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Chapter 381 Progress Check - II

"I went to the market square and to the north," the majordomo said. "The deconstruction of the abandoned huts is almost done. The last few shacks will be taken down by evening. Most of the shops in the market square are proper wooden houses, so they're still standing, even though a lot of them are damaged. Same with the makeshift vegetable stalls. But we can't afford to pull those buildings down without having something to offer the owners instead."

"The new market square in the north will solve that once it's ready," Kivamus said. "But that's not an immediate priority. Let the old shops stay for now. It's good the clearing work finished at this time, though. These are the people who have worked in building construction in the past. Send those workers to the third longhouse construction site from tomorrow. They really need more hands, and this will cover it."

"I will," Duvas said with a nod. "To take down all the village shacks, the last of the refugees who were living in them have already been moved into the courtyards of the longhouse blocks, though both courtyards are overcrowded now, specially with vegetable gardens also being cultivated there. And the insides were packed full already." He sighed. "These days entering a longhouse is like visiting the market square at the peak of business hours, like when the coal miners returned in the evening to buy food for the day from the market until last year. It's seriously congested there."

"That's true," Kivamus agreed, "but the third longhouse is already under construction. It will take some time to finish, but with building material coming in so fast from the sawmill, it will only take a fraction of the time the first two needed."

"I know," Duvas said. "But are you sure about building such a large structure with more than one floor? The first two blocks only have a single floor, so there was never a big risk of people getting hurt, even though we used unseasoned logs. A two-story building with unseasoned logs is another matter. You know we brought the planks and beams from Cinran to build the manor, right? If we'd used unseasoned logs here, it wouldn't have lasted half as long, especially for a double-story building."

"Don't worry about it," Kivamus said with a smile. "I had a long discussion with Taniok about it, and we inspected many of the stockpiles of logs stacked up within the walls. He told me that fedarus wood isn't like most other timber. It's far more efficient. It takes only around six months for it to lose all its moisture and turn into seasoned wood. They couldn't build ships from fedarus wood in Dorastiz otherwise. That means the trunks from the start of the forest clearing last winter are already fully seasoned, and more trunks will be ready in the coming months."

He leaned back slightly. "You already know I wanted three-story buildings in the north, especially now that refugees keep arriving every few days. But Taniok said that while he had worked on three-story buildings before he moved here, it was a long, long time ago. The rest of the workers also have no experience at all with multi-story buildings. His opinion was that we should continue making single story blocks, while I pushed for three-story buildings. So after an extended argument with him, we reached a compromise of making double-story buildings for now, which will also be faster and safer."

He went on, "Making two-story blocks now will also help the workers slowly build that much-needed experience—most of those construction workers were coal miners just half a year ago, after all. This way, once we've built a few double-story longhouse blocks, we can move to three-story ones if we really need to. But to be honest, if we build more double-story blocks instead, that will probably be safer for us anyway. We still have plenty of open space inside the walls, and if we add a third floor, they will be visible from outside the village. That makes them an obvious target for any bandit who wants to set them on fire."

The majordomo nodded slowly. "We're going to coat all those longhouse walls with clay anyway, just like in the first two blocks. That will keep the worst of the winter wind out and also make it harder for them to catch fire if someone tries. But you're right. We can't afford to take such risks."

"Exactly," Kivamus said.

"I am still not sure that we need to take the risk of making two-story buildings..." Duvas said.

Kivamus shook his head. "No, it'll be better this way. If we'd made the first two blocks double-storied as well, it would have helped a lot in housing everyone today, but back then all we had was unseasoned wood. And we didn't have any trained builders either. The workers who built the manor went back to Cinran when that job ended two decades ago, like you told me. Only Taniok had real experience from building the merchants' houses and market shops, while we just had coal miners to help him."

He gave a small shrug. "Now it's different. We have a few dozen workers who've already built longhouses before, and we can produce construction material much, much faster than we could before the winter—when we depended on a single carpenter and his apprentices crafting everything by hand. This is the perfect time to start making double-story longhouse blocks."

"I guess so," the majordomo said. "It will certainly help with the housing problem, which will turn into a crisis soon if we don't build more. I'm just glad we had these two blocks and their courtyards to house new refugees."

Kivamus nodded. "Yes, but there's another issue Taniok found recently. Because the first two longhouse blocks were made from completely unseasoned wood, some of the beams and posts have already started to warp and twist. The buildings are still safe to live in—for now—but he said they won't last very long. They might survive this winter, or they might not. The warping has been faster than expected because fedarus wood dries much quicker than other trees. That'll only help us in the future, since we now have huge stockpiles of seasoned logs for the upcoming construction projects, but those first two blocks—" He shook his head. "—they aren't going to last."

Duvas frowned. "We've already packed those blocks full, but if they don't last through the coming winter, that'll be a grave problem. People simply won't survive without the safety of those walls in the freezing winters of Tiranat. Can we even make enough new blocks before then?"

Kivamus allowed himself a small smile. "We can. I'm sure of it now that the sawmills are working. We can build new longhouse blocks much faster than we did last winter, and these are going to be two-story blocks, capable of housing even more people. If it seems that the first two blocks won't last the winter, we can tear them down in autumn and replace them with new multi-story blocks in the same spots."

He leaned forward slightly. "Taniok will give me a better estimate about the construction timeline in a week, but his first guess was that they can finish the ground floor of the third block in about twelve to fourteen days, and the upper floor in another week—assuming there's no shortage of construction material. That speed will only improve in the future. The third sawmill isn't even finished yet, and the workers are still getting used to multi-story construction."

"Let's hope so," Duvas said. He scratched his short white beard. "Since the inside of the new blocks is basically the same as the old ones, how many people can we house in the new double-story blocks?"

"It's not completely the same design," Kivamus explained. "There will be slanting staircases in the courtyard on each of the three inner sides of the block, since a lot of people will need to use them. But we've also modified the inner design to add another staircase within the central section, for use when the weather is very bad. We don't want mothers carrying their infants out into the snow just to climb to the upper floor after eating on the ground floor near the kitchens. That inner staircase will let children and the elderly stay in the warm indoors most of the time."

"That will surely help a lot in preventing toddlers and infants from getting sick from the cold," the majordomo said. "I had taken a look at your blueprint and seen some of the changes. Making two gates in this design to cater to the much larger number of residents and adding a continuous walkway on the inside of the upper floor in the courtyard to connect each side was a very good idea. But what about the space right above the kitchen and the storage rooms on the ground floor? I didn't understand too much of your design."

"That's the good part," Kivamus said. "Our first plan was to copy the layout and make another kitchen directly above the one on the ground floor, so each floor could cook separately. But one of the longhouse foremen suggested it would be better to specialize instead. After talking it through, we agreed to add a small staircase inside the ground-floor kitchen connecting it to the kitchen above."

He tapped the table lightly with a finger. "That way, all the actual cooking on fire, as well as the clay oven for making bread will stay on the ground floor, with the smoke taken out through the walls. It wouldn't be feasible to make them safely on the upper floor anyway. In the new blocks, the upper kitchen will handle all the peeling, chopping, and other food preparation, which was being done on the ground floor earlier. That frees more space downstairs for another clay oven and more open floor for cooking, which is a good thing since they'll need to cook for roughly double the number of people in these new blocks now. So instead of repeating the same kitchen twice, we're giving each floor a different role." He grinned. "Specialization, you know?"

Duvas smiled. "Your way of thinking is starting to spread to the common folk too, since it was the foreman who suggested it. The leftover scraps from food prep can be given to dogs, or can be used as compost in the vegetable gardens in the courtyards. But what about the storage rooms?"

Kivamus lifted a shoulder. "With nearly double the number of people living there, we need almost double the storage space just to keep provisions for the same number of days. So the storage rooms on the upper floor will also be used for food, and we've expanded them a little to store even more, including in the area right above both the gates on the ground floor. It cuts into the living area a little, but it's worth it in the long run."

He added, "As for your original question: the first two longhouse blocks can each hold 128 people in bunks, even though we currently have roughly double that number squeezed inside and in the courtyards. But the new two-story design can comfortably accommodate 248 people in bunks."

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"That's nearly 250 people per block!" Duvas grinned. "Almost twice the capacity of the first ones. Now I just hope it's finished soon. The cramped conditions are already causing trouble in the old blocks. There was even a fist fight a few days ago over who got to sleep inside and who had to sleep in the courtyard."

Once someone gets the right to stay inside, they'll never give it up, and it can be the difference between life and death once winter arrives."

"Tell them to hold on a little longer," Kivamus said. "Although now that they can see the new block going up right in front of the old ones, it should calm them. They'll know their own bunks are coming soon."

"I will," Duvas nodded. "We should also do something about moving the sawdust press to the sawmill site. Gorsazo really wants the children to stop gathering sawdust soon so he can teach them for longer. He has really gotten into the role of a teacher here."

"Well, he is a teacher—a pretty good one," Kivamus chuckled. "But no. I've decided not to move it there for now. We still need that wood press to make paper, and that happens right here outside the manor walls in the east. Eventually we'll have to shift the whole paper-making process to the dam as well, but until we have an extra triphammer built for that, there's no point."

He continued, "So for now, we'll just move this press outside the east wall of the manor, where the training ground and barracks will be built in the future. Hudan can keep sending any lagging guards there as punishment to beat the wood pulp. However, when we move it there, we'll remove the sawdust briquette mold and fix a permanent flat plank instead, instead of the workers changing it depending on whether they need to press paper or make briquettes. That way it'll be easier for the paper-makers to press sheets and finish the whole process in one place. At least until we shift everything to the dam site."

