

Londoner 321

Chapter 321 Ideas

Once the guard captain had exited the hall, Duvas looked at Kivamus with tiredness evident in his eyes. "I know you are doing your best to feed everyone, but I hate us being so low on food. It reminds me of the time just before you arrived, when the villagers were so close to starvation. We could barely feed a single meal to those living in the manor, so all I could do was watch when the remaining villagers just wasted away."

Kivamus sighed. "I know... That's why we started farming here, even though it won't help us for months. Now that Tiranat's population has started to increase, even if slowly, we really need to find ways to produce more food here."

Duvas gazed at the setting sun visible from the window open in the west. "I think instead of making more longhouses, you should get Taniok to make a few more mushroom barns in the south once he's done with the watchtowers and the sawmill. We don't have any shortage of space within the village walls, and only a few workers would be able to grow a lot more Rizako mushrooms to feed everyone."

"That is what I had planned earlier..." Kivamus shook his head, "But we couldn't even afford to wait long enough to let all the mushrooms mature in the first barn. We are already going to use those mushrooms to feed the villagers, which means we can't afford to wait long enough for those mushrooms to grow and replant them in a new barn instead of eating them right now. Once the sawmill is ready near the dam, Taniok will get a steady supply of a lot of planks with just a single apprentice working there, instead of him using all three of his apprentices to cut planks. Once it's working properly, we'll be able to construct new barns and longhouses much faster than we did last time."

He exhaled. "If we had a few more trained carpenters here, we could have done this even faster, but getting more craftsmen requires increasing the village's population, who will in turn require more food and housing, for which we will need more carpenters once again... There is no easy solution to this. I just hope our two hunting parties will be able to bring enough meat in a few days."

The majordomo nodded. "Let's hope so, since another merchant coming here in time is not in our hands." After a while, Duvas looked at him again. "There was something else I wanted to talk to you about. It's regarding the quality of the paper we are making here. You've said that it is very crumbly and rough right now."

Kivamus looked at him curiously and gave a nod. "Yeah, I've seen much better quality paper in the Ulriga Palace, but I just can't think of how to improve what we are making."

"Then you'll like this news. I had talked about it with the laborers who work to make paper, with the hope that they would do the sawdust pulp mixing and beating more properly, so the final quality of paper would improve. That hadn't really worked, but this afternoon one of those laborers told me that he wanted to try mixing something else in it. There is a bitter, starchy root of a weed found commonly here, which could do the trick of binding the sawdust fibers more properly, according to him."

"A starchy root?" Kivamus asked, immediately thinking of it as a possible food item. "Why doesn't everyone use it as food then?"

Duvas sighed. "It's just not suitable for human consumption. It immediately gives diarrhea to anyone who tries it, and trust me, some villagers still tried it more than enough times last autumn. Animals can usually digest it, so we occasionally feed them to our cows when we are low on hay - and to even the nodors, sheep and rabbits now. Anyway, the worker said that he had even tried boiling it last autumn to see if it could be eaten after that, but it didn't help at all and he still got sick after trying it. But he had noticed that it still seemed very starchy, and might help in improving the quality of paper."

"Hmm... I'm not sure if it'll help, but there is no harm in giving it a try. Why didn't he say it earlier? I didn't know about that root."

"Well," the majordomo shrugged, "the manor residents are more confident of speaking openly these days after your constant efforts for it, but the village workers are still hesitant to suggest new ideas. Anyway, all the workers know how precious that paper is, and to try this idea they'll have to do it with a whole batch. If it doesn't turn out well, it will ruin four or five sheets of paper at least - which'd cost us nearly a full gold coin based on the rates Pydaso bought it from us. That's ten days' wages for a laborer, so they were hesitant to even suggest it."

"Never mind that. It's still a risk we have to take. If it works, we'll be able to sell the paper at a much higher price, so it'll be worth it. Tell him to try it with tomorrow's batch. He should try boiling a few of those roots, and reduce the water until only the starch is left. Then he should mix it in the slurry." He added, "You should still commend him for suggesting a good idea. If this idea works out as he hopes, we will even reward him. Hopefully it will give confidence to the other workers to give such suggestions without any fear."

Kivamus shrugged. "As many new ideas as I come up with, it simply can't compare to every person thinking innovatively about what they're doing. That is what will help Tiranat to keep progressing in the long term."

Duvas nodded. "I'll go to the east of the manor tomorrow morning, and will tell him about it. The idea of a reward will certainly motivate him to give it a good try. That reminds me," he snorted, "Hudan has been sending any guards who haven't been doing well in their training to beat the sawdust slurry for the day - to help out the workers there, and also as a kind of punishment to motivate the guards to do better. However, after we had recruited the six new guards, they were the ones who were usually sent to do it. But right now they must be jumping in joy to join the hunting parties, just to get away from beating the pulp."

Kivamus laughed. "I'm sure they are, not that they will find hunting for animals in the forests to be any easier..."

~ Ustaimo ~

Ustaimo gave a sigh of relief as their wagon finally entered the gates of Cinran. The knight was still riding his horse in front of them, while his squire and the two guards were sitting near him on the wagon. He smiled broadly seeing the usual hustle and bustle of the town. As interesting as Tiranat had seemed to him, this was home.

However, it hadn't been an easy journey for them while returning from Tiranat. With two fewer guards coming back with them, the constant risk of being attacked and the tax gold being stolen had prevented him from sleeping properly in the night. The ratty old blanket he'd brought with him to serve as a bedding on the journey had hardly provided any comfort on the bumpy ground under the wagon which had been his bed for the last three nights.

Before long, they started moving on the cobblestone road of the affluent section of the town, and soon, the huge stone mansion of Count Ebirtas of Cinran was looming in front of him. Once they entered inside, the two guards jumped over the wagons, and started walking towards their barracks after a nod to him. The knight also climbed down from his horse and handed it to his squire to take it to the stables, before he started walking to his own accommodations.

Ustaimo called out to him. "Sir Tuilas! Let's report to the Count first. We can rest after that."

The knight grimaced, looking at his heavily muddied armor. They had to deal with a wild boar's attack on the road near what used to be an inn in the past, and its after-effects had left the knights' usually shiny armor not so shiny. "Fine. I'll come with you."

Ustaimo confirmed that the satchel with all the gold was still secure under his tunic, and started walking with the knight to the meeting room of the Count.

Soon, they were shown inside the door by the guards, who closed the door after them.

Count Ebirtas was sitting at the head of the ornate table with his head supported on one of his hands while looking at a map spread on it. Sir Makanas, the knight commander, was leaning over the table next to him, pointing at something on the map, while the gluttonous baron Zoricus was sitting on the other side of the table, munching on something as usual, but he frowned when his eyes went to Ustaimo.

The Count looked up once he noticed their entrance, before he glanced at the muddy armor of the knight, making him wrinkle his nose in disgust. "What happened to you! Couldn't you have... taken a bath or something before coming here and assaulting my nose?"

Sir Tuilas grimaced. "I'm sorry, uncle. It was a boar we found on the road... Ustaimo told me to report to you as soon as we arrived, or I wouldn't have come without bathing first."

"Forget it! Just stay off my rugs..." the Count ordered with a scowl. "You both are still late... I thought you might be dead with the gold lost with you."

Ustaimo shook his head, "We are only late by a day, milord. It's usually a three day journey to that village anyway. We were still pushing the horses hard, so we only took two days to reach Tiranat from here, but while returning, our wagon broke a wheel on that sorry excuse of a road. We wasted a few hours trying to repair it, but when it didn't work, we had to send a guard on horseback to call for another wagon from your mansion. It was already dark by the time it arrived, so we had to stay out another night and only reached here just now."

"It's fine," the count waved it off. "I'm just glad you are back safely."

However, the pot-bellied Zoricus was still looking at them with a frown. "Any, uh... major news from Tiranat?"

Chapter 322 Reports

Ustaimo squinted at the baron as he took a seat. What was he talking about? Why would there be any major news at all from such a small village?

Sir Tuilas sprawled in his chair, looking at the Count and Zoricus in turn. "There was! And you won't believe it till you hear it! Dosol, one of the guards I had taken with me, turned out to be an assassin! I caught him trying to kill the baron red-handed!"

Lord Ebirtas glared at the young knight. "What? How is that possible! I can't believe we had such a traitor in our ranks!"

Zoricus interrupted him. "So is the Duke's son dead then?"

Sir Tuilas shook his head. "Thankfully, no."

"Praise the goddess!" The Count breathed. "Kivamus Ralokaar may be exiled, and I still have to make him follow the same rules as my other barons, but I don't want to think about what would have been the response from Ulriga if he was assassinated!"

"So what happened with that Dosol guy?" Zoricus asked carefully. "Did you find out who sent him?"

Sir Tuilas sighed. "He never admitted to anything till the time I beheaded him. He must have gotten a lotta gold for keeping his mouth shut."

Zoricus exhaled loudly, before he chuckled. "It's good that you executed him. We can't allow anyone to kill nobles..."

Ustaimo had been looking at the gluttonous baron carefully, and was starting to get some horrible suspicions about Zoricus, but this was no time for him to say anything about it, not without any proof at least. Was that why Lord Kivamus had sent him and the knight out for a stroll many times during their stay in Tiranat? Because he already feared something like this, and didn't know whom he could trust?

He had also noticed a few guards present inside the manor house this time, which he hadn't seen in any of his past visits there. Hmm... It had to be something like that... There was no other reason why Lord Kivamus would take so many precautions for a visiting delegation from the Count. Ustaimo knew that he wouldn't get to meet with him again until the autumn, but he would have to talk about it with the young baron.

