

Londoner 171

Chapter 171 A Good Haul

"In warmer weather, certainly," Sryne explained. "And if it's the middle of summer, those leaves won't be of any use after only a few hours of plucking them. But it's winter right now and it's snowing heavily near those hills, and that cold weather will preserve those leaves for much longer. We can easily use them for four or five days if we keep them packed with snow, and maybe even for a whole week."

"That makes sense..." Kivamus realized that refrigeration would certainly slow down the degradation of those leaves, just like it did for stored meat or vegetables. The reason losuvil leaves couldn't be stored for long in the summer was simply because there was no artificial refrigeration available in this world without any access to electricity. That meant transporting these vines would make them lose their effects, unless they were located within a couple of hours journey from a town, at most. But in the freezing weather they had these days, it meant that they would still have viable losuvil leaves for a week.

He looked at the young hunter. "Alright. You have just arrived today, so you can rest for the night, but tomorrow morning you and your group will have to leave again to those hills, since you all are the only one who can find those hills again. But this time it will be a short trip, since your target is not to hunt but to gather as many losuvil leaves as you can in bags. Of course, if you luckily see some animals you can easily hunt on the way, that's just fine, but otherwise you have to hurry to return with those leaves as soon as possible."

Yufim gave a confident nod while sneaking another glance at Sryne. "Leave it to me, milord! Your compass would help us find those hills easily and I'll make sure to bring all of them." He added enthusiastically, "No leaf shall escape my grasp!"

Kivamus just shook his head at the archer, while Feroy gave a snort.

"You should put some snow in the packs in which you'll store those leaves on the journey back," Sryne suggested. "That would keep them cold enough to preserve their effect for longer."

"Of course!" Yufim nodded readily. "I won't forget to do it, Miss Sryne!"

"Alright then, go and take some rest now," Kivamus ordered. "You should also tell others in your group about this so you all can leave early tomorrow morning."

"I will, milord." And after a quick bow, Yufim exited through the outer doors.

Kivamus thought of something and looked at Sryne. "Is it possible to replant those vines here, if we ask the hunters to bring a few of them?"

Sryne shook her head. "Not really, milord. Those vines are very delicate, and ma had already tried doing it a few times when she attempted to replant those vines from the nearby forests to our inn's garden patch. But it never works. Uprooting them and trying to replant them kills the plants every single time."

"It's okay I guess," Kivamus muttered. "Even without replanting them, it's really good to know that we will have a steady source of losuvil just a day away from us." Then he thought more about it. "But it still won't be helpful to us after the winter, will it?"

Sryne nodded reluctantly. "That's why those leaves are so costly. Apart from a few herbalists in towns who have somehow cultivated it in their own gardens to sell it to anyone who needs it there, it is really difficult to get access to those leaves, since their leaves lose their effect within a few hours in the summer. And for those living far away from bigger towns, unless a losuvil vine is located within a few hours of where they live, it is pointless to find them in the wild, since they can neither bring their leaves home to store for later use, nor they can replant that vine."

Kivamus gave an understanding nod. Gorsazo had lost his wife to fever in the past because he couldn't bring those leaves to home on time. "Duvass told me earlier that it cost nearly a week's wages for a labourer to buy them just for a single use. That means it would be very difficult for those in need to be able to afford it."

The majordomo nodded. He remarked after a moment of thought, "If I remember correctly, a freshly grinded paste of losuvil leaves goes for around six silver pieces in Cinran for each use."

"That's indeed very costly..." Kivamus muttered.

Duvass sighed. "It's such a waste that we have such a big source of losuvil leaves nearby, but we can't do anything about it. If only we could sell it to the bigger cities," he added wistfully, "it would become a good source of income for us, while helping others in need at the same time."

Kivamus knew that if he were a trained botanist he might have been able to do something about it, but despite all the time he had spent on the internet reading about things, biology or botany had never interested him much. He looked at Syryne to whom he had given that task. "Keep trying to find a way to preserve it somehow. We are going to get a lot of those leaves in a couple of days but like you said, they are only going to last for a week. That's how long we have to find a way to preserve them otherwise they would all just go to waste."

"I have thought of some other methods to try this time," Syryne told him. "We didn't have any spare losuvil leaves here for me to experiment with until now, but I'll try my best in the coming week."

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Thinking about helping in at least some way, Kivamus suggested, "This time, separate the leaves into a dozen or so different batches, and give a number to each. We should certainly have enough spare clay pots in the kitchen, so you can use them as well. Try to think of a different way to preserve them with each batch, but do the whole process on the same day so you can compare the results easily. And make sure to write the exact method you had used for each batch in a piece of parchment. This way if we get lucky and any of them are still usable after the coming week, you will know what you did right with them, so you can improve on it further."

Syryne seemed to be thinking about it. "That's a nice way, milord. I didn't consider doing it like that. I was thinking of picking a few leaves at a time and trying to do something with them, but keeping them in separate batches and trying the preservation on the same day would certainly make it easier in so many ways."

Kivamus smiled. What he was suggesting was something which would sound simple enough to any person on modern earth, but without any access to good education, and without a history of a few centuries of scientific experiments, this world's people still had to discover such ways. He was glad that he could help at least this much, since he couldn't give more help for any experiments with plants. It would take two days for the hunters to return with the leaves, so he would still try to think if there was any unique way he could suggest to preserve those leaves.

It had been two days since they had sent the hunters to get the leaves, and they were expected to be back by evening. However, there was still no news about Hudan, and they were three or four days late from when they had been expected to return.

By now, even Feroy seemed to be frowning all the time, and since yesterday, he was constantly taking a few hours to patrol around the village after he had told Kivamus that one possible reason for Hudan being late was that they had encountered another bandit group, which meant they had to be fully alert until the group was back. Without the eight guards who had gone to the quarry, it had meant that the remaining guards were even pulling double shifts in some cases to make sure that each gate of the manor had at least four men ready to fight, while they had also increased the number of men on patrols in the village, especially in the nights.

Duvas had also prayed to the goddess many times since yesterday, hoping for the safe return of the guards, while Kivamus had tried to make himself busy in drawing more blueprints, apart from participating in some light training with the guards.

He knew that they needed to start dewatering the coal mines soon, so he was also trying to think if he could design something which could be constructed from the available resources in the village to help them do it faster. But he still needed to visit the mines first to get a better idea of what would be required, and that had to wait until they had all the guards back.

At this time, the sun was already close to setting, although it was only a guess with how cloudy it had been since yesterday. Apart from that, the short respite from snowfall in the previous few days had ended, and it had been snowing continuously since the morning, making it a daunting task to go out in the snow.

Right now Kivamus and others were sitting inside the manor hall once again. A servant entered, and told them that the hunters who had gone to the east had arrived.

Kivamus told him to allow one of them to come inside, and soon Yufim entered the hall.

The young hunter seemed to be shivering a little, and there was snow gathered on his hair and shoulders above his leather armor. Of course, the few spare fur coats they had, had already been given to the guards who had gone to the quarry, so the hunting groups still had to brave the snow without proper gear.

"Milord, we have brought all the losuvil leaves we could find there," Yufim reported while rubbing his hands together for warmth. "I didn't know where to keep them so I have put the sack outside the door for now."

"Oh, you brought a whole sack of it!" Syryne exclaimed from nearby. "And that's a good idea. The cold would help to preserve the leaves."

"Well done, Yufim!" Kivamus praised the young guard, who beamed in response. "Now go and warm yourself up," Kivamus ordered, "you look like you're freezing. Make sure to get something to eat soon."

The archer nodded, "Of course, milord. I heard that Madam Nerida has prepared a meat stew for us in the servants hall, from a deer which the other hunting group had brought yesterday." And then with a quick bow, Yufim exited the hall.

Kivamus looked at Syryne. "You know what to do with the leaves. You can use the help of as many servants as you need to lift that sack and divide the leaves."

"If I may suggest something," Duvas interrupted, "that's a big haul of losuvil leaves we have gotten, and most of it would likely go to waste in a week anyway. So I'd suggest taking a small part of it - just a few handfuls would be enough - and to send it with a servant to give to anyone who needs it in the village. There are many labourers - especially those who are climbing the trees or cutting them - who get some small nicks and cuts every day, and without any access to losuvil leaves in the village, they have to make do without it."

Kivamus didn't have to think long about it. "That's an excellent idea! It would be a good chance to help them and gain some goodwill, especially after we couldn't prevent the bandits from entering the village in that raid." He added, "Syryne, instead of just giving them the leaves, use some of it to make a paste from it, and give it to the servants to distribute to whoever needs it in the village."

"I'll do it immediately," Syryne replied and exited the hall.

After a few hours, it had gotten fully dark, while the snowfall had continued unabated. Kivamus was now alone with Gorsazo and the majordomo, and he couldn't help but worry about Hudan and the other guards.

"They will be alright, won't they?" he asked no one in particular.

"Let's hope so, my lord," Gorsazo replied, while Duvas seem to be looking upwards, probably praying to the goddess again.

Chapter 172 Journey

~ Maisy ~

~ Going back to her new family! ~

It was fully dark now, but Maisy had nearly reached her home. Yes, her home! She was returning from the school - which was a new word for her, before papa told her that it was a place where nobles sent their kids to get educated. Immediately, Timmy had asked whether it meant that they were nobles now, but sadly papa had told them that the Lord baron of the village just wanted everyone in the village to get educated - and by his very own teacher!

But Maisy didn't care that she wasn't a noble, because her mom had told her that becoming educated would make it easier for them to become maids in the manor, and it would open other doors for them in the future. She had been confused about how it would open any door without someone pulling it open, but later she had laughed a lot along with Elsie when she found out the meaning.

