

Londoner 181

Chapter 181 Vendetta

Kivamus frowned. "I don't know who is lying and who's not, so why don't you tell me your side too? Are you purposely giving her more tasks, perhaps because she used to be a slave in the past? And if you are damaging our limited supply of clothing just for a vendetta, I won't be pleased. It's not like we have a hoard of coins to buy new clothing whenever we want."

Madam Nerida shook her head furiously, her short graying hair moving behind her. "No, milord, I'd never do that! I always do my best to support all the maids. When you had arrived here and freed the slaves, I didn't go against your decision - even if I don't think it's right to free someone who had been sold as a slave without them working enough to pay their slave-debt. But I'd seen how the previous baron treated the slaves, and I didn't want any of them to be whipped anymore. So I still supported your decision!"

She glared at the young maid. "I just don't know how she could accuse me of this! The other maids have been told to gather any clothes which need mending in a pile on our floor in the servants hall. It's them who gather the damaged clothes from around the manor - I don't even do that myself! I have a lot of other things to take care of instead of ripping up mended clothing again!"

Kivamus took a minute to think about it. Both parties believed they were telling the truth, but Leah was still getting more work than she should have.

But before he said anything, Nerida looked into the distance for a moment and said, "But I can tell you that some of the other maids - especially those who have never been slaves - have been complaining that they have to work even in the nights, whether it's to cook food or to clean up, but they only get the same wages as Leah does, even though she only works during the daytime."

Leah immediately protested. "But I still complete all the tasks given to me by working harder during the daytime! I don't even get any free time to take breaks these days because of that!"

That made Kivamus think of another possible reason for the higher workload of Leah. "Could it be... that some of the other maids are jealous and are tearing up the repaired clothing and sheets again so Leah has to work more?"

"That..." Nerida paused. "That's possible..."

Duvas immediately reprimanded, "If it's really true, then that's completely unacceptable to me! These days we barely have any coin to spare even on essentials like food! If anyone is damaging our already limited inventory of clothes, then they have to be penalised for this."

Nerida added with a determined voice, "I will try to ask around with others to see if it is really happening. One of the maids will surely tell the truth in return for an extra day off from her duties." Then she looked at Leah. "I'm sorry, dear. I never thought it could be the work of other maids. But you accused me directly and that made me so mad that I didn't even stop to think about it. You know I hate it if anyone goes against my authority!"

Leah just shook her head in resignation. "I... I never thought that they could do it either but that's the only way it makes sense." She looked at her supervisor. "You had opposed me living outside the manor, so I blamed you without even thinking about it."

"I only did it because I was worried for your safety when living outside our walls..." Nerida muttered.

Leah looked down for a moment, but then she glared towards the direction of the servants hall. "The other maids have been my friends for years, for Goddess' sake! How could they do this to me?"

Kivamus didn't think that it was a big privilege to live outside the manor when most of the people in the village would have given up a lot to be allowed to live inside it, but it was possible that the other maids might have considered it unfair, and tried to make life harder for Leah.

Nerida looked at Kivamus again while bowing her head. "I'm sorry milord, I know you have a lot of things to do, and I've wasted your time with such a petty thing. I should have taken care of it myself instead of getting angry at Leah."

Kivamus waved off the apology, feeling glad that the situation seemed to have resolved by itself. "I'm just glad that you have a better idea of the motive now."

Duvas remarked, "When you have found who did this, bring those maids to me so I can note down their names. The cost of the damaged clothing will be deducted from their wages along with a fine. That should give them a lesson that nobody is to harm the manor's property."

Stolen from Royal Road, this story should be reported if encountered on Amazon.

Nerida nodded, while Leah just looked relieved and thanked them again. And with that both of the women exited the manor hall.

Kivamus gave a sigh. These were the kind of things for which he was glad that he had a capable majordomo to take care of things by himself.

He looked at Gorsazo, trying to change the topic. "How are your classes these days?"

"It's slow going, my lord," Gorsazo replied. "As I had expected, the children have taken to learning the alphabet faster than the adults, with some of the young ones showing signs of having a really good mind for this. It's going to take some time before they are ready to join advanced classes with Syryne. But I have to say, I didn't expect her to have such a sharp brain."

Kivamus agreed with a nod. Syryne had taken to the ways of scientific thinking he had taught her like a duck to water, and she had already been doing comprehensive experiments to preserve losuvil leaves after they had gotten that big haul of it from the eastern hills. Not knowing too much about biology, he had given her full freedom for that with only a few ideas here and there, and he couldn't wait to hear the results.

"What about the two kids here?" he asked his former teacher.

"Lucem is probably going to be a lost cause," Gorsazo responded with a laugh. "Believe me, I am trying, and he'll still learn enough to write his own name and read numbers in due time, but his interest simply doesn't lie in education, it seems. Not for now anyway." He added, "That being said, Clarisa - our young maid, as well as Maisy - one of the orphans who had been adopted by a village merchant seem to be doing quite well. I have big hopes for them in the future."

Kivamus nodded with satisfaction. These were only green shoots at the moment, but he knew the future of Tiranat would be better because of this. It was certainly a good idea to educate everyone in the village, even if there were going to be no returns on that investment for a long time.

He looked at the majordomo. "How is the progress with the second longhouse?"

"It will be ready any day now," Duvas replied. "Taniok is working hard as always, and by now the construction workers have a much better idea of how to work with wood and logs, so the carpenter doesn't have to supervise every single thing himself. His apprentice has also been working eagerly, and we already have five wooden wheelbarrows completed - and are getting a new one nearly every week - bringing the total to eight by now including the iron ones."

He added, "That has allowed us to provide them to most of the places where there is work going, and the workers are more than thankful for them. Apart from that, you already know that he has also been providing new sledges and stretchers to our hunters as needed, once he had replaced the shafts for the spears with better quality wood. I've been told that those spears have been very helpful in hunting."

"That's good to hear," Kivamus agreed.

The majordomo continued, "But we have a decision to make about where to put the carpenter to work after the second longhouse is completed. The mushrooms we had started growing in a temporary shed in the south are doing well under the care of madam Helga, but there are only a small number of them there. A single bad spell of frost can kill all of them, not to mention we simply aren't getting enough mushrooms from that shed to feed even a single person."

Duvas explained, "While our food stores are holding for now, we already know that we will be short on wheat to use as seeds in the spring, by which time the prices would be astronomical. So it would be a good idea to make a barn for mushroom farming in the south soon if we want to start getting a regular supply of them in a few weeks. That will allow us to conserve more wheat to use as seeds later. That's one project where we can put Taniok, but on the other hand, while the new village walls are nearly ready now, they still have gaps where we plan to make the gates." He added, "Taniok is the only one who can work with the construction of the buildings or the gates, so we have to decide which of these projects he is going to work on."

Gorsazo nodded. "That's true. Darora is also an expert in working with wood, but he has only worked to make warbows and other small and intricate stuff in the past and has no experience in construction of buildings. The makeshift huts he had made at the quarry hardly count for this, so we just can't trust him to make any big structures safely."

Kivamus already knew the risk of not completing the village walls, but he didn't want to hear Feroy's rebuke for being so careless with the safety of the village again. "Before anything else, we have to

ensure that the village is safe from any other bandit raids in the future. We all know that Nokozal's group wasn't the only one living in these forests, and we have been lucky that Tiranat has only gotten two raids in the past few months. But as the winter proceeds further, the shortage of food will be felt everywhere, making them even more desperate to attack us to steal food."

He continued, "So once the second longhouse is built, tell Taniok to immediately start working on the gates. We had planned to make three gates, so it will take a few weeks for him to finish all of them. But that has to be our first priority. Once he's done with that, he can start working on the new barn in the south of the village for the mushrooms. Even if we might be short on seeds later, at least we have enough food now to feed everyone in the winter, so preventing any deaths from a raid is a higher concern at the moment."

"That's what I was thinking too," Duvas replied, "so I'll let him know about it." He added after a moment, "But there is another thing we need to address soon. We are likely going to have a problem of coal shortage in the near future."

Chapter 182 Coal And Wood

Duvas explained, "Before you had provided braziers to so many places in the village, I was quite sure that even without restarting coal mining in the winter, our two coal barns would easily last us for the whole season, maybe even with some coal still left over to sell after the snow melts. But at the rate we have been burning coal so freely for heating all over the village - including the longhouses and all the construction sites - and without any new coal being mined in the past few months, that's not the case anymore."

The majordomo continued, "Our servants had already emptied one of our two coal barns a week ago, and these days the coal stored in the second one is being used. That should still last us for the rest of the winter, but we have to start thinking about restarting coal mining soon, otherwise we won't have any of it left to start selling to the visiting merchants after the winter. That's our only source of revenue at the moment, and our expenses will go through the roof in spring, since we will also have to pay taxes to the Count at that time."

Gorsazo pointed towards the stone fireplace where tall flames were flickering above a few branches, "I noticed that these days we are already burning wood here instead of coal, can't we do that in other places too?"

Duvas shook his nearly bald head. "I have already told the servants to use any recently cut branches and stumps wherever possible for heating - especially in the open - since they aren't going to be of any use as logs anyway. But it's just not feasible to do it indoors unless there is a stone fireplace. So we still have to use coal inside the longhouses, as well as to provide it to most of the villagers as part of their

payment, since none of them have a stone fireplace inside their homes. That means we will have to start mining coal soon."

At that moment, the outer door opened again and the guard captain walked inside while brushing some snow off his huge shoulders. Giving a nod to Kivamus, he took a chair near the fireplace place as well.

Kivamus began, "I've been thinking about clearing the coal mines of water in the past few days, but I don't think we will get enough workers to do it manually bucket by bucket, with them being busy clearing the forest and other projects in the winter, and they will also have to start sowing the seeds after that." Before he continued, he thought of another possible problem. "I am also concerned if the water logging inside the mine shafts might already have turned into ice in this weather. That would make the task much more difficult if not impossible."

