

## Londoner 331

### Chapter 331 Speculations

Morning came gray and plain. Kivamus was sitting at the head of the manor table with Duvas, Hudan, Fero and Gorsazo gathered around. The sunrise was only a short while ago, but everyone's faces already showed the strain of not getting a good sleep, or even any sleep in case of the guard leaders, but everyone's eyes were still alert.

"Any changes in the bandits' actions?" Kivamus asked. "What were they even doing all night?"

Fero rubbed his jaw. "I was awake most of the night. From what the guards observed, they didn't move much. They are still staying in front of the three gates, and keeping to their general positions. Once in a while, a man walks over to another group to talk, but mostly they seem content to just sit there and watch us while staying out of range of our bows and crossbows. It looks like they're delaying an attack, or waiting for something."

Duvas folded his hands on the table with a sigh. "The villagers are too scared to go to work today, and for good reason. They have already started gathering in front of the manor, waiting for orders, but I don't think more than a handful will be willing to leave the safety of the walls today."

Gorsazo frowned. "If the coal miners miss a day or two, we can take that hit. Our coal barns already have more of it stored than we can sell right now. The problem is sowing. We can't waste the limited days available for it."

Duvas shook his head. "I spoke with Pinoto last night. He thinks the weather will hold for a bit. Even if we miss a day or two, we will still have time to finish the sowing after that if we push."

Kivamus leaned forward. "A few men risking their lives for just another wagon load of coal won't help much. Make an announcement that nobody is to go outside the walls today. No one leaves until we've dealt with the bandits."

Fero looked up sharply. "The bandits will immediately realize that the fields are empty then. If we wait too long, they might ride through the farms and trample them with their horses if they have brought 'em or even on foot. They certainly have enough men for that."

"I know," Kivamus sighed, "but it's a risk we have to take or our people might be killed or taken as slaves by these bastards." He turned to Duvas. "How are our food supplies looking?"

Duvas' face looked grim. "If we keep feeding everyone two meals a day with just the wheat and the mushrooms and no new meat, we have about four days worth of food left. Of course, we still have some grain stored separately for sowing. If we use that too and feed people from it, it will add around another week. After that, we'll have to start butchering our animals or risk starvation."

Kivamus drew a slow breath. "I don't want to start killing the animals unless we absolutely have to. Four days you say...?" He thought about the problem for a while. "If Trevalo doesn't arrive in the next three days, we'll stop the sowing. We'll send a caravan to Cinran ourselves to buy grain in that case. Of course, for that we need to deal with the bandits first. We simply can't send that many guards out to escort a caravan while these bastards are sitting outside our gates."

"It would really help if Trevalo comes back sooner..." Gorsazo said. "We asked him to bring all the wheat he could. That would make a huge difference."

Kivamus shook his head. "No. I hope he doesn't come back for a few more days. If he runs into these bandits outside the village and gets killed, or even if he sees them and turns back to Cinran, we won't see him again for weeks. We can't afford that. We have to deal with the bandits before he returns."

"But how? With three hunting groups out, our numbers simply aren't enough to beat them in a swordfight..." Duvas said quietly.

"Then what are we supposed to do?" Hudan growled. "We can't just sit here hiding like cowards, hoping they get bored of us and leave!"

Feroy gave a sharp snort. "Oh, they aren't leaving. Torhan is here for revenge. He won't walk away until he's had it or he's dead. And he might have guessed that we came through winter with almost nothing left - he was the reason for it when he stole everything from the villagers in that very first raid. That means he must already be expecting that we've got little food left now. Even if he's just guessing about this, the fact is we really don't have enough food stored here, so we can't sit and wait for too long, you know?"

Gorsazo stared down at the table. "The way those bandits are just sitting there instead of attacking makes it seem like Torhan's plan is just to force the villagers to starve. Or maybe he's hoping that the villagers will rebel against you if they don't have enough to eat, and open the gates themselves to welcome that bastard inside as a saviour."

Kivamus shook his head firmly, already having that much confidence in his people by now. "That won't happen. I trust the villagers."

Duvas scratched his short white beard. "And they trust you, that much is clear to all of us here. But Torhan doesn't know that... In his mind, you're a new baron, barely here for a few months. He'll think the villagers haven't had time to form ties with you, even if you were a benevolent leader, which most nobles are not. Either way, he might be assuming that if the villagers are hungry enough, they'll rebel and overthrow you. Remember—he may be a bastard, but he's still a bastard of the Baron of Kirnos. He knows how nobles' politics work."

Gorsazo's eyes turned wide. "That must be it! I think I know why those bandits aren't attacking us. That bastard might really be playing the long game here. His half-brother Lanidas is the rightful heir of Kirnos, so maybe Torhan is thinking he can make himself the Baron of Tiranat instead."

Kivamus snorted. "Tell him to get in line. He's hardly the first man who's wanted to kill me or take this village from me."

Hudan frowned. "Wait, how would that even work?"

Gorsazo explained, "I think Torhan might be thinking that by forcing our villagers to stay inside, he can stop any new food from coming in—no merchants to bring grain and no hunters to bring meat. And the longer his men sit in front of the gates, the less food the villagers get. Eventually, he might be hoping that the hunger would make the villagers turn on Lord Kivamus. Then he shows up as their savior, probably with some food he had already brought for his own bandits, and takes the place of the baron. If he can present that as having popular support to our superiors in Cinran, he could be made the Baron of Tiranat. If he's really a bastard, he does have some noble blood running in his veins, after all."

Duvas shook his head. "That's not how it works at all... Nobody can become the ruler just by having the support of the public."

Kivamus coughed suddenly to hide his laughter. So much for democracy.

Gorsazo shrugged. "Obviously, I know that, but remember, he is a bandit leader who rules by force. As long as the majority of the bandits support him remaining the leader, there will be no threat to his power. He might be using the same logic here."

Hudan's jaw tightened. "To hell with it! In my eyes, anyone who even thinks about overthrowing Lord Kivamus is no more than yesterday's trash to be dumped out! If he ever comes inside the village, I'll cut him down in half!"

Duvas chuckled. "If Gorsazo is right, one small upside is that even though Torhan wants to kill our guards in revenge, he is unlikely to use fire arrows on us, since he might want the village intact to take over, and burning it before he became the baron would be counterproductive. That's probably why they didn't use any fire arrows last night, even though it could have made our situation much weaker."

Gorsazo nodded. "That former slave Joric said that Torhan's own compound just had some piles of branches stacked together as a makeshift wall. So maybe he's thinking that if he ever gets to capture our village, he can use these walls to defend from any immediate attacks to throw him out of here."

Feroy laughed harshly. "The balls on this guy! If that's his real plan, he's either insane or a braver man than anyone I've ever met."

Kivamus shook his head. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. We have no way to know what he's really thinking. And whatever Torhan plans for later doesn't change what we have to do now. We need to find out if the bandits are just sitting there to siege Tiranat—perhaps waiting for reinforcements—and to prevent anyone from leaving and entering the village to push us to starvation, or if they intend to attack soon. Either way, we can't wait too long. We risk losing the proper window for sowing seeds, and merchants like Trevalo and others may see those bandits and turn back. We can't let that happen."

Kivamus looked around the table. "Most of us were up all night. Let's take a few hours' rest, have some breakfast, and meet again after that—and see if anything's changed. We'll decide what to do after that."

They all agreed and the meeting broke.

\*\*\*

Nine bells had just rung when Kivamus finished a light meal and waited for the others to return. Gorsazo had once again gone to the longhouse blocks to teach the kids with some of his learning games to keep them occupied. Today he'd also taken Syryne along with him, saying that helping to teach the kids will help her learn more as well.

Duvas had gone to talk with Madam Nerida about the situation of their food stores and to discuss if there was a way to extend their supplies further, while Feroz was taking a nap in a chair nearby, half-crouched. Hudan still hadn't returned after he had left, saying he needed to meet with the watchtower guards to find the current status of the bandit camps.

Kivamus had used the wait to run through his thoughts, thinking about what could be done about the bandits. By now, he had the rough outline of a plan that might work - but he needed the others' input before he decided on anything.

#### Chapter 332 Tactics

Soon, the outer door opened and Duvas and Hudan walked in together. Feroz woke up from his sleep, and rubbed his eyes tiredly.

"Report," Kivamus ordered immediately.

Hudan set both of his swords down and began, "Now that it's daytime, and there is no risk of them giving out their positions easily like during the night, all three groups have lit fires. They seem to be cooking something—probably rabbits or whatever they managed to trap last night."

"It's like these bastards are having a bloody barbecue like nobles!" Feroz scoffed.

Hudan continued, "Anyway, each group still has around the same number of men. A man or two go off now and then—nature calls, or to speak with the others—but mostly they're staying in their general positions."

Kivamus nodded. "Are they still outside the range of bows and crossbows?"

"Yeah," Hudan said. "They're well out of crossbow range. Yufim and Nurobo tried shooting again with their warbows, but they didn't get any hits at all. The bandits are too far even for them."

"That's fine," Kivamus said.

Duvas frowned. "Why's that fine? We still don't have a plan! I ordered the villagers that nobody is to exit the gates today, but most of the workers are still waiting by the manor gates for news or to see if there are any new orders from us. They're more nervous than I've ever seen them! Getting a surprise raid in the night is one thing, but knowing that the bandits are sitting right outside the gates, ready to attack the village any time is taking a toll on everyone."

Kivamus gave the first smile he'd had in days. "Don't worry. I think I have an idea that'll put those bandits right where they belong - which is six feet under."

Feroy blinked and sat up straighter. "What are you thinking?"

Hudan and Duvas leaned forward as well, waiting for him to explain.

Kivamus looked at Hudan. "By now you must have a better count of the bandits. How many of them are there in total, and in each camp?"

Hudan rubbed his jaw. "Our count last evening was more or less accurate enough. From the latest report I got, there are eleven men sitting in front of the northeastern gate, ten at the southwestern gate, and twelve at the southeastern gate. These numbers could still be off by one or two—someone might have been away when the crossbow women took their counts."

Kivamus nodded. "Does it look like they're going to attack any time soon?"

Hudan shook his head. "I don't think so. It will only take them a short time to pick up their swords and get ready for battle, but right now they're just sitting there, roasting meat."