He had no doubt that Zoricus had always resorted to underhanded tactics to get what he wanted, but he hadn't anticipated that the greedy baron might be willing to go as far as trying to assassinate a son of the Duke... He had no way to know for sure, but if his suspicions really were true, Ustaimo knew that his days might also be numbered in this world...

Trying to put the morbid thoughts out of his mind for now, he focused on the conversation around him.

Lord Ebirtas was looking at the young knight with a frown. "Is that all?"

Sir Tuilas shook his head. "Actually, there was another guard of ours who didn't survive. Levalo got so drunk on our last night there that he started a brawl with the local guards using a dagger, so the other guards had to forcefully take him down, but Levalo got badly injured in his chest and didn't survive..."

Ustaimo glanced at the pot-bellied baron, and noticed that he was frowning once again.

"Did this Levalo say anything when he was drunk?" Zoricus asked. "Anything weird?"

"I have no idea..." Tuilas shrugged. "I only found out about it later when I went to see him, but he was already dying by then. Although some other guards were saying that Levalo was trying to harass the local maids, so maybe that's why they got so enraged."

Zoricus took a deep breath, before he muttered something under his breath. He looked at the others sitting around the table. "Well, I guess Tiranat really is a dangerous place. It's good that idiots like that guard die sooner rather than later, instead of eating our precious food."

Sir Makanas, the knight commander, gave a nod. "I agree. It's also incredible that there was an assassin like Dosol working here... I'll make sure to test the loyalty of our other men immediately. Trust me, I won't let anything like this happen again."

The Count was rubbing his wrinkled forehead. "I don't need this kind of headache right now... Is that everything or do you have more bad news to give me?"

"No, uncle. There wasn't anything else like that." Sir Tuilas grinned. "I do have to say, one of the baron's personal maids was really something. It's a pity he didn't agree to sell the redhead to me."

"Shut up!" The Count scolded loudly. "You are way too old to fool around like that. You may not be my son but you still belong to the same bloodline. Learn to behave like it instead of being another embarrassment to me. I already have an idiot son doing enough of that."

The young knight gazed downwards in chagrin, but remained quiet.

The Count exhaled loudly. "I can't believe that two out of the four guards we sent are dead, but I'd say good riddance if they were like you said. We can't afford any traitors these days with Binpaaz getting bolder and bolder." He looked at Ustaimo. "So did you get the tax or not?"

Ustaimo nodded. "I brought the full amount. It was a little under 1100 gold this time."

"At least that's something," Lord Ebirtas smirked, before glancing at Zoricus. "I guess I won't have to borrow anything from you this month after all."

The pot-bellied baron shrugged. "Well, if you need a loan next month, I'll be in your service to provide it to you on time. With the usual interest rates, of course."

The Count just shook his head at that.

Ustaimo looked back at the man he worked for. "I also bought an adzee pelt from there. It was a little costly, but..."

The Count interrupted him with a grin. "That's just fine, I am a count. I can afford to buy a damned pelt! Where is it? It's been a while since I had a new adzee fur coat made."

"The servants must be bringing it here from the wagon," Ustaimo replied. "If you want, I can give it to the furriers immediately to make a fur coat."

Lord Ebirtas scratched his medium length white beard. "It's spring, so I won't get to wear a fur coat for months... Maybe I should have a rug made this time... Tell you what, just have it put in a storeroom for now. I'll decide what to do with it later."

"As you wish, milord." Ustaimo added, "The Baron of Tiranat also sent a personal gift for you." He picked up the wrapped package from the floor and opened it to show the exquisitely carved warbow to the count.

The Count took it in his hands, and looked at it from all sides, before he handed it over to the knight commander. "I've seen better ones, but this is still quite good. I guess having a Duke's son serving under me as a baron would be helpful after all. At least he knows how to treat his superiors properly!"

Ustaimo noticed that Zoricus was frowning after hearing that, but remained quiet at the moment. Huh... maybe his suspicions were on point, after all.

"Anything else you need to report?" Ebirtas asked.

"Well, I don't know if this is important," Sir Tuilas reported while rubbing his neck, "but when I'd asked around about Tiranat before leaving, I had heard that it was a dirt poor village and didn't even have a wall around the village." He snorted. "The dirt poor part is still true, but it looks hell of a lot different than what I'd expected. They now have tall walls around the village, and are building one watchtower after another. It's like they are preparing for a war or something."

"You mean stone walls?" The count asked with a frown. "Like the ones we have?"

"This doesn't sound good, my lord!" Zoricus interrupted. "I think you should order them to tear down their walls..."

Sir Tuilas snorted. "No, no... How can a copperless village like that ever afford to build mighty stone walls like ours? They don't even have a proper tavern there, for goddess-sake!" He shrugged. "It was just a wooden palisade wall. Hardly half the height of our walls."

Lord Ebirtas laughed hearing that. "Then let them be. With Binpaazi knights growing more audacious these days, I don't mind my barons improving their villages' defenses. As long as they never gain the power to challenge me, or to resist a punitive raid from me in case they don't pay their taxes or something, it's all good."

The count shrugged. "Tiranat is already located in a dangerous region of the kingdom, like you saw. Those walls will help them defend against the wild beasts and bandits which are scattered there like insects in late summer. Forget about the walls. I'm just glad that you brought the full tax. We have bigger things to worry about right now. While you both were out, Binpaaz sent another group of horsemen to harass our farmers in the east. They trampled over some of the farms, and burned a few huts again."

Ustaimo sighed as the knight commander began listing the farms which had been hit. His journey to Tiranat had ended well, and he was more than glad to be back in Cinran, which was his only home. However, he still couldn't wait to visit Tiranat again. Who knew just how many changes would have come there by autumn? Lord Kivamus didn't seem like a man who ever sat idle, and he was excited to see what else he would do in that village to help the commoners. Wishing that autumn would come sooner, he focused on the conversation around him.

~ Kivamus ~

Kivamus was sitting in the manor hall in the evening as usual, working on the latest blueprint, when the outer door opened and Duvas walked inside with a grin. Kivamus stopped what he was doing and looked at the majordomo curiously.

Duvas, who had been holding a small satchel on his shoulder, opened it and removed a few sheets of paper from it. "It worked, milord! That experiment worked!"

Kivamus took one of the sheets of paper in his hand, and looked at it in the light of the evening sunlight coming through the window. Turning it around this way and that, he touched the texture of the paper and found it to be much smoother. Finally, he held a corner of the paper, and tore a thin strip from it, to see how crumbly it was. Of course, it tore easily enough, paper being just paper, but it felt much better than what they were making till now.

It was still far from the quality found on modern earth, but the new sheet of paper was at least a grade above that which was being made earlier. He could see some fibers visible on the paper, which could only be removed when the pulp was beaten up even more forcefully than what was possible to do manually, while he still needed to find a way to bleach it to make it whiter in color. However, he had been thinking of making something like a rolling stone wheel, which would be simple enough and could crush wood chunks and sawdust properly, even without the triphammer - which would already be used for many other things. It would still have to wait until the village craftsmen had some more free time, however there was no doubt Pydaso would be surprised to see even this quality of paper.

He grinned, and handed back the paper. "This is wonderful, Duvas! From tomorrow, tell the workers to mix that root's starch in every batch of paper they make."

Duvas chuckled. "I already gave the order knowing you would say that."

Kivamus laughed. "I'm glad to hear that. Wait, is there even enough of this root available here? We aren't going to run out of it if we start using it regularly, are we?"

Chapter 323 Plans

The majordomo snorted with laughter. "It's the root of a weed! It grows everywhere even if we don't want it to. Trust me, we are never going to run out of it. That being said, how about giving that worker The Baron's Medal of Science? That is what it is for, right?"

"That's a good idea," Kivamus agreed. "It's late today, but tomorrow morning when the workers gather outside the manor, call up that laborer to the front and I will give him the medal and tell the villagers about his achievement. We will also give some gold to him as a reward, but that's for later. Hopefully this will inspire other villagers to come up with good ideas by themselves."

"Let's hope so," Duvas nodded, before he walked to the corner shelf to put the new sheets of papers there. We already sent the first hunting group out in the morning, so are you sure about sending more guards out?"

Kivamus nodded. "Assuming our scouts in the forest and on the watchtowers don't see anything suspicious tonight, send out the second hunting group in the morning. By now, the losuvil vines should also have started getting new leaves, so they can start bringing those as well. Although, now that winter is over, I'm worried if the leaves will last long enough for their journey till here..."

Duvas took a seat before he replied. "Hmm... it's still spring, so I think it will be fine. Those leaves are good enough for a few days in winter, but only a few hours in the summer. So in the spring I think they should last for at least a day or so. After perhaps a month and at most two months, any leaves plucked from those hills would lose their effects before the hunters reach the village."

"I think we'll have to think of a better solution later. Syryne has already been working with the village potter to make more and more customized clay pots to refine and process the leaves into the medicine. So once we have enough leaves, we will try to stock up on as much acelos as we can in these two months, but after that we might have to make a temporary encampment there. We have other things to worry about right now so I guess we'll deal with it when the time comes."

The majordomo nodded. "That reminds me, Madam Helga told me that she saw the first fruits of Toloraberries in this season."

"Oh, weren't those the ones she made that delicious pie from?" Kivamus asked.

Duvas grinned. "They were, although it will take a few weeks for there to be enough of them for that. Once that pie is being made again, we can start rewarding the best students in Gorsazo's classes with small slices of pies instead of the unsweetened baked cookies we have been giving them."

"I'm sure they would love it, and seeing the treats might also inspire even the older villagers to start participating in the classes more seriously." Kivamus knew that the toloraberries grew on a shrub, but there weren't too many of them here. "Madam Helga has some past experience growing plants, right?"

Duvas nodded. "She grew a lot of herbs and such plants when she used to run that inn on the northern road. She is also the one who supervises the vegetable patches we grow here in the manor."