Duvas waved it off, "No, my lord, that's not a concern at all. Those mine shafts go deep under those hills, and the temperature inside those tunnels is much warmer, enough that it doesn't go below the freezing point there. You can trust me that the water inside those shafts will still be liquid, but the problem remains that even if we could spare enough workers to clear that water, the sheer quantity of water inside the mines would mean that it will take weeks to clear it. That's why I said that we need to start doing it as soon as possible."

Kivamus gave a nod. "If the water is not going to be frozen inside the shaft, then I think I should be able to think of a better solution." He gave a knowing smile to Gorsazo who was the only person who knew about his real origin. "This was the first problem I was told when I arrived here, so I've been working to sketch the design of a simple water wheel which can make the task much easier. But I still need to visit the mines before I can finalise the blueprints." He looked at the guard captain. "Let's do it tomorrow then. We have already postponed this long enough because of one reason or another."

Hudan nodded. "As you wish. But to ensure your safety, we'll have to leave early in the morning, since I don't want it to get dark on the return journey in case we got late for some reason."

"That works," Kivamus said. "It should only take me a couple of days to finish the design after that, but we will need a capable woodworker to build it. I think Darora should have the required skills for it, so I'll show him the designs once I have it ready."

"Let's hope it works," Duvas replied. "That being said, it was a good idea to separate the tasks of both of the carpenters in the village. Taniok is already getting better and more efficient in the construction of buildings, while Darora seems to be more interested in building weaponry."

"That's certainly true," Kivamus agreed. "Unlike Taniok, who has lived here in the relative safety of the village for more than a decade, Darora was quite fearful of bandits from his time at the quarry, and he knows what life as a slave is like. A while ago, he had told me that he will do his best to build anything which can help us defend the village better, since he has no intention to become a slave again if another bandit raid happens and we can't repel them successfully." He added with a shrug, "Anyway, he already used to work building warbows in the past, which means making weaponry does interest him already."

The author's content has been appropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

"But we have to wait for him until he reports with the final result of his current project." Kivamus continued while looking at the guard captain, "What about the hunting groups? Was it a good idea to make a fourth group with our limited number of guards?"

Hudan nodded. "It wouldn't have been possible if you hadn't decided to recruit women as guards. By now they can be trusted for watch duty at the gates of the manor, which frees up more men to be sent out for hunting. Of course, if you are really successful with making a crossbow, and if they are as good as you claim, then we would be able to send women out to hunt as well, but for now they can still work at the gates here, which doesn't require too much fighting skills because there are other male guards nearby anyway."

"You will find out soon enough about the crossbows," Kivamus commented. "How many female guards do we have now?"

"You had told me to recruit fifteen female guards," Hudan replied, "but as you know, the recruitment has been slow. But we still have eleven of them in our guard force now. That's why I had to start putting them on watch duty at the manor gates, because we couldn't afford to keep that many people sitting idle."

"I agree with that," Kivamus said. "Even including the new arrivals from the quarry, our village population is still only around three hundred and eighty." He continued, "But I still have a better idea for you. Now that we are close to our targeted strength of guards to defend the village walls, you should start putting them on duty at the gates of the village, even if it's only a gap in the walls at the moment. With the rest of the walls ready, those gaps are the only places to enter the village, so putting our guards there would help in quickly detecting any wild beast or bandit attack in the future."

Hudan gave a slow and thoughtful nod. "That's true. We already had to defend against three different attacks from wolves and such beasts near the village. Our nightly patrols had caught them on time so there weren't any injuries to villagers, but at least we haven't sighted any adzee nearby so far."

The guard captain rubbed the small stubble on his chin. "We are sending four hunting groups out now, which means we still don't have as many people as we expected to man the gates as we had thought at that time. We also can't afford to put our guards only at the village gates while keeping the manor gates undefended, since there is also a risk of untrustworthy villagers coming inside, now that there has already been a murder here of that bandit." He added, "I'll have to think more about it, but it might still be doable using the women guards."

"There is still no progress in the search for the culprits of Sejkil's murder, is there?" Gorsazo asked curiously.

The guard captain shook his head. "Not really. Feroy does have suspicions on a few men, so he's keeping an eye on them in the village, but there is nothing to prove anything yet."

"Let's hope he does find it out in the future," Duvas muttered. "May the goddess not have mercy on the murderers."

Kivamus knew that this time he would have to be very strict with the culprit, if they did find them. But he could only wait for now.

He glanced at the flickering flames inside the fireplace for a while. Then he looked at Hudan again. "What is the progress with the hunters?"

The guard captain answered, "Oh, that's what I had wanted to report to you when I came here. The hunting group which came last night came with another two nodors they found in the forests, taking our total to four of them in the manor. With the help of the compass you had given them, as well as the sledges they are using now, they are bringing in a lot of big games as well."

Kivamus nodded with satisfaction. All that meat had meant that the guards who had been skinny when he had arrived were starting to get a little more muscle on their frames now. The hunters were also selling what they couldn't consume within the manor to the butcher at the market square, but that was

only a small amount since the butcher refused to buy too much meat because he didn't expect too many customers these days. "What about sheep though?" he asked.

Hudan shook his head. "Nothing so far. One of the hunters thought he saw a sheep a few days ago when his group had gone quite deep into the eastern hills, but we still can't be sure what he saw. I have already told him to go towards that area again on their next hunting trips. We can only hope that these hills have some sheep for us to gather."

After a while, Duvas suggested, "I never thought I would say something like this a few months ago, but I think it would be a good idea to make a smoke house in the village now."

Chapter 183 Experiments

The majordomo continued, "While the snow is helping to prevent the meat from going bad for now, but with the amount of meat coming in being more than what we consume these days, it would be better to smoke it and store it for the future."

"That's true," Kivamus agreed. "But do we have anyone here who can smoke the meat properly?"

"That won't be a problem," Duvas replied. "Once in a while we did get some extra meat in the past, on the rare occasions when the previous baron went out to hunt. So some of our servants have good enough experience smoking meat that they can handle it easily if they have a dedicated smokehouse. Fedarus wood is also good enough to smoke it well, and we have a lot of small branches lying around everywhere so we don't have to worry about that either."

"Good," Kivamus nodded. "A smokehouse will only need to be a small room at the edge of the village, so it might only take a day or two for Taniok to build. Let him know to build it first before starting work on the gates."

"I'll do that today," the majordomo replied. He continued, "We are also getting a decent number of animal furs now, but we neither have a trained tanner or enough quantity of cheap alcohol here to make fur coats from them, so for now we are just salting them and keeping them dry, which will keep the rawhides usable for at least a year. That should be long enough for us to sell these to any merchants after the winter." He added with a smirk, "They go for a good price as well! I'm glad that we bought a good quantity of salt from Pydaso before the winter."

Kivamus nodded. "It would have been ideal if we could tan them and make fur coats from them right here, but selling the rawhides to the merchants is still a better idea than letting them go to waste." He looked towards the outer door again. "When will Darora be here anyway? Didn't he say that he would come here in the morning? I really want to see what he has come up with."

"I can't say, he might have run into some problems," Duvas guessed. "Not that I know much about it, but crafting a crossbow isn't going to be easy, or every town and village would be doing it and there would be a widespread use of them in every noble's retinue, but it's certainly not so if even the Duke's knights didn't have them, at least outside of the Fort Aragosa. I'd be surprised if Darora can make it at all."

"Well," Hudan said with a shrug, "those other carpenters didn't have access to any detailed crossbow designs like the one Lord Kivamus had provided to Darora. Let's hope he is able to craft it using them. It would add a lot to our defense if he is successful."

The outer door of the manor opened, and Syryne walked inside wearing a fur coat. She seemed to be grinning.

Kivamus thought of asking about the reason, but before he said anything she spoke up herself.

"Milord, I did it!" she beamed.

"You did what?" Hudan asked in confusion.

"I mean my losuvil experiment!" Syryne replied with a wide grin. "They work! They still work!"

"That's... that's impossible!" Gorsazo exclaimed while standing up. "The hunters had brought those leaves a month ago, there is no way they are still usable!"

Syryne grinned. "But they are! That's why I had gone to ask about it from a few guards who had gotten small cuts yesterday."

Gorsazo looked angry now and was probably going to shout again in anger, but Kivamus held up a hand. "Calm down, Gorsazo. She is not lying. I had given her full freedom to do the experiments as she wanted, but I still went to give her ideas once in a while, so I know what she's talking about. I was going to tell you about the progress a few days ago, but you have to go to the longhouse block for your classes for hours, and I have also been so busy these days that I never got the chance."

"But... my lord..." Gorsazo slowly sat down while shaking his head. "If it is really true... if there really is a way to preserve losuvil leaves to make them last so long... then it could have saved so many lives." He held his head in his hands. "If only this had been done in the past... then my wife might still be alive today..."

Kivamus knew that no words would be enough to console him, so he just walked closer to his past teacher and gently patted his back. After a while, Gorsazo sat up straighter, and gave him a wan smile.

Kivamus walked back to his seat and gazed at Syryne for her to continue, but she looked decidedly uncomfortable now, and stayed quiet.

"It's okay, Syryne," Gorsazo said with a weak smile. "I apologise for shouting at you. Go on and tell us more about it".

Syryne took a moment to compose herself and then continued. "It would be better if I showed you all."

"That's a good idea," Kivamus remarked and stood up while gesturing everyone to follow him towards the inner door of the manor house.

This story has been stolen from Royal Road. If you read it on Amazon, please report it

As they walked there, Gorsazo muttered towards Syryne. "You could have at least mentioned it at some point in our lessons. I teach you every day for Goddess' sake!"

Syryne gazed downwards. "I just... wanted to be completely sure that it worked before saying anything. I just didn't want to give false hopes to anyone. I'm sorry..."

Gorsazo exhaled loudly and shook his head. "Don't worry about it anymore."

Kivamus waited for Hudan to lead ahead with a tallow candle to provide some light before crossing the inner door, then entered a short corridor with a series of doors on both sides. He walked to the last one on the right, and walked inside the room behind the huge guard captain, with others following him inside as well, making the small room feel a lot more crowded.