"Good," Kivamus grinned. "It was a good idea to wait and observe them. If they stay like this, my plan will work. Here's what we'll do - we'll defeat them in detail."

Hudan blinked. "What do you mean, in detail?"

Kivamus explained, "Defeating in detail basically means to divide and conquer. It means we'll use our full force against a small group, beat them, then repeat the same tactic on the other small groups of the enemy."

Feroy nodded slowly. "I think I understand what you mean... The mercenary group I ran with used to do something similar when we were hunting a pack of wolves for their fur."

Kivamus explained, "We will start by using this day to let the villagers rest. They haven't had a proper day off since I arrived here. They can't afford to skip work and spend time with their families - since they need to earn their food, and they won't get their weekly rations if they don't work enough. The foremen of each group track their work hours everyday for the very same reason. So let everyone have today as an off day. That includes the clay diggers who are working on the trench." He looked at Duvas. "Tell them to stay inside."

He turned back to the guard leaders. "The same logic applies to our guards. Most of 'em have been awake for days since we first spotted these bandits, with barely any rest in between, and that tiredness is adding up." He pointed at Feroy. "Even you—someone who is called a ghost by other guards since you barely need any sleep—look battered. It would be much worse for the other guards. So we'll give them a good rest today."

The others shifted in their seats but kept listening.

"The guards also don't need to scout the hills or do mounted patrols outside the village right now," Kivamus went on. "So, just for today, we will rotate everyone's watch duties in shorter shifts so they get enough rest during the day. Torhan and his men will certainly notice that nobody left the walls, which'll make them think that we are too scared and huddling in fear. That works in our favor - since that's exactly what we want them to think."

"But..." Duvas interrupted. "If it's just for today then it may be okay, but we can't afford to postpone the sowing too much or it will be too late."

"Just listen," Kivamus said. "It's only for the daytime today." He looked at Hudan, thinking about it. "You know what, I think we need to give our male guards a complete rest for this to work. After this meeting, go and change the shifts, and call up the usual older villagers who keep watch and send them to the towers. One crossbow woman will stay with them until noon, then another will replace her from noon to evening. The older villagers will stay the whole day."

"But what about our male guards?" Hudan asked. "They've been helping to keep an eye too. I don't see why you don't want them to help."

"Listen to me first," Kivamus said. "It doesn't seem like the bandits will attack during the day, but the female guards and the older villagers can still blow the horn if the bandits decide to attack, and the swordsmen can still answer the alarm in time. This way our male guards will get some proper rest by evening. We need to take off men even from the watch post duties, so we'll put a couple of servants to cover the western manor gate and lock the eastern one. As for the village gates, nobody is supposed to leave the village today, so they will be locked and barred up as well, while the women at the watchtowers will continue keeping an eye out."

He continued his explanation. "Make sure that the old watchmen and female guards keep a close track of where all the bandits are when it starts to get dark. The bandits were careful yesterday and didn't make any fires in the night, but we might get lucky tonight and they'll light fires thinking they're safe enough. Every villager and guard staying within the walls during the day will make these bastards think we're huddling inside in fear — and that'll make them feel safer themselves. If everything remains the same, they'll likely keep their positions and stay in the same groups of ten to twelve in front of each gate even tonight."

Hudan nodded. "That's how it was yesterday. And then...?"

Kivamus grinned. "Even after the hunting groups left, we've got twenty-one swordsmen, including you both. That can still give us a numerical advantage of two against one."

Feroy smirked. "I see where you're going with this. I like this plan! Making them feel safer by not trying to attack them even once since they arrived here is going to work in our favor now."

"Exactly," Kivamus nodded. "This tactic is going to work only because by now we know that the bandits are staying separated in three groups and until today, we have given them no reason to unite and defend against an attack from us."

Duvas looked at the others in confusion. "I don't understand..."

Kivamus explained, "Here is the plan. We're going to move all our swordsmen under the cover of night as close as we can to one of the camped groups. If the bandits don't light fires, it'll be dark enough until the moon rises near dawn, so they won't spot our men until they are very close. And if they do light fires tonight, we won't have anything to fear with their ruined night vision."

Duvas frowned. "But even with our numbers, our guards will still be at a disadvantage in the dark, won't they?"

"No," Kivamus grinned. "Here's where our crossbows come in. We have twelve crossbows plus two good archers. The archers won't be of much use in a night assault, so I'll post Yufim and Nurobo in separate watchtowers, and put four armed crossbow women in the other towers to cover the remaining directions. That gives us eight free crossbows to hand over to the swordsmen. If the latest reports in the evening still say that the bandits are staying grouped in their three camps, we can even use the remaining crossbows, since we won't have to fear them flanking us from another side."

Hudan nodded. "I've been making the swordsmen practice regularly in the usage of crossbows, and by now everyone is a decent shot with them, not that they are difficult to use at all. What about the rest of the female guards?"

Kivamus replied, "We'll also post them on the towers to keep watch during our counter raid and to give a signal if the other two bandit groups notice and try to flank us. If they do, the horn will be blown and the swordsmen will pull back. If they don't, the swordsmen will continue."

The room went quiet for a moment as everyone considered the plan. Kivamus watched their faces to see if anyone would oppose it.

When no objection came, he continued, "As soon as our men get close to the first camp of bandits, the ones we've given crossbows will shoot—eight bolts at the minimum, maybe twelve if we can arm them all—into that lazily sitting group of bandits who might be roasting some more meat by then. If we're lucky, that first volley will take out or disable most of the bandits from that first group. Even if that doesn't happen, it'll still cut down their numbers sharply. Our guards will immediately put away the crossbows after that volley of bolts, and in the resulting chaos between the bandits, our twenty-one

swordsmen will rush in to finish any survivors before they've even gotten their swords out of their scabbards."

Hudan finally grinned. "Now that's a good way to show these bastards what happens when they dare to attack our homes!"

### Chapter 333 Preparation

Feroy nodded. "This trick will probably only work once, but it should still let us take out one bandit group with almost no losses. The cover of night will also help since tonight is a moonless night—at least until the moon rises near dawn, but that's enough time for us."

Hudan rubbed his chin. "Won't the other bandit camps be hidden from the sight of each other by the village walls? I think we might be able to repeat this tactic again, since the other bandit groups are unlikely to easily get any idea that one of their groups is wiped out. Sound carries far in the night, but they are still far enough away."

Kivamus nodded. "If we are lucky, yes, we might be able to repeat it. The layout of the village gates will also help us here. The southwestern and southeastern groups are relatively close and the bandits sitting in one of those groups can likely see the other group from where they are sitting, but the northeastern group is on the opposite side of the village from these two groups. So they will be completely out of sight of the other groups. That's why we'll hit the northeastern group first—they're the farthest from the other bandit camps and an attack on them won't be noticed easily by the others."

He continued, "This way, we can take out that group of eleven bandits easily. Then our men will circle around from the east, after reloading their crossbows, and we'll hit the south-eastern camp the same way, since that's the next closest camp. Of course, the south-western camp will certainly notice that we are attacking that camp, but by the time they move, the south-eastern group will already be wiped out—first by a volley of crossbow bolts, and then by our swordsmen taking care of any survivors—if everything goes well."

Hudan grinned. "By then they'll have maybe ten men left against our twenty-one, assuming nobody gets hurt on our side. We can mop them up after that easily!"

Feroy agreed, "Even if the southwestern group immediately rushes to help the southeastern one, we'll likely have time to reload the crossbows again after finishing the first fight. That will give us a huge advantage in thinning out the numbers from the last group, enough that the remaining bandits won't stand a chance."

Kivamus kept his face neutral, but inside he ticked off all the pieces that would have to line up—a silent approach, accurate volley of bolts, then the rush to attack, and a clean withdrawal if anything went wrong. However, with both of his guard commanders not voicing any opposition to the idea, he decided to finalize it.

He folded his hands on the table. "If all the guards go together, we need to decide who will lead them. We need one of you as the overall commander for the attack to prevent any confusion."

Duvas blinked. "Why? Hudan is the guard captain—each of our guards knows that."

"That's not the point," Kivamus replied. "They've been following the lead of Feroy as much as that of Hudan."

Hudan cut in, rubbing the back of his neck. "You're right. I know that no one here can beat me in a straight swordfight yet—Tesyb and Kerel come close, but Tesyb needs more experience before he can defeat me while Kerel's getting old. But being a captain isn't the same as leading a night assault. Even after the training I did as a squire in Cinran, and apart from guarding Madam Helga's inn for a few years, I don't have much experience of leading men in the darkness, but Feroy's lived in the wilds for years. He's got far more practice fighting in forests and running raids than I do."

Kivamus nodded. "Exactly. For the foot charge to any of the bandit camps, you should be at the front where your skill matters. But I want Feroy mounted on a horse a little behind, watching the whole thing so he can make sure the plan goes as intended—and to change it if he has to. Is that fine with you, Hudan?"

Hudan looked at Feroy, then shrugged. "I was actually going to suggest the same. Feroy's three years older and far more experienced than me. Even if I'm the captain of the guards, I don't mind following his lead tonight."

Kivamus turned to Feroy. "What do you think?"

Feroy shrugged. "I'm fine either way. Hudan's learned a lot these last few years at Helga's inn. I think he can lead the guards just fine. But if you want me to lead, I will—though I don't need a horse. They will be a handicap in the dark at best, especially if we have to pass the treeline."

"Sure, that's up to you," Kivamus said. He looked at everyone in turn. "This is final, then. We attack tonight. Rest well, and give the guards an extra meal. They'll need the energy, since the night is going to be busy."

Hudan and Feroy stood and left the manor hall together. Kivamus let out a long breath and rose as well. "I'll try to get a few hours of shut-eye as well. I hardly slept last night, but we'll all need to be alert later."

Duvas stood, smoothing his sleeves. "I'll make another announcement to the villagers, telling them to return to their homes and rest properly today. They can even use this free day to visit the temple and meet Father Edric, since they rarely get the chance these days. I'll also speak with Madam Nerida about that extra meal for the guards. As little as we can spare it, tonight's attack going well is far more important than anything else right now."

Kivamus nodded and headed for the stairwell, hoping their plan would go well and not just blow up in their faces in front of such an overwhelming number of bandits or by something going horribly wrong.