Her best friend was walking next to her right now, while their younger brothers were chattering about something walking ahead of them, with Leif walking behind them while talking to a friend of his. Their new teacher - Gorsazo - was teaching all the villagers together after they returned from work, so when the class had ended, every villager had started returning to their home at the same time - well, at least those who didn't live in that huge new building.

During the class, their teacher was telling them about how to make some squiggly shapes on a small wooden board. Maisy had tried to copy it perfectly, while her younger brother just doodled on it, like he often did on the ground.

She grinned as she remembered the snowball fight which Elsie and her had started after they exited that huge building - which was called a very long house - and their younger brothers had joined them immediately. That had delayed them a little, until Leif had scolded all of them to hurry back home. But this time she had won the fight, no matter what her best friend claimed about winning it herself! And right now, there were still some other people walking in the dark alleys while going to their own homes, so she didn't feel scared in the dark.

As they passed the market square and turned into the alley leading to their home, she felt a little chilly in the falling snow, but she knew that her home wasn't far away now. And her new mom had promised that they would have some meat for dinner tonight! When Timmy had asked papa about where he got it from, because even he knew that most of the shops had been closed in the market square for months, papa had told them that the new baron was now sending his own hunters deep into the forest to kill dangerous beasts. Now they were bringing a lot of meat which they had started selling to the butcher in the market square, so he had used some of his savings to buy it for them as a late celebration for them becoming a new family.

Soon, they all reached in front of their home, but then she heard someone shouting from nearby, making their parents come out of the house. Leif held all of them close to him protectively, but soon they saw a manor guard walking in that alley along with a manor servant who was holding a small clay pot in his hands. Their neighbours had also come out of their houses to see what was happening, and seeing the small crowd the guard began to speak.

"Listen up, everyone! Lord Kivamus has generously sent us to see if any villager needs losuvil paste for any injury," the guard announced. "Is there anyone like that here?"

Maisy didn't know what that... losuvil was, so she looked at Leif who looked very surprised.

"But that's... very costly!" one of the neighbours exclaimed. "None of us can afford to buy it from you right now."

The guard grinned. "Don't worry about the cost. For today, this paste is being distributed for free to whoever needs it. If any of you are injured, just let us know."

"What? Is that really for free?" papa asked with wonder.

"Where did he get that many losuvil leaves anyway?" another neighbour asked. "I know there aren't any more of them left near the village."

"I can't tell you that," the guard replied, "even if I did know about it. The baron has clearly told me and the other guard who is distributing the paste that we aren't allowed to tell you anything about that. But if you need it, you can still take some of it from us. This paste will last much longer in this freezing weather, so it should be helpful to you in the next few days too."

While the older people still seemed too surprised to say anything, Leif took a step forward. "Please give me some of it then. I got a small cut in my arm when chopping down a branch in the north today."

The guard nodded and gestured to the servant to give some of it. And immediately everyone started asking for it! But Maisy didn't think all of them were hurt. Were they?

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Then Elsie whispered in her ear, "Maybe they all want to sell it to others who haven't gotten it."

"Oh..." Maisy muttered. Should she ask for some of it too? Then she shook her head. Where would she even keep it anyway? Leif and papa were already taking some of that paste - whatever it was. That should be enough for them.

When everyone had gotten some of it, the guard began walking away, but Leif shouted, "Please thank the baron for us!"

Maisy still wasn't sure about all of it, but she followed her new big brother's lead, and shouted her thanks as well, even though she hadn't even taken any paste. Elsie and their younger brothers also copied her, making all of them giggle.

"Come on, you all," ma scolded them. "It's very cold outside. You don't want to let the meat stew get cold, do you?"

"Noo..." the younger boys immediately wailed and went running inside the house, while followed by others at a slower pace.

Maisy just watched them all walk for a moment, before she smiled and started walking too. She was feeling so happy today. She had joined a school like a noble's daughter, she had found a new family and a new home, and there was freshly cooked meat waiting for them inside!

She grinned. Life was good!

~ Hyola ~

Hyola was feeling so tired right now. And she was hungry. And it was so damned cold with the snow falling continuously. Calubo had told her that it should be less than a week's journey to reach the village, but they had already been travelling for ten days now. Or was it eleven days? She wasn't sure. Just when would they reach Tiranat?

She sighed. There was no point in getting agitated. She already knew that they had kept losing track of their location again and again in the forests, and sometimes even when they knew where to go, there was no good path between the trees for their two wagons, which meant they had to backtrack many times, making the journey even longer. At least the wagons were sturdy enough and built to travel through the forests while carrying heavy limestone blocks, which meant they hadn't broken down on the way. Although many times they all had to climb down from the wagon and push it from behind to move it when one of them got stuck on something. The guards and some of the slaves also had to clear the path many times with some axes.

As her stomach growled again she wondered when she would get to eat a full meal again. But then she snorted. Had she already been spoiled by getting a good meal twice a day since the time the guards had arrived to rescue them?

She fondly remembered the first few days after leaving the quarry. It had been wonderful, with the guards preparing enough porridge for all of them every evening, coupled with some dried meat and even some hardtack biscuits. To all the slaves it had felt like they were having a feast every day after being on the brink of starvation before that.

However, the guards had only brought a limited amount of food for their journey - which was expected to last only a little more than a week - so their rations had started getting low a few days ago, making the guard captain announce that everyone would only get half meals from then. For some reason, they hadn't found any animals to hunt either, which had made their problems worse. But she had seen that the guards were also eating only half rations, so it wasn't like they were having a feast themselves while barely giving anything to the slaves - quite unlike when the stonecutters lived under the rule of bandits at the quarry.

Hyola had also been giving some of her own meal to the older slaves, since they needed it even more to survive in this freezing weather, which had made her feel even more hungry these days. At least the guards lit a fire every evening when they stopped for the night, otherwise she didn't know if any of them could have survived this cold. But during the day, when they had to sit on the wagons, all of them had to stay huddled together for warmth.

After travelling south for many days through the forests, when they had finally exited the woods to find a dirt road going west to east, she had hoped that at least it would be easy going from now on, since they wouldn't get lost now. But snowfall had started the very same day and it hadn't stopped since then, burying the dirt road under snow, and making all of them cold, hungry and miserable.

Some of the older stonecutters were already worried if they would even survive this journey, while a few of them had even started blaming her, saying that at the quarry, at least they knew what to expect, and they were familiar with the place. She didn't know if there was anything she could reply to them, other than to hope for the best, so she had remained quiet against their grumblings.

But in the past few days, even she had started to get some doubts about whether she had made the right decision. Hopefully, the goddess would take care of all of them, otherwise she wouldn't be able to forgive herself for making the older slaves leave the only home they had known, as bad as the situation had been there.

Out of the four guards who had been riding on their horses, the guard captain had made sure that one of them was always ahead of them to scout the road, while another one was trailing back behind them since the time they had turned to the east on this road.

As it started to get dark, Hyola saw the leading scout returning back towards them on his horse under the constant snowfall, and she dreaded another bad news, since that's all they had been getting recently. Usually it was about the path ahead being too narrow for the wagons to cross when they were still in the forests, while other times it was about the scouts having seen some dangerous beast ahead - including an adzee one dreary afternoon - which made turning around to find another path the only good option.

As the guard reached closer to them, Hyola noticed that he seemed to be grinning. Once he reached closer to the guard captain - who was riding on his own horse - the scout jerked his thumb behind him and announced, "Captain! Tiranat is just ahead of the next bend in the road!"

Chapter 173 Arrival

Immediately, there was a loud cheer from everyone. Some of the stonecutters even began to whoop and clap, being enthusiastic about reaching the place for which they had been travelling for so long now.

The guard captain ordered the wagons to start moving faster, saying that he wanted to reach before nightfall if possible, although the sun must already have set by now - but it was difficult to tell in the constant snowfall. Then he rode ahead with another rider to report about their arrival to the baron, leaving the other guards to lead them to the village.

The sky was still overcast, just like the past few days, and it seemed like it had been snowing for a while here, since there was a thin layer of snow already gathered on the ground. By this time, all of the slaves had turned to face the front, hoping to catch a glimpse of their new home, and they didn't have to wait too long.

As they turned around a small bend in the road, she found that they had finally arrived at Tiranat. The first thing she noticed under the falling snow was a towering palisade wall in front of them, although it seemed like there was a gap in the wall in front of the road. Maybe it wasn't completed yet? It certainly wasn't a stone wall like some of the bigger towns had, but it was far better than the quarry which just had a makeshift barricade to stop any wild beasts from coming inside. But she still hadn't expected such a remote village to have any kind of wall at all.

Before long, their small caravan of two wagons and the two remaining riders passed the gap between the wall, and Hyola saw that there was still around a hundred yards of empty space in front of the wall before the first houses of the village. But why? Wouldn't it have been better to make the walls closer?

As they reached closer, she saw a few villagers coming out of their houses or peeking from their windows at the new arrivals. However, as their wagons entered the village proper, she realized that the majority of the houses in the village were just huts - just like the ones they were living in at the quarry!

They would barely protect anyone from the freezing winds or the constantly falling snow. How was this going to be any better for the slaves than how they were living at the quarry? Even the rare wooden houses she saw in the village had more than a few holes in them and looked patched over many times. It seemed like the village was just as poor as the quarry! Would they even have enough extra grain to feed all the new arrivals?

Now she was starting to doubt herself again. Had she really made the right decision to come here? But Calubo, who had been riding a horse on the side of the wagon, noticed her expression and told her not to worry and to trust the baron. She just gave a nod to him, hoping he hadn't lied to them.

They kept travelling through the narrow alleys and she felt that many of the huts were completely empty at this time. But why would their occupants be outside their homes in the night, especially in this freezing weather? Or maybe the huts were just standing there, and nobody lived there anyway? That was weird. Where did all those villagers go then? Suddenly she felt a pang of dread in her heart. They weren't executed by the baron for some stupid reason, were they? Or did they just leave the village, because they didn't have enough food here? Hyola wasn't sure what to think, but she couldn't get rid of the doubts in her mind now.

