

## Londoner 371

### Chapter 371 Cinran - II

Around half an hour later, Tesyb slipped away toward the market square to meet with his sister. Once the guards and the wagon drivers had started hauling out coal to the warehouse, he had told Trevalo that he needed an hour for a task from Lord Kivamus. That wasn't exactly a lie; the baron had told him to give his offer to Isuha whenever he came to Cinran. The merchant had been curious but he didn't mind, so Tesyb was already on his way to her.

Soon, the cobblestone area of the main square opened in front of him—a wide crowded space under the early evening light. He had been here in the past, but it still felt huge compared to Tiranat's own muddy market square. Bakers shouted about fresh loaves still warm from their ovens. A blacksmith displayed horseshoes and small tools on a blanket. A butcher carved meat while flies gathered around his stall. Hawkers moved between the crowd, waving tools, clay pots, or cheap fishhooks, trying to pull in anyone who passed. The whole marketplace felt... alive. The smell of smoke and cooked meat drifted together above the noise, making him wish he could afford to buy things from here.

However, he didn't even have the coins to buy anything nice for his sister, so he had borrowed a few coppers from Trevalo. The merchant hadn't minded; the amount was tiny for him, and he'd be trading with Tiranat regularly now. Whenever Trevalo wanted those coppers back, he'd have more than enough chances.

Tesyb turned left into the narrow street he remembered from the last time he had visited the seamstress' workshop, although even this was a cobblestone road. Cinran was a big and rich town, after all. He passed a few shops, before he reached the area specializing in clothing. The first sewing shop was owned by a grubby looking man, but the next shop—its faded sign half tilted—was the seamstress' place where his sister worked. He even managed to read the name this time! Walking to the door, he knocked twice and stepped inside.

The shop's insides were dim. The sunlight was low enough but only a single candle lit the counter. The old woman who owned the place sat behind it. When she saw him, she leaned forward and squinted at him. "I think I know you, young lad..."

Tesyb smiled. "I'm Isuha's younger brother. I came here before winter."

Her face brightened. "Ah! That's where I remember you from." She turned towards the stairs and yelled loudly, "Isuha! Come down. Your brother's here." She looked at him again. "What's your name again?"

"Tesyb. I live in Tiranat—the coal-mining village south of here."

He heard fast footsteps thundering down the stairs before the woman could reply, and grinned. Soon, Isuha rounded the last turn and ran down the stairs as fast as she could.

"Slow down!" he called out in worry.

She didn't. She jumped at him, wrapping her arms tight around his shoulders. He patted her back, steadying her. When she stepped away after a few moments, she looked him over from head to foot.

"You look... bigger," she said. "Like you're more muscular or something." She snorted, "I didn't think it was even possible. Even though you're three years younger, you were always bigger than me, but now the difference between us is just stupid!"

"I told you—I'm the big brother." Tesyb said with a laugh and ruffled her hair until she smacked his hand away with a glare. "Last time I came here, I told you that I've been working as a guard. That's why I look fitter now."

"Yeah, I remember that, but I still don't get it," Isuha frowned. "Isn't working as a coal miner supposed to be much harder work? Don't guards just sit lazily on benches near the gates?"

Tesyb barked a laugh. "I wish! Our captain runs us near to death every morning. Then he trains us for a few hours every evening, then mock fights with other guards, then some group battles for training."

Isuha looked confused. "A battle?"

"It's something our baron thought of. The captain divides the guards into teams and we have to fight each other with wooden swords like one of 'em is a group of bandits attacking the village, and the other is defending against them. Trust me, being a Tiranati guard is not easy at all." He looked at her more closely. She was as beautiful as always, with her black hair having grown to her shoulders now, but she looked a little gaunt. "You look thinner than last time. Are you getting enough to eat?"

Isuha hesitated. "Of course," she said after a moment. "Come on, let's go outside." She glanced at the old woman. "Can I take a break?"

"It's been a break most of the day anyway," the woman muttered as she shooed her away. "Just go."

Tesyb followed his sister out to the street. Once they were clear of the door he remembered what he'd brought. He pulled a rolled piece of cloth from a small satchel and handed it over. "Here. This is for you."

She unwrapped it carefully and found a freshly baked sweet bun inside. "Oh! I love this!" she said, grinning. "Haven't had one in ages."

"Eat it before it gets cold. I have to return the cloth to the baker after that."

She leaned against the shopfront and bit into it with a small sigh of pleasure. He watched her eat, suddenly sure she wasn't getting three meals a day. Maybe not even two.

"Well?" he asked.

She blinked. "Well what?"

"You didn't give an answer. Are you getting enough to eat?"

Isuha shrugged. "It's not like I can afford a feast like nobles every day, but I'm not starving. That's more than what can be said for a lot of people in the town."

Tesyb frowned upon hearing that, but didn't comment on it yet. "What did she mean," he asked, "when she said the whole day is like a break?"

Isuha let out a long breath. "We barely get orders for new clothes anymore. I don't know why she hasn't fired me yet... When the times were good a few years ago, we both were busy from morning to night and still couldn't fill all our orders. Now she sits idle all day, and I just practice sewing fancy patterns on the upper floor which gets more sunlight. Commoners can't afford those things but if we display a new

dress or robe with some good embroidery in front of the shop, then some noble usually snaps it up. That's what keeps the shop open these days, I guess. Maybe that's why she hasn't fired me yet. Her eyesight isn't what it used to be, and she can't do the fancy patterns anymore."

Tesyb nodded slowly. "Well, that's related to the other reason why I came."

Her eyebrows rose. "What do you mean?" She smirked. "You didn't come just to check on your good old sister?"

"Of course I did," Tesyb said, grinning. "But I have another task." He lowered his voice. "Remember I told you Tiranat has a new baron?"

Isuha nodded. "The duke's son. People keep saying he was exiled by his father. Because why else would anyone ever leave a big city like Ulriga to live in a shithole like Tiranat?"

Tesyb bristled. "Hey! You can't say that about the village! That's my home. It used to be yours too. The baron's doing a lot for us."

She shrugged. "Truth is truth. You said the baron fed everyone with his own gold, but that won't turn Tiranat into Ulriga."

Tesyb snorted. "Not yet, anyway. It'll take time."

She frowned. "Huh... What do you mean?"

Tesyb watched his sister take a small bite of the bun, crumbs clinging to her fingers, and said quietly, "Would you believe me if I told you nobody died in the village last winter? From cold or hunger."

Isuha stared at him. "I'd call you a liar if I didn't know you better. Of course, it's a very good thing that nobody died there... but what about it?"

"That's not the only thing happening in the village." He glanced up the street. A few passersby moved past them. A young man slowed and leered at his sister—who didn't seem to notice it—until Tesyb gave him a hard glare, making the man turn away quickly.

Tesyb lowered his voice. "I can't say much here. Too many ears around. But you wouldn't even recognize Tiranat if you came there today. And I know that it's only the start."

Isuha took another small bite, savoring the taste, though her attention was on him now. "It's been a while since I last went there, but it's hard to imagine the village changing much..."

"Well, you don't need to imagine it," Tesyb said. "You can come back with me and see it for yourself."

Isuha laughed loudly. "I know you and our parents both want me back there, but what would I even do all day in that village? You're a guard now, and father works as a foreman, so I don't want to sit idle the whole day. I don't want to wake up every morning just to eat two meals a day from what you both earn."

Tesyb shook his head. "No. You wouldn't be sitting idle. If things go well, you won't even get the chance to rest. The thing is—it's not just our family calling you back." He paused. "The baron of Tiranat, Lord Kivamus Ralokaar, wants you there."

Isuha froze. Her jaw stopped moving mid-chew. The bun slipped from her hands, and Tesyb barely caught it before it hit the ground.

She shot to her feet and glared at him. "How dare you say that! Are you even my brother?"

Tesyb blinked, completely baffled. "What—?"

Chapter 372 Cinran - III

"How can a brother try to pimp his sister to a noble...?" Isuha whispered harshly, her eyes already glistening with tears. "I never expected such a thing from you..." She spun and made for the door.

Tesyb was so surprised that it took a moment for his mind to understand how she had misunderstood. Feeling horrible, he lunged, catching her wrist before she could enter the shop. "Wait! You misunderstood! It's not what you think!"

She folded her arms and stared hard at him. "Then what else is it?"

Tesyb saw people slowing on the street, watching them with curiosity, so he pulled her away from the shopfront and walked with her farther down the street until they reached a quiet stretch with no one nearby.

She glared at him, with her arms still crossed. "Well? How did I misunderstand?"

Tesyb exhaled. He knew why she'd jumped to that thought. A noble wanting a good-looking young woman to come to his manor... anyone would assume the worst. But he had known Lord Kivamus for half a year now, and he knew that the baron would never do such a thing. But Isuha didn't know him the way he did.

He began, "Calm down first. You're reminding me of Hyola."

Isuha frowned, tapping her foot on the ground in anger. "Who is that? Someone you like? You didn't even tell me about her!"

Tesyb snorted. "No, no! She's way too scary for that... Anyway—listen. It's not what you think. You don't know Lord Kivamus like us Tiranati people, so I understand why that thought came, but he's not like other nobles. Not even close! He'll never do anything like propositioning a woman to serve him in that way. In fact, he protects the village and the villagers better than you can dream of. He is taking personal risks to free people who live as slaves, and now they're living life freely in Tiranat, instead of serving a master. Hyola was one of them."

Isuha's anger wavered. "Slaves... became free? Did he pay their slave price? It sounds costly..."

Tesyb shook his head. "No, that's not how it's happening. The village couldn't afford that anyway. But that's another long story, and I don't have time to explain it right now. Let's leave that for the next time. What matters is this—Lord Kivamus wants you there because of your skills as a seamstress."

She stared at him. "For my sewing skills?"

"Yeah," Tesyb said. "He's making some kind of contraption that will make it much easier and faster to weave and sew clothes. But he needs someone skilled in sewing to help him with it, so I suggested your name."

Isuha leaned closer. "A contraption? What does it do? Wait, is it—" she lowered her voice "—some kind of witchcraft? Does it sew clothes if people bring sacrifices to it every day?"

