Feroy shrugged, "Not in so many words, but it was clear enough. Although he's still not opening his mouth about who ordered him to do that. If you give me another day, I'm sure I can find out more."

Kivamus shook his head, already knowing it was Zoricus behind it, but he didn't want to say so in front of the knight. "If he still didn't say anything about who his masters are even after you and Tuilas interrogated him, I don't think he's going to tell it anymore."

Sir Tuilas, who was still wearing his full plate armor apart from the helmet, looked at him. "Then it's time for his retribution. Dosol came here under my authority, so it's my responsibility to give a proper sentence to him for trying to kill a noble."

Kivamus nodded, knowing he couldn't keep acting as benevolent as he had been until now to those who had committed a crime, even though it had turned out for the better in Levalas' case. "What punishment do you think would be right for him?"

Sir Tuilas raised his eyebrows. "I'm surprised that you are even asking that. Someone being caught red-handed trying to kill a noble calls for immediate execution. That's the only way we can deter these lowlifes from trying to shed any more noble blood."

Kivamus scowled, hearing the highborn knight referring to commoners as lowlifes, but didn't call him out on it. While he still hadn't had anyone executed in cold blood so far, but after spending nearly half a year in this world, he realised that 21st century Earth's morals were not always right for this world. He also didn't have any prior association with Dosol to try to save him, nor did he want to keep forgiving the assassins Zoricus kept sending after him again and again. At some point his luck would run out, and one of these men would really succeed, so he didn't want to let it get to that stage.

"I agree," he said. "Executing Dosol is the only way here."

The knight nodded. "I will immediately carry out the punishment myself. Where do you usually do this?"

Kivamus grimaced hearing Tuilas expecting a regular execution place in the village. Most likely the previous baron would have made a proper spectacle of it in front of all the villagers.

He looked at Duvas for an answer, before he shook his head. No, it didn't matter where the previous baron did it. He didn't want to follow in his footsteps in any way. Executing an assassin without giving him proper legal recourse was one thing, but making it an event for the public to enjoy was still far too barbaric for him.

"It needs to be done somewhere outside the village," he answered. "We bury any dead villagers or bandits in the eastern hills, so we will carry out the execution outside the village walls in the east."

"Fine by me," the knight nodded, before he turned around towards the outer door.

Kivamus looked at Tesyb. "Call up Hudan and a few more guards. I am coming as well."

Kivamus was standing some distance away from the outer walls of the village towards the eastern hills along with Duvas and nearly a dozen other guards. Night had fallen some time ago, so some of them had brought burning torches with them, which was the only source of light here. Sir Tuilas already had his sword out of its sheath, with Dosol being pushed to his knees with his hands tied behind him.

Kivamus looked at the assassin, wondering what had led to this man becoming a person like this. However it wasn't too difficult to imagine. With bad harvests everywhere these days, and people barely getting enough to eat in the southern part of the kingdom, a man having a steady job as a guard for someone influential like Zoricus would be something to preserve, since it would allow the man to earn enough to easily feed his family, even if their neighbours might still be starving.

So when their masters start asking them to do underhanded things like threatening merchants in the case of Levalas, or sending them to kill rival nobles in the case of both Dosol and Levalas, just so people like Zoricus could gain more land and gold, the guards wouldn't be able to say no. Sometimes it would

end with the rival noble dying and Zoricus' power and wealth increasing even more, while in other cases it would end with the guard being brought near a dark hill to be executed.

It was a cruel world, but that's how this medieval kingdom functioned. He hoped that with his modern knowledge, he would eventually be able to prevent people like Dosol from reaching such a grim end - for at least those who weren't killing people out of pleasure or greed - but he knew that it would take time. A lot of time. So far, he had barely been able to protect his own village, so changing the whole damn kingdom or the rest of the world was a long, long way away. But hopefully, one day he will get there.

"Any last words?" The knight asked while looking at the assassin.

Dosol spat on the ground. "I've nothing to say against selfish noble bastards like you all. May you all rot in..."

The knight's sword moved right at that moment, and Dosol's head rolled a few feet away, before his body slumped to the ground, spraying blood everywhere. Kivamus flinched seeing such a brutal way of ending someone's life, but that was the world he had found himself in, and he had to accept it for now, for better or for worse.

The majordomo prayed to the goddess for a moment, wishing that the departed soul would get peace, before the guards began the dirty work of transferring the dead body to a ditch some of them had already dug between the nearby hills.

The knight used a dirty rag he had brought to clean his sword, before looking at Kivamus. "This matter is over, and I'll report to the count about it. It's a pity that we couldn't find out who sent him, but I'm sure Uncle Ebirtas would have a better idea about it."

Kivamus shook his head. It would be far better if Ebirtas didn't have any idea about it... So far, it had seemed that it was only Zoricus who was trying to kill him, so even though the count was indebted to that bastard, it would be easier to deal with them if he didn't have to worry about the Count trying to murder him as well.

"Well, we'll see about that. Come on, let's return now. You also have to leave early tomorrow morning."

Sir Tuilas gave a nod as he put the sword back into its sheath, and with that, he and the majordomo, along with most of the guards, started walking towards the village, while a few of them stayed back to finish burying the assassin.

Chapter 315 Quandary

It was late in the night, and Tuilas and the tax collector had already retired to their respective rooms, since they would have to wake up quite early to leave for Cinran tomorrow. So Kivamus was using this opportunity to have an impromptu meeting with his advisors at the moment. Duvas and Gorsazo were sitting on one side, while Feroy and Hudan on the other. The usual two guards of his temporary protection detail had been sent outside of the manor hall for now, with one of them standing guard in the inner corridor to make sure the knight or the tax collector didn't stumble into the manor hall before they were done with the meeting.

"So? What do you all think?" He looked at the others. "So far the knight doesn't have any idea of Levalas' confession to us. Should we even believe in his story? If so, we will have to think of a good way to make him stay without Tuilas finding out about it. Otherwise we might have to execute him as well."

Gorsazo began, "Apart from a few short visits, I've never stayed in Cinran long enough to know about the local political affairs, so I can't say whether his story is true, but I don't see why he would go to this much trouble to surrender to you if he didn't mean it. If he still wanted to assassinate you, it would have been far better for him to let Dosol do what he wanted instead of reporting to us about it. I think we should believe in him."

Hudan shook his head. "Whether he's lying or not is hardly as important as the need to set an example. Now that we know he's the same guy who tried to kill you before the winter and had escaped unpunished for that, we need to give him a proper sentence now. Whether it's execution, or sending him to the mines for a few years like we had planned at that time, he can't be left to live without giving him any punishment."