"Then tell her to try replanting the shrubs of these berries. I don't know if it will work, but if she's successful, we can use the cleared space outside the walls to grow them on a larger scale. Those shrubs are short enough that they won't hinder the line of sight from the watch towers either."

The majordomo scratched his short white beard. "Of course, we had already tried it in the past before you arrived here, but it didn't really work. But I think we can try it again. It might just work this time with Madam Helga's past experience in gardening."

"Yeah, having something sweet to eat in the colder months would motivate a lot of people. How's it going with the craftsmen?"

"Darora gave the 11th crossbow yesterday, so now we have enough to place two of them on every watchtower, with one extra remaining for the sixth one under construction, or to train other guards. The last tower will take a few more days, but Taniok said it is right on schedule. As for the blacksmith, he already gave us the new wire meshes we wanted, so once Darora has used up all the stored crossbow parts, he will make the new frames for more moulds and deckles. Cedoron has also given four more safety lamps to the coal miners, so once he has made two more of them by tomorrow, he will start forging the iron parts for more crossbows, as well as the trial parts for the scorpion. He has also been talking with Taniok about the design of the triphammer and the sawmill, so they are working out the best way to make the iron parts required for them which will do all the tasks while also saving on as much iron as possible."

"That's good to hear," Kivamus nodded. "I can't wait to see the sawmill ready. Taniok can make a lot more planks immediately after that. Hmm... That means most of the bulk carpentry would move there after that, apart from Darora who only works on small, intricate parts and doesn't produce much sawdust. So perhaps we would also have to shift the sawdust press machine to the stream's banks to make it more efficient, since after the sawmill is ready, basically all of the sawdust would be generated right there. This would also free up the kids who needed to gather it from the village, so they can focus on studies and other things. In fact, with all the sawdust being produced there, it would be a good idea to shift the whole paper making setup to near the dam."

He continued, "Same for the blacksmith, I think. Once the triphammer is ready, Cedoron can use it to forge things much faster while working there, although he might have to make a new forge near the dam for that. We'll see what to do about it when the triphammer is ready. Although we also need to do something to increase our coal production."

"Huh... But why?" Duvas asked. "You know that the demand for coal is quite low right now. We can barely sell what we already produce here."

"That is exactly why we need to produce more, so we can target new markets for it." Kivamus shook his head. "I am thinking about the future right now... With Cinran being our only market, we have to rely on the vague hope that merchants from there will come regularly. But that setup is not working these days, you already know that. Kirnos' demand is low enough that it hardly counts. Anyway, I have a few ideas about how to increase coal production, but before anything else, we will need a better road connecting the village to the mines."

Duvas frowned. "We already have a road there..."

"Hah!" Kivamus snorted. "That's not a road! It's a dirt path at best. A road means something having a wide and flat service- just like the ones we've made in front of the longhouses. We will need to make something like that for the mines soon... So how long does it take for loaded wagons to travel from the mines to this manor?"

"With the wagon empty in the morning, it takes something above half an hour." Duvas added, "When returning, the wagons are heavy so they often get stuck on some potholes on the road... well, the dirt path. So they usually take three quarters of an hour, to a full hour when returning."

"Hmm... with a better road where the wagons never get stuck, and where the horses can pull their loads easier, would mean the whole one-way journey could be done in well under half an hour. That would save around an hour of time including both sides' journeys. That's an hour extra which the miners can use to dig more coal..."

"In fact, we will be better served by extending that road further ahead of the mines to the dam site, which will save time for the carpenters' apprentices and the paper makers too. And maybe even the blacksmith. But that is still only a start. Later on, I want to make some parallel wooden rails connecting the village to the mines, and later to the dam site. We can even make a new kind of wagon which will run only on those wooden rails, with the horses walking parallel to the rails pulling that load. It will allow the horses to pull a much heavier load and faster. That means with perhaps two pairs of horses, which can drag just two wagons right now in total, will be able to pull a longer wagon-train of four or five wagons easily with the help of those rails. Perhaps even more."

Duvas frowned. "I still don't understand. I think I know what you mean by the rails. I've seen the carpenters using something like that when they have to drag a heavy log closer to a construction site,

but that still takes a lot of men - or a pair of horses - to drag it. So how will the horses become twice as strong just because of dragging the load on wood instead of dirt?"

Kivamus smiled. "It has to do with something called friction. I can explain it more easily when we have those rails ready, so let's leave it for then. Anyway, right now we don't even have the capacity to make that many wooden rails with our two carpenters already using up all the daylight hours for other things. But once the sawmill is ready, it should allow us to increase our wooden-goods production many times over. We should be able to produce those rails after that. But again, we have a few more steps to go through until we reach there, starting with a better road."

Duvas took a deep breath. "You've said a lot of things which don't seem to make much sense, but I know that you are not just boasting about things which are not possible..." He nodded. "Since we often have new refugees coming here these days, we will have more labourers in the future. So I'll tell the carpenters to take on a few more apprentices. Even if they can only do the basic stuff, it will help in increasing the production of wooden goods in the coming days."

"That's a good idea," Kivamus praised. "I just hope we are able to deal with Torhan's bandits without any major losses. Once the sword of an imminent raid stops hanging over our heads, we will be able to focus on the construction of everything a lot more easily."

"Let's hope so, milord... let's hope so."

Chapter 324 Wondering

It had been two days since they had found that mixing the root of that weed into the paper pulp improved the quality of the paper, so since yesterday, all the new batches of paper sheets being produced here were of the improved quality. Yesterday morning, Kivamus had also given the baron's medal of science to the worker who had thought of the idea, and the young man couldn't seem prouder of his achievement. The other paper workers had immediately gathered around him to see the medal while saying that next time they would be the ones to get it, giving Kivamus good hopes for the future of Tiranat.

The second hunting group had also been sent out by now, so hopefully the dangerously low levels of food stored in the manor wouldn't turn out to be a curse for the village until they returned with fresh meat. The Rizako mushrooms were already being included in the meals, which resulted in a small but definite decrease in the amount of grain consumed daily.

The sowing had been progressing steadily, and by now they had sown nearly two thirds of the total area marked for farming. Of course, those fifty loggers had continued felling trees in the south - just so they

could maximize the amount of wheat harvested in the autumn, which would reduce their dependency on food imports. They had orders not to stop until the rest of the farm area was already sown, which was also increasing the number of logs being moved to inside the village walls using the log-movers. At this point he didn't know if they would get enough seeds to sow the complete area, but he hoped that Trevalo would arrive in time to help them.

He took a step back from the blueprint he had been working on, and glanced at the setting sun through the window in the west. At one point he had even considered pausing the sowing so they could keep more grain for feeding the villagers, but had decided not to do that. All the villagers realized that Tiranat's food situation wasn't good, but they were still managing it so far, even if barely. But by the time autumn came, the village's population would be noticeably higher than today, which would mean their food situation might get seriously bad in the next winter without a good harvest, so he wanted to do his best to prevent that. He had always believed that investing in the future was far more valuable and helpful than consuming something now, whether it was money back on earth or food grain here in Tiranat.

Right now, Gorsazo was out to teach the children and the willing adults in the longhouses, while Hudan was training the guards. The brawny guard captain had used this opportunity of having most of their guards present in the manor to drill them heavily, and all the guards were looking fitter and fitter every day. Of course, it wasn't possible to make everyone a competent swordsman in such a short time, but hopefully it would be enough to make a difference.

That's when the outer door opened, and the majordomo walked inside. Once Duvas had taken a seat near him, he reported, "The sixth watchtower is nearly ready now. Taniok has already completed the sitting platform today, along with the outer parapet, and it will take another day or so to finish the remaining parapets and the roof. When I met Taniok, he looked quite excited to start working on the triphammer and the sawmill soon, which made me remember the last autumn when he and the blacksmith were sitting idle most days."

Kivamus exhaled. "I'm glad to hear that his rivalry with Darora is motivating him to work harder, but I still wish we had more skilled craftsmen here. We are on the right path with both the carpenters and the blacksmith training their apprentice every day, but the results can't come soon enough for me. Anyway, tell Hudan to start posting guards on the sixth watchtower as well. Taniok was smart about finishing the outer parapet first, so our female guards can stay there with at least some safety and keep an eye in the south."

"I'll let him know," Duvas said. "Darora also gave another crossbow today, which makes it 12 in total, but he has used up all the stored parts, so the speed of production will slow down from now. But he said that his apprentices are already trained enough in most of the simple things, so they will still keep

providing us new crossbows regularly even without Darora spending most of his time on it. He will only check the quality of the parts made by his apprentice and do the final assembly from now. From tomorrow, he will spend most of his time crafting the parts for the first scorpion."

"That would be a real boon to us..." Kivamus muttered.

The majordomo nodded. "By the way, his apprentices are also making the frames for the moulds and deckles, so by tomorrow evening we should have half a dozen more of them, so we can double our paper production with that. I don't think we need to allocate more workers on paper making either, since until now they were limited by the number of moulds available. Mixing and beating the pulp is always a difficult process, but other than that, the paper making process involves a lot of waiting until the slurry is boiled with lye, or when waiting for the moulds to get free to put in a new batch of slurry in them. That means those workers can use these new molds to produce more paper. I think we can even give them some more moulds without increasing workers, but you had told me that Cedoron needs to work on scorpion parts first, so I'd only ordered half a dozen moulds this time to save on both time and iron."

"That's fine," Kivamus agreed. "Doubling our paper production will have to be enough for now. Once we have a few scorpions ready, we can make more moulds if needed."

He sighed. "I wish we could have made a few scorpions by now to help in the coming raid, but at least the process will start now. Still, having twelve crossbows means we have one for each woman guard now, so we can start arming the swordsman too from the next ones we get." He grinned. "With two crossbows on every watchtower, it will give a mighty punch in the face to any bandit group who dares to attack us."