"I can see the benefits of that," Duvas said. "But what about making new sawdust briquettes, since the current wood press machine will be dedicated to making paper? We need them now more than ever. Even if the village doesn't burn much coal in summer, we need every lump of coal we can get to sell to merchants—especially after Trevalo sets up the new trading route to Ulriga."

"I know," Kivamus said. "That's why we'll soon build a new, bigger sawdust press near the sawmills. Taniok can work on it once he's done with the triphammers. Instead of the old design with four molds, the new one will have more—at least a dozen—so the workers can press more briquettes at once. They'll have no shortage of sawdust and wood chips at the dam site, that's for sure."

He rubbed his thumb against his fingers as he thought it through again. "It does mean the workers will need to walk there every morning, and the briquettes will have to be brought back every evening. That will need another wagon, and we're already short on those, but we'll have to solve that somehow. With the amount of wood we're going to be processing now with three sawmills, the supply of sawdust will

jump, and the number of briquettes we can make will rise along with it. Once that new wood press machine is working properly, we can even start handing out briquettes as cooking fuel. Or we can sell them after we start paying people in coins. They're easier to store too and it'll save the firewood they're burning for cooking now, so that wood can go to carpentry and other uses."

"That's a good idea," Duvas said. "Talking about the dam reminds me—someone told me the furnaces for making steel and coke are both ready, and their baking is finishing today. Cedoron and his men have made enough charcoal and have forged enough iron bars by now. Should we start the process for making the first batch of steel?"

Kivamus nodded, already waiting for this day with anticipation. "Of course! Tell Cedoron he has to go to the dam tomorrow morning and oversee it properly. I'll come with him too, since it's the first time. The cementation process is long, but if we start tomorrow, we'll let the charcoal burn with the iron bars for about a week, then let it cool for another two weeks. In the meantime, we'll build two more furnaces for steel and another two for coke. Then we'll have three cementation furnaces working in parallel—each of which needs three weeks in total to convert iron to steel—and then we'll start getting a fresh batch of steel every week. The three coke furnaces will work the same way and will give us enough fuel for that and for the blacksmiths' regular work."

He continued, "Once the first furnace has cooled, the blacksmiths will just need to forge and re-weld the new bars a few times, and that will give us our first batch of steel, around three weeks from now. After that, we can finally start making the steel parts for the lathe. Darora is already working on the wooden frame."

"I saw it when I visited his workshop around noon," Duvas said. "His men will also have another crossbow ready for us by evening."

"Good," Kivamus said. "That means we can have one crossbow on each watchtower again, even after giving many of 'em to the hunting groups, plus the two with Feroy and Hyola. But I still can't wait for the lathe to be ready. That's what will increase the speed of making crossbows by an order of magnitude."

He noticed Duvas's puzzled look. "Uh... by a big multiple," he added. "Much faster."

"I see." Duvas nodded slowly. "We still have at least two months before the mercenaries arrive. If we're lucky, they won't come for another month after that and will only appear at the end of summer, before the heavy rains start in early autumn. But either way, we need the guards' morale to stay high. So I think you should start paying the guards soon. No one has said anything to me directly, but everyone is

grumbling. I know you've planned to start paying them after Pydaso returns next time, but that's at least 15 days away. I don't think it's wise to leave the guards unpaid for that long."

Kivamus grinned. "I know. That's where the secret plan I mentioned the other day will help. It might take that long anyway to pay the guards even with this plan, but if things go the way I hope, we'll have more than enough gold to start paying not only the guards but everyone in the village in coins, and we'll be able to pay off the mercenaries easily. At least."

Duvas frowned. "What is that secret plan anyway? I've been too busy these last few days to join your weekly village defense meetings with the guard leaders, but I know you've been talking with Hudan and Kerel about something."

Kivamus smiled. "Just wait until Tesyb and the others return with Trevalo. I'll explain it in detail then." He glanced toward the open western window, where the sun was close to setting. "Darora told me yesterday he still needs a few more days to finish the scorpion. I really can't wait to see it in action."

Duvas nodded. "Neither can I. But..."

The manor hall door opened again and a servant ran inside, breathing hard as if he had sprinted the whole way.

"Milord, I just came from the north-eastern gate," the servant reported. "I saw Trevalo arriving from the northern road with six wagons. But not just that—there are at least two dozen people walking beside the wagons."

"Two dozen people?" Duvas repeated. "They can't be bandits if they're just walking next to the wagons."

"No, no," the servant said quickly, shaking his head. "Tesyb and our other guards are with them."

Kivamus grinned. "Then they must be the refugees from that encampment! Tesyb must have brought them safely, which explains why they're late. Walking with so many people would slow down a caravan for sure." He looked at the servant. "Did you see how much wheat the wagons were carrying?"

The servant shrugged. "I didn't stop to count, but all six wagons were fully loaded with sacks. It has to be wheat or other food stuff."

"Good. You can go back," Kivamus said.

When the servant left, Kivamus stood up and glanced at Duvas. "Let's go and see the new arrivals. We haven't had such a big group at once, so it'll need some managing. It's good though that they came with Trevalo—along with the wheat he's brought." He added, "It's nearing sunset so the villagers must already be returning from work, so we can also announce that from tomorrow we'll go back to three meals a day. And the weekly grain and food ration for the workers will be increased by the required amount for that."

"Everyone has been waiting for that announcement for weeks," Duvas said as he stood. "I'm sure they'll be glad to hear it. I'll also send a servant to the longhouse blocks to tell them to cook extra food tonight for the latest refugees. Although I don't think we can fit another two dozen people into either block. There's just no more space."

Kivamus nodded after a moment of thought. "That's fine. It wouldn't be a good idea to mix up this many new people with the villagers immediately—at least not until we know more about them. Feroy isn't here right now, but Levalas is also good at finding out people's secrets. We'll send him to mingle with these refugees and learn their stories, one by one. This work will suit his particular talents far more than him pulling another watch duty at the gates."

"I'll explain the task to him."

"Good." Kivamus continued, "For now, tell the new refugees to camp in the empty space west of the first longhouse block, where we'll make the new market square in future. These people have lived in the forest for months; they can endure staying outside for another couple of weeks until the new block is ready. We'll give them whatever provisions they need."

"Of course," Duvas said as they walked together toward the outer door. "I'll arrange it. As usual, we'll tell them that they can rest for a few days before we assign them work. I'll also check if any of them are injured or sick so we can give them losuvil powder to heal quicker. Acelos tablets won't be used within the village, like you said, for safety purposes."

Kivamus nodded, pushed the door open, and stepped outside with the majordomo at his side. It was time to meet the new arrivals.

Chapter 383 Widel - I

~ Widel ~

~ Approaching Tiranat ~

Widel was tired. And hungry. And angry.

Just how far did she have to keep walking! They had been walking south for days and days, but this miraculous village of Tiranat was still not in sight. Tesyb kept saying they were close, and the other guards kept repeating the same thing, but her tired legs did not care about promises.

She looked around and saw the same exhausted expressions on others' faces. The whole group was dragging itself along on aching legs. At least the elderly had been given space on the wagons' seats, while the guards walked on the ground beside them. They certainly looked fit enough for that, while those from the camp were all thin and gaunt. The toddlers and children kept switching—carried in an adult's arms for a while, then sat down beside the sacks on the wagons until someone else needed the space again.

She kept glancing at those sacks. What was even in them? They hadn't been opened once since they left the clearing. When the children sat on them, the sound and the give of the cloth made it feel like grain—probably wheat. But that was a lot of wheat. What would a small village like Tiranat even do with that much? Didn't just a few hundred miners live there? Then again, she didn't really know how much food that many people needed. Maybe even this wasn't enough.

Still, at least the guards had been true to their words and the promises they had made at the camp. So far. There really were more guards waiting on the road to protect the group, just like they had told them at the camp. Everyone had rested that first night at that clearing where the wagons had been parked, then started moving south the next morning.

That same morning, Feroy—the man who had been making all those tall promises—had left north again, and a redhead woman went with him. Widel had watched them go and felt a flash of alarm. She had been distraught, thinking now that their leader is gone, the rest of the guards will start getting adventurous. Hands that wandered. Smirks. Quiet offers. A little extra food for an hour alone. The

guards of any noble were supposed to be like that, from her experience back at the farms. But as it turned out, she had been worrying for nothing, and none of those things had happened.

So far, the guards' behavior had been better than she had ever hoped. None of them had harassed her or the other women. None of them had tried to bargain, or acted like the camp people owed them for saving their lives.

Every day, the guards—led by their brawny leader Tesyb—made sure enough porridge was cooked in the evenings so everyone got to eat their fill, and so that there was still some of it left for the morning. The bread and dried meat had been used up long ago, but the veggies the guards had brought were freely shared with everyone through the stews they made. Whatever they managed to trap in the night gave a little meat at breakfast—which was already a new experience.

Back at the encampment, everyone barely got to eat once a day. Eating twice only happened on those rare days when the traps gave more than expected. Having three meals on the same day was still just a dream, and not something she remembered ever having in all her life seeing 20 winters, even though Tesyb had promised they would get that in Tiranat soon. Only time would tell if that was true, or just another promise said to keep people walking south.