"I don't think that would help anyone at this point," Duvas disagreed. "Getting one more coal miner is hardly going to do much for us, and executing him doesn't help us in any way, since apart from those sitting here, nobody knows that he's the same guy as the one who tried to poison you. As far as the guards know, he's just a dutiful guard of the tax collector who wanted to prevent your assassination, which is why he reported about Dosol. We'll have to tell Levalas to retain his current look for now, and by the time some other guard recognizes him, they will know him a lot better as a person, so we can reveal more about his story to the guards if needed at that time. As for his story, I remember enough from the time Ebirtas came into power that Levalas' story seems credible enough to me. Looking at him when he was confessing, I didn't see a liar there, but I still don't know if we should trust him enough to let him stay here and work for you like he wants."

"You all are missing the point," Feroy interrupted. "Yes, it's important to check whether he's lying, and I don't think he is, but you all are forgetting that he is someone who has worked for Zoricus nearly all his life. That means he knows the kind of things about that greedy baron that we have no other way of finding out. By now we all know that even the Count seems to be working on Zoricus' directions. Well, more or less. But knowing Zoricus' greed and the fact that he's already sent two assassins here, he's not going to stop doing that anytime soon. For now, he doesn't have any control over the knights, but if he does force or manipulate the Count into that, he might just send an official punitive expedition to Tiranat along with the help of other barons of Cinran to weaken or even destroy us. From what I know, it could be a force of at least a hundred guards and knights, and possibly double that number, if not even higher. As it stands, we are in no state to resist such a force, so any insider information Levalas can offer at the time would only be helpful for us. Even if we can't act on that information right now, it could be vital in the future when dealing with Zoricus."

"There is no reason for the Count to do that!" Hudan retorted. "Even if Zoricus gets some control over the deployment of Cinran's knights, the Knight Commander will not agree to such a thing without a good enough reason. Now that we have paid the taxes, there won't be any such reason until autumn at least."

Kivamus kept quiet for the moment, letting others reason it out.

Feroy snorted. "You still seem to think that everyone in Cinran works by the gallant knightly ideals."

"I've met Sir Makanas, the Knight Commander of Cinran!" Hudan said with a glare. "He is a prime example of what a knight should be like! There is no way he would do anything uncivilized, like attacking a village under his protection without a very good reason!"

The ex-mercenary shook his head. "That may be true, but he still has to follow the orders of the Count, doesn't he? Zoricus only has to find some vague but plausible enough reason to make the Count accept it. Once Lord Ebirtas has agreed, and there isn't an immediate threat from Binpaaz, you can rest assured that prime example or not, Sir Makanas will have to follow those orders, whether he believes in them himself or not. Isn't that how it works?"

Hudan sighed, before he gave a nod. "If there is an official order from the Count, the Knight Commander will have to agree for sure. But can Zoricus even find a good enough reason for that?"

Feroy chuckled. "He doesn't have to find a reason. He can just create a new one. I haven't met Zoricus personally, but I can already guess what kind of man he is. Trust me, if he wants the coal mines of Tiranat, then he will not stop at anything, especially if he gets the full backing of the Count for it." He shrugged. "Anyway, we are already hiding the fact that Lord Kivamus doesn't allow slavery here. Even if that's his own choice for this barony, now we've even started keeping escaped slaves from Kirnos to gain more workers, which is certainly going to be a problem if they realize where their slaves are running off to and make a complaint to the Count about it. There's a plausible reason for you."

"Unless we allow some officials from Kirnos to perform a thorough check of every villager who lives here," Gorsazo remarked, "they won't get any solid proof of it, and we have no reason to allow them to do that. While it's far from ideal, we can't stop taking in new people either, but we should be fine on that front for now."

Feroy shrugged. "That's just one possible reason. If news gets out about us being the real source of acelos medicine, or us having a way to produce paper cheaply, I have no doubt a crafty noble like Zoricus can find some loophole to make it illegal for us. The crossbows we already have and the scorpions we are going to make are obviously illegal for anyone outside Fort Aragosa to have. Let's say that somehow we manage to hide all that for now, what about in the autumn? Nobody knows how our finances will be at that time, and if we are even a week late, that will itself be a good enough reason for Zoricus to ask for us to be punished for the delay. Isn't that right, Sir Duvas?"

The majordomo nodded. "Last autumn was an exception when the tax collector didn't come here because of the threat of bandits on the road. There was no point in coming here to take the gold - assuming we even had enough of it at the time - only to lose it again, just like it happened with the previous baron. However, this autumn, I don't think they will agree to any delay of more than a week or so."

"See?" Feroy looked at the guard captain. "Knowing Lord Kivamus, we are going to be spending a lot of gold on all kinds of things..."

Kivamus snorted after hearing that, but remained quiet for now.

The ex-mercenary continued, "That means a short delay is more than possible. Even if that doesn't happen, Zoricus can still think of a different reason. The point is, he's not going to stop. Whether it's sending more assassins, or a full scale punitive raid from Cinran, we will undoubtedly get into conflict with him at some point. So having someone like Levalas working for us - someone who has all kinds of insider knowledge into how the baron operates - will be a Goddess-sent gift for us in that conflict." He finally looked at Kivamus. "I think we should let him live, and instead of sending him to the mines which

would be a waste of his talents, we should slowly try to include him in everything here, once we are more sure of his loyalties. In time we will get a much better idea about him, and can even start including him in our meetings like this one."

"I know your instincts are rarely off the mark," Kivamus muttered, "but you seem to have a lot of faith in someone you have barely met..."

Feroy shrugged. "I see a lot of myself in him. Unlike him, I don't have a drop of noble blood in me, but we were both forced to live a kind of life we didn't want to. That has resulted in both of us getting a variety of experiences just to keep surviving, and that experience is going to be extremely useful to us in the future. For example, in case we need to send a spy somewhere in the future, especially to a city, he would be a far better option than even me."

The ex-mercenary continued, "While I can judge people's intentions easily enough and can certainly hold my own in a swordfight, I've lived most of my life as a mercenary in the forests, and I hardly have any idea of how to merge in with those of high society, like the rich merchants or nobles, especially those of bigger towns and cities like Cinran and Ulriga. I did well enough trading in Kirnos, but in the future, if we need to send someone to those bigger cities, whether as a merchant or a hidden representative of Tiranat, Levalas' past experience living in the Count's mansion and having a good experience of dealing with all the nobles in that place will be invaluable to us. Of course, Sir Duvas or even Gorsazo could do most of that just as well as him, but I don't think that you'd be able to spare their usual tasks for long enough to send them away from Tiranat for weeks at a time."