Duvas snorted. "I don't doubt that at all. Your order to the fletcher to keep making more and more arrows and crossbow bolts means we have no shortage of them by now - at least the purely wooden ones. I also noticed that Hyola has basically become the leader of all the female guards, and has just announced the start of a daily competition between them from tomorrow to see who can get more headshots on the straw targets."

Kivamus chuckled hearing about the fearless redhead taking the lead. "I can't wait to see the results. In the future we can even start including the male guards in it once they have their own crossbows. In fact, tell Madam Nerida to give an extra portion of food to whoever wins. With not enough food these days, there can't be any better motivator for them to do their best."

"That's a good idea," the majordomo nodded. "As expected, Yufim also wanted to participate in it, but Hyola barred him from it, saying only those who used a crossbow were allowed to participate."

Kivamus laughed, imagining the whiny reaction of the blonde archer at being denied a chance to gloat over the others. There was no doubt that there was simply no match to Yufim's archery skills in the whole village, but the fact that he still wanted to prove it to everyone belied his young age of just 22.

"Yeah, as good as the crossbow women are in their targeting, I don't want the newer ones to be demoralized when competing with Yufim. But give them a few weeks to get more practice with the crossbow, and I have no doubt they could challenge Yufim as equals."

Duvas laughed as well. "That's for certain. Hyola already defeats him more times than not, and it makes me think if crossbows are the future, instead of bows and arrows."

Kivamus snorted. Bows and arrows were going to be outdated soon enough, but even crossbows were only a stepping stone. He didn't know when it would be, but eventually he was going to make guns here. And let the world come at Tiranat after that, 'cause after that? Their enemies will get to know a kind of defeat they couldn't have imagined in their wildest dreams...

He just muttered, "You have no idea, Duvas... Simply no idea."

The next evening, Kivamus was leaning on the handrails of the roof of the manor house, with Hudan and Duvas standing nearby. As usual, Feroy had been scouting near the hills last night, so he was taking a nap during the daytime. However, by now Kivamus had started to question the utility of it. It was leading to the ex-mercenary and the other guards they were using to scout in the hills to get excessively tired, and they still had no results to show for it.

Duvas' words interrupted his thoughts. "I wonder if Torhan's raid is going to happen at all... It's not like we had any definite proof of him wanting to take revenge. Feroy's intuition is all we had to go by, and he still hasn't seen anything suspicious out there. It makes me think if we have been worrying for nothing. If we had been sending hunters out regularly, we wouldn't have been so short on food either..."

Chapter 325 Scouting

Kivamus glanced around at the daily happenings of the manor as he thought about Duvas' question.

Down below, he could see a maid drawing water from the well near the gates, while a servant was pushing a wheelbarrow carrying a sack of grain from the storage barn, probably to make some porridge for the evening meal. The horse stalls in the stable were empty as usual. Even though nearly all the plowing of the fields had been completed, Pinoto still had to use them to drag the seed drills for sowing in the fields. Of course, a pair of horses was also being used to plow the small area of land which was being cleared by the loggers every day until the sowing was completed.

The two nodors they had in the manor had been loaned over to the village miller, so he could rest his own solitary nodor despite being needed to grind more grain these days because of the increasing population of the village. Chickens were clucking in their small enclosure near the stable, while the cows were resting at the time, just like the sheep. They also had more than a dozen rabbits by now, but they were usually kept indoors to prevent any aerial predators making a snack out of them.

On the other side of the manor, in the southeast, guards had already started gathering, where Kerel was supervising a mock fight between two of them. Two hunting groups were out of the village at this point, but there were still more than enough guards in the manor these days that there was a small crowd of off-duty guards gathered to watch and participate in those fights.

Further ahead of them, Hyola was overseeing the other female guards as they tried their best to reload the crossbow quickly and shoot as many bolts as they could into a straw target while Hyola counted down from hundred to one. It was the redhead's own suggestion to improve the rate of fire of the crossbow women. Close to them, Yufim was showing their newest recruit Levalas how to hold a bow properly. Levalas could hold his own in a sword fight - well, kinda, since he'd mainly used a dagger in the past - but he had shown interest in being able to hit targets from afar, so Yufim had taken him under his wing.

So far, there hadn't been any indication that Levalas had any bad intentions in mind, and Feroy had said that the young man was trying his best to change his life, so he had told the other guards to try to include Levalas as much as they could in everything. The fact that he had worked for the Count in the past didn't hurt his prospects either, since the other guards were often seen asking him for stories about Cinran and the tasks he used to do there. He had no doubt Levalas had more than enough stories to tell, even though it must have been Zoricus who had ordered it instead of Count Ebirtas, but that detail was limited to a few people only.

Still, looking at everything proceeding normally around him made Kivamus proud that the village had come so far within half a year. Who knew just how much better they would be in everything by the next

winter. However, they still had to deal with the threat of a big raid from Torhan, which might happen any day now - but that was only if it was happening at all.

"You may be right," Kivamus muttered, "and Tiranat might not be raided at all, but I haven't seen Feroy's instinct lead us astray so far."

The majordomo nodded. "I know, but no merchants have been coming here either, so without enough hunting groups out, it's really hurting our food supplies..."

Kivamus looked at Hudan. "Is it feasible to send more hunting groups right now?"

"I don't want to lower our defenses right when we might need it," the guard captain shrugged, "but including the six newly recruited guards, we have enough guards in total that we can afford to send five hunting groups out these days. Of course, that might mean not having enough guards here in case a raid does happen... but because of the food shortage, we might be able to send another two hunting groups out now. It's not ideal, but having villagers starve is not good either."

Kivamus took a deep breath, gazing down at the people of the manor. "You are right... but we barely have more than a week's worth of grain remaining right now, if we don't want to stop sowing. That means unless Trevalo comes soon, we would have to send a caravan to Cinran ourselves, like before the winter - which would lower our defenses a lot more, while also risking the lives of our guards on that road. Compared to that, sending hunters out is much safer, since it gives us fresh meat - which we can't buy from Cinran - and only requires four men for a single group." He looked back at Hudan. "Tell two more hunting groups to be ready to leave by tomorrow. Include all the new recruits in them. If nothing happens tonight, we will send one of these groups out tomorrow morning, and then another group out the day after."

"As you wish," Hudan nodded. "Including the earlier two groups we sent, it would mean being down by 14 guards, apart from the two village hunters. The only reason we can afford to do this is because all the watchtowers are nearly ready, and we have enough female guards now to pick out any bandits from the towers. However, I would still like some trenches dug outside the wall sooner rather than later. If we make them wide enough, it would prevent any horsemen from trying to attack any place other than the roads exiting our three gates."

"I think we can afford to do it now," Kivamus agreed. "The clay diggers who had been digging the foundations of the watchtower are free now, and we don't have any major requirement of clay right

now, so we can put all of them on trench digging now. Hudan, meet with them tomorrow morning and tell them the details of the trenches."

The guard captain nodded. "Of course. We will also start putting in the sharpened stakes in the trenches as soon as the diggers move on to dig further. As for making those stakes, we have no shortage of small branches these days, so I'll just put some of the guards to use their machetes to do it themselves."

"Good idea," Kivamus praised, before he glanced at the people of the manor again. While everything looked normal from up here, he had seen the tense expressions in the faces of the guards, and the anxious looks the maids threw to each other. Lucem and Clarisa - the two kids they had here - also seemed subdued these days, and that was having an effect on others as well.

He exhaled loudly, as he turned around towards the door of the stairwell. "We all have work to do. Come on."

It was the next morning and Kivamus had been told that another hunting group had left earlier today, while one more group was ready to leave when ordered. No new merchant had come last night as well, which meant their hopes were only hanging on Trevalo returning in time. He also estimated that Pydaso must have reached Ulriga by now, and hoped he would be able to make a good deal there.

Right now, he was taking a stroll in the manor grounds along with Hudan and Duvas, while enjoying the pleasant sunlight of spring. Gorsazo was tutoring Syryne at the time, while Lucem and Clarisa had gone out of the manor to collect sawdust with other village kids.

Duvas had also reported that the carpenter's apprentices had provided the six new moulds and deckles to the paper makers, which would at least double the production of paper in the village. This would obviously require more sawdust, but for now they had no shortage of it in the village and the kids were already gathering small heaps of it near the paper makers and the wood press machine every day. Of course, eventually they would have to think of a better way - of perhaps using wood pulp directly if they wanted to increase the paper production even more - but there was still some time until then.

Soon, he saw Feroy entering the gates of the manor, with dark circles under his eyes. Noticing him, the former mercenary walked towards him.

"Milord! You look fresh and rested..."

"And you look like you just climbed out of a grave," Hudan taunted with a grin.

"Staying up night after night to scout will do that to ya'..." Feroy laughed, before he took a long yawn.

"I am still thankful to you for that," Kivamus smiled. "Others can rest easy knowing that you are out there keeping an eye on any approaching enemies."

The ex-mercenary shrugged. "Somebody has to do it anyway. And I have more experience in this than most others."

"So, did you see anything?" Kivamus asked.

Feroy shook his head. "Nothing but squirrels and other critters. Did hear an adzee howl from the southeast once, but nothing of notice other than that."

"Well, I guess that's good news..." Kivamus muttered. "What about the other two guards keeping an eye along with you?"

"One of them came back with me, and he hadn't seen anything either. Still have to meet with the other one..." The ex-mercenary glanced at the gates. "Ah... there he is."

Feroy called over the guard, who came jogging towards them.

Kivamus frowned when he looked at the guard, who looked a little jumpy for some reason.

"Did ya see somethin'?" Feroy asked with a frown.

