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Chapter 42. Blending In

Duvas shook his head. "No, my Lord. We only have an alehouse at the market square, with a couple of rooms for visitors on its upper floor, as well as the hall on its ground floor. Tiranat is a small enough village that it has always been enough for the few visitors, mainly the traveling merchants, who come here." He added, "Last I checked, the owner of the alehouse had already taken in a few people there."

Kivamus gave a nod. "Alright, let's leave it at that. And from what you told me earlier, we already have enough grain in the barns to feed the entire village for at least ten days. By that time, Pydas will already be back with a new shipment."

Duvas offered a nod in confirmation. "Indeed, my Lord," he replied. "With that buffer, issuing these additional rations shouldn't be a problem, especially since it's temporary." A thoughtful expression crossed his features. "Since today is the first day of our free meal program, there are bound to be more villagers gathered outside the gates out of curiosity than the actual number we'll be feeding. It would be a good opportunity to announce this new incentive program."

"That's a good idea," Kivamus nodded. "Get the word out there today itself. Then, tomorrow morning, when the workers report for doing labor work, announce it again, so that everyone finds out about this."

Thinking for a moment, he continued, "While we're at it, let's add another point to tomorrow's announcement. Inform them that after a week, once our grain stores are replenished, we'll be offering grain sacks to the village merchants at cost price. Since we are buying the grain in bulk, our prices should still be a little lower than what Pydas would have offered them. It's a win-win situation - we recoup some of our grain investment, and the merchants get a chance to resell at a fair profit to those who still have the means to buy it, to earn some income and feed their families."

Kivamus' brow furrowed slightly as he gazed at everyone gathered in the manor hall. The fire crackled in the hearth, casting long shadows that danced on the walls. Looking at Feroy, he remembered that the ex-mercenary was nowhere to be found in the morning. "Feroy," he called out. "Where were you earlier? When we were talking about the guards for the caravan, I looked for you within the manor, but didn't see you anywhere."

Feroy chuckled. "Actually, milord," he admitted, putting down his tankard of ale on the table, "I was down in the village, getting the lay of the land. See what the villagers are feeling about their new baron."

He continued, "Talked with some vendors at the market square, listened to Hudan's announcements there - even spent an hour at the alehouse later on. Folks get real chatty after a few pints, you know?."

Kivamus hadn't expected that kind of initiative from him. Looking at the surprised face of Hudan, it seemed even he hadn't realized that Feroy was standing within the crowd. The ex-mercenary clearly had a knack for blending in, a skill that could prove very useful in the future.

"It was a good idea going there," he conceded with a nod, a hint of grudging respect in his voice. "So, what do the villagers think?"

Feroy stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Too early to say for sure," he began. "Every villager has their own way of looking at things, you know? But after the announcements about work and food, the general mood seems positive. Most folks are happy they'll have a chance to earn grain and coal for their families from tomorrow. Especially the older ones, the ones who thought they'd have to spend the winter begging for scraps."

He took a swig of his ale, the firelight gleaming off his tankard. "Of course, even if these announcements were completely unexpected to them, they have had a lot of bad experiences in the past where the nobles made big promises which never came true. So they are hopeful, sure, but they gotta see it to believe it, you know? Whether they truly have a baron who actually cares about them, or it's just another empty promise."

Kivamus nodded. While he was doing his best to ensure everyone's survival through the winter, and he wanted to do a lot more for the village in the future, he wasn't naive enough to believe he'd win over every villager's heart overnight. "That's fair enough, Feroy," he conceded with a slow nod. "Earning people's trust takes time, especially after a string of disappointments."

"Anything else?" he probed, leaning forward in his chair. "There must be a few people who aren't exactly thrilled with the changes."

Feroy grunted, swirling the ale in his tankard thoughtfully. "There were a handful of them who were grumbling, for sure. Mostly folks who hold a grudge against the manor in general. They haven't forgotten about the manor guards not helping them during the recent bandit raid."

Duvas sighed. "I did tell you all that we just didn't have enough guards during that raid, to protect the manor and the village at the same time."

Feroy's gaze locked with Duvas. "I realize that, but the villagers don't care about the reasons, do they?" He added, "All they see is a group of bandits rolling in, pillaging their homes, and the manor guards nowhere to be seen." He shrugged. "It's a harsh reality, but they're not wrong. The guards didn't fight the bandits."

Duvas released a weary sigh, the weight of responsibility apparent on his features. "I can't deny that," he conceded, running a hand through his thinning hair.

"Truth be told," Hudan added, "I'd say the bandits expected the manor guards coming out to attack them, which is why they focused on quickly plundering as much as they could and rode away before giving enough time for the guards to respond. Otherwise, it could have been much worse."