Glancing around, on a few wooden tables kept on the periphery of the room, there were many different clay pots kept in a series, and a small parchment with some scribbles kept next to all of them. He had already visited this room a few times, but Syryne was the one who had claimed it as her laboratory, so he gestured to her to continue.

Syryne nodded, looking more in her element now, and began, "I'll start from the beginning then." Pointing at the clay pots, she explained, "Lord Kivamus had told me to divide the sack of losuvil leaves which the guards had brought here from the eastern hills into separate batches, so I had used fourteen different clay pots for this. I've tried a different method to preserve them for every batch - including cooking them in boiling water with and without some salt, drying them near a fire, immersing them in vinegar or alcohol, or even both in one case and so on. I had also kept one batch without doing anything to it - as the control group - so that I could compare the results of the other batches to this one."

She gave a shrug while looking at Kivamus. "We don't have a big amount of vinegar, alcohol or other such things in storage, but Lord Kivamus had told me to use them freely for this, so I did exactly that." She continued, "Apart from that, for some batches I'd kept the leaves intact instead of making a paste from them, while for some other batches, I made them into a paste first, before starting any method to try to preserve them."

Once Duvas and Gorsazo nodded, she continued, "But as I had expected, the leaves in nine of the fourteen batches had lost any healing effect within a week of the plucking of leaves, as is normal in this weather - including the control group."

"But how were you testing them," Gorsazo asked curiously, "that they were still usable?"

"That's on me," Hudan grunted. "I'm not going easy on training our guards, and once in a while I even make them fight with real swords instead of wooden ones, and that always causes a few nicks and cuts. It's not like we had many losuvil vines nearby, so usually they just washed it off and wrapped it with a boiled bandage, but when Syryne told me that she needed uh... test subjects for her experiment, all of

the guards agreed to volunteer when I told them that it meant they would be getting free losuvil paste to apply on their wounds."

Syryne nodded. "I was using a baseline that a fresh batch of losuvil paste starts working within an hour, and as long as it is a small wound, usually the person doesn't feel pain anymore after a few hours. So every time I gave them some losuvil paste from different batches to apply, I told them to use it only after they heard the next temple bell, and to remember how many hours it took before they felt pain-free. If it had no effect, then I considered that batch to have become a waste, while the ones which still worked more or less as expected from a fresh paste were to be considered viable."

Kivamus smiled mentally, seeing that she had taken to that scientific jargon so easily. He had also noticed in his earlier visits here that she had started applying rational methods and scientific thinking properly after he had taught her about them, making him feel quite satisfied inside. She was certainly going to become a great botanist in the future, and likely a good inventor of medicines in this world. So instead of disturbing her by congratulating her for that, he just let her speak.

"Didn't any of the guards complain that they had to wait for the temple bells to apply the paste," Gorsazo asked, "even when they were already in pain?"

Hudan gave the answer. "Oh, they complained alright!" Then he gave a savage grin. "But I made it clear to them that anyone who went against those orders wouldn't get any losuvil paste in the future at all. Knowing that their training isn't going to get any easier in the future, that made all of them fall in line immediately."

Duvas chuckled. "I was there at the time, and I have to say, the previous guard captain never managed to control our guards this well."

Kivamus grinned, and remarked, "It just means that I chose a good captain of the guards!" making everyone laugh.

Once everyone had quieted down, Syryne continued while pointing at a few clay pots, "Of the five remaining batches which were still viable after a week, three of them lasted for another few days, but then they also became completely ineffective. I was thinking that I must have done something right with those batches, but Lord Kivamus told me to focus on the remaining two batches - the ninth and the twelfth batches - since it was possible that the leaves in the batches which lasted just a few more days might just have been stronger or healthier than the initial ones, and it wasn't anything special in the

process since they only lasted a few days longer. By that time the weather had also become colder which might have affected this."

"That's true enough," Gorsazo commented. "What about the last two batches?"

Syryne finally gave a grin. "These two were the real surprises." She pointed at one of the two pots kept on the middle table. "The ninth pot was effective for around fifteen days in total, but then it lost its effect quickly, while the twelfth pot was still viable at the time. So Lord Kivamus suggested to me to repeat the preserving process of the ninth batch with the twelfth one, so we could get the benefits of both processes in that batch."

She pointed at the other pot on the table, which was kept covered like others. "That's the twelfth batch. That's the one which I had given to the guards this morning after their daily training, and I just returned from the training grounds to ask about the effects." She finished with a beaming face. "And it works! The guards told me that it worked just as fast as a fresh batch of losuvil, if not even quicker."

"But how did you preserve this final batch?" Duvas asked curiously.

Chapter 184 Precautions

Syryne took a deep breath before she started explaining. "I had divided that twelfth batch of Losuvil leaves into four different parts once I had seen that it had lasted the longest so that I could try a different new method with each of them to make it last even longer - including repeating the process of preserving the ninth batch with all of them. I didn't achieve a good result with three of those smaller batches, so I will skip them for now."

She pointed at the clay pot in front of her. "This pot contains only one half of the two parts I had divided the fourth smaller batch into, the other also being discarded when it lost its effect. So the final process starts with immersing the intact leaves in concentrated juice of some Toloraberries for at least seven days - thankfully, ma had still kept a few of them in the kitchen so I took it from there. Then I removed the leaves and covered them with a good quantity of salt for three days."

She continued, "After that I cooked them in some ale, before adding a certain amount of dry roasted and crushed rizako mushrooms in it - which I brought from the shed in the south. Then I had to make it into a paste using a mortar and pestle before immersing it in some relatively concentrated alcohol for three days - for which Lord Kivamus gave me one of the precious few bottles of wine of the previous baron he had found in a locked trunk recently - and then I had to dry that paste near the fire, nearly roasting them, before I..." She kept speaking further enthusiastically but then paused and looked at others' faces, which just showed confusion.

Shaking her head, she explained, "The actual process is even longer and complicated, but I have noted it down in full detail, so we can repeat it in the future as long as we have all the materials available for that - including wine, Toloraberries and Rizako mushrooms."

Duvas exhaled loudly. "I'm just glad that Lord Kivamus chose you to do all this instead of me."

Syryne laughed, and looked at Kivamus. "Should I show some of the final product?"

Kivamus nodded. "Sure, but only a small amount, and then put it back. After dividing it so many times, there is only a small amount left here and we need to keep using this batch for as long as possible to see how long it remains viable."

Syryne nodded and walked closer to the table. She picked up a small wooden spoon and after dipping it into the pot, she brought it closer to show it to everyone in the light of the candle. It was a powdery reddish substance, which looked like it was completely dry.

Duvas took the spoon and brought it closer to his nose, sniffing it. "Doesn't smell like losuvil paste at all."

"We do need to use a few drops of water to make a paste from this before applying it," Syryne explained.

"That makes sense," the majordomo commented.

Kivamus was still thinking about it though. If this powdery substance contained the compound acetylsalicylic acid - which was better known as aspirin - then it stood to reason that it could also be effective if taken directly with water. He looked at Syryne. "Now that we have a powder which is still usable, next time I want you to give it to the injured guards to consume it directly along with some water. Use the smallest possible amount in the beginning, and if it doesn't work, keep increasing the dosage in very small amounts until it starts to work."

"But... losuvil is always used as a paste directly on the wound..." Syryne said with confusion.

"Yeah..." Kivamus muttered. There was still a lot of knowledge like the basic concept of atoms, molecules and compounds which were alien to these people. But he neither had an easily explainable way to tell about that, nor Syryne was ready to absorb that knowledge at this point. For now, he just waved it off, and tried to explain it in simple terms. "I know about that, but trust me on this. At this point that powder doesn't really resemble losuvil leaves anymore, like Duvas mentioned earlier. It is a highly concentrated compound now. Uh... basically, it contains the essence of losuvil leaves - which is the part which helps to reduce pain, fever or inflammation. So I'm quite sure that it will work even better if consumed directly with water."

Stolen content warning: this content belongs on Royal Road. Report any occurrences.

Duvas and others looked doubtful about it, but Syryne gave an understanding nod. "You have been right about all of this so far, so I'll trust you on that. None of us could have expected that it was even possible to preserve the effect of losuvil leaves for longer than a week, but it can be done after all - just like you had expected."

"That's true..." Gorsazo muttered looking at Kivamus. "It seems your otherworldly knowledge is going to be even more useful here than I ever expected."

"Otherworldly knowledge?" Duvas asked with a raised eyebrow. "What does that even mean?"

Kivamus' breath hitched in his throat and he glared at his former teacher for the slip.

"Oh... uh..." Gorsazo hesitated. "I mean, the kind of things he has read in books, and the ideas he thinks of to help the village might very well be otherworldly in how innovative they are."

"That's true enough..." Duvas nodded with understanding.

Giving an exhale in relief, Kivamus noticed how Syryne was staring at him carefully, but he shook it off. "At this point this losuvil extract is dry enough, but we need something to seal it inside in the future to make it last even longer. Likely small glass jars, although they are going to be very costly -so even ceramic ones would do. We will have to buy some of them from any visiting merchants, but that's for after the winter, once the losuvil vines in the eastern hills start sprouting leaves again."

He looked at everyone for a moment. "Now that we know that we can preserve losuvil for at least a month, and probably even longer, I think it can turn out to be very profitable for us in the future. I think it would be a good idea to try to do it at a bigger scale in the future, so that we can try to sell them in nearby towns and cities. But we have to make sure that the exact process of preserving it doesn't leave this room."

Gorsazo looked at him in anger. "To profit from it would mean charging a high price from people who can barely afford it!" He continued loudly, "And if they don't have the money to buy it, it would mean someone in their family might lose their lives because of our... greed!"

