

## Londoner 20

Chapter 20. A Surprised Owner of...

Kivamus forced himself to take a deep breath.

"Duvas," he began, his voice firm but laced with concern, "did you get a chance to find out what remains in our treasury?"

Duvas nodded grimly. "I have, my lord. Although we have a lot of coal stockpiled in the barns, which we could sell for more money if an opportunity arose to trade it, we have less than two hundred gold crowns remaining in actual currency."

Kivamus sighed, the meager sum doing little to ease his growing anxiety. "That's... not much at all," he muttered, more to himself than anyone else. "However," he continued, a hint of determination in his voice, "at least with my personal savings, we should have something to work with."

He looked at Madam Nerida once more. "How much grain do we need to feed the entire manor two meals a day, for the winter?" he asked. He thought for a moment, and continued, "Let's say for four months. That should be long enough for the snow to melt and for us to trade again. Isn't that right, Duvas?"

Duvas nodded. "It will be more than enough, my lord. I think it should be around a month until the snow starts falling, and after the snowfall gets heavy, the road to Cinran would be blocked for roughly another month after that. And then it'll take a few weeks for the snow to melt enough that traders can start coming again. So if we have enough grain stocks to last us three months, it might be enough to tide us over through the winter. But if we can afford it, it is always a good idea to have enough stored grain to be sure that we won't starve even if the winter lasts longer, or if the traders don't start coming right after the winter ends. Although, I think by the time winter ends, enough time would have passed since the previous Baron's murder for traders to visit regularly again."

"That will certainly be helpful." Kivamus declared, "And four months it is then. So how much do we need Madam Nerida? To feed the manor for four months."

Taking a minute to think it over, Madam Nerida replied, "Twenty sacks, my lord. That will easily feed the uh... around forty people now living in the manor, for four months. If we can add some meat to the meals from hunting, we can make it last even longer."

Kivamus nodded solemnly. "Alright, so twenty sacks to feed the manor." However, that was just a starting point, since he had to think about the whole village as well. "Duvas," he began, his voice firm despite the knot of worry twisting in his gut, "how many people live in the village?"

Duvas blinked, surprised by the seemingly simple question. "We've never done an exact count of the villagers, my lord," he admitted after a moment's hesitation. "But at my best guess, I'd say around three hundred people live in the village itself. Then, of course, there are the forty or so who reside here at the manor now, and that brings the total to around three hundred and forty."

Gorsazo added with a thoughtful frown. "However, my lord," he interjected, "if we're planning to feed the entire village, it might be wise to err on the side of caution. Grain can spoil or be eaten by rats during storage, and there's always the chance our initial estimate for the population is a bit low. It wouldn't hurt to factor in a buffer."

Kivamus appreciated his caution. With a nod, he acknowledged the point. "Indeed," he agreed. "Let's plan for three hundred and fifty people, and four months, to be on the safe side. That ought to be enough for the village to survive this winter."

He took a deep breath, the enormity of the task settling in. Feeding hundreds of people through the harsh winter was a daunting challenge, a far cry from the small teams he had managed back in his London life. Yet, there was no room for self-pity. These people, his people, were depending on him.

"Right," he continued, his voice unwavering. "Based on that number, we'd need approximately... one hundred and seventy-five sacks of grain in total to last us for four months, based on what Madam Nerida told us." His gaze moved towards Duvas. "How much would that cost?"

Duvas grimaced. "Last season, my lord," he replied, "the price for a single sack of grain hovered around three gold crowns and eight silvers, after accounting for the cost of transporting it here. However, if we were to purchase such a large quantity in bulk, there's a chance the seller might be willing to offer a slight discount."

He paused, scribbling some figures on a piece of parchment kept on the table next to him. "That still means we would require..." He trailed off, his brow furrowed in concentration.

Before he could voice the figure, Kivamus cut in, the answer already forming in his mind. "Around six hundred and fifty gold crowns," he said, his voice steady. "Perhaps a little less if we can negotiate a better price for purchasing in bulk."

Duvas sighed, a sound of weary agreement. "Your estimate seems right, my lord." He cast a sympathetic glance at Kivamus. "Unfortunately, as you know, our current treasury holds a meager two hundred gold crowns."

Kivamus offered a tight smile. While the cost of feeding the village over the winter would significantly deplete his savings, which was all he had to secure a long-term solution for the village's many problems, it would ensure no one starved over the winter. It would buy them time, time to find that solution, and time to get Tiranat back on its feet.

"So be it," he declared, his voice firm with newfound determination, "we'll add my savings to the treasury. Gorsazo, see to it after this. While it is not a permanent solution, buying enough grain to feed the village through winter is our first priority. We'll deal with finding a long-term solution once we can ensure that the village will survive the winter."

Kivamus leaned forward, his full attention on Duvas. "But why did you let the grain stocks fall so low in the first place?"

Duvas explained, "Pydas is one of the very few traders to visit Tiranat since the previous Baron's murder, my lord, either from Cinran or Kirnos. We simply haven't had an opportunity to buy a good amount of grain or sell enough coal in months."

Kivamus already knew that the road from Cinran to Tiranat was rarely traveled now, from his discussion with Madam Helga and Pydas when he stayed in her inn. But it seemed that these days traders were rarely visiting Tiranat from other places too. He nodded, the pieces of the puzzle clicking into place. "That explains the lack of supplies," he murmured. "But why haven't you purchased more grain from Cinran, then? Surely you could have sent someone there if traders weren't willing to come to Tiranat?"