"You are right in everything, but all that hinges on how much we can trust him," Kivamus said. "I agree that Levalas could be very useful to us in the future, but he could also stab us in the back easily enough if we give him this much freedom."

Chapter 316 Tricks

"There was a similar risk when you included me in your council," Feroy said, "wasn't it? Even though we were forced to come together because of that ambush at Madam Helga's inn, you had never met me before either. As for Levalas, I'm not saying that we need to immediately make him an advisor of yours or something, but I do think it should be okay to include him as one of the guards for now. Of course, we shouldn't give him full access to you until we are completely sure of his loyalty, but even until then we could use him as a guard."

"I'm still not too sure about it..." Hudan muttered, "but as long as he's never left alone with Lord Kivamus or is allowed to go too close to him anytime soon, I am willing to give him a chance."

"Don't worry," Feroy reassured the guard captain, "I'll keep an eye on Levalas. If we decide to keep him here, we don't even need to tell anyone else that he is the same guy who tried to poison you. We can just let others know that he's just someone who wants to serve you instead of Zoricus. Guards often change their loyalty if they are paid more and for a lot of other reasons. It's not that common, but it's still a good enough reason for other guards not to question it too much." He looked at Kivamus. "The final decision is yours. What should we do with him?"

Kivamus gave a slow nod, feeling ambivalent about it. He knew that he had made some miscalculations in the past by being too forgiving, so he didn't want to repeat such mistakes, but he also didn't want to execute someone who wanted to change his old ways and had surrendered to him in good faith.

By now, he realized that he needed to be far more practical in the perspective required to survive in this world, which included being strict and even executing people when needed, like he had done with Dosol. However, he also knew how precarious the situation of their village was, in so many ways. That meant they needed all the help they could get, even if it came in the form of a former assassin. He wasn't yet sure how exactly he would use Levalas, but that kid was beyond talented, there was no doubt of that.

Hardly anyone would possess the courage to return to a place from where he had barely escaped with his life on the slim chance that he would be forgiven instead of being executed. Not to mention, changing his appearance well enough so nobody would recognize him and behaving naturally - while posing as just another guard who came with the tax collector - and staying in the same manor which had dozens of possibly hostile guards required a lot of skill. And nerves.

He nodded. If there was someone who could dupe even Feroy - since the former mercenary hadn't been able to find Levalas' real identity until he'd revealed it himself, it meant that his talent was prodigious. On the other hand, there was still a small possibility that this was just another ruse by the assassin to find a better way to kill him, but this was a harsh medieval world and as a noble, some threats to his life would always remain. More importantly, while he had never imagined that he would become a politician or a ruler in his past life on earth, in Tiranat he really was one of them, for better or for worse.

And in politics, there were no permanent enemies, since this wasn't a simple case of forgiving or executing an assassin anymore. In case something happened to the old Count, Levalas could be revealed as a genuine rival for the domain of Cinran. Of course, Ebirtas already had a son to claim his place after that, and even Tuilas was a distant nephew of the count, but with Levalas working for him, it would be possible to influence that situation to benefit them in so, so many ways.

He took a deep breath, before looking at others. "I agree. Levalas is far too skilled for us to just execute him when he could turn out to be tremendously useful to us in the future - whether because of his professional skills or his birthright. We should give him a chance."

Feroy nodded. "I know this is not an easy decision to make, but I'm glad that you are going to take the risk this time. Trust me, I won't let it go wrong. If Levalas shows even a hint of turning a traitor, I'll end him myself."

"So be it," the guard captain said. "Now the question is how do we get Sir Tuilas to leave him with us."

"This has to be done very delicately," Duvas agreed, while glancing at the inner door. "Like Feroy said, if Levalas was really just another guard, we could just say that we are going to pay him more, and their supervisor - in this case the knight - would agree to leave him with us, usually after taking a bribe. However, Levalas is not just another commoner. He's the son of the count's older brother, which means a big rival to his power, and he's also been working as an assassin for Zoricus, so even the crafty baron will need a good enough reason for him not to ask too many questions about it."

"What can we do then?" Kivamus asked. "I want to keep this under wraps as much as we can."

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Feroy snorted. "Then there is only one way here. We need to kill Levalas."

Gorsazo frowned. "What? Our whole discussion is about not executing him!"

The ex-mercenary smirked. "He doesn't need to really die, of course. But for Baron Zoricus and the Count to accept it without questions, they still need to believe that he's dead. That's the only way Sir Tuilas is going to leave him behind."

Hudan rubbed his chin. "I think I get what you're talking about. How about a brawl?"

Feroy nodded. "That's what I was thinking. We still have enough losuvil powder remaining for a few more doses, so it should be fine for them to recover afterwards."

"Just what are you both talking about?" Duvas asked.

Feroy smirked, and tilted forward. "Here is what we'll do."

It was the early morning of the next day, and Ustaimo was ready to leave along with the knight's retinue. The sun had just risen above the Arakin mountains in the east, and the spring weather felt perfect for a nice and slow journey to another town - not that Kivamus wanted to travel on a wagon on the bumpy road himself. The sole wagon of the tax collector had already been prepared for the journey, with the adzee pelt folded carefully under an oil cloth in one corner, while Madam Nerida had provided enough dried meat and fresh bread for the two day journey for all those who would be traveling.

Once all the preparations were done, Ustaimo walked to him. "It was really nice to meet you, milord. You were not at all like what I expected from a son of a Duke."

"I'm glad to hear that," Kivamus grinned.

The tax collector returned the grin. "People need leaders like you in this kingdom. I just hope you don't let the world change you."

Kivamus snorted. "Don't worry, there's no chance of that."

Sir Tuilas, who was wearing his full plate armor as usual, glanced at the servant's hall once again with a frown, while holding his steel helmet in one hand. "Can't believe that idiot got so drunk that he started a brawl with a sword! To think that he wanted a fight to the death against three guards at the same time! I'm glad your guards did what was necessary to take him down."

"There are bad apples in every bunch, you know?" Duvas spoke regretfully. "I'm just glad that Levalo wasn't able to injure any more people before he was taken down." He shook his head. "Can't imagine why he wanted to get drunk so badly... I heard that he'd even borrowed a silver coin or two from many others to buy more ale when he'd used up all of his own."

"I wish I'd been there at the time," Hudan grunted. "To start a drunken brawl is one thing, but also trying to threaten the maids after drinking too much? I'd have separated his neck in one strike for daring to do that!"