Kivamus sighed and shook his head. "No, that's not what I meant at all. If... we are actually sure in a few months that we can make this powder last much longer, then we will sell it to traders, but at only a small margin. In fact, I will only sell it to trusted merchants like Pydaso after taking an assurance from them that they will not mark it up more than a certain percentage, otherwise even if we sell it to them cheaply they might just increase their selling price later. I am not going to profit from sick people who can barely afford to buy it, especially when we have so many losuvil vines in those hills that we might never exhaust them fully."

He continued, "But I still need to think of the village first. We were only able to afford to give Syryne access to these pots and the materials she used because we had the money to spare for it, even if barely. Think how many more such helpful things we can make in the future if we have the money to keep experimenting like this."

Knowing that Gorsazo knew about his past, he added, "Even if nobody else, at least you should understand that I am not lying when I say that I really have a lot of ideas to improve the lives of everyone." Thankfully, others would only think that he meant to say that he had gotten ideas from his studying at the library in the Ulriga Palace, instead of the real reason.

Gorsazo took a deep breath. "I... I know that. I shouldn't have shouted at you, but after hearing that you wanted to profit from sick people, when my own wife died because I couldn't afford to bring losuvil paste in time to save her just made me too angry to think rationally. But you are right, of course. If anyone else was saying this, I would say that they were lying, but I do agree that it's different with you."

Kivamus nodded, trying not to look at Syryne who was still frowning at him after listening to his teacher's words. "Exactly," he said. "This is still a long way away, but what I plan to do is to sell it at a high enough volume that we will still make a decent profit even if our margins are not high, since we are going to be the only source of this miraculous medicine. For example, if the usual losuvil paste sells for ten silvers in Cinran for a single use, maybe we can keep the price at five silvers - assuming that covers

our costs and gives us a small profit. That way people would be able to afford it easily, and we would get a reasonable profit as well."

He added, "That's why I prevented our hunters who had gone to the east from telling anyone else about the source of Losuvil vines as a precaution, even though they will eventually let that information slip in the future. However, we have to keep the information of the preservation process limited to the few of us here. Do not mention even a single word about this process to anyone else."

Duvas frowned looking at Kivamus, "Is such a precaution really necessary though?"

Chapter 185 Profiting Or Profiteering

The majordomo added with a shrug, "I don't think you need to worry too much about it. Even though we all have heard the process, I think that maybe excluding you, no one else other than Syryne has any chance of replicating it anyway. The process is so complicated that I barely remember it anymore."

Having lived on modern Earth, Kivamus had a much better idea than the majordomo of how profitable industrial espionage could be for their nearby nobles if they found out about this process, not to mention it took only a little information for someone to start thinking in this way, and eventually they might stumble upon the process just like they had. It was very likely that it would happen anyway eventually, but he had to try to prolong that time as much as he could.

He explained, "Still, don't mention it to anyone else even if you think the person is trustworthy. This procedure can easily be leaked or sold by that person to someone like Zoricus in exchange for some coin, and that greedy bastard certainly won't hesitate to sell it at a price ten times as high as what I would charge, if not even higher. In our case, I only want a small profit to keep these experiments going and use any leftover money to feed and house the villagers, but as for Zoricus, there is nothing stopping him from charging a sky high price to profiteer from this procedure - since he knows that people will still buy it to save the life of a family member even if they have to sell another child into slavery to be able to afford it."

Duvas grimaced. "Yeah, I get your point now."

Kivamus looked at Syryne. "Tell me the results of the guards consuming the powder directly when you have it." Once she nodded, he looked at others. "Let's return back to the outer hall now. Darora must be coming soon."

It was evening now, and there was still no sign of Darora so far. Kivamus had returned to work on another of his blueprints, while Gorsazo had gone to teach the villagers in the longhouse block. Duvas was out to give some orders to the servants in the manor, while Feroy had returned back recently after spending most of the day in the market square.

Since the light was getting too low to keep drawing, Kivamus took a step back and looked at the improved design of the seed drill. It looked like it should work better than the first design he had made. But he couldn't help but sigh. Despite getting another trained carpenter, the list of things they needed Darora and Taniok to build still kept growing and he hadn't been able to get the first seed drill built. There was still around a month before the snow started to melt, but he had to get it done before then, so he could make any further improvements if needed. Although he could still tell the blacksmith to start working on the iron parts first. Yeah, it was a good idea. He will have to do it tomorrow.

Soon, the outer door of the manor hall opened, and Hudan walked inside while smiling broadly. Following behind him was the young carpenter with crew cut black hair, who must be around thirty at most. Although Darora didn't look nearly as frail as he did when he had arrived from the quarry, his short frame could still use more food. The last one to enter was the blacksmith Cedoron, who was easily the only one rivaling the giant build of Hudan.

But that wasn't all. Looking closely, he saw that Darora had a big burlap satchel on his shoulders, and was beaming as well.

Kivamus grinned. This must be what he had been waiting for!

He raised his eyebrows while looking at the newcomers. "Would it be better if we left the manor hall for the training grounds?"

Hudan smirked. "I think that would be... wise."

"It's ready for testing then?" Kivamus asked, trying not to show how excited he was.

Darora gave a confident nod. "It is, milord!"

"Perfect! Let's go then! We can also find Duvas somewhere outside," Kivamus said while taking his fur coat and started walking towards the outer door. "I can't wait to see his expression when he realizes what this is!"

Feroy got up as well, frowning at the carpenter.

Exiting the door, Kivamus saw that it was around sunset, with there still being enough light to see without the help of braziers. He tightened his fur coat around him, glad that it wasn't snowing at the moment. He followed the guard captain towards the training grounds in the southeast of the manor with the snow crunching under his boots, and kept an eye out for the majordomo.

Before long, Kivamus saw him talking to Madam Nerida and a few servants near a barn in the east. "Duvas, join us!" he hollered towards the majordomo, who gave a quick nod and after another few words with the servants, he slowly walked towards Kivamus.

"What is it?" Duvas asked curiously before they all started walking towards the training grounds again. "I was in the process of allotting the weekly grain rations for the workers, although it's mostly done by now."

This book's true home is on another platform. Check it out there for the real experience.

"Then leave it for now," Kivamus commented. "Madam Nerida can take care of the rest this time. There is something else that I want you to see."

Duvas looked curiously at the huge blacksmith and the young carpenter walking in front of them along with Hudan and Feroy, then he suddenly looked back at Kivamus with wide eyes. "It couldn't be... that, right?" The majordomo added without waiting for a reply, "Is it really what you have been talking about for so long?"

Kivamus smirked. "It is, although I have yet to see the final version for myself."

Soon, they reached the training grounds where a guard was engaged in a mock fight with Kerel, with another few guards - including Hyola and a few other female guards - cheering them on. Immediately,

he saw as their wooden swords struck each other repeatedly with a few loud thwacks, before both the fighters took a step back to reassess.

Hudan clapped his hands loudly. "Alright, that's enough training for today. Those who are hungry can go for a meal now, but it would be a good idea if you stay back. You might see something interesting."

Kerel and the other guard immediately stopped fighting and began looking towards them curiously along with the other guards.

Hudan was going to say something else but Feroy interrupted him and looked at Kivamus, "So far nobody else knows about it apart from the few of us. Are you sure about testing it in the open? Should we not try to keep it confidential like... the medicine?"

Kivamus nodded. "They are the ones who are going to use it in the future, so they'll need to know sooner or later anyway. There is no point in hiding it anymore."

At his nod, Hudan turned back towards the guards. "Move back and make some space here! Yufim, come here and bring the archers with you." Then he arranged the guards so they were standing in a wide semicircle, with the south-eastern corner of the manor wall ahead of them and nobody else in the way.

Seeing Kivamus' gesture, Darora put his hand inside the satchel and brought out what would only look like a weird wooden contraption to everyone else. Then the young carpenter gave it to the guard captain who gazed at it from all sides carefully, with Feroy watching the device with a frown.

The rest of the guards looked a little confused, probably wondering why the baron had come to interrupt their training. Duvas still looked doubtfully at the device, but stayed quiet.

Before long, Hudan nodded and held it towards Kivamus. "I think you should be the one to try it first. You are the one who designed it, so the honor of being the first user of the first crossbow should go to you."

Kivamus nodded, and took the device over from him, looking at it in the light of the setting sun. This... this was a crossbow, alright. Although it was a little heavier than he had expected.

He looked at the blacksmith for the other thing he was expecting, and saw that Cedoron was holding a small object shaped like a huge two-pronged fork made of iron. That was the other required part for using a crossbow - being aptly called a goat's foot lever. It was a very simple mechanism which you just put on the top of the crossbow and pulled its lever back to load it. Noticing his gaze, Cedoron handed it over to him.

As Kivamus put the lever on the top of the crossbow, he thought about how they had finalised this design. In the past few weeks, the blacksmith and the carpenter had come to him many times to consult with him about the design which would be most practical for them while being cheap and easy to make as well. Before giving the order to the carpenter and the blacksmith to start building it, he had been confused about which design would be the best for them.

So he had started with drawing the design of a windlass on a parchment, and he had even sketched the primitive gearbox of a cranequin, but while the first design - which would be better called an arbalest - would be huge and would require someone with considerable physical strength to wield it, the second design with the cranequin would simply be too complex to make at scale.

A cranequin would also require a lot of high-quality iron, and it would require an intricate process to forge it. As talented as Cedoron seemed to be in acquiring new concepts - it would still need him to work for a long time to produce even a single one. So after some input from Feroy and Hudan, he had thought of a simpler solution, and they had finally settled on the current design. It was a middle ground between the earlier two designs, and used a straightforward system called a goat's foot lever, which needed a much smaller amount of iron to forge, and it was a very simple design as well, making it easier to produce more of it.

However, while this design was capable of very high draw weights, that would require the prod - which was the bow-like part of the crossbow at the front - to be made of iron, so he had decided to make the crossbow in a smaller size than what it must have been like on medieval Earth. That had allowed them to use a prod made of fedarus wood, thus saving a lot of costly iron. And with hunters bringing in a lot of hunted animals these days, there was also a good amount of sinew and rawhide available to make the strings of the crossbow, and their new fletcher had been vital in crafting it.