"Makes sense, I suppose," Kivamus conceded. "At least no one died in that raid, or those grumbles might have turned far more serious. However, dwelling on the past won't solve anything." He continued, "Our focus now must be on preparedness, so that nobody in the village dies or gets all their life savings, including their stored food stolen by bandits."

Hudan, his face grim, nodded curtly. "Indeed, my Lord. The bandits won't be so timid next time, especially since they would have seen that the guards remained inside the manor. They would expect the manor defenses to be weak and would come prepared for a fight. And if they come in big enough numbers, they might even attempt to breach the walls of the manor itself."

He continued, "It won't be easy to defend against such an attack right now, since we'll be spread too thin for the next fortnight. Escorting the grain caravan means a dozen guards will always be out of Tiranat for the next two weeks, leaving only half our force to defend both the manor and the village, just like it was before we hired the new guards."

"We'll have to make do with what we have," Kivamus said. "But on the bright side, once they return, we'll have a full complement of two dozen guards."

Hudan's lips curved into a determined smile. "Indeed, my Lord. I assure you, I'll do my best to whip them into a good enough shape that we can repel any bandit attacks after these two weeks."

Kivamus leaned back in his chair. He added, "Hopefully, we'll have that much time. But in this uncertain world, we can never be sure, can we?"

~ Tesyb ~

Sitting inside the servant hall now, Tesyb savored the last spoonful of his warm porridge, a content sigh escaping his lips. Earlier that day, when Hudan, the gruff captain of the guard, had announced his selection as one of the new manor guards, the whoop of pure joy that erupted from him and his fellow recruits had echoed loudly throughout the training grounds. The news had brought a surge of excitement, a testament to the life-altering opportunity that lay before them.

He had even noticed the new baron, Lord Kivamus Ralokaar, watching them for a while during the selection process, his pale skin and highly unusual silver hair noticeable easily. He looked young, probably the same age as his own twenty-two years, but lacked the muscled physique common with heavy labor, or the golden jewelry commonly associated with nobles. But Tesyb had returned his focus to his upcoming fight, so he didn't notice when the baron had walked away from the training grounds.

Gazing around the bustling servant hall, with other servants, guards and maids coming and going continuously, he took in the sight of his new surroundings. A door opened to the communal kitchen on the right, where maids were busy transferring the huge amounts of porridge they had prepared from the cooking pots into wooden buckets. A staircase next to the kitchen door went to the floor above, with the upper floor being restricted for use by only the female servants. For the male servants and the guards, two rows of straw mattresses were lined up next to the walls on the wooden floor, quite unlike the dirt floor of his own house. This was where he was sitting now, along with the other new recruits having their meal. A large fireplace crackled merrily on the left wall, casting flickering shadows that danced across the room, close to where they were sitting.

The two-story structure, its strong wooden beams bathed in the warm glow of the roaring fireplace, offered a sense of security and stability he hadn't known for a long time. Even now, with half of the new recruits already stationed at the manor gates, the voices of the remaining men, along with the other off-duty guards and servants filled the hall with a low hum of conversation. This, he thought looking around the cozy hall, would be his home for the foreseeable future.

However, with a dozen new recruits joining the ranks of the existing guards, the once-spacious hall was bound to feel crowded. Yet, there was a comforting camaraderie in the shared living quarters, a sense of belonging that soothed the ache of misery prevalent in the village. There was also the fact that while the

actual number of mattresses was lower than the total number of guards and servants, many of them would be on duty at any given time, which would mean enough empty sleeping spaces for those who needed to rest.

Unlike other recruits, he had been assigned a different task. He was part of the contingent tasked with escorting a vital caravan departing for Cinran at dawn. The boisterous chatter of the new guards, most of whom hadn't left the village since arriving in Tiranat as children, including Tesyb himself, filled the air with a nervous excitement. The prospect of an expedition to the bustling town of Cinran, which was said to be teeming with life, was both daunting and exhilarating. But tonight, they were granted a reprieve from guard duty, allowed to rest before the journey began tomorrow.

Yet, he did realize that even if they had been equipped with well-used leather armor as well as swords and shields, which made many of them feel like seasoned guards unlike the fresh recruits they actually were, the journey was not going to be easy. The dangers of escorting a caravan through dense forests, especially after the recent bandit raid and the ambush which took the life of the previous baron was still fresh in their minds. But, even if he hadn't ever trained as a guard, he had found in the training earlier that he could still hold his own even against some of the veteran guards. A sliver of fear danced in his chest, but it was eclipsed by a newfound sense of purpose. He was a guard now, a protector, and he was determined to live up to the responsibility that came with the title.

Earlier in the evening, a pang of guilt was gnawing at his heart. The warmth and comfort of the hall, the camaraderie of his fellow guards, had all felt undeserved when he had pictured his hungry parents huddled in their cold, dark shack.