

## Londoner 391

### Chapter 391 Strength - I

Hudan replied, "We had 40 swordsmen before the latest round of recruitment, but including those 10 recruits, we have 50 men in total. Although those 10 aren't any good in a sword fight right now. I have also started looking for 10 more men like you wanted, and have recruited three of them by now. In a few more days, we will have 60 swordsmen in total, including the 20 newbies. As for the women, with the current round of recruitment, we have 22 female guards—including that former slave from the encampment, Widel—and I'm already looking for more volunteers to reach your target of 24 female guards."

Kivamus nodded, crunching through the numbers in his mind. "No, target to reach 40 female guards for now. We need to put two people on each watchtower, which means 36 people are needed in total to cover all three shifts for each of the six towers. That means we can use six older people during the day shift along with a woman, with two women on duty in both of the night shifts. That means 30 female guards will be needed to cover all the shifts, which will leave 10 other female guards free. In the beginning, we need to keep these patrolling squads stronger, so let's add five swordsmen to their group to get 15 guards in total."

Hudan seemed to be thinking about it. "I see what you mean. Two women and a man in each squad, and five such squads in total for now. It will be a fairly balanced group after that."

Kivamus nodded. "Yeah. Once you have finished the latest rounds of recruitment, create these patrolling squads of three guards, and start sending them for duty to patrol around the fields, during the day and night. One squad will cover the east of the fields, with the others covering the south and the west. The village is located in the north of the farms, so that side is safe already. Although I know it's still not enough people to cover all three shifts... Perhaps we can extend the working hours for each shift..."

"Don't worry about it, milord," Hudan interrupted with a smile. "After this recruitment, we will have a hundred guards in total, including both men and women. That is a huge number, and I couldn't even have imagined having to lead that many people just six months ago. That will already take some adjusting, even though more than a dozen will be out escorting the caravans of Pydaso and Trevalo, as well as the hunters who are out. But either way, the field patrolling assignment is a very easy one, since they will basically just be sitting or walking near the fields, and will only have to work if an animal or saboteur is seen. So we can just use off-duty guards for this, especially in the daytime. Everyone knows how important this first crop is going to be for the village, so no one wants to be sitting idle when they are off duty. I have no doubt that instead of just those 15 people which you wanted, I will easily get double of that number volunteering for this, once I announce what these patrolling squads will do. That will allow us to cover all the sides of the farms easily. In fact, the guards are so loyal to you that if you ask for it yourself, they will skip sleeping completely to pull any duty which is needed."

Kivamus smiled on hearing that. He knew that it would take a long time before the village could hold a candle to the strength of the Girnalican mercenaries, but he had vowed to make his village as strong as he could. That's why he had made a mental target to reach a strength of 100 guards as soon as possible. Once they had all been trained properly, as well as armed with crossbows and better swords, Tiranat's strength would already be far, far superior compared to the time when he had arrived here, when there were just a dozen guards to protect the whole village.

He began, "I'm glad to hear their dedication to their duties, but we need to do everything sustainably. We don't want them to pull a few sleepless nights for duty, and then fall asleep the whole day after that right when we might need them. That's why we are even hiring so many guards. For the village's population of just above 600, having a 100 people working as guards is already a very high percentage. But we are not exactly living in peaceful times, with so many threats lurking around us, so doing that is a basic requirement for our survival. It is doable enough since the refugees are arriving regularly now, and they will make up for any lack of laborers and miners. We will also freeze the recruitment for a few months once we reach hundred guards, then we will focus on training them properly."

"I'll bring them all up to speed as soon as possible," Hudan said. "Before long, every single male guard will be able to hold his own in a sword fight, while Isomi and Savomi will lead the female guards and train them in general fitness workouts and the usage of crossbows, with Hyola out with Feroy these days. Although it only makes me think that we really need a dedicated barracks for them soon."

Kivamus nodded. "I know, and that day is not far now with the sawmills ready. But coming back to the previous topic, we can ask off-duty guards to patrol the periphery of the fields during each of the two day-shifts, while we will have a dedicated squad for the night shifts, since we can't send guards to pull a night shift at the farms right after they worked during the day. But this will still allow us to use the guards effectively and cover the whole area of the fields. So, after you have recruited all the guards, start sending patrolling squads to the farms, and after the Torhan plan is completed, we will start sending out more hunting groups too. A lot more."

"I will finish the recruitment within the week," Hudan pledged, "and will start sending out patrols to the farms after that. But what about that Torhan plan? Do you think the time is right for that?"

Kivamus looked around. There was no one else on the roof, but down below, servants and maids were working here and there, walking to their next tasks in the courtyard. Sound carried far in the open, and he didn't want to risk anyone overhearing it. "Let's move to the manor hall first."

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Kivamus, Duvas, and Hudan were sitting on chairs, while Tesyb and Kerel had remained standing, despite Kivamus' insistence that they could sit.

He looked at the majordomo, who was the only one here who didn't know the plan in detail, and grinned. "The secret plan which we have been planning for so long is to liberate Torhan's clay mine. It's time for revenge!"

"To liberate his clay mine?" Duvas repeated with raised eyebrows. "How the heck will you even manage that? He had more than 50 slaves there working for him at that compound, the last we knew, all of whom he could arm against us. We also know that he has at least one other compound for sure, which means he has a lot more bandits working for him. How can we possibly liberate and capture that place? I don't even want to think about the legal ramifications of that. Torhan may be working as a bandit chief, but we know that he actually owns that land. He may be using slave labor for everything, but he is still the legal landowner of those clay mines."

Kivamus shrugged. "I know, and as much as I would like to, we can't hold on to that mine with our current strength anyway. So that is not our objective here. But we will free up all his slaves in that clay mine, and bring them here. Any of his bandits who are there at the time will be sent to the goddess. If our guards find Torhan present at the compound, he will get the retribution he deserves, but even if he's not there, doing this will take away at least half of his revenue source and a lot of his workforce, as well as the huge loss he will take for losing that many slaves he had bought with cold, hard coins. This will nearly cripple him, and will prevent him from attacking us again in a few months, when the mercenaries are expected to arrive. Of course, unless we manage to kill that bastard, he will likely try revenge again in the future, but we will deal with it at that time."

Duvas hesitated. "But..."

"Don't worry," Kivamus said. "We have talked about it in detail, and I have full confidence that the plan will work."

"What is that plan anyway?" Duvas asked. "You can't be thinking of relying on the latest recruits to fight against someone like Torhan! He won't be overconfident this time, and will know exactly what he's dealing with after we killed nearly all his bandits in his raid last time."

"I realize that." Kivamus began, "But Trevalo has just left today, and he will only return here after his trip to Ulriga—after at least three weeks. That's how long we have to raid Torhan and get the guards back here—because that's the duration when the eight experienced caravan guards we had sent with him are going to be available in the village. We will also hold back all the hunting groups when they return to the village this time. That means within a few days, we will have nearly every trained guard available here, except for Calubo and the other guard escorting Pydaso, as well as Fero and Hyola. But the former mercenary will be returning here within a week, as per the plan, so he will also be available for this counter-raid."

Hudan explained, "Our plan is to use nearly all of our best guards to hit that bastard's compound, while keeping the newest recruits here to defend the village until they return."

Duvas frowned, looking at Kivamus. "Are you really thinking of trusting the whole village's security to those new recruits? They were coal miners and laborers just a few weeks ago!"

Chapter 392 Strength - II

Kivamus shook his head. "You are forgetting the crossbow women. We already have 22 of them, so by pairing one experienced woman with a new one in each shift, we will be able to cover all the watchtowers without keeping any men up there. All the watchtowers have two crossbows again, so that's 12 crossbows to kill any bandits if they attack us. We also have 40 trained swordsmen in the village right now—38 after excluding Pydaso's escort. Our plan is to send 30 swordsmen to hit Torhan's compound, while keeping the eight remaining men here for an emergency. Along with the help from the crossbow women, as well as the new recruits, we will be able to defend the village for the ten days our guards will be out for that raid."

He smiled. "The best thing is that Torhan's group is probably the most powerful bandit group in this region, but we are already going to attack him, and the mercenaries are still a couple months away from arriving. Which means even if we get any bandit raids during that time, it will either be weaker and smaller groups, or desperate civilians. Which means we can easily defend our village from them."

"Fine," Duvas said. "I can agree that we should be reasonably safe during those 10 days with eight experienced guards and the new recruits. But will the remaining men be enough to attack Torhan's compound? Especially knowing that they will have the defending advantage this time."

Hudan answered with a grin. "We are sending 30 swordsmen, Sir Duvas. Thirty! Unless that bastard has magically trained all his slaves into proper bandits so soon, there is no way that single compound will be able to resist us. Fero had given an estimate that Kirnos had somewhere around 50 to 60 guards in total, which means our 30 swordsmen, who are better trained and far more disciplined, could give even Kirnos' guards a run for their money, assuming they weren't hiding behind walls. Anyway, we had killed

nearly 30 bandits of Torhan in his raid here, which had to be most of his strength. It's only been a few weeks since that raid, so even if he started to recruit more bandits, it hasn't been long enough for his strength to change too much."

"But didn't he have a different compound too?" Duvas asked. "He has to have more bandits there."

"Of course," Hudan said. "Joric had told us that he had seen around 20 bandits in the compound he had been in. Let's assume Torhan had kept that many bandits at his other compound too. Then it means he should have 10 bandits in total after we killed 30 of them. Those 10 will also be divided between those two compounds, which means just five in each place. Obviously, Joric's estimate might have been wrong, but even if Torhan has double, or even triple that number of bandits remaining, that's still just 15 bandits to defend both his compounds—against 30 of our much better trained guards. Of course, we plan to give them crossbows too, which will help them take out many bandits before the fight even starts. I will be there to lead our men, and I will make sure it goes well."

Duvas seemed to be thinking about it. "But who will protect the village if both you and Feroy leave for the counter raid?"

"I will be here," Kerel said, pressing a fist to his chest. "Don't worry, Sir Duvas. I will protect the village with my life."