\*\*\*

~ Hyola ~

Night had fallen hours ago, and for tonight, Hyola was standing on duty for the night shift at the northeastern watchtower. For the past few days, she had the help of two other guards with her helping to keep an eye out, but all the men had been given the day off. Instead, another woman stood nearby after the old watchman had returned at dusk, her crossbow ready at the hip. However, Hyola's own weapon had been taken for the raid. She had known about the upcoming counter raid all day—the captain had explained the plan clearly to everyone—but her hands still twitched now and then, reaching for something that wasn't there. The weight of her trusty crossbow had become so natural that it felt like a part of her, and without it she kept feeling off-balance.

In fact, the swordsmen who guarded the gates all day had also been relieved of their duties to rest. A couple of manor servants had stood there instead, ready to open the gates when required, not that it had been needed with all the villagers staying inside all day.

From what she had found out, ten of their twelve crossbows would be given to the swordsmen, with only two left for them, plus Yufim and Nurobo with their warbows, which would put an archer or a crossbow woman on each of the four corner watchtowers. Just enough to sound the alarm if needed and to thin out the bandits' numbers in case of an attack, but her empty hands still felt strange.

Her fingers drifted upward instead, brushing through the hair that hung against her neck. It was almost to her shoulders now. After years of keeping it cropped short at the quarry—short enough that the bandits had one less reason to notice her—letting it grow felt like defiance and freedom, all at once. Calubo had teased her about it at first, but she knew he liked it. Maybe if she let it grow long enough, he'd finally gather the courage to ask her what she'd been waiting to hear. But the idiot still hadn't popped the question.

Well, perhaps she should learn to be patient. It wasn't like there was any rush. Of course, she felt that every day that he hadn't asked her to marry him was a wasted day, but at least life in Tiranat was far safer than the years she'd lived at the quarry while wondering if she would live to see another day—whether because of hunger, or cold, or something even worse. Perhaps it was better to wait for him to feel ready for it, instead of trying to rush him and risk losing something good.

She leaned forward on the railing, eyes narrowing at the fire burning far outside the wall. The bandits hadn't doused their fire today when night had fallen. It was hard to make out from this distance, but it looked like they were hunched around it, maybe roasting something they'd trapped. Her stomach grumbled thinking of the smell and taste of freshly caught meat being roasted, and she pressed a hand to it, annoyed at the noise it made. Meat—real meat.

She wished she could eat some meat too... It had been weeks since the last time she'd had anything more than porridge and bread.

That's when she noticed a low murmur from somewhere behind. She turned her head, then motioned to the other woman to keep watching outward. Moving back toward the ladder, she peered down into the shadows below.

A chill went through her at what she saw. A column of heavily armed swordsmen was moving toward the northeastern gate. The burly guard captain was leading them, with his sword already drawn, and a shield in his other hand. Behind him came nearly two dozen men, their leather armor dark against the faint light coming from somewhere in the village. They were armed with their usual swords, as well as their shields strapped to their backs—which Kerel had recently been training them in.

Around half of them must also be carrying the crossbows, but it was impossible to pick out in the darkness. At the rear, she spotted Feroy, walking close with the silver-haired baron and the majordomo, his head giving an occasional nod in their hushed conversation.

#### Chapter 334 Strike Back - I

Hyola's hand fell uselessly to her belt, fingers brushing against the leather, instead of the familiar wood of her crossbow. Why couldn't she be part of that counter raid too? She had begged to join, knowing that that bastard Nokozal must be amongst them, but the captain had still refused. He had explained that after the first volley of bolts, there'd be no time to reload the crossbows before they were upon the bandits, and she wasn't ready to meet their swords head-on. She swallowed hard, resentment bubbling up even though she knew the captain was right.

If only her crossbow could fire more than one bolt without stopping to reload, then she would have been able to stand shoulder to shoulder with the other guards...

Hah! What was she even thinking? How would such a thing be possible? Neither a bow nor a crossbow could shoot again without being reloaded after each use. She sighed, hoping she would get to be a part of Tiranat's ever-growing sword-arm in the future.

She searched the group of guards as they reached close to the gates, her eyes straining against the dark for the familiar cropped black hair she wanted to see. But the braziers had been doused to protect the men's night vision and to avoid the bandits noticing the firelight when the gates would open to let these men out, which left only starlight and the faintest slice of moon hanging in the sky to give shape to their bodies. She still thought she saw him - Calubo - but couldn't be sure.

The sound of a faint whistle carried up. She looked in the direction to see Feroy beckoning her. She hurried down the ladder, boots hitting the earth lightly, and jogged across the gathered group to meet him.

"Any changes with the bandits' positions?" the ex-mercenary asked, with Sir Duvas muttering something to Lord Kivamus who was standing next to him.

"None at all," she said. "Still nearly a dozen men out there. Their fire's still burning too. Although they might put it out later, when the bastards are done cooking whatever they've caught."

Feroy's mouth twisted into a half-smile. "Good for us." He jerked his chin toward the ladder. "Back up you go. Keep your eyes sharp and be ready to blow the horn if you see them move toward us. Otherwise, silence is golden."

She nodded once, then quickly climbed back to her post. On the platform again, she steadied herself against the rail. She could just catch Hudan's voice below, low and steady as he gave his final instructions to his men before the waiting servants opened the gates to let them out.

Hyola glanced upwards, and whispered a quick prayer to the goddess. Keep them safe, bring them all back alive and with their limbs intact. Every last one of them. Especially Calubo...

\*\*\*

~ Tesyb ~

Tesyb had been waiting for this night for months. That dark night when Torhan's men had burned his house and half the village was still as fresh in his head as if it had happened yesterday. He remembered how his father, Pinoto, and his mother had been forced to live in that burned shell of a house—the only thing left standing after the fire. His hands had itched every night since then to see Torhan's head separated from his shoulders. He knew he couldn't track or fight a bandit group in those forests alone, so he hadn't even tried, but tonight could be the night he would finally get to keep the vow he had made to himself to take revenge.

He had no way of knowing if Torhan was sitting in the northeastern camp or one of the others, or if the bastard had even shown up at all. But if Torhan was here and Tesyb found that bastard, he wouldn't be leaving this place alive.

Then there was Nokozal. That bastard had slipped out of Tesyb's grip twice before in a blade fight, but he was hoping that the giant would also be here tonight. That was one more bandit that needed to be put under the ground.

As the wooden gates in front of him creaked open, he noticed the bandits' campfire glowing a few hundred paces ahead against the inky background. The captain walked out of the village first, before Tesyb began moving silently in the dark along with the others. Around him the others were moving the

same way, their boots making soft sounds on beaten earth. Soon, all twenty-one of them had moved outside and the servants were closing the gates behind them.

Hudan put a finger to his mouth, reminding them to stay quiet, before he crouched low and started moving quickly toward the bandit camp. Tesyb waited for all the crossbow men to fall in behind the captain—with their crossbows ready in their hands, their swords sheathed and shields tied on their backs. He and the rest of the swordsmen moved up behind them with their swords out in one hand and their shields ready in the other, while Feroy was bringing up the rear.

Hudan had also offered him a crossbow earlier, but there weren't enough of 'em to go around, so he had told the captain to give it to someone else. He trusted his sword and knew it would be enough to send more than a few bandits to the goddess. He whispered a quick prayer as they kept moving while keeping their profiles low and small, hoping they'd remain unnoticed by the bandits.

His prayers were seemingly answered, since they reached within a few dozen feet of the bandits without the bastards having any idea that they only had a few more moments left in this world. Tesyb's heart was beating faster and faster, knowing each step was bringing them closer to what he'd been waiting for.

He was hoping to pick out Torhan by his clothes—if the bastard was here, a single glance at his fancy attire might be enough. The bandits were staring at the pair of rabbits being roasted over the fire, while a few were already tearing into meat which had been cooked earlier. He also noticed their swords lying beside them on the ground, which made him grin at the sight. This was going to be bloody, but it was going to be fun!

They were closing in when Hudan glanced back at the crossbowmen and jerked his hand toward the bandit camp with a nod. All the ten men who had brought loaded crossbows with them, raised their weapons higher to aim, when one of them took another step to get a better angle, and stepped on a dry twig which snapped loudly under his feet.

Tesyb's stomach dropped, fearing their plan would go to waste.

Most of the bandits turned their heads toward the noise, their eyes slow to adjust after staring into the fire for so long. That's when they must surely have noticed death looming in front of them - since one of the bandits opened his mouth to shout, but no sound came out.

In that blink of confusion, the crossbowmen shot all of their ten bolts into that close-sitting group of bandits.

As soon as Tesyb heard the trigger clicks, he and the other swordsmen who hadn't brought crossbows and already had their swords out, rushed towards the bandits—shields up, swords in hand.

However, before they had even reached the camp, he noticed the bandits slumping backwards one by one, a bolt sticking out of the chest of most of them, with blood gushing out in spurts. By the time he reached the bastards who had been camping merrily, he realized that nine out of ten bolts had hit their marks and eight bandits had already collapsed to the ground with their eyes wide and mouths open in shock, with another one clutching his bleeding arm.

He thanked the goddess for their luck in achieving a complete surprise over the bandits, which meant the bastards had forgotten to shout in alarm or to alert their other camps and were still trying to pick up their swords haphazardly. He was already breathing hard by the time he reached the closest standing bandit, who was still fumbling with his scabbard, trying to pull his blade free. Tesyb didn't give him time.

He closed on him, lifted his shield into position with his left arm, and stabbed his sword with everything he had. The blade met the bandit's chest and blood gushed out like a fountain as life left the eyes of the man, before Tesyb felt the dull, cold finality of it hit him for a heartbeat.

No! He cleared his mind forcefully. There was no time to get lost in such thoughts. These bastards had burned his home, looted their food and stole all his savings - making his parents go to sleep on empty stomachs. These bandits deserved everything coming to them tonight.

When he looked around to see if someone needed any help, he realized Hudan had just killed another bandit nearby, his muscular arms making his sword pass through the bandit's neck like a hot knife through butter. The man's head rolled on the ground for some distance, when he noticed Kerel plunging his sword through another bandit.

Tesyb's pulse was still racing as he scanned for another target, when he realized the fight was already over. Most of the bandits were either dead on the ground or collapsing where they sat with a bolt sticking out of them. A few guards were moving amongst the fallen, stabbing the bastards a few more times to make sure they were dead, while those who had brought crossbows had already started reloading them in the light of the fire.