Two nights ago, a boar had attacked their overnight camp, but the guards had dealt with it way too easily. That meat had filled many bellies that night, but what she remembered most was watching those young men fight with confidence and without any panic at all. It made her think of the men from their own camp—brothers, husbands, sons—and it made her want to believe that at least some of them really were alive in Tiranat. She didn't have any relatives amongst them, but those men were still like brothers to her.

But she couldn't let herself believe it yet. Not until she saw them with her own eyes.

She kept walking, jaw tight, and tried not to count how many steps were still ahead of her. At their stop two nights ago, near what used to be an inn, the guards had said the village was just a day's wagon ride from there. So two days on foot with a group this size. That meant they should have reached the village by now, since the sun was already sinking again.

That's when the guard on the leading wagon stood up, squinting ahead. A moment later, he looked back with a grin.

"We've arrived at Tiranat, everyone!" he shouted.

The whole group reacted at once, bodies straightening, heads turning, people trying to see past wagons and shoulders. Widel craned her neck, but with her short height, she couldn't see anything except a guard's head and the backs of people in front of her.

She pushed forward through the slow-moving crowd, aiming for the front of the caravan. By the time she reached there, there were just two men in front of her—Tesyb walking beside another guard. She expected to see the village in front of them, but she saw... nothing. Just forest.

"Huh?" The word slipped out under her breath before she could stop it. She frowned at the guard who had shouted. Why would he say they'd arrived, if there was nothing ahead? Her hand immediately went to the broken knife she kept with her at all times. Was something weird going on here? Was this some kind of trick?

She looked at Tesyb, expecting him to be tense, to be scanning the trees, to be doing something unusual. He wasn't. He just looked like a man who had finally made it home after a long journey.

Widel turned forward again and this time she noticed something. The forest ahead was thinning. The trees didn't crowd the path the same way. The undergrowth was also breaking up. Then a short distance ahead, the forest seemed to have ended abruptly.

She kept walking eagerly with the others, and soon they crossed the tree line. That's when she got her first glimpse of what was probably going to be her new home. A tall palisade wall stretched across the open ground, running from some distance on the left to far off on the right. Three watchtowers rose above it—tall and solid-looking, nothing like what their men had been expecting when they went to raid this place.

Oh, maybe that wagon guard had known about the village in advance because he'd stood up on the wagon and spotted the walls first. Or maybe he recognized the trees here. This was no trick. There really was a walled village in front of her.

However, even though the guards' behavior had been faultless, Widel still couldn't stop bleak thoughts from digging in. That's how life worked for people like her. You either stayed on your toes, or you ended up dead. Or worse. So if she and the others wanted to run, this was the moment. Once they went

through those tall walls, they would be at the mercy of the guards—and their baron, the so-called Savior of Tiranat. If all those promises were a lie, just for him to get new slaves for free, then the moment they stepped inside, they'd be helpless.

She had to decide right now.

Widel kept her eyes forward as the caravan trudged closer to the walls, forcing herself to look at details instead of her own fear. A wide trench ran parallel to the palisade, and she flinched noticing that sharp wooden stakes were planted in it. It looked... scary. The walls themselves were coated in clay for some reason—maybe to stop them from catching fire. That thought only made her stomach tighten. Was there someone who wanted to burn this village? And if someone did, was this place even safe for the kids and children in their group? Or even those who lived here already?

She shook her head hard, annoyed at herself. There she went again. Worrying, spiraling, searching for knives in every shadow. At the very least, she owed these people the benefit of doubt. Even if the guards were pretending, this was still the best anyone had treated them in a long, long time. They deserved—if not her trust—then at least a chance. And even if this did turn into another life of slavery for them—despite everything they'd promised—then with the amount of food they were getting every day, it would still be a far more comfortable kind of misery than the farms or the forest camp had ever been.

She decided she wouldn't run. Not yet anyway.

As they drew near the wide gates, she noticed two figures high up on the watchtower—an older man and a young woman peering down at them. The woman held a strange small bow in her hands. The older man watched the group for a moment, then his eyes went to the guards. He gave a nod toward Tesyb, then leaned over the railing and shouted, "Open up! It's Tesyb and our guards!"

The gates started to open at once, heavy wood shifting with a deep, steady creak, and the caravan began to move inside. Widel was near the front now, so she saw the inside first—and it wasn't what she expected.

Right past the gates, a small group of guards stood alert, positioned like they were ready for any kind of trouble—even though she thought there would be lazy and corrupt guards here as well. That was common in every village or town she had been so far. But there were no bribes given by the merchant to enter the gates here. It felt weird.

She was surprised when she gazed further. From what their group had known back when their men had gone to raid this place, she'd expected a series of half-burnt shacks, some damaged huts, and the baron's manor towering over it all. Instead, just a short distance in, there was a huge wooden building made of logs. For a moment she wondered if that was the baron's manor, but as the caravan creaked forward—on a wide, flat gravel road—she saw another building like it beyond the first. It couldn't be the manor, since there couldn't be two of them.

There was a stream of people entering and exiting the gates of these huge buildings, so it had to be housing of some kind. Was this where the villagers lived here? But where were the huts and shacks?

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Widel tried to look past the enormous buildings. There was a lot of open ground ahead of them on the right, while on the left, she saw a smaller palisade wall that had to be the manor. There were a few wooden houses visible in the distance too, but no huts. No damaged and half-burnt shacks. It was weird. Really weird.

Closer to them, on the right, she saw construction work underway. She was looking at the workers there, wondering what they were building, when Tesyb stopped walking and turned around to face the refugees.

"Everyone who came from the camp, stay here for now," he announced in a loud voice. "I'll be back soon to tell you where you're going to stay in Tiranat. Guards, stay here and help these people get water from a longhouse block. Trevalo, take the wagons to the manor. The baron will want them kept there again."

"A block of a... long house?" an old woman muttered, sounding completely lost.

The merchant nodded, and once the elderly climbed down from the seats, the wagons started rolling forward again, wheels creaking as they moved away.

The guards with them told the refugees they could sit nearby until water was brought. Once most of the group had settled down, Widel lowered herself onto the gravel road. It pressed into her palms and her legs, but she didn't care. With how tired she felt, any place to sit was good enough right now.

She watched the guards jog toward the huge buildings and noticed something else—all the villagers passing by gave those guards nods and small smiles, like they respected them. That couldn't happen if the guards treated people badly here.

The more she looked around, the more the village looked... nice. The people going in and out of the big building didn't look scared. They didn't look tense or under stress. Children were running around, and a group of kids were chasing each other in a game of tag, laughing as they dodged around adults. Everyone looked so... happy.

Even more importantly, they all looked well fed here. There were no thin and gaunt frames amongst the locals—quite unlike the people from the camp. This didn't seem like a village which treated its people badly. Nothing like Kruzil, or the farms where they worked near that disgusting slave village.

Trying to distract herself from her past memories, Widel glanced to the right again and noticed something else. The square foundation of the new construction underway there looked similar in size to the big blocks on the left. Were they building another one of these long—houses? Ahead of where this third block was taking shape, she saw people finishing the stone sides of what looked like a newly dug well.

She noticed other strange contraptions too. A man pushed a cart with just one wheel, steadying it with both hands like it was the most normal thing in the world. Nearby, a pair of horses were hauling a bizarre wagon—with no wagon bed at all—loaded with long pieces of wood, and it had a pair of enormous wheels that looked almost ridiculous in size compared to the rest of the wagons she knew.

Laborers were everywhere around the new block. Some carried long beams with help from others, moving in short careful steps. Some pulled on ropes together, grunting as they worked to make the logs stand straight in the foundation. As Widel watched, more workers started returning from wherever they'd been sent. A lot of them were coal miners—their hands and feet blackened with coaldust—and were coming back through the same gate Widel's group had entered from.

So the guards hadn't been lying when they said there was a lot of labor work available here. Real work. Not just a few miserable chores to keep people busy and distracted from their wretched lives as slaves.

Still, she wasn't sure she could do that kind of work—carrying beams, hauling rope. All her limbs were still working, but with her short frame, and poor diet nearly all her life, she simply didn't have the strength for it. And she had too much anger packed inside her anyway. Anger at the farm-lords who had owned them before they escaped, whipping them every chance they got. Anger at the nobles who

allowed it and even benefited from it. Anger at that bastard Zoricus who owned all those farmlands. If she was made a laborer here, she'd probably end up starting a fight with the first person who looked at her the wrong way.

Then she saw movement that made everything else vanish from her mind.

A small group of men came out of the farther longhouse and started jogging toward them. For a second, Widel didn't recognize them because of their healthier frames. But then she did. They were the missing men from their camp.

They were alive. They were really alive.

She noticed a few missing faces that weren't there, and the hole those absences left hit her hard, but perhaps that was the Goddess' punishment for attacking this miraculous village which cared for its people. However, the rest—brothers, husbands, sons—were running toward them on their own feet. The moment they reached the camp people, all emotions broke open. People cried. People laughed. Arms wrapped around shoulders. Hands gripped so tight it hurt. There were sobs and relief and voices calling names again and again.

Widel stood there, breathing too fast, watching it happen like she was afraid it might disappear if she blinked.

It took a while for her to calm herself. That was when she noticed Tesyb jogging back toward them, with another small group walking slowly behind him. For a moment, she caught herself smiling at the sight of the brawny guard—the man who had ensured everyone reached this village in one piece.