Soon, they reached a big empty area, ahead of which she noticed another palisade wall, this one only around half the height of the earlier one. Was this where the mighty baron lived? Hah! Even his own grand abode wasn't immune to the falling snow, seeing how a thin layer of snow was gathered even inside the manor.

As their wagons stopped for a moment in front of the gates, she looked inside the busy manor grounds with envy, as a few guards including Calubo left the caravan and entered the gates with their horse and the two nodors. Now there was only a single guard driving each wagon, apart from a fat new guard who had come out from the manor.

So the guards in the manor did get to eat a lot, even if the rest of the village lived in huts? Was the baron of this village really a benevolent person like the guards had claimed? Hyola wasn't too sure about it now. Then the fat guard pointed forward to the left of the manor and told the wagon drivers to start moving the horses again after he climbed on the seat of her own wagon.

For a moment Hyola thought this was a very modest welcome for the slaves, after all the pompous talk of the guards about the baron being so benevolent and caring and so on... but then she scoffed. What was she expecting here? To be welcomed like a noble? Hah! She would be glad if they just got a roof over their head and something to eat. Although she wasn't sure if that was even possible after seeing the poor condition of the huts in the village. She just prayed to the goddess that today wouldn't turn out to be the worst decision she had made in her life.

As their small caravan of two wagons and twenty-six slaves, accompanied by the three guards lurched forward again, they traveled on that alley parallel to the walls of the manor. She guessed they were going towards the north - although it was hard to tell, since it had gotten fully dark by now.

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All of the slaves had started whispering and murmuring about what kind of treatment they would get here. Would they really become free like the guard captain had outrageously claimed, or was it just a ruse to get more slaves for free to the new baron? It wouldn't be long before they found out the truth anyway.

By now it was snowing heavily, and it was getting difficult to see more than a few feet ahead of them. Before long, Hyola watched as they reached the last houses of the village, with only the falling snow visible further in the north. Of course, it made sense. The new baron would want to keep them at the edge of the village, so they would stay away from his own villagers. But it meant that they would at least be getting some huts to live. Could have been worse, she supposed.

But the wagons kept moving even after they crossed the last houses. Wait... Shouldn't the wagons have stopped here to disembark the slaves? She frowned as both of the wagons kept moving further north under the guidance of the guards who were huddling in their fur coats, and slowly the last houses of the village disappeared behind them in the heavy snowfall.

She was trying to think furiously about where they could be taking the slaves. And why were they going out of the village? What was happening now? At the same time she also noticed the slaves getting more and more worried just like her, with some of the younger slaves even standing on the wagon beds in panic to look around them.

"Where are you taking us?" an older slave asked the guards with worry.

"I'm not sure," the wagon driver replied. "I am only following orders."

"You tell us then!" the slave demanded the other guard who had joined them from the manor.

The fat guard just waved his hand to the front, and spoke lazily, "Don't worry man, it's just a little further ahead."

This worried Hyola even more, her concern mirrored in the face of others around her. She squinted and tried to look further, but it was fully dark now, and it was no use trying to see more than a few feet ahead in the heavy snowfall.

Her heart was beating fast now, and she wished Calubo was driving the wagon to reassure them. But he was nowhere to be found, and these guards were only giving vague answers... What was happening? They weren't being taken outside of the village to be executed, were they?

She didn't know their destination, and panic was already threatening to overwhelm her mind. Was all this really just an elaborate lie by the guards to get the wagons, the nodors as well as all the tools from the quarry to the baron for free? Were they planning to kill all of the slaves so they wouldn't have to feed them? She had heard stories of nobles executing commoners for much less than that...

Her eyes became wet as she remembered motivating the other stonecutters to join the guards and leave the quarry along with her. What had she done? And where in the world was Calubo? Had he left her alone now that his task of bringing the wagons to the baron was completed? Or was it just because he couldn't bear to see them all killed in front of him?

Anger made her see red, as Hyola thought about what she would do to that bastard if she ever saw him again. It was good that he had run away! At least he had the shame to not kill them by his own hands!

Hyola tried to look all around the wagons but she couldn't see much. Time passed slowly as the wagons kept moving.

How long had they been travelling in the village? It felt like hours to her, but it probably had been much less. Where were they going? What would happen to them? Were they really going to die tonight?

Tears started flowing freely from her eyes and she began praying to the Goddess to save them, with many other slaves also looking upwards for salvation. Prayers were their only hope now that even Calubo seemed to have betrayed them...

~ Kivamus ~

A short while ago, he had just finished with today's work of drawing blueprints, when a guard had arrived in the manor hall to report that Hudan had sent a rider to the village, and that the stonecutters were only around half an hour away from the village now. That hadn't given them enough time to prepare a proper welcome for the refugees, but he still wanted them to greet them in person at the longhouse block. They had to be quite hungry and cold by now, especially since the trip had lasted longer than they had expected. He just hoped they hadn't encountered too many difficulties on the way.

Then Feroy had suggested they ride on horses to the block even though it wasn't far away, so that Kivamus wouldn't have to trudge through the snow on the ground. For a moment, Kivamus had become nervous about how to explain that he never got to learn how to ride horses in London, but then he remembered from the memories of the original Kivamus that he did know how to ride horses! Unlike his older brothers who regularly went to hunt in the forests near the Ulriga palace and were excellent riders, the original Kivamus had spent most of his time inside the palace, but he had still been taught how to ride a horse as a son of the Duke.

When the guards brought one of the best horses they had in the stable to him, he didn't know how to even mount the horse, but on urging from Duvas to hurry up, he let his muscle memories take over, and found that it was surprisingly easy to do it, no matter how huge those beasts seemed to him just a few moments ago. Others had climbed on separate horses and they had started their short journey to the north through the following snow.

Once he had arrived at the longhouse block along with Duvas, Helga and a few guards, they had kept their horses outside the gates with a guard to watch over them, and entered inside. Only then he found out that the residents of the block had already eaten by now, which meant it wouldn't be possible to share their meal with the stonecutters.

Chapter 174 Dread

After he found it out, Kivamus had immediately told Helga to talk with the supervisor of the block so they could prepare a warm meal for around two dozen people, since the guards would be eating in the manor anyway. Once she had become busy arranging that, he decided to take Duvas, Feroy and another

guard with him to see the conditions inside the longhouse since he was here anyway and they had some free time.

Once he entered the inner doors from the courtyard, the villagers who had been resting there after finishing today's work as well as the daily classes from Gorsazo, immediately stood up and greeted him, making him happy to see the smile on their faces.

As he walked from the right section of the block to the middle one, he realized that conditions were quite cramped inside, with all the bunks already occupied by the villagers and their meager belongings, while most of the empty space on the wooden floor was also occupied by those people who had wanted to stay here instead of in their damaged huts.

Once he reached the left section, he found that as he had ordered, the bunks at the end of the section were completely empty. Duvas told him that a few of the villagers had been complaining about them being forced to sleep on the floor while there were still empty bunks there, but a single glare from Feroy was enough to shut them up. Even so, Kivamus took a minute to reassure them that there was a good reason for that.

Once he was satisfied that the stonecutters would have enough places to sleep, he entered the courtyard again and moved towards the outer gates. Reaching there, he noticed that it looked way too dark and unwelcoming.

"This just won't do." The stonecutters would already be feeling anxious about leaving everything they had known behind them, so he wanted to welcome them personally to reassure them that they would be taken care of. Not to mention, he was already starting to feel cold here after having trudged here from his manor in the continuously falling snow, even though he was wearing a fur coat unlike most other people. If nothing else, it should be a little brighter here, at least for tonight.

He looked at a guard who was standing nearby and called him over. "Go and bring a couple of braziers here, and put them next to the gates. There should be enough of them inside the building."

"At once, milord!" the guard immediately ran inside to fulfil the task.

Then he sent another guard to bring some firewood from outside the block, since he wanted some brightly burning flames to welcome the new arrivals, instead of presenting them with the dull glow of burning coal.

Before long, two burning braziers had been kept just inside the gates, with lively yellow flames flickering above them. Kivamus nodded. This did look better.

Soon, Helga came and reported that the kitchens had been started again with the help of a few volunteers and there would be a warm meal waiting for the stonecutters when they arrived here, before she returned to the kitchen to supervise the process.

He walked closer to one of the braziers along with Duvas and Feroy, with the remaining guards moving closer to the other one. Now they just had to wait. It shouldn't be long before the stonecutters arrived here. But the snow hadn't stopped falling at all, so as he put his hands close to the fire, he still hoped that they wouldn't have to wait here for too long.

~ Hyola ~

She had kept praying to the goddess to save their lives, but she had also been looking around to get any idea of where they were being taken. The snow was still falling continuously, and she felt like she was already losing any feeling in her hands by now, even though all the slaves were huddled together on the wagon for some shared warmth. Were they going to freeze to death before they even reached wherever they were going?

But soon, despite the falling snow, she saw some kind of light a short distance ahead of them. She tried to squint to see clearly and as the wagon moved further, she realised that the light was coming from the front of a wooden building - which was huge! It was easily bigger than any other building she had seen in her life. Once the wagons reached closer, she saw that it was only a single storey building, but she still couldn't see the left or right ends of the building in the falling snow in this darkness.

What was this place? Was it some kind of a jail? That was the only thing that she could think of which needed to be this big from the stories she had heard from the older slaves. But why had they all been

brought here? Oh... Goddess save them! The baron really wanted them as slaves, then! Was that why he was bringing them to this jail so they couldn't escape?

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The other slaves had also started muttering about it by now, while some of them were whispering that this was the last chance they had to escape, before they were sentenced to another life of slavery at best, or execution at worst.