Feroy soon stepped up between them, his voice low but urgent. "Come on! No time to stand here. We gotta circle around through the east and hit the next camp before someone comes to check on these bastards."

#### Chapter 335 Strike Back - II

As the crossbowmen reloaded, Feroy called them up closer and glared at them. "I'd told you all to only shoot your target! That's why I allotted each man his own target—the leftmost guard will shoot the leftmost bandit and so on. How could you mix up your shots?"

"Uh..." one of the guards rubbed the back of his head. "I remember what you said, but... I got scared that they'd notice us... So I shot to kill someone—anyone—before I could count which one was my target..."

"Same here..." another guard added as he finished reloading.

Feroy exhaled. "Fine... I get that most of you're new to this. But keep it in mind in the future. I didn't make all those plans just to sound fancy. We can't afford wasted bolts in case the bandits outnumber our crossbows."

"We won't repeat the mistake," the first guard promised.

"Good. I hope you don't," Feroy nodded. "Our lives may depend on that..." He glanced around the group, peering into the darkness. "Now load faster!"

"Sir, yes sir!"

As soon as all the guards had finished reloading, Hudan took the lead again and started moving east along the wall. Tesyb waited for the crossbowmen to pass before he and the other swordsmen followed, Feroy once again bringing up the rear.

Tesyb took this chance to pray to the goddess, wishing that the coming fight would go just as well for them as this one had, but he knew that there were no guarantees in a battle. As proud as he was of his newly gained sword fighting skills, a sharp blade slashed by an enemy would take his life just as easily as before if his attention wavered or if he made the slightest mistake. So he had to do his best and make

sure nobody died or got badly injured here. The other guards - no, his brothers - were depending on him.

At first they were running hard, boots pounding against the dirt, until they reached the northeastern corner of the wall. Beyond that point the glow of the first fire faded, and darkness pressed heavier around them. Their footsteps were still sounding too loud in Tesyb's ears, and he kept glancing toward the south, worried that the bandits at the next camp might notice the sound of their thudding feet on the ground.

However, the captain knew what he was doing, and by the time they reached halfway along the eastern wall, his run had eased into a careful stalk, and the men adjusted to match him. When they came to the southeastern corner, Hudan paused for a moment, crouched lower, and listened. Then he raised his left arm and jerked it forward, giving the signal to continue with the original plan.

Perfect, Tesyb grinned. This would give him another chance to take revenge. Torhan hadn't been at the first camp, and neither had Nokozal, but hopefully he would find at least one of them here.

The captain moved forward again, step by step, and Tesyb saw the faint firelight ahead as he moved around the corner as well. Another group of bandits was gathered around it, their shapes flickering in the glow. They weren't cooking this time, just sitting close to the flames. Tesyb wondered if they had already eaten or if someone here had ordered them not to cook.

It didn't matter. Nothing about it would change what was about to happen to these bastards.

Tesyb eyes scanned the sitting group and his breath caught when he spotted a shape that looked nearly twice the size of the man beside him. Broad shoulders, heavy arms. That had to be Nokozal! He clenched his sword tighter, his hand itching to run to him and drive the blade into that brute's neck.

No, he needed to be patient.

The line of the swordsmen crept closer to their targets, while slowly spreading around. Hudan slowed further, waiting for the right distance as the crossbowmen raised their weapons and steadied their aim, waiting for the captain to give them the order to shoot.

Then one of the bandits pushed himself to his feet, stretching with a wide yawn before turning his face toward the darkness. The bastard's eyes were lined up straight towards them...

Shit!

"We're under attack!" one of the bandits shouted, stabbing a finger toward them. The cry ripped across the camp, and the rest of the bastards were snatching up their swords in a heartbeat, turning with murder flashing in their eyes.

"Shoot!" Hudan bellowed, his voice echoing at the same moment. The crossbowmen already had their weapons ready, but Tesyb knew that they still weren't as close to their targets as they should have been when they got the order to pull their triggers. It also wasn't the same thing to shoot calmly at a group of armed swordsmen coming to kill you, compared to the first camp when the crossbowmen had gotten sufficient time to take proper aims and maximise their chances of taking out their enemies.

Ten bolts shot out nearly at once, cutting through the air with wicked speed toward the bandits rushing forward. But just as Tesyb expected, he only noticed a couple of them stagger while just one man collapsed, which meant the majority of the bandits had gotten away with minor injuries only.

Fuck! He braced himself for a brutal fight ahead as his focus locked on his own target - the giant bandit leader known as Nokozal.

Past fights had taught him enough—this wasn't going to be easy. The man had gone up against both Hudan and him at the same time during the last raid on the village, slipping away with hardly a scratch. Tesyb could still picture Nokozal in that ambush near Kirnos, swinging like a mad ox, cutting a guard's arm clean off while holding off three men - and this was after Hyola's bolt had already grazed his upper arm.

Tesyb sprinted straight for him, sword and shield ready—until he noticed something strange. Nokozal's right hand still gripped his long sword as usual, but most of his left arm was just... gone. It ended in a stub just above where the elbow should have been, the ragged stump bound tightly with dirty cloth.

Tesyb faltered for half a breath. What the hell...

He blinked his eyes, thinking he was hallucinating, but this was real. Just what had happened to the bastard? He couldn't imagine a person who could have defeated the giant in a swordfight alone and cut his arm off. However, he suddenly remembered that in the last fight with Nokozal near Kirnos, this was the arm which had been hit by Hyola's bolt.

That's when the firelight flickered across the flesh above the wrappings, and Tesyb saw it was nearly black. Was that...?

It had to be! Nokozal's arm had gotten the rot! The bastard must have never cleaned his wound properly after that ambush, like Madam Helga kept telling the guards about. He must have been thinking something like that could never affect him, but he must have gotten the rotting disease in his arm soon after that night.

Tesyb's grip tightened on his sword. That meant the bastard might have cut his own arm off to save himself, but the blackness had already climbed past the stub. It wouldn't be long before the rot spread through the rest of his body and killed him anyway. But Tesyb wasn't about to let the goddess wait that long to claim this bastard.

He couldn't help but laugh as he closed in on the giant. The sound came out harsh and raw, carrying on a rush of joy. This was exactly what that bastard deserved.

Nokozal swung first, his long sword flashing in the firelight. Tesyb raised his shield in time, the impact rattling his arm and sending a jolt up his shoulder. He pushed back hard and countered with a thrust, his own blade darting for the giant's ribs, but Nokozal twisted, the strike glancing off the rag-bound stump of cloth at his side. The bastard grinned through his teeth, even with one arm gone.

They circled close to the fire, its glow flickering across their faces. The rest of the camp had already devolved into chaos - steel on steel, shouts and grunts, men falling under the guards' blades. Tesyb barely noticed it. His eyes stayed locked on Nokozal.

The giant's right arm was still strong, every swing of his sword forcing Tesyb back a step, sparks flying when steel struck steel. But his left side was slow, unguarded, and Tesyb was pressing toward it. He slashed again, forcing Nokozal to twist his bulk, but had to raise his shield again as the giant's blade crashed down with bone-jarring force.

The same dance continued for a while, Tesyb not getting any opening. His tired arms were already feeling the effects of the giant's strikes, even if he was mostly unbloodied by now.

Tesyb prayed he would get some help, knowing that the giant was going to outlast him, and that could only have one end...

That's when another guard darted in from the side to help, his blade arcing in low, before it bit into Nokozal's back with a wet sound. The giant roared and spun, his sword cutting through the air in a brutal backhand swing. The other guard was caught in surprise at the quick attack and didn't have time to bring his shield into position, and had to take the blow full on his arm. Blood splashed hot in the firelight, and the man staggered, clutching the wound with a howl.

Tesyb didn't waste the opening. As Nokozal turned, his chest came wide open. Tesyb lunged and drove his sword forward, the blade sinking deep. The giant bellowed in rage, thrashing wildly, his weapon hacking around again to defend himself.

Seeing the fury in the giant's eyes, Tesyb braced himself to defend from another bone-jolting attack, when Hudan entered the fight.

The captain's heavy frame slammed towards the giant in a vicious kick. Nokozal stumbled, his balance torn away, and crashed onto the ground with the firelight throwing his shadow wide. The injured guard, his face twisted with pain and fury, took this opportunity to ram his sword into Nokozal's remaining arm in retaliation. Bone cracked, and the giant's long sword clattered to the dirt.

Tesyb rushed in quickly, stabbing down into the giant's chest. Nokozal's roar grew ragged as Tesyb's blade pierced deep, and blood spilled across the man's armor. Hudan immediately raised his sword high, before his muscular arms brought it down in a savage arc, slicing clean even through the thick neck of the giant. The head rolled away into the dirt, Nokozal's eyes wide with surprise and fury, but without any life remaining in them.

For a heartbeat, everything seemed to go quiet. Tesyb's chest heaved with exhaustion after the brutal fight, before relief surged through him so strongly it nearly buckled his knees, and made him drop his shield. It was over... Finally, it was over.

He sent a silent thanks to the goddess, whispering the words in his head. He couldn't wait to bring this news to Lord Kivamus—and to Hyola, who had suffered as a slave under this brute. She deserved to hear that Nokozal would never raise a hand to threaten her again.

"West!" a guard shouted suddenly, his voice sharp with alarm.

Tesyb spun, eyes following the pointing hand. His gut clenched. A swarm of figures was pouring toward them out of the dark. The southwestern bandit camp must have seen everything, and now they were charging in. In the rush of battle, Tesyb hadn't even noticed their movement, but they were almost on top of them.

"Shit!" he spat, lifting his shield again.

He glanced quickly at the crossbowmen. Only a few had bolts loaded and ready to shoot; the rest were still fumbling, hands shaking in the frantic light. Hudan's order rang out sharply. "Drop the crossbows! Swords and shields!"

The line shifted at once, the guards throwing the unloaded crossbows aside, before steel scraped free. Feroz was there too, his blade slick with blood, but he must have been caught up in the fighting just as the rest of them had. The chance to surprise this last group was gone.

Tesyb took a deep breath as he readied himself. The battle wasn't finished. It was about to begin all over again...

Chapter 336 Strike Back - III

The shapes were rushing in fast now, spreading across the dark ground like a tide of shadows. Tesyb's heart sank. There were more of them than he'd expected—far more.