It made her wonder if she could be recruited as a guard too. They would certainly be paid higher than the common laborers, and looking at all the respect people gave them, it seemed like a good job to have.

She scoffed at herself. As if a slave like her would ever be trusted with that. If she even got a labor job, she should probably thank the goddess for it.

Soon, Tesyb reached them, and announced, "Both of the longhouse blocks are already full beyond capacity, so you can't stay there," he said. Then he pointed west. "But there's enough empty space beyond this new longhouse block. You'll have to camp there for now. With the palisade walls surrounding the whole village now, you all will be safe here from any beast or bandits in the night."

Widel scoffed under her breath. Of course—keep the new arrivals away from everyone else. It wasn't like they would be treated the same as the locals. Not really. But at least no one had said out loud that they were going to be slaves again, although it couldn't be long now until then, if it was even going to happen.

Tesyb kept speaking. "It's only for a short time though. I've been told this new longhouse block will be finished in a few weeks, and then you all will be allotted bunks inside. Don't worry. This block is being built two stories high—it'll have more than enough space for each of you to get your own bunk."

Widel frowned. A bunk? What did that even mean? Still, it sounded like they would eventually be living with everyone else in the village. At least that was good.

On their way here, she had heard the guards claiming again and again that there were no slaves in this village. She hadn't believed it. But after the way they'd been treated on the road, and after seeing most of their missing men alive—and free—she found herself wondering if it might actually be true.

While the brawny guard spoke, other guards returned with one of those weird one-wheeled carts. A barrel of water sat in it, sloshing as they pushed the cart across the gravel. They began handing out water to anyone who wanted it, passing wooden mugs, letting people drink until their mouths stopped feeling dry after conserving water for so long on the road.

A little later, Widel saw the group that had been walking behind Tesyb draw close—half a dozen guards wearing leather armor, and two men dressed better than the rest. One of the guards was huge though. She'd thought Tesyb was big, but this man towered over him like it was nothing.

One of the two men in good clothes was bald and looked quite old. The other looked young, maybe only a little older than Widel herself. His hair was a strange silver color, cut to medium length. And the way the guards formed around him made it clear who mattered here. Was that the baron of this village? Lord Kivamus?

He had to be.

As he approached, he muttered something to the huge guard. The big man immediately sent some guards towards the gates of the longhouse blocks. Those guards began calling out for people to gather for a new announcement. The other guards dragged a bench in front of the slowly growing crowd, and the baron climbed on it, looking regal in the light of the setting sun which hit his face in just the right way.

Being curious about what was going to happen, Widel felt her own feet drift that way without thinking. The crowd grew, locals mixing with the new arrivals who had followed behind her. She kept watching the baron, expecting cold eyes, a cruel mouth—the same look she'd seen on so many men of noble birth who thought they owned the world.

Instead, she saw villagers smiling at him. Nodding. Bowing. Like they respected him. Not the forced kind either. It looked real.

When there were enough people gathered, the baron raised his hand, and the noise died down.

Chapter 385 Widel - III

"I know you all are tired," the baron began. "You've been working all day, and you want to eat and rest, so I won't take too long. But I have two big announcements for you all."

The crowd went even quieter, like everyone had decided to hold their breath at the same time. Widel found herself hanging on his each spoken word too, wondering what the announcement was going to be. She kept staring at the baron, still thrown by the fact that he had come to make an announcement himself instead of sending someone else while he stayed in his luxurious manor like other nobles.

"Firstly," Lord Kivamus continued, "the time you have all been eagerly waiting for for weeks has arrived. From tomorrow, everyone in the village will get three meals a day."

For a heartbeat, it didn't even feel real. Then the whole crowd exploded into cheering and clapping, loud enough that Widel felt it in her bones. The baron raised a hand, and the noise slowly dropped again.

"Duvas will tell you the details later, of how it will be managed with nearly all the people living in the longhouse blocks now," Lord Kivamus said. "Of course, everyone was already getting three meals till

early spring, but you all know how we had to start saving on food after that raid on the village. But finally, Tiranat has overcome it."

The crowd gave another loud applause before he could continue. "It won't be easy to manage for now, since you know how high the food prices in Cinran are these days, but once the first harvest of wheat comes in late autumn, it will become much easier. This time my target is to continue this scheme for a long time. Forever, if we can manage it."

The cheering came back even louder. Men, women, children, even the elderly—everyone was shouting, and it didn't sound forced. Widel stared at them, feeling stunned. The baron wasn't just tolerated here. He was loved. She had never seen anything like it.

When the noise settled again, the baron smiled and went on. "That was the first announcement. Now the second one," he said, and his grin widened, "which you all will like even more."

People leaned in without even realizing it. Widel felt it happen around her—the whole crowd quietening down in anticipation.

"Depending on how a plan of mine goes," Lord Kivamus said, "after around 2 to 3 weeks, and at most a month, you all will be paid directly in coins instead of in kind. That's a promise."

This time the crowd didn't just cheer. It roared.

"All hail Lord Kivamus!" someone shouted, and the words rolled through the people like a wave, people repeating the chant as loud as they could.

"Long live Lord Kivamus!" someone else yelled, and that got taken up too, repeated again and again until it felt like the ground was shaking with the sound.

The chanting went on and on. Even the guards beside the baron raised their fists with the crowd, yelling in support.

Widel found herself cheering with them before she even thought about it, just like the other new arrivals were clapping. Part of her was still stuck on the idea that the villagers weren't being paid in coins until now, but the enthusiasm and the happiness of the crowd was infectious. She realized she was smiling so hard her face hurt.

She decided that she loved this village already!

The baron let them have their moment. Finally, he lifted his hand again, and the shouting slowly died down.

"Again, Duvas will let you know more details about it in the coming weeks," Lord Kivamus said, "but I'll do my best to make sure we don't have to return to a barter system ever again."

Then his arm came up, and he pointed directly at her. Widel flinched on instinct, her stomach tightening—but it took her a moment to realize he wasn't pointing at her alone. He was pointing at the new arrivals as a group.

"Finally," the baron said, "we have 28 new arrivals today who will be living in Tiranat from now." He smiled. "I welcome you to my village. You all will get warm stew, enough fresh bread, and some roasted meat in an hour or so. Just be patient until then. If any of you are still sick or injured, let one of the guards know, and they will arrange to provide more medicine to those who need it. You don't have to worry about the cost of that food or medicine. It is on me. For the next few days, your only task is to rest properly and get some good food in your stomachs."

Once Widel got over the incredible fact that they would be getting food for free—at least for a few days—her mind jumped straight to that medicine. She had seen what it did. It had healed the pain from a broken arm and a big gash in the leg of two of their people like it was nothing. It had to have cost fortunes, but the baron was offering more of it, just for asking. For no price. No hidden costs. It felt like she was in a dream now.

The light of the setting sun gave Lord Kivamus' face a special kind of warmth as he looked toward the rest of the villagers. "Make sure they feel welcome and at home. They have gone through a lot living as slaves in the past, so you all will have to help them integrate in the village, just like you have done for the other people who used to be slaves in the past."

Used to be slaves.

Widel caught on that phrase and held it tight, like she was afraid it would slip away. Used to be meant they weren't slaves now. Did that mean her group wouldn't be slaves here either?

It felt impossible. But when she looked around and saw the way people watched the baron—smiling, nodding, proud—she couldn't make herself believe he was lying. Not here. Not like this.

That's when one of the brash teenage boys who had come with them, looked at the lord of this village, and asked loudly, "Is that really true, milord? We aren't slaves anymore?"

Widel was going to scold that idiot for opening his mouth in front of the baron without taking permission, but she was surprised to see that he didn't look angry at all.

Lord Kivamus looked at the new arrivals and gave them a warm smile. "Yes. I can officially confirm that none of you are going to be slaves in Tiranat, since keeping slaves is fully outlawed in my village. That is something that is never going to change under my rule. That means whether you used to be a slave in the past or not is irrelevant now. Now that you are here, there is a new and happy life waiting ahead of you if you want."

The baron pointed at the other villagers. "Many of these people used to be slaves of other nobles, farm-owners or merchants in the past in other places, but they all live as free people now, from the moment they arrived in Tiranat. You all are still new here, so I know this won't be easy to believe or accept, but it is the simple truth about life in this village. After you have eaten, you can go and talk to other people who used to be slaves. They'll tell you about their own stories, and will make it easier for you all to integrate in this village. So yes, you all are free people now."

He spread his hands wide with a grin. "Welcome to Tiranat!"

It only took a few moments before some of the older women beside her started to cry openly. Mothers pulled their children close in happiness, burying faces into hair and small shoulders. Widel saw tears on cheeks all around her.

The baron looked at their group again, and gave them another smile. Then after giving them a quick wave, he stepped down from the bench, turned around, and began walking away with the older man, the guards moving with him.

Widel stayed rooted in place, feeling glad she and the other slaves—former slaves—had arrived here today. If they had come even one day later, they would have missed this. She felt so overwhelmed by everything—relief, hunger, exhaustion, disbelief, hope—that it made her lightheaded.

When she wiped her face, her fingers came away wet. She stared at them for a moment in surprise, then looked up at the darkening sky. She whispered thanks to the goddess again and again. As long as she could remember, her tears had always come from pain or fear. This was the first time she could remember crying because she was happy.

She had never thought such a thing would be possible in this life, but it seemed that just like the guards had claimed, Tiranat really was a miraculous place...

~ Kivamus ~

Kivamus took one last look at the newest refugees and stepped down from the bench.