The young guard glanced at Kivamus' and others faces for a moment, before he winced. "Uh... I don't know..."

"What do you mean by that?" Hudan immediately questioned him.

"Well..." the guard rubbed the back of his head. "There wasn't anything out there till the sunrise, that's for sure! But around an hour before I decided that it was time to return, I think I saw the shape of a man in the distance... But you know that the new moon is only three days away, so there is barely any light in the night these days. I wasn't sure what I saw, so I went to take a look, but I didn't find anythin'! I still stayed there for a while, just in case, but still nothin'... That's why I was late. But I'm still sure I saw something..."

"Could it just have been some wild animal?" Duvas asked. "There are a lot of them in those hills."

The guard reluctantly shook his head. "Not unless it's learned how to walk on two legs..."

"Well... shit!" Kivamus cursed.

Chapter 326 Fear

Could it be someone from Torhan's group of bandits? Kivamus wondered with a shiver as Duvas glanced at the sky, seemingly praying to the Goddess.

He looked at the others. "What do you think?"

Feroy scratched his short beard. "Can't say anything from this... He could have easily seen me or the other guard coming back. No way to know for sure."

"But it still could be that bastard's men..." Hudan muttered. "It might be a scout sent ahead of the others..."

"You're right... And this happened right after we sent another hunting group out today... Shit!" Kivamus cursed again. "At least we didn't send another hunting group which we had been planning." He looked at the guard captain. "Can we call back the group we sent today, just in case we need them?"

"Too difficult, milord." Hudan replied. "These hunting groups take a new path on every trip to maximize their chances of catching some big game. They've been out for a few hours, so they could be anywhere by now. Searching for them would mean sending more men out, preferably alone in a few directions, and they still might not find them." He shook his head after a moment, "No, it's not a good idea. It'll be very risky if there really are bandits out there. The hunting parties are traveling in groups of four, so they should be safe - or at least could hold their own long enough to escape - but the bandits could take out these lone guards without trouble."

Kivamus exhaled a loud breath. "Leave it, then. I don't want to lower our strength even more just on a vague chance while risking the guards' lives. How many guards do we have in the village right now?"

"In total, apart from Feroy and me, we have 29 male guards including the new recruits, along with 12 female guards. Well, there's also Levalo, but his skills are not up to par yet. We also have the six older men who help keep a watch in the daytime, but they can't fight either, just like one of the guards who had lost his arm. Right now, we've already sent out three hunting groups, which means 10 guards are away, apart from the two village hunters who went with them. That means we have just 21 swordsmen including Feroy and me. 20 if you exclude Levalo."

"Dammit..." Kivamus exhaled a breath to calm himself. "If Torhan's group is really here in full force, we really don't have enough men to fight them in a frontal assault."

"As hard as it is to admit it, you're right," Feroy said. "From what I found from Joric, Torhan should still have above 20 men, even after those we killed. He would have to leave a few of them to keep an eye on his slaves, but on the other hand, he might have armed a few of those slaves who showed any promise in a swordfight. It's hard to know how many of those 54 slaves might be good for it, but he could have added half a dozen men to his group easily if he went this way."

"That's not the only risk..." Kivamus muttered. "If we are right about him being a bastard son of Baron Farodas, he may have gone to ask for help from Kirnos. So..."

"The baron won't easily agree to that," Duvas interrupted. "Giving Torhan access to his markets is one thing, since it makes both of them good money, but if he openly started arming a known bandit and slaver group, word would get out that Farodas has a bastard son out there. I don't think any noble likes to admit that. So unless the baron had no other choice, I don't think Kirnos' own guards would have come to help Torhan."

"You may be right..." Kivamus nodded. "Or at least, I hope you are. That still means Torhan could have brought somewhere from 18 to 25 men, depending on whether he decided to include slaves with his men."

Hudan sighed. "If those numbers are correct, we simply can't defeat them in a sword combat without losing more than half our men, and the outcome is still up in the air even then. The crossbow women can help out if the battle happens close to the watchtower, but if it doesn't, they would just be sitting idle."

"No, not idle," Kivamus corrected him. "I really hope it doesn't come to that, but just in case if we've lost the battle, the crossbow women will be picking out the bandits one by one from the watchtowers if they come too close. We have two crossbows on each tower now, which means a much higher rate of fire than what Hyola managed alone during the Kirnos ambush. If the bandits surround the village, the crossbow women will be shooting quick volleys of 12 bolts again and again, and if the bandits attack from a single direction - those who remain alive after the battle - they will still be in range of at least two towers, which still means four bolts being shot together. With all the target practice the women are going through, trust me, the bandits won't be able to approach our walls without losing most of their men."

"At least not when there is enough light," Feroy muttered. "If it happens in the moonless nights..."

"You are right..." Hudan breathed. "That bastard chose the days near the new moon for a reason! This must be why he delayed the raid so long! Damn him!"

Kivamus shook his head. "No, It won't be easy for the bandits either, if there isn't enough light."

"Not if they start shooting arrows lit on fire..." Feroy said. "Our walls are still wooden, you know? Only mercenaries are known to do that... but I wouldn't put something like that out of Torhan's mind. The archers just have to tie something burning to the arrows. It will completely take away any kind of accuracy, but they can still hit our walls or even the watchtowers easily, which present a huge target."

"Dammit..." Kivamus cursed again, wishing they had something like concrete walls and weren't dependent on the enemy being benevolent enough to not just set their village on fire. "No, wait. They would still have to come close enough for that, and with the height advantage of a watchtower, wouldn't the women be able to pick them out with crossbows?"

"Hmm... I didn't consider the height advantage..." Hudan muttered. "It still won't be easy to see them in the dark, but if the bandits start setting their arrows on fire or come close enough to start throwing small branches lit on fire, the women can still target them. This can work!"

"No..." Feroys sighed. "There is another way, something I used to do when I was with that mercenary group. On a moonless night, all they have to do is to sneak in a few men carrying some flint and steel right next to the walls, before they set them on fire and run away. Our watchtower scouts might not be able to spot them until the walls are already burning."

"Damn it!" Hudan growled. "Damn that bastard Torhan!"

Kivamus took a deep breath, and tried to remove that image of his whole village burning from his mind. "Okay, let's stop thinking about that for now. That is still the worst case scenario, and our crossbow women might still be able to spot them. In fact, start putting more guards on the watchtowers during the night time. We have all six of them nearly ready, so having enough eyes could still prevent anyone from sneaking too close."

He was thinking about what else they could do when he noticed that a few other guards and servants had moved closer, listening to them surreptitiously. There was no point in telling them to go away, since the news about an imminent raid would have to be told to everyone anyway so they could prepare properly.

He looked at the others for a moment before he started giving orders. "Dukas, tell the villagers that everyone should return within the walls before it gets dark, since the gates won't be opened for anyone after that. Hudan, don't stop training the guards, but keep it light and make sure they aren't too tired in case they have to fight right after that. Feroys, I want you to take more precautions as well. Until we are sure that there are bandits out there, I don't want you to stop scouting, but from tonight you have to move in pairs. Until now, you and two other guards were scouting independently, but from tonight, take another man with you, and move in pairs only. For now, we only have guesses about whether there really are bandits out there, but I don't want you to take any unnecessary risk."

The majordomo left after saying that he needed to meet with the foremen of each group to tell them about the orders, while Feroys and the other scout went on to get some rest after eating something. Hudan was the last one standing next to him, apart from a few other guards and servants who were still standing nearby with worried looks.

However, as worried as Kivamus was feeling, he knew that he needed to project a confident facade here. He looked at all the guards standing nearby, noticing the growing crowd, and grinned.

Chapter 327 Conjectures

"Don't worry, everyone," he began, "Tiranat is not the same village as it was when that bastard attacked us before the winter. We had less than a dozen guards at that time, but right now we have more than 40!"

The other guards nodded at his words, so he continued loudly, "We also have six watchtowers ready to spot them, and a dozen crossbows to slaughter any approaching bandits! You all have trained very hard in the winter - so trust me, those bandits stand no chance against you!"

Some of the listeners started to nod confidently at that. Finally, he gave a dangerous smile. "Now it's time for revenge!"

"Hell yeah!" One of the guards yelled. "We will show them what it means to attack us!"

"Nobody can win against us!" Another one bellowed, raising his sworded arm high.

"We'll send the bastards to the goddess!" Hudan roared.

"For Tiranat!"

"For Lord Kivamus!"

"For Victory!"

Kivamus grinned seeing their confidence, knowing he had done his work. It wouldn't take away their worries, but it wasn't a lie when saying that this really was a different village now. Everyone realized how far they had come, and they all were willing to fight to the death to protect their home. He couldn't be prouder of his village and his people. Now all that was left was to deal with that bastard who had dared to attack his village twice!

A full day had passed since that guard had spotted some movement in the forest, but there had been nothing else of notice during the day and the villagers had been able to go to their work in the mines, on the farms in the south, as well as to the dam to check on the status of the fish in that reservoir. Although there was still nothing there, and it might take nearly a year by the time enough fish started to live in that reservoir for the villagers to use them as a food source sustainably.

Apart from the guards scouting from the watchtowers, Hudan had also sent a couple of Horsemen to go close to the surrounding forest during the day without entering them to prevent them from being outnumbered and to see if they could find anything, but there was still nothing.

The news about a possible raid on Tiranat had also been announced to the villagers, so everyone had been keeping a wary eye out, not that they had seen anything. It had made the atmosphere inside the village uneasy, but there was still no certainty of an attack, so the villagers hadn't hesitated to go outside the walls for work.