Immediately, she stood up on the wagon bed, and was thinking about jumping over the side to escape, along with some others who had also stood up probably thinking the same thing, but she hesitated as she saw some kind of a long ditch which the wagon was crossing at the time. Why was there a ditch here? Was it to bury their dead bodies after the guards had killed them? Then was it not a jail but an execution place for them?

She was so scared now that she didn't know what to do. At the same time, the wagon drivers kept telling them to sit down or they would fall over, but none of the slaves were listening, while some of the older slaves had even started weeping in fear.

She was still trying to build her courage to jump outside the wagon, but then the wagons turned to the right, and she saw the entrance of the huge building right in front of them. This was the place which she had seen lit up from afar - the reason being the roaring fires burning in a couple of braziers kept just inside the gates. For a moment she thought which idiot had decided to waste firewood like that and was burning these braziers out in the open?

Looking at those burning flames made her shiver once again, but then she remembered that she wasn't at the quarry anymore where everyone had to make sure to preserve everything to make it last as long as possible. This was a whole village where hundreds of people must be living. What was a small amount of firewood for these people, especially since the village seemed to be already surrounded by forest?

There were also a few horses tied nearby - like they didn't even value the horses, if they had left them standing here in the snow. But Tiranat certainly didn't seem like a rich village to her based on the conditions of the huts she had seen earlier. Nothing made sense to her anymore.

Once the wagons slowed down in front of the gates, she noticed that there were many guards standing there, probably to make sure none of them could escape from this jail. One of them raised his hands and spoke towards the wagon drivers, "Alright, stop the wagon right there!"

With a small jerk, the wagon finally slowed to a stop, marking an end to their long journey from the quarry. But by now, Hyola was already expecting the worst, and she could only hope that it wouldn't be an end to their journey on this world as well.

Soon, the guards started telling the stonecutters to climb down from the wagons, and she realized that she had missed her chance to escape earlier due to her hesitation. If she tried to run now, those huge guards looked like that would capture her in a moment, especially with the horses nearby ready to chase them down.

She sighed. She really should have jumped earlier. She didn't know how long she would have survived inside the forests in this cold, but it probably would still be longer than the life she and the other slaves had remaining here, right?

Why had she even supported Calubo and the other guards when they were trying to gather free slaves for the bastard who ruled over this village! How could Calubo do this to her and the others?

As she climbed down along with the other stonecutters who were looking around fearfully, she noticed an impeccably dressed young man with short length silver hair exiting the gates. He was wearing a fur coat while being accompanied by a much older balding man with a short white beard as well as a middle aged older woman.

She realized that the younger man must be the baron of this village. Did that mean he was the bastard who had brought them here? But why would he be standing outside here in the cold? Nobles like him should be sitting in their warm mansions in this weather while drinking their expensive wines. Why was he here then?

Maybe he was here to see if he had obtained any good slaves amongst them? Or perhaps this bastard was going to demand her and the two other younger women amongst them to accompany him back to his manor, like most nobles were supposed to do? For them to become his newest playthings?

No! She would never agree to it! She pledged to herself that she wouldn't let something like that happen to her or the other women. It was her fault that they had fallen into the honeyed words of the guard captain, so it was her duty to protect the honor of the women here. She had never taken the life of a person before, but she believed the goddess would only help someone who knew how to help themselves.

She gently moved her hand to the side of her right leg, where she had hidden a sharp shiv of iron under her leggings, after she had found it broken away from one of the picks at the quarry a few months ago. It had always been her last resort in case a bandit got too drunk and tried to get handsy with her, but it hadn't been needed at the quarry since she and the other women knew not to go too far away from the other slaves for their own safety. But it seemed like tonight would be the night when she finally got to use it.

Finally, she felt the reassuring coldness of the shiv under her fingers and tensed her muscles while glaring at the young silver-haired bastard who was called The Baron of Tiranat.

Chapter 175 Mistrust

If that bastard even tried to ask something like that from her or the other women, or even if his eyes strayed where they shouldn't, she would directly go for his throat.

She looked at the young baron with steely eyes, judging how long it would take her to cross that distance between them if it came to that. He was standing maybe six or seven feet away from her. Would she be able to get there before the guards got to her? She wasn't sure, but she would certainly try if she needed to.

Could she still escape with her life if she did that? Probably not, but that was still much better than becoming a play thing for a lying, backstabbing young noble.

Then the young baron walked closer to all of them in the light of the two braziers burning nearby, and gazed at all of them.

This was it then. The moment of truth.

However, as much as Hyola tried to gauge his intentions, she didn't see the same arrogance and entitlement that was common in highborns. She hardly had much experience of meeting with nobles,

but she had heard enough stories about them from the other slaves to know how they behaved with commoners.

She frowned as she looked at his face. If anything, he seemed to have kind eyes, and his demeanor looked warm and gentle. But why? Hadn't he told the guards to lie to the slaves so he could steal their wagons, tools and the nodors? Hadn't he brought them here to this jail to keep them as his own slaves without even paying for them?

Then why was she thinking that he had kind eyes? Maybe she was getting delusional because of hunger and cold. Yeah, that had to be it. She had barely eaten anything in the past few days after all. Yeah, she had to be on her toes, ready for anything.

Finally, it looked like the young bastard was ready to speak.

~ Kivamus ~

He heard the sound of wagons arriving outside the gates and started walking towards there along with others who had come with him. It was dark outside, but in the light of the braziers burning nearby, he saw the sorry state of the stonecutters who had arrived here. He knew the journey had lasted longer than their estimates, so they must surely have had a shortage of food towards the end. He sighed. There was nothing he could do about the past, but he would do his best to take care of everyone under him from now on.

Looking closely at them, he realised that Calubo wasn't lying at all when he said that these people barely got anything to eat there. None of them had brought any belongings with them, with the worn out clothes on their backs probably being the only things they owned in this world. Most of them looked like they were malnourished, and their downcast eyes and the scared looks they kept throwing around made him realize how badly the bandits had treated them - likely more like disposable work animals instead of humans.

He walked a few steps ahead of others to speak to the stonecutters and noticed a tall and relatively well built young woman with red hair showing a multitude of emotions on her face. At first she looked scared, probably fearing the worst here. He was a noble, after all, and nobles had never given any

reason for commoners to trust them at all. But then she seemed resolute to meet everything head on. He nodded at her perseverance. These people had everything taken from them and had been banished to a miserable life of servitude, but they still had some fight left in them. They hadn't given up. That was good. That was very good.

As he was going to speak, he noticed that Feroy took a step closer to him, with his hands on the hilt of his sword. He thought of telling him to give him some space to speak to the stonecutters, but then he thought better of it. He didn't see any danger to his life here, but Feroy must know what he was doing.

Finally, he looked at the people in front of him and began, "I know you all must be scared and confused. I have a pretty good idea of how badly Nokozal treated his slaves, and then you all had to go through a difficult journey to travel from the limestone quarry to Tiranat. But I promise you that your difficult times are in the past now. From now on you all will be taken care of, just like every other person in this village."

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All of the stonecutters seem to be hanging on his every word, but he didn't want to take too long here. "I know it won't be easy for you to adjust to life here, but I can promise you that you will get enough opportunities to live a better life in Tiranat than you have until now. But it's freezing here, so there is no point in standing outside in the snow."

He pointed to the guards, as well as the middle aged supervisor of the block who was standing nearby. "Follow them inside, and you will find a hot meal and a warm sleeping place waiting for you. Just by chance we also have a good stock of Losuvil leaves in the village right now. So anyone who is sick or has an injury - or even a small cut - can talk with the supervisor of the block and he will provide you with the required amount of paste, free of charge."

As he was going to turn around, he heard the voice of a stonecutter.

"But why?" the older man asked with distrust in his eyes. "Why are you doing this for us? You don't even know us!"

"Why?" Kivamus repeated with a frown. "Because you are human beings and not possessions of a greedy bandit. Because you deserve to get an opportunity to live like humans."

He continued, looking directly into the older man's eyes, "One of my guards should have already told you, but I'll repeat it anyway. From the moment you stepped a foot inside Tiranat, you stopped being a slave of Nokozal. That goes for all of you. From this moment on, you will have the same freedom as everyone else in Tiranat, which means you will get the same rights and opportunities as any other villager in this place. That includes getting a reasonable wage for your work."

The older man looked like he had tears in his eyes, along with some others. A few of them seemed to be looking upwards, probably praying to the goddess, but many others still looked suspicious of his promises.

Kivamus exhaled. He could see that they weren't going to trust his words that easily. It would take some time for them to start believing that he wasn't lying, but trying to make it more appealing for them, he added, "We only got the news about your arrival just half an hour ago, so there wasn't much that we could prepare, but I've been told that you will be getting some warm meat stew, along with some freshly baked bread." He pointed towards the gates once again, "Now Madam Helga will show you inside. Eat up to your heart's content and take some rest. You deserve it."

"Come on now," Helga said to the stonecutters, and with some hesitation, one by one they started to move towards the gates. A few of them stopped for a moment to heat up their hands in front of the braziers, but it seemed like they were willing to listen for now. A warm meal on a hungry stomach on a cold winter night had to be quite tempting, after all.

Kivamus watched the slowly moving crowd as a couple of guards as well as the supervisor of the block also helped to show the way to the stonecutters. Once they were all inside the gates, he looked at Feroy. "You looked ready to cut someone in half earlier. What was that about?"

Feroy was still looking towards the gates. "You noticed that tall redhead at the front of the crowd earlier?"

Kivamus nodded. "Yeah, what about her?"

"That gal holds a fight in her, and I'm pretty sure she was hiding a shiv somewhere," Feroy explained. "At that moment, she looked ready to kill, with you being the only probable target here."