"Duvas, let's return," he said. "Hudan, call Tesyb."

Hudan gave a loud holler, and Kivamus turned away before any of the refugees could read his face too closely. He clenched his fists as he waited. The refugees standing by the road looked thin and gaunt in a way that made him want to grind his teeth. With how malnourished they were, it was incredible that they had remained alive for this long living in the forests.

Tesyb joined them a moment later, and the group started moving back toward the manor.

"You called for me, milord?" Tesyb asked.

"What do you know about these people?" Kivamus said. "This is the first time we've had a group this large arrive in Tiranat."

Chapter 386 Krukzil

Tesyb pursed his lips. "They're slaves, milord. Escaped slaves. They ran away from the farms last winter. Their original group was over 50 people, since they'd been planning the escape for months, and they'd joined up with slaves from other nearby farms when they fled. A few children and some elderly didn't survive the harsh escape journey, which took weeks until they found a good clearing and made a camp. Some more of them were lost in winter... I can't even imagine how even the rest of them survived the freezing winter with those windy cones made of branches which they called homes. During the chase, they'd also lost most of the provisions they'd stolen from their owners, and they barely got anything to eat in the forest."

Kivamus clenched his fists at the adversity they had faced.

"That's why they got so desperate," Tesyb continued, "that their men raided us a few weeks ago. They'd heard rumors before they escaped that Tiranat was an easy place to loot. Some men from their group had also stayed behind when they escaped, to distract the slave owners' guards who chased them, hoping to join the rest of 'em later. Just one made it back. The rest..." He grimaced. "They were probably killed. Or worse. The penalty for caught slaves is often a lot of whipping and then amputation to set an example for others."

"Damn these bastards," Hudan growled. "Cutting the hands of commoners after tying them up. Let them take on someone like me in single combat if they dare!"

"It gets worse," Tesyb added, his voice turning flat. "I learned from them that the life of a disabled slave is very short and miserable where they came from. Knowing that they are not going to be useful for manual labor anymore, their owners often take them to Krukzil and pit the disabled or amputated slaves in a fight to the death against each other. The owners claim the one who dies got what he deserved for escaping, and the one who survives earns the right to live a little longer. Until the next fight anyway."

"Curse those bastards!" Duvas spat.

Kivamus glanced at him, surprised. He had seen Duvas irritated before, but this was the first time he'd heard him swearing out loud. He tried to hold back his anger as they continued walking south towards the manor. The villagers didn't need to see him lashing out in the public. "Anything else of note?"

Tesyb nodded. "More than a dozen of their men had attacked our village that time, and we had killed some and captured the rest. That meant there were only a few young men left at the camp to protect everyone from bandits or beasts. No bandit group found them, thankfully, but they were attacked by a boar a few days ago. A teen boy barely survived. Feroy had to use a lot of the losuivil powder he brought just to keep him alive."

"Feroy?" Kivamus repeated with surprise. "How was he there?"

Tesyb's expression eased slightly. "Oh, luckily he and Hyola met us at the second resting point on the way to Cinran, the day before I was going to the camp. So he came along with us and used the powdered medicine to help anyone who was injured or sick. He still had to save most of it because he had to continue your... mission."

"We should've given him more powder," Duvas said with a distraught face. "You told me to, but I was only thinking about the cost!"

"Don't worry," Kivamus said. "He'll be back in a week with more information about what we need to do to bring more slaves here. We can give him more medicine next time. That reminds me, Duvas, send someone back to the new arrivals with more medicine once we reach the manor. That injured boy and some others might need more of it."

After the majordomo nodded, he looked at Hudan. "I think it was a mistake that we killed the men who attacked us. They were just desperate slaves who only wanted to feed their families..."

Hudan let out a breath. "What other option did we have at the time? That night, everyone thought it was Torhan's group attacking us. We did capture the rest alive—those who had surrendered, but there was no safe way to protect any people who attacked our gates. Crossbow bolts rarely leave a person alive, unless he's a giant like Nokozał was."

"I know," Kivamus said quietly. He couldn't exactly apparate tasers into this world to make that easier. "Still, I think we should try harder to take people alive when we can, even if they're attacking us—unless it's clear that it's a bandit group. Otherwise, it could be slaves like these people, pushed into it by hunger. Killing them is not the best solution for anyone."

"Well, I agree, but such a thing is not likely to happen again," Hudan said. "Those old rumors—about Tiranat being an easy target that Torhan could hit without trouble—would already be dying. Soon the latest rumor will be that you don't touch Tiranat if you value your life and want to keep breathing. And even if some desperate slaves come again to loot us, they'll likely stop when they see our watchtowers and walls. It's nothing like Cinran's stone walls, but it's surely enough to make most of them reconsider."

"Let's hope so..." Kivamus said. He looked back at Tesyb. "Do you know which farm these people escaped from?"

"No single place," Tesyb said, "but most of them worked on different farms near Krukzil. They slowly found other like-minded slaves and planned the escape together."

"Krukzil..." Kivamus repeated, thinking where he had heard it. The name felt familiar in a way that irritated him. "Did the slaves tell much about it?"

"Not really," Tesyb said, "but they often referred to it as the slave-village, since nearly all the people living in Krukzil are slaves of someone."

Kivamus frowned, trying hard to remember where he had seen it. "Where have I heard that name?"

"I think you must have seen it on the map Pydaso brought," Duvas said. "It's located northwest of Cinran. It's the barony ruled by Zoricus."

"Of course, it's Zoricus' village!" Kivamus spat. "How is it that anything horrible or inhuman happening in this region of Reslinor is linked to that bastard Zoricus in one way or another?"

"He's just too powerful..." Duvas spoke in a low voice. "He's easily richer than the Count, and has business interests everywhere in this region. That means an ongoing trade in slaves is only to be expected from him."

"It's not like he's just trading in slaves..." Kivamus said with anger. "He's amputating perfectly fine men and women just because they wanted to be free from his tyranny. The farm owners in his lands are having pit fights between humans! These people have lost any humanity left in them, if they ever even had any..."

"It's not that uncommon, milord," Duvas said. "Having pit fights between humans is not something which would ever be officially allowed, but such things happen a lot in the underground, away from the eyes of the authorities. But if the authorities are the ones organizing it..."

"What wrong did these people do, huh?" Kivamus stopped walking as they reached near the gates of the manor. "Just because they were born in the lands of a noble whose greed is worse than a demon, they are cursed to have a life not worth living. How do these people even find the motivation to get up every morning, just to look forward to another day of such a horrible existence... I can't even imagine..."

"They don't..." Tesyb mumbled. "Not always. I found that some of the family members of these refugees had killed themselves in shame or after losing all hope, which was when the others made up their mind that they couldn't continue to live there. They decided it was better to die while escaping, instead of living that grim existence."

For a moment, Kivamus thought this would be the perfect time to gather all his guards and burn that village to the ground. It was a stain on humanity. But he just didn't have the power to try such a thing against the most powerful baron in this region. Not yet, anyway. But there would come a day for his reckoning...

He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths to calm himself. Once he was sure he wasn't going to start cursing everyone around him, he looked at Duvas and the others. "This can't continue. I won't allow it to. Until now, we've only been passively enticing already escaped slaves to Tiranat just to get more workers for the village. But every time I hear more about their lives, I find out just how horrible their situation is. We can't allow this to continue... I think it's time to take a more active role in this from now on."

Hudan frowned. "What do you even mean by that? We barely have the strength to resist a raid from a large bandit group. We can't free slaves from a whole village even if we wanted to."

Kivamus looked around, noticing many people coming and going through the manor gates and walking nearby. "This isn't the place for such a discussion. Let's move to the manor hall. Tesyb, there is a separate but related plan which I, Hudan, and Feroy have been working on for a few weeks. That's an immediate plan"—he lowered his voice, adding—"and it relates to Torhan and his slaves. We need to get it done before Trevalo's trip to Ulriga is over, since we'll have a lot more guards available until then. After that we'll have to continue providing caravan escorts to him so it wouldn't be feasible. But we will talk more about it tomorrow when you have rested. Right now, you look dead on your feet after walking

for days. So, go and get something to eat and get some rest. The same goes for the other guards who came with you. You all did good to give up your wagon seats to the older slaves."

Tesyb smiled and gave a nod, before he took a loud yawn.

Kivamus chuckled. "The rest of you, follow me."

Chapter 387 Plans - I

Once everyone was sitting inside the hall, Kivamus looked at the two people in front of him. Duvas seemed distraught after hearing the plight of the slaves, but he had known for decades that such a thing was happening. Still, he looked nervous, perhaps expecting him to take a rash step. Hudan was still clenching and unclenching his fists in anger, his muscles bulging through his patched-up tunic's biceps.

He looked at the majordomo. "How many slaves do you think there are in this region?"

"Uh... what?" Duvas looked surprised. "How am I supposed to answer that? I don't even have any idea how many people live in this region in total... Although I'd still say there are a lot of slaves. I remember that when I lived in the north of the kingdom, slaves were less common there. Some of the nobles even followed a similar policy to yours, and didn't keep any slaves themselves on principle, but nobody wanted to be noticed for it, so none of them outlawed slavery outright in their domain like you. In the south of the kingdom, slavery is far more common. Basically, anyone who can afford a slave keeps one, or more."

"Still, what percentage of people in southern Reslinor would you say are slaves?"