Coming back to the present, he hooked the lever on top of the crossbow, and pulled its handle back to nock the string. He still had to use a decent amount of force to pull back the string, making him glad that he had been participating in some running and light training with the guards. His flabby body of a few months ago when he arrived in this world might simply not have been able to do it. While the lever

certainly didn't need someone of Hudan's strength to load it, it was still harder to load than he had expected it to be, and yet it was still doable easily enough.

Once he had pulled the string back till the nut, thus spanning - or loading - the crossbow and making it ready to shoot, he asked Darora for the bolt.

Chapter 186 Target Practice

The carpenter nodded, and pulled out a bunch of bolts, some of them simply being made of sharpened fedarus wood, while the others also had an iron tip - some of which were pointed, others being broadheads. The fletcher had also attached feathers on the sides to stabilize its trajectory.

Kivamus picked up a simple wooden bolt without an iron tip and laid it on the top of the crossbow stock in the required groove. Before shooting it, he glanced around him and saw everyone looking at him attentively. Hudan gave him an encouraging nod to try it, so he brought the crossbow in front of his eyes, putting the end of its stock - the butt - on his shoulder. He was glad that instead of keeping the end part of the stock relatively thinner as it was supposed to be, he had ordered it to be made thicker like the butt of a gun, to make it easier on the shoulder of the one shooting it.

The design even had a bolt clip to keep the bolt in place easily, which would be vital when the guards were shooting downwards from the top of a watch tower, otherwise the bolt could simply fall off the crossbow to the ground before shooting it.

Holding the crossbow carefully, he looked ahead towards the walls, and brought a human shaped straw mannequin in front of the crossbow sight. The mannequin even had a circular target made of wood attached to it, so he aimed at the centre of it. After taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly, he pulled the trigger. Immediately, the bolt flew with a high velocity and struck the target with a loud thwack! It didn't hit even close to the centre of the wooden target he had aimed at, but he was still able to hit it near the edge.

For a moment, many of the people around him looked confused about what had happened, but it didn't take long for them to understand when Feroy pointed at the straw target and exclaimed, "You did it, milord, you really made an arbalest here!"

"Were you already an expert archer, my lord?" one of the guards asked in wonder, with another one immediately replying, "Of course he would be! He is the son of the Duke, after all!"

Duvas was just shaking his head in disbelief, while Hudan gave a roar and started clapping, with the other guards joining him. Soon, the training ground was filled with victorious roars and cheers of success, with some of the guards including the women raising both of their hands in the air and cheering in anticipation of a much secure future of Tiranat.

Kivamus couldn't help but grin in satisfaction. A lot of work from other people had gone into this, but they had really made it successfully! He looked at the ex-mercenary. "It's a crossbow, and not an arbalest, but now I am confident that we can even make those if we wanted to."

"Milord, I simply need to try it for myself!" Feroy urged, making Kivamus hand over the crossbow to him. The ex-mercenary picked up a bolt from the waiting bunch in the carpenter's hands, and after loading it, he put the target in his sights.

Surprisingly, he did the loading all by his instincts, without even needing any instructions from anyone on its use. Before long, there was the sound of another bolt striking the target, this time with enough force to push the straw mannequin back a little before it balanced itself again, making the crowd erupt in cheers again.

"This is beyond what I had expected in my wildest dreams!" the ex-mercenary exclaimed to the guard captain, who just gave a grin in reply.

Kivamus glanced at the small crowd and saw that while the female guards seemed to be anticipating their turn to try it - knowing well by now that it was mainly meant for them - but Yufim, who was their best archer, seemed to be frowning.

Now Kivamus needed to verify whether it served the purpose for which it was made for. "Feroy, hand over the crossbow to Hyola."

The ex-mercenary nodded, and gave the contraption to the tall redhead woman, who held the crossbow in her hands and turned it around to look from all sides.

"Go on," Kivamus encouraged, "it's your turn now. I need to see if you can load it easily as well."

Hyola gave an uncertain nod, and picked up a bolt from Darora - who must have known her for years - gave her an encouraging smile. But she realised that she needed to load it first, so she handed it back for the moment.

Unauthorized usage: this narrative is on Amazon without the author's consent. Report any sightings.

Hyola needed the help of Feroy to show her how it worked, then she nodded and put the goat's foot lever in its place. She grunted with exertion for a moment while loading it, but nonetheless she was able to do it without anyone else's help. While the past month with regular food had helped her and others a lot, the loading would get easier in time when she had done some practice and had gained more strength.

Once she had put a bolt in the groove, Kivamus said, "Alright, you should shoot it now. Try to target the centre of the straw mannequin."

"But..." Hyola protested, "but... I have never even held a bow in my hands! How can I hit the target on my first try?"

Kivamus smiled. "That's the main difference between a crossbow and a regular bow, so don't worry about that. Just bring the targets in your sight like Feroy showed you and pull the trigger."

Hyola took a deep breath and carefully lifted the crossbow in front of her, and after taking nearly a full minute to target the mannequin, she pulled the trigger, and surprisingly, she hit the mannequin in the head. The nearby guards erupted in cheers once again, but this time the women's cheers were louder than anyone else.

Hyola just turned back and gazed at him in wonder, not believing that she was the one to have done that. But Yufim didn't take long to taunt the ex-stonecutter. "I can still shoot better than that!"

Hyola looked a little demotivated on hearing that, but didn't say anything. However, Feroy - who was grinning like a madman - gazed at the young archer. "Of course you can, but you are missing the point!"

"Which is?" Yufim asked with a frown.

Hudan gave the answer. "The point is that learning how to shoot a crossbow barely takes any time, even if the person has never held a crossbow in their hands. Nobody can deny your accuracy in archery, but you have taken what... ten, fifteen years to learn to shoot like that?"

Yufim nodded proudly. "I've been doing it for most of my life. So nearly two decades, I think."

"Exactly," Hudan said. "But Hyola had never even seen a crossbow in her life, and yet she hit the target in her first try without needing the experience of decades to learn how to shoot. Just like Lord Kivamus and Feroy."

The young archer still didn't look satisfied, and pointed at Hyola. "Then I want to challenge her! Even if it doesn't take much practice, that had to be blind luck. Nobody can make a headshot in their first try!"

Hyola looked at Hudan for permission, and he gave a short nod while grinning, making her look at Yufim with a challenging glint in her eyes.

Before long, Yufim had already nocked an arrow on his heavy warbow, and at Feroy's gesture, he let loose the arrow which flew faster than eyes could track it and hit the head of a straw mannequin, easily piercing it from the force. That was an instant kill. Yufim grinned and looked at others, who clapped at his accuracy.

For her turn, this time Hyola had taken a iron-tipped broadhead bolt at Feroy's insistence, and once she had put it in the groove, she shot it towards one of the straw mannequins after taking aim carefully. Whether by luck or skill, she hit the straw target in the neck this time, but this iron tipped bolt had enough power in it to make the straw head fly off the mannequin's body with its force. However, it didn't stop there at all. The bolt kept flying and loudly struck one of the logs of the palisade wall of the manor, which was at least ten meters behind the straw mannequin.

Immediately, the female guards whooped loudly, with the other guards joining them, making it clear who had won the challenge.

"That's not fair!" Yufim protested again. "This target wasn't even far enough. I can easily shoot its head at thrice the distance! I demand a rematch!"

"That's enough for today," Hudan said with a finality in his voice, making Yufim look down and start to sulk.

Kivamus chuckled at the childish antics of the young archer. He knew that an expert archer like him could easily shoot much further, and with much more accuracy. Also, a crossbow bolt was heavier than an arrow, especially when it used an iron tip, and wouldn't fly nearly as far as the arrow before its trajectory turned downwards.

The crossbow would also take much longer to reload than nocking a new arrow on a bow, however, for a short distance, its benefits were undeniable. Hyola - a woman who had no practice with archery couldn't have done this with a bow, yet with the help of a crossbow, she could make a lethal shot easily enough. It was likely that the other women guards might not be this accurate, especially without some more practice, but the fact remained that a crossbow would make their female guards just as effective as men under particular conditions. That was good enough for Tiranat for now.

Kivamus rubbed his hands together as a sudden gust of wind chilled him to the bone. He gazed at the snow on the ground for a moment, before looking at the guard captain. "It's pretty cold here, so let's return back to the manor hall. And bring the crossbow with you."

Hudan nodded and started giving quick orders to the guards. "Tesyb, go and bring all the bolts back to me. The rest of you, go and have something to eat. While you all have seen what a crossbow is and how effective it can be, you are still not allowed to discuss it with anyone who lives outside the manor. Kerel, make sure that there are no slackers on duty tonight in their over excitement." Then he picked up the crossbow from Hyola's hands, and gave a nod to Kivamus.

Chapter 187 Priorities

They had returned to the manor hall, with Duvas sitting near the fireplace along with him. Gorsazo had just returned as well and Hudan was animatedly telling him about the evening while pointing out various parts of the crossbow in his hands, while Feroy seemed to be lost in his thoughts. Cedoron had returned to his workshop, but Kivamus had told Darora to stay back for a while.

Kivamus gestured to an empty chair near the fireplace. "Darora, take a seat."

The young carpenter hesitated for a moment before Duvas gestured again at the chair. Darora sat on the edge of the seat, and looked around the room.

Kivamus took the crossbow from Hudan, and gazed at the crossbow. "You have done very well, Darora. I had trust in your skills after seeing you make warbows for us, but seeing the real thing is another thing altogether."

Darora smiled at the praise, while rubbing his short black hair in embarrassment. "I couldn't have done it without Cedoron. I had to go to him again and again to modify the parts which did not fit or work as I expected, but he was able to forge everything I needed. But it was good that you made us settle on a single design using ideas from both of your crossbow blueprints, otherwise it would have been very difficult to make."

Kivamus nodded. "Yeah, my earlier thought was to make one big crossbow and one small one at the same time, so we could decide which of them to build again in the future depending on which version worked better." He looked at the crossbow in his hands. "But I think the decision to settle on a design before crafting it was for the best. Well done!"