"Come on!" Hudan roared, his voice cutting through the noise. "One more time and it's a victory for Tiranat!"

"Hell yeah!" the guards roared collectively.

"Crossbows ready," Feroz called out, "and..."

The few crossbowmen who had managed to load their weapons raised them, squinting into the darkness ahead.

"Shoot!" Feroy shouted.

Their few bolts hissed through the air but Tesyb only saw one bandit collapsing mid-stride, the others barely slowing as they jumped over the fallen body. Then the last crossbowmen also tossed their used weapons aside and drew their swords. The two lines met with a crash that swallowed every other sound.

Tesyb braced behind his shield as a blade slammed against it. The impact numbed his arm, but he shoved forward and swung low, cutting for the man's leg. Steel bit flesh; the bandit stumbled, snarling through his teeth. Tesyb raised his sword again, ready to finish it—but another man came from the side, his blade flashing toward Tesyb's ribs. Tesyb twisted, barely catching the blow on the rim of his shield, and the screech of metal on metal filled his ears.

He stumbled back, boots sliding in the dirt. The first bandit was limping, blood pooling beneath him, but still alive as he fell to one knee. The second was pressing hard, hacking again and again, sparks bursting from every parry. Tesyb barely ducked a wild swing that might have taken his head clean off. His shoulder burned where the blade grazed past him, the wound shallow but sharp enough to sting.

Thankfully, another guard slammed into the second bandit from the side using the opportunity, yelling something lost to the noise. Together they pushed the man back, the three of them tangled in blades and shouts. Tesyb slashed, missed, and then blocked a cut meant for the other guard. The bandit stumbled over a fallen man, and that was their opening. Tesyb struck fast, his sword sinking into the man's stomach. The bandit's eyes went wide as he crumpled.

However, the first one was still alive, crawling for his sword. Tesyb stepped forward, kicking the weapon away, then drove his blade through the man's back. The fight had already moved around him—shouts, firelight, and the ringing of steel blending together into one endless roar.

Someone screamed. Tesyb turned in time to see a guard go tumbling backward into the campfire. Flames burst upward, licking at his clothes as the man howled and thrashed. The smell of burning flesh hit Tesyb's nose. Another guard broke from the fight, throwing down his shield to drag the man out, and beating at the flames to prevent the man from burning further.

Tesyb turned back just as another bandit came at him. Their swords clashed again and again, neither giving ground. The man's eyes were wild, teeth bared as he swung with desperate strength. Tesyb met each strike, the clang of metal echoing through his bones. He lunged forward, slammed his shield into the man's chest, and drove his sword up beneath the ribs.

He barely had time to breathe before another crash erupted beside him. Hudan was already there, roaring, his blade cleaving bandits' flesh in brutal arcs. Feroy fought on the other side of the melee, his movements sharp and efficient as he cut down the arm of a man who had tried to flank them.

Tesyb's muscles screamed with every movement as he ran to help another guard who seemed overwhelmed. The air stank of sweat, smoke, and blood. The fire behind them had scattered sparks into the dirt, glowing like tiny eyes.

Everywhere he looked, men were grappling and slashing, shouting, cursing. One of the guards took a hit to the leg and fell, but another stepped over him, preventing the bandit from taking his life. A bandit tried to rush through the opening and met Hudan's sword full on.

Tesyb's own breathing was ragged now as he kept fighting. His arm was heavy from the shield's weight. He parried another blow, shoved back, and countered, his sword catching the bandit across the throat. The man dropped, gurgling.

All of a sudden, the clang of steel began to thin, as he heard a few groans rising from the ground. The last of the noise was breaking apart into scattered shouts and the wet sound of blades finishing what they'd started. Tesyb was panting hard, his arm trembling from the weight of the shield. All around him, the ground was littered with bodies—guards and bandits tangled together, the fire throwing their shadows long and jagged.

Then he heard a hoarse voice cutting through the night. "Retreat! The battle's lost!"

Tesyb snapped his head up. One of the bandits, his face looking pale in the firelight, had moved a little distance away from the fight at some point and was pointing to the trees ahead. The remaining bandits immediately turned and bolted for the treeline, following the man who had made the call and was already some distance away.

"Don't let them escape!" Hudan roared. "Feroy, manage things here!" The captain immediately started sprinting towards the bandits.

Tesyb surged forward with him, legs burning, dirt sliding under his boots. Two more guards fell in behind them, their breathing rough and loud in the darkness. The fleeing bandits were crashing through the brush, one stumbling as his foot caught on a root. Tesyb lunged, sword raised, and cut him down mid-step. The man dropped with a grunt, blood spraying into the air.

Hudan was already ahead, his stride long and powerful. The next bandit turned, swinging wildly as the captain reached him. Steel flashed, and Hudan's sword tore through the man's chest, sending him sprawling backward into the dirt.

They continued running and chasing the remaining men as they reached the treeline in the southwest.

The man who had made the call, had already escaped into the darkness, while the third bandit was still visible and running, his silhouette darting between the trees. Tesyb chased after him, lungs burning, the cold night air making his already dry throat even more parched. Branches whipped at his face as he plunged into the shadows. The glow of the campfire faded behind him, replaced by the dark press of the forest.

He could still hear the man ahead—snapping twigs, labored breaths—but the sound was fading fast. As they all spread around, Tesyb pushed harder, following the noise, his boots sliding on the uneven ground. He caught a glimpse of the man's shape just ahead, but a moment later it vanished between the trunks.

"Damn it!" he hissed, slamming his shield against a tree in frustration.

Hudan's voice came from behind while Tesyb was still looking for the bandit. "Leave it. We're not finding them in this dark."

Tesyb stopped, breathing hard, the forest spinning faintly around him. He wanted to argue, to push further, but Hudan was right. The night was too thick, the trees too dense. A man could disappear here and not be found for days.

Soon, Hudan was walking back toward the faint flicker of firelight in the distance, his sword hanging loosely in his grip, while the other two guards were treading next to him. Tesyb fell beside them, all the guards breathing in the smell of smoke and blood that still carried through the night air.

As they reached close to the bandits' camp where they had been fighting, the battlefield looked worse than before. The fire had burned lower, but someone had replenished it with a fresh branch, and the renewed glow showed the damage clearly. Several bodies still twitched where they'd fallen. Guards were moving among them, kicking away weapons, checking for anyone still breathing.

One of the guards jogged to the captain to report. "We killed 14 bandits here, but we've lost one of ours as well," he said while pointing at a body wearing the familiar leather armor. "Another guard is half burned. He'll live, but he's going to have brutal scars for life. Some of our men also have serious injuries, but none of them look fatal right now."

"Damn it!" Tesyb cursed as saw the captain taking a visibly deep breath. He should have done more... He should have helped the others and made sure nobody died... He should have...

"We've won the fight," Hudan said as he patted Tesyb's back. "That's what matters here. We'll sweep the area, and verify that there aren't any more of them hiding nearby. We'll make sure the fallen guard has a proper burial. That's all we can do for him at this point."

Tesyb gave a single nod, not trusting himself to speak at the moment. Damn that bastard Torhan! First he burned the village before winter, then he killed his brother-in-arms today. He glanced around into the darkness of the night. Where the hell was that coward? If he had entered the fight instead of hiding away who knows where, Tesyb would have made sure to separate his head from his body before anything else.

He exhaled as he wiped his sword across his sleeve, smearing blood he couldn't tell was his or theirs. He didn't know how long the fight had lasted, but it felt like it had taken hours. As the silence settled, Tesyb realized his hands were shaking. It was over—at least for now. But the smell of smoke and blood said it wouldn't be for long.

Hudan looked around before he started walking, and Tesyb followed him.

Feroy was crouched near the edge of the firelight, a hand gripping the collar of a wounded bandit. The man was barely conscious, blood bubbling from his mouth with each breath. Tesyb and Hudan approached them, their boots crunching in the dirt.

The ex-mercenary didn't look up at first. He said something low to the dying man, but hearing nothing back, he pressed his knee against the bandit's chest, forcing another wet gasp.

Tesyb's pulse was still hammering from the chase, but seeing the bandit there—alive, if only barely—lit a new spark of anger in him, and made him want to kill him right here. Maybe this one could still answer for what they'd done. But he knew that wasn't what Tiranat or Lord Kivamus needed right now. They needed information about these bandits more than anything. Looking at the expression of Feroy, he knew the ex-mercenary wasn't going to leave this bandit alive for long.

Hudan glanced at Feroy. "Find out what he knows. Every detail."

Feroy nodded once, eyes cold in the firelight, and turned back to his gruesome work.

#### Chapter 337 Aftermath - I

Kivamus was pacing near the gates of the manor, his steps echoing in the dim quiet, while his mind was caught between hope and dread. Every few moments, he would glance toward the closed gates as if expecting them to swing open, but so far there had been no news of the battle. Still, looking around the nearly empty manor felt weird. There wasn't a single male guard left inside. Every man who could fight was out there in the dark. Only the female guards were on the watchtowers, keeping their eyes fixed on the horizon.

However, even though it was the middle of the night, nobody was sleeping. Most of the braziers were burning, their orange light spilling across the walls of the manor buildings. All the off-duty male servants and grooms had armed themselves with spare swords and shields, standing watch at both of the manor gates in case something went wrong. The maids were clustered in the kitchen of the servants' hall, busy over pots and pans, preparing a quick meal for the guards, whenever they returned. The smell of broth and roasted grain drifted faintly through the manor, sharp and warm against the chill. Cooking had also given them something to do—something to keep from imagining the worst.

Near the servants' hall, Duvas was speaking quietly with Madam Nerida, the two of them bent over a piece of paper. The majordomo was scribbling something in the light of a brazier, likely planning how to stretch the last few days of food they had left. Nearby, Gorsazo was sitting beside Madam Helga on a bench, his voice soft and steady as he tried to calm her. She looked pale, eyes fixed on the gates as though she could see through it while expecting the worst, with the raid probably reminding her of the

time when bandits had killed her husband and nearly made her kids a pair of orphans. However, Clarisa and Lucem were thankfully asleep at the time. They had worn themselves out with Gorsazo's practical educational lessons earlier that day, the same games that had made the kids and children forget about the fear for a little while.