"Well, you can say he got what he deserved anyway," Kivamus shrugged, "although he did manage to injure two other guards before he was taken down. It'll take them weeks to heal fully..."

"He's really not going to make it, is he...?" Ustaimo asked with worry.

"You both just saw him yourselves," Kivamus spoke in a sorrowful voice. "There is no coming back from a stomach wound like that. I'm just surprised he even made it through the night, although there is simply no chance he'll get to see another sunrise. We'll have to look for a proper burying place for him later today."

"Good riddance!" Sir Tuilas spat. "I don't need reckless fools like him anyway..." He shook his head in disgust. "What rotten luck I had on this trip! One of the guards I brought turned out to be an assassin, while the other was a drunken cretin!"

Hudan snorted. "Well, one is already dead, and the other will die soon enough. They reaped what they sowed."

Ustaimo looked at the knight with concern. "Wouldn't it be risky for us to travel through the forests with just two guards to protect the tax gold?"

"If you want I can send a few of my guards to accompany you till Cinran," Kivamus offered.

"There's no need," Sir Tuilas grunted. "We'll just have to be a little more alert on the road, but apart from the two guards in chainmail, there is also me, as well as my squire, to protect the gold. The roads are much safer now. From what I know, it's been months since the last bandit ambush on that road. We'll be just fine."

"Well, I really hope so," Kivamus nodded, feeling glad that he had already gotten the receipt for the tax payment. He really hoped Ustaimo would return safely, but it wasn't his responsibility anymore.

"We should leave then," Ustaimo said. "I really look forward to meeting you again in the autumn. You too, Sir Duvas."

"Wait. Before you leave, I want to present you with some small tokens of appreciation," Kivamus said, before he called up a servant who had been waiting nearby with a few bundles wrapped in some old cloth.

Chapter 317 Parting

Taking the longest bundle in his hands, he gave it to the knight. "This is for you."

Sir Tuilas unrolled the cloth to find a sheathed sword inside, and raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Perhaps we don't have craftsmen as good as those in Cinran," Kivamus smiled, "but this is still a brand new sword, which I had our blacksmith make specially for you. It even has your name carved on the blade."

Sir Tuilas brought the sword closer to see it, before he grinned for the first time since he had arrived. "Thank you, milord. I'm sure it will be very useful in separating Binpaazi heads from the rest of their bodies."

Kivamus chuckled at the audacious knight before turning to the old tax collector, and offered him a much smaller package.

Ustaimo opened it, and a small pocket-sized ledger made of paper came out. "This... this must have been costly!"

Kivamus grinned, not revealing the fact that it was made from paper created right here in the village. He had Leah sew up a small bundle of it, after cutting a bigger sized sheet of paper into 4 to 6 smaller sized rectangular pages. It had only taken them a few regular-sized sheets, but the result had been a small sized notebook which had enough pages to last a while.

"Don't worry about the cost," he grinned. "I know you must be called regularly by the count to give reports on his finances, so this small ledger should be useful for you to make small notes and write such numbers."

"Of course," Ustaimo gave a smile. "I will put it to good use!"

Lastly, Kivamus picked up the final package from the servant, before handing it to the knight. "This is a small gift for Count Ebirtas."

Sir Tuilas opened it, and found a finely crafted warbow inside. "This... This is exquisite! Where did you even get it?"

Kivamus shrugged, hiding the fact that he had asked Darora to make another warbow by putting all his other tasks on hold, and to make intricate carvings and designs on it, as was common on nearly everything which the higher ranked nobles used. However, they simply couldn't reveal that they had a talented craftsman capable of making a warbow here, since with the tensions running high in the east Darora would surely be asked to serve the Count from now.

"Oh, just a merchant who'd visited us from Kirnos," he replied. "It wasn't cheap, but I hope the Count will like it."

The knight smiled, as he gave the bundle to another guard who had come with him to keep in their wagon. "Uncle Ebirtas really likes collecting luxury items, and this is no less than that. I'm sure he'll be pleased."

"Well, let's hope so," Kivamus replied, as the knight's guards and his squire climbed on the wagon.

"May the goddess smile upon your village," Ustaimo wished, before he took his place on the wagon.

The knight gave him a final nod, before he mounted his horse as well, and with that, the tax collector and his protection group began moving towards the gates of the manor.

Before long, the wagon had exited the manor and turned to the right, to exit the village from the northeastern gates on their journey to Cinran.

Kivamus exhaled loudly, finally feeling relieved that his worries about tax payment were over and the knight was soon going to be out of the village. "Well, that went well."

Hudan shook his head in wonder while looking at him. "I still can't believe you managed to make them think that Levalas is dying..."

"All credit goes to Feroy for this," Kivamus said as he started laughing, remembering everything which had happened in the night, before Duvas and the guard captain joined him as well.

After his decision that he wanted to give Levalas a second chance, Feroy had suggested that they make it seem like the young man had started a drunken brawl and gotten mortally injured during it. They did have to give some real wounds to him as well as another couple of guards to make it seem more genuine, but all those were surface wounds and would easily heal in a couple of days, especially with the use of their remaining losuvil based medicine. The former mercenary had even used some fresh blood from a wolf they had killed after it had strayed too close to the village walls in the night to make the wounds seem even more serious than it was.

After everything was done, they had called up the knight and the tax collector and told them an elaborate story about the brawl which had gotten out of control. Tuilas had immediately decided that Levalas wouldn't survive for long after seeing that much blood, and had said that there was no point in trying to take him back to Cinran's herbalists, since the guard wouldn't live long enough to survive the two-day journey anyway.

Thankfully, everything had worked out for the better, and the knight had returned to Cinran with the news that two of his four guards were dead, including Dosol and Levalo. That news would certainly reach Zoricus' ears, but the baron would have no reason to believe that Tuilas might be lying, and the greedy bastard might even be happy to know that Levalas had perished and wouldn't be able to tell anyone about the assassination plot.

Somehow getting his laughter in control, Kivamus looked at the guard captain. "Where is Feroy anyway?"

"Oh, he went to the eastern hills to scout them and see if there are any recent signs of someone being there. We've already been keeping two guards there for scouting and to get an early warning of Torhan's raid, but none of them match the skills of Feroy in a forest."

"Will he also start staying out in the nights from now on?" Duvas asked.

Hudan nodded. "He has to. We can't afford to be caught unaware if Torhan arrives with all his bandits." He shrugged. "I just hope it happens soon. It's not that I want our village to be raided, but all this waiting is making the guards too tense and agitated. It's not good for their morale."