Tesyb burst out laughing. "No. No sacrifices. No witchcraft. This particular machine hasn't been built yet, but I've seen other machines he made, and none of them have anything strange about them. That's why he calls them machines—things that make work easier." He shrugged. "I don't really understand much about those machines or sewing, so you'll have to ask him yourself for details."

Isuha looked unsure. "Even if that machine works like you say... What will that change? Even if it can make hills of clothing, what good is that if nobody can afford to buy them? Our shop can hardly sell anything here these days, and Cinran is a much bigger place than Tiranat. That contraption won't change anything..."

"If Lord Kivamus says it'll work, then I believe him," Tesyb replied with a shrug. "And I'm speaking after seeing his tall promises actually come true—again and again—but any details about the machine are way above my pay grade. You'll have to ask him about it."

She hesitated. "Let's assume I went there—and I'm not saying I will—but let's assume for a moment that I agreed to go back to Tiranat for a while. I wouldn't even know how to act properly in front of a noble. What if I don't curtsy right? What if he gets angry and has me whipped for that?"

Tesyb exhaled slowly. "There's a lot you don't know about the village, and about him. I don't have enough time to explain everything now, but trust me—I'd stake my life on this—he will never do anything like that. Talking to him is easy. Like talking to an old friend. He encourages everyone to ask questions. He treats people like equals, whether they are nobles or commoners. When you speak to him, you'll never feel like you're speaking to someone superior, like it always feels with nobles. You just feel like you're speaking to a long-time friend and can talk to him about anything."

I suha let out a breath. "I want to believe you... but it's difficult to imagine a noble like that. Not that I've talked to many. When nobles come to buy clothes at the shop, I only take the measurements of their wives or daughters. If it's a man, the shop owner sends me upstairs and handles it herself. As much as it annoys me, I understand why... It's just to keep me safe from their grubby hands. So it's hard to believe Lord Kivamus is that different, even though he's also a noble, just like them."

Tesyb said, "You'll have to see it yourself then. And he also told me to tell you that he'll pay you the same wages you earn here, at the very least."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Wait—what? He'll pay me? Like in a full-time job? I thought he just wanted me to visit Tiranat for a short time to help out, until that contraption was built. I was even worried that if I didn't agree, he could remove you from your job as a guard."

Tesyb laughed. "I don't want to brag, but I'm one of the best fighters there. Apart from the captain, anyway. So he won't remove me without a very good reason. And just to be clear, he doesn't want you there for a short visit. He wants you to work there permanently as a seamstress, or rather, to help him as an advisor in building those cloth-making machines. He even mentioned that your shop owner would also be welcome, since she is also a skilled seamstress."

"I don't think she'll ever agree to move away from Cinran... She's lived here all her life." I suha frowned, looking into the distance. "Will he really pay me?"

Tesyb shrugged. "Truth is, the guards and villagers haven't been paid in coin yet, although it shouldn't be long now until that starts. But everyone is still getting housing and food for free, so we don't have any real expenses these days. Anyway, once he starts paying everyone in coins, he said he'll pay you at least the same wage you earn here. Maybe even more, from what I understand. How much are you making here?"

I suha looked down the street, lost in thoughts for a while. "Not much... The same as any apprentice here. I've been sewing for years, so I'm far too skilled to still be called an apprentice, but it's not like I can afford to open a new shop here. 14 coppers a day is what I get now. It used to be 18, but last autumn the shop owner told me she could either cut my wages and keep me there or I could try to find another job for the same amount. The old man at the sewing shop next door is a creep, so I didn't even consider that, and the third shop in the town wasn't hiring, so I accepted her deal."

She added with a shrug. "It's not possible for a seamstress' apprentice to earn any more in Cinran these days. I've heard Ulriga has much bigger demand for clothing and they can pay more for seamstresses."

With my skills, I could probably earn twenty coppers a day there, even in this downturn of sales. More when the times get better. But the living cost would also be much higher in a big city like that. Even if I share a room with other women, I'd still have to pay much higher rent and food prices, so I postponed that idea as well."

Tesyb nodded with relief. "That was a good decision. It won't be easy for you living alone in a big city. If you decide to move, I think the baron will start paying you immediately. The common laborers, servants, and guards haven't been paid in coin yet, but he never hesitates to spend gold on his new projects, which is the reason he wants you there. I can't tell you about his past projects right now—not at this place where others could overhear—but I'm speaking from experience. The skilled craftsmen like the blacksmith and carpenters are being paid in coins even now. So if you move, you'll start earning right away."

Isuha looked uncertain. "I don't know... You've boasted a lot about the village, but it sounds too good to be true... The shop owner also keeps saying that things'll get better soon—though nothing has changed for more than a year now—and that we'll start getting big orders any day now. Maybe she'll even raise my wage back to 18 coppers a day in the future..." She looked at him again. "Do you think he will pay me that much?"

#### Chapter 373 Cinran - IV

Tesyb shrugged. "I never thought to ask exactly how much he was willing to pay you, but I'll tell him what you earn here and ask about it next time. But I can still tell you what people earn back home. The rates are obviously lower than those in a big town like Cinran, but our expenses are also lower. Anyway, unskilled laborers and coal miners get eight to ten coppers a day. There's enough work for everyone in Tiranat these days, so that's the bare minimum any new arrival can earn. New manor guards like me start at 12 coppers a day, while the more experienced guards can even reach 16 to 18. Father told me that foremen like him will earn 20 coppers a day, once the payments start in coins again."

He watched her face, trying to guess what she was thinking. "What's probably more relevant for you is what the skilled craftsmen earn. I've heard that the blacksmith and the two main carpenters earn more than 20 a day. Maybe even 25. That's secondhand information though, so don't hold me to it. But one of their apprentices, who's a friend, told me that once they pass a test, they are supposed to earn 15 coppers a day. So even if Lord Kivamus thinks of you as an apprentice, you'll get at least 15, which is already higher than what you earn here. And if he decides your sewing knowledge is good enough, then you'll earn even more. Surely above 20 coppers, although it could be even higher. Syrene—a young woman who's skilled in creating, uh...something I can't talk about here—she's highly valued by the baron, and rumors say he might even pay her 25 coppers. Since the baron needs your help to advise him on his machine, he might probably pay you in the same range. But I can't swear on it until I confirm it from him."

Isuha stood quietly for a moment, the half-eaten bun loose in her hand. "I don't know, Tesyb... I want to believe you. I really do. But I've lived here for years. It's not the life I dreamed of, but at least it's something familiar. But I don't know anything about how life would be in Tiranat now. Even if the baron wants me just for sewing skills, it's hard to believe he'll pay me even a single copper when he hasn't paid you even once by now..."

Tesyb sighed. She wasn't wrong, and he couldn't argue it away. He thought of trying another tactic. "You have no idea how happy mother and father will be if you decide to move back..."

Isuha nodded, slowly. "I know. And maybe I'll consider it in the future. But I don't see how I can move right now. You said we don't even have a house now, right? I'd also end up in that huge building you told me about—sleeping in a bunk with a hundred other people nearby. I can't do that... Not when I'm used to at least having a room with a door that locks. From what you've told me, even if I earn good money in Tiranat, there isn't even any proper house in the village to rent at the moment, is it?" She looked a little embarrassed. "Sharing a house with a few other women to lower the rent would have been fine—as long as I got a separate room for myself. But living in a big hall piled together like that... it scares me..."

Tesyb nodded reluctantly, understanding her reason. A good looking young woman like her, staying in one of those longhouse blocks with so many other people, just didn't feel right... He hadn't heard of anything bad happening there, but then, none of the village girls looked like her.

"All right. I'll tell the baron about your answer. Maybe he can do something about it to help make up your mind. Anyway, I have to leave tomorrow afternoon for the village, although the merchant—Trevalo—will come back here to go to Ulriga. That trip should take around three weeks, and our guards won't accompany him that time, since he'll go by a sailboat. But after he returns, the baron has planned to start a weekly coal caravan from Tiranat to Cinran. He'll also send guards with it, since we'll have to travel through the forests. The guards will be rotated for that escort, but once it starts, I can visit you regularly. If not every week, then certainly every other week."

She smiled. "That sounds good. It gets too long to meet otherwise."

Tesyb nodded. "Yeah. This means you've got around a month to think about your decision until I come to meet with you again. And when I return next time, I'll tell you exactly how much he's willing to pay. We won't have any contact for another month, but after that, you can change your mind any time about moving there. Just hitch a ride with the caravan guards and they'll take you safely to the village. Trust me—you can rely on them for your life. Or you can wait another week, since I'll likely be here in the next rotation anyway."

He glanced at the sun. It had sunk behind the rooftops in the west, leaving a dull amber glow along the street. "I should get back now. Trevalo wants to take the guards to a tavern for food before it closes. I can't miss that chance."

Isuha laughed. "Of course. You need a lot of food for those muscles." She glanced toward the alley which led to her workshop. "I need to return too, or the owner will start to nag."

They walked together until they reached the shop's doorway, and with another hug, Tesyb left the place. As he watched her enter the shop, he noticed a man staring at her from across the street. Tesyb didn't say a word. He just walked to the man with his fists clenched—his bulk easily towering above the bastard—and glared back, hard and long enough for the man's expression to crack. The man vanished almost instantly down an alley, thankfully not needing him to use his fists.

Tesyb exhaled and made his way toward the baker's shop to return the wrapping cloth and get a copper back. He kept seeing Isuha's face in his mind—the thinness in her cheeks, the way men in town looked at her. She didn't realize her own beauty, but the other men he had caught staring at her today certainly did. And he hated the thought of leaving her alone in this place. She was his sister, so it was his responsibility to protect her—at least until she got married.

But he could do nothing for her if she stayed in a whole different town. However, if she moved to Tiranat, she'd be safe from such bastards. He'd make sure of it. People would also know that she is a guard's sister, and nobody would dare to leer at her. She'd have steady food too, which'd surely be better than what she was getting to eat here. And if Lord Kivamus's new contraption worked out well, she could even build a real future there, working directly for the baron as a respected employee—just like Syrene—with a job that paid excellently.

