

Londoner 211

Chapter 211 Digging

Kivamus explained while looking at others, "Now we have two dozen former stonecutters in the village, who are well versed in this. They have more than enough experience of cutting through much harder limestone, and with no real shortage of tools now, they should be able to do it without too much difficulty. I have already mentioned that we need to keep the labourers working in the South to clear the forest as long as possible, but we can afford to shift two dozen of them to the eastern hills, so that they can start digging and mining some seat-earth, basically that clay."

"Duvas, I want them to start on this from tomorrow morning. When all the workers return from work in the evening, make an announcement for all the former stonecutters to gather outside the manor. That's where we will explain it to them. You can leave the fletcher, the carpenter Darora, and the guard Hyola out of that group. It will still give us twenty-three trained stonecutters for this task."

The majordomo nodded. "I will talk to them later."

Kivamus continued, "I estimate that it will take us at least a couple of weeks for those twenty-three stonecutters to dig enough of that clay to start the construction. Once we have stocked up enough clay to start building the dam, we will utilize as many labourers as we need to make it as quickly as possible, since the snow will start melting within a month. That means we need to try our best to build the dam before that happens." He added, "I will visit near the location of the coal mines tomorrow to confirm that it is a good quality clay which will do the task. When we start to get enough clay in stock, I will also visit the stream to find a good spot to start building the dam."

Duvas smiled. "I know that it will take a while for it to be ready, and even more time for us to shift that water wheel and build that axle and so on, but if it really works like you said it would, it should help a lot in all the construction in the village, since having a saw mill would take a lot of load off from Taniok's and his apprentices' shoulders. By now we have dozens of piles of criss-crossed logs kept all around the village, each of which easily has over a hundred logs. So we aren't going to be short on logs for years to feed a new sawmill, especially once all the farmland has been cleared in the South."

"Exactly," Kivamus agreed. "We are only starting to rebuild the village. The longhouse blocks in the north are only a temporary solution. We just can't keep that many people in such cramped places for too long. I'm not sure when we would have enough free labourers for this, but I want to start clearing the burnt out houses in the middle of the village from that raid by Torhan's group. Once that is done we can start building decent quality houses for the villagers for them to move back in. Of course, this is only a future plan for now, since there are a lot of other things we need the carpenter to build before we can get to it."

At that moment, Lucem entered the hall from an inner door while grinning, being followed by Clarisa walking behind him.

The boy ran towards Kivamus with excitement while holding something in his hands. "Milord, look! Look! I got first place in the sawdust gathering competition today!"

"I was the one who wrote your basket counts though," Clarisa retorted from nearby. "You can't even write yet!"

Trying to prevent an argument between the kids, Kivamus praised, "That's wonderful, Lucem! And you too, Clarisa. I have heard that you are doing excellently in your classes." The kids beamed in pride at the praise, before he pointed at the boy's hand. "What is that?"

"This is what Ma has made to give to everyone who participated in the competition," Lucem explained as he showed the single cookie in his hands, while still being unable to hide his grin. "But I got first place so I also wanted some of the prize right now before everyone got it in the classes!"

"I also want my share from it!" Clarisa told the boy with a glare, making Lucem rub his head sheepishly.

"You already know I was going to share..." the boy whined, before both of the kids went to sit on a rug to share the freshly baked cookie. Thank you for reading. This was brought to you by M|V|L*EMPYR.

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Kivamus smiled while gazing at the happy kids, both of whom had come a long way from their difficult pasts. Then he looked at Gorsazo. "Did you already know that he had won it? Why didn't you tell me?"

Gorsazo shrugged. "I wanted Lucem to surprise you. He looked really excited to tell you about it himself and show his prize, which was still being baked an hour ago when I found out about it. Although I still have to announce it in the classes later today. Speaking of which," he added while standing up, his fur coat already around his shoulders, "I really should leave for the long house blocks, or I'll be late for today's classes."

Kivamus nodded. He was just happy to see that the kids of the village were getting something exciting to do while still learning in the process. While Lucem might have been the one to win it today, the winner would be a different kid nearly every day because of the kids' fierce rivalry, which should make the kids a lot more enthusiastic about learning to read and write. The fact that the competition was also helping to reduce the coal consumption in the village, was certainly a very desirable benefit.

Looking at the kids who had already finished eating their delicious prize, the teacher ordered, "Lucem. Clarisa. Come on now, or we'll be late. You both can walk with me to the classes today."