Kivamus explained, "While Kerel will stay here to lead our swordsmen in case of an emergency, Feroy, Hudan, and Tesyb will each lead a group of around 10 men in that raid. And they will hit the camp from three sides. If something is not as we expected, Feroy will be there to change the plans accordingly. We are also going to send a group of four scouts in advance within a few days, so they can find out any weak points of that compound, and see if that bastard Torhan is there. They will continue scouting there for a week after that. These 10 days will be used for the guards to conduct mock raids, with two groups of a dozen men led by Hudan and Tesyb each. Our men know how to fight, but attacking a group which has dug in defensively is not the same thing. I will also help them in planning it this time. The newest recruits will also get some basic training at that time, which will be helpful in the future."

He continued, "Feroy will return by then, so after 10 days, we will send the group west. They will meet up with the scouts there, and make the final preparations for the attack. Feroy will decide the best time to attack."

"Are you really planning to kill Torhan?" Duvas asked. "He is quite likely the bastard son of Baron Farodas of Kirnos. He won't take it well if his son is killed by us."

Kivamus shook his head. "It's not like Kirnos is acting friendly to us in the first place, but no. The primary objective of this plan is to liberate all those slaves and bring them here, and to destroy and burn that compound to give enough of a setback to Torhan that he can't think of raiding us again anytime soon. Based on the reports of the scouts, Feroy will decide whether to hit the compound when Torhan is present, or when he's not. The reason is that now that we know he has at least one more compound, and has good relations with Kirnos, that means he would usually be moving between these three places. And he would also be taking some bandits with him as guards."

He continued, "That means if we find Torhan in that clay mining compound and our guards can still take them with their strength, they will attack at that time, hoping to kill him too. But if it seems that he has too many guards, we will wait for him to leave the compound, which will leave the place even less defended, and then we will hit it to liberate the slaves. There are a lot of variables, which is why Feroy's presence will be vital there after his first round of spreading rumors in the north. He had also contributed in the planning of how to organize the raid before he left, and by the time he returns, we will have everything ready for him and Hudan to lead the guards west."

Duvas chuckled. "It seems you have planned everything already..."

"Hardly," Kivamus shrugged. "There's a saying that no battle plan survives first contact with the enemy. It means many things can still go wrong, but we have already planned for a lot of variables, and in the next 10 days we will refine the plan further based on how the guards are performing in the mock raids. Then the group will leave for Kirnos through the forest, reaching there in around two days with that large group. Based on the reports of the scouts, they might have to hold on for a few days before attacking—which will only last a few hours at most, even if the bandits have dug in. Then another day to clean up and patch any injured guards, as well as to convince the slaves to come back with us. Then they will burn the compound, and return here in another few days. If everything goes well, they should be back here in three weeks from now."

He continued, "By now we have seen absolutely no sign that Levalo may be hiding any other intentions, so I think we can start trusting him more now and send him west with the group. Feroy had already vouched for him, and his instincts are rarely wrong."

"I agree that it was a good idea to let him live," Duvas said. "He had been talking with the latest refugees all night, and has confirmed that their stories matched with what we had found out from the men we captured earlier. These people really are escaped slaves from near Krukzil, and we can integrate them into the village without any problems. But using Levalo to attack the bandits? Isn't he only an expert in using a dagger? I don't think he has suddenly become an excellent swordsman, has he, Hudan?"

Hudan shrugged. "He isn't, which is why Lord Kivamus has a different plan for him."

Kivamus explained, "We are going to give a separate mission to him at the same time our guards are liberating that compound. Joric, the freed slave from that place, didn't see everything in the compound when he was there, so we will have to trust the report of our scouts for the layout, but we will still send Joric with the guards to meet up with the slaves after the fight is done. The local slaves will know him, and when he tells them that Tiranat is a good place for slaves, they will have far more reason to believe him compared to just our guards claiming that."

"Then what's the problem?" Duvas asked. "I know Joric's a good man, so he should agree to help us free other slaves."

Kivamus snorted. "I had talked with him a few days ago, and I agree that he is a good man, which is why he had sold himself into slavery instead of his wife or daughter. But he put a condition to help us this time. He asked us to help bring his wife and daughter from Kirnos if we want his help to talk with the slaves. He can't do it himself, since he is officially a slave and Torhan's property in Kirnos, which is why he asked for our help."

Chapter 393 Strength - III

"So what's your plan?" Duvas asked.

Kivamus began, "We'll send Levalas disguised as a merchant to Kirnos, along with two of our new recruits to act as his guards. Their overt task will be to sell two wagonloads of coal and repay the smoked fish merchant in Feroy's name, and buy some more of it. We do have the gold for it right now. But their secret mission will be to liberate Joric's family. We will send the group immediately—that is, tomorrow—so he gets around two weeks to help her sell the house and shop. If the timing matches well, he can even return with the rest of the guards after the counter raid."

Duvas nodded slowly. "Trevalo's wagons are going to help us a lot in this as well. It wouldn't have been possible to spare two wagons for this long without those six wagons he loaned us. But why does that mission even need to be a secret? Can't Joric's wife just sell her house and return up with Levalas openly? I know right now she doesn't even know Joric is here in Tiranat, but once Levalas tells her about that, it should be easy enough."

Kivamus shook his head. "Selling the shop is the easy part, obviously. But there is no good reason why a woman like that—with her husband a slave and a small child in tow—would ever want to sell the stable

income she gets from that shop, as well as the safety of living in a wooden house within Kirnos' walls. Anyone who notices her sitting on Levalas' wagons to leave the village will ask questions, and eventually it may bring us into highlight. We just can't risk any scrutiny of that kind. So we'll do it another way."

"The plan is that after she has received the gold from selling the shop," he explained, "Levalas will hide her and her kid on the wagon. I had thought of making a secret compartment for it, but when I was talking about it to Levalas, he suggested a better idea. The smoked fish we buy from that merchant comes in barrels, so we'll just rent two empty barrels from him, and put Joric's wife and daughter in them."

Duvas' face had a look of disgust on it. "That's... inhuman!" He sighed. "But... I agree. Nobody will ever think that Levalas may be smuggling humans inside those fish barrels."

Kivamus exhaled. "I know... And that's the point, as difficult as it may be for those two. Anyway, it'll only need to be done until they cross the walls and get some distance away from Kirnos. After that they can come out into the open. This way, the locals will only know that she sold her shop and disappeared... somewhere. Maybe she was forced to sell the shop by Torhan before he took her away in the night as another slave, or maybe she boarded one of the merchant ships which regularly visit Kirnos and ran away for a better life elsewhere. Who knows where she went? The fact that a merchant from Tiranat was present during the time of her disappearance will be nothing more than a coincidence. This way she can come here without anyone suspecting us of harboring slaves."

"All that will have to come out in the open at one point or another," Duvas muttered, "but yeah, that's a good plan. Still... I don't fully understand why you are taking all that risk of attacking Torhan. We've already decided that we have no choice but to pay the mercenaries this time, which means we aren't going to get in battle with them—at least this year. So attacking such a powerful bandit chief, who is very likely in cahoots with the Baron of Kirnos, doesn't seem like such a great idea to me. Even if the battle goes well, we will probably lose a few men—and for what? Just to get more slaves? I agree that that would be helpful, but it still sounds too risky. We are already getting enough slaves and refugees here anyway even without that kind of risk..."

Kivamus just smiled. "We have no choice but to take risks at this point, or the village is never going to get any better than a destitute coal-mining village located in the middle of nowhere."

"I agree with you on that," Duvas snorted, "not that you are going to stop changing this village anyway. But Torhan isn't just a bandit chief like Nokozal—he is a land owner. That's a big thing in the kingdom—even I don't own any land working as a majordomo and being a son of a baron. That gives him legal rights—as little as they are enforced in this region of the kingdom. And even if he's officially not a noble,

and even if you don't plan to capture his land, attacking him like that will be counted as illegal in any court, including the Count's, who will have jurisdiction over a dispute like this, between people of two baronies. If it was Baron Farodas attacking Torhan, or even confiscating that land for whatever reason, that would be fine because those clay mines come within the barony of Kirnos. But you don't have any official right to do that... What if—"

Kivamus grinned, interrupting the majordomo. "You already gave the answer to your question yourself. Whatever legal rights Torhan may have as a landowner, the kingdom's laws are barely enforced in this frontier region. That gives us a lot of leeway. Even if Torhan remains alive after our counter raid, what's he gonna do? Complain to his daddy Farodas?"

Hudan exploded into laughter. "I can't imagine an egotistical bastard like Torhan doing anything like that. He even tried to attack Tiranat just to take revenge for our guards killing some of his men that time. He has no less than a high noble's ego! And doing that would give credit to the rumors that he's really a bastard. He won't do that."

The majordomo's lips also curled upwards, although he remained quiet.

Kivamus nodded. "Exactly. So what other options does he have? Will he complain to the Count? Saying that big bad Kivamus stole his little slaves? Hah! I don't think so. Even if he somehow got his ego under control to make that complaint, would the Count even care about petty matters like this, right when Binpaaz is getting bold in the east?"

He shook his head. "No. Just like the Count would have ignored us if we complained that Torhan stole so much from the village before last winter, Ebirtas will also ignore any pleas from Torhan about that—if the bandit chief even complained about it, and I don't believe he will. Even if there was a full on battle between two barons of the Count, Ebirtas would likely have ignored it—since such disputes between minor nobles are quite common all over the kingdom—even if the Count didn't have to worry about Binpaaz. And Torhan may be the bastard son of a baron, but he's not the baron himself, or even a noble. He is nothing more than a bandit chief in my eyes. That means protecting our rights and defending our village from any threats within the kingdom is up to us—including dishing out the rightful punishment on a bandit group like Torhan—who stole so much from us."

Duvas frowned. "I agree with nearly everything you said, but doing all this just for revenge...? I never saw you as someone who held grudges like that."

Kivamus laughed. "No, no. I'm not doing it to satisfy my ego. I'm far more practical than that. And—" he glanced around and made sure the door was closed, "—you are forgetting something. Something which is the main reason I even considered doing something this risky. Why did Torhan attack us before the winter?"