Kivamus frowned, glancing at the gate guards who had bunched together and had been talking to each other with a nervous voice. "I know what you mean... It's also been more than ten days since we stopped sending guards out for hunting. We really can't afford to do this for too long, especially now that our food stores are nearly empty."

"How about we send some scouts further?" Hudan suggested. "Perhaps a half day journey towards Kirnos..."

Kivamus shook his head. "It is too risky. It's not like Torhan would use the road to travel here, but even at best we will only get the news that he is coming soon, which we already know, so it wouldn't help us that much. But if that guard gets captured, perhaps by a single arrow striking his horse, the bandits can force him to tell a lot more about our defenses, which will really hurt us."

Hudan sighed. "You are right. Well, I'll go and make a visit to all the village gates to see how our guards are doing. I'll also tell the women guards on the watchtowers to start keeping the crossbows in the open now."

"Go on then," Kivamus nodded, before looking at the majordomo. "How is it going with the sowing?"

"The seed drills have been wonderful," Duvas reported with a grin. "The farming foreman Pinoto told me that we have already sown around a third of the total cleared area. He was grumbling that he needed more seed drills to use, but even with the dozen we already have, we'll be able to complete sowing the full area in perhaps two weeks. This is with just around 30 farmers in total! Perhaps a dozen more, if you include those who are transporting the seeds to the farms and those who are using the horses to plow the remaining fields even now. Still, I'm no farmer, but even I didn't expect that we would ever be able to grow enough wheat to feed the whole village using just a small fraction of the population."

Kivamus snorted. "This is still too high, you know? Above 40 men and women being used for farming from our population of around 400, means we are using more than 10% of the population for farming. Even then we likely won't be able to feed everyone from the harvested grain, especially if our population keeps increasing. Ideally I want to reach a stage where only around one percent of the population being engaged in farming is enough to feed everyone, but that will take a long time. Still, I agree that it is a big improvement from what is common elsewhere in this kingdom. If we had to use above 200 workers for this, like Pinoto had estimated, we simply wouldn't be able to mine any more coal - which is not an option for us."

Duvas nodded. "Yeah, that's one of the reasons the previous baron never even tried to start any farming here." He added, "Pinoto told me that he would still need around 30 workers - mainly those who have some experience in farming - to tend to the fields after the sowing is completed, but that is hardly a problem. We can afford to give 30 workers to him, but 200 men working there continuously just wouldn't be possible."

"Certainly. How's it going with the blacksmith and the carpenter? I didn't have enough time to ask them when I gave them the custom orders for the gifts."

"The new iron shipment will help us a lot. Like you wanted, I told Cedoron to make ten more fine meshes first, so Darora can fix them on the frames for new moulds and deckles to increase our rate of making paper. Once the blacksmith is done with it, he will make half a dozen new safety lamps for the coal mines. The miners are making do for now by transferring the few safety lamps they have to each mineshaft again and again to check for any dangerous gas before they start using tallow candles for light, but having enough safety lamps will save the time wasted in transferring the lamps, and will help to increase our coal production."

The majordomo continued, "All that should only take a few more days, since Cedoron can hand over most of those things to his apprentices now. After that he'll start forging the iron parts for new crossbows. Darora already has some wooden frames for them ready, while his apprentices are making more of the wooden parts every day. Once they start getting the iron parts from the blacksmith, they can start making more crossbows again."

Chapter 318 Updates

Kivamus gave a nod to Duvas. "It will postpone making the scorpion, but I think it's a good idea. Darora needs some time to study it more, while I also need to modify the design a little so it can be fixed on a pivot ahead of the parapets of the watchtower. Right now, it's not like we are expecting attacks from knights wearing plate armor, so we can postpone the scorpion a couple of weeks to arm our guards with more crossbows."

Duvas frowned. "I have no real proof of what this scorpion might be capable of, but it would have been very helpful in the coming raid if it works like you claim."

Kivamus shrugged. "Even if we told Darora and Cedoron to build the scorpion first, it will still take around two weeks - at least - since this is the first time they will be working on it and they might have to make changes as the final design comes into life to make sure it works properly. Most likely, if we are going to be raided, it will happen long before that and their effort would go to waste, because even if we got to finish it in time, we would still only get a single scorpion and only one watchtower could be mounted with it, while the bandits could attack from any other direction, rendering the scorpion a moot point."

He continued, "On the other hand, the carpenter could make half a dozen more crossbows in that time using his already crafted parts, if I am estimating it right. That would help us a hell of a lot more to defend from a raid. Taniok is already working on the fifth watchtower in the middle of the northern wall, so more crossbows is what we need more than anything right now. That reminds me, what about the shields Feroy wanted?"

"Darora has ordered his apprentices to start making them as well," Duvas reported, "now that we have enough iron. Their structures are simple enough that the apprentices can make them easily, but until now we were waiting for more iron, without which the wooden shields wouldn't be able to be reinforced. So Cedoron's apprentices are also making the iron bands and the other parts for reinforcing them."

"Good. So far we haven't really been using shields to train the guards... By now, I had expected to arm everyone with enough crossbows and perhaps even..." he trailed off, knowing they wouldn't be able to make guns any time soon. "Anyway, knowing how slow the process is to produce new crossbows, it was a good idea from Feroy to train them in using shields as well. At least we have half a dozen guards who already have experience in it, and can help in training the others."

The majordomo glanced at the nearby guards again. "What do you want to do about them? We really need a regular supply of meat to feed the villagers and keeping the guards cooped up within the walls for so long isn't a good idea anyway."

Kivamus sighed. "I know... but we can't afford to lower our strength right when we are expecting the raid. Let's wait a few more days, and if there is still no sign of Torhan, we will start by sending out a single hunting group, and will increase them as needed."

Duvas nodded. "It should be fine I guess. Although we do have to think about how to start paying the guards soon. We may not be able to pay all the villagers yet, but at least we need to start with the guards and the manor servants, along with the maids."

Kivamus exhaled. Their expenses were not going to go down anytime soon, were they? "Let's wait for more merchants to come, and then we'll see about it. We do need to save enough gold to pay the tax again in the autumn, but hopefully we should be able to raise more revenue from uh... our original products."

"I pray that Pydaso is successful with that negotiation in Ulriga..." the majordomo muttered while looking at the sky. "Tax-free income would be a goddess-send for us right now." He glanced at the servants' hall. "Today is the weekly grain distribution day for the villagers, so I should talk with Madam Nerida about how to manage it from our limited food reserves, for when the workers return in the evening."

"Go on then."