Hudan stood up while putting on his fur coat. "I should also take a round at all the guard posts now. Feroy is the one who usually does it, but until he returns that's also my responsibility."

Eventually, Duvas got up as well, while still looking like he was feeling cold. "The workers will start returning soon, so I need to leave now to call up all the stonecutters. I will send a servant to call you when they all have gathered so you can explain about the digging project to them."

Before long, all of them had exited the manor hall to their respective destinations, leaving Kivamus alone with the crackling fireplace. He gazed at the shelf next to the long dining table and the dwindling supplies of the empty parchments kept on it. He still had to do something about that, but for now he could still make some new sketches on them for the next machine he wanted to build here.

He stood up from the armchair, and stretched his hands above his head. It was time to get to work.

It was the afternoon of the next day, and Kivamus had just unmounted from his horse along with Hudan and a few other guards. It had been bitterly cold on the way here, but at least the snowfall had stopped for the moment. Right now he was standing in a narrow valley in the hilly region near the coal mines while looking at all the fires burning there.

Yesterday, he had still been doubtful if the labourers would be able to dig through the frozen ground at all, but when he was explaining about the project to the stonecutters, one of them had suggested a unique method, and that was what was being done here since the morning.

When the two dozen stonecutters had arrived here in the morning, they had also brought a loaded wagon with supplies for them. Most of it was digging tools including pickaxes and shovels, but it also had some dried food for the labourers, and most importantly, they had brought as many long tree branches as they could load on the wagon bed.

At the moment there were many such long branches burning all around in the valley near each other, and it was easy to see that the snow had started to melt in the area between the fires, while the snow directly under the burning fires had already melted away.

With there being nearly no wind present here because of the surrounding hills, the narrow valley had become relatively warm at the moment, enough that he was sure that he could go without the fur coat just like the labourers.

Soon, he saw a few laborers dragging the long branches of the fire to another place while holding them from the side which wasn't burning, leaving the area of the former fires ready to dig. Immediately, a few labourers began walking to that place with pickaxes and shovels, ready to start digging in the freshly cleared ground. This process had been going on since the morning, and at the moment there was already a small pile of mud gathered in some places.

Gesturing to the guards to follow him towards that mud pile, he decided to use the method told to him by Pinoto - the southern foreman and who used to be a farmer in the past - to check the soil type. Picking up some of that mud, he kneaded it in his hands until it was more or less spherical in shape and uniform in texture.

Then he tossed it up a few times and, catching it again, he noticed that the ball of mud retained its shape well enough, which bode well for this test. Then remembering what he had been shown by Pinoto, he took the mud ball in one hand and squeezed it between his thumb and index finger, until it started to extrude into a strip of mud.

Chapter 212 Invitation

Kivamus remembered that when the ex-farmer had done it in the South of the village, the strip had lasted for around two to three centimeters, before it had started to fall to the ground in a clump. That had meant it was good quality loamy soil for sowing wheat. But this time, the strip of mud kept getting longer until it was easily five to six centimeters long. That meant this was very good quality clay. Perfect for construction! This fire-clay was also going to be instrumental in making a furnace in the future - but of course, that was for the future.

Grinning in satisfaction, he looked at the guard captain. "This clay will do very well for the dam. In a way we are lucky that there are so many coal mines in the region, since that is why this clay had formed here in the past. Tell the labourers that this location is perfect, and they should keep digging as much as they can until the evening."

Hudan nodded. "Sir Duvas had made one of them as the temporary foreman for digging here, so I'll let him know about it."

"Good." Kivamus continued, "With these fires burning here day by day, the nearby ground in this valley will also start to thaw slowly, making it easier to dig every new day. I think we should be able to gather a few wagon loads of clay in the next few days, so we will visit the stream at that time to decide the location of the dam."

Looking at the branches burning around him, he added, "Tell the foreman that from tomorrow he should bring some tree stumps too in the wagon, since they don't have too many uses in the village, and they will burn for much longer."

"Wouldn't it be too difficult to move it once the nearby snow has melted away?" Hudan asked with a frown. "That was why we brought these long branches here in the first place."

"No, I don't mean for them to bring the stumps here to thaw the icy ground," Kivamus explained. "They will still need the long branches for it so they can move it around to a new place easily. But once the thawing is done, the stumps can be set on fire here with enough gaps between them. They will also keep burning for much longer, and we can even let the stumps burn overnight here. There are hardly any trees here, so there is no risk of a fire spreading from here. The heat from those burning stumps will prevent the ground from freezing again in the night - which will make digging much easier the next day - and it will also save a few hours which would otherwise be needed to thaw that ground again."