Duvas raised his eyebrows slightly. "Because our village was very weak at the time? Because the previous baron and his guards were murdered on the road, leaving Tiranat basically unprotected?"

"Keep going."

"Uh... To steal food? And even slaves? Or to steal..." His eyes widened. "Oh...!"

Kivamus grinned. "Yes. To steal gold. And it wouldn't have been the first time Torhan stole gold from someone who couldn't protect it. Most likely he has been doing it all over the barony of Kirnos, stealing gold from any farm owner who is too weak to resist. Torhan wouldn't have become the biggest bandit group in this region otherwise. As long as it never got out of control and he kept giving a cut to Farodas, the baron would only send a nominal guard force to satisfy the farmhouses later on, likely saying it's out of his hands to protect every single farm—there's so many farms to protect and so few guards. That means—"

"—Torhan likely has a lot of stolen gold stacked up by now," Duvas breathed. "Gold which he has likely hidden in his compound."

Hudan gave a dangerous smile. "Yes. The same gold which he stole from the villagers—the same gold we are going to steal back from him! Just like he did it from us! The bastard didn't leave a single copper in the hands of any villager. But now he's going to regret it!"

Kivamus nodded. "And that is the primary reason I thought of this counter raid. Getting around 50 slaves would give a huge boost to the village by itself, but if we can recover some gold from Torhan, it will allow us to easily pay the mercenaries' tribute, as well as the taxes in the autumn. Depending on how much we get, we might even have some gold left over. And this gold is over and above anything we earn as our normal revenue."

"Oh..." Duvas muttered. "So that's why you had openly announced that you will start paying every villager directly in coins within three weeks."

"Indeed," Kivamus grinned. "Now that coal sales are improving, and with the additional tax-free gold we get from selling acelos tablets and paper to Pydaso, we were already getting in a position to start paying the villagers soon. The new trading route to Ulriga will take time to start generating the full revenue it can give us, because we can't produce that much coal yet, but that's another source of revenue which is going to start giving gold in the near future. But the gold we are going to recover from Torhan will give us a good boost right when we need it. We might even get hundreds of gold coins from this counter raid."

"Hearing about so many sources of gold makes it seem like we will need to purchase a bigger strongbox in the near future," Duvas snorted. "But... you are only planning to hit a single compound, right? What if Torhan has kept nothing there? What if the gold is in another camp? All this would be for nothing then."

Chapter 394 Predicament - I

Kivamus shook his head. "Torhan didn't reach where he is by being stupid. A man like him will never put all his eggs in one basket. Most likely he would have spread out his savings. He'd have hidden some gold at each of his two compounds—assuming there aren't even more of them—and some at a bank, uh... moneylender in Kirnos. This way even if someone finds one of his stashes and steals it, he wouldn't end up dirt poor. I'm confident that we will find at least some amount of gold in that compound where Joric was held. We can't hit another compound at the same time, and his gold saved with the moneylenders is out of our hands, but that first compound? Yeah, we'll turn it upside down to find every single copper he has stashed there."

"I only hope you are right..." Duvas spoke under his breath.

"Don't worry. There is a risk in anything we do or don't do, but we have planned a lot for this. I know it is going to go well. It has to..."

Duvas looked at him for a moment before he nodded. "I'll pray for that." He stood up. "I have to go and check on some other things in the manor, so I'll take my leave now."

Hudan rose from his chair as well. "I'll go and start looking for more recruits. I need to meet that target of 100 guards within a few days so we can start training everyone."

"Go on then," Kivamus said. "I also need to work on a blueprint."

Once the majordomo and the captain had left, he opened the window, looking at the bright sunshine of the late-spring afternoon. If all went well, this counter raid would give a huge boost to the village, in more ways than one. Now all that was left was to prepare well for it.

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~ Hyola ~

~ Somewhere to the north of Cinran ~

The bald guard squatted near the body of his comrade, then slowly shook his head. "He's deader than dead, boss..."

The old knight nodded at the man as he kept strolling left to right with a frown. The four other guards—bastards, all of them!—glared at her while standing nearby, all of them looking ready to separate her head from her shoulders.

There was a group of scared slaves cowering on the right side at the farmhouse where Hyola had been captured, while the mothers tried to hide their children behind them, hoping the guards didn't notice any of them. The owner of the farm, a retired knight to boot, was holding the crossbow he had taken from her as he walked, looking at it from all sides.

With night having already fallen a few hours ago, the light from the half-moon, along with the flickering light from a brazier burning somewhere, gave a ghastly look to the knight whenever he glanced at her. He couldn't be more than 50 years old, but the scars on his hands and face told of a life lived with a sword in his hands. Curse him!

Hyola's hands were tied up behind her, while the bastards had also taken nearly all her weapons, including her crossbow—the same crossbow which the knight was holding. The small dagger she hid in her boot was still with her, but she had no easy way to access it with her hands already tied.

Dammit!

Damn it all!

Damn her temper!

Handing over the crossbow—her crossbow—to another guard, the old knight finally stopped in front of her. "Well, well, well... What do we have here?"

She cursed her inability to keep her temper in check. That's what had landed her in this predicament. It had all started so well too...

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After Feroy and her had left Tesyb to lead the slaves from the encampment to the village, both of them had continued riding north. They had skirted around Cinran, and decided to go west. East was far too dangerous—especially if they went close to Tolasi Hills—and north would come later.

They had killed a pair of wolves on the way, and prepared the pelts to sell, keeping the smoked meat for themselves for later use. The first farmhouse they encountered became their first indoor stop on the trip, after spending so many nights in the open since they had left Tiranat.

The farm owner had been more than happy to buy their pelts at the below-average price they were offering to get in his good graces, and had gladly allowed them to stay in the barn along with the other slaves. Looking at the tired, hopeless faces of those people, she had remembered the time when she used to be a slave too, and it made her proud at how far she had come. She had vowed to do her best to help them—even if it was done only indirectly, by telling them about Tiranat. She just hoped they found the courage and opportunity to escape in the future and come to her home village. Life was good, there. And she wasn't even thinking about Calubo at the moment. Not at all.

Well... maybe a little...

After they had gotten some grub with the other slaves after sunset, the barn had been barred from the outside—likely to prevent the slaves from trying to escape in the night. It had scared her for a moment, but eventually it turned out to be a good opportunity. Feroy had asked about the stories of slaves living there, and once he was satisfied that there were no spies of the local guards hiding amongst them, he

had regaled them with tales of a place where slaves could escape to and live as free men and women. A place where commoners were treated better than any other place in the kingdom. A place where the baron ensured that everyone got food and shelter, no matter what.

The kids had listened with wide eyes, while most of the older slaves hadn't truly believed them, but it had surely sown some seeds of doubt in their minds. Only time would tell if they decided to flee to Tiranat in the future. After making them promise not to speak about it to anyone, Feroy had also given some of the losuvil powder to anyone who was sick or injured, saying that it was just a small example of how benevolent the lord of Tiranat was. The man who had bandaged a recent gash in his shoulder had been stunned to see the rapid effects, with the other slaves asking him again and again if he was really feeling no pain. The man had grinned, and had to confirm it many times before the others believed him.

The next morning she and Feroy left the farmhouse—the slaves smiling at them this time—and had reached another farm by dusk. The same story had repeated for the next few days—traveling during the days, then telling stories and healing the slaves with losuvil powder in the nights at whichever farmhouse they stayed. A family of slaves living at an outlying farm had nearly given up on their sick child, but Feroy had handed them a few doses of the powder, assuring them that the kid would have a much better chance now.

The ex-mercenary had even handed over a few coppers and some of their smoked meat to those slaves who looked like they were on the verge of starvation. She had no idea where he got the coin from, but that charity had made many of those slaves seem ready to swear their lives to him. Feroy had just told them to hold on until they got a chance to run away, and then to head south. The journey wouldn't be easy, but if they made it, their life would change in such a drastic way that they couldn't imagine it. She had no doubt a few slaves would already start reaching Tiranat by the time they returned themselves.

Feroy said that it wasn't a good idea to linger too long in any place, since the disappearance of slaves could be linked to them and it would make the task more difficult for them in the future, so after a week, they started to move toward the northwest of Cinran.

They had spent the last two days spreading rumors at some farmhouses there, when this morning Feroy decided to turn east towards the Lokir River. He didn't want to risk going too close to Krukzil for now. That bastard Zoricus ran a huge slave operation, with rumors saying nearly all the people in his village and surrounding farms to be slaves, which meant the baron could easily hear about someone spreading rumors about Tiranat if they went too close.

They continued moving east during the day, and just before dusk they had found this farmhouse after a long day of travel. Located between some forests in the west, and big farms in the east, this place was

far more isolated than others. It had given her a bad feeling even before they had reached the farmhouse.

They didn't have anything to trade this time—they hadn't found any wild game on the way for the last two days, being so far from the southern forests—but Feroy's silver tongue had still managed to grant them a night's stay in the stables from the retired knight who owned the farm. Hyola had seen many slaves here—just like at most other farms—but for some reason there were mostly women kept as slaves here. There were some men, of course, but instead of being the usual equal ratio between the two genders, there were more than a dozen female slaves here—some of them living along with their kids—compared to just three male ones.

That had looked a little fishy to her, but she hadn't given it much thought at the time. The stables they had been allotted were located right next to the barn where the slaves lived. Feroy's plan was to wait for the guards to go to sleep, before they would enter the barn from a loose window on the outer side he had noticed, and then to mingle with the slaves and tell them about Tiranat. They couldn't do so in the presence of any local guards, but for some reason the two men who had come for duty at sunset kept loitering near the barn.

After eating together with all the guards a few hours after sunset, the old knight had retired to a wooden building some distance away. Seeing the scared looks the slaves had given the knight, Hyola had wanted to go and talk to them immediately, but the former mercenary had told her that it wasn't the right time. He had assured her that they would surely talk with the slaves before they left, but Hyola hadn't wanted to wait. However, with the two guards lingering near the barn even after eating, she never got a chance to talk with the slaves.