Right now, it was the morning of the next day, and Kivamus was pacing near the gates of the manor, waiting with anticipation for Feroy and the other scouts to return with any news. Dugas was talking to Madam Nerida nearby, asking about their remaining supplies of food, while Hudan was talking with the guards who had been on duty in the night and had just returned to rest, while those who would work the dayshift from eight to four had already left.

Gorsazo was teaching Syryne at this time as usual, while others were also busy with their usual tasks. Clarisa and Lucem, who were usually jumping around the manor at this time while waiting with anticipation for the villagers to go to work so they could start gathering sawdust with the other kids, were looking subdued today due to the news about bandits, which meant all the kids had been prohibited to leave the village walls for now. So Madam Helga had sent them to play with their friends who lived in the longhouse blocks, since it was basically a leisure day for all the village kids until they were allowed to go outside again.

Soon, Hudan waved at him. "Milord, come on here."

Kivamus walked to the guard captain and noticed that there were still a pair of female guards talking to him.

Hudan pointed at the women standing in front of him. "Isomi and Savomi were on duty at the south eastern watchtower last night." Then he gestured to the women to speak.

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"But..." Isomi began, looking hesitantly at the guard captain. "I am still not sure about what I saw..."

"Anything you can tell will help us in finding out more," Kivamus reassured her. "Just tell me."

The older sister Savomi began, "The treeline is way too far in the south across the farms, but in the east, it's still close enough for us to see things. Around uh... six in the morning I think, right when it'd started to get brighter, I saw some movement from there. None of the villagers had left for work by then, so it couldn't be them, but it was still dark enough that I couldn't be sure that they were humans and not just a pack of wolves or something. We would have blown the horn and sent someone to alert the manor otherwise."

"Yeah..." Isomi nodded. "My eyesight is pretty good, but I wasn't sure either. Although if they were bandits, they're smart, since none of them had any sword or dagger out at the time, or we might have noticed the reflection."

Kivamus gave a slow nod. "We can't be sure of anything from just this, but coming just after that other guard saw something in the hills the previous night, it might very well be bandits. Well, you both did good. Now go on and get some rest after your breakfast. We need everyone to be at their best right now."

The sisters nodded and walked towards the servants' hall, before he looked at the guard captain to ask for his opinion. That's when he noticed the former mercenary walking inside through the small eastern gate of the manor, with another three guards accompanying him.

"Feroy is here," Hudan muttered at the same time. "Oi, walk faster, you slowpoke!" he called out.

The former mercenary snorted, before he sent the other guards to the servants hall, and continued walking to them. Soon, Feroy was standing in front of them, with some small twigs and leaves stuck on his leather vest, although he didn't look harmed otherwise.

The guard captain spoke with impatience as the ex-mercenary remained quiet. "Did you see something or not?"

Feroy kept gazing at the top of the trees visible over the manor wall for a moment, before he exhaled loudly. "We are going to be raided. Perhaps even tonight."

"Shit!" Hudan swore. "How's that?"

"Sometime before sunrise, me and my scouting partner saw a man in the northeast of the village between the trees there," Feroy reported. "It's only one day before the new moon night, so there wasn't enough light for us to recognize who it was, but there is no way any villager would have been there after the announcement that there might be bandits out there."

"We even tried to catch the lone bandit," the ex-mercenary continued, "hoping we could get all the information about his group from him, but we were flanked from another side and someone shot at us with arrows. We didn't get injured before we escaped, but we couldn't catch any of them either."

Kivamus sighed. "I'm just glad that you're fine. So there are bandits out there for sure... But we still don't know if this is Torhan's group or some other one. We can take care of a smaller group far more easily."

Feroy shook his head. "That wasn't the only sighting. The other scouting team saw three men in the southeast as well. They didn't give chase since they were outnumbered, but that makes it at least five bandits out there. Torhan's group is way larger than that, but I have a bad feeling about this. I think it's him."

"Damn that bastard," Hudan cursed. "I hope you find him while scouting tonight and finish him off!"

Kivamus immediately shook his head. "No, there is no point in scouting in the forests anymore. We know for sure that there are bandits surrounding the village right now, so we'd only be risking the lives of our guards. Whether it's Torhan or some other group, they would've seen our watchtowers by now, and they would expect archers to be stationed there, so it's unlikely for them to attack during the daylight hours where they could be easily picked off as they run across the distance between the treeline and the village walls. But they'd be far more alert during the nights, so our scouts can easily be surrounded and killed by them."

The brawny guard captain took a deep breath. "You're right... Then shouldn't we stop allowing the villagers to go outside the village walls as well?"

"Not yet," Kivamus replied after a moment of thought. "The villagers go to the coal mines in a group of more than a hundred, and at least thirty when they go to the farms. These bandits are here to loot gold and food from us, not to exterminate us. So they wouldn't risk attacking such big groups. As for Torhan, he wants revenge against the guards, so it's not likely that he'd kill the villagers for that. If anything, he would like to take them as slaves, but those are big groups, and he wouldn't do that until he has at least tried an attack against us."

Feroy nodded. "We have still confirmed only five bandits out there, so they can't kidnap those huge worker groups, but if we see more bandits, we might have to reconsider this."

"I know," Kivamus agreed, "but we can't stop coal mining, and certainly not sowing seeds unless there is no other choice."

Chapter 328 Worries

Hudan looked at Kivamus. "I think it might be a good idea to go out and kill the bandits before they attack us. They only seem to be scouting us for now, so maybe we can finish them off before the rest of them arrive."

Feroy shook his head. "No, it's too risky this time. For all we know, they are already here. You remember that when we'd attacked Nokozal's bandits in the northern forests, we had insider information from Calubo that there were eight bandits in total, so it made sense to attack them in superior numbers. But this time we simply don't know how many men are lying in wait out there. If this is Torhan's group, and I think it is, they must have brought at least 20 men. Perhaps even more. We simply don't have enough men to attack them in the forests without risking horrible losses."

"You're right..." Hudan exhaled. "Nokozal had attacked us in late autumn, so there were no leaves on the trees, and we could see clearly in the forest. But the trees have gotten new leaves again, so we'd risk being ambushed if we went inside the forest to attack the bandits. It's not like we have plate armor for the guards..." He clenched his fists. "But I don't want to keep sitting here idly waiting for them to attack!"

"That's true," Kivamus agreed, "but we need to get a better idea of their numbers first. We are also in a fortified position here, so we can afford to wait for a day or so to find out more about them. We will also

have a defensive advantage as long as we wait for them to attack so we can have the battle on our terms, so it's safer to wait for now instead of attacking them in the forest. Our watchtowers can help a lot in thinning out their numbers in that case, and who knows, if Torhan is really smart, maybe he will recognize that Tiranat's condition is a hell of a lot more different than the time he attacked us last time, so perhaps he'll decide to run away with his tail between his legs."

Feroy snorted. "I doubt it, but I agree it would be better to wait for now." He looked at the guard captain. "Have you decided on the signaling patterns for the horns which we talked about? I didn't get the chance to ask it from the guards, since until now I was scouting in the nights and sleeping in the days."

Hudan nodded. "We haven't practiced it with the horns yet, to prevent the villagers getting scared for no reason, but all the guards being posted on watchtowers, including the older villagers and the women, have memorized the patterns. A single long blast will indicate an attack from wild beasts like wolves or adzees, while a double long blast is for an attack from bandits. Three long blasts are for a very dangerous attack which could threaten the existence of Tiranat, whether from a very large armed force of above 50 men, or an aerial attack from a bakkore, but the third case would be very rare, and I don't expect that signal to be used anytime soon, but I still added it since you wanted that option too." He added, "After that the guards will give a few short blasts to indicate the direction. One for the north, two for the east and so on."

"This is good. It'll help us in responding to an attack much faster," Kivamus said. "Let's just hope we don't have to use it soon." He glanced at the rest of the manor for a moment, before looking back at the others. "Well, the watchtower guards are already alert, so let's see what more information we get by evening. Feroy, you go and take some rest for now. Hudan, send someone to confirm that all the watch towers have a good stock of crossbow bolts kept there."

Hudan nodded. "The guards are already using that secret compartment to store bolts, which gives enough storage space, but I'll check anyway."

With that, both of the guards walked away, while Kivamus looked at everyone going about their tasks. On the surface, it seemed everything was normal, but looking at the faces of the people revealed their nervousness about being raided, especially from someone who had set half the village on fire last time - with the burnt husks of the shacks from that night still present in the village.

For a moment, it made him wonder if Tiranat was even capable of withstanding a raid from a strong bandit group like this...

No! There were still a lot of things he knew which they needed to work on, but everyone had still done their best in the past few months. He just hoped it would be enough...

It was the evening now, and Kivamus had just completed the first part of the blueprint he had been working on for a while. He took a step back, and looked at what he had drawn. There were many other parts he needed to draw for this new machine, but the current part looked more or less accurate to him. He would have to talk with Tesyb's sister Isuha, who lived in Cinran, to ask if there were any other improvements in the design, but that would have to wait. The carpenters already had a lot of things they needed to craft or build, so this new machine could only be built after that.

With all the intricacy involved in this, only Darora had the skills to make it, but he needed to work on assembling more crossbows from the parts his apprentices and the blacksmith gave him, while also working on the first scorpion. Eventually they would need at least six scorpions - one for each watch tower - as well as at least 50 crossbows in total, and they only had a dozen at the time. This new machine could only be built after that, but having the blueprints ready in advance couldn't hurt.

The outer door of the manor hall opened and the majordomo walked inside along with Feroy and the guard captain.

"Taniok has just finished everything on the sixth watchtower," Duvas reported as he took a seat.

"Finally!" Hudan grinned. "Now we have a good line of sight in every direction for the very first time!"

Kivamus smiled. "Certainly. How's it going with the digging of the trench?"