What else could anyone ask for, in these difficult times everywhere...

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~ Kivamus ~

Finally, the day was here. Kivamus was walking toward the manor gates with the others, the cool morning air brushing against his neck. A wagon was waiting near the gates, hitched to a pair of horses stamping at the dirt. Duvas, Hudan, and a few other guards were already gathered near the wagon.

The old carpenter Taniok had met the majordomo the previous evening to report that the sawmill was finally ready. It was too late to visit the dam then, so today had become the long-awaited trip to the sawmill. It would help them tremendously in scaling up the construction projects, and would allow them to build housing for the new refugees who were arriving every week—although feeding the ever-growing population was a different matter.

A hunting group had returned late last night with a good haul of meat from the western forest, rolling it back on a pair of wheelbarrows, but with only three hunting groups out these days, they weren't getting as much meat as they needed to start smoking it for the winter months when all trade would stop. On the other hand, the farming foreman Pinoto had told Duvas that the last stretch of farmland was nearly planted. Another day or two and the sowing would finally be completed. The foreman had suggested that they could stop clearing the forest now, since they didn't need any more farming land.

However, Kivamus had disagreed, and had ordered the loggers to keep cutting trees ahead of the farmlands. Wheat sowing was nearly finished for the season, but he didn't want the village depending on a single crop. They had already ordered a bigger shipment of liwabeans for that purpose from the portly merchant Pydaso, but they could only be planted in late autumn. So he wanted to buy some other crops which they could plant after wheat. It would help them in increasing their food supply further, as well as diversifying it and making it a healthier diet. Potato beds were already being planted near the new vegetable patches in the southern part of the village, although the total area covered by it was a small one. So he was thinking of buying more potatoes in the future and planting them in the newly cleared strips of land beyond the wheat fields.

The villagers had also been told to go and pick any ripe fruits and nuts from the forest in their free time. So they were making groups of around a dozen people once every week and going into the forest with baskets in their hands, with a few strong men taking machetes for defense purposes. Because of all the activity around the village, most of the dangerous predators had left the area near the village anyway. Or at least they stayed away in the daytime, which was good enough for now.

Adzee howls were still heard occasionally in the nights, but so far none of them had attacked the village. Hopefully, it would stay like that, although they couldn't count on it. For that purpose, they needed to continue hiring more guards. Thankfully, seven new recruits had already passed the basic test given by the captain and had been inducted into the guard force, while three more would be recruited within a day or two, and then their proper training would be started by the captain.

He realized that it was only possible to hire more guards because new refugees were coming to the village continuously in a slow but steady flow. It meant more mouths to feed, but also more hands to work. It was a catch-22 situation, but that was the only way for the village to continue growing.

#### Chapter 374 The Sawmill - I

Apart from the primary purpose of improving the village defenses, Kivamus also had something else in mind in the near future for which he had ordered Hudan to start looking for another 10 guards to recruit soon. Hiring this many guards wouldn't have been possible in the past, but a few days ago Duvas had given an estimate that the village population had reached above 500 now—compared to just above 300 when Kivamus had arrived last autumn. So they could hire more guards now without severely affecting coal mining and other projects. However, paying all of them was a different matter altogether, and he would have to deal with it soon. Eventually he planned to do a census of the village for a proper inventory of what skills the residents had and their basic details including where they had immigrated from, but that would take too much manpower and right now they had far more important priorities.

Soon, he reached near the manor gates, and climbed onto the wagon bed, settling in beside Duvas and Hudan. Four more guards sat on the wagon bed, while two more were on the driver's bench. They all were armed with shields and swords, while their spears had been tied to the side of the wagon, in a way that would make it easy to take them out in an emergency. They had also borrowed two crossbows from the watch towers. More would have been better, but they were still short on them, and he didn't want to weaken the village defense even more during the time he was out with that many guards.

"Let's go," he said finally.

Hudan repeated the order, and the driver flicked the reins, jolting the wagon forward. They turned right just beyond the manor gates and before long, they were passing in front of the longhouse blocks. The buildings were nearly deserted at the time, with all the adult men and most of the women out working, while the kids had also gone out to gather sawdust. That only left the younger children, as well as the elderly who stayed here to take care of them, along with a few other men and women who cooked for the whole block. On the left side of the road, he saw a group of men using shovels to dig a new well, while another laborer was loading the excavated mud into a wheelbarrow to be used elsewhere.

They reached the northern wall soon after and approached the northeast gate. The guards on duty straightened when they saw them and immediately pushed the gates open. The wagon slowly moved ahead, and Kivamus saw with satisfaction that the new defensive trench had already been completed here. It ran cleanly along both sides of the gate and across the whole northern wall—deep, wide and lined with sharp stakes, leaving only a narrow stretch of road in front of the gate. The clay coating of walls was also coming along nicely. The nearest watchtower was already thickly plastered on the outer

side, and nearly half of the northern wall wore the same layer of clay. It was far from an ideal solution, but once it was done on all sides of the village, at least it would reduce the chances of the logs catching fire in case a bandit group or the mercenaries tried that tactic. On the eastern end of the walls, foreman Yeden's bald head was easy to spot as he barked at workers, waving his arms to make them work harder in coating the walls.

The wagon kept rolling, its wheels crunching through the narrow stretch of road beyond the gate as they continued toward the dam. "What's the status of the trenches on the other sides?" Kivamus asked the majordomo.

Duvas shifted, trying to get more comfortable on the wagon bed, which was only covered by a layer of rough cloth. "The progress is good, even though we have allotted a third of them to dig new wells now. The diggers have completed the trench in front of the northern and western walls, and the eastern side is more than half done. I think it will take another 10 days to complete the whole thing. However, the clay coating of walls is going slower. Soil dries up faster in the morning with the weather getting hotter now, so the clay which the diggers bring has to be wetted with a few buckets of water from the central well before it can be used, which slows down the whole process. We could allot more workers here, but coal mining is too important now that merchants are coming more regularly."

Kivamus nodded slowly. Another merchant had come yesterday and bought three wagon loads of coal from them. If Trevalo managed to arrange regular sales in Ulriga in the coming weeks, they would need to produce an even larger amount of coal. The steady trickle of refugees and ex-slaves helped in that, but only to a point. They were allowed a day or two to rest and eat before being sent to the mines, yet the numbers still weren't enough. They needed either a lot more people to arrive and work as miners or he needed to improve their ways to mine coal. He already had a few ideas in mind, but other projects needed to be finished first for that.

As the wagon creaked ahead, he watched a pair of laborers hauling buckets toward a heap of freshly dug mud, their boots sinking slightly into the wet dirt there. The first well had already been dug near the farms, while priority had been given to dig the second one in the southwest, since that was the furthest place from the central village well, which made it a hazard in case of a fire. That well had also been completed yesterday, so now the third well was being dug in front of the longhouses, which he had seen before passing through the gates. Once that was ready, they'd dig another well near the southeastern gate, and the last one in the east, where a guards' barracks and training ground would be built in the future.

"Did Taniok take new logs to the dam?" he asked.

Duvas nodded. "I've told one log-mover crew to stay near the farms where the forest is still being cleared. They'll bring the fresh logs inside the village walls from there. The other crew will haul the dried logs to the sawmill starting today. They already left earlier this morning with a pair of long trunks."

"Good."

The road continued north for a while, before they took the eastern bend towards the hills. The wagon rocked and bumped as the ground began to rise, making Kivamus wince. He'd be sore for hours after this wagon journey. The new potholes had already been filled, but it was still hardly a road. Without any proper padding on the wagon bed for sitting, it was not a comfortable journey. Once all the trenches were dug he'd have to put the diggers on cutting the hills and making a better road here.

It took just above half an hour to reach the coal mines, with the coal dust making the mineshaft entrances and even the hills look darker than they were. Another two quarters of an hour passed before they saw the final turn toward the dam.

Once they rounded the bend, the dam stood ahead of them at a distance, solid across the narrowed stream. Small groups of workers were gathered on both banks of the stream. On the near side, Taniok and his apprentices were pushing a log into the slot of the sawmill frame. On the far bank, both men and women were smoothing the walls of a tall clay structure—the cementation furnace Cedoron needed for steel. The structure looked almost finished. Once it dried fully by the next day, they would bake it hard and start building a second furnace for making coke some distance away.

As their wagon rolled closer to the sawmill, the driver slowed it to a stop. The guards jumped down, loosening their shoulders and looking around. Kivamus stepped onto the packed earth, and noticed the log-mover with its huge wheels being turned around by its crew so it could trundle back toward the village for another load of logs. He walked toward the sawmill.

Taniok straightened and gave him a respectful bow. "It's ready, milord. We've tested it already, but we waited for you to inaugurate it officially."

Kivamus let his gaze travel over the sawmill assembly. The design was simple enough when seen as a whole. Two large wooden gears, banded with iron, linked the waterwheel to a long wooden axle made from a particularly lengthy and debarked fedarus trunk. They could not afford full iron gears of that size—yet—so the structure was still wood, but the iron rims would keep them from wearing out too quickly.

The long axle ran from the wheel up onto the bank, resting in primitive bearings—a series of wooden Y-shaped supports, each lined with iron plates. They held the axle's weight and left the top open so it could be greased easily. One supporting pillar sat close to the waterwheel, another at the start of the stream's bank, and a third further up on the left, where the ground leveled out. The axle was also lined with a thin sheet of iron where it met the supports to prevent the wood from degrading too fast. This setup would need plenty of grease, but it was something the workers could manage easily, and it also saved them a lot of iron needed for making proper bearings.

If needed, the axle could also be replaced in the future without too much trouble when it started to get weaker. The best thing was that Fedarus wood didn't rot—even in seawater. Of course, this wasn't fully seasoned wood, but it had still been drying for many months. Taniok had also chosen the best logs amongst the stockpiles in the villages to make the sawmill assembly. It should easily last for a few years at least, and that was good enough for now.