Hudan gave an understanding nod. "That sounds true enough. Give me a moment and I'll explain it to them and then we can return."

Kivamus waved him away, and looked at the former stonecutters again, some of whom were using a pickaxe to further soften the ground, with others using shovels to dig into it. Cutting limestone was a back breaking task, and these people had done it for years. That meant they already had the skills to do it. However, they used to be barely fed slaves not too long ago, but the past month of getting regular food three times a day had done wonders to their bodies, and they had already started to put some

muscle on their frames. Hopefully, it meant that this digging project was going to progress smoothly enough.

Before long, he saw Hudan walking back towards him, so he gestured to the other guards to get the horses ready. It was time to return. The latest chapters are uploaded first on M|V|LE3MPYR.

Later in the evening, he was inside the manor hall completing a sketch, while Duvas was also sitting near the fireplace. Gorsazo hadn't returned yet from the classes though.

The outer door of the manor hall opened, and a servant walked inside along with the young carpenter Darora.

Looking at Kivamus, the carpenter reported, "Milord, the first mineshaft is clear of most of the standing water, and I have just returned from the coal mines after guiding the workers to dismantle the water wheel, and reassembling it in the next mineshaft. It was too late for the labourers to use the water wheel there today, but they will start clearing the second mineshaft tomorrow morning."

"That's excellent!" Kivamus praised. "How is the second crossbow coming along?"

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"I have most of the parts ready to assemble," Darora answered with a shrug, "but I am still waiting to receive the nut and trigger from Cedoron." He continued, "I think the specialisation is certainly going to increase the production speed of every part, but not all parts take the same amount of time to craft or forge. For example, the wooden stock of the crossbow is simple enough and doesn't take long to craft from a straight piece of wood. On the other hand, the iron parts - especially the small ones - are much more time-consuming. That's why I am still waiting on those complex parts while I have already started to gather a small pile of other simpler parts. It will take a while until the production rates of every part match close enough to build a new crossbow at a good rate."

"Hmm..." Kivamus thought about the problem, but he already realised that with everything being forged manually by the blacksmith, it wasn't going to be easy to increase the production rate of the smaller

parts. He could certainly order him to take on more apprentices to do it faster, but that would only use up their limited stockpile of iron even faster.

Apart from that, Cedoron only had a single forge for now which was also slowing down the production speed of iron parts, but there was no point in making a new one until they could be assured of a cheap and steady supply of iron ingots. He certainly knew that they were going to need a lot more iron in the future, but first he had to gather the funds to buy it, or to buy the ore from somewhere to smelt it into usable iron.

He looked at the carpenter. "Our situation is far from ideal, and I will do something about it in the future when it is feasible, but for now just do the best you can from our limited resources."

"Of course," Darora nodded.

"Good. Now, you must have already heard by now that there will be a small feast inside the manor this evening to celebrate the New Year's eve. Glancing at Duvas for a moment, he added, "It is only limited to those who live inside the manor this time, but I have already invited the other two specialised craftsmen in the village - Cedoron and Taniok for this, and you should also come here to enjoy it."

Darora looked thoroughly surprised. "You are inviting me too?" Then he shook his head and grinned. "Of course you are... I am also an excellent craftsman after all!"

Kivamus chuckled at the brash reply of the young carpenter, but didn't comment on it. It was certainly true that Darora was very talented, and without him it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to build the crossbow and the wood press machine here, not to mention the sawmill he was planning to build near the dam on the stream.

He smiled at the carpenter, and allowed him to return to his duties for now. Looking at the majordomo, he asked, "Is everything going well for the feast preparation?"

Duvas nodded. "Of course, I've already checked with Madam Nerida about the adzee meat she is preparing for the manor residents. Unlike the last time when we had given a feast to the whole village, this time we barely have fifty people to feed, so it is much easier to arrange tonight."

The majordomo continued, "I have also talked with Hudan about increasing the patrols inside the village for tonight, as well as putting extra men on duty at the village gate in the north and the gaps in the walls on the other two planned gates. Hopefully, this time we won't be as unlucky as the last time when we had given a feast."

Kivamus shuddered thinking about Nokozal's raid that day. That huge bastard was still alive and must already be planning a revenge against Tiranat. Then he snorted. It's not that there wasn't already a long list of people who wanted to damage, destroy, or capture the village from him. "Let's hope so, Duvas. Let's hope so."