Kivamus frowned, castigating himself that he hadn't even noticed a threat on his life from so close. "But why would she do that? She couldn't possibly be an assassin sent by another noble, and none of the stonecutters could have known anything about me before today, certainly not enough to want to kill me."

Feroy snorted. "Despite your words about freeing them from slavery, they aren't going to believe it that easily. Anyway, that redhead didn't need to know any more than that you are a male noble. Being a young woman going to the domain of a noble, it would have felt to her that you had come to personally inspect the new slaves - likely to choose the best ones for yourself - especially the female slaves. I'm sure you can imagine the rest."

Kivamus just shook his head in exasperation. He could understand it alright, having personally experienced the schemes of greedy, unscrupulous nobles of this world. But he just wanted to make them feel welcome here, dammit! And all he had managed to do was to make the stonecutters suspicious of his intentions...

He gave a sigh. No good deed goes unpunished, after all.

Regardless, what's done was done. He could only hope that in the coming days they would see that they would be treated just like any other villager here, and hopefully that would take care of some of their misgivings about him as a noble.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of horse hooves from nearby. Turning towards the sound, he saw riders coming towards them from the south.

Chapter 176 A Place Just For Herself

Feroy and the other guard immediately stepped closer to him, but it didn't take long for them to realise that it was Hudan and a few other guards.

Climbing down from his horse, the guard captain - who looked nearly as tired and exhausted as the stonecutters - walked closer to him. "Milord, so this is where you are. I thought you would be at the manor so I went to report there, but someone told me that you had gone to the north."

Shivering a little, Kivamus rubbed his hands together, and told a couple of guards to take the braziers inside now. Then he looked at hudan. "Let's return to the manor first. We can talk inside the manor hall. It's way too cold here, and you must also be hungry. Not to mention Duvas has been giving me looks about dragging his old bones out in the cold here."

The majordomo gave a chuckle. "I won't confirm or deny your accusations, but I wouldn't mind sitting in front of a roaring fireplace now."

Kivamus nodded, and gestured to a few guards to bring their horses. "Let's go then."

As they climbed on their horses, he saw that Calubo walked closer to Hudan. "I'd like to stay here for a while if that's okay. It will be helpful for the stonecutters to have someone familiar with them here, and having a guard here for some time would feel reassuring for the other villagers as well."

Hudan looked at Kivamus for permission, but Feroiy gave the answer. "Sure, why not. Earlier today, I decided to regularly assign two guards to stay here in shifts at all times, at least until we can be sure that these stonecutters aren't going to start stealing or something like that. We just can't be sure of their loyalties yet, you know?" He added, "You must be hungry too, but you can stay here for a while if you want. You can return along with Madam Helga and the other guards later."

Calubo nodded. "Thank you for this! I'll just eat some of what the stonecutters are having."

~ Hyola ~

Hyola followed the middle-aged woman inside the gates of the huge building - which she had found out to be called a longhouse block - but she kept looking behind her, just in case the silver haired noble had second thoughts about not choosing a few slaves for himself. She still couldn't believe his words when he said there would be warm beds and enough food to fill their bellies waiting for them inside. It had to be a lie so he could make the slaves willingly enter the jail without them making any trouble, right?

However, she had listened to his words carefully, and they matched with what the guard captain had claimed. So was the baron really lying? Were they really even slaves now? He did say that they all were

free to choose their destinies from now on. But could he even do that? She shook her head which had started to hurt from all that thinking on an empty stomach. She would find out soon enough anyway.

She kept walking behind that woman, leading the small crowd of tired, hungry and scared people, and soon she entered the courtyard of the building. There wasn't much light to see here, but before long, she saw a couple of guards carrying the braziers inside, and they kept it near one of the doors on the right. In the flickering yellow light, she saw that there was a huge tree in the middle of the courtyard, although it didn't have any leaves in the winter. Then she noticed something thin hanging from one of its branches. What was that?

The light was faint, so she had to squint a little, before she realized that those were two strong ropes hanging from the tree. Why were there ropes here? They couldn't be tied there to hang those people who disobeyed the baron, could they? No, it couldn't be, or at least she hoped so... But then the flames became a little brighter for a moment, and she noticed a small plank connected to those ropes at the bottom. Huh. It was just a swing? Like the one she used to live at when she was a child? But who would have made a swing here?

Putting that question to the back of her mind, she noticed a door opening on the other side of the courtyard on the right, and a few people peeked their heads outside despite the falling snow, probably after hearing the murmur of the newcomers. Soon, another door opened in the front, and some more people along with a few children stood there watching them curiously. Immediately, she saw that taking advantage of the opportunity, two of those children ran quickly to the swings and sat on it, with both of them pushing the other away, while claiming that it was their turn first. Immediately, a few adults - probably their parents - went after them, scolding them that it was too cold to play outside.

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Hyola kept watching the ordinary scene with a numbed detachment. Everything looked so... normal. Could this really be a jail? She wasn't too sure about it now. A place where children were smiling and laughing like that couldn't be a bad place at all.

It was only now that she realised that there was a very nice smell coming from somewhere. She couldn't stop salivating when she realised that it smelled like meat being cooked. But she noticed that she had fallen behind the others, so she quickly jogged to catch up to the slaves, who had started entering the door on the left side of the courtyard.

Immediately after she put a step inside the door, she was confused for a moment at the weird design of the longhouse block from the inside. Those seemed like... wooden bunks for sleeping? Yeah, they had to be, when she walked a few steps further and saw a few people sleeping on the upper bunks, while some others were sitting on the lower ones gazing at the slaves. Many of them seemed to have spread some straw above the bunks, while others had even covered them with some ragged clothes as a kind of mattress.

Hyola blinked. She hadn't seen a more comfortable sleeping place in... forever.

She moved further towards the left and saw that there were a few braziers burning in the middle at some fixed places, which had kept the inside of the longhouse quite warm compared to the freezing weather outside, despite the small ventilation holes on the sides of the roof. There weren't any flames on them, which meant they had to be burning coal! That had to be costing the baron a small fortune! But she guessed that the baron must be deducting that amount from these people's wages, if he really did pay them.

She kept looking around with curiosity while walking and saw that the walls were made from debarked logs - which had been fixed in a staggered way to reduce any gaps between them, while there were also a few mud patches in some places between those logs, probably to seal it better from the freezing wind outside. However, all of those bunks were made from wooden planks. Those couldn't be cheap at all!

She realized that the floor felt quite smooth to her feet compared to the courtyard outside, and she noticed with a start that even the floor had wooden planks! From what she had heard in stories, only the nobles' mansions had them, especially outside bigger cities. Were they really going to stay in a place with wooden flooring from now on, just like nobles? She couldn't hide her grin thinking about it.

Then she followed the crowd further to the left, and began listening as the older woman, who had been called Madam Helga by the baron, started to speak.

The older woman pointed to the bunks. "There are twenty-six empty bunks here, and this is where you all will sleep from tonight." She added, "There wasn't much we could do about the bedding, but the baron had donated some straw from the manor for this, so at least you all wouldn't have to sleep directly on the wooden planks."

Hyola was utterly surprised. Earlier she was thinking that the baron would just allow the slaves some empty space on the floor to sleep. Even that would be much better than what she had been expecting - this building had a wooden flooring after all. With the braziers burning nearby, and the wooden floor

insulating them from the freezing ground below, sleeping inside this longhouse block would be a lot more warmer and comfortable compared to how they had been living back at the quarry. But had the baron really left enough empty bunks for all of the slaves? That meant everyone would have their own place to sleep!

Hyola barely realized that she had a goofy smile on her face now. She couldn't even remember when was the last time she had a separate place just for herself... She had some faint memories of the time she had lived with her family when she was very young, before she had been sold as a slave by them, but even then her whole family had to share the limited space inside their shabby hut. Since leaving her home, this was the first time that she was going to have a place for herself...

She didn't even remember how many times she had dreamt of such a thing. It didn't matter that it was only a wooden bunk with straw bedding instead of a whole hut. It was still much, much better than anything she could have imagined just an hour ago.

Madam Helga continued, while pointing around, "There are two braziers for this section of the block, and you all don't have to worry about saving coal for heating. The baron has already promised the longhouse block an unlimited supply of coal for heating inside - for the whole winter. This is a coal mining village after all, so there is no shortage of coal here."

"But we can't possibly afford to pay for that coal..." one of the slaves muttered from nearby.

Chapter 177 Not A Dream

Madam Helga smiled. "You don't have to pay anything for that. At least for this winter, the supply of coal for heating will be free of cost."

What? Could that really be true? Hyola couldn't believe those words. There would be enough coal here for them to use around the clock? That meant nobody would freeze to death this winter! While at the quarry, she had been worried about which of the slaves wouldn't survive the coming winter, but here, that wouldn't be a concern at all. She wouldn't have to worry about waking up next to a cold corpse, like in many of the past winters at the quarry. If anything, a warm place to return back every evening after work would make their lives comfortable.

Hyola frowned. Huh... Comfortable... Like the lives of nobles? From what she had overheard in the stories from some bandits at the quarry, she was pretty sure that even the commoners living in Cinran had to brave some of the milder winter nights without coal to save it for when it got really cold. But here they would be able to burn coal every single night? And they didn't even have to pay for it? Just who

was this baron? He could have made a good amount by selling that much coal. Or did he not need that coin at all?

Madam Helga's next words interrupted Hyola's thoughts. "You all have been through a long journey, so you should rest here now. But I need a few of you to come with me to the kitchens so I can show you the place and so you can bring food and water for the rest of you all. I also need one of you to tell me how many of you are sick or injured so I can talk with the supervisor about providing enough Losuvil paste for you."