Duvas thought for a while. "I would really, really be extrapolating here... You still want me to guess?"

Kivamus nodded. In this world, rumors and past experiences of people were the best and most reliable source of information, as much of an oxymoron as it was. "Go on."

Duvas continued. "The situation differs vastly depending on what kind of a place it is. If we take the example of a big city like Ulriga, I'd say most people living there are free men, since a city is obviously richer than the rural areas. The people living in cities are usually merchants or craftsmen, and rarely need to sell themselves or their family members into slavery, although most of them are still not rich enough to own a slave. But the wealthier people—especially the nobles—certainly keep slaves there,

usually as household workers. Still, the percentage of people who are slaves in a city like that would be very small because of its sheer size."

He scratched his short white beard. "In south Reslinor, I'd say... maybe 5% to 10% of residents in big cities are slaves? That's my best guess anyway. If it's a town like Cinran, the average resident there would be poorer than those in Ulriga. So in towns, I would say maybe 10% to 15% are slaves. Perhaps. In villages like Tiranat and Kirnos, there may even be a quarter of the population who are slaves, whether belonging to a merchant or a rich landowner or a noble. Lastly, in the countryside, like in farmhouses, where a landowner and his family stays, with a lot of people tending to fields, the percentage of slaves may be much higher. Perhaps more than a quarter, and maybe even approaching a third of the population. I'm really guessing wildly here, mind you. But that's my best estimate."

"That's OK," Kivamus said. "It still gives me a general idea." He tried to estimate the population of this kingdom. He used his memories from the past years, to think of a comparable population density based on a relevant time period from Earth. Based on the scale of the map he had seen in the duke's palace in Ulriga in the past, and the size of this whole kingdom, he estimated that the population of this kingdom would be above 15 million on the lower end, and up to 25 million on the higher end. It was still a very, very vague guess, but it was the best he had to go on.

He began, "I am also just estimating here, but I guess that in southern Reslinor, which occupies somewhere around a quarter to a third of the area of this kingdom—which is basically the whole Duchy of Ulriga—the total population should be around 6 to 8 million. Considering that there is just one big city and barely half a dozen big towns in this region, most of the population lives in and around villages, or in the farmhouses and farmlands. Then based on what Duvas said, it means there might be more than one million slaves in this region, at the very minimum. Likely more."

"One million...?" Hudan repeated. "I don't even know how to count till such a number..." He squinted into the distance, probably trying to visualize it. "How big a million is, anyway?"

Kivamus looked at the captain. "Cinran has around 3,000 people, while Ulriga has around 50,000, including those living outside its walls, so it's nearly 20 times more than Cinran. A million people is 20 times that of Ulriga's population."

"20 times Ulriga...?" Hudan repeated with incredulity. "That would be what, like, a thousand times our village's population?"

"Double of that, actually," Duvas muttered. He glanced at Kivamus. "I really can't say how populous this kingdom is, but if your estimate of population is even remotely right, then there should probably be at least that many slaves. Perhaps even more. But why did you ask this?"

Kivamus gave a deep exhale. The number was certainly mind-boggling, to say the least. "Because that's how many people we can bring to our village. Because that is how many people we need to liberate. The fact that it will also help us get more workers for all the budding industries here is only a side effect, of course."

"A million people...?" Duvas raised his eyebrows. "Like Lond... like that city you mentioned."

Kivamus nodded, ignoring the curious look from the captain.

"But it is... it is insane to even think that we could bring one million people here!" Duvas exclaimed. "We can barely feed the 500 people already living here! Where would so many people ever live? It's much, much larger than any army I could think of during the previous war. It's... it's such a stupidly large number that I can't even imagine that many people living in one place!"

Kivamus snorted. "Don't worry, it's not like I'm going to make an announcement for every slave to start marching for Tiranat. But that number just means we have a lot, a lot of possible refugees who can come here. It's not going to happen in a day, or even in a year. But we have to continue bringing more people here. Actively. It's the least we can do for them."

"I agree with that sentiment, at least..." Duvas exhaled. "But what do you mean by taking a more active role?"

"It's similar to what we've been doing, although at a much larger scale," Kivamus continued. "Feroy has already spread rumors near Kirnos about good opportunities for slaves here, and by now we are getting nearly a dozen new refugees from the west every fortnight. Two dozen every month. But that number is still very small for us to even increase our output of coal mining in time for Trevalo to start trading on the Uliga route. So we have to make more efforts to get more people here. Since the slaves are being treated in an excruciatingly horrible way everywhere in this region, it means we just need to spread the word in the right ears about Tiranat having a better life for them, while also continuing to develop Tiranat so we can actually fulfill those promises. That will lay the foundation of this."

"Then what?" Hudan asked. "It's not like we can make an announcement in the market square of every village and town. It would unite all those nobles against us."

"Obviously." Kivamus grinned. "That's why I said we need to liberate those slaves. It means bringing them here secretly. Kirnos isn't that big, and slowly, the news will already reach most of the slaves living there. So the north is where we need to focus in the future. Feroy and Hyola have started doing it, but that's just one scouting group. We need to start sending more such groups out to the north. After we have recruited more guards in a few weeks, we will send another such scouting group to the north, and many, many more in the future."

He continued, "Once we can make more crossbows with the lathe under construction, it will become easier for us to arm them properly. And later, we will change the size of each group to three or even four people, which will make it plausible that they are really just hunters roaming around, looking for good wolves and bears to hunt and bring their pelts and meat to the markets. This will let them stay out of the notice of any authorities, and under the pretense of making that trade, they will continue spreading word about Tiranat being a safe refuge for slaves."

"This is feasible enough," Hudan said. "But we are already doing something like it, aren't we?"

"That is just the first step," Kivamus said. "But you know that even if a slave hears that this village is a good place to live, it's not easy to escape from their slave owners and their guards, and to travel safely for days to Tiranat—especially through those forests—while running away from guards and bounty hunters. The latest group of refugees had lost many family members during their escape. So, once the news starts spreading around in a few months, and people have started to seriously consider it, we will take a more active role. By then we'll also have enough guards to do it. Then we will start sending wagons out to any place from where scouts have told us that the slaves want to escape, in the guise of trading for something with that place. But when returning, our guards will liberate the slaves."

He continued, "They will secretly hand over some small weapons to the slaves to deal with any guards of their current owners and will tell them to reach the forest with their families and wait for the guards there. At the same time, our guards will distract the local watchmen by posing as a bandit group attacking them from the other side. During the time the local baron or farm owner is thinking of how to protect their lands, the slaves will escape, and our guards posing as bandits will pull back, letting the owners believe that their village was just too strong for the bandits to raid."

"Our guards posing as bandits?" Duvas frowned. "I'm not sure if I like the idea."

Hudan scratched his chin, thinking about the idea.

Kivamus grinned. "It will be like just another training exercise for the guards. And they don't actually have to kill anyone, other than any local guards who pursue them." He shrugged. "I consider them fair game for enslaving these innocent people and kids and making them fight as animals. But I'm not doing it just to take revenge against them. There is a far more important reason for this. Doing this will prevent us from getting highlighted as the place where the slaves are going. This way, other nobles will likely think that the slaves are just trying to escape to the forests while the guards are distracted with a bandit raid, which is quite common and to be expected. The nobles will also think that, as usual, the slaves can't run far away, and will be confident of getting them back within a few days to punish them. But in the night, our guards will meet up with the slaves in the forest, where our wagons will already be waiting, and will bring them to Tiranat. We can also specialize the tasks, like keeping one expert scout team to act as bandits, while another transportation team will bring the slaves from the forest to here. But those details can be worked out later when we start doing this in a few months. Perhaps in late summer to autumn months so that we have had more time to consolidate Tiranat's strength."

Duvas gave a slow nod. "I can understand your reasons now... I guess it could work, but I don't think it's going to be easy."

Hudan gave a grin, looking at Kivamus. "I still believe it's a good idea. With the way you are changing this village and its policies, we are going to get into conflict with other nobles at one point or another. Don't worry, I am fully with you in everything. But the more we can increase our strength before that happens, the easier it will be to deal with them. This will also give more practical experience to our guards, which the newer recruits are sorely lacking in."

"Exactly," Kivamus agreed. "Southern Reslinor is huge, so we will start doing it with a single team of scouts in the beginning, and will increase the scale of our operation in the future as the village keeps growing. We are in no position to do it at a large scale right now, but we still need to start laying the foundation for this. So we will start with the farms near the forest at first, then expand to further places later. This way we can continue liberating slaves and give them a better life here, and in return we will get a lot more workers. Another good thing is that unlike any free people who immigrate here, these slaves will have a lot of reason to support us against their previous owners. Once they have tasted freedom here, they will never want to get back to their previous lives. So if it comes to a battle between us and another village when that baron finds out we have stolen their slaves, these newly freed people will support us all the way. We can even recruit the best of them as guards."

"We'll have to do that anyway," Hudan said. "It won't be long before we run out of the original villagers of Tiranat to recruit guards from. Not all of them want that kind of risky work. In the future, these guards can form the officer grade of our forces, which you explained to me in the past, while the new

recruits from the slaves will be the enlisted men, or privates. I already like those terms. Makes me feel like I am a knight or something, commanding so many people!"

"That you are," Kivamus grinned, "even if not in name."

Duvas raised his bushy white eyebrows. "Uh... Officers...? Privates...? I can't say I know much about those terms, but it sounds like you are trying to raise an army here."