Syrene had come to him earlier, and they had agreed to dilute the remaining losuvil powder into a thin paste to make it last longer, in case they had too many injured men to treat. The thought turned in his head again now, and he found himself glancing toward the gate again.

He had no idea how the battle was progressing, but at least no horn had been blown. That was something. If the guards had been flanked or the village walls threatened, the alarm would have been sounded by now. The silence meant they were holding. Or maybe that the fight was finished. One way or another...

He rubbed his temple, wishing he could see it for himself. He had wanted to stay on one of the watchtowers to watch the battle unfold, but Hudan had outright refused to allow that, saying even a stray arrow could end his life. The captain had claimed that no guard would be able to fight properly if their baron wasn't safe inside the manor, with two separate walls between him and the bandits. So here he was—still waiting for some news.

Suddenly, the silence broke with a heavy pounding on the gates. A voice shouted from outside, breathless and desperate. "Open up! I've brought news!"

The servants rushed to the small peephole, checking the face beyond, and then hurried to unbar the gate. Kivamus was already walking fast towards the entrance, Duvas and Gorsazo close behind.

The gate creaked open, and a figure stumbled inside—Isomi, one of the crossbow women from the southeastern watchtower. Her face was flushed from running, and her hair stuck to her forehead, but she was grinning.

"Milord," she said between breaths. "We've won the battle!"

For a heartbeat, the words didn't seem to land. Kivamus stood still, blinking, his mind needing a moment to catch up. Then the noise came—cheers bursting from the servants, shouts echoing through the courtyard. Some of them even began to cry openly. Madam Helga pressed both hands to her mouth and

began to sob against Gorsazo's shoulder, while Duvas looked upward, eyes glistening, and whispered a prayer of thanks to the goddess. This was Tiranat's toughest test so far against the strength of the mightiest bandit group in this region, but they had prevailed...

Kivamus exhaled slowly, relief spreading through his chest like the warmth of a hot drink after a long cold night. "What else do you know?"

Isomi straightened. "Not much, milord. I ran here as soon as I saw the captain chasing the last of the bandits into the trees with some guards. I realized it meant the remaining bandits had already been killed, and that we'd won. I knew you'd want to know about it immediately so I didn't wait for them to return."

"You did good to bring us the news," Kivamus said, nodding in relief, "but you should return to your post for now. We can't rest easy just yet."

"Yes, milord." Her hands went to the crossbow tied at her hip, as if reassuring herself, then she turned and ran back out through the gates, which were barred once again.

Madam Nerida's voice came from behind. "I'll make sure the soup is ready when the guards return."

Kivamus gave her a grateful nod. "Do that. They'll be hungry." He looked at Duvas. "We'll wait here for the others."

He gestured to one of the servants. "Bring a bench."

The servant hurried off and returned with a sturdy wooden bench, placing it near the gate. Kivamus sat down beside Duvas, the two of them facing the gates where the cold night air seeped through the cracks. Outside, beyond the walls, the forest was silent again.

The battle was over, but the waiting was not.

\*\*\*

The wait dragged on, every minute stretching longer than the last. The braziers hissed softly as the sawdust briquettes burned low before they were refilled by some servants.

Kivamus was still sitting beside Duvas, elbows on his knees, eyes fixed on the gate. Each creak of the timbers made his pulse tighten.

Then came the pounding. Heavy, hurried—followed by muffled voices outside. Easily a dozen of them, maybe more. The servants at once rushed to the peephole, voices overlapping until one shouted, "It's the guards!"

The gate bolts were drawn back, the wood groaning open.

The guards filed inside under the light of the burning torches and braziers. Their boots were streaked with dirt, armor smeared with blood, and eyes hollow with exhaustion. For a heartbeat Kivamus felt a rush of relief—but it dulled as soon as he saw their faces. The smiles were forced, the cheers thin.

"Glory to Tiranat!" someone called out suddenly, before the other guards and servants echoed it. Cheers rose again, louder this time, the sound of people reminding themselves that they were still alive, but the noise faded soon as Hudan stepped forward. He lifted an arm and pointed behind him. Two guards came carrying a makeshift stretcher between them.

The smell hit first—burnt flesh and iron. The man on the stretcher was still breathing, but one side of him was charred and blackened, the outlines of his armor melted into his clothes. Another pair of stretchers followed, each carrying men with haphazardly bandaged limbs and dark stains seeping through the cloth.

The last stretcher came in silence. For a moment Kivamus thought the man on it was sleeping, before he realized the guard's chest - which was covered with blood - wasn't moving at all. His face was pale beneath the streaks of blood and soot, his hand still curled tight around a broken sword.

"Is he—?" someone whispered.

Hudan nodded once. The noise around them died instantly. Even the braziers seemed to quiet down.

Kivamus lowered his head for a moment in respect, then looked to Hudan. "Tell me."

The captain drew a long breath. "We struck the first camp cleanly. With our 10 loaded crossbows, they never stood a chance. That battle ended without a scratch on our side. The second fight went harder—more men, better trained, and we couldn't surprise them as well as in the first battle. We had barely finished that group when they were reinforced by bandits from the southwestern camp. We lost one of ours before the battle was over. The rest will live, with the Goddess' grace, although with scars for life."

Duvas' jaw tightened. "We'll make a new burial plot tomorrow morning in the eastern hills. For the fallen guard and for any others who follow, although I hope it's a long, long time before we need it again."

Kivamus nodded. "Do it." His voice was steady, though his throat felt dry as he looked at the gathered group. "I wish I never have to give this medal again in future, but sometimes things are out of our hands. This man gave his everything for Tiranat, and we will forever be grateful for him. He will be given the first medal of valor this village has ever seen. When the coffers allow, his family will also receive a year's pay in his name, and they will be taken care of until then by the manor. When conditions allow, we will also make a memorial stone near that burial plot with his name etched on it, so his name is never forgotten."

Hudan gave a somber nod. "It's the least we can do. He more than earned it in the fight. He was a menace to the bandits until he fell, right after he saved another guard's life."

Kivamus took a deep breath, as the body was carried away by the servants. He announced, "There's soup ready for you all. After your injuries are taken care of, eat your fill, and get some rest. Sleep if you can. You deserve it."

A murmur went through the area. Some of the guards took a seat on the ground wherever they could find some empty space before they leaned on the walls, with Nurobo - who had just returned from his watchtower duty - moving through them asking about their injuries. The rest of the guards began to drift toward the kitchen of the servants' hall, some leaning on others, their movements slow and stiff. Servants and maids followed after them, already asking questions, wanting to know how it happened, who had done what.

Knowing that the servants' hall was already well-overcrowded, Kivamus wished they had a barrack ready for the guards, so the injured men could stay there comfortably until they healed, but it would take

time, like every other thing here. But at least it was a good problem to have, with the battle won tonight and with the majority of the guards coming back alive.

#### Chapter 338 Aftermath - II

Sryne came running from somewhere at that moment, her hands red-stained from mixing the medicine. "The losuvil paste is ready," she said, breath short. "It's thinner now, but it should still help until we can get more."

Hudan looked toward Tesyb, who was standing near the injured men. "Go with her. See to the wounded."

Tesyb nodded and followed Sryne toward where the injured guards were being laid out on the ground by Nurobo and some other guards and servants who had stayed back to help. Kivamus watched as the burned man was lifted carefully, his skin cracking where the cloth touched it. Sryne went to work, applying the thin, reddish paste to the worst of the burns as the smell of herbs and singed flesh filled the air.

Kivamus murmured quietly, half to himself, "I wish we had more of it..."

Hudan turned to some of the less-injured guards. "You all—head to the watchtowers after you take your bowls of soup. Relieve the women who've been on duty since the last morning. They've done their part."

Kerel, the older guard with iron gray hair, gave a nod. "I'll go as well. I can't go to sleep right now anyway."

With that, the men saluted and left, their boots thudding softly on the dirt on their way towards the servants' hall.

When the last of the orders had been given, Kivamus gestured toward the manor house while looking at the two leaders of the guards. "Come on. I need a more detailed report."

The manor hall was still warm as they entered. Hudan, Feroy, and Duvass followed him in and took their seats, as the returning fighters took long swigs of water from the wooden jugs. The chairs creaked softly, the sound oddly loud in the quiet that had settled over them.

It should have been a victory—a clean, joyous one. Instead, the air was heavy with smoke and grief. No one spoke for a long time.

Feroy finally broke the silence, rubbing at a cut on his forearm. "It went well, all things considered," he said. "But it could've gone far worse. Those bandits weren't rabble. The ones at the southwest were well-trained and fought like they were a part of the Duke's army! I'd wager Torhan was with them. He must've stayed behind with a few of his men, using them as a personal guard while the rest charged in."

Kivamus leaned back slowly in his chair, the fatigue finally settling over him.

Hudan cleared his throat, the sound cutting the low hum in the room. "We also finally killed Nokoza," he said, "but only because he had the rot in his arm."

Kivamus frowned. "The rot?"

Duvas answered, "It's what happens when a wound gets infected badly, or when blood stops flowing to a limb. Flesh decays. People call it many things." He looked at Kivamus, and the baron's face remembered a word that fit.

"Gangrene..." Kivamus said quietly.

Hudan exhaled. "That giant was something else... Even after the rot took most of his left arm, it still took the three of us to bring him down — Tesyb, me and another guard. If he were fine, I don't know how he would've been stopped. He might as well have been immortal with the way he kept surviving!" He gave a short, bitter laugh. "He even survived the rot for so long. That bastard should have died a long time ago with the way his arm was looking..."

"I'm just glad he's gone," Kivamus said. "Hyola and the others who were slaves under that giant will be glad to hear it. You all did well."

Hudan nodded. "The crossbows were the real gift tonight. They let us take out the first camp near the northeast without a scratch on our men. The second group were more alert, so the bolts weren't as decisive there, but it still proved their outsized effects. If we could get enough of them, they would be a

wonderful addition even to all our male guards - especially when we manage to take an enemy group by surprise."

"I know..." Kivamus agreed. "I plan to get more crossbows made until every guard has one, however long it takes."

Hudan shifted, before continuing his report. "Everyone was tired after the battle and we had serious injuries, so we didn't wait to clear the bodies in the dark but I'd confirmed that the bandits were dead or in Feroy's hands before we left them."

"All dead now," Feroy added. "Their injuries were too severe to save any of them even if we wanted. Our guards were brutal."