~ Tesyb ~

~ Approaching Kirnos ~

After travelling for nearly two days, they were finally approaching the coastal village of Kirnos. They had left yesterday morning, and in normal conditions they should have reached Kirnos by this afternoon, but because of the snow covering the ground everywhere, they hadn't been able to see a pothole in the dirt road, since that was also covered by a layer of snow. That had taken them an extra few hours just to get the loaded wagon free from the pothole, and they had only been able to resume their journey after that.

He was sitting in the leading wagon, with the setting sun directly in front of his eyes. Feroy had also changed his position to the leading wagon and now he was sitting next to him, with the other two guards in the trailing wagon.

The snow had been falling continuously for all their journey, but it was much lighter this far away from the Arakin Mountains, compared to how it was in Tiranat. Thankfully all four guards had been given fur coats this time around, so the cold had been more bearable than it would have been otherwise.

There also hadn't been any bandit ambush or any wild beast attack on the way, like the time when that boar had attacked them when they were coming from Cinran to Tiranat and he had frozen in fear. However, the fight with Nokozal had opened his eyes and he had been training as much as he could

when he wasn't on watch duty, so this time he was a lot more confident of taking on any bandits or beasts.

Chapter 213 Bargaining

Tesyb gazed around the snow covered dirt path while the horses kept pulling the wagons. Since the past hour or so, the scenery around them had changed completely. For most of the journey from Tiranat, the path they had been following was just a clear track of ground between the leafless trees of the forest which surrounded them on both sides, but as they had reached closer to Kirnos, they had started to see some small farms on the sides of the path, until eventually they were passing between huge farms on both sides of the road. Of course, right now all those farms were completely covered by a few inches of snow, but it wasn't difficult to recognise that they were cultivated lands from the scarecrows and the hedges surrounding them.

This was the first time Tesyb was going to Kirnos, so he wondered how his life would have been in Tiranat in the past if it also had farms like this around the village. Maybe the villagers wouldn't have been so close to starvation in that case? Nobody could tell the answer to that, but at least Lord Kivamus had made plans for that in the future. He did know that Tiranat was only founded less than two decades ago when the coal mines had been discovered there, but Kirnos was a long established village, and people had been living there for who knew how long. So it probably wasn't surprising that they had so many farms near the village.

Even though Kirnos was located on the coast and had access to fish all the year-round, they still needed to eat grain, and it would have been too difficult for them to buy wheat from anywhere else if they didn't grow it right here, since in his knowledge, the only other major habitation that Kirnos was connected to by road was Tiranat, which didn't have any farms at all, not to mention it didn't even exist two decades ago. There was certainly the option to buy wheat from any visiting ships which might be coming south from Ulriga, but that would increase the prices a lot, making it too costly for anyone but the baron.

Suddenly he heard some unknown sounds which he couldn't recognise the source of. Looking around, he saw that there was nothing close to the wagon which could be making that weird sound, and it was too loud for that anyway. Somehow, it felt like the sound was coming from everywhere around him.

"What is that sound?" he muttered.

"Hmm...?" Feroy looked at him. "You mean the sound of waves? It's the Dujtaar Ocean ahead of us, which surrounds Cilaria in the west." N%e+e@d# c*haract.e-r& sheets and glos&s+a.r&ie%*?! V!i#s.i&t MV.^L@EM^PYR.!

"Oh..." Tesyb mumbled. So that was how the seas sounded like... He certainly hadn't heard that unique sound before in his life. There was even the loud squawking of some kind of birds, whose silhouette he could see far in the distance towards the sun. His father Pinoto had told him that he would get to see a lot of seagulls at the coast, so these must be those birds.

Soon, they passed a bend in the road, and he saw the first sight of their destination. They had finally arrived at the coastal village of Kirnos.

As they reached closer, he saw that there was a decent sized palisade wall surrounding the village - probably the same height as that around the baron's manor in Tiranat. That must be invaluable in defending Kirnos in case of a bandit raid or a wild beast attack. Of course, it wouldn't be long before Tiranat would be completely surrounded by a palisade wall too, once all the gates had been built - and those new walls were at least half again as high as these were, making Tiranat much better protected. However, neither of those walls could compare to the mighty stone walls of Cinran, which had been built for protection from Binpaazi raids in case of war, and a simple wooden palisade would do nothing against them.