After a while of watching them, Feroy had told her to go to sleep, and Hyola had eventually relented, laying down on a bale of hay in the stable and closed her eyes. But sleep just wouldn't come.

Her mind had been drifting somewhere between dreamland and the real world for a while, when she heard some sounds of arguments and protest. She immediately woke up, and noticed that Feroy was nowhere to be found. Guessing he had gone to take a leak or something, she stood up, deciding that she'd better investigate what was happening. She exited the stables towards the barn, from where the sound had been coming from, and what she witnessed sent shivers down her spine.

Chapter 395 Predicament - II

A pair of local guards were pulling a young woman by her hand away from the barn as she protested vehemently, continuing to shake her head again and again. It seemed like she was going to scream when one of the guards slapped her, making the woman cower in fear, although she didn't stop trying to free herself.

Some of the other slave women were pulling her back by the other hand, while a few children huddled behind the doors of the barn. The three male slaves she had seen earlier were not present at the time—perhaps because they had been sent to do some work elsewhere, or maybe they didn't sleep here in the barn.

It barely took a moment for her to realize what was going to happen, with two male guards leering at the young woman they were pulling away from the barn, while the other slaves tugged her back with distraught faces.

She glanced around in a hurry to call for help, knowing that she had seen half a dozen guards when they had arrived, but it seemed only these two bastards were present on duty tonight.

Dammit!

She looked at the scuffle again. There was only one thing in the future for that poor woman, and it filled her with such a burning rage that she forgot where she was and what she was doing.

Before she knew it, she found her crossbow in her hands—already loaded with a broadhead bolt—and aimed at one of the guards.

"Get away from her!"

The guards—one tall and the other bald—looked at her in surprise.

"Who the hell are you?" the tall one demanded.

"She's one of the drifters the boss gave shelter for tonight," the baldy replied. "They came here when ya were sleepin'..." He glared at Hyola. "Get back to the stables if ya know what's good for ya!"

Then the guards started to pull the young woman away from the barn again, ignoring her.

"I said leave her alone!" Hyola snarled, her voice trembling with fury.

"Mind your own business, bitch!" the tall guard snapped. "It's been so long since the two of us were allotted for night duty together. Just be smart and get back inside the stable."

"Fuck you!" Hyola barked as she brought the guards into her crossbow sights. The sole brazier had been extinguished earlier, and with just a half-moon in the night sky, there wasn't much light, but it was still more than enough for her. By now, her crossbow had become like an extension of her arm. She could load and aim it in her sleep if she wanted.

"Move back right now or you'll regret it..." she growled, a dangerous note in her voice.

The guards finally let go of the woman's hand, and turned to her.

"Ya don't know how to take orders, do ya?" the baldy scowled as he looked at the crossbow. "What's that in yer hands, anyway?"

"Looks kinda dangerous," the tall guard muttered, before he began to remove his sword from its scabbard. "Better take care of her first."

The baldy nodded and pulled out his own sword as he sidled away, trying to flank her. "Ya'll regret not listenin' to us."

Hyola gave a sidelong glance to the slaves, who had all huddled together, but were some distance away from the guards. Perfect.

The tall one smirked at her as he also took his sword in his hands, then glanced at his partner in crime. "Maybe tonight'll be good anyway. We haven't had a redhead in forever. She's tall too. Gotta be fun for sure!"

Hyola saw red. She brought the tall bastard's head into her crossbow sights, and without wasting another moment, squeezed the trigger.

The guard's head exploded.

It was dark enough that the full gory details weren't visible, but it was still easy to see bits and pieces of the tall bastard's brain tumbling everywhere, before his body fell to the ground, lifeless.

"What the fuck...?" The baldy's hands fell limp to his sides.

Immediately, there were screams from the slaves, ringing loud in the night. It cleared Hyola's mind at once and she finally realized what she had just done. She was alone here, and the baldy would be upon her before she could reload. Even if she could somehow be quick enough to load it first, he was a swordsman, and her crossbow could only shoot once...

Shit! Where the hell was Feroy when you needed him?

She didn't regret killing that tall bastard one bit, but she had no doubt that she was going to be heavily outnumbered, and soon. She needed to escape long before that.

She glanced around, noticing that guards had started pouring out of another building, then she looked at the baldy, who was still staring at his comrade's dead body in shock, and decided this was her chance. Probably her last chance to survive.

She began to run away from the cursed place as fast as her legs allowed, while trying to load the crossbow at the same time. She looked around as she ran, searching for the ex-mercenary. She needed to warn him not to return to the stable, or he'd be dead too—because of her and her temper.

Dammit... She should've thought up a proper plan before killing that bastard. The baldy was still alive, and the slaves' lives wouldn't get better just by killing one of them.

She kept running, and before long, she saw that she was being chased by five angry guards. She gave up loading the crossbow, and just began to run for her life.

It didn't work.

The night was fairly dark, and she didn't know the terrain as well as the locals. Her foot got caught in a hole in the ground when she was glancing back at her pursuers, making her tumble. She cried in pain as her ankle twisted, before she went down to the ground.

By the time she found her bearings and began to limp away, the guards had already surrounded her. And that's how she found herself in her current situation.

Damn it!

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Handing over the crossbow to another guard, the old knight finally stopped in front of her. "Well, well, well... What do we have here?"

Hyola spat at him, targeting his face, but only managed to dirty his tunic with her mouth thoroughly dry.

The knight just snorted before he bent low, holding her chin in his hands. "A feisty one, aren't you?"

Hyola immediately chomped down on his fingers with all her strength, making the older man howl in pain. The bastard slapped her with his other hand, hard, making her open her mouth in pain, which finally allowed him to free his bleeding hand.

She had fallen to the ground from that hit, but she still grinned at the bastard.

Hyola—one; old bastard—zero!

The knight glared at her, as he wrapped a cloth around his hand, provided by another guard. Once he was done, he tilted his head. "Seems you're not going to make it easy for me..." He looked around. "Where's your partner though? Feroy, was he? I refuse to believe that you two are just traveling merchants."

Hyola finally managed to sit up on her knees after a few failed tries, and just glared at the bastard.

The boss of the farm looked at the baldy. "Go and find him! And bring him back alive. I want to know how they managed to get a hold of an arbalest. They're not supposed to be found outside of the duke's armed forces at the fort."

The bald guard nodded, and called out two of the other guards before they ran away from the group, leaving just the knight and two other guards here. The slaves were still gathered nearby, watching the scene nervously. Their male family members had also gathered with them now, from wherever they had earlier been sent to.

Looking at her situation, she wondered if she could have done something differently? Should she have waited for Feroy before attacking? Perhaps, but she just couldn't have left the woman to go through with what was going to happen to her. If she had waited, by now...

She didn't even want to think about it. Yeah, she knew she had a temper, and had a tendency to act before thinking or planning, and she would have to work on it if she survived tonight, but she didn't regret it. Not at all.

The knight took the crossbow in his hands again, as he looked at it from all sides. "I haven't seen one of these since I left Aragosa a decade ago... It's much smaller than I remember, but it looks far more handy than those arbalests at the fort. Those were a pain to reload in a pinch."

He looked at her again. "You know what—if you tell me where you got it from, I promise to give you an easy death. The Count is going to pay a lot of gold if I can tell him the name of the bowyer selling arbalests in the black market. If it's someone smuggling them out from the fort's stockpile, even the Duke will reward me for reporting on that."

The retired knight tilted his head. "Or... perhaps I can buy a few of these for myself. Being a patriot doesn't pay much nowadays anyway. Those pesky patrols of the Duke are giving my drug mules a lot of trouble these days. Can you imagine my Veydril sales to Ulriga have nearly halved in the past few months...? If a few of those damned horsemen fall to bandits' bolts, maybe the Duke will decide to focus somewhere else. Like on Binpaaz—which he should be doing anyway. So why don't you be a nice little girl and tell me where you got this?"

Hyola scoffed as she finally managed to stand up, and spat at him again. This time, she met her target, and grinned.

Hyola—two; old bastard—zero!

The knight shook his head as he wiped his face. "Hmm... Looks like it's going to be the hard way then."

He ordered a guard to bring a chair. "But you know what, I ain't gonna do anything to you—not until your partner is found. He has to know just as well as you where you got this mini-arbalest from. Let's see how long he manages to hold out once I put the screws on you in front of him. Or the other way. Whatever works."

He smirked at Hyola as he sat on the chair a guard had just brought and stretched his hands, sending a chill to her bones. "It's been a while since I interrogated anyone. Seems the night ain't gonna be boring after all..."

Hyola grimaced, hoping the mercenary wouldn't be caught by the bastards too. There was going to be no hope for either of them otherwise.

Chapter 396 Predicament - III

It had been nearly an hour since they had been waiting, but there was no change in the situation. The knight had been curious about the crossbow, muttering something about the loading system being different than what he was used to, but he had still figured it out easily enough and given it a few tries at a tree, being surprised at the ease of reloading it.

Everyone except the dead guard and the baldy were wearing tunics and trousers—none of them having any time to put on their leather armor in the hurry of chasing after her, while the knight was wearing a much better-quality robe, but not his plate armor. Hyola wasn't sure if he would've even fit in it anymore.

Hyola's legs hadn't been tied, probably because the knight was confident that there was nowhere for her to run—especially with her twisted ankle—but her hands were still securely tied up behind her with a rope.

The slaves were also sitting nearby, after the knight—their owner—had told them to stay, so he could show an example of what happened when someone killed his men. Feroy hadn't returned either, making her wonder if he had decided to abandon her.

No, he wouldn't do that!

Right...?

The three guards who had been sent to find the ex-mercenary also hadn't returned. The old knight was getting impatient by now, looking around again and again, waiting for his guards to return. Eventually, it seemed he'd had enough.

"You!" He pointed at one of the two remaining guards. "Go and find where those idiots are. They should've returned by now if they couldn't find the other guy."

"Yes, boss," the guard nodded, and ran off too, leaving just the knight and one more guard.