Kivamus chuckled. "Not yet, but you're not wrong. By now we have a good idea of what's happening in our neighbourhood, so we'll need that strength. Within six months or so, we need to be able to defend ourselves from any other barons attacking us, and within a year we need to be able to deal with any punitive raid from Cinran even when they bring knights. At some point, Zoricus will surely find an excuse to make the Count attack us, so we need to be ready by then." He pointed to the east. "But you both know that our real enemies are outside."

His expression became serious. "Binpaaz has finally started probing the defenses of Reslinor after two decades of peace. It's still nothing serious right now, but nobody knows when the rulers of Binpaaz will decide that Reslinor is ripe for another invasion, or make them want to capture the iron-rich Tolasi hills once again, which means a certainty of another war. In the south, Giralica seems content to live as a mercantile nation, earning as much gold as they can. But from what Feroy told us, Velonox's mercenary group is not particularly big among Giralica's other groups, but as of today, we have no possible hope of defeating even them in a straight battle. So what will happen if Giralica hears about our village in the future, and decides that it wants Tiranat for itself? It will become far more likely if Binpaaz invades from the east, and Cinran and Fort Aragosa become busy in dealing with them. We probably couldn't expect any help from them anyway, but if—or rather, when—Binpaaz invades, Reslinor's forces will have a genuine reason to focus on defending the east instead of providing help to us in case Giralica sends a few companies of mercenaries to force us to bend our knees to them."

Hudan nodded. "Two decades of peace is already longer than it usually lasts. But I don't know if Giralica would ever care to bother with a small village like ours. As a relatively rich kingdom, their profits would be far, far more than what we earn here."

Duvas shook his head. "No, I understand Lord Kivamus' reasoning now. Other countries aren't going to be interested in Tiranat just for its few hundred workers or its coal mines. But once they start hearing about the unique products being made here, that will make them start salivating to capture it for themselves."

He grinned at Kivamus. "I have no doubt you are going to make a lot more interesting things in the future, but what we already have is enough by itself to make them consider something like that. We can now produce paper which is as good as a good quality paper from the guilds of Plumron, even if it's still not as good as their best quality paper or at that scale. However, what will really tilt the balance is the Acelos tablets we are making. Any country worth its salt will immediately want the secrets of it so they can stock up on the tablets in case of a war, and to prevent their enemies from getting the same. So far, the rulers of Giralica probably have no idea that a village called Tiranat even exists on the map. But the mercenaries who will come at the end of summer will see the changes. It won't be enough to make them report to their superiors, but it will certainly make them curious that there is something different here."

"But how would they ever know that we are the ones making the tablets and the paper?" Hudan asked. "We will never let the mercenary representatives get close to any such area."

"They don't have to see it themselves that we are making it here," Kivamus replied with a grimace. "Remember that Pydaso is selling the tablets in Ulriga, which is a big port city. Some sea merchant will surely buy it and take it to other places in the world, hoping to get a good profit, because the medicine is good enough to safely last for that long. That means the ruling class in Binpaaz and Giralica will be amongst the first to know that there is some revolutionary medicine being made in Reslinor. They won't connect it to us immediately, but if that Velonox is smart, he will probably connect the dots and realize that we are the origin after noticing so many unusual things here. Perhaps not this summer, but surely in the next summer when they come here to ask for their tributes again. But by then, my plan is to grow strong enough to send them packing without paying them even a copper coin. But either way, the point is that as our village grows, and as our products reach new markets, stronger and stronger enemies will start noticing us. That means we have to continue growing our strength, particularly in defensive measures. That's why I know that we need to increase the size of our village, and fast."

Duvas nodded. "You are right in all that, as much as it scares me to think that Binpaaz and Giralica might start noticing us in the future. Or... that empire. But I know you are not going to change your path, so the best we can do is to make sure our village remains safe in the future."

"We just have to do our best," Kivamus said. That's when the temple bell rang, sounding out eight times. "Well, it's getting late today. Let's end this meeting now. Duvas, we have to meet with Trevalo tomorrow morning and make the purchase for everything he has brought, and you have to tally up the total amount we owe him. Hudan, we will meet again around noon tomorrow along with Tesyb and Kerel, so we can make a proper plan for that other thing."

"What other thing?" Duvas asked curiously. "Wait, is that what you hinted Tesyb about? Something to do with Torhan and his slaves?"

Kivamus nodded. "It is. We were not able to kill that bastard in the previous raid, which is why he might be ready to take another try at revenge in a couple of months. That's exactly the time when we expect mercenaries. We cannot possibly deal with two such threats at the same time. So we have to neutralize the smaller threat, or at least make it less dangerous while we can." Duvas still looked confused, so he added, "Don't worry. We will talk in more detail tomorrow."

And with that, the meeting ended.

Chapter 389 Favors

It was the next morning, and Kivamus was sitting in the manor hall while Trevalo had been negotiating the prices with Duvas. Hudan was outside, taking a visit to the defensive trenches outside the walls, to make sure they were being built properly. Tesyb and another guard were standing nearby in the corner of the manor hall.

Soon, Trevalo looked up. "I think we can make a deal at this rate."

"Great," Duvas said, before he looked at Kivamus. "We have finalized the prices, milord."

"How much is it?" Kivamus asked, already dreading the answer.

Duvas glanced at the small ledger in front of him. "We already owed him 348 gold before this visit, and everything he has brought today adds up to another 332 gold coins, at a rate of five gold and eight silvers per sack of wheat."

"That's nearly 6 gold per sack!" Kivamus exclaimed. "It's hard to imagine that wheat was being sold for less than 4 gold per sack just two years ago. How many sacks of wheat is that total for?"

"He has brought 51 sacks of wheat," Duvas answered, "as well as 9 sacks of vegetables, including a lot of potato to use as seeds. Although he isn't buying any coal this time for some reason."

"It still sounds like too high a price," Kivamus sighed.

Trevalo shrugged. "I can't help it, milord. Last time I had sold you wheat for five gold and six silvers per sack, but this time I was buying such a big quantity in a hurry, and no merchant was even willing to sell me that much unless I paid even higher. I had to leverage all my contacts for this, but at least I was able to fill all my wagons with foodstuff."

"I guess there was no other way," Kivamus replied. "So that's a total of 680 gold we owe you, right?"

Trevalo nodded. "It is, and unless you came into a lot of money suddenly, I know you can't pay it. But that's fine. I know you will be able to more than make up for it once the new trading route starts. Although this is the last credit I am extending you, since I am also out of my savings now. Still, you don't have to worry about paying any interest on it, as a favor to our continuous trading relationship."

"Thank you for that," Kivamus said with a small smile. "So you're leaving for Ulriga tomorrow?"

"It's still morning," Trevalo said, "and if I hurry, I can make it to the first stop at Helga's inn before it gets dark, since the days are getting longer now. So I'll leave within the hour."

"What do you mean within the hour?" Kivamus frowned. "There is no way we can empty all your wagons and load them with coal so fast! Wait, you aren't even buying coal this time. Still, if you had told us about this yesterday, I would have put servants to finish the task overnight, but it's really not possible right now. Besides, I don't think you can reach Helga's Inn even if you leave within the hour."

Trevalo grinned. "Don't worry, I know it's not possible to reach the former inn with a slow-moving caravan, but I can easily ride there on a horse. I'm meeting with a few sailboat captains in Cinran, then after I've made a deal, I'll take that boat from there to Ulriga. So I won't be able to use my wagons until I return back in, say, three to four weeks. I will also have to pay some other merchant to keep my wagons safe in a warehouse in Cinran until I return, which will cost me precious coin. So I've decided that I'll just ride back to Cinran on a horse, with two of my drivers serving as protection on their own horses. I don't need any of your guards this time, since I don't want to attract attention in Ulriga by taking a big group. So I am entrusting all my wagons and the remaining four of my drivers to you until I return. That's fine with ya?"

Kivamus glanced at the majordomo. Even if it was temporary, getting six extra wagons in the village would help them out a lot. He looked back at the young merchant. "It's not a problem at all, Trevalo!"

"Great!" The merchant smiled. "In return for feeding and housing my drivers, you can use the wagons as you see fit. Just make sure they don't break or something. My men are trustworthy, and I've known them for years, so you don't have to worry about anything with them."

Kivamus grinned. "Don't worry, we will take care of housing and feeding your drivers. But is three weeks enough? Even on a horse, it will take you around three days, including today, to reach Cinran. Another day or two to find a good sailboat captain and lease his sailboat, then a two-week round-trip journey, as well as another few days in Uriga to make a deal to sell coal and buy wheat there. Then three more days to ride back here from Cinran. Hmm... I guess a four week timeline will work better. Just make sure to let the Urigan merchant know that it will take us time to start producing enough coal. That means our sales will be lower in the initial months, and will increase slowly in the coming months."

"Of course," Trevalo replied. "I know it's not possible to double your coal output overnight. So do you want me to rent extra wagons when I am returning from Cinran? I have 6 wagons of my own, but we had planned to transport 10 wagon-loads of coal to Uriga, along with three more to Cinran, every week."

Kivamus thought about it for a moment. "I think your 6 wagons will be enough in the beginning. So instead of renting all those wagons immediately, you can just rent an extra wagon whenever we need it, as our coal production increases. You will be traveling to Cinran every week anyway."

"That makes sense," Trevalo said as he stood up. "Well, I'll just go have something to eat at the village alehouse, then we will depart. I do have to say, after finally removing all those burned huts and shacks, the village looks very empty, but still better. I also saw the moats and some construction in the north when I was coming yesterday."