When he had gone to Cinran in the past with the merchant Pydaso, he had seen that there was always a steady stream of wagons, horsemen or even farmers from nearby areas walking on foot to the gates, but here in Kirnos, there was nearly nobody visible outside the gates. He had already seen that the farms were covered by snow, which meant the local farmers wouldn't have any reason to go outside from this gate, but there still should have been at least a few people here... He slowed down the horses as they approached the village while contemplating about it.

Before long, they had reached the tall wooden gates, which were open at this time since it wasn't dark yet, and Feroy gestured to him to stop the wagon. Pulling up the reins, Tesyb followed the order, noticing from the corner of his eyes that the second wagon had also stopped behind them.

There were two fat guards wearing fur coats who were lazily sitting on a bench just inside the open gates. Noticing the newcomers, one of them stood up and slowly walked towards them, with the other not even caring enough to stand up while he gazed at them with a wicked glint in his eyes.

"Hol' up right there!" the standing guard drawled, as he squinted at them in the light of the setting sun, which had dipped behind the walls by now. "Haven't seen the two of ya before... Where ya coming from?"

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Tesyb kept quiet as he had been instructed by Feroy earlier, and let him give the answer.

"We're from Tiranat - in the east," the ex-mercenary replied with a jerk of his thumb in the direction.

"Been a while since we'd wagons coming from that pitiful village..." the sitting guard commented.

Feroy stared at the guards. "Why would you think it's pitiful?"

The standing guard frowned. "Didn't ya all get raided by bandits a few months ago?"

Feroy tilted his head to the side. "How would you even know about that?"

Tesyb noticed from the corner of his eyes that Feroy had very gently moved his hand to his side, right where he had kept his sword next to him on the wagon seat. If he wasn't paying attention to the ex-mercenary, he was pretty sure even he would have missed the action. That meant the guard wouldn't have any idea about that either. Following his lead, Tesyb did the same, just in case.

The standing guard shrugged. "Jus' heard rumors, is all."

"How would you have heard about any rumours about Tiranat," Feroy inquired, "if like you just said, no wagons have come from the east in months."

The standing guard frowned and looked at the other fat guard who had been sitting for all this time. "Where'd ya hear about it?"

The sitting guard tilted his towards the inside of the village. "From a pottery merchant in the marketplace, I think. Not sure about it though, it's been a while."

Feroy just glanced at Tesyb for a moment, and he understood what must be going on in the ex-mercenary's mind. By now he had also heard from the other guards in Tiranat that Torhan's group - which owned a clay mine somewhere to the north of Kirnos - was the one which had raided and burned half the village including his own home before Lord Kivamus had arrived. If that bandit group mined clay, and needed to sell it in Kirnos, then a local pottery merchant would be the best place for it.

They still didn't know where Nokozal had run off to after his own raid on Tiranat had failed, since he could also have told the local merchants about it, but the guard had said that it had been a while since he had heard that rumour. That confirmed their earlier suspicions that Torhan's group had regular dealings in this village. They would have to be on their toes while inside the walls of Kirnos. Who knew just how much influence that bastard Torhan had in this village.

"Anyway, what are ya here for?" the standing guard asked while gazing greedily at their wagons. Then he looked at the ex-mercenary. "Ya don't look like a merchant though..."

Feroy gave a lazy shrug. "Oh, I've been around... buying and selling stuff. You might as well call me a merchant."

Tesyb had a sudden pang of unease, remembering just whom he was sitting next to. While the guards in front of them wouldn't have gotten the reference, he was quite sure that by that sentence, Feroy meant taking money and attacking and killing people in return as a mercenary. He was as far from being a simple coal merchant as anyone could be.

Then Feroy shrugged. "We are here to sell coal, of course. What else does Tiranat have worth selling anyway..."

The local guards snickered at that, before the standing one added, "I get ya, man. Like I said, Tiranat's a pitiful village, after all." Then he grinned at his partner before looking back at them. "Either way, ya do know there is a tax for outside merchants entering the village, don't ya? The baron needs four silvers of taxes from every outside merchant at his entry, and double that at his exit."

Immediately, the sitting guard interrupted with a raised eyebrow, "Did ya forget, ya fatso? He'd added an extra two silvers to it just last week..."

The standing guard grinned while rubbing his palms together - which Tesyb was quite sure wasn't because of the cold - before he looked back at them. "Oh... of course, of course. How did I forget about that..." He gazed directly at Feroy