Darora grinned. "Thank you, milord! Would you need me to make more of them in the future?"

Kivamus chuckled while looking at the guard captain who was giving a very enthusiastic nod in support. "Yeah... I think it's safe to say that we want more of them - now that we have seen that it's feasible to make it here. Although I was expecting you back a day or two ago."

"We had run into some problems with the trigger mechanism," Darora explained. "The first few times Cedoron had forged it, it was just too tight to pull easily, and that just wouldn't work if you wanted women to use it too. So I had to tweak the design a little a few days ago, and once the blacksmith had forged it by this morning, it didn't take long to assemble it."

"It's hardly a problem that it took longer than we expected," Duvas remarked with a snort. "The fact that we can make it at all is already beyond my expectations!"

"I agree, milord," Feroy remarked. "Although this is much smaller and less powerful than the arbalest I had seen in the past with other mercenaries, it still holds a damn good punch in it, you know? I don't know if a bolt from this crossbow can pierce the armour of a knight like an arbalest could, but an unarmored enemy? Nothing will save him if he gets hit by a bolt from this one!"

Kivamus agreed, "That's why we had taken the best ideas from both designs. An arbalest would have needed a windlass which would make it very cumbersome to load in a hurry and most likely it would be too unwieldy for women to use. But we just saw Hyola using this crossbow easily enough, and so can the other female guards with some practice."

Hudan nodded enthusiastically. "This is going to transform our defence! Once we have enough of them and have placed the women guards on watchtower with these crossbows, no enemy will be able to come close to our walls! We can't thank you enough, Darora!"

The young carpenter just gave a weak smile. "I never want to become a slave again in my life if I can help it, so I'll gladly stay in Tiranat for all my life if I can remain a free man. I am just glad I could help make this place more secure."

"You don't know how right you are," Fero commented. "I know how costly iron is, so I have no idea if we can ever afford to make enough crossbows to provide them to all of our guards, but if we could do it anyway..." He gazed into the distance like he was lost in memories. "If there is enough light to target the enemy accurately, then with this crossbow, even a physically weak woman like Hyola could have taken down someone like Nokozal in a few shots and without even getting hurt! That's when that huge bastard didn't die even when fighting Hudan and Tesyb at the same time and they are our two strongest men!"

The mercenary shook his head. "Once we have the advantage of the height of a watchtower, we could even take down horse riders with this crossbow, for Goddess' sake! At least as long as they don't have a knight's armor on them."

Reading on this site? This novel is published elsewhere. Support the author by seeking out the original.

Hudan grinned as well at that image, and looked at Kivamus. "Milord, we need as many crossbows as we can get for our defense. I'm sure that after seeing how effective they can be, the guards would even agree to give up half their wages for a while if it means you will have the funds to provide enough of them to us, so that everyone could have one of it for themselves."

Kivamus grimaced for a moment. He knew how poor everyone in this village was, and yet Hudan was confident that the guards would give up half of their pay for this. It just went to show how poorly defended this village was until now. Without having even a wooden wall around them, most of the villagers - including the new guards - must have slept in fear every night of either a bandit raid or even a wild beast attack - fearful enough that they knew their families would agree to eat half meals for a while

as long as they could afford a crossbow in return, which would mean the guard would return back to his family safely every time.

He looked at the guard captain. "I'm glad to hear that the guards would be willing to do that, but I don't think it would come to that. We could have made the prod of the crossbow from iron which would have increased its power further, but I wanted to use as little iron as possible to keep our costs low, so I had them made from Fedarus wood, and it turned out just fine. So I don't think iron is going to be our limiting factor here."

With everything needing to be done by hand in this world, the time needed to craft every single crossbow was their biggest obstacle here. He looked at the young carpenter. "How long do you think it would take you to make a new crossbow?"

Darora thought for a while. "It's not easy to craft every single wooden part myself, but now that I know what the final result is supposed to look like, it would still save the time that Cedoron and I used to try different things in the first one, just to see which one would work better - not to mention the times when a part fell just a little shorter or longer than what we needed." He continued after a moment, "Hmm... I know it took me nearly a month to make the first one, but I am quite sure that I can make another one in half that time."

Kivamus grimaced. That was going to be too slow for them to arm their guards anytime soon. He thought about it for a moment. "Do you know about the concept of specialisation?"

"The blacksmith had mentioned it to me, I think," Darora muttered with a frown. "That uh... specialization... It means to concentrate on becoming an expert in a single thing, isn't it?"

"You do know it!" Kivamus said with a grin. "Yeah, that's exactly what it means. You have already taken two apprentices, right?"

"I have," Darora nodded slowly.

But before Kivamus could explain how to proceed, the young carpenter spoke up again.

"I see what you mean," Darora muttered. "You want me to tell them to craft only a single type of part... Hmm..." Then he nodded more confidently. "I think that should work. I couldn't have done that for the first crossbow since I had to craft all the wooden parts by myself. Until now, my apprentices just helped me in bringing new tools or cutting up pieces of wood from a log in the required size."

He continued, "I had never even thought about this uh... specialisation at the quarry, since I had to do all the woodworking stuff by myself, with Nokozal ordering every other slave to cut more limestone. But I think this idea would help a lot in speeding up things in the future, once I have trained my apprentices more to trust them to make any particular part of the design without my help."

"Good, then I want you to start training them from tomorrow whenever you have some free time," Kivamus replied. "And as for you, I need as many crossbows as you can make in the coming months. So you should start working on the second one tomorrow."

The majordomo interrupted, "But milord, you had told me that you wanted him to make that water wheel first. Restarting coal mining is much more important for us."

Hudan frowned. "We still have a whole barn full of coal in the manor! Having more crossbows would help us a lot more right now in defending the village."

Duvas stared at the guard captain. "That would be useless if all of us freeze to death first!" He looked at Kivamus, "Even if you have changed your mind about making the water wheel, and want to get more crossbows crafted first, then we still have to shift some workers to start removing the water from the mines by buckets instead of clearing the forests. We should do it tomorrow itself, otherwise it might be too late, since the workers will take a few weeks to clear the mines."

Hudan was going to retort again, but Kivamus put up a hand before the argument escalated. "I will get to that in a moment." He looked back at the carpenter. "Cedron already has permission to take as many iron ingots as he needs from our stores for any crafting orders for the manor, so you can freely tell him to make all the required iron parts without worrying about the costs. The manor will take care of providing the wages for you both as long as you are working on any order from us. Of course, as for now, neither his apprentices nor yours are trained enough to get the higher wages of a specialised craftsman, so they will just get the weekly grain and coal like other labourers."

"That will be fine, milord," Darora said with a nod, while standing up. "I will start working on it tomorrow."

"Wait for a moment," Kivamus said, and gestured to Darora to take a seat again. He continued, "I will go to visit the coal mines tomorrow to get a better idea of what kind of water wheel will be required for it. You have seen one of them before, right?"

Chapter 188 Traveling

Darora nodded, "I have, milord. There are a lot of them on the Kal river in Ulriga, as well as a few even in Cinran."

"That's great. I'll need you to make something similar at a high priority, before you craft anything else. It will work in the opposite way of those water wheels you have seen, but it has the same concept, so you should be able to do it easily enough."

Darora looked confused. "But you just told me to start working on the second crossbow from tomorrow..."

"Yeah, and you should," Kivamus explained, "but it will take me a few days to draw up a suitable design for the water wheel to remove water from inside the mines, so until then you should keep working on the second crossbow. But once I provide you with the design, you will need to postpone making more crossbows until you have finished the water wheel."

Darora smiled. "Oh, I understand it now!"

"Good. In Tiranat everything hinges on having enough coal for heating and cooking in the winter, and we are already using a lot more coal this winter than the previous ones - without even mining any new coal at all." Kivamus continued while looking at Hudan, "If we run out of coal here, most of the village would just freeze to death even without any bandit raid. That's why dewatering the mines has to be the first priority for us."

He looked back at the carpenter. "This water wheel design will be smaller than the ones you have seen and it isn't going to be nearly as complex as the crossbows, since we only need to remove the water from the mines instead of running them continuously in fast flowing and deep river waters to use them as a power source like in bigger cities, so I think you should be able to make it within a week."

"I'll do my best, milord!" Darora said enthusiastically.

Kivamus smiled. "I know you will."

Kivamus tightened his fur coat around him before mounting on a horse near the stables. Although the temperature had remained below freezing, the snowfall had stopped for the moment. It was cloudy as usual, but with the time being just after seven bells of the temple, it was bright enough to see even without the sun.

Hudan and four other guards were already sitting on horses nearby, with two of them in front of him, and two behind him, while the guard captain was right next to him on another horse. All the guards were heavily armed with swords, spears and daggers, while Yufim had his trusty bow with him, just in case an archer was needed. Kivamus had taken his own sword as well, not that he considered himself anything close to an expert with it. But having something to defend himself with was much better than being defenceless.

Duvas was standing on the snowy ground nearby with a regretful face. The majordomo wanted to accompany him to the mines, but he had caught a cold at some point in the night, so Kivamus had ordered him to stay here and get some rest in the manor hall with a fire to accompany him. The losuvil extract would also be very helpful to him, and he was very glad they had been able to preserve it.

That's why Tesyb, their new guard who used to be a former coal miner was included in the guard complement to show them around the mines in place of the majordomo. Feroy was also going to stay back at the manor - with quite a bit of reluctance - since Kivamus had decided that he needed a trustworthy guard with good experience to stay at the manor to organise the defence in case there was an emergency. That meant one of Hudan and Feroy always had to be in the manor whenever he wasn't present here himself.

Turning to the side, Kivamus gazed at the manor grounds, where all the maids, servants, grooms and guards were busy doing one thing or another. It was so good to see everything going so well and everyone being enthusiastic about their tasks. Then he looked at the guard captain. "Alright. Let's go!"