Hyola wondered for a moment if she could take them on, before she exhaled. Even if her hands hadn't been tied up, and if she still had her crossbow, she probably couldn't have taken the guard by herself. And he wasn't alone either. The knight's prime days were long in the past, but even at around 50 years of age, his body still looked fit enough—more or less—although a potbelly was starting to develop. But if his claims of serving in Fort Aragosa in the past were right, he could probably cut her in halves with his huge sword with barely any effort. She knew that because even someone like the guard captain Hudan hadn't been able to become a knight and serve in Aragosa. So anyone who did serve there, had to be scary good for sure.

The knight had tried a few more times to ask about the crossbow, but she hadn't told him a thing. She would gladly die before betraying Lord Kivamus!

She had also decided to sit down after realizing that standing in protest wasn't going to do anything other than tire her out. However, she had another purpose in mind for sitting now. When she finally sat down this time, she made sure she was facing everyone else, which meant her hands were behind her and close to her feet—specifically, her boots, where her small serrated dagger was hidden.

After some initial struggle to escape in the beginning, she had calmed down after the knight had slapped her again, letting him believe she wouldn't try to run. That meant the knight was looking around—waiting for the other guards to return—while the last remaining guard was just standing idly and yawning.

That was all the chance she needed.

She gently pulled out the thin dagger, and started to cut the rope tying her hands. Before long, only a few strands were left, when she stopped cutting—she could break them easily with her own strength whenever she wanted, but at a quick glance the ropes would still appear tied up. Now she just had to wait for a good chance.

She looked back at the two remaining captors. She might not be able to kill both the men, but she knew she could still run away from them—she just had to break free before the other guards returned. It wouldn't be easy to run away with her twisted ankle, especially without knowing the local terrain, but there was no other choice. She had to escape before the moon set.

She glanced up, seeing that the moon was slowly approaching the roof of the barn in front of her, which was on the other side of the knight and the guard. It would only be a couple of hours before it went completely dark around midnight. Better not to wait.

She was going to cut the last strands of rope, when she noticed a silhouette in the moonlight, just beyond the barn. She stilled, thinking one of the guards had returned, but the person was moving... differently.

She squinted. Was that...?

Hell yes!

It was Feroy. It couldn't be anyone else skulking there at the time. But where were the local guards?

It only took a moment for her brain to process it and she barely stopped herself from laughing loudly. She knew exactly where those bastards were. Going against Feroy in the night? Even the goddess couldn't save them if she wanted. And she wouldn't.

That meant Feroy must have taken care of at least the first three guards who had gone to look for him, and possibly the fourth one who had gone to find his comrades. That meant it was two against two now.

She gave a furtive glance to the knight, whose back was toward Feroy, and found that he hadn't noticed the ex-mercenary. The guard was also looking at the slaves, with Feroy on his left.

She knew this was her chance. She cut the final strand of rope and freed her hands, without making any other movement. She held the dagger in her hand, waiting for the ex-mercenary to move first.

She didn't have to wait long. Her heart started beating faster as she noticed Feroy creeping closer and closer to the guard who was watching over the slaves.

Before long, Feroy was standing right behind the bastard—who had no idea just how soon his life was going to end. The slaves must surely have noticed the ex-mercenary by now, but thankfully they understood what was happening and remained quiet.

Feroy slowly stood to his full height, clamped a hand over the guard's mouth, and slashed his neck.

As she expected, the guard couldn't even make any sound as he slumped to the ground, but a child watching them nearly let out a scream before her mouth was covered by a female slave.

Shit!

The knight began to turn around in surprise, and Hyola knew she only had moments to distract him.

She jumped to her feet, not letting the rope fall from her hands.

"You know what, old man? Fuck you!" She smirked. "Wait, I think I said it wrong. I bet you can't even get it up now, huh?"

The knight turned to her with a glare as he stood up. "You bitch! What did you just say?"

He strode to her with a scowl, his sword still in its scabbard, and slapped her again. Hard.

Hyola lost her dagger from the force of the strike as she fell to the ground again. Dammit!

She somehow managed to keep her freed hands behind her, along with the rope, as the knight bent low, right above her. "I'll show you exactly what I can—"

Hyola let the rope slip and brought her hands to the front—one of them still carrying the rope—startling the older man for a moment. That was long enough for her to throw the rope around the bastard's neck and catch it with her other hand. Immediately, she pulled him towards her and headbutted him on his nose. Hard.

The knight sprang back in pain, clutching his bleeding nose, as Hyola scrambled to stand up.

The older man finally drew his sword. "You damned—"

He had barely opened his mouth when his body jerked forward with the force of something striking him near the shoulders. The knight immediately turned around to see who had hit him.

Hyola saw Feroy throwing his crossbow aside as he ran toward them with his sword out.

Knowing the knight wasn't going to die from that bolt, Hyola sprang up, finally spotting her dagger on the ground. Ignoring the blazing pain in her ankle, she lunged in and stabbed the bastard from behind—right where his heart would be.

Shit. The knife was too short to go deep enough to kill him...

The knight still cried out in pain, turned, and backhanded her with his left fist.

Hyola fell to the ground once more, and this time, the pain in her ankle didn't let her get up immediately. The slave owner lifted his sword high, ready to send her to the goddess, when a different sword exited from his chest.

Feroy had stabbed him from the other side. The older man gurgled blood for a moment, then fell with a loud thud.

"You bast—" the knight's last words stopped before he could finish the sentence.

Hyola took a deep breath to calm her thundering heart, her mind refusing to believe that it was over.

Then she remembered the fourth guard. "Wait—what happened to the other guards?"

"Took care of 'em already," Feroy smirked. "It's nighttime—my favourite time!"

"No—how many guards did you kill?" Hyola blurted. "The knight sent a fourth one after you!"

Feroy snorted. "I can count too, you know? It wasn't easy fighting three men together. Got more than a few cuts for my trouble. The last one was alone—he went down way too easy."

Hyola laughed. Of course. Fighting against four men in the night was anything but easy, but Feroy was Feroy...

She exhaled loudly. It was over... It was finally over...

"I thought you'd abandoned me," she muttered after a moment.

"Of course you'd think that," Feroy snorted as he removed his sword from the knight's chest, and after making sure he was dead, he wiped the blade on the dead man's robe. "Is that really what you think Lord Kivamus teaches the guards?" He shook his head. "Loyalty to your partners is more important than anything. You should know that by now."

Hyola dropped her gaze. "I'm sorry..."

Feroy looked at the slaves still huddling together in fear. "Forget about it. We've got a lot of work to do before the moon sets."

Chapter 397 Predicament - IV

Hyola tried to stand up, but the pain in her ankle wouldn't let her put weight on that leg. "Oww..."

The ex-mercenary looked back at her. "What happened to your foot?"

"Got stuck in a hole and twisted my ankle. That's how these bastards caught me."

Feroy put his sword away, then checked her ankle. "Doesn't seem broken, at least." He helped her up.

"Thank you..."

"You really should've waited for me, you know?" he said, steadying her movement. "I wasn't far when those two bastards were trying to take that girl away. If you'd waited just a bit, I'd have found you and we could've coordinated and taken both of them down together. Or thought of some other solution. I wasn't going to let anything happen to her."

Hyola stumbled as she tried not to put weight on the injured foot, before Feroy stopped her from falling again. "I know... I just couldn't think calmly at the moment..."

Feroy helped her walk to the knight's empty chair. "I understand you getting angry after seeing that, but in the future, keep in mind that there are always more solutions to any problem than going in headfirst. We just killed a knight—even if he was a retired one—and all his guards. Now we need to make sure there are no witnesses left here to report on that, or there would be a huge bounty on our heads within a week."

He stared at her. "Even if we do want slaves to come to our village, we need to do it secretly. We cannot highlight our village's name in front of the authorities. Tiranat simply cannot take that kind of scrutiny right now—you know that. But even if you didn't think about those big-picture things—as Lord Kivamus likes to say—you do realize that we were well outnumbered and the fight could have gone either way, right? If I was just a few moments late at the end, you would be dead now."

Hyola just gazed downwards as she sat. "But those bastards were going to..."

The ex-mercenary sighed. "I told you, I would never have let that happen." He glanced at the slaves who had started to get up after being huddling together in fear for so long, and were looking at them in curiosity. "Well, all's well that ends well, I guess. The slaves aren't treated well anywhere in south Reslinor, but it wasn't this bad in any of the other farms we've been to." He snorted, looking at the dead bodies. "I guess these bastards did deserve it, huh?"

Hyola grinned. "'course they did!"

Feroy chuckled. "Let me find something to bandage your foot with, then we'll think of what to do with the slaves. Still have some powder left up too. That'll take care of any pain."

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A brazier had already been lit up to provide some light. By the time her ankle had been bandaged properly so it wouldn't move, the slaves had begun to roam around. Many of them had come to thank her and Feroy—including that young woman, although she still looked distraught—before they went kicking and spitting on the dead bodies, making sure they were dead, or perhaps they were just getting even with the local guards.

Feroy seemed to be thinking. "I think it is time for us to return. It's already been a week since we've been out, and I need to get back for... another thing."

Hyola looked at him. "What thing?"

Feroy smiled. "Later."

She frowned. "Then we aren't going to be spreading rumors anymore?"

"Of course we will. This is a long-term plan, but that's for after that thing is completed."

"Fine..." Hyola glanced at the slaves. "But we aren't leaving them here, are we? What if they tell someone about us killing the knight?"

"I know," Feroy lowered his voice. "At this point, we have no other choice but to take all of them with us now, and to... take care of anyone who doesn't come. We can't leave any witnesses, or our rumor-spreading tour will come to an end right here."

Hyola grimaced, thinking about that grisly image. "I'm sorry..."

Feroy shook his head. "Don't worry, I won't let it come to that. These are people who are as down on their luck as possible. Trust me, I can easily convince them all to come with us. But we still have to make it seem like they're making that choice themselves. That'll keep them far more motivated for a new life in Tiranat."

Hyola sighed. "Let's hope they agree."

Once she had taken some of the losuvil powder with some water from her waterskin, Feroy called up all the slaves. Once the whole crowd of nearly 20 slaves, including children, had gathered up, he pointed at the knight.