Duvas's expression turned grim. "We did try, my lord," he explained. "I dispatched a guard on horseback on three separate occasions. The first time, soon after the previous baron's demise, the guard returned from Cinran with unsettling news. That was before the harvest, so prices of grain were sky-high, and no merchant was willing to risk the journey on this dangerous road to transport it at that time."

He continued, "That was a frightening time for us, my lord, since everyone here was terrified after the previous baron and his whole retinue were murdered, and I did not know at the time if there would be an attack here as well. So during that time, I didn't want to take the risk of sending too many guards away from the manor to escort a grain wagon ourselves, and risk being caught without enough guards here to defend the manor in case an attack did happen. We had enough grain at that time as well, and I decided to wait until the situation had normalized." He took a deep breath. "Thankfully, there was no attack on the village after the baron's murder, and it was only recently that we got the first bandit raid since then. However, since we couldn't defend the village in that raid due to a shortage of guards, now there is a constant risk of another bandit raid."

"Indeed, and later today, we'll try to find a solution for that too. But what about Kirnos?" Kivamus inquired, hoping for a better outcome from the neighboring barony. "That was also an option to buy grain, wasn't it?"

"I did send a rider there as well, my lord. Unfortunately," Duvas continued, his voice heavy, "the news from Kirnos wasn't much better. There's a grain shortage there as well, and the prices are exorbitant. Also, Kirnos is only moderately larger than Tiranat itself, and wouldn't have enough surplus to meet Tiranat's needs anyway. That's why we buy our grain from traders coming from Cinran, which is a much bigger place compared to our village."

A cold dread settled in Kivamus's stomach. Not only was Tiranat close to starvation, but the surrounding areas were also struggling. Things were far worse in this world than he had initially imagined.

Duvas's face hardened as he continued. "The last guard whom I sent to Cinran for buying even a small amount of grain to carry with him on his horse, never returned, and that was only two weeks ago. I fear that he fell victim to bandits along the way."

Kivamus sank back in his chair, the weight of the situation settling heavily upon him. The near-empty grain stores, the dwindling coin reserves, a ruined economy, and the dangerous state of the roads all painted a bleak picture. Yet, there was some hope now.

"Thank goodness for Pydas then," he finally said, a hint of relief in his voice. "At least with him here and with his grain, we can buy some time to find a better solution."

Stepping out of the manor hall, he looked around the place once again in the light of the morning sun. This was his first day in Tiranat as the new Baron. The ground, damp with the dew of the previous night, squelched softly beneath his boots as he walked. Kivamus took a deep breath of the crisp morning air. It

was chilly, a stark contrast to the warmth of the fire he'd just left behind. He pulled his fur coat tighter around him, the luxurious material a welcome comfort against the morning chill.

The imposing Arakin Mountains dominated the eastern horizon, their snow-capped peaks gleaming in the morning sun. The trees in the surrounding forest had shed most of their leaves, revealing their bare frames reaching skyward.

The sky was a clear, vibrant blue, promising a bright day ahead. A short distance away, Pydas' wagons were parked under a weather-beaten shed close to the stables. Hudan stood in conversation with the gate guards, their voices a low murmur against the backdrop of chirping birds, while Feroy was nowhere to be found.

Life bustled around him while he stood watching the manor, as the servants and maids went about their morning duties. The rhythmic clatter of cleaning implements and the murmur of hushed conversations drifted through the air. A feeling of normalcy, however fragile, seemed to be returning to the manor.

A sense of quiet determination settled over Kivamus as he surveyed the scene. The challenges before him were daunting - a starving village, a crippled economy, and the constant threat of bandits... and he didn't know what other surprises might be waiting for him in the future. But the resilience of the people, the breathtaking beauty of the land, and the glimmer of hope offered by Pydas' arrival all fueled a growing resolve within him. He wouldn't let Tiranat crumble.

"There is a kitchen here in the manor house as well, isn't it, Mr Duvas?" Helga asked.

"There is, right next to the hall we were sitting in earlier," Duvas replied. "But at the moment, it sits unused."

Helga looked towards Kivamus. "My lord, if you allow me, I'd like to take care of your meals from now on, along with Syryne. We do have a lot of experience cooking food, and it would help us feel useful as well."

Kivamus didn't take long to answer her. "Of course, I was thinking about that myself. It would help you to settle in, as well. You can start from today itself, Madam Helga. We will work out the wages for you both later, after consulting with Duvas." Helga looked happy to hear that, while Syryne had a smile as well.

"You are already providing us with lodgings and food, my lord. I couldn't even have imagined yesterday that I'd be living in a baron's manor house today! My family and I are very grateful for that itself, my lord," Helga said to him. "You don't need to pay us a wage as well."

Although Kivamus had a lot of experience working in a team as well as managing it, back in London, he wasn't the owner there. And hiring employees was not something that he knew much about. But one thing was certain, no matter what the standards were about that in this world, he wouldn't make people work for him without giving them a wage.

"Nonsense, if you are going to work for me, you'll get a wage. I'm not going to have people working for me without paying them like they were slaves!" Kivamus exclaimed.

Duvas hesitated for a moment. "But my lord, you do have slaves here. The previous baron was their owner earlier. But now that you are here as the new baron and the owner of all the surrounding lands, the slaves are now also owned by you."

It was such an unexpected statement, that it took a moment for Kivamus' brain to process it. He abhorred the practice of slavery and never in his mind, he could have imagined that all of a sudden he would become a slave owner.

"What did you say?" he boomed. "I will not tolerate slavery under me for even a moment! I was unable to help them the last time, and that still eats at me. But when I can do something, anything, about it, I will not let it happen." He ordered, "Bring them all here, right now. Bring every last person in the manor who is a slave."