Hudan nodded, and relayed the order to the other guards, and with that, their small group started moving towards the manor gates. Passing the three guards at the gate duty, including one of the female

guards, they reached the empty area outside the gates, and turned north, before they walked their horses on the narrow alley parallel to the palisade walls of the manor.

Taken from Royal Road, this narrative should be reported if found on Amazon.

Soon, they reached the end of the village, and Kivamus saw the current status of the construction projects in the north. There was a steady stream of men and women going inside and coming out of the first longhouse block. There was also a thin plume of smoke rising from the inside, likely from the kitchens where their afternoon meal must already be in the process of cooking. The supervisors of the block had been chosen wisely by Duvas and they had been able to manage any arguments or quarrel from the residence by themselves. He was glad to see that this system was working out so well.

As they moved further, they passed next to the second block, which also looked complete from the outside, which meant the remaining task was finishing up the insides - likely to install all the bunks there. Just like in the first block, he had ordered Taniok to leave a tree standing in the courtyard of the second block as well. While that was only a Fedarus tree, unlike the Bilona Tree in the first block which gave its famed Bilona nuts, it would still be enough to provide shade in the summer months.

They kept moving further north, and before long they reached the gap in the new village walls where a gatehouse would be built in the future. He looked to both sides of him, and was glad to see the tall and sturdy walls extending far into the east and the west. There was a series of horizontal logs on the inside of the wall, which were supported by slanted logs to give the palisade walls extra support. That was a later addition they had decided on, at Hudan's recommendation, and they had decided to do that for the whole length of the walls a few weeks ago, and by now that was completed as well. Once they had all three gates completed, it would make their village more secure than it had ever been in the past.

Noticing his gaze, Hudan mentioned, "It's not possible to dig in the winter, but once the ground thaws in the spring, we will dig a shallow but wide trench parallel to the walls on the outside, along with sharpened stakes in it to deter any cavalry charge against it.

Kivamus nodded with satisfaction. However, despite seeing all the progress, it still felt to him that everything was happening so slowly here when compared to the modern Earth standards. Relative to this place, construction work happened at a lightning pace with the help of modern construction machines on Earth. However, while the current technology level of this kingdom meant that such a thing wasn't possible here anyway, from his talks with Duvas and Gorsazo, he still knew that the current pace of construction in the village was still far higher than what was common in this kingdom. He sighed. There was no point in comparing Tiranat to London anyway. He would just have to do his best to protect the village and make it prosper within the limitations he had here.

They kept moving on the northern road laden with snow, and soon, they reached a bend in the road, and turned to the east in the direction of the coal mines. He had been told that it was only around a half hour walk on foot, which meant the mines couldn't be more than a few kilometres away from the village, so it wouldn't take them too long to reach there. He kept observing the surroundings with curiosity, this being the first time he was going towards the east.

Before long, they reached the end of the plains, and he saw the hilly terrain starting in front of him. Looking towards the east, these foothills eventually led to the snowy peaks of the mighty Arakin mountains further ahead at the Horizon.

They continued riding their horses slowly on the narrow and winding paths between the hills, with Tesyb leading them from his experience, while Kivamus gazed at the countless leafless Fedarus trees and other plants and shrubs on the hills. With the ground covered with snow everywhere, only the trees broke up any monotony in the mid-winter landscape. He thought he even saw a rabbit flitting around somewhere near the bottom of a tree, but it ran away so fast that he couldn't be sure about it.

After a while, they made a sharp bend towards the right, and Tesyb, who was riding in front of them along with Yufim, looked behind towards Kivamus. "We are here, milord," the bulky young guard announced. Pointing further ahead at a few hills one by one, he showed the entrances to the famed coal mines of Tiranat.

"In that case. let's walk on foot from here," Kivamus said while dismounting from the horse.

Looking around he saw that there were many large to medium size hills all around him - all of them being covered with a layer of snow. But despite the snow, it was easy to see that the empty area where they had stopped - which was located in the middle of three different hills - was mostly flat.

Tesyb explained, "This is the area where wagons were parked for the miners to load coal into them." Pointing ahead at what only looked like a dark cave from the outside in one of those hills, he added, "Those are the entrance to the nearby shafts. There are more shaft entrances further ahead in other hills as well. The miners went inside these mine shafts to dig coal, while the women brought it in small baskets to the wagons. Some children, mainly those whose both parents were working here, helped around as well for a few coppers from the majordomo, usually to pick up the lumps of coal which had fallen down on the ground while carrying them here."

Kivamus nodded, having already been told about the child labour by Duvas in the past. He would have to see what could be done about that in the future. "Let's see a mineshaft from the inside now."

Chapter 189 Tiranat's Coal Mines

Hudan nodded and ordered the guards to tie their horses to a nearby tree. Once that was done, they started trudging towards the entrance of the closest mine shaft. Reaching at the entrance, Kivamus stopped for a moment, waiting for someone to bring a light source. Tesyb and another guard didn't take long to light a candle using a flint and an iron knife.

Seeing that it was ready, Kivamus began to walk inside but his arm was held back by Tesyb.

"You can't go inside yet, milord!" the young guard cautioned.

"What?" Kivamus frowned. "Why?"

"We need to check for fire-damp first," Tesyb explained.

"Oh..." Kivamus muttered. "How could he have forgotten about how dangerous coal mining used to be in the past - or rather, how dangerous it still was in this place. If they had walked inside with that burning candle, and if there was firedamp - or flammable gases - present inside, it could very easily have led to an explosion depending on the concentration of the dangerous gases inside the shaft, possibly killing all of them on the spot.

Taking a deep breath to calm his heart which had started beating rapidly, he gave a nod to Tesyb, who lay down on the ground, before he was handed that burning candle from another guard. It was only now that Kivamus noticed that it was a very thin candle, as if all the excess tallow had been removed from it. He watched carefully as Tesyb crawled a little further on the floor, doing his best to shield the flame. Once he had reached a little inside, he stopped and carefully started raising the tip of the candle. However, the flame kept burning as it was without any change.

Tesyb stood up, and used the thin candle to light a normal one in the hands of another guard, before extinguishing the thin one and keeping it in a satchel he had. Looking at Kivamus, he explained, "The air inside is safe today, so we can enter. We might still have to check it again a few times where needed."

"Right..." Kivamus nodded. "How would you have found out if there was firedamp inside?"

"The flame tells us, milord," Tesyb explained. "It is rare enough here, but if the tip of the flame had started turning blue, while extending in height, that would have meant that firedamp was present there. I have only seen it happen once though. Then we would need to ventilate the area with a few handheld fans, although that isn't possible if it happens deeper in the shafts."

"I don't see such a fan with any of you," Kivamus commented.

"Oh, it's made of wooden strips, and it can be folded, so it takes much less space when it isn't needed," another guard gave the explanation. He might also have been a miner in the past. He added, "I have it in my bag, but I didn't bring it out because if there was firedamp present, then on Hudan's orders, we simply couldn't risk letting you inside this shaft anyway."

The guard captain explained, "I have no experience in coal mining, but I have told the guards that your safety is more important than anything else."

Kivamus nodded in understanding. "What if you couldn't ventilate the area?"

"Then we would have to trigger a small explosion," Tesyb replied with a shrug. "That would burn up the firedamp, then it would be safe for the day."

Kivamus shook his head in exasperation. It just kept getting more and more dangerous! With a morbid curiosity, he asked, "And how would you make that explosion?"

"That's the tricky part," Tesyb explained, "but I have seen it done once. To do that, a miner would crawl on the floor of the mine shaft, with a candle lit and raised on the edge of a stick, until it exploded. The explosion passes over our heads, so it's not that dangerous."

"It's not that dangerous?" Kivamus echoed with his eyebrows raised high.

"Well..." Tesyb hesitated. "That one time, the miner who was triggering the explosion had gotten caught in that blast and had gotten really bad burns. But that's still better than not detecting the firedamp until the miners are already far inside the shafts, because that can cause a much bigger explosion in a closed place with their burning candles. That's the main reason for the high-level of injuries in coal mining in

our village. Around a decade ago, a few miners had even died because of that, so triggering a small explosion ourselves is still less dangerous than taking the risk of the firedamp exploding outright inside the shafts."

Unauthorized reproduction: this story has been taken without approval. Report sightings.

Kivamus didn't know what to say for a moment. Making a deliberate explosion right in front of you, that wasn't dangerous? It sounded like the definition of what counted as dangerous was completely different in this world. But then he thought about where he was and sighed. This was a medieval world after all. It's not like they had access to any modern instruments to make it safer. But this just couldn't be allowed to continue. He had to do something about this!

He thought hard about it, but without access to portable batteries and an electric bulb, it was never going to be safe enough. Thinking hard about what could be done from their current resources, he suddenly remembered something which was used on earth in the 19th century, called the Davy lamp. That should make it a lot more safer, although even that had its limitations.

"Is there a strong draft inside any of the mineshafts?" he asked.

Tesyb didn't take long to reply. "Not really, milord. I mean, there is usually a draft everywhere, but it's not strong enough here. Why though?"

"I have an idea of a safety lamp in my mind, which would make it hell of a lot safer than using an open candle inside the shafts." Kivamus continued, "Its only major limitation is that if there is a strong enough draft, then it can still cause an explosion, just like a candle would. But if there isn't a strong draft here, then it should be safe enough. I will get the blacksmith to start working on it immediately, since he has already finished up our earlier orders a while ago anyway."

Taking a deep breath to rid his mind of the imagery of an explosion passing right over their heads, and done deliberately to boot, he gestured everyone to enter the coal mines.

"There is quite a bit of water gathered here, that's for sure," Kivamus commented while seeing what seemed like a small pond inside one of the mineshafts in the light of a tallow candle. The water wasn't frozen either, just like Duvas had estimated. It was quite warm inside as well, at least when compared to the freezing temperature outside. He was thinking about the possible solutions which could work, when one of the guards they had sent to swim through the small pond and see how far the flooding went returned back.

"This is the only place where the water is gathered in a large quantity," the guard reported, "and it's mostly dry further inside. At least inside this shaft."