"That's your previous owner—dead now. So what to do with your life from today is your choice."

"What do you mean?" one of the female slaves asked. "Aren't you taking us with you? You're rivals of that bastard, aren't you? Or are you bandits?"

"Shut up!" a man immediately reprimanded her. "You can't say that to them!"

Feroy immediately broke out into laughter, before Hyola joined him too. It was ironic, she thought, that after being a slave of bandits for most of her life, she had finally gotten the freedom and power to liberate other slaves, and now they were calling her a bandit.

"Hell no!" Feroy said. "We're not bandits."

"Then...? Who are you?"

"We are..." Feroy glanced at Hyola for a moment before he looked back at the slaves. "We are the guards of a certain baron, and we've been roaming around, looking for new people to join our village."

"Told ya..." the female slave muttered to the man.

"Well?" an older woman asked. "At least tell us where you're taking us."

"We're not taking you anywhere," Feroy explained, "unless you want that. Like I said earlier, what to do with your life from today is your choice. You can come with us, or you can run away somewhere else, or you can stay back here—although I wouldn't recommend that. Someone else will visit the village sooner rather than later, and they'll blame the deaths of these bastards on you."

"I've never heard of bandits giving slaves an option to join them..." someone muttered.

"I told you we're not bandits!" Hyola retorted. "And we're not taking you as slaves! If you come with us, you'll be free people."

The people in front of them immediately became suspicious. "What do you mean by that? You give us an option to come with you or not, and you claim we'll be free there? Just who are you people?"

Feroy gave Hyola a side-eye for her outburst before he replied. "I can't tell you the name of the place unless you decide to come back with us. But yes, those who do join us will be taken to our village, and they'll live as free people from that time."

He described life in Tiranat for the slaves who already lived there—including Hyola's own history as a former slave—without taking the name of the village. He added, "But whatever you decide to do, make the decision quickly. I want to be away from this place before the moon sets around midnight."

The slaves muttered amongst themselves for a while, when one of the men looked back at them. "I speak for all of us. We'll come with you. We have no other place to run to, and staying here will be a death sentence for all of us when these bodies are found. I still don't believe your tall claims, but even if

you keep us as your slaves in that place, it's still normal for us. And I heard why you both started this whole fight. You can't be any worse than these bastards. So we'll all join you."

"Good choice," Feroy smiled. "Then we'll all leave for Tiranat within an hour."

"Tiranat...?" one of the slaves muttered. "I've heard it's a coal mining village..."

"It's a lot more than that," the mercenary snorted. "But you'll find out more later."

"Wait, isn't it located in the southern forests?" someone else asked.

"Southern forests...? That's way too dangerous for kids!"

"We can't go to a place like that. Adzees will eat us alive in the night!"

Feroy snorted. "They can do that just as well right here. Don't worry, I promise you that place is far safer than you can even imagine. We don't have stone walls like Cinran or Ulriga, but we've lost no lives to an adzee there for... years at least. Bandits can't touch that place either. Trust me, they tried, and we have a large grave full of those bastards' dead bodies. Tiranat is as safe as a village can be. So make your decision now, and choose wisely."

The slaves muttered to each other for some more time, before their leader looked at the ex-mercenary. "We'll come with you. We have no better option anyway."

Feroy nodded. "Good. Now start packing up any belongings you have. Only what can be carried on your own back is allowed."

"We don't have anything to our names other than the clothes on our bodies," the man shrugged, "but we can't leave tonight. Four of our group aren't here tonight. We have to wait until they return in a few days."

"What do you mean?" Hyola asked. She didn't think any of the slaves were missing from what she had seen in the evening.

"There are four more male slaves who live here. They've gone to Ulriga to smuggle Veydril to the city. There is also a guard of the dead knight who went with them."

"Veydril...?" Feroy muttered with disgust. He looked around. "So that's why this knight chose such an isolated farm. All this was for a drug-running operation..."

Hyola remembered the name from her time at the limestone quarry, where some of the bandits had mentioned scoring some Veydril from Cinran the next time they went there. The knight had also mentioned the name earlier, but she hadn't connected it at the time. So it was a drug... Obviously banned by the authorities, but the knight was using slaves so he would stay safe. Damn that bastard! At least he was dead now, which was exactly what he deserved.

"They should be back in a few days," the man continued. "My brother is amongst them too. You have to wait until then!"

Chapter 398 Predicament - V

Feroy shook his head. "No. We can't possibly wait that long."

Hyola thought of an idea, feeling proud that she could read a little by now, since attending Gorsazo's classes at least twice a week was mandatory for all guards. Those who had the time and were interested could certainly attend more of them—the classes were free, after all. She asked, "Can't we write some instructions for them or something to follow us to Tiranat?"

"No slaves are taught to read," Feroy said. "Only someone who comes here to check on things will be reading it. And we can't risk that."

One of the slaves snorted. "Nobody comes here. The knight ran his drug business here for that very reason. This farm is so isolated already, but the knight didn't entertain any visitors at all."

"Someone still has to be coming here soon," Feroy muttered. "You said they were smuggling Veydril to Ulriga. Even if they were processing it here, I know it can't be produced here. The plant that drug is

made from only grows in dense forests—like in the southern forest. Someone has to be bringing it here from those forests, before the knight used to repackage it for sale in the city."

"He bought it from somewhere in the south," the slave agreed. "I don't know where, before he smuggled it to Ulriga using us slaves. If they get caught, they've been told to take their own life. The knight was pretty clear that if someone blabbed about it, and a patrol from the count or the duke comes here to investigate the drug, every single one of that man's family members will be killed in retaliation. That's how he kept us in line."

Hyola grimaced, hearing the brutality of the knight. His end had been far too kind, compared to what he truly deserved.

"What's your point?" Feroy asked.

"I mean," the slave answered in a hurry, "you can write all the instructions you want. One of the four men who is out has been taught to read a little so he could count the gold he receives from the Veydril dealer in Ulriga. No one else will come here."

Feroy frowned. "I can't believe the knight would ever risk his slaves running away with that money."

"No, no," the man immediately shook his head. "It was only so the slaves would bring the right amount of money out of the shop, or wherever it is sold. This way, if the authorities caught them, only the slave and the dealer would be caught, and the guard would stay safe. At least one guard always went to Ulriga with the slaves, and he would take the gold from the slave right after they had moved away from the dealer. Then he would bring the gold here along with the slaves."

He quickly added, "So if you write some hints about where you're taking us, and also tell them to burn it or something after they read it, I think it'll work. Just one guard has gone with the group this time, and those four men can easily kill him once they realize what's happened—especially if you hide a knife or two here for them. We aren't allowed any weapons otherwise."

"Writing something is still going to be risky..." Feroy muttered as he looked into the distance.

Immediately, one of the girls cried, "I'm not leaving without Pa!"

Another woman also pleaded, "We can't leave them! My husband is amongst those four men. If they think we were killed after seeing all that blood, then they wouldn't have any reason to live anymore!"

Hyola looked at her in surprise.

"She's right," the man who had been acting as the leader of the slaves agreed. "The knight only sends those slaves who have family here. My brother," he pointed out at some other slaves, "her father, her husband, and that woman's son. They are the ones who are out. If they see so much blood here, and think we're dead, probably all of them would take their own lives, knowing they have nothing to live for anymore—they've already been trained to do that by the knight. Our lives are as close to shit as possible, so seeing that all their family members have been killed would be the final straw."

Hyola barely heard Feroy muttering some unspeakable expletives under his breath, and she fully agreed. This knight would give any cruel bandit leader a run for his gold. She felt glad the bastard was dead. Once again.

She looked at the ex-mercenary. "I know writing something is very risky, but those slaves won't do anything to risk the safety of their families."

Feroy seemed to be thinking for a while. Then he started giving orders. "Fine. I still don't like it but I think it's a risk we have to take. Bring me a piece of wooden board and some charcoal from the brazier. I'll write some simple instructions to them about how to follow us, and we'll keep it in that barn you all lived in."

One of the slaves immediately ran away to bring it.

"We can hide that board safely inside some clothes and other stuff—maybe a woman's clothes—in that barn," Hyola suggested, "so it wouldn't be found easily if someone else like the suppliers did come here first, but those male slaves would certainly search everywhere when they can't see their families, and they would surely find it."

"Good idea," Feroy agreed. "I'll write to them to burn the board after they're done reading."

"Why not burn the whole damn place already?" Hyola asked. "I don't see any reason to let it stand, apart from that barn. Nothing good ever happens here."

Feroy shook his head. "We can't risk it right now, or someone will notice the fire. If not in the day, then by the next night. And we won't be moving fast with so many women and kids with us, so we can't risk any pursuers. But I'll write to do that as well on the board and to bring in whatever gold they received in Ulriga. Those returning slaves will run to us right after they kill the last guard and set everything on fire. It'll make it impossible for anyone to find out what happened here. We'll also remove any traces of the crossbows being used tonight and we'll bury the bodies of those who were killed here."

"They don't deserve it!" a slave spat.

"That's not the point," Feroy commented. "You said it'll take a few days for those slaves to come here. We can't risk someone finding out anything before that. Without any bodies, any visitors—like the drug supplier—will just think everyone is out of here for some reason. The blood left on the ground won't be of note if they knew anything about the knight."

The slave nodded. "We'll dig a grave for them between the bushes so it won't be seen easily." He pointed at the other male slaves. "Bring the shovels and follow me."

Feroy looked at the female slaves. "We also need to take everything of value from this place. Help us with that."

"You just said you were not bandits!" one of the women pointed out.

Feroy laughed. "Dead men won't need the gold or food stored here. Do you really want to protect the property of that knight?"

Once the woman shook her head, he added, "I meant it when I said we're not bandits and Tiranat takes care of all former slaves who've moved there. Everything we take from here will be used to feed people like you—other liberated slaves we've taken there in the past."

With that, everyone got to work.

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It was well after midnight now. Taking care of everything had taken much longer than they expected, but finally, all the preparations were done. Hyola was sitting in one of the two wagons they had found here along with her trusty crossbow, since she couldn't ride her horse for now, while one of the slaves who knew how to ride had taken her place there. They had also found 4 other horses used for pulling those wagons, and they had been put to work.