"That they were," Hudan snorted. " Tomorrow morning we'll clear the field properly. We'll bury the bandits in a ditch on the eastern hills after taking their swords, whatever coin they had, and their armor."

Duvas made a grim face. "They won't have much coin, but their swords will be useful. Cedoron can melt them down or rework them. Iron's always valuable, even if we'd just gotten that big shipment."

"What did you find out from the bandits?" Kivamus asked the ex-mercenary.

Feroy sighed. "Nothing much of use. Nearly all of them belonged to that same clay mine where the former slave Joric used to work, but there were some men amongst them whom the bandits I interrogated hadn't seen before. I can't say the reason behind that, but they might have been new recruits. I'll take Joric to check their faces in the daytime to find more. Even if we didn't get Torhan tonight, but we should move on his compound before he can gather what's left and strike again."

Hudan shook his head. "Unlikely he can do that any time soon. We killed a huge portion of his forces tonight. He'll be short on men even to guard his compound near Kirnos right now."

Kivamus tapped a finger on the table, thinking out loud. "You said that you counted eleven men in each of the eastern camps and fourteen in the southwest that you fought. Two escaped, and that doesn't include Torhan and his personal guards. That adds up to over forty men in total, not counting those left

at his compound. Even if some of them might have been slaves who had been given swords, it means his clay mining operation is even bigger than we thought, or he's got another camp somewhere which Joric had no idea about. That might not even be a clay mine. Maybe Torhan also does something else on the side, but it's hard to say right now."

Feroy's jaw tightened. "Still, he is weak now. This is the time to strike, to end his life and free his slaves. If we bring them here, you will have more workers to help us build everything faster."

"I'd like that more than anything," Kivamus replied with a sigh, "but we simply don't have enough food to support more mouths right now. If we bring them here, we'll just starve our villagers sooner. We need to secure food first."

Hudan agreed, "We also aren't in any position to mount such a long mission right now. Most of our guards are already wounded, and it'll take time until everyone is ready to fight again."

"I know," Kivamus nodded. "This is a time to consolidate. We must use what we've gained. Right now our first priority is to get more meat by sending out more hunting groups immediately and getting more grain somehow. If no merchant comes in a day or two, we'll have to send a caravan to Cinran ourselves, and that will also need guards. We can't spare men for a raid on Torhan's compound at the moment, as much as I want that bastard dead. But don't worry, his time will come."

Duvas's face was tired. "We're walking a really tight line regarding feeding the villagers. Unless we touch the seed stores marked for sowing, we won't have food to feed everyone after tomorrow, so we'll have to use them anyway. That means even after we buy more grain, some of that will still have to be reserved for use as seeds. So we'll need to buy more grain once again after that."

"We'll manage it, somehow..." Kivamus muttered. He leaned back, feeling the stress of dealing with one problem after another.

"The last few days haven't been easy, but we survived — even though we lost one of our own. All the guards still did very well. Just a few months ago, nobody could have imagined that we would come out with such little losses when dealing with a raid from more than 35 men. So we need to be proud of that, but tomorrow there will be more to do, and I'll need you all at your best. For now, you both go and have something to eat and then get some rest."

The majordomo looked at him with hesitation. "This bandit threat has been dealt with, but there's also something else you need to know about..."

Kivamus frowned. Was there another bandit group as big as Torhan...?

"What is it...?"

Duvas looked like he was going to speak before he shook his head. "Nevermind. This is not the right time for that kind of discussion."

"Later then," Kivamus said, before Hudan and Feroy rose and left the hall. Duvas stood as well, rubbing his eyes. "I need to get some sleep too," he muttered while walking to the inner door which led to his room.

Kivamus nodded and rose too. He moved towards the stairwell, feeling exhausted with all the recent happenings and relieved that it had gone well, even though his mind continued thinking about the raid. They had removed a major threat to the village, but the danger wasn't finished with Torhan still out there. Even if that bastard didn't come back to take revenge once again, he knew it wouldn't be long before someone else came to threaten his people and his village.

But they would deal with any enemies when the time came. They always had.

#### Chapter 339 Remembrance

The drizzle which had started sometime in the night had turned steadier by the time morning settled in, with a thin grey mist hanging over the hills east of the village. Kivamus stood under his cloak near the freshly dug mound of earth, the smell of wet soil heavy in the air. The guards were finishing the shoveling of dirt over the new grave which had been dug on a small hill, their boots sinking into the soft ground, but the weather hadn't deterred the villagers from gathering here. The continuously falling drizzle blurred the line between grief and the sky's own tears, and he was quietly thankful for it.

Earlier in the morning, Kivamus had learned that the man who had lost his life at the hands of bandits was one of their new recruits, taken into service just before winter despite his wife's pleading for him to stay a laborer. That thought had settled heavily in his chest. Even one death felt too large a price, but it was a price they had to pay to keep Tiranat safe from all who wished her harm.

In the morning, Duvas had proclaimed their total victory over the bandits to the gathered villagers in front of the manor, and their victorious cheers had resonated loudly throughout the village. But the majordomo also had to announce the death of the guard, which had made the mood somber. However, it meant most of the villagers had walked to the hills together to pay respects to the fallen guard, and he was glad for that.

Back in the present, Father Edric's voice carried over the patter of rain, calm and steady as he said a prayer for the fallen guard. Near him, the young widow was weeping quietly, clutching her little girl to her chest. Every so often, the child's faint wail rose above the priest's words, only to be hushed by a trembling hand. The current weather matched the mood of the village, and the rain helped to hide the tears in many eyes.

When the last clod of earth fell and the priest concluded his prayer, Kivamus stepped onto a broad rock near the grave. The guards straightened instinctively, water dripping from their hair and leather armor. He took a moment to look over the gathered guards and the villagers—faces streaked with rain and exhaustion, yet unbroken.

"This man," he began, his voice carrying clearly through the rain, "was braver than an adzee protecting its pup last night. When a comrade's life was in danger, he stepped forward and took the blade meant for another. He held the bandits back until his strength gave out, and because of that, the rest of the guards returned home safely. Tiranat is proud of him and we will forever be grateful that a man like him served our village."

He paused. For a moment there was only the sound of the drizzle against the leaves of the nearby trees, and then Hudan clapped once—firm and loud. The rest of the guards joined him, then the villagers, the sound rolling through the wet air until it faded back into quiet after a long time.

Madam Helga was already by the widow's side, one arm around her shoulders. A few steps away, Lucem and Clarisa were crouched beside the little girl, murmuring something soft enough to draw a small, uncertain smile from her as she wiped her eyes with her sleeves.

Kivamus reached into the pouch at his belt and drew out the medal—a round piece of iron, larger and more ornate than any other medal they had crafted. Rain glimmered on its surface as he held it up.

"This," he said, "is the first Medal of Valor ever given in Tiranat. It belongs to him, for his courage and sacrifice. May he rest in peace."

The widow came forward slowly at Madam Helga's behest, her steps uneven. When Kivamus placed the decorated piece of iron in her hands, she bowed her head over it, sobbing openly with the medal clenched tightly in her hands, before Madam Helga was back at her side to prevent her falling to the ground.

"His family will not be forgotten," Kivamus continued, once the widow looked a little calmer. "We will see that they are cared for - for however long they need it. As soon as we can, they will receive a year's worth of his wages as compensation. It's nothing compared to what he gave to the village, but it's a small gesture of appreciation for his sacrifice."

Duvas nodded nearby, rain running through his white beard.

"And," Kivamus added, "this hill will not remain bare. A memorial stone will be placed here to honor every man or woman who gives their life for this village. Madam Nerida has promised to cultivate a flower garden here, so that those who visit the departed will leave with peace in their hearts instead of sorrow."

He stepped down from the rock, feeling the pull of sorrow deep in his bones. He wished he could have done more. Even after what he had promised, he knew that the life of the widow and her child wouldn't be easy from now on. But before the moment could fade, one of the villagers stepped forward—a middle-aged man with mud up to his knees.

"My family will make sure they always have warm food on their table," he said, glancing toward the widow. "It's the least we can do."

A woman's voice rose from the crowd. "And I'll help with their house work. Chores, repairs, whatever they need—until they're ready to manage again."

Then another spoke, and another, until several had offered something—tools, labor, company, support. The widow began to cry harder, overwhelmed, clutching her child close as the villagers surrounded her with quiet nods and murmurs of comfort.

Kivamus felt the weight in his chest shift, not lifting, but still getting a little lighter. Pride, sorrow, and something steadier than either. These were his people—their strength wasn't just in swords or walls,

but in this camaraderie. He felt proud that the villagers understood and respected the risk that the guards were taking every time they went out of the village to defend Tiranat, whether from bandits or from beasts.

Eventually, the crowd began to drift away, walking down the slope of the hill, with the sound of boots and bare feet squelching in the mud. The widow was gently helped toward her home - a bunk in the second longhouse block - by two other women, the little child walking between them.

Kivamus stayed a moment longer, watching the rain patter against the new mound of earth. "Rest well," he murmured under his breath.

He turned around, mud clinging to the edge of his boots. With the villagers leaving slowly, only the guards were left behind, who were patting the mound flatter and placing stones around the edge to mark it properly. The rain had slowed to a fine mist now, hanging in the air like smoke, as he turned back to his advisors.

Hudan, Feroy, Duvas, and Gorsazo were waiting nearby. The captain gave a nod as Kivamus joined them.

"It is hardly a consolation for losing a man, but at least we got a decent haul from the bandits," Hudan said. "Thirty-six swords—though none worth showing off—and about the same number of leather armors. Not a single coin on any of them, though. Either those who escaped took it back with them, or they hadn't brought much with them in the first place."

Kivamus gave a nod. "It's still something. Give the swords to Cedoron. He can forge them into new iron parts for the scorpion. It will be symbolic in a way. The bandits' own iron will protect us from them in the future. Leah will take all the leather armor. Have her repair what she can so we can equip the six recent recruits and keep an extra stack ready for when we hire more guards in the future. We'll need them for sure..."

Feroy adjusted his scabbard, the motion slow from fatigue. "I'd gone with Joric to look at the bodies before the guards went to clear them up, to see if Torhan was amongst them. As I expected, Joric confirmed that the bandit chief wasn't amongst the dead. No official guards from Kirnos either that he recognized, so they were all Torhan's men. Don't know where he brought that many bandits from. I also took a few men to search the southern forests again, to see if we could track down the ones who had escaped, but the rain had washed away everything. Not a trace of 'em was left."