Before long, another guard who had gone to check a different mineshaft returned, and reported something similar.

Kivamus nodded. The good news was that water had gathered in the first large dip in the mine floor it had found, and in most places it hadn't gone any further. The bad news was that most of these water deposits were big and deep enough that clearing them manually bucket by bucket would take too long. It also meant that it wouldn't be feasible for workers to haul coal through it while swimming to the other side, which is why they had stopped coal mining, so the water had to be removed first before they could start mining again.

However, once a particular mineshaft was cleared of any standing water, they could begin mining coal in that shaft, without waiting for the other shafts to get cleared, even if that meant their coal output would be much smaller than what it could be with all the shafts active.

They walked around and visited a few different shafts and he made mental estimates of the inner dimensions of them to keep in mind for the future. Once he believed he had a good idea of what would be needed, he looked at the guard captain. "Let's return now."

Hudan nodded, and called up the other guards before they started walking towards the exit of the shafts.

Tesyb looked at him curiously. "Milord, can you really do something about this, or do we have to bring the workers here to clear up the water manually?"

"I think I have a good idea of what would work here," Kivamus replied. "I'll still need to talk to the carpenter Darora to be sure, but I think he should be able to make it in a week."

"That's really good to hear," Tesyb said with a relieved smile.

Once they had reached outside, they made a small fire for the soaked men to dry themselves properly, while the others took the opportunity to warm up their bodies as well. Once that was done, and everyone had mounted their horses, Kivamus said, "I think it's a good idea to visit the stream as well, so we wouldn't have to make another trip here in this cold."

"I agree," Hudan commented. "Tesyb, we are going to the stream in the east now. Lead the way."

Tesyb nodded, and their group of six horses and their riders began moving further east on the narrow path between two nearby hills.

This journey wasn't too long, and soon, Kivamus heard the babbling of moving water from nearby. They circled around a hill covered with snow, and he got the first glimpse of the only stream near Tiranat. It was small, and certainly couldn't be called a river, but it was still big enough to not freeze even in this weather. He even saw a few fish swimming in that nearly freezing water.

However, Hudan was looking at the stream in surprise. "I thought any stream would be frozen in this weather! How is it still flowing?"

Chapter 190 Turbulence

Kivamus explained, "There are many reasons, but a major one is that this is not stagnant water. The continuous movement of water, especially in a fast moving stream like this, creates turbulence, which is uh... a lot of movement, and that prevents ice crystals from forming."

"But everything around us is already covered in snow by now..." Hudan said with a frown.

"That's true," Kivamus said while pointing at the shores of the river. "As you can see there, some ice has already started to form on the edges, but the volume of water in this stream is still enough to prevent it

from freezing completely even at this temperature. Of course, if the temperature gets even lower for a sustained time, then even this stream would freeze over."

"I have seen that happen in the past when I was still young," Tesyb commented from nearby. "It was easily the coldest winter I remember in my life, and my father had brought me here to show the frozen river, since it was so rare. But I know for sure that it has only happened once in this place, at least since we moved here a few years after the founding of the village."

Kivamus nodded. "That's good to know. A particularly harsh winter can certainly freeze this stream, but I am glad to know that it's not common."

He thought about the feasibility of connecting the stream to the farming areas in the South. He had kept a keen eye on the surroundings when moving here, and as expected, the ground had a small upward incline as they had moved deeper into the hills. That meant the elevation of this hilly area was a little higher than the flat ground in the village, which should have made it very easy for water to flow from here to the farmlands, but the stream was flowing in a deep channel between these hills, and while he couldn't be sure about it, he still believed that the elevation of water level was equal to the ground in the village, or probably even a little lower.

That meant the water of the stream would have to be lifted around a meter at least to make it flow easily through the canal they were planning to dig from here to the village. This would also require a small water wheel, but there was no hurry to build it since any digging for a canal could only be done after spring when the ground had thawed. But it was still good to know that it was possible to irrigate the farms with this stream.

"Alright, let's return now," he announced.

Tesyb looked wistfully at the river. "Can't we at least catch a few fish? It's still early afternoon, and we will easily reach back to the village before it gets dark."

"Of course not!" Hudan immediately reprimanded the guard. "We don't have the time for that!"

Kivamus intervened, "It's alright, Hudan. I think we can afford to take a break here and have something to eat. I am getting a little hungry as well."

They had already brought some of their precious meat jerky and hardtack biscuits with them for lunch, and this seemed like a good time and place for that. If the guards could catch a few fish here, it would make it all the better.

Hudan looked reluctant to agree, but eventually nodded in acceptance.

"Thank you, milord! I'll catch a big one for you!" Tesyb claimed with a grin, and immediately untied a long fishing pole from his horse, with another guard doing the same.

Kivamus just snorted. Had the guards already planned to do fishing here before even leaving the village?

Then he noticed that what he had thought to be a fishing pole was actually just the spears where Tesyb had tied a string on the blunt side of the shaft. He sighed. What was he even thinking earlier? How would these poor villagers have a fishing pole with them in the first place? They weren't out on a luxury fishing vacation in a lake in England!

The fishing had taken much longer than they had expected, and the rare glimpses of the sun behind the clouds was showing them that it had already dipped behind the hills to their west.

A while ago, Kivamus had also tried his hand at fishing as well, but not having any experience of fishing at all, he didn't get any success. However, the guards seemed to be well versed in it and they hadn't taken long to catch nearly half a dozen of them. The fish had looked kind of like trout to him, or perhaps like salmon, but the guards had told him that it was named sorjun and was the most common fish in this stream.

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

He was still surprised that if it was so easy to catch fish here, why didn't they keep fishing every day, but Tesyb had told him that it had been more than a month since they had last come for fishing here, and that was why the fish seemed abundant today, otherwise they wouldn't catch nearly this many fish in such a small stream. That showed why the village didn't use this stream as a regular source of fish.

However, in the future, once they had dug a big enough pond in the South of the village, these fish should survive there easily enough, and that should increase the availability of fish for Tiranat.

Since there still weren't enough fish caught by them to take back, they had decided to roast them all over a fire and have them as a late lunch, so that they could save the dried provisions they had brought for future use. That was a couple of hours ago.

Kivamus took a gulp of cool water from his water skin, and looked towards the west. With the sun already having dipped behind the hills, sunset wouldn't be far away now, and with every passing minute it seemed like the worry lines on Hudan's forehead kept increasing because of the delay.

Deciding not to make him any more distressed, Kivamus ordered, "Let's pack up now. We need to leave or it might get dark before we reach the village."

"We are probably already late though," Hudan muttered, and he didn't take long to organise the guards, and soon they were all riding back towards the village in the same formation as earlier. Two guards riding in front of Kivamus, two guards behind him, with Hudan on his side.

"We really shouldn't have left this late..." Hudan complained with a frown. "Even if just an aggressive bear comes in our way, it would be very difficult for us to fight it while protecting you at the same time on this narrow path."

"I know, I know," Kivamus tried to reassure him. While the coal mines were around half an hour's journey from the village, this stream must have been closer to an hour-long journey from Tiranat, but he felt confident that with five guards surrounding him, there shouldn't be any problem. Then he quipped, trying to make the mood lighter, "Once we had decided to roast the fish here, we couldn't have just left in the middle of it, could we? And come on, even you enjoyed eating the freshly roasted fish!"

Hudan didn't give any reply, and just grumbled as their small group kept moving west.

After a while, Kivamus estimated that they had been traveling for nearly an hour, so the village of Tiranat shouldn't be far away now. They still hadn't left the hilly region though, likely because their pace had started to slow down as it began to get dark, but thankfully they hadn't encountered anything dangerous on the way, and there was still enough light to see the path they were riding on, albeit barely.

"See?" He teased the guard captain. "Everything went fine, didn't it? You worry too much."

Hudan was going to retort something with his persistent frown, but suddenly the air was filled with a series of bone-chilling howls, the kind of which Kivamus had never heard in his life. It felt similar to the howls of a wolf, but for some reason this particular howl felt a lot more dangerous to his ears.

Immediately, he saw the guards riding in front of him stiffen in fear in their saddles, before they pulled the reins to stop their horses, while putting their hands on the shafts of their spears.

"That's the howl of Goddess' damned adzees!" One of the guards in the front hissed loudly. "What are they doing so close to the village!"

"Quiet!" Hudan scolded the guard immediately in a whispered voice. "Not one more word or we are all dead!"

Kivamus looked at the guard captain with wide eyes, his heart racing fast, but didn't know what to say. There were adzee out here in these hills?

He pulled the reins too with shaking hands, while he noticed Hudan stopping his horse as well on his right, while pulling his sword out.

From the howls it sounded like there was a whole pack of them here! He had heard that even a single fully grown adzee usually took an armed knight to take it down, and with some help from others to keep it at bay. But if there was a whole pack of them out here? He didn't fancy their chances of survival at all.

They kept waiting for a while, everybody trying not to make any sound. Even the horses seemed jittery now, making him worry even more.

Before long, there were many more howls echoing in the air. With the sound reflecting from the surrounding hills, it was hard to tell where the howls were even coming from. He looked at Hudan again with worry, thinking why they had even stopped. Shouldn't they be riding fast now to run away? But the guard captain, who already had his sword ready in his hands - unlike the other guards who were holding spears - was just looking at the surrounding hills carefully, perhaps searching for any kind of movement.

By now Kivamus' heart was beating so loudly that he thought everyone could hear its sound, and he kept blaming himself for the decision to catch fish and roast them like they were on a damned picnic!

This was a dangerous medieval world with all kinds of savage beasts everywhere, especially in the middle of winter. He really should have thought of everyone's safety first, instead of trying to impose his will over the guard captain earlier. Hudan had the most experience of how to survive in this region - especially when he worked at Helga's inn, which was located in the middle of the forests. He really should have listened to the guard captain's advice to leave early.

As he heard another howling sound from somewhere, he blamed himself once again for getting everyone caught in this situation. Would they even return alive to the village now?

What had he done...