Immediately, Hyola raised her hand for it, and following her lead, a few other young slaves volunteered as well. How could it be that the baron could afford to provide losuvil paste for all of them? She had certainly heard about it in the past, but as a slave she never had any income to be able to buy it, not that it was even possible to buy it at the quarry. However, some of the slaves including Darora - the guy who was a good friend of hers at the quarry - had lived in Cinran in the past, but buying any losuvil paste had always been too costly for most of them, even when they weren't slaves. But now they were all going to get losuvil paste if they were sick? And for free?

Hyola shook her head in disbelief. The surprises never stopped coming in this village, did they? At least they were good surprises for the first time in her life...

They followed Madam Helga back outside the door, and walked towards the door on the right side of the outer gates, where a couple of guards were talking next to those burning braziers which had been kept under an overhang of the roof. The guards being here made sense. The baron wouldn't want the slaves to run away with that coal, after all.

They followed Madam Helga through the snow, and entered that room - which turned out to be the kitchen - and immediately Hyola's nose was filled with the delicious smells she had found earlier. Inside the door, she saw that in the light of a few other braziers, there were a few people working next to a huge cauldron which had something bubbling inside it. It seemed like the food preparation had already been done earlier, and those cooks were just keeping an eye on the food now.

On the far side of the kitchen, there was a mud oven, where a few other people seemed to be busy with something. Could they be baking fresh bread for them? Hyola salivated at the thought. It had been months since she had tasted any bread. She really hoped there would be some bread for them tonight.

Noticing them, an older man who was sitting on one side, stood up. "Madam Helga! The food is 'bout ready now." Then he looked at the slaves who had volunteered to bring the food to others. "Oh, are these the stonecutters?"

Madam Helga nodded. "Yeah, let's give them some food now. They must be starving."

"But most of us don't have any bowls to take the food in..." one of the slaves protested. "Although we could still share the bowls like we did at the quarry."

Madam Helga smiled again. "No need to worry about that." Then she pointed to a corner, where there were many tall stacks of wooden bowls kept next to each other, and explained, "When Lord Kivamus had sent Hudan and the other guards to rescue you all, he had anticipated that you wouldn't have much with you. He regrets that he couldn't provide you and others with better clothing yet, but he had still ordered the carpenter's apprentice to make more than enough bowls for anyone who needed it. You all can keep them with yourself if you want to."

Madam Helga pointed to another side of the kitchen, where there were a few barrels of water kept next to each other. "You all can take as much water as you need from here anytime. The barrels are kept inside the kitchen which usually has a fire burning most of the time - with someone keeping an eye on it, of course - so the water never freezes here. Lord Kivamus does have plans to dig a new well nearby - and well water never freezes in Tiranat - but that's for the future. For now, these barrels have to be refilled by someone from the well at the market square, but it'll do the task for now."

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Hyola was feeling completely overwhelmed by now, but she tried not to think too much about so many unexpected but good things happening to her and the others.

Then she saw the older woman point to her and the other slaves - no, not slaves, she pointed to the stonecutters - and told them to fill a few bowls with water and take them to the others inside the longhouse while the cooks started distributing the food. Hyola gave a nod, and walked along with others back to the other stonecutters to provide them with water, and by the time she returned, she saw that the cooks had already started pouring the stew in bowls.

Hyola was at the front, so she got the first bowl from the cooks, along with a generous portion of bread. She had been trying to control her emotions for a while, but as soon as the savory smell of the meat stew and the sweet smell of the freshly baked bread hit her nose, she finally broke down into sobs.

Was she imagining everything? Was all this just a dream? Was she still lying hungry and cold inside one of the huts at the quarry close to starvation, which had led to her start dreaming of such wonderful food? She didn't know. So she took a bite of the bread to test whether it was really a dream, and her sobs only got louder when she realised that it was real. Food couldn't possibly taste this good in a dream!

She leaned towards the wall for support, and nearly lost her balance since she couldn't see clearly between the tears, but Madam Helga immediately held her in a hug and prevented her from falling down, while someone else took the bowl from her hands for now otherwise it would spill all over the floor.

"Don't worry, dear," she heard the voice of the older woman reassuring her while patting her back gently, "this is not a dream."

Had she really been speaking out loud? It didn't matter... This wasn't a dream...

"But I thought..." she mumbled between sobs. "I thought this was a huge jail... and that the baron was going to kill us for our wagons..."

"It's nothing like that, dear," Madam Helga muttered in a soothing voice. "You are far away from the bandits now. You don't have to fear for your life anymore. You are safe here."

Hyola only clutched her tightly in response, while sobbing. She really was inside a warm building, with fresh food waiting for her. It was real...

After a while, Hyola and the other volunteers had distributed the food to the other stonecutters along with a general supply of losuvil paste for anyone who needed it - which was basically all of them. Madam Helga had also stayed nearby in case they needed any help while they all finished their food.

Most of the stonecutters seem to have tears in their eyes as they ate the warm food with a generous amount of meat in it, along with the bread. And not just that, there was more than enough of it for anyone who wanted seconds, which was a completely new experience for them.

Once they were done, the stonecutters didn't hesitate in asking Madam Helga to thank the baron for them. The older woman just nodded with sadness in her eyes, and then exited the door, probably to return to wherever she lived.

Hyola immediately got up and followed her outside, but she found that Calubo was still waiting for her there. Earlier, when she had seen him there when bringing food from the kitchen to the others, she had wanted to hit him for not making it clear that they were just going to a newly built building outside the village, instead of a jail or to be executed. But she couldn't really say anything, since it wasn't really his fault for her mind running to such conclusions. However, she just couldn't bring it in her mind to forgive him completely at the time, so she hadn't talked to him then.

"Why were you crying earlier?" Calubo asked with a frown.

Ignoring him, she accused, "You said that Tiranat was only a small village. I haven't been to many places outside the quarry, but I don't think any other village has walls that high, even if they are only made of logs and not stone."

Calubo just shrugged. "I've lived here for more than a decade under the previous baron, but there were no walls here before Nokozal had kidnapped me a few months ago. But Lord Kivamus doesn't want to let bandits enter the village ever again, and having strong walls is a basic requirement for that. I don't know much about him but he is certainly very different from the previous baron, or from any other noble I have heard about, and he seems to have some big plans for the village, not that I know any more than that." He continued, "Although I thought I did tell you at the quarry that there was a lot of construction work going on in my village..."

"Yeah, that you did," Hyola muttered. She looked around the square shaped courtyard, "Why do they call it a long house anyway. It should better be called a giant house or maybe a square house."

Calubo laughed. "Yeah, I was confused about that as well. But someone told me that it really was supposed to be a single long building in the beginning, but then the plan was changed by the baron, and three longhouses were built in a square shaped design to be self-sufficient and more defensible. But it was called a longhouse in the beginning, and the name just stuck."

"Calubo, we gotta go," one of the guards called out from near the outer gates, where Madam Helga was also standing.

Calubo gave her a parting hug, and jogged towards them.

But before they left, Hyola ran towards them as well, and looked at the older woman. "Madam Helga, will the baron come back to the longhouse block again? I want to thank him for everything he has done for all the stonecutters."

Chapter 178 Skills

Madam Helga shook her head. "I'm not sure, but he is very busy managing a lot of things in the village, so I don't think Lord Kivamus will be visiting the block unless there is an emergency."

Hyola thought quickly. "In that case, can I come with you all as well? I was blaming the baron for wanting to keep us in jail or to execute us earlier, so I really want to apologise for that!"

Madam Helga seemed to be thinking about it for a moment. "Sure, I guess. But we won't be returning back here tonight, so you'll have to share your sleeping space with our maids for the night."

Hyola nodded eagerly. This meant she would even get to visit inside the manor of the baron! "That would be just fine, madam. I won't even take up too much space. Thank you so much!"

~ Kivamus ~

Kivamus and the others had finally reached inside the manor house, with the warmth inside the hall more than welcome to everyone. Duvas had taken the chair closest to the fireplace, while Hudan had also taken a seat inside along with Feroy. Gorsazo was already sitting there as well.

When he had entered the manor, he had passed near the cattle shed, and saw the two nodors there for the first time. Hudan must have brought them with him from the quarry.

While shaped similarly to oxen, those beasts weren't that tall, but still looked like they had more than enough muscle to do most of the work done by oxen. But what separated them from the bigger beasts was the deep-red colour of their skin, with some small black patches on them. That kind of color should have given them a more violent look, but it seemed like they had been domesticated well enough that they looked quite tame and safe to keep near people. Either way, he was glad that he would have at least two of them for help in plowing the fields after the winter.

Hudan's words made him come back to the present. "Milord, I wanted to report that from this rescue mission we got four fur coats, three leather armors, as well as four swords and a couple of daggers from the bandits." He continued, "Of course, you have already seen the two wagons we brought from the quarry, along with the axles for an extra wagon. There were also a couple of healthy nodors there, so we brought them with us and I've kept them along with the cattle."

Kivamus gave a nod, "I already saw the nodors, and I'm glad that we were able to bring all the stonecutters here safely. Getting twenty-six trained laborers to work for us from now on would speed up all the construction in the village."

Hudan continued, "After repairing everything we got this time, we can properly arm and equip all our twenty-four guards now - no, twenty-five guards including Calubo. The armor or even the weapons we have gotten from the bandits are hardly top notch quality, but it's better than arming our guards with a stick."

Kivamus nodded with satisfaction. "That would certainly be helpful after we have trained our newer guards better and they are ready to take the place of our veterans wherever needed."

Gorsazo suggested, "Those fur coats will also be helpful for us to give them to the hunting groups, especially those who are going towards the east."

"Certainly," Kivamus commented. "With Hudan back along with all the eight guards, it means we can send more hunting groups out as well."

Duvas added with a rare grin, "That makes it sounds like this was a worthwhile trip, after all, despite my objections earlier." He looked at the guard captain. "You wouldn't happen to have found some coin there as well, did you? I would have thought Nokozal had some gold stashed there."