Kivamus watched as Duvas walked away, before he turned towards the manor house. He needed to modify the scorpion blueprint first, and then he could finally start working on something he had wanted to design since arriving here.

In the evening, Kivamus had just finished with the blueprint, and given it to a servant to take it to the carpenter. He glanced at the empty shelf in the corner of the manor hall where he used to keep blueprints in the past. After the scare of the knight arriving in the manor just as he had remembered to put them away, he had decided to keep all of their blueprints and such designs in the makeshift laboratory room and only bring those blueprints here which he had to work on at the moment, just to be on the safer side. It would be far easier to explain a single drawing as his idle musings to someone, compared to explaining how he got a shelf full of such designs.

However, something still had to be done to prevent such a thing happening again in the future. While calling that laboratory a storage room had worked this time to prevent it from scrutiny, they couldn't take such a risk in the future. They really needed more space for things like that.

He snorted. When he had arrived at this manor house before the winter, it had seemed way too big to him with nearly a dozen rooms and only Duvas and him to stay here, but now it felt far too small. Perhaps it was a good thing too. It showed that Tiranat was progressing. Still, there wasn't anything he could do about this problem before the more important tasks were completed - the list of which always kept growing - but he would have to think of a good solution for it in the future.

Duvas, who had been sitting nearby while scribbling on his ledger about the usual daily expenses, put his quill down right as the outer door opened and the guard captain walked inside.

"Milord, I have uh..." Hudan scratched the back of his head, "good news I guess."

Kivamus looked at him in curiosity. "What is it?"

"Well, the guards on duty at the south-western gate just reported that more than a dozen new refugees have arrived there from the west."

Kivamus shook his head. "More immigrants right when we don't have enough food to feed them.... Still, this is indeed good news. Now that we have shifted the village to only two meals a day, our remaining food supplies should stretch long enough for us to feed them until we can buy more wheat. Any good craftsmen in them?"

Hudan shrugged. "Not really. Most of 'em were slaves and did whatever their masters asked them to do, while the others used to work as laborers and such. No carpenters or blacksmiths there."

"Well, we can't have everything I guess. You did confirm that they were not bandits or any scouts for Torhan, right?"

"Of course. None of them were even armed. Most of them were gaunt and haggard, and didn't look strong enough even to break a twig in half." The guard captain snorted. "Trust me, they aren't bandits. But I'll still ask Feroy to talk to each of them separately to confirm their stories."

"That's a good idea," Kivamus agreed, before looking at the majordomo. "You have already asked the villagers for us using their shacks, right?"

Duvas gave a nod. "I have, although those are hardly in great condition. But we have more than enough space to house these new arrivals for now."

"Good, it will have to do for now, but we really need to start working on better housing soon, preferably before the summer is here. Now that the village's population is increasing, we will need at least one more longhouse block soon before we can start making new houses where the shacks are currently standing."

"There is certainly a lot to do..." Duvas sighed. "Taniok will need three or four more days to finish the fifth watchtower, then around another week to finish the last one in the south. Then you wanted to have him work on the triphammer, right? Shouldn't we make a new longhouse block first?"

Kivamus shook his head. "Now that the dam is complete and the waterwheel there is working properly, that trip hammer is going to be very important for Tiranat. It will help us a lot in making more paper, as well as cutting new planks at a very high rate, which will speed up most of the construction in the future. Once it's done, Taniok will be able to make new buildings far faster than he can do now." He looked back at Hudan. "How is Levalas doing?"

The guard captain snorted. "We did give him some real wounds to make it seem genuine, so he'll need a few more days before he's ready to run around."

"That's a good thing actually..." Kivamus said. "It will give Feroy and the other guards more time to talk with him and find out if he has any hidden intentions in mind."

"Of course," Hudan agreed. "We have enough guards here right now, so I have already told some of them to keep an eye on him all the time. Once he has healed fully, I'll start including Levalas in the daily workouts and training with the other guards to get him up to speed to our standards, which will also give me a chance to find out more about him."

Duvas looked at him in curiosity. "Did nobody wonder why we suddenly have a new guard here - one who wasn't even a resident of Tiranat? How are the other guards taking it?"

"That's the thing," Hudan shook his head in wonder. "The morale of the guards has only increased once they found out about Levalas, or rather, Levalo - as he prefers to be called in public, so nobody asks questions about his original name. Anyway, even though we are keeping his real employer Zoricus as

well as his noble blood hidden from everyone else, all the guards and even the servants are happy to see that someone who used to work for the Count wants to serve you now. It makes them feel proud of their workplace!"

Kivamus chuckled. "That makes sense. I guess it was a good decision to keep Levalas here, for so many reasons..."

Chapter 319 Guarding

It had been four days since the tax collector had returned, and there was still no sign of Torhan or his bandits. It was difficult to say at this point if it was for better or worse. On one hand, it might mean that the western bandit chief had decided not to attack them at all, which could only be good for the village. On the other hand, it might mean Torhan was still gathering more bandits and weapons to attack Tiranat with more strength. Only time would tell, but hopefully the village would be ready for him this time.

Right now, it was late morning of a new day and Kivamus was walking to the north of the village along with Hudan and a few other guards on the invitation of Taniok. The weather had remained pleasant, so he had again started participating in some light workouts with the guards while also getting some basic sword training with the guard captain, not that he expected to become an expert in that any time soon, if ever.

Darora had already received the updated blueprint of the scorpion a few days ago to study in his free time, but he wouldn't start working on it for now. However, Cedoron had started to forge the iron parts of a crossbow once again from the newly bought iron ingots, which had allowed the carpenter and his apprentices to keep working on them, and Darora had already provided a new crossbow to the manor two days ago, and they were expecting another new one by today. It was slow going, but one day they would be able to provide a crossbow to every single guard, which required nearly 50 weapon pieces to arm everyone, including all the woman guards, as well as the six new guards they had recruited after getting news of Torhan's impending raid.

Soon, he passed the second long house block, and turned towards the northwest. Before long, he reached the place where Taniok had been working on the fifth watchtower. Seeing him approach, the bald carpenter quickly climbed down the ladder, and bowed to him.

"Milord, I thought you'd come by the afternoon," Taniok said while scratching his neck. "This watchtower would have been completed by then."

Kivamus chuckled. "Don't worry about it. So it's nearly done?"

The carpenter nodded proudly. "Just need to fix the planks for the outer parapet. That's the last thing due for this one."

"That's good to hear," Kivamus praised, before looking at the guard captain. "Have you already started putting guards here?"

"Of course," Hudan nodded before he grinned, "although we might really need to hire even more guards if you keep making more towers! We have 12 women guards right now, so after the sixth watchtower is built, I'll only be able to put them on duty for two shifts out of the three every day."