Near the stream's bank, a stout gear fixed to the axle meshed with another gear anchored to the sawmill frame. That second gear turned the circular saw blade. Making that blade had taken a large amount of iron, but it was the only way to make it strong enough to cut through the thick logs. The gear attached to the sawblade was larger than the one attached to the axle, which meant the blade would spin more slowly but with greater force—and more than enough torque to bite through the biggest logs they could haul here.

While the circular sawblade had been made from a strong sheet of iron, it would still have to be replaced and repaired regularly. In the future, they would make the blades with steel, which would make them last much longer, but for now, a pair of spare sawblades were kept nearby, ready to be swapped in when the first one dulled or cracked. One of Cedoron's apprentices would work here full-time from now on as the sawfiler, keeping the teeth sharp and changing blades when needed, so the carpenters wouldn't waste precious cutting time.

Finally, a sturdy lever sat by the pair of gears of the sawblade. When pulled down, it would ease the middle gear away and let the circular blade stop even when the axle kept turning. A similar, but bigger lever had been built for the pair of gears on the waterwheel so the workers could uncouple the axle from the waterwheel when they were done for the day before they returned to the village every evening. Later on, he wanted to provide good lighting here and have this sawmill working round the clock, but that was also for the future.

That only left the problem of moving the heavy logs, so he had also taken that in account in this design. Beneath the blade, a row of thick wooden cylindrical-shaped rollers formed the bed for the logs being

brought for splitting. Another pair of gears on the axle drove those rollers. When a log was rolled off the log-mover and onto the roller-bed on the other side of the big axle, the turning rollers would draw the log forward into the sawblade. The rollers were also carried in smaller Y-shaped blocks, just like the main axle supports. It was certainly not as smooth as proper metal bearings would have been, but it was something they could build now, with the tools and skills they had. There was another lever here to engage or disengage the rollers from the long axle with their dedicated pair of gears for moving the logs.

Kivamus looked at Taniok with satisfaction. "Let's give it a try."

#### Chapter 375 The Sawmill - II

The carpenter waited while his apprentices and the other workers settled the log into place. Once they were done, he checked it quickly and nodded. "You can do the honors now, milord."

Kivamus stepped forward and pulled the first lever down. The teeth of the sawblade gears found each other, and the circular blade spun up with a rising whirl. He pulled the second lever. The long axle shuddered once as its gear bit into the one linked to the rollers, and the fedarus log began to creep forward.

Everyone watched in anticipation as the log crept toward the sawblade. The moment it touched the teeth, there was a crackling sound and a heavy spray of sawdust burst into the air. The log kept moving, the blade cutting straight through the middle. Before anyone could react, the full length of the trunk had passed the blade. Two halves of the log rolled on along the cylindrical rollers until they slid off the end and dropped onto the ground.

There was a brief silence, before the workers and guards broke into a loud cheer.

"It really works!" Duvass exclaimed.

Kivamus grinned at the successful project. The first sawmill worked indeed, and how! It was a really good decision to make circular sawblades—which needed a lot of iron—instead of simpler crank-slider blades which worked in a reciprocating motion, just like a hand-operated saw, and would need much less iron. The simple reason was that circular sawblades were much more efficient and faster, and they could operate in groups far more easily compared to a straight saw which went back-and-forth.

This sawmill could evidently cut thick logs along their length with ease, but it was not limited to that. If they needed smaller pieces of a long trunk, a log could be placed on the bottom rollers at a right angle

to the sawblade—without activating the rollers—so the long trunk could be cut into shorter logs easily. It could also strip bark if the log was positioned in such a way that the sawblade would only remove a thin layer from the surface—repeated for all sides of the log. Some wood would certainly be wasted this way—since there was no way yet to turn the logs in place precisely without losing material—but this would have to do for now. It's not like they had a shortage of timber these days.

Taniok quickly pushed the two levers up to stop the sawmill—the sawblade and the rollers. He began calling out orders to clear the split log from the front and drag it around to the back of the sawblade so it could be cut into thinner beams. The sawfiler stepped in at once to check the teeth of the blade. Once Taniok was finished with his instructions and the workers had fastened the halves to a pair of horses and started hauling them away, the carpenter walked back to Kivamus.

Taniok's mouth pulled into a wide smile, showing a missing tooth. "It works just like it did in the trial. We'll be using the same log again to show you how it can cut the split logs further. But after this trial, some workers will keep feeding logs from the back while the ones at the front will stack the split pieces nearby. That way we won't waste time dragging logs from the front to the back every time, while stopping the mill."

Kivamus nodded. "That's a good idea, but it's only needed for a short time, until you build the next two sawmills. It was a good idea to make the waterwheel so big so it would have enough power to run all three sawmills. That's why we built the axle so long. So how long will it take to build them?"

Taniok looked towards the far end of the long axle where a gear was already fixed around it. "Only a few more days. The blacksmith has already given us some spare sawblades, and he's promised more in the coming days." He pointed to a spot some distance away, where a group of carpenters was busy at work. "My apprentices are making more wooden cylinders for the rollers, and the Y-shaped supports are also being made right beside them. Now that this first sawmill is working properly, I'll start on the next sawmill in the afternoon—the one with two blades."

Kivamus nodded. "Just remember: this first sawmill has a single sawblade. The second one will have two circular blades, and the last one will have six."

"Of course," Taniok said. "I have kept the blueprint nearby, though I remember your design well enough. The first sawmill with a single blade is for cutting the thick fedarus trunks into more manageable timber. The second, with two rotating blades in parallel, will cut that timber into beams and posts for construction work. We'll keep using mortise and tenon joints, so we won't need iron connectors at the joints. That will save iron. The last sawmill will have six blades set in parallel—which you called a gangsaw. That one will cut timber directly into planks ready to use in construction work."

"That's accurate," Kivamus said. "Making so many sawblades is certainly a big expenditure of our precious iron, but it will be worth it. So how long to complete all of it?"

"My apprentices will start setting the supports and the rollers for the second mill in a few hours," Taniok replied. "The long axle is already set up properly with all its gears, so if there are no problems, I think we should finish the second sawmill by tomorrow. The third one is a little more complex, but Cedoron will come here himself to help with attaching the parallel blades. I think it will take another two days to finish that one. So give me three or four more days, and I'll be done with all three sawmills."

"Good. Then you'll have to finish the triphammer on the other bank of the stream," Kivamus said. "Cedoron has been waiting for that for quite a while."

"I know," Taniok said. "But that one is quite easy compared to this. That design also has a long axle for the triphammers, just like on this side. But you only want a single triphammer at the beginning, so it won't take long, especially since it doesn't even have any rotating parts and it doesn't need so many rollers and levers like here."

"That's true," Kivamus said. "That long axle has the option to attach four triphammers working in parallel, but it will only be useful later when we're processing raw iron ore and forging steel on a larger scale. One triphammer will be enough for our current needs."

Taniok nodded. "Yes, but the problem is that we also need a second waterwheel for that. That will stretch out the time needed to build it. But once this sawmill is fully running it will be easier to cut the logs into thinner pieces so my apprentices can easily carve them into the rims and spokes for the new wheel. By the time I'm done with the second long axle and the first triphammer, they should have the waterwheel parts ready, and we can assemble it quickly. With the help of the sawmill, I think it will take another week after I'm done with the sawmill project to get the first triphammer working."

"Hmm... it's longer than I thought but that will have to do," Kivamus said. "While you're getting the triphammer ready, tell your apprentices to start stocking up on building parts. When you're done with the triphammer, you can start on the third longhouse block immediately."

"Of course," Taniok said. "I've planned for that in advance. One of my apprentices is pretty smart and has experience in longhouse construction. He can oversee the work there while I handle things like the

triphammer. I'll still visit the new longhouse site every morning and evening to make sure it's going properly."

The bald carpenter shook his head in wonder as he looked at the sawmill. "When you showed me the blueprint of this sawmill, I didn't really believe you when you said it could do the work of a dozen carpenters at once. But now I can freely accept that when all three sawmills are fully working in a few days, it can do even more work than you estimated. Probably the same as what two dozen carpenters would do in a day—and even more if we can feed the sawmill with fresh logs continuously." He glanced at the log-mover which was making the final turn to start trundling towards the village. "But everything depends on us getting enough logs here, and then taking the lumber back to the village. A single log mover simply won't be enough for this."

"I was already thinking about that after seeing the sawblade working so well," Kivamus said. He turned to the majordomo. "Duvás, the forest clearing will continue to the south of the farms, but tell the workers to just stack the logs there for now. Send the second log mover here as well."

Once Duvás nodded, noting it down in a pocket ledger he carried everywhere, Kivamus looked back at the carpenter. "A single log mover can carry two medium trunks or a single large one at a time. I've been told that each crew can reach the dam from the village in around two hours and return back faster in another hour without the load. Let's allow one more hour for loading the logs at the village and unloading it here. That means each log-mover can make at least three round trips in a day. So each one can bring six medium sized logs to the sawmill every day. With both log-movers working here, you'll get more than a dozen full-sized fedarus logs each day."

Taniok nodded. "That's true, but the first sawblade will barely need any time to split the long transported logs into two or three shorter ones, depending on the length my apprentices need, and to debark them. When the second sawmill is ready, it will also cut those shorter logs into construction lumber very quickly. The apprentices will choose the length and width they need—whether for beams, columns, joists, or other building parts. And the third sawmill will make planks at a rate that's hard to even imagine right now. What I'm saying is that I don't think even two log movers will be enough to feed all three sawmills."

"I know," Kivamus said. "My estimate is that we'll need at least four or five log movers bringing trunks here from sunrise till sunset just to feed the first sawmill properly. The other two sawmills will only use what comes out of the first one anyway, but we can't make any more log movers yet. We don't have the iron axles and bearings for them. We either have to buy those from Cinran—which will cost a lot—or hope a wheelwright moves here and builds them for us. I'm working on that problem on the side, but we can't know when one of them will agree to come. Hopefully Feroy will succeed in bringing one of 'em here."