"The clay diggers have already started working on it," Duvas replied, "but it's slow going. To dig a ten metres wide trench surrounding the whole length of village walls will mean digging more than... uh, 1000 metres. It will take a while for those diggers to finish it."

"I know, but at least we have started it. Make sure that the dug out mud is deposited within the village walls. We will use it to reinforce the walls when we have more laborers free for it."

"Of course," Duvas nodded. "Taniok was also boasting that he would finally get to start working on the triphammer from tomorrow, so he can show Darora that he can make new things too."

"I don't think it's a good idea to send our people as far away from the village as the dam site," Hudan said. "The watchtower guards saw more movement in the forests during the day. It was easy to confirm that they were men and not beasts in the light of the sun, so it means more bandits have moved closer. I think they might even attack tonight."

"With tonight being a new moon night," Feroz commented, "it's certainly possible, although it will make it difficult for the bandits to attack without enough light to guide them. I don't think they will bring burning torches with them, since it would make them easy targets in the night, so perhaps they might really be thinking of shooting fire arrows on the walls or watch towers. The watchtower guards will also have to be extra alert in the nights so the bandits can't just sneak to the walls and set them on fire."

Hudan nodded. "Don't worry, every guard knows the importance of not letting that happen, and we already have three guards keeping an eye from each watchtower in the night. It won't be easy for anyone to sneak close enough, although it can still happen..."

"Dammit... I just wish at least one hunting group had returned so we could have gone out to kill them right there..." Kivamus looked at the guard captain. "What's the status of our remaining guards?"

"They are ready," Hudan said, "but continuously staying on alert when anticipating a raid certainly takes a toll on one's mind. Feroz and some others had been staying awake in the night, so they are also not at their best."

"You're right..." Kivamus muttered, before he remembered the question about the carpenter going to the dam from tomorrow. "Duvas, tell Taniok that he is not to leave the village walls for now. The coal miners and the farmers move in big enough numbers that they should be safe enough, but Taniok and his apprentices can easily be killed or taken as slaves if they go to the dam site. Until we have dealt with the bandits, tell him that his apprentices should work on making some more wheelbarrows, since even the hunting groups are using them now, while Taniok should work on making the smaller and easily portable parts of the triphammer and the sawmill right here at his workshop in the village. When it gets safe outside again, he can take the parts to the dam site on a wagon and assemble them after making the heavier parts right there."

The majordomo nodded. "I'll let him know. Darora is also working on the scorpion, but he doesn't have to leave the village. It's the same for the papermakers, while the laborers working on the sawdust press machine can just leave with the farmers, since that machine is located right next to the farms. So they shouldn't be at any risk."

"Good. Make sure that the villagers only leave the walls in big enough numbers even during the day," Kivamus ordered, before glancing at the setting sun through the window. "Have the villagers started returning within the walls yet? The farmers and the coal miners?"

Chapter 329 Numbers

"No villager has returned yet," Duvas said, "but it shouldn't be long now."

Kivamus nodded. "Then send a servant to fetch a few village elders and send them to all three gates so they can recognize and confirm each person before they enter inside. It's not very likely that a bandit could be posing as one of them, but I don't want to take that risk anyway."

"That's a really good idea!" The majordomo praised, as he got up from the chair. "I'll send someone immediately since the villagers will start returning soon."

"Wait, where is Gorsazo? If the villagers hadn't returned yet for the evening classes, why haven't I seen him since the morning?"

Duvas chuckled. "He has been teaching the kids in the longhouse blocks. Usually they are out gathering sawdust during the day, but with the kids being prevented from leaving the walls, they were being restless so Madam Helga had suggested Gorsazo to use the opportunity to make them learn something, which would also keep them occupied."

"That was nice thinking," Kivamus nodded, "but I don't think kids or children would want to study at this time. They may be young, but they still recognize the dangers of a bandit raid. I don't think they could focus well enough to study right now."

"Oh, he isn't going to teach them about the alphabet or how to write words," the majordomo clarified. "Gorsazo said that he's going to try some fun activities with the kids to give a more practical lesson today while still making them learn a little. One of his ideas was making some of them play a game of tag, while the others counted how many times each kid has been tagged. It will keep them busy and

prevent them from thinking about the raid, while also getting some counting practice. He had mentioned a few other such learning games as well. Don't worry, he knows what he's doing."

Kivamus grinned. Gorsazo wasn't appointed as a teacher of a Duke's son for no reason. "Go on then."

Once Duvas had exited the hall, Kivamus looked at the others. "Feroy, you have already rested and you don't have to go out to the hills for scouting tonight, so talk with all the watchtower guards when they return from duty and gather every fact they have observed about the bandits during the day. Once you've met with each of them, return here so we can discuss what our options are."

He looked at the guard captain next. "It was a good idea to give an extra meal to all the guards even in the afternoon, since they are the ones who will need that energy to fight the bandits. For now, your task is to make sure all the guards are well-fed and rested, and every one of them is ready to respond to a raid tonight. If Feroy is right, it might happen sometime around midnight, or a little later. In fact, if any guard has been pulling double duty, tell them to rest for a few hours, and send some other volunteer to duty for their shift. It doesn't matter right now that everyone has to pull duty in a proper sequence. We have to manage it in a way so that no guard is feeling too tired when the bandits attack."

Hudan nodded. "Don't worry about it, milord. I had managed this during the previous raids when we didn't have enough men. Even though 10 guards are out hunting right now, we still have enough men for me to rotate the watch shifts properly, although the senior guards are also helping out in organizing everything. Kerel and Tesyb are overseeing all the swordsmen's shifts, while Hyola is doing the same for the crossbow women. Yufim is making sure the archers are ready whenever they are needed - including the few servants who have been practicing with bows - while Calubo and Levalo, who have closely experienced life with bandits and Zoricus' men - who are hardly better than bandits - have been talking to see if they can figure out the bandits' strategy. Of course, I am meeting with all of them every hour, on the hour, to see if there are any problems."

Kivamus gave a nod. "Go on then. We'll meet around dinner time when we have more information."

Kivamus had just finished eating a soup made of Rizako mushrooms and some freshly cut veggies grown in the vegetable patches in the manor, coupled with newly baked bread. Once Madam Helga and Syryne had cleared the table - apart from a covered bowl and some bread left for Feroy - and the kids had been taken to their rooms to sleep, Kivamus and others moved to the chairs near the fireplace, although it

had been kept extinguished since past few days. However, a couple of braziers were still burning nearby to provide sufficient light inside.

Duvas was sitting next to him on the right, while Gorsazo had taken a seat ahead of the majordomo. Hudan was sitting on the left, while the next seat had been kept empty for the former mercenary who still hadn't returned.

There was a handmade sketch of Tiranat spread on the small table in front of them which Kivamus had drawn himself based on his observations around the village. It was only a primitive sketch drawn on one of the newer and improved sheets of paper manufactured here, but it would still help in deciding how to deal with the attack, whenever it started.

That is when the outer door opened and Feroy walked inside. On Duvas' gesture, he picked up his bowl of soup and bread, and carried it to the smaller table in front of the armchair where he took a seat and promptly tore into his bread.

"What did you find out?" Kivamus asked.

"Gimme a moment first!" the ex-mercenary glared with his mouth still full. "Haven't eaten anythin' since the mornin'!"

Kivamus chuckled and allowed him a few minutes to eat, which was all the ex-mercenary needed to clean up his bowl. Once he had taken a big gulp of water directly from the wooden jug, Feroy wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve. "The news wasn't urgent, or I'd have spoken earlier. It didn't seem like the bandits were going to attack immediately, but there certainly is a big group of 'em gathered outside, that's for sure."

Kivamus exhaled. "So it's really happening..."

"What are they doing?" Duvas asked.

"Well, the crossbow women had been seeing movement in the forest throughout the day, but the bandits were just roaming around between the trees at the time, so it was hard to take an exact count of them." Feroy continued, "By the time all the villagers had returned inside, the bandits had started to

gather in groups, and around an hour ago they had formed into three different groups. Each group is sitting some distance away from each of our gates."

Kivamus frowned. "They are just sitting there for now? How big are these groups?"

"Around 10 men in each..." Feroy answered with a grimace, "if not even more."

Everyone stared at Feroy in disbelief.

"That's thirty men at least!" Gorsazo exclaimed.

The ex-mercenary nodded with a grim face. "I know... It's hard to get an exact count from here, especially since it's already dark and it's a moonless night. But from what the watchtower guards saw at last light, there were around ten men in front of each gate. They're keeping just far enough away from crossbow range - probably something Nokozal warned them about. The women even tried shooting a few bolts when the bandits wandered closer earlier, and one of them took a minor hit on his arm. But after that, they learned their lesson and are staying well out of range now."

Kivamus leaned forward. They had cleared around 500 metres of ground ahead of the village walls till the forest surrounding the barony. However, Yufim's warbow - which was technically a longbow - had a maximum range between 250 to 300 metres, and even higher if shooting from the height of a watchtower. That was easily more than double the effective range of a crossbow.

"Hasn't Yufim tried to shoot too? His warbow has a much better range than a crossbow."

"Of course he did," Feroy shook his head. "But the bastards are staying outside even his reach. He tried it a few times from a watchtower, but he said it's hard to shoot anything accurately at that distance - even in broad daylight. Anyway, the bandits must have brought an archer with them too, and he must have told them how far an archer can shoot from our side. So they are staying just outside that range."

"Damn it!" Kivamus muttered.

Hudan clenched his fists. "We've barely got twenty swordsmen left in the village right now. As much as I'd like to, we simply can't march out and face thirty armed bandits head-on!"

"I know..." Kivamus sighed. "That's why we have to look for a good opportunity, or wait for them to come closer."

Gorsazo frowned, rubbing his jaw. "How does Torhan have that many men anyway? He couldn't have left his compound and all those slaves completely unguarded."