Kivamus frowned. "Aren't the older villagers being used as watchmen too?"

"They are, and that's how I will have to manage it in the future after our guards start going out hunting again. For now, I am posting one guard during the day and two at night on every watchtower, since we can afford it these days and the threats are high. We had recruited half a dozen older villagers, so in the future they will work the dayshift from eight to four, while the women will be used for each of the two eight-hour night shifts, since they'll have better night vision than the older villagers. Of course, there are still two men posted at each gate as well, especially in the night, so they can bring the news of an attack to the manor quickly and to provide support to the crossbow women if needed." Hudan shrugged. "I think it will be fine as long as there are only six watchtowers. Six older villagers and twelve women guards can easily cover those in three shifts, although it will still mean reverting to only one person on each tower."

Kivamus shook his head. They were probably already overdoing it in terms of how many villagers they were using as guards, but with all the threats surrounding Tiranat, it was never enough. Still, now that new refugees and immigrants had started coming here, and with more than enough space between the village walls and the present houses in the center of the village, Tiranat's population could expand quite a lot even within these walls. Eventually they should be able to hire more guards, although it would take time.

He looked at the carpenter. "You'll still start on the sixth watchtower in the afternoon, right?"

Taniok nodded enthusiastically. "Its foundations should be completed by then, so you can take back the clay diggers after that. My apprentices have already started stacking up on planks, so I'll start putting in the pillars today, and the last watchtower should be completed in another four days, I think."

"Excellent!" Kivamus grinned, waiting for the day when the guards would be able to have a good line of sight in every direction. "You have to start working on the trip hammer after that."

The bald carpenter grinned, with gaps easily showing in his teeth. "I really want to try something new, so I can't wait to start on it! Darora has been taunting me these days that I am getting old and can't build anything new, so this will show the young'un that these old bones can still compete with him!"

Kivamus chuckled hearing about the friendly rivalry between the two village carpenters. "I'm sure you will. Go on then. We need all the towers built as soon as possible."

Taniok turned around, and climbed up the ladder with an agility belying his age which was certainly above forty. Kivamus watched the carpenter working for a moment before he turned around as well.

Two longhouse blocks had helped the villagers survive the harsh winter here, but once Taniok was done with the triphammer, he would have to start constructing new longhouses as well. The same size and design as the earlier ones should be good enough, so two new blocks could be constructed on the other side of the wide dirt road which ran in front of the two older blocks. That should ease up the strain on the older blocks enough for the carpenters to start demolishing the shacks and huts in the village center, and make proper housing there. However, he had to consider if it was worth allowing people to live in separate single storey houses, which would require a lot of space and would need them to expand the village walls far sooner than they would have to if everyone lived in longhouses.

But letting everyone live within longhouses wasn't a good idea either, since the coming summer would mean very congested and muggy conditions inside the blocks, which could give rise to all kinds of diseases. He sighed. If they could make concrete here, it would allow them to create high-rise buildings, but Tiranat just wasn't there yet. They simply didn't have the production capacity to produce enough steel or concrete for that, nor did they have workers trained in that. Truthfully, their current population didn't even require high-rises, so perhaps brick buildings would be better for now.

Hmm... that was a good idea though. While concrete was out of their hands, making bricks should be much easier. They would still need to make cement for those buildings, but it would be required in far lower quantity than it would be for a fully concrete-made building. Brick houses couldn't be made too high, or they would be unsafe and be at a risk of collapsing under their own weight, but they should still be able to make five or six stories and be safe. Earthquakes could certainly damage even them, but from what he remembered from the original Kivamus' life, they weren't a major concern, at least in Reslinor.

Eventually, they would have to move to concrete buildings for sure, but this would allow the workers to get experienced in making multi-story buildings, since the two-story wooden manor house was the highest most of the local workers had worked on. Also, cement production - whenever it was started here - would take time to catch up to the amount needed to make a fully concrete building anyway.

Yeah, this should work. He remembered that the first industrial revolution in England had mostly started with the countless cotton mills being housed in brick buildings. He snorted, thinking about the new blueprint design he had started. Perhaps brick buildings really would be what helped bring an industrial revolution here as well. It would also prevent the risk of a fire breaking out and burning everything into the ground, which was always a nagging worry in his mind these days - especially knowing that for Zoricus or Torhan to destroy this village, all they had to do is to smuggle in an arsonist inside the walls who would set the houses on fire in the night, which would destroy overnight all the progress they had made over the winter.

He glanced at the wooden longhouse blocks on the left, and the empty space on the right full of dirt and weeds swaying in the wind. He sighed. Yeah concrete buildings were still a long way away, and perhaps even brick buildings would take time. At least he had some time to make a decision on it, since Taniok still had to build two more longhouse blocks first.

In the evening, he was sitting in the manor hall working on a blueprint, while Hudan had also returned to the hall after training the guards. The two guards who had been posted inside the manor while the knight stayed here had returned to their usual duties as well. That's when Dugas walked inside the hall and interrupted his sketching.

"Milord, the fifth watchtower was just completed," the majordomo reported. "Also, a new merchant has just arrived from the north."

"Finally!" Kivamus exclaimed, turning his head to look at him. "I was getting worried about our food stocks emptying before the next merchant arrived. We have less than a week's worth of food remaining after accounting for all the seeds we need for sowing."

Dugas looked frustrated. "No, the merchant has hardly brought any grain!"

"What?" Kivamus pivoted around on his chair in surprise. "But why?"

Chapter 320 Managing

"The merchant said that he got the iron ingots for cheap since hardly anybody is buying them in Cinran these days," Duvas explained. "He said that he had heard rumors that there was a good demand for iron in Tiranat so he wanted to make some profit on it. As for the wheat, its prices are so high that he wasn't sure if we would want to buy much of it."

"Damn it!" Kivamus cursed. "Did he bring any wheat at all?"

"He came with two wagons," the majordomo reported, "with the cargo space of one and a half wagons used for iron. All he has brought for food is seven sacks of wheat."

Kivamus sighed. "Better than nothing, I guess. It will provide... uh just under six more days of food for the whole village at two meals a day." He shook his head. "I really miss the times before the winter when we were able to send Pydaso to Cinran with customized orders."

"No, we can't risk sending a dozen guards to Cinran right now!" Hudan objected. "Torhan might raid us any day now. It'll be all for nothing if he burns the whole village to the ground this time because we didn't have enough guards to deal with him."