All the female slaves and the children were sitting in the same wagon as her, with two of the male slaves sitting on the driver's seats. That was eighteen new slaves they were taking, with four more joining them in the near future when they returned from Ulriga. The other wagon was occupied by all their loot and covered by an oil cloth they'd found, and was going to be driven by the other male slave. Feroy was still going to ride his own horse, and was going to lead the small caravan. Most of the remaining losuvil powder had been used for any slaves who were sick or injured, which had only left enough of it for maybe a couple of uses. Hopefully that would do till they returned to Tiranat.

Hyola looked at the loot wagon and grinned. The wheat sown in the farms would take months to get ripe, but they had still found five sacks of wheat kept in the barn—which was nearly two months of supply for the locals, probably because the knight wanted to keep any contact with the outside world as limited as possible. The biggest haul was the full steel plate armor kept stacked up. It was old, a little rusted and was bent in some places, and would need repair before it could be used, but now Tiranat was going to get its own plate armor! Hyola wondered who would get to wear it—could it be Calubo...? She grinned just thinking about that mental image.

Wait, was it even allowed to let someone wear plate armor if he wasn't officially a knight? Maybe Lord Kivamus could appoint someone a knight by himself as a baron? Probably so, but that wasn't for her to worry about. She had done her part, and gotten a possibly broken ankle for her trouble. Although she would gladly pay a bigger price if it led to giving slaves a better life and helping Tiranat.

They had also searched the knight's own living quarters thoroughly using a burning torch—where they had found that plate armor—and had also found three good quality swords, a pike, and a big shield, likely his own from the time he used to be an active knight. Some good quality clothes had also been liberated from there, and finally, in a strongbox hidden under the floor, there was a lot of gold. Nearly 300 coins at a quick count, which Feroy had kept with himself for now. The ownership paper of the slaves had also been taken in case a count's patrol found them on the road—although it would be better not to have any need to show them on the way. Feroy had also promised the slaves to let them burn it by themselves once they reached Tiranat as a symbol of their new freedom.

All that was apart from the seven low quality swords used by the dead guards they had taken, as well as any leather armor which was salvageable. She had also found a small stock of the drug Veydril which she was planning to burn, since it didn't have any good uses, but Feroy had taken it with him, claiming it could be used in an interrogation. Hyola had been confused before she realized what he meant and had handed it over with a grimace. Well, whatever helped Tiranat against its countless enemies was fine by her.

Once everything was done and Feroy had kept the wooden board with instructions in the slaves' barn—along with some non-perishable food and a pair of knives—he had spread some blood there too. While the dead bodies had been buried, it wasn't possible to check and remove all blood spatters in the night, so Feroy had thought of that idea. Now anyone coming here to investigate would think it was some bandit group which killed the knight and the guards and stole the slaves—who had obviously resisted thoroughly before being captured. It wouldn't do well to let anyone think that the slaves had escaped without injuries, which could mean they were the ones who had killed their masters. That would never end well for any other slaves in the region.

Finally, Feroy mounted his horse and rode towards her, where she was sitting at the end of the wagon. "You keep an eye on this side, and I'll cover the front."

"You can..." Hyola yawned. "You can count on me."

"Sure I can," Feroy snorted. "We're only going to travel till the sun's up. Just try to stay awake until then. We'll look for a big copse of trees, where we'll hide during the day and let everyone rest. We're only going to travel in the nights till we pass Cinran and reach the road going south to Tiranat."

Hyola nodded. The losuvil powder was doing its effect and she wasn't feeling any pain in her ankle now, but it had also made her a little drowsy. But even without that, normal people needed sleep when they were tired, unlike the ghost in front of her. "Don't worry... I'll manage."

Feroy nodded, before he looked at the wagon drivers. "Let's go! Time's a-wastin'."

With that, he took his horse to the front and started moving southwards at a slow pace. The loot wagon followed behind him—since that driver knew the local terrain for some distance—followed by Hyola's wagon, with her crossbow already loaded in her hands.

It was going to be a long journey, but looking at the weary, exhausted, but hopeful faces of the slaves and their kids, she felt proud of herself.

Hell yeah! This was what Tiranat stood for. She grinned.

Hyola—three; old bastard—zero!

No, wait! She snorted as she remembered where the man was now.

Hyola—three; Dead bastard—zero!

Chapter 399 Village Tour - I

A few days later, Kivamus was visiting the south of the village in the afternoon, with others coming with him. Hudan was walking on one side, with Duvas on the other side, while a few guards had made the usual box formation around them.

Before long, he reached the southeastern gate, where the guards on duty gave a crisp salute and opened the gate immediately. The guard who had lost an arm was also sitting on duty here, although he was usually posted at the manor gates only. Nesser, the man who had gotten half-burnt in Torhan's raid had also recovered by now—at least as much as he was going to—and was now working as a trainer for the new recruits. His heavily scarred appearance made him seem like an instructor from hell, which was exactly what Hudan wanted for the recruits to keep them motivated.

He looked at the watchtower, which was located just beside the gates. One female guard was on duty at the time at the tower platform, accompanied by an older man. The woman was keeping a sharp eye into the distance—where the farms were located—while the man was looking at their group curiously. Half of the tower had already been coated by clay, and a pair of workers were using a wooden bucket while standing on a ladder to apply it further.

Reaching outside the village, he felt satisfied to see that only a narrow stretch of road was remaining there—the same width as the gates—while the trench was ready on both sides. Sharpened branches and stakes had been placed into the trench at somewhat regular but randomized gaps, making it look like a proper moat. Once rainfall filled some water in it, any coming enemies likely wouldn't realize there were intruder-piercing stakes in that water, meant to kill any enemy who dared to attack Tiranat.

Noticing him, the bald foreman Yeden jogged to him.

"Milord! You are here already!"

"Will everything be done by the evening?" Kivamus asked.

"The trench will be done, yes." The foreman gave a confident nod. "That's why I even sent that runner to call you for you to inspect it." He pointed at the moat on the right, where a few laborers were working some distance away. "That's the last stretch. Their digging is already completed, and they are just finishing up with the stakes. Should be done before sunset." He pointed at the palisade walls. "We've already completed the clay coating of the walls on the west, north, and the east."

Yeden pointed further away, nearly at the southwestern corner of the wall. "This southern wall is still being done, as you can see. I think it'll take three or four days to finish this and the last 2 remaining watchtowers. It would have been done a few days earlier, but the captain pulled away the off-duty guards who'd been helping us in putting in the sharp stakes, so everything has to be done by my workers now."

"There are good reasons for that," Kivamus replied, "but I'm sure your workers can do it well enough."

He glanced at the team of workers applying clay on the wall, while one of them brought water in a bucket from the new well which had been dug near the farms. Once everything was done, the palisade walls and the towers would at least become fire resistant, if not fireproof. The other wells had also been completed, and by now there were five wells within the village as well as the last one near the farms, along with new wooden buckets. That would help a lot in taking care of any fire which still managed to take hold in an enemy attack.

"Everything looks good," he praised the foreman. "Did you talk with the hunters who'd gone scouting for a better path to the dam?"

Yeden nodded. "I did, Milord. They told me that the path to the coal mines was the shortest it could be, but they did say that there was a small hill between the mines and the dam which looked like it could be cut through. They said if we make a path through that, the road going from the mines would become much straighter, and a little shorter too. I haven't taken a look at it myself though."

"You should go with those hunters when you have an hour free," Kivamus suggested. "We are not sending out any more hunting groups right now, so they will be here to help you out until we send them west."

"I still have to stay here today to see the stakes are being placed properly, but I'll go tomorrow morning. Are the hunters only going west into the forest to hunt this time?" Yeden asked curiously.

Kivamus glanced at Hudan for a moment. It wouldn't be a good idea to let any rumors spread through the village about it, in case a visiting merchant heard it, and blabbed about it in Cinran or Ulriga. Everything related to their counter raid on Torhan had to be a complete secret from those who weren't involved in it. That was the only way for them to stay clear of any blame in case Torhan—a son of a baron—was killed, even if he was only a bastard.

"Something like that..." he muttered. "Anyway, take all these clay diggers to the hills from tomorrow so they can start widening and flattening the road like we talked about earlier. You will remain that group's foreman."

"Leave it to me, milord." Yeden thumped his chest. "I'll get it done. I can't give you a timeline of when it will be completed until we start it and see what we have to work with, but I'll let you know when I have it. Although it would help a lot if there were a few guards to defend the workers when we're working in the hills. They've all been working here to dig a trench for nearly a month, and it's as safe as it can be here, right under the oversight of the watchtowers, but when we are working in the hills everyone will be worrying about if an adzee is lurking around. That will decrease morale, and will slow down the work."

Hudan shook his head. "Can't do it, Yeden. Not right now. The guards are occupied elsewhere at the moment. I'll send a few men when I have some spare strength, but you'll have to take care of it by yourself until then. You can still leave with the other coal miners in the morning and return with them in the evening. Such a large group won't be touched by an adzee anyway."

"I've already planned to do that," Yeden shrugged. "But it's the rest of the time I'm afraid of."

"Don't worry," Hudan added, "the hunters haven't reported any adzee sighting near the village for the past few weeks. Most likely their packs are moving somewhere else these days. If it's something smaller like a boar, or a wolf, you should be able to take care of it with your numbers. Most of the workers in your group are former limestone cutters. They won't freeze in case of a threat."

"I don't think it will work..." Yeden muttered. "They aren't trained guards..."

Kivamus pondered about it. Until the Torhan counter raid was completed successfully and the guards returned in around 15 to 20 days, they would be too short on guards even to defend the village. It simply wasn't possible to send any of them out to escort any particular group of laborers. But the danger still remained of the workers being attacked by beasts during that time.

"Tell you what," he suggested. "I will give your group some weapons to defend yourself." He looked at Hudan. "Do we have some extra spears?"