"It's fine, I guess," Kivamus sighed. "Even if a few slipped away, we severely reduced that bandit group's power. Torhan may still be alive, but even if he had another compound to call up bandits from, he's not coming back any time soon—not with his numbers gutted like this. It'll take him months to gather enough men again - if he even can. So we are safe for now."

He exhaled, watching the mist swirl in the breeze. "I'd like nothing more than to hit his compound and stop any chance of him returning for revenge again, but we just don't have the strength for that right now. Not yet... But one day we'll get our payback."

Gorsazo's tone was gentler as he spoke after a while. "Now that the siege and the bandit threat is over, I'll send the kids back to gather sawdust from today. Still, I wish I could keep teaching them in the mornings too."

"It won't be long until then," Kivamus said. "Once we have made the new sawmill near the dam and the majority of carpentry work and the sawdust press move there, the kids won't have to haul anything. You'll get your classroom mornings back."

Duvas had been silent until then, his hands folded behind him. "You should also think about sending a caravan to Cinran, my lord. If not this evening, then tomorrow for certain. We have no choice but to use some of the reserved seed grain as food anyway, but Pinoto said we shouldn't delay the sowing too much."

"Do it," Kivamus said, "but only mark half the seed as rations. That gives us another four days to find a way to feed everyone. By then, some of the hunters should be back. The rest of the seed can go to the fields once Pinoto says the ground's ready to sow again after this rain."

He looked toward Hudan. "Tell the clay diggers to restart work on the trench surrounding the village walls. You should keep planting sharpened branches in the already dug trenches with the help of the spare guards. Now that the bandit threat's gone, we don't have to keep everyone on alert all the time."

"Of course," Hudan agreed. "For today, I've only posted the older villagers on the watchtowers to give some rest to the female guards who were on duty last night. By evening, I'll have one crossbow woman on each tower again, but we can't spare any more eyes on the towers if we want to send more men for hunting."

"I know," Kivamus nodded. "Are the hunters ready to leave?"

"Two groups are ready—they just wanted to attend the burial first."

"Good," Kivamus said. "Send them out as soon as you can. We'll need whatever meat they bring in. Hopefully, one of the earlier three hunting groups will return soon."

The advisors exchanged brief nods, the kind that carried both relief and exhaustion. Then, wordlessly, they started down the slope together toward the manor. The mist still hung in the air, but the clouds were beginning to break apart, and a faint stripe of blue showed above the hills in the east.

Kivamus smiled. The clouds hanging over Tiranat had passed - both literally and figuratively. For now.

#### Chapter 340 Moving On

The evening was grey and cool when Kivamus was bent over the long dining table which doubled as his drafting board, marking the next curve on the blueprint. The burning brazier was the only source of light in the manor hall as his quill made a steady, practiced sound. He had just reached for the straightedge when the outer door opened and a servant came running in, grinning so wide his cheeks were flushed.

"Milord, two of the hunting groups have just come back — with a lot of meat!"

Kivamus straightened, the tiredness leaving his shoulders as he grinned back. "That's excellent! Duvas, this calls for a feast - even a small one. It's a good opportunity for a celebration after our victory last night. Everyone needs a way to put that raid behind us and have something to cheer for after the difficult weeks recently."

Duvas set his quill down on the ledger he had been scribbling in and was on his feet before Kivamus had finished the sentence. "I agree. I believe Madam Nerida wouldn't have started on the dinner yet. I'll tell her to use this meat tonight. Madam Helga can also make her signature Rizako stew too using that meat — everyone would like that."

"Certainly," Kivamus said. "With the haul from two hunting groups there will be a lot more meat than what we need for the manor. Send the rest to the longhouse blocks. Let the villagers have it - a good meal will put a smile on everyone's faces after living under the threat of bandits for the last few days."

Duvas nodded and left at once, the servant following him outside.

After a while, Kivamus went back to his blueprint, but couldn't concentrate even after some time, since half his thoughts were away from the designs. With two hunting groups back they were in a much better position in terms of the number of available guards. Although three other hunting groups were still out right now, perhaps a small caravan to Cinran could still be organised, but he would have to talk to the guard captain and the majordomo before deciding anything.

However, Duvas still hadn't returned and Hudan must still be training the guards right now, so that question would have to wait. Hearing the sound of a door opening, he glanced around and realized Gorsazo must have already finished up today's lessons for Syrene, since the young woman had just entered the hall with an already scribbled-over sheet of paper, perhaps working on some problem which her teacher had taught her.

On the other hand, Gorsazo himself must have gone to meet with Madam Helga again, like he often did. He had an odd, private amusement at the thought that the two of them were often found in the same small conversations these days. In fact, he had begun to think that there was something going on between them, not that he had any opposition to it.

Madam Helga was a widow, with her husband killed by bandits years ago, back when Lucem was still a child, while Gorsazo's wife had died a long time ago because of fever and illness. Neither of them had married again after losing their spouses, and they were both of a similar age as well in their mid 40s. He chuckled. Perhaps he should even nudge both of them towards each other if they were hesitating. He knew Lucem wouldn't mind getting a new father, and neither would Clarisa - who had basically been adopted by Madam Helga as a daughter in everything but name - while Syrene already treated Gorsazo with huge respect as her teacher.

He shook his head as he turned back to his blueprints. He had more pressing matters at the moment instead of meddling in others' love lives - whether real or imaginary.

After a while, he had still not managed to concentrate properly and was weighing how many guards an escort to Cinran would need when the outer door opened a second time and a guard entered, wiping mud from his boots on the doormat kept just outside the door before he walked further.

"Another hunting group has returned, milord," the guard reported. "They brought a good haul of meat - and a lot of losuvil leaves."

Kivamus looked at him in wonder. All three hunting groups returned together on the same day, right when they needed them the most? "Perfect! Meet up with Hudan and take as many leaves as necessary to the injured guards so they can use the fresh paste. Make sure to take proper care of the man who had burnt his skin. Tell the hunters to bring the rest of the leaves here."

The guard gave a quick nod before he exited the hall.

Kivamus turned to the young woman. "You've already prepared the new clay pots, right?"

Syrene, who had been sitting on the low bench by the window with a new scrap of paper and a stub of charcoal, stood up and answered without pausing. "Yes, milord. The village potter gave them to me days ago. If I can have a few servants to help, I can now process at least three times the amount of losuvil than what I managed before the winter."

"That's very good," Kivamus said. "But it is mid-spring already, so those leaves might not last until the morning after the time the hunters already took between plucking them from the vines and bringing them here."

Syrene folded the paper into her lap and gazed into the distance for a moment, as if she was already lining up tasks in her head. "I know. That's why I was planning to start working on them tonight. The Toloraberry shrubs have already started to give fruits, so that will help me in starting the preservation process immediately. Although it does mean you won't get to eat a Toloraberry pie anytime soon."

Kivamus chuckled. "I'm sure Feroy will miss it far more than me, but it's fine. Anyway, the hunting group will bring the leaves outside, then you can take the help of the servants to transport them to your, uh... laboratory," Kivamus said. "Until then, go and make sure the bigger pots are ready and there is enough water and wine in that room."

Syrene grinned. "I think I know how to process the leaves better than you!"

Kivamus laughed again. "I have no doubt of that at this point. Anyway, try to use the remaining wine sparingly until we can afford to buy more of it from a visiting merchant."

Syrene nodded and slipped out of the hall to get the servants.

A few minutes later Duvas returned, brushing some water from his sleeves. "I've told Madam Nerida to start on the feast. We got losuvil leaves from the last group?"

Kivamus gave a grin. "I think today is a lucky day for us."

The majordomo nodded as he looked upward, murmuring something as he sent a prayer to the goddess.

Kivamus leaned back with relief as well. Three hunting groups back — that would push the food stores up by several days. It might be enough to avoid sending a caravan immediately — provided a merchant turned up with enough grain by then. He didn't trust the safety of the northern road one bit, but the extra days would buy them more time for the guards to heal and to arrange a proper escort for the caravan if they still needed one.

He went back to his blueprint, the lines clearer in his mind now. Tonight there would be a small celebration, a hot meal, and an evening of relaxation for everyone. But from tomorrow they would have to start moving on to the next thing in their long list of problems. However, for the next few days, there would be meat on the table and losuvil to help the guards heal faster, and that was enough to steady him for now.

\*\*\*

The next morning, when the sun was already climbing high, Kivamus had just left the manor for a walk toward the southern farms. The rain had stopped in the night, leaving the air cool and dry. Small puddles still glittered on the packed dirt road, and the smell of wet earth still lingered, where some weeds had also started to sprout by now. He could feel the warmth growing by the hour—it wouldn't be long before summer began pressing in.

He smiled thinking of the feast from the night before. It had been held in the southeast corner of the manor grounds - which was usually used for training the guards - but these days it was the only large open area left, since vegetable patches had spread over nearly every other open space. The servants had brought benches and tables from the hall, lining them up in rows, and the guards, maids, grooms as well as the servants themselves had crowded in, tired but smiling.

It hadn't been much of a feast by noble standards—no cheese and no pies—only stew and bread with a full serving of meat and some veggies, as well as the famous Rizako stew from Madam Helga - but it had been enough. The guards had eaten until they were beyond full, the servants and maids had laughed over their plates, and even Lucem and Clarisa had run between the tables, their laughter bright in the light of the braziers, probably having forgotten about the raid already.

Back in the present, Duvas was walking beside him as usual, a small ledger tucked under his arm, while Hudan and three other guards followed at an easy distance. The path curved eastward until they reached the southeastern gates of the village, and they exited it to continue walking south.

Soon, he walked past the wood press machine, where he saw the laborers packing the sawdust into the wooden molds before they turned the levers of the huge screw to make new sawdust briquettes. In the evenings, the briquettes would be piled together to be transferred to the manor for use in the braziers everywhere, and then the laborers would use the press machine to compress and make new sheets of paper which the paper-workers would bring from the east of the manor by then.

They didn't have to walk long before they saw the fields being worked ahead of them. The farming foreman Pinoto was talking to another man at the start of the farmlands, his straw hat pulled low to shade his eyes. The old farmer waved when he saw their group approaching.