"Of course not," Feroy grunted. "After our ambush, we expected no more than twenty of his bandits left alive. But it's not like Joric had taken an exact count when he was at that bastard's compound. Some of the bandits could have been out hunting or escorting their clay wagons while he was there. Torhan might also have recruited more men since then - maybe even pressed a few slaves into service. From what Joric saw, he's the kind to terrify them into obedience. Anyway, the slaves know he's got ties to Baron Farodas - which means no chance of mercy if they run. My guess is, he's dragged nearly all his strength here, with only a few men to keep the slaves in line."

"That's out of our hands anyway," Kivamus exhaled, "but let's make sure every guard is alert. If they mean to strike in the night, we'll be ready for 'em."

Hudan rose without another word, Feroy following close behind him as they left the hall to see to the guards. The door thudded shut behind them, leaving the hall quieter than before.

For a moment, no one spoke. Kivamus stared into the dim fireless hearth, wondering if even the newly made watchtowers and crossbows would be enough against that many bandits, with Torhan's cunning brain leading them.

Beside him, Duvas tilted his head back, eyes fixed on the rafters, lips moving in a silent prayer to the goddess. They needed all the help they could get this time, even if it came in the form of divine intervention...

Chapter 330 Observing

Kivamus had been tossing and turning all night, but sleep just wasn't coming. He had told the guards to wake him immediately if there was an attack, but the horn had never sounded.

All night he had kept thinking about what he could have done differently. If only they had more grain stored in the barns to withstand a siege for longer... If this was even a siege... But as it stood, they only had a few days' worth of food left, apart from what was set aside for sowing. He wished they had bought more from Cinran in the past weeks, or that more merchants had come so they could have traded coal for it.

He hoped the wheat prices had been lower which would have allowed them to buy more, and that made him wonder once again about why the prices had gone up so much? Compared to last year, the cost was at least thirty to forty percent higher already. That was an astronomical increase for a single year. He didn't believe the harvest could have been that bad. Something else had to be behind it.

Then he stopped himself from brooding about it. It didn't matter right now. Grain prices in Cinran were out of his hands anyway. He had to focus on defending the village.

Still, he couldn't help thinking of other things he could have done. Perhaps he could have kept the hunters from leaving for a few more days, which would have given them enough swordsmen here to take out the bandits directly. Or perhaps he could have made more crossbows to equip every guard with them, so they could thin out the bandits' numbers even in a frontal assault.

Maybe he could have told Darora to build the scorpions first, since they were powerful enough to reach the bandits easily, and Nokozal had no way of telling Torhan about it. But there was nothing that could be done about it for now...

He finally sat up on his bed, giving up on getting any more sleep. He was feeling exhausted right now, but there was no way he could calm down his mind enough to get any rest. Expecting to hear the horn throughout the night had worn him out too much. He had braced for it again and again every time he heard a creak of the wooden wall from the wind, expecting it to bring bad news, but nothing...

He rubbed his eyes and glanced at the window of his room, and only saw darkness at the edges of the wooden panes. It was still night, but morning had to be close now, even though there was still no sign of an attack. Just what were those bandits waiting for? Shouldn't they have used the cover of a moonless night to attack?

He sat up, deciding to take a walk for now. Pulling on a robe over his tunic to protect against the night chill, he left his room. The manor house was quiet, other inhabitants probably asleep at the time. Or maybe they were also turning around restlessly like he had been.

Reaching outside, he saw that the sky was still dark, although he could guess that dawn was probably less than an hour away. A few guards were standing near a brazier kept next to the servants' hall, talking in hushed voices.

"Tesyb," Kivamus called out, spotting the burly guard.

The guards straightened when they noticed them, and Tesyb jogged toward him.

"Where are Hudan and Feroy?"

"Captain just went out to inspect the village gates again," Tesyb replied. "Feroy's been climbing up on one watchtower after another, observing the bandit groups."

Kivamus nodded towards the door. "You, follow me. I want to take a look too."

Tesyb hesitated. "The captain told us to stay here and protect you..."

"It's fine," Kivamus said. "You all can come with me then."

Tesyb looked at the others, then nodded. "As you wish, milord."

The four guards, each carrying a sword, a shield, as well as a dagger, came along with him as he left the manor and walked toward the northeastern watchtower.

As Kivamus walked past the longhouse blocks, he saw many of the well-built villagers sitting outside their gates with nervous expressions. Some had machetes in hand, others held knives, daggers and even axes. They straightened when they noticed him, giving nods or small bows.

He raised his hand in return, feeling a swell of pride. They weren't just leaving the defense to the guards. He had no doubt that the villagers trusted the guards to do their job properly, but these men were still willing to sit awake all night to protect their families. If the bandits broke through or managed to set fire

to a section of the village wall and came inside, the longhouse gates would be the last barrier protecting their families. Their narrow entries—easy to hold—would buy enough time for the guards to come to their aid. Their wives, children, and the old folks inside would have a fighting chance because of them.

He realized that there was always an option to raise a temporary militia, but it would immediately decrease morale, making the villagers think the guards weren't enough to protect them, while also letting the guards believe that he didn't trust them for this. So he had postponed it, leaving it as the last-ditch option. The situation still seemed manageable for now.

He kept walking north until he reached the northeastern gate. Just before the gates, there were two swordsmen sitting on a makeshift bench made from a fallen log. A brazier was burning next to them, which the guards were using to warm their hands over the sawdust briquettes. On the watchtower platform above, two crossbow women and another guard had trained their eyes into the darkness outside the walls.

That's when he spotted Hudan approaching with another guard in tow from the west. When the guard captain drew close enough to see his face, his brow furrowed. "My lord, you shouldn't have left the manor! It's not safe for you here..."

"I just couldn't keep sitting inside," Kivamus grunted. "I needed to see things for myself." He glanced at the watchtower again. "I want to take a look from up there. Think the platform can hold more men?"

Hudan snorted. "The old carpenter knows what he's doing. The tower'll take seven, or even eight men easily." He jerked his chin toward the ladder. "I'll go first. You can follow when I give the all-clear."

The burly guard climbed up steadily, the wood creaking, but easily supporting even his weight. Reaching the top, he leaned close to the guards, speaking in low voices, before gesturing for Kivamus to join them.

Kivamus grasped the ladder, every step making him wonder if an arrow might come out of the dark at any moment and end his short journey in this world. Something had to be done about that soon. But no shafts flew, and soon he was pulling himself onto the platform, followed by Tesyb behind him.

The guards there gave short nods of respect, shifting to give him space. He turned outward, peering into the night. For a moment he saw nothing but the faint shimmer of stars in the sky. Then his eyes

adjusted, and shapes began to form. A cluster of figures sat on the ground in the distance - somewhere between three or four hundred metres away.

Squinting his eyes made him wish he had a pair of binoculars here. Even a set of primitive lenses would have made a difference, but that was just wishful thinking at this point. "Anything of note in the night?"

Hudan gestured to one of the crossbow women. "Isomi. Report."

The woman stepped closer, voice low. "They've been there since before nightfall. Sometimes one or two wander off—likely for the bushes, or maybe to meet with the other groups—but that's all. Otherwise, they've just been sitting there, like they're waiting for something."

Kivamus frowned. "They can't be delaying the attack to get even more men, can they?"

Hudan shook his head. "It's not likely, but I wouldn't count out anything at this point. Torhan has already brought thirty men when we thought he had twenty at most. Still, I don't think they can get any more reinforcements without direct help from Baron of Kirnos, and Sir Duvas said that wasn't likely. Although they might be waiting for any men of theirs who were left behind—maybe even some slaves armed in a hurry."

Kivamus kept looking out into the dark. "Are they really out of Yufim's range? Did he try again?"

Hudan snorted. "Oh, he tried, alright. He had taken it as an insult to his pride that these bastards were just sitting there lazily, so he shot at them many times from each of the watchtowers in front of the three groups. Of course, they were just blind shots in the dark, aimed in the general direction of where the bandits were sitting, but there were no cries of pain or any sudden movement to show they'd been hit. Either he couldn't aim at them in the dark, or more likely, the arrow didn't reach the bandits, since they had learned their lesson to stay away when one of them got shot in his arm in the evening."

Tesyb growled from where he had been leaning on the parapet. "I just wish we had even a single scorpion up on any tower! I've never seen one of 'em, but from what you said, it would have covered the whole empty ground till the forest. We could have taken out this whole nest of rats with it!"

Kivamus pursed his lips. "No, it wouldn't have helped that much. One scorpion can only cover one gate. The other two gates would still be free for the bandits to sit in front of without any fear. Scorpions will only be helpful when we can cover all the directions from them."

Tesyb's jaw tightened. "But we can't just sit here watching them enjoy! Like they are having a... a... a noble's barbecue on a leisure hunting trip!" He clenched his fists. "These are the bastards who burnt my home! I want to go out and kill them right where they are sitting! "

Kivamus met his eyes. "I know how you feel, and trust me, we will make them pay. But we have to wait for a good opportunity for this. If we rush in without thinking of a good plan, we'll lose far more than we'll gain. We need to wait for an opening where we can make it count, even with our lesser number of men. They couldn't have brought too much food with them, which means that chance might come sooner than you think."

Tesyb frowned but didn't argue further. Around them the guards shifted, all of them gazing into the darkness. No one spoke after that for a while.

Kivamus watched the forms in the distance a little longer, thinking through the options he could think of, then nodded. "I'm going back for now. Report to me at once if anything changes."

He climbed down the ladder, putting his feet on each step carefully. Once Tesyb had followed him down, he started walking back to the manor with the other guards, thinking about whether there was a way they could take out those bastards without risking the lives of their guards any more than what was necessary.