"Oh, that's the third longhouse block we're building," Kivamus explained. "It will be two stories this time. It should be completed by the time you return, so you can see it then."

Trevalo smiled. "I can't wait for it." Then he gave a short bow and took his leave.

Kivamus looked at Duvas with a grin. "Six more wagons, huh?"

Duvas smiled back. "I'll put them to work right after we remove the sacks. It will allow us to transport more coal from the mines, and more construction material back from the sawmill. With the help of these wagons, I think the construction of the new block will speed up by a few days."

"Perfect!" Kivamus said. "We've already made the announcement for three meals a day from today. So make sure to distribute the required amount of grain to the longhouse blocks."

"I've already made the arrangements," the majordomo replied. "I will tell Madam Nerida that she can use more maids and even some village workers, if needed, to plant the new potatoes we got today in the vegetable fields in the south of the village. Are you sure you don't want to use the first crop immediately?"

Kivamus nodded. "It will take 3 to 4 months for them to mature, but I think we won't have any real shortage of food at the time, assuming all goes well with the Ulrigan trading route. This way, we will also be harvesting a new potato crop which will be at least five times more than the potatoes we plant. So we will replant them again after that in new expanded fields outside the village walls, since there would be a lot more forest cleared by then. The wheat harvest should get ready while the second crop of potatoes is maturing, so we won't have any shortage of food during that time either. And the second potato crop will mature at the end of winter, giving us at least another five times of what we planted, and likely even more. That's right when we will need all the calories we can get. By then, our population will be even higher, so that crop will help us a lot. We will keep the best ones of that winter potato as seeds for the next round of sowing, because the cold, hard winter will kill any pests. Then we will replant it in early spring along with the next season's crop of wheat."

"Hmm..." Duvas muttered. "So it will be two crops in quick succession for this year, but then two proper crops of summer and winter potatoes from next year, giving a couple of fallow months in between. I guess this will work better."

Kivamus nodded. "We will also rotate the fields from next year—planting potatoes in a new area, then sowing wheat where we will plant potatoes in the winter, planting liwabeans where we have planted wheat right now, and leaving another quarter of the fields empty. Anyway, Pinoto is an experienced farmer. He will take care of the details. But from next year we should be able to move onto four-field crop rotation. It is going to be very important for the village in the long run."

Duvas stood up. "Well, I should go and take care of sending the wagons where they are needed."

"Go on," Kivamus said. "I've told Hudan, Tesyb, and Kerel to come here around noon so we can talk about that revenge raid. Be on time."

Chapter 390 Saboteurs

Kivamus was standing on the roof of the manor house on the western side, looking at everything going on down below, with Duvas standing nearby. He was waiting for the captain to arrive before they could start planning the revenge. It was midday, and the late spring sun was hanging high in the sky. The weather was getting hot every day, and it wouldn't be long before it started to get muggy. But at least it was still bearable so far.

To his right, Trevalo's wagons were being unloaded one by one, with servants using wheelbarrows to transport the sacks of grain, vegetables, and potatoes to the storage rooms. The merchant had already left on horseback, though, taking two wagon drivers with him. On the left side towards the south, Madam Nerida was busy counting sacks as she noted things down on a small piece of paper—real paper. Once they had an estimate of how many sacks would be needed to provide three meals a day to all the people living in the longhouse blocks, a few servants would take those sacks to the blocks after that using wheelbarrows.

He had also sent Madam Helga to talk with the latest batch of refugees who had arrived yesterday to see if they needed any medicine or any other help. More than two dozen people arriving at a time was a lot, but that group's male members who had already been living here had been helping out in getting the refugees to settle into a new life here. With no space in the blocks, a few makeshift tents had been arranged for them, with relatively straight wooden branches serving as pillars of the cone, while some old cloth served as a roof. It wouldn't help if it rained, but the skies looked pristine these days. To be fair, it was hardly better than their living conditions in the forest camp, but at least this was only going to be temporary.

That's because he could see the third longhouse block's construction underway from here. Taniok's apprentices and other woodworkers had been working hard, and nearly all the tall pillars of the ground floor were already in place, jutting high above the heights of the men there. Right now they were fixing the beams to make the roof, above which another floor would be made. Duvas had also reported that the third sawmill would be completed by the evening by Taniok, which meant that from tomorrow, freshly cut planks would start arriving from the dam site on Trevalo's wagons. After that, the bald carpenter would start working on the triphammer on the far side of the stream.

The majordomo noticed his gaze. "The wagons which Trevalo left here are going to help us a lot in finishing that construction soon."

"Let's hope so..." Kivamus said. "We really need more housing space here, now that Feroy has started spreading rumors even in the north. The flow of refugees is only going to increase in the coming months. By the way, did you get any updates from Darora today?"

Duvas nodded. "He will provide another crossbow by evening. But you will be more interested in knowing that the first scorpion should also be done by tomorrow. He's in the final stage of assembling it, so I think we should be able to give it a try the next afternoon."

"Finally!" Kivamus grinned. "Once this is done, we will get him to make the wooden parts for more scorpions, although we will have to tell Cedoron to hold off on making the metal parts. Now that the cementation furnaces near the stream are already belching smoke into the sky, we will get the first batch of steel in just a little more than two weeks. So I think it will be best to make the metal parts with steel for the next scorpion. I am already doubtful if even the first one will be able to work with iron parts."

"We will find out in two days anyway, so we can modify it if needed," Duvas shrugged. "It will also give Cedoron some free time to catch up on the regular orders of pickaxes, shovels, and the like. Now that the number of coal miners is increasing with every new batch of refugees, we really need more of those tools. He and his apprentices had been dedicating all their time to make the furnaces and the iron bars for it, so they had been lagging in the other things they needed to forge. Darora has also started running low on iron parts for more crossbows, so we can use the next two weeks to stock up on those things, and Cedoron can work with the steel we get after that."

Kivamus nodded. "What's the status of other projects?"

Duvas began, "The trench on the last side—the south one—will be done in two or three more days. The coating of the walls will take at least ten more days, though."

"Send one group of hunters to scout a good path from here to the coal mines and then to the dam, so the diggers can cut a wide road through there after they are done with the trench. We already have a working road, but they can find out if there is a better path, especially when cutting through the slope of the hills."

"One hunting group returned this morning," Duvas said, "so I will tell them about it, and they will scout it from tomorrow. Just a day or two would be enough for that. And by then the diggers will be free to work on the road. Apart from that, Pinoto has said that the space we had cleared between the farming fields and the forest is not enough. He wants some more empty space there to work as a firebreak. He

also requested fencing for the fields if possible. In a few months the crops will present an easy grazing ground for any animals, especially at night when we can't keep an eye on such a large area."

The door of the roof opened and Hudan walked to them, with Kerel and Tesyb following him.

Kivamus held up a finger to them to wait, as he thought about what Duvas had said. "It's not feasible to make any kind of fence until we've made the third and fourth longhouse blocks, and the encampment in the hills for making medicine. Completing all that will take around a month, but after that we can use the sawmills to cut out something like a picket fence. Ideally we should have used barbed wire for that, but we can't possibly spare that much iron. Wooden fences will have to be enough for that. Although even that won't be enough to stop any saboteurs..."

"What do you mean?" Duvas asked.

Kivamus looked into the distance. "If Zoricus, or anyone else, like a grain trader who is profiting greatly from the high prices of wheat, sees our fields undefended, then knowing that our village has always been seen as a very weak one, they can set fire to the fields, especially when the crops start to get mature and the weather is hot and dry. Even a single person can destroy all our crops before we can do anything about it. And it will be disastrous for us."

"Should I post guards there when the crops start to get mature?" Hudan asked. "I don't think we have that many men for that, though."

"I realize that..." Kivamus said. "Making watchtowers wouldn't be a good idea either, since we can't make enough of them to cover the huge area of farms, and someone can still reach the fields in the cover of night."

He paused, trying to think what Feroz would suggest here, and it immediately gave him an idea. "You know what, I think I know what to do. We will need to patrol the boundary of the fields with our guards." He explained, "Once we have more guards, we will make more hunting squads, but we will keep a few of those squads just to defend the fields. They will stay in the forest just outside the fields most of the time, and move from place to place. In their free time, they can kill any animals which come to eat our crops, whether in the day or night, and in case they see someone unidentified there, they can easily apprehend him."

Hudan scratched his chin. "The plan sounds fine, but those fields are huge, covering an area many times larger than the village, and those fields are expanding every week. It will need at least three or four groups... Hmm... No, actually we don't need to make groups of four men here. We can just put them in pairs, and each of them will cover a certain section of the boundary of the fields. That way we should be able to cover it more easily."

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

Tesyb looked at him. "How about we use female guards in those patrolling squads? The forest near the fields is much safer than the places where the hunters usually go. So a squad of two women can easily take care of any animals which wander there, especially if they have crossbows. And if they see some unidentified people, they can blow a horn to call up the other squads for help. We can even send help from the village in that case, since the farms are right next to us. Of course, we should have some swordsmen also patrolling, but women can take up most of the responsibility here."

Kivamus smiled at the brawny guard, feeling glad that he had suggested it himself, which meant the guards were starting to see women as equals now. "Good. That's a much better idea. I want to start this immediately, at least on a smaller scale. Hudan, how many guards do we have now?"