Hudan's huge frame shook as he chuckled. "I'd already have reported it if I had, Sir Duvas. We did check any possible hiding places at the quarry, with the help of the stonecutters. It seems Nokozal really was short on coin these days, and if he still had anything left, he must have been carrying it on his own person wherever he went. It's not like someone like him would trust anyone else with the coin anyway."

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The guard captain continued with a grin, "Before we left from the quarry, we also gave him a parting gift by setting all the huts on fire. When he reaches there now, he will find that his underlings are already dead, all his slaves have vanished along with his wagons and nodors, and he has no place to shelter in the snow."

Feroy smirked, "Now this is the kind of payback I like to hear about!"

Before Kivamus replied anything, the outer door of the manor hall opened and Madam Helga walked inside, followed by someone he hadn't expected to see here. Walking behind her was the tall red haired woman he had seen at the front of the crowd earlier.

Madam Helga explained before taking a seat, "This is Hyola. She wanted to thank you in person, so I brought her here."

Kivamus looked curiously at the young woman who looked quite nervous at the moment.

Hyola began with a bow, "Please forgive me, milord!"

Kivamus raised his eyebrows. "For what? I don't think you have done anything to ask forgiveness for, have you?"

"Please understand, milord," Hyola continued, "the life of the stone cutters hasn't been easy at all. When I saw that we were being taken to the outside of the village, most of us feared that you were taking us to a jail, or maybe you even wanted to kill us so you wouldn't have to feed us..."

Kivamus couldn't hide astonishment at that accusation from showing on his face. After he had gone through all the trouble to bring them here from the quarry, they still thought he would execute them? He gave a sigh. Just how cruel was this world to the common people.

Hyola added without waiting for a reply, "When you were giving a speech to us earlier, I even thought that..." But she shook her head and trailed off instead of finishing the sentence.

Feroy had a knowing glint in his eyes, but he kept silent as well.

Hyola continued with fear in her eyes, "Please forgive me for doubting your intentions after everything you have done for us."

Kivamus didn't know what to say for a moment. "There is nothing to forgive. Just do your jobs well in the future to help yourself and the village. That's all I ask for."

Hyola nodded vigorously, but then doubt crept on her face. "But can we really stay here? As free people instead of slaves?"

Kivamus smiled. "Of course. You all are free to stay in Tiranat for as long as you want. And if you want to leave this village at any time to find a different place to live in another village or town, then you are free to go. Although you'll have to wait until after the winter, since the road to Cinran would not open before that anyway - but I won't stop you."

He continued, "However, you will have to keep in mind that while you all will remain free people in Tiranat - since I refuse to allow slavery in my domain - I can't promise you the same if you decide to leave. I only have control over the barony of Tiranat, after all. How other nobles treat their own people is out of my hands."

"If we can really find work here..." Hyola replied pensively, "and if we aren't going to be slaves of anyone in Tiranat, then I don't think any of us would ever want to leave this place..."

"I know it might be hard to believe for now," Kivamus replied, "but you'll find out more about the village in the coming days and you'll realize that it's all true." He added, "Also, being free means it's up to you to choose which jobs you want to work in, but it will take a few months before more types of jobs

become available in the village, including farming and coal mining. Still, that freedom to choose is yours from now on, same as all other villagers who live here. For now though, working as a laborer is the most likely work you will find these days."

"That being said," Gorsazo remarked, "these people are mainly trained in cutting rocks, and we don't do any of that here. How useful will they be here?"

"No, no!" Hyola interrupted anxiously. "While all of us know about cutting limestone, some of us have different skills as well, otherwise we wouldn't have survived for long while living in the middle of nowhere." She explained, "Two of us are decent with hunting and trapping, since they often went with the bandits to catch animals there for food. Another one used to work as a carpenter in a different town, before he was sold into slavery when he couldn't pay back his debt. He was the one who repaired the wagon and tools at the quarry when they got broken, and he also made the bows for the bandits, as well as the buckets for removing water from the quarry when it got flooded."

Kivamus glanced at others for a moment, feeling giddy inside. Another well-trained carpenter would solve a lot of their issues.

Hyola barely paused to take a breath before she continued. "One man is also trained as a fletcher, and he provided the arrows to the bandits, and I am a good shot with throwing things."

Kivamus couldn't hide his grin. This just got better and better. He saw that his excitement was reflected in others' faces as well. He looked back at the young woman. She was tall and well built, even if she looked malnourished right now. She might be a good addition to their budding guard force. "We are looking for new guards these days, especially women. Would you be interested in joining up as a guard here?"

Chapter 179 Darora

Hyola looked so surprised that it took a while for her to respond. "I can do that? I can really become a guard just like Calubo?" She quickly asked with a confused face, "You are really recruiting women as guards?"

Hudan gave the reply, "We certainly are. We already have five women who are working as guards here. They will be getting the same wages as the male guards, as well as free food and lodging here, like all our workers in the manor. There is a catch though - we are going to start paying the wages again only after the winter when the northern road opens again, but you can trust Lord Kivamus that we will surely pay them."

Hyola shook her head as if to rid her brain of cobwebs. "That's... that's just fine with me! By now I know that you will stay true to your words. But... but I know nothing about fighting with a sword!" Then she pointed hesitatingly towards the guard captain. "Can those other female guards really fight one on one with someone like him?"

Kivamus looked at the gigantic build of Hudan for a moment, and guffawed loudly. "Of course not! Even our male guards can't fight one on one against him! But I have plans to change that in the future by building something called crossbows, which will allow even women to be as effective as men in killing someone, from a good distance anyway."

Seeing the doubtful face of the young woman, he continued, "Of course, there is no hurry for you to join up. You can talk with the other female guards before you decide on that. For now, you should go and get a good rest. You all have been through a lot, and it will take a while for you all to adjust to life here."

Hyola nodded slowly. "Of course, milord. Thank you for that opportunity, and for everything you have done for us!"

"Oh, before you leave," Kivamus interrupted, "tell me the name of the carpenter."

Hyola nodded eagerly. "His name is Darora and he should be in his mid-thirties, I think."

"Alright then," Kivamus said. "You can leave now."

Madam Helga stood up. "I'll show her to the servants hall where she can sleep with the other maids tonight." She looked at Hyola. "That's where our female guards sleep as well, so you might get an opportunity to talk to them tonight." And with that, both the women exited the manor hall.

Kivamus looked at others and grinned. "I can't believe we got so lucky! Two hunters, a fletcher and well-trained carpenter! And possibly even another woman as guard."

Feroy agreed, "We had bought quite a few arrows from Cinran on our last trip, but I still had to tell the hunters to use them only when they were sure of their shots killing an animal, since it would be a while until we could buy more of them, you know? But having a fletcher here in the village would allow them

to be free about spending arrows to shoot animals. As for those two stonecutters with experience in hunting, we could start sending them in a new hunting group."

"Certainly," Kivamus nodded. "Hudan and you can decide who to send in the new hunting groups. I think including our guards, the two former stonecutters as well as the hunters from the village, we should be able to send three or maybe even four hunting groups of four men out at the same time. That should still leave enough men here to protect the village and the manor."

"That sounds about right, milord," Hudan replied. "I'll decide whom to send by tomorrow, and then we can start sending them the day after, once everyone has rested for another day."

Kivamus gave a nod. "I would also like to meet with this new carpenter, Darora. If he is really skilled enough to make a new warbow from scratch for the bandits, he might just have the talent to build crossbows for us from my designs!"

He paused for a moment. "That being said, if he is really that talented, then why would he have gone into debt in the first place? Rather, even if he had to take a loan to buy something, he should easily be able to pay them off with the income he would get from selling warbows. Those can't be cheap, right?"

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Duvas replied, "They certainly aren't, which is why we were trying to make do with the two warbows we had in the manor. We did have a couple more of them in the past but those were lost in the ambush on the previous baron along with our two archers. However, these days there isn't that much of a demand for weapons of war. You already know that iron is being sold for quite cheap in Cinran, because people are tightening their belts and skipping any unnecessary expenses like new tools so they can keep buying food for their families despite the sky high prices."

The majordomo explained, "While nobles certainly aren't going to be short on food any time soon, everyone in southern Reslinor is trying to minimize their expenses because of the recent bad crops. That means even the nobles aren't buying new swords to re-equip their guards and knights, or new warbows for their archers and hunters. Because of that even a talented carpenter like Darora - although he might better be called a bowyer if he can really make bows - might have taken debts to buy quality wood and iron to make warbows, but he simply wouldn't have been able to sell many of them in the past few years."

Duvas continued, "In that case, the well-armed debt collectors would have sold him into slavery to recover their money, likely to Baron Zoricus who wouldn't be short on funds to buy new slaves because of his vast land holdings. I think he might have given the carpenter to Nokozal so the bandits wouldn't have to spend coin on anything which Darora could make himself at the quarry, thus increasing his own profits further."

Kivamus nodded slowly. "It does make sense. That greedy bastard would certainly do anything and everything to earn more coins." Then he grinned. "Well, I guess we could say we relieved Zoricus of one of his better assets by bringing Darora here."

He continued, "It will certainly take a while for him to be able to build the crossbow parts, since those are going to be quite a bit more intricate than making any other thing he knows, but until then he can also make new warbows for us, of which we can never have enough, especially since we are sending a lot more hunters out now."

"That's true enough, milord," Feroy said. "If we can make and keep spare warbows here, it would allow us to train the other recruits in that as well."

Duvas suggested, "We might even be able to sell it to any visiting merchants in the future if we want to."

"I'm not too sure about arming our neighbours better, which basically means making our nearby nobles stronger," Kivamus muttered. "We'll see how to proceed once I've talked to Darora."