He added, "Once we can make the bearings and axles ourselves, we'll build double the number of log movers we need, so they can work in pairs. That way the logs will be lifted from both ends, which will completely remove drag from the ground and make the log-movers travel much faster. With a wheelwright here, we can even build bigger log-movers that carry more trunks at once, using thicker iron link chains and larger wheels. But that's for later. I believe that those will still be inefficient, but until we have even better transportation methods, we have to accept it. For now, our two log movers will have to be enough."

Duvas looked at him. "What about taking the lumber and planks back to the village? We can't spare any more horses other than the four that will be pulling the log-movers. Shouldn't we find a way to send the lumber back with them?"

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"That's a good idea," Kivamus said to the majordomo. "On the way back, the horses won't be dragging the weight of the trunks, so they can pull a loaded wagon easily. Let's assign two wagons here full-time, one for each crew. The workers here will load them with lumber and planks, and when the log mover crews arrive, they'll unhitch the trunks, attach the wagons behind the log movers, and take them back to the village."

Taniok nodded. "That will work." He glanced toward the workers. "I should get back now. It's still the first day, and I have a lot to organize here. I also need to select which apprentices will work here full-time, and which will stay in the village for the new construction." He grinned with a missing tooth. "Specialization, you know?"

Kivamus chuckled. "Of course. Go on, then."

He looked at the sawmill as the carpenter walked back. The first split log had been further cleaved into thinner parts while they were talking, and another log was now in the process of being split. There was no doubt that this set-up of three sawmills complementing each other was going to revolutionize construction in the village. They would be able to provide better housing, stock up on construction material for the encampment in the eastern hills for harvesting losuvil, and in the future, they could even make one or even two better overnight stops on the road to Cinran, by repairing Helga's former inn and building a new one. It would help the merchants in feeling more secure on the way, knowing they wouldn't be eaten by an adzee on the forest road while they're sleeping in the night. Once that road starts feeling safer to them, more merchants should start coming here.

There was another benefit to this. Once the second sawmill was ready, and once the immediate need for more housing was covered, it could start cutting wooden rails with ease using its parallel sawblades. Those could be laid along a better road from the coal mines to the village to move coal much faster. The same kind of rails could be used inside the mine shafts as well, which should increase their coal output by a noticeable amount. After that, they might even have to shift to a new coal dump system somewhere outside the village instead of storing even more coal in those barns within the manor, since that was a fire risk anyway. That would also empty up precious space within the manor for other purposes.

He turned to the majordomo and the guards. "Let's return now. We all have things to do. Hudan, hire the three more guards needed for this round of recruitment, and then look for 10 more guards after that. Duvas, help him choose men who are trustworthy. You also need to talk with Pinoto and Yeden."

Once Duvas nodded, they started walking back to the wagon they had traveled here on. Kivamus sighed at the sight of the wooden wagon bed. It was going to be a bumpy ride.

\*\*\*

~ Tesyb ~

Tesyb sat in the middle wagon this time in Trevalo's caravan of six wagons. This way he could move toward either side quickly if there was trouble. The caravan had left the town of Cinran in the afternoon, and the light was already slipping toward sunset.

He glanced over the loaded wagons with quiet satisfaction. Trevalo had done well with the purchase. All six wagons were piled with sacks of wheat, along with other foodstuffs—potatoes, cheese, vegetables, salt, and more. Tesyb had no idea how much it had all cost, but after seeing the prices in Cinran's market square, he knew it couldn't be cheap. That was between the merchant and the baron, though. His work was simple enough: keep the caravan safe—both from beasts and bandits.

He grinned to himself, thinking of Yufim back in Tiranat. Telling his friend that he had eaten tasty food and drank some really good ale in a tavern in Cinran would be worth the whole trip by itself. The archer would be annoyed once again, knowing that he wasn't being sent to towns while Tesyb was chosen for it nearly every time. He chuckled, already picturing Yufim's expression when he heard it.

It was a pity Isuha hadn't come back with them, but Tesyb was sure the doubt was there in her mind now. She wasn't earning much in Cinran anyway—well, it was still higher than what he was supposed to earn as a guard, but then she was far more talented than him and deserved the higher amount. So if Lord Kivamus offered her a proper wage, he felt certain she would choose to return. Their family still didn't have a proper place to live: he slept in the crowded servants' hall inside the manor, while their parents stayed in the first longhouse block.

Lately he had heard rumors that more housing would be built soon—after something called a sawmill was completed near the dam—and maybe even proper houses and not just new longhouse blocks. That would make it much easier to convince Isuha who had gotten used to living a more comfortable city life. He was also excited to share this news with the baron. Even if his sister hadn't come this time, she could still decide to move in a month, when he made the next trip to Cinran.

He glanced to the west and saw that the sun had nearly set already. They had only entered the southern forest a few hours ago, and it was still spring, but the forest canopy was already thick, nearly as dense as they became in the summer months. He estimated that it would be dark within half an hour. This was a good time to stop and make a camp for the night.

He tried to match the trees around the caravan to his memory. There had been a good stopping place somewhere near here from the last journey, close to the narrow forest trail the man from the encampment had shown them—the one that led toward his camp. They needed to head there tomorrow anyway, so it would be good to stop near that trail.

Before long, Tesyb spotted the small copse that marked the clearing near the road. He was going to order the wagons to stop when he noticed the guard on the front wagon suddenly standing up on his seat.

Tesyb frowned, not seeing anything odd yet from his own place in the middle wagon. The guard suddenly shouted, "Riders ahead!"

It took only a moment for Tesyb to understand that there shouldn't be any riders on this road. This road was barely traveled as it was. His heart started beating faster, wondering if there were bandits ahead. But why would bandits ride openly on the road instead of making an ambush? It didn't make sense.

He blew two quick whistles just in case there was danger, giving the signal to halt. The wagons began to grind to an immediate stop as he jumped down to the ground with his sword already in his hand.

The other guards followed his lead, dropping down with weapons drawn, ready to take on any threat. The wagon drivers also pulled out their long daggers and began edging the wagons closer together. Tesyb watched them with approval as they arranged the vehicles just as he had ordered earlier—forming a rough, semicircular barricade from two directions.

Having crossbows would have made a forest battle much easier—as much as they annoyed Yufim, the best archer—but even without the new ranged weapons they were far from helpless. With 14 men on their side, plus the young merchant with his sword ready and the man from the encampment as well—no ordinary bandit group could harm a hair of their group! Only the largest bands would be a real problem. But no matter, he was sure he could take on anyone! He was the one who had killed Nokozal, the Giant, after all. Well, with others' help, but still.

Once he was sure everyone was in position, Tesyb glanced back at the front. The lead guard was still standing on the wagon, squinting into the dimming light. Tesyb moved closer, ready to climb up beside him, when the guard looked back and grinned.

Tesyb's frown deepened. What? he almost asked, but the man spoke first.

"It's the other regular merchant—Pydaso—with four of our guards," the man called down. "I see Feroy, Hyola, Calubo, and someone else I can't recognize from here."

"Ah..." Tesyb let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. They were safe. For tonight anyway.

Even so, he kept the men at their posts until he could see the approaching wagons himself. It didn't take too long. The distant creaking of wheels reached them, and soon, two wagons appeared from the south around a bend on the road. The portly figure of Pydaso sat on the front one, with Calubo beside him. The second wagon had its own driver, with another manor guard perched along the seat, while Hyola and Feroy were each riding their own horses.

Tesyb grinned. They really were Tiranati people!

"Stand down!" Tesyb called. He turned to the drivers. "Move the wagons into the clearing. There's enough room for all of them."

The drivers began to steer the wagons off the road toward the spot Tesyb had pointed—the same one where they had stopped last time. It was a big enough clearing on the left side of the road, and had been used often by travelers on this road as the first nightly stop when going towards Tiranat.

Soon, Pydaso's caravan pulled alongside and came to a halt. Trevalo stepped down from his own wagon and went straight to the other merchant, greeting him with the easy manner of an old friend. Whether they had been that close before or not, Tesyb knew that both men had now chosen to base their business around Tiranat. Whatever competition they had in the past was turning into a more friendly kind of rivalry, which could only be good for the village.

Feroy climbed down from his horse and walked over to them as the guards from both caravans started to mix, clapping arms and laughing while exchanging the latest news. The noise rose quickly as everyone began trading stories at once, but with nearly 20 armed men in one place now, Tesyb doubted any bandit group would choose this night to try their luck. Even so, the guards assigned to watch duty were already spreading out to the edge of the clearing, standing near the trees and peering into the shadows, eyes sharp for any sign of danger. Dangerous predators still lived in this forest, after all.

#### Chapter 377 The Caravan - II

"How are you here?" Tesyb asked the former mercenary as they clasped their arms in greeting. "It's quite lucky we met at this spot."

Feroy laughed. "Hardly. This is one of the just two good places to stop on this road—apart from the old Helga's inn. We left that place a little late today because of a boar attack, but I'm glad we reached this clearing before dark."

Tesyb grinned. "So am I. Wait, you were attacked by boars too near Helga' inn? Same for us, although we got a lot of smoked meat out of it. That really is turning into dangerous territory though."

"I know," Feroy said. "We'll have to do something about it soon. It's a pity we couldn't risk smoking all that meat with so few of us there in case an adzee caught that smell. We had to dispose of what we couldn't eat immediately." He glanced around at the busy clearing. "I don't see any refugees with you."

"Yeah." Tesyb scratched his cheek. "We hurried a lot in Cinran, but we only reached this spot just now. My plan is to go look for them tomorrow morning. The man from the encampment said there's a trail going toward their camp from near here." He tilted his head. "Now that you are here, can you help us

out tomorrow? Unless you're in a hurry, that is. Having four more men would help a lot in guarding the wagons while we go to that encampment."

Feroy rubbed his short brown beard. "Me and Hyola are free. We have free rein to move around near Cinran on a mission from the baron."

Tesyb raised his eyebrows. "Oh, that kind of mission? Like the one in Kirnos?"

Feroy nodded once. "Yeah. So the two of us can help you. Pydaso can't wait, though. He has to go on to Ulriga, so he can't lose a day here. He'll have to leave tomorrow morning with Calubo and the other guard."

"Well, it's still better than nothing," Tesyb said. "Come on. Let's eat!"