"I agree," Duvas commented, "not that we have any excess gold to buy that much wheat right now, unlike before the winter. Sending Pydaso to sell the medicine in Ulriga was far more important anyway. We really would have been bankrupt at this time after paying the taxes if he hadn't put an advanced order for acelos tablets from us."

Kivamus exhaled loudly. "You're right... So how much gold do we have right now? Can we even buy the iron and wheat from this new merchant?"

Duvas scratched his short beard. "After paying the taxes, we had just above 162 gold left. We have already promised to pay the remaining 94 gold to Trevalo when he returns in around 10 days, but we can buy everything from this new merchant with the remaining amount. Although we will have to postpone paying the smoked fish merchant of Kirnos for now."

"That's fine, Feroy didn't agree on a definite time for paying him anyway."

"Still, are you sure you want to buy all the iron ingots?" Duvas asked. "We can save that gold to buy food instead..."

"From whom exactly?" Kivamus countered. "It's not like we have access to a huge marketplace of wheat here in Tiranat even if we had the gold." Or any online marketplace, he muttered under his breath. "With Pydaso away, we have to depend on the merchants coming here. Like hudan said, we can't even risk sending a caravan to Cinran under Feroy's lead, since we need all the guards here right now."

Thinking about the various ways iron would help them in the future, he shrugged. "You also know that the price of iron might not remain this low for very long in case Binpaaz further escalates their raids, so it's a good idea to stock up on it whenever we can. Saving gold for wheat would be helpful, but only if we can actually buy it." He made some mental calculations. "We'll need to pay this merchant around 36 gold for all his wheat, and just above 41 gold for all the iron at its currently low prices, instead of the 71 gold we'd have to pay at its usual prices. By fully emptying his cargo space, we can also sell two full wagonloads of coal to him, which will earn us above 20 gold, so we should be able to manage it."

"Then I'll make the trade tomorrow morning," the majordomo gave a slow nod. "His prices might be a little different from the previous merchants, but I think your calculations should be correct enough, so we'll have to pay him a net amount of around 54 gold for everything he's brought. After repaying Trevalo, that will leave just enough gold for us to continue paying the craftsmen. For now at least."

"It's far from ideal, but we'll have to manage it. Once we've paid Trevalo all the dues, he should agree to sell us more wheat on credit once again, although we'll have to give him a good deal on coal once again. Hopefully he'll bring wheat in all six of his wagons next time, which will easily feed the whole village for more than a month."

Duvas gave a slow nod. "Let's hope so. Trevalo won't come for another 10 days, so even adding these seven sacks of wheat to our remaining food stores will only allow us to feed the whole village for around less than two weeks. This is cutting it too close."

"That's only if no other trader comes until then, but that's unlikely. Even a single merchant coming with a full wagonload of wheat will tide us over this time." Kivamus added, "Still, you are right, and I don't like it either. Not sending hunters out to supplement our diet with meat is already hurting us. Did you talk with Madam Helga about the current state of the Rizako mushrooms? I think we might need to use them before we'd planned."

Duvas nodded. "I already told her to use them as food. She wanted another week to let them grow fully, but we can't afford to wait that long, so she agreed to start picking out the ripe ones from tomorrow."

"That will help to extend our food stores by another day or two," Kivamus agreed, "but it's still only a small supplement to the diet, especially since we couldn't give them time to grow into that mushroom barn fully."

"Then shouldn't we start sending hunters out now?" the majordomo asked. "It's been two weeks since we got the news of a possible raid by Torhan, but it seems like it's not going to happen at all and we were worrying unnecessarily."

Kivamus took a deep breath, thinking about it. "I don't think Feroy was completely wrong in anticipating it. That former slave Joric also agreed that Torhan behaved like a highborn noble and wouldn't let his men get wiped out by us without trying to take revenge, but you may also be right... Still, I don't want to send hunters out now only for us to be raided right after it." He looked at the guard captain. "What do you think?"

"In my opinion," Hudan shrugged, "I would prefer every single guard to stay in the village. It's my job to make sure Tiranat is always well defended, and we can never have enough guards for it. But letting people start to starve in two weeks if no new merchant comes by then is also not an option. I think we can start by sending a single hunting group out to the east, preferably by using the two village hunters, and only two of our guards."

"It will help, but a single group can hardly bring enough meat by themselves..." Kivamus muttered. "Okay, let's do this then. If there is no sight of any bandits by tonight, send that first hunting group out in the morning. Assuming tomorrow night also stays quiet, send another hunting group the next morning. Make sure not to send our best archers or the strongest swordsmen. We still need them here to deal with the bandits."

Duvas looked at the guard captain. "Can you still defend the village with the remaining men?"

Hudan nodded. "We recruited six new guards recently but I don't think they are ready to fight against trained bandits yet. So I can send two of them in each hunting group, coupled with a village hunter and a trained guard with past experience in hunting. This way we'll only be losing two experienced guards, but we'll be able to send out two fairly balanced hunting parties."

"That's a better idea than what I suggested," Kivamus praised. "Two hunting groups might just be enough to help us through this time. So, will the remaining guards be enough for defence?"

Hudan shrugged. "Even with these six guards out, we still have around two dozen male guards, apart from the dozen crossbow women. It's not ideal, but with five watchtowers already built, I think we should be able to get a warning of a raid in good time for us to deal with them. We also have at least one crossbow in every watchtower now, which will help to thin out the bandits before they reach the walls. It helps that the full moon was just a few days ago, so there is enough light in the night these days for the guards to spot any approaching bandits in the cleared area outside the walls easily."

"Hmm... Torhan seems like a crafty bastard, or he wouldn't have reached where he is today. I think he might very well wait until the next new moon," Kivamus suggested, "but we'll have to manage. These two hunting groups should return in four to five days so the meat they bring will help us a lot. I really don't want to start butchering our animals here unless we really have to. The sheep and rabbits we have gotten have to be preserved for the future."

"I agree. However, now that the snow has melted," Duvas began, "it's not going to be easy to drag the animals over the forest terrain, since they can't use the sledge properly. We'll have to give a wheelbarrow or two to each of the hunting parties."

"Do it," Kivamus ordered. "We have enough of them right now for Taniok to manage the watchtower construction without them."

Hudan stood up. "Then I'll go and select the guards and tell them to be ready to leave in the morning. I'll also have to send word to the two village hunters."

"Go on then..." Kivamus gave a nod. "These hunting groups and the mushrooms are going to be vital for us in the coming days."

"Of course," Hudan agreed. "I'll make sure to tell the hunters about the importance of getting enough meat and in time." With that, the brawny man walked towards the outer doors.