"I'll make sure to bring him here some time tomorrow morning," Duvas replied. He grinned as he added, "You really were right to send Hudan to rescue these people, my lord. I couldn't have imagined that we would get so much from the bandits and these stonecutters!"

Kivamus laughed. "I didn't do it with the expectation of getting anything in return. All I wanted was to prevent these people from dying of starvation or cold in the winter, but I can't deny that I am more than happy with the results."

Kivamus gazed towards the windows, although they were closed right now. The harsh winter of Tiranat had begun, and they had barely survived against a bandit raid, but they had also gotten a few much needed craftsmen in return. He was certainly glad that they had completed the first longhouse not too long after the start of the snowfall. And now the other projects like the second longhouse block, the

outer village wall, as well as the clearing of the forests to start farming after the winter were already in full swing.

When he had arrived in this world a couple of months ago, he didn't know if he would even survive more than a week here. His brothers' didn't seem to have left any stone unturned to make sure he wasn't a threat to their ambitions, and nearby nobles including that greedy bastard Zoricus had already tried to assassinate him for the coal mines of Tiranat. But he had still survived despite everything, and the future looked promising.

He looked at the people sitting around him in the manor hall, and thought about those who weren't here at the moment. He had been more than lucky to have found such good advisors around him in Gorsazo and Duvas, who corrected him when his ideas were not workable in this world, and told him how to deal with this world and its inhabitants better.

Hudan and Feroy had already saved his life on multiple occasions, and he knew that he could trust them with anything. Madam Helga's contribution couldn't be understated either. Who knew if they would still be eating bland porridge every day if it wasn't for her vast experience in cooking at an inn.

Sryne already seemed like she would become a promising new botanist in the future, having already absorbed the teachings of the scientific method from him. Lucem and Clarisa were still too young to work, but he was glad that he was able to start providing education to them and the other villagers as well.

He knew that it would take some time before his other modern ideas and the sketches of machines in the daily growing list of blueprints would come to life in this world, but he believed that with the support of everyone around him, some day they would certainly get there.

He gave a satisfied exhale. There was still a lot to do in Tiranat, but this was a good start nonetheless.

Chapter 180 Midwinter

~ Kivamus ~

Kivamus tightened his fur coat around him. Again. Damn, it was so cold today! He should never have left the warmth of the manor hall!

He was standing near the edge on the roof of the manor house with his hands on the wooden guardrails while looking around his domain. Consistent snowfall over the last month had made this place look like a winter wonderland, even though the snow gathered on the ground wasn't any more than five or six centimeters thick inside the manor. All the trampling of the ground by so many people working all the day meant it was the same inside the village as well, but he had visited further ahead of the northern village wall a few days ago - which was ready except for the gates - where there must easily be fifteen centimeters of snow gathered in the places where people didn't walk over it.

It was afternoon right now, and while it was still as cloudy as every day, there was no wind today, so he had decided to go to the roof to get outside the manor hall where he had been spending most of his time for the past month, making him feel confined inside. He had no way to measure what temperature it was, but he certainly hadn't felt this cold in London, ever. It must easily be between minus five to minus ten degrees Celcius here, if not even lower, although he could only make a wild guess about it without any instrument to measure it accurately.

He gazed at the inhabitants of the manor from the roof, who were working as diligently as possible even in this cold. He saw a servant using a new wooden wheelbarrow to transport some coal to a brazier burning near the stables. Those stables used to be open from one side, but he was glad that he had made the stables as well as the cattle shed closed from all sides using some planks.

A maid was drawing up some water from the well near the gates before she put that bucket on another waiting wheelbarrow, which already had another two full buckets, and then a waiting servant started pushing it to replenish the bigger barrels kept in the kitchens and the manor house. He was certainly glad that at least the previous baron had the wells dug deep enough that they didn't freeze in the winters, especially since they were kept covered when they weren't in use.

Towards the south-eastern area, he saw a group of guards practising mock battles with wooden swords. Nearby, the tall redhead Hyola and the other women guards were learning the basics under the tutelage of Kerel. Closer to the manor walls, Yufim - who was easily their best shot with an arrow - was instructing a few guards on how to hold the warbow in a better way. Kivamus gave a satisfied smile looking at that. When they had started sending four hunting groups out of the village a few weeks ago, they didn't even have enough warbows to equip all of them.

But Darora, the former stonecutter, had been just as good as he had expected, if not better. With the help of a couple of apprentices he had taken, he had already provided half a dozen new warbows for them, making it much easier to train other guards in their use. Fedarus wood - which was strong enough to even make seaworthy ships in the shipyards of the capital Dorastiz - had thankfully turned out to be just as useful in making heavy warbows. With their new fletcher having already set up a workshop near the market square, there was no shortage of arrows either.

However, he still wanted to equip his guards with crossbows, which would allow even women to be effective. So after giving the designs of the iron parts of the crossbow to the blacksmith Cedoron, he had provided the crossbow designs to Darora a couple of weeks ago, and he could hardly wait until the new carpenter was back with the results.

Looking outside of the walls of the manor, it was easy to see that the tall fedarus trees which had loomed right over it when he had arrived here, were quite far back from the walls now, with the area between them and the walls already clear of any trees. It wasn't like he could easily measure the cleared area, but Pinoto - the foreman of the south - had given him an estimate that they had cleared nearly half the required area in the south for farming with the help of the log movers, which had made it much faster to remove the cut trees from the area.

That cleared area still didn't include the extra land needed to feed the stonecutters they had brought to the village, but at least they were on the right path to start farming in spring.

The smaller branches were already being used as firewood wherever needed, but that also meant there were many growing piles of thick logs kept criss-crossed in various places at the edges of the village, to be used wherever needed. One of those piles was easily visible from here ahead of the eastern wall of the manor. Hopefully, it wouldn't be long before they could start making a dedicated training area there.

Stolen novel; please report.

With all the logs they were getting these days, they easily had a lot more logs kept ready now than they needed. While Fedarus wood didn't really need too much seasoning, keeping them in the open should dry them enough in only a few months that they could even make permanent structures from them, which would easily last decades, unlike the first longhouse they had built.

As he gazed into the distance, he wondered how it was going in Ulriga. His brothers in this world had succeeded in sending him away from the city, but his sister Astela should have returned back to the palace by now after visiting her sick friend. Would his brothers do the same to her and send her away once again? Or would they be doing their best to get her married to another noble for their own political gains, no matter what her wishes were?

Apart from Gorsazo, she was the only one who had cared for the original Kivamus as family, despite being nearly two years younger than him. He just hoped she would be okay in that pit of vipers called

the Ulriga Palace which had been his home in this world before he was sent to Tiranat. He sighed. But what could even do about that from here? It wasn't like he had a phone to call her in this medieval world.

While he was lost in thoughts, he heard the creaking sound of the door of the stairwell opening behind him.

Gorsazo walked outside, rubbing his hands together while blowing on them. "So this is where you are! I was searching for you all inside the manor house. There is something that needs your attention."

Kivamus nodded. "Yeah, let's go back then. It's so damn cold that I was already thinking of returning."

With that, they entered the stairwell and it didn't take long for them to reach the manor hall on the ground floor, where a fire was burning brightly in the fireplace. Before anything he walked close to the fire and after taking off his gloves, he put his hands as close to them as he dared, giving a sigh as he felt the warmth.

Once he had taken a seat near the fire, with Gorsazo doing the same, he looked around and saw that Leah - the village blacksmith's girlfriend - was standing nearby, with a furious looking madam Nerida also there arguing with the majordomo. It was a rare sight to see either woman inside the manor hall, so he curiously looked at Duvas.

The majordomo hesitated. "Uh... I think it's better if you listen to it directly from her," he said while gesturing to the young maid.

"What is it, Leah?" Kivamus asked her.

Leah looked warily at madam Nerida for a moment, who was staring back at the maid indignantly, then the young maid turned towards him. "Milord, I'm really sorry for taking your busy time, but it is too much! I just can't take it anymore!" Then she looked uncertainly towards the majordomo and Gorsazo, before frowning at Nerida again.

Kivamus realized that it must be a sensitive matter, but other than the two women, only Duvas and Gorsazo were inside the hall, and he trusted them implicitly, so he didn't see any reason to send any of

them out. "Madam Nerida, would you mind stepping outside for a moment? I'll talk with you soon after I've heard her side."

Nerida huffed, and exited the outer door, still looking angry.

Kivamus looked back at the maid. "You can speak freely here, Leah."

The young maid took a deep breath, building her courage, and then started talking. "It started soon after you allowed me to live outside the manor. You might know that my tasks mainly include sewing and repairing clothes, and you had told me that it was fine for me to live outside as long as I did all the work I was asked for during the day. And I have! But... but my workload has kept increasing, because Madam Nerida was giving me more and more clothes to repair."

"Alright," Kivamus said with a frown. "Go on."

Leah continued with a nod, "At first I thought there were just a lot of damaged clothes to repair. Everyone has been working hard these days, so I thought that all the clothing must be getting torn or frayed sooner than usual, but it just never ends! For the last few weeks, it's become so much that even after working for all the daylight hours, I've to stay back and keep sewing clothes and sheets even in the light of a brazier, but it still never ends!"

She raised her hands in frustration as she continued, "I didn't know what to think about it, but yesterday I saw that I had been given the same cloth to mend which I had sewn just a day ago! It's like someone was tearing those clothes again and again just to give more work to me!" She glanced at the outer door for a moment. "It's like Madam Nerida wants to punish me for leaving the manor! I know she was never supportive of that decision, but this is too much, milord!"

Kivamus gave a sigh. "Alright, Leah, I think I understand what you are saying. But I need to hear her opinion as well. Why don't you tell Madam Nerida to come inside, so I can talk with her as well."

Leah nodded, and soon she was back with her supervisor.

Nerida looked angrily at the maid before gazing at Kivamus. "Has she already filled your head with lies, milord?"