"Sure," the captain nodded. "We are a little short on good quality swords, but we have enough spears. Cedoron provides us a new spear basically every day. We also wouldn't be taking many spears for... that thing, since they won't work well in close quarters. I think we can spare some of them."

"Good." Kivamus looked back at the foreman. "We will give you a few spears to defend yourself. In fact, I'll also allot a crossbow for your group's use."

Duvas looked at him sharply. "Are you sure about that, Milord? So far we haven't allowed anyone but the guards to use it. It's risky..."

Kivamus nodded. "There's no other way. The coal miner group has safety in numbers on the road, and they can just blockade the mineshafts in case someone sees an adzee or a bakkore nearby. But those who work at the sawmill and the cementation furnaces are still at risk, just like Yeden's men will be while they construct a road. Giving each group a crossbow is the least we should do for their protection."

"Well, I haven't used these crossbow things," Yeden commented, "but if you think it will help, then I accept."

"Good, then Hudan will hand over some spears and a crossbow to you along with enough bolts. Come to the manor once you get free in the evening, and one of the guards will show you how to use it. It will be your responsibility to keep the crossbow safe. And it's not something to show off to other workers. You will keep it by yourself, and will only use it in case there is a beast or a bandit in front of you."

"I agree with those conditions," Yeden shook his head. "But I can't do it myself. I'll be too busy overseeing the workers. If I take my eyes from them for just a single moment, they start to slack off. I can't ride them to keep working hard if I am on the lookout for a threat all day. But I'll put one of the workers on lookout, and he'll do that task."

"Hmm..." Kivamus muttered. "Let Duvas know who you will be handing over the crossbow to, so he can clear the person. In fact, bring him to the manor so the guards can train him in its use. That worker will also have to give the crossbow back to the manor every evening when the group returns, and he can take it again the next morning before leaving."

"That's fine," Yeden nodded. "Although I don't think my men even know how to use spears..."

"You know what, bring all your workers to the manor in the evening. We will hand a spear to all of them, and we will select who will use it based on those who can follow the instructions properly. There is no point in giving a spear to someone who can't even plant it on the ground properly when needed." He looked at the captain. "Hudan. Put Tesyb or Kerel on it. Nesser would be way too much for civilians."

Duvas snorted. "The workers will just run away when he starts yelling at them. He's as scary as an adzee even to our guards."

Hudan chuckled. "True enough. Don't worry, I'll take care of it,"

"Good." Kivamus looked back at the foreman. "Well, carry on then. Good work with the trenches."

"Thank you, milord," Yeden smiled proudly. Then he gave a short bow, and jogged off to his workers.

Chapter 400 Testing - I

"It'll be completed sooner than we estimated," Duvas replied, looking at the third longhouse block. "One of Taniok's apprentices who's acting as the foreman here said another week at most to get it ready for people to start living in. Having Trevalo's six extra wagons has helped us immensely. These workers' past experience from making the first two blocks is also helping them work faster."

"That's good to hear," Kivamus said. He glanced at the makeshift camp where the people from the encampment had been staying on the left side of the third block, which would become a market square

in the future. They all had been put to work wherever more laborers were needed, although some of the elderly amongst them were still there keeping an eye on their children who were running around and playing. The late spring weather was mild enough—neither too hot nor too cold—so it wasn't a problem staying in the open in the nights, but soon they'd all be able to live indoors after the third block got ready.

"The completion of the third block will help with the overcrowding in the other blocks too," Duvas said after noticing his gaze. "It still won't be enough though to house all the people living in the courtyards and sleeping on the floors, even with its double housing capacity."

"That's why we aren't stopping after this." Kivamus looked across the third block, where the foundation work for the fourth block was already underway. Once the third block was done, the fourth one—also with two floors and double the usual capacity—would be the next building to be constructed.

After that, they should finally be able to catch up with the housing problem, and should probably be able to provide a separate bunk to everyone who stayed in the village. Unless even more refugees arrived by then, depending on how successful Feroy's rumor-spreading operation went, and how soon they could start sending liberation squads to bring in slaves here. He chuckled. It would mean they couldn't stop constructing housing any time soon, but that would be a good problem to have.

"Let's go to Darora's workshop now," he ordered. "He must be getting impatient to show off his latest toy."

"The man is enthusiastic in his work," Duvas snorted. "That's for sure. I can imagine him getting restless to start the testing."

Kivamus and the captain laughed as they all turned west and started walking again.

He looked at the captain. "Do you think the scouts would have found Torhan's compound by now?"

Hudan shrugged. "I don't have nearly as much experience moving through forest as the hunters or Feroy. But we had selected the four best men from our five hunting squads—that's a pool of 18 skilled men, excluding the two village trappers. They all are experienced hunters now, and they know how to look for prey that doesn't want to be found. If anyone knows how to move quickly and without leaving a trail, it's them." He glanced to the west. "They left three days ago, so let's say it took two days for them

to reach near Kirnos—it's usually a day and a half journey, but they'd move slower through the forests. That means they've had a full day to travel north of Kirnos and look for that compound based on the directions Joric gave. I'd say they would've found the place by last evening, and by now they must be keeping an eye on it."

Kivamus nodded slowly as they moved ahead of the third block and turned right towards the northern village wall. "Let's hope they can find everything about the compound by the time we send the other guards there. Levalas also left yesterday with two wagons, so he and the two recruits would also reach Kirnos by this evening. Hopefully their ruse of acting as a coal merchant isn't found out, and they will manage to convince Joric's family to move back with them."

Duvas exhaled. "As much as I disliked your decision of letting Levalo live, I can't deny that the kid really is far too talented. At this point, I believe using him as a regular guard is just wasting his skills."

"I agree," Hudan said with a nod. "He's like a younger version of Feroy, but with a slightly different skillset."

Kivamus laughed. "True. Feroy is the master of the jungle, and no enemy can lay a finger on him at night. His strategies and intuitions are exceptionally good. But Levalas... he's a master of disguise. He can infiltrate any place he wants to without people getting any idea of it. Let's just say I hope we don't need to use his true skills anytime soon."

Duvas nodded, somber. "I agree. If we need to send him to assassinate someone—assuming he even wants to do something like that in the future—it will only mean that times are not going well for Tiranat. I hope it doesn't come to that."

"Yeah..." Hudan muttered. "I prefer having an honest fight with an enemy, whether it's a giant like Nokozal or someone else. Battling swords with an enemy in front of you is the only proper way to send him to the goddess. It's just more honorable this way."

Kivamus shook his head, knowing that Hudan's childhood spent dreaming of becoming a gallant knight as he saw real knights coming and going near his home outside Ulriga—as well as his training as a squire—meant he often wanted to follow the so-called knightly ideals in battle.

"Our enemies aren't trying to use such honorable methods. You know that, right?" he asked rhetorically. "So far, people have tried to assassinate me at least three times—that I know of—and they certainly aren't going to stop in the future when they see our village getting stronger and more prosperous. As noble and honorable as it may seem to have an honest swordfight with a foe, that's not how our enemies operate. We can either adapt to their methods, or we won't live to see the future..."

Hudan didn't reply, and just looked ahead, like he was lost in thoughts.

Kivamus let him be, knowing that his own habit of reverting to Earth's 21st-century modern ideals—or at least how they were supposed to be in theory—was not really suitable for this brutal medieval world. So even for him, it was the same as what he was preaching to Hudan. Either you adapted to this cruel world—at least in some ways—or you died...

Before long, they reached some distance west of the center point of the northern wall, where Darora's workshop was located and entered the shed. A group of apprentices was hard at work as usual, and they gave him and the group nods of respect before they went back to their work. Some of them were cutting logs into smaller pieces of wood, others trimming them into something resembling the shape that was needed. The blonde woman Layita—whom Darora had claimed was his best apprentice—was shaping the trigger, the nut, the trigger guard, and other small parts.

As he watched, one of the younger apprentices went to her to ask for some advice. Layita only had to take a single look at the wooden part he was holding in his hands for her to start describing what he was doing wrong. Darora was indeed right that she was talented.

He still hadn't seen Darora though, nor the scorpion. Before he could ask, Layita noticed him looking around and jerked a thumb behind her, towards the west.

"Boss is back there with the scorpion," she said, answering the unasked question, before she went back to work again.

Kivamus nodded in thanks, although she wasn't even looking at him anymore. He chuckled, appreciating her work ethic.

"Come on then. Let's go."

They circled around the workshop, and finally saw a small group of people in the distance, standing around something. That had to be Darora's group.

They kept walking, and before long the young carpenter noticed them.

"Milord, you're finally here!" Darora grinned as he jogged to him and pointed at the wooden contraption. "I can't wait to finally start the testing!"

Kivamus looked at it. Yeah, that was a scorpion, alright.

"It's ready!" the carpenter reported. "I brought it here this morning in a cart and was just getting the others to set up a proper target for this. It's way too risky to test anywhere near other people. Except for those on watchtower duty, nobody else comes to the northwestern corner of the village, since there is nothing here—not even a gate. It was the safest place I could think of for the testing."

Kivamus nodded and looked at the wooden scorpion.

It sat low and wide on a heavy timber frame, with thick prods on the front and a long central rail that would hold the bolt in place. Powerful torsion springs had been attached at the front on both sides of the prod, which would store the immense potential energy needed to launch the bolt to such a huge distance. The winching or rather, the reloading mechanism was mounted to one side, with a pair of wooden gears and a crank that could be worked steadily without needing brute strength.

Plank shields rose on both sides near the sightline, angled to cover the operator's torso while still leaving room to aim and reload. The whole thing was mounted on a swiveling pivot, so it could be turned after it was installed on a watchtower, instead of forcing the crew to drag the entire machine to adjust its aim. The pivot had leather layered around the contact points to absorb some of the recoil and keep the movement from grinding itself apart.

At a quick glance, the scorpion looked exactly like that in his blueprint, but one thing kept occurring in his mind—whether the wrought iron would be able to take on the stresses involved in this. The cementation furnaces would still take a couple of weeks to give the first batch of steel—which is what they planned to use in the second scorpion. That's why he had stopped the blacksmith from making more metal components for the second scorpion until they had tested this one properly.