He turned to the side and saw that the camp was already in the process of being set up. The eight wagons had been moved into the clearing and arranged in a loose circle that would give them some protection from boars or bandits. A small fire had been lit in the center, where Pydaso and Trevalo sat talking on a thick log someone had left here from a previous stop.

The guards had pulled out some of the vegetables and potatoes from yesterday's purchase, as permitted by the baron in advance, although they left the cheese alone—that was a luxury item reserved for those who lived in the manor house. Two of the guards had already taken over cooking in a big pot they kept for such trips. There was still a fair amount of smoked meat left from the boars they had killed near Helga's Inn, and Trevalo's guards shared it with the new arrivals, leaving some for later. In return, Feroy's group passed around some bread they had brought from the village. It was two days old by now, but still tasty enough.

Before long, nearly everyone was sitting around the fire with a wooden bowl of hot stew, some smoked boar meat, and a chunk of bread. The warmth and the steady talk around him gave the camp a relaxed feel, even though they were in the middle of this dangerous forest. It was quite different from the rushed grain trips before winter, when everyone had been tense in the forest and desperate to get back inside the safety of Tiranat's walls.

But this time there was a quiet confidence in the group. Everyone knew there were dangerous beasts and bandit groups in this forest, but they also knew they could handle trouble if it came. Even so, some

of the men were already posted at the edges of the camp, watching the darkness between the trees. Their shifts would change every few hours so all of them got a chance to sleep.

Seeing that everything was under control, Tesyb finally walked over and joined the circle of people gathered around the fire, taking a place near Feroy, Hyola, and Calubo.

He grinned at the younger guard. "Well?"

Calubo frowned. "Well what?"

Tesyb snorted and turned to the redhead. "Has he still not asked you?"

Hyola let out a long breath and shook her head, clearly annoyed.

Calubo still looked lost. "Asked what?"

"Nothing, you idiot," Hyola muttered, and Tesyb and Feroy both snickered.

Tesyb looked back at Feroy. "So, how are we doing it tomorrow? We have to leave enough men here to keep the wagons safe while we are out. It'll take a few hours to reach that place through the forest trail and another few to allow the people to pack up to leave. Coming back to this place will take longer though with all those people with us. Overall it will probably take the whole day, so there would be no point in leaving for the village tomorrow. We'll have to leave for Helga's Inn the next morning." He glanced at the guards sitting nearby. "After Pydaso leaves with his wagon driver and two guards, there will still be... ten guards and six wagon drivers here, apart from Trevalo and the man from the encampment. How should we divide our numbers?"

Feroy stared into the fire. "We're not going there to fight those people at the encampment, so we don't need full fighting strength with us. We just need enough numbers to make them hesitate in doing anything stupid while we talk. On the other hand, these wagons need some good protection. So, apart from me and you, we'll take three wagon drivers with us, plus the man from the camp. That leaves eleven men here to protect the wagons apart from Trevalo, while there'll be six of us going to the encampment in total. That's enough to handle any small danger on the way, while the remaining men here can handle most of the trouble with that strength."

Hyola glared at him. "What about me? You can't be thinking of leaving me here!"

Feroy shook his head. "No. You'll have to stay here."

Hyola's hands tightened around her bowl. "Why? I can fight too!"

Feroy snorted. "Exactly. That's why you'll stay here. We're not going to the encampment to fight. If there's a fight to be had, you might very well get it here while protecting the wagons."

Hyola glared at him while she took a sip of stew, but didn't say anything.

"We also can't take those two weapons to the encampment," Feroy added, lowering his voice a little. "If anyone there sees them and runs off with that information, it could harm us a lot. So we'll keep both of them here. You'll use your own weapon to protect the wagons, and someone else will take the one I brought."

"Fine!" Hyola muttered.

Tesyb snorted again, watching her. She knew as well as the rest of them that they had to keep the crossbows a secret. Feroy had told them that both weapons were still hidden under thick cloth on the horses they had ridden in on. All the guards knew about them, but the wagon drivers and the two merchants did not. It had to stay that way for now. They would use the crossbows in an emergency if they had to, but until then it was better to be careful.

Feroy went on, still looking at Hyola. "You'll be the one leading the guards here. The other men all use swords, so they'll have to move out of the wagon circle to meet any enemy. You'll keep Trevalo next to you inside the circle and organize the fight while protecting him."

"Fine," Hyola said again, giving a quick glance to Calubo. "Now I hope some bandits do come here. My hands are itching to kill someone. Anyone."

Tesyb shook his head at the hotheaded woman and dipped his bread into the warm stew before taking a bite. She was a good leader, and had organized the female guards at the village quite well into proper watchtower sentries, but she really needed to keep her head calm. He snorted. It wasn't like he was any better in that regard. His habit of getting overconfident again and again was going to bite him in the rear one day unless he learned to keep his ego in control.

"Calubo," Feroy said, turning to the younger guard, "make sure you keep Pydaso safe. Ulriga is a huge city—perhaps around a hundred times bigger than our village—and it's the first time you and the other guard are going there, so you have to keep your wits about you. You can't afford to get distracted by anything or anyone in that place. If someone is asking for help and wants you to go into a dark alley to help their sister or children, or he's trying to make you an excellent offer to buy something, it's most likely a scam. So just ignore all of them. You have to do exactly what you've been told to do—keep the merchant and his cargo safe. And nothing else."

Calubo nodded firmly. "I will protect them with my life."

Tesyb caught Hyola still giving Calubo the stink eye. He snorted again. These two really should marry soon, or the redhead might really end up killing someone.

Feroy finished his meal, stood, and stretched. "I'll go take a walk. I'm not used to riding a horse for days."

Calubo got up at once. "I'll come with you."

Tesyb barely held back a laugh, knowing Calubo just wanted to get away from Hyola's ire for a while. He pushed himself to his feet as well. "I'm done eating too. I'll go arrange the watch shifts for tonight."

As he walked away from the fire, he glanced back and saw Hyola glaring at the backs of both Feroy and Calubo. He let out a short chuckle. She really was a scary woman.

Chapter 378 The Encampment - I

The next morning, Tesyb, Feroy and the others had left early for the encampment. The man who lived there and three wagon drivers had come along, and they all had been walking for nearly three hours already. The remaining guards and drivers, along with Hyola and the merchant Trevalo, had stayed behind at the clearing where they had camped last night. They would wait there, praying an adzee didn't come sniffing around.

Pydaso had left at dawn with Calubo and the other guard toward Cinran, and from there he would go on to Ulriga. Tesyb had wondered for a moment what it would be like to see such a big city, but he pushed the thought aside. What would be the point if he went there? He didn't even have a single copper to spend, and in a place that size he would probably just get lost anyway. He forced himself to focus on the task in front of him.

The narrow trail that had started from the road had disappeared into the undergrowth a long time ago. Now they were just moving in the general direction the man kept pointing out. Feroy led the group, since he had the most experience living in forests and could spot trouble before anyone else. The man from the encampment walked just behind him. The wagon drivers followed them in a loose line, and Tesyb brought up the rear. Many of them were carrying small satchels of food. The straps kept catching on low branches and twigs, making it even more annoying to walk.

The forest was as dense as Tesyb had expected. Low branches, shrubs, and tangled vines slowed them down again and again. The few machetes they had brought were a blessing though. Without them, he had no idea how they would have managed to force a path through this kind of growth.

Tesyb cut through another thin branch with a quick swipe and pushed it away from his face in annoyance. Just how far was this encampment...?

He looked towards the front. The man was pointing west again, trying to reassure Feroy that they were still going the right way, but Tesyb wasn't convinced. How could anyone even remember a path through this forest! They were supposed to reach the place in about two hours, but they had probably been walking for twice that long, and there was still no sign of the camp. If he hadn't known better, he might have wondered whether the man was leading them into an ambush. Did he even remember the way at all?

He was about to call ahead and ask how much farther they had to go when Feroy suddenly raised a fist. It was the signal to stop.

Tesyb halted at once and shifted the machete to his left hand, resting his right hand on the pommel of his sword. Was there danger up ahead? He hoped it wasn't a bear or something even worse. With the limited strength of their group, they could likely handle boars or even wolves, as long as there weren't too many. A larger predator could be a different story.

After scanning the trees and undergrowth for a while, Feroy leaned back and whispered to the wagon driver behind him. The message moved down the line. They had reached the camp, but Feroy would go ahead with the encampment man to scout it first. The others were to stay where they were.

Tesyb gave a small nod, but realized Feroy had already slipped away by then.

All that was left was to wait. He thought it might take some time, but the former mercenary returned sooner than expected and gestured for them to follow. Tesyb moved after the wagon drivers until Feroy raised his hand again and pointed ahead. Tesyb squinted through the trees and only then noticed movement in a large clearing.

The encampment finally came into view, and the sight of the run-down place reminded him of Tiranat as it had been before winter. On the left side of the clearing stood about half a dozen makeshift huts. They were nothing more than branches leaned together in a cone and tied up with vines, with smaller leafy branches filling the gaps as walls. A small fire burned in the middle of the clearing. A few gaunt women were gathered there, tending clay pots that steamed steadily, likely cooking whatever they had managed to find. On the right, a long fallen log served as a bench. Several older men sat there, watching a handful of children playing nearby. They were probably not older than 50, or they wouldn't have survived living in such a place, but time hadn't been kind to them. It rarely was.

Everyone's clothes were worn thin, patched and mended many times over. It might be enough now that the weather was warm, but he had no idea how they had lived through winter dressed like that. The people in Tiranat hardly dressed any better, but they had the longhouse walls to protect them from the wind and coal burning in braziers to keep away the cold. These people had tangled branches and rags. Maybe... maybe not all of them had lived through the cold months after all, and what he saw now were only those who were hardy enough to survive.

Looking around, Tesyb didn't see any men of fighting age—just some teenagers. Some of the other women were sharpening short wooden sticks, probably meant as weapons, with the boys helping them out.

He counted quickly. There were just over a dozen people in the clearing. That wasn't even half of what the man had claimed when they spoke on the road. Where were the rest of them? He swallowed, wondering if they had already gone to meet the goddess by now...

Before he could speak, Feroy gave the man beside him a firm shove. The man stumbled out of the trees and into the clearing, catching everyone there by surprise.

A short, young woman with cropped brown hair, carrying a small pot toward the fire, turned to see who had arrived. She stared at the man for a moment, dropping the pot in surprise. It shattered on the ground, and water spilled out at her feet. Her face went pale and she froze, eyes locked on him, like she had seen a ghost.

"How...? You're still alive?" the woman breathed. Her eyes were already filled with tears as the rest of the camp hurried toward her. "Where are the others? Are they...?"

She didn't finish. She ran to the man they had brought with them and wrapped her arms around him, hugging him so tightly he almost stumbled.

Feroy finally stepped into the clearing, with Tesyb and the wagon drivers coming in behind him. None of them had drawn their swords, but their machetes were still in their hands. Looking at the fearful faces around the fire, Tesyb belatedly realized that that might have been a mistake.

The frail older men and the other women snatched up the sticks they had dropped in surprise and moved to stand between the newcomers and the children. The teenage boys ran to pick up sharp branches, as they glared at the man whom the guards had brought with them.

"Did you bring bandits with you?" one of the older men demanded. "How could you!"

The man who had come along with them opened his mouth, trying to reply something, but a young woman turned toward the guards with a desperate look. "Please don't do this to us..."

Even the kids had grabbed sharp branches of their own by now and stood ready to defend their families, while the older men pulled the younger children, and the girls closer behind them, forming as much of a wall as they could.

"I won't let you take them!" one of the gray-haired men shouted. "Never again!"

An older woman leaned toward a teenage girl and whispered something quickly. The girl gave a sharp nod, then turned and sprinted into the trees on the far side of the clearing. Before Tesyb understood what she meant to do, she was already gone, swallowed by the undergrowth.

"Shit," he muttered.

The brown-haired woman had moved back toward her people now. She glared at Feroy while lifting a jagged, half broken knife to her own throat, with some other young women following her lead. "You will not take us alive! We are never going to be slaves again—of a damned noble or you bandits. Either you turn around right now, or you'll only find corpses here."

Tesyb opened his mouth, but no sound came out. The situation had spun out of control so fast he could barely follow it.

The man who had come with them tried to speak again, but an older woman scowled at him, still trying to shield a girl with her body. "Shut up, you traitor! Not a word from you!"

The man dropped his gaze to the ground, shoulders sagging.

Tesyb was still trying to think of something that might calm them when Feroy let his machete fall to the dirt.

"Drop it," the ex-mercenary said quietly. "All of you."

Tesyb hesitated for a heartbeat. He wasn't sure if this was wise in front of the enraged camp people, but he obeyed. His sword was still sheathed at his belt anyway. He lowered his machete and let it go. The wagon drivers followed his example and dropped their own blades, putting their empty hands in front where everyone could see them.

"We are not here to harm you," Feroy began, his palms open at his sides. "We're not bandits."

"As if we would ever believe that," the brown-haired woman shot back, the knife still pressed to her throat. "Tell me the truth. Who sent you? Was it that bastard Zoricus? Or are you bounty hunters from Cinran out to get a few coins for turning us in? How did you even find us! We don't even live close to any road!"

She suddenly turned on the man who had come with them. "It was you, wasn't it? You were the one who sold us out!" She spat at the ground. "I hope you got enough coin for it! You'll certainly need it in hell!"

Tesyb realized then what these people must be. Escaped slaves. They must have fled from a noble's lands—likely Zoricus—or from a farmhouse within his barony.

Feroy shook his head. "We're not here to take you back to Zoricus. Or to Cinran. We just want to help you." He tilted his head toward the man who had led them here. "He didn't sell you out either. He only told us how to find you so we could help."

"To help us?" The brown-haired woman, who seemed to be the leader here, stared at him with open suspicion. "That doesn't make sense. Why would you ever help us? We are nothing to you!" She squinted at the new arrivals. "If you aren't bounty hunters, then just who are you all?"

Chapter 379 The Encampment - II

Feroy gave her a small, easy smile, which did nearly nothing to soften the woman's expression. "We're from Tiranat, and we came to invite you to come back with us. In our village, you all will get—"

"I knew it!" she cut in sharply. "Tiranat is where our men went! And you killed all of them! You want to do the same with us!"

An older man scowled at them. "Your baron sent you, didn't he? Wants slaves for free, that bastard!"

"He doesn't want slaves!" Tesyb burst out, unable to hold back. "Lord Kivamus doesn't even keep slaves! He's not like the other nobles!"

"Hah," one of the older women snorted. "Just another devil with another name. They all talk pretty, until you're chained up in their cellars. You killed the rest of us!"

Tesyb was about to snap back, but Feroy lifted a hand to stop him.

"Those men attacked our village," Feroy said, his tone steady. "Some of them died, yes, but we were only defending our homes. You can't blame us for that. But most of your people are still alive—everyone who surrendered." He jerked his head toward the man they had brought. "Ask him."

The brown-haired woman fixed her eyes on him. "Speak! Where are the rest of the men? We've been waiting for you all to return for weeks!"

The man started to talk, the words spilling out in a rush. Tesyb watched the woman's face while he spoke. Something about her made him think of Hyola—the same hard edge, the same way her jaw set when she was angry. For a moment he even wondered if they might be distant cousins, before remembering that Hyola had bright red hair, not brown like this woman.

The man told them how they had tried to raid Tiranat, expecting an easy target, and how every bit of their information had been wrong. He explained how they had been overwhelmed by the village's defense and how the raid had ended before they could even enter the village. He told them that nearly half a dozen of their number had been killed, but the others had been taken alive and locked up at first, then given food and some kind of magical medicine that healed their wounds. He described how those men had slowly been allowed out of the prison after being questioned, and how they had been working as laborers for the past few weeks.

The woman looked from him to the guards and back again. "So they're really not bandits?" she asked in a low voice. "They aren't here to take us back to the farms near Krukzil and get the bounties?"

The man shook his head. "No, Widel, they aren't. I came here to take you all to Tiranat. It's a good place to live, better than you can ever imagine. We can all live there like normal people, the kind of life we never had on the farms."

"Then why didn't you come earlier?" Widel shot back. "Or were you enjoying your life there so much you forgot about the rest of us?"

"Of course not!" he said quickly. "We wanted to come back right away, but there was a bigger raid on the village immediately after that. The baron stopped anyone from leaving, in case they helped the bandits. We wanted to come after that, but how were we supposed to escort children and old people through these forests with just those of us who remained?"

He gestured around at the trees. "Nobody could find this camp unless someone led them here—not even bandits. Now that it's spring, I knew you all could survive a few more weeks on your own, just like we had for the past few months. But if we had come without enough protection, some real bandit group could easily have ambushed us on that road and made us their slaves, making worthless all the pain and hardship we had gone through to escape. So we had to wait for the baron to give us guards, since he had already promised to help us out." He jerked his thumb at Feroy. "That's why these guards are here. There are a dozen more waiting on the road. Trust me, they'll keep us safe from anything."

Widel's expression had changed from pure anger to something more uncertain. Her hand with the knife had also lowered during the argument. "You're not lying about the village, are you? I'll never forgive you if you are..."

"Just trust me this time," he said. "You can see it for yourself in a few days."

Widel looked at Feroy and the wagon drivers. "You all don't have that savage look of bandits, any of you. I can accept you're guards from that village and not bounty hunters. But why do you even want us there? If you aren't lying about not making us slaves again, then why? No place has enough food these days. Why would you want more mouths to feed?"

Feroy grinned. "You'll find out more when you get there, but we want as many mouths to feed as we can. Tiranat needs workers for its industries."

"Tiranat..." one of the older men muttered. "It's just a small coal mining village, isn't it?"

Feroy nodded. "That's what we mainly do, among other things. You can work there as coal miners, but there are other labor jobs too."

The old man frowned. "Does it look like I can swing a pickaxe? We ran away because most of us couldn't do the hard work they wanted on the farms near Krukzil. That meant we barely got any food—just more whips when we couldn't keep up. Our families came with us when we escaped, but you've already killed nearly half of our young men, and the rest of us can't do that kind of labor. We barely get enough to eat here, and there's always the risk of some wild beast coming in the night, but at least nobody whips us."

"You will be treated well in Tiranat," Feroy said. "Ask your man later about how he and the others are treated there. About working—you don't have to mine coal or till fields if you can't. As long as you do

what you're able to, that's enough. And even then, Tiranat has a welfare system for those who can't work at all. We already have a few disabled people there who still get shelter and regular meals even though they can't work. The baron makes sure nobody goes hungry in our village at his own expense."

"You're lying!" someone snapped. "That's not possible!"

"I'm not buying it either!" Widel agreed.

"Yeah, I was almost going to believe you all," an older woman said, "but you ruined your sales yourself. There's no way a baron spends his own gold to feed invalids!"

The man who had come with them shook his head. "That's what I thought too, the first time I heard it. But it's true. I've met one of those people, and they get the same two meals a day as the other villagers. I even heard rumors that it might even become three meals a day in the coming days."

"But how...?" an older woman with a limp asked. "Why would anyone do that? Who could even afford that? For people like me who can't even work!"

"Well," Feroy said, "it's not like they sit around doing nothing. Like I said, everyone helps where they can. Those who can't move much can still help out by cutting vegetables and doing other cooking work, which doesn't need them to walk around. Some of the older ones or people who've lost limbs help by watching over the small children while the adults are out working. That is still an important task. What I mean to say is that you don't have to dig coal or shovel dirt to earn food. Those who can do that, or those who have skills like carpentry or smithing, are obviously more valuable and will be paid good wages, but the rest of you still won't go hungry and will always have a roof over your head."

The camp people didn't look particularly convinced by those claims, so Feroy gestured to the wagon drivers carrying the food satchels. They moved a few steps ahead, but the refugees flinched back in fear.

"We're not going to hurt you," Feroy said with a disarming smile. "These men have brought food for you. Some of it is bread that's only a few days old—fresh enough that it still retains the taste. We also brought vegetables, and half a sack of ground wheat you can cook as porridge, plus some smoked meat. The smaller satchel has some salt." He pointed at the clay pots still steaming by the fire. "I can see that those pots barely have anything in them. Add some vegetables to one of those pots, and you can boil some wheat in another one. It'll be ready within an hour if you add more firewood."

"That's... that's for us?" a frail woman asked. "Really?"

The children stared hungrily at the satchels and the half sack of grain the drivers had set down in front of them. Widel glanced at the food as well, before she glared at the drivers. "What do you want us to do in return? I won't sleep with you! Neither will any other woman."

Feroy let out a slow breath. "It's just a gift, to show we mean well. Whether you all come with us or not, you can still keep it. Our baron is generous. We even brought some medicine—something to heal anyone who's sick or injured, but that's for after you've eaten." He pointed at the satchels. "Now go on. You all look hungry."

The children were the first to move. A couple of them ran to the satchels at once, and some of the adults followed, opening them one by one. A boy let out a shout. "It really has bread!" He tore off a big chunk and took a bite before another kid snatched it from his hand and bit into it as well.

An older woman hurried over, scolding them and pushing them back. Some of the adults took over opening the rest of the packs and began to divide the ready-to-eat food properly. The satchel with the boar jerky emptied first. Most of the adults chewed on the tough meat, while the softer bread was passed into the small hands of the children.

One toddler stared at the bread in his fingers as he munched. "Ma, will we get to eat this bread thing again?" he asked. "Never had it before. But I like it!"

His mother's face crumpled. She pulled him into a hug and started sobbing as she passed her own share of bread to him.

The older woman who had taken charge was already giving new orders. Some of the ground wheat went straight into a pot that was already boiling over the campfire, while she told others to carefully put the vegetables aside for later.

Tesyb watched all of them with his heart aching. It was not hard to imagine what their days in the forest had been like—always short on food, always waiting for something to go wrong, and nobody coming to help. Just how difficult would it have been for all of them living in this forest? Widel seemed to be

putting up a brave front, but he had heard from Calubo and Hyola what it was like living as a slave. Widel's life would have been just as difficult, if not worse, living near that bastard Zoricus' own village.

#### Chapter 380 Progress Check - I

When the first rush around the food settled down, Widel pointed toward the swords at the guards' belts.

"You've brought gifts from the goddess," she said, while glancing at satchels of grain and bread. "It's something we never expected, and I thank you for it. You've even invited us to your incredible village where we will supposedly get such meals regularly." Her gaze went to their weapons again. "But you've also brought iron with you. Do we even have any choice in this?"

"The weapons are for the beasts in the forest," Feroy said. "And yes, you certainly have a choice. We'll return back within the hour if you choose to stay here. I wouldn't recommend that, but we're not going to force you to come with us. I'll also hand over some of the medicine to you and will tell you how to use it before we return. But I still think you need to give your people a chance at a better life. How long do you think your children and the elderly can survive here? The next winter will take most of them, if a large predator or a bandit group doesn't do it first. But yes, it's still your choice whether to come with us or not."

He glanced up at the sky, where the sun was already climbing close to its highest point. "Either way, you need to decide soon. I'll give you an hour to talk it over and to speak with your man who has already lived in Tiranat, so he can tell you more from his firsthand experience. After that, we'll have to leave— with or without you all. Otherwise we'll be stuck in the forest at night, and nobody wants that."

Tesyb remembered the lower than expected count of people in the clearing. "Where are the rest of you?" he asked. "We expected above two dozen people here."

Widel looked at the others, then her shoulders dropped. "They're out gathering nuts and berries, and checking our traps for small animals. With only a few men left here, we can't hunt anything bigger. But even if we decide to go with you, we can't leave until everyone is back."

Feroy thought for a moment before answering. "You sent that girl to warn them about us, didn't you? That means they're probably already hurrying back, thinking bandits came to raid your camp. We'll wait as long as we can to give you time."

"Thank you," Widel said. A hesitant smile crossed her face before her eyes went back to the food being shared out.

Feroy returned the smile. "Go on. You should eat something too. You deserve it."

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~ Kivamus ~

Four days had passed since the first sawmill had been completed. The second sawmill had also been finished two days ago, and the carpenter apprentices were already stacking construction material at a steady pace. Three times a day, both log mover crews hauled fedarus trunks to the sawmill site and brought back beams, posts, joists, and other building parts—everything but planks. They were being stacked in front of the two longhouse blocks for use in the new one, and other carpenter apprentices were already cutting the mortise and tenon joints in the parts needed for construction.

The foundations for the third block had been dug long ago, and with one of Taniok's apprentices overseeing the work, half a dozen laborers had started the construction yesterday. A groma was being used to make sure the layout stayed straight and square, especially since the design had been modified this time. Ideally, Kivamus would have put more men on the site, but he did not want to slow down coal mining. He could only hope more refugees arrived soon to ease the constant strain of labor shortage.

The third sawmill was also expected to be finished by the evening, which was just an hour away now. From tomorrow, it would start turning out planks at a previously unimaginable rate, although the shortage of log movers would still prevent it from running at full capacity. Kivamus just hoped Feroy would succeed in persuading more craftsmen to move here, especially a wheelwright to build more axles for new wagons and log-movers. He had also been expecting Trevalo to return by now, but the merchant was already late by two days. Kivamus tried not to dwell on it, but he couldn't help but worry that something had gone wrong on the road. Though he really hoped it wasn't so.

A few days ago, the farming foreman Pinoto had reported that all the wheat sowing was complete and that all the seed drills had been brought back inside the manor for some small repairs and safekeeping until they were needed again. The final sown area was at least a quarter times bigger than what they had planned initially. Hopefully it would help them get a good harvest in the autumn.

The loggers were still expanding the fields to the south though, preparing for the next merchant who might bring potatoes or other crops that could still be planted. The vegetable gardens south of the village were being enlarged as well, with new refugees helping under Madam Nerida's direction. Madam Helga was overseeing the mushroom barn and had reported that within a couple of weeks enough mushrooms would be mature to replant in a new barn, if one was built in time. Kivamus hadn't promised her anything, but with the sawmill running now, there was at least a good possibility of that happening. It certainly wouldn't have been feasible without the sawmill.

Pinoto had also retained nearly 30 farmers for weeding and irrigating the fields as needed. The weather was still mild in late spring, but the peak of summer would definitely require more irrigation. That would have been impossible without a well close by, but a new well had already been completed near the fields, so farmers could load buckets on wheelbarrows and carry water for targeted irrigation. Even so, that was barely a stopgap measure. Kivamus knew they needed to dig the canal from the reservoir to the farms before summer turned harsh, or they would risk losing part of the crop.

The farming foreman had also asked for a lot more help at harvest time. Thirty farmers would be enough to tend the fields while the grain grew, but he would need at least a hundred more men and women for the harvest itself. Probably even more. Kivamus knew they could not afford to stop coal mining for weeks to free up that many people, so he had assured Pinoto he was working on the blueprints of a machine that would make it much easier to harvest the fields with the workers they already had. Pinoto had been stunned at the idea, but after seeing the seed drills in action, he had tentatively accepted the promise.

Inside the manor, another batch of losuvil medicine had been processed by Syrene. Several ceramic jars filled with acelos tablets now sat on the shelves in the laboratory. Duvass hadn't been able to hide his grin when he saw them, knowing how much gold that medicine could bring in once it was sold. However, the budding scientist had warned them that workers would only be able to gather losuvil leaves for at most one more week because of the rising heat.

After that, the leaves would lose their potency before the hunters bringing them even reached the village, which meant after the next week, new medicine could not be made again until late autumn, when the weather cooled, or until an encampment was built in those hills. Kivamus had told her to focus on making pills from the leaves already gathered, since it would take another three weeks to process the latest batch, and he would do what he could to build the encampment as soon as possible.

The better-quality paper was also being made regularly now. One of the rooms—the same one the tax collector had used during his last visit—had been set aside for storing it. A small but steadily growing stack of sheets lay there, bound by thin twines. The paper was still yellow and could have been smoother, but for now it was decent enough to be sold for a good amount.

Meanwhile, the hunters had brought in a few more sheep and some rabbits. Another group had found a pair of roaming nodors in the forest, and they had also been brought to the manor. The rabbit population was already starting to rise, giving hope that it would lead to another steady source of meat in the future. Kivamus had also asked the visiting merchants to bring cows, pigs, and other large animals they could not catch in the forest. If all went well, they would soon need a dedicated animal enclosure in the south.

On the trading side, another merchant had arrived yesterday. He had bought four wagon loads of coal and sold them a good amount of iron ingots, along with a few pigs Kivamus had ordered earlier. They still needed many more animals, but at least it was a start. He didn't bring grain though, because of its high prices. Hopefully, Trevalo would bring a good amount of it soon.

With new wells being dug in all four directions of the village, as well as near the farms, Tiranat had become much safer in case of a fire, whether started by accident or on purpose. Only the last well remained, and the diggers were already working on it just beyond the eastern gate of the manor, where a new training ground would be built in the future. They all had been lined with stone brought from the eastern hills. Buckets were already being stockpiled near all the watchtowers and wells. It would take a few weeks before they had enough of them, but at least the work had begun.

The multitasker foreman, Yeden, had reported that the defensive trench outside the walls was now complete on the eastern side as well. The diggers were already working on the last stretch in the south. That would take less than a week, after which the crews would be sent to cut a proper road from the village to the coal mines and then on to the dam, forcing a wide and relatively straight path through the hills. They would also work to dig a canal parallel to it.

The clay coating of the village walls was also coming along well. Laborers had finished coating the north and west, including the watchtowers there. Only the east and south were left, and that would take around 10 more days.

He was musing about the next steps in his current blueprint when the manor hall door opened, breaking his train of thought, and Duvas walked in looking tired. He let out a long breath as he sat down and poured himself some water from the wooden jug on the table, taking several gulps before setting it back.

"What's up with you?" Kivamus asked. "You were gone for hours. I nearly finished my latest blueprint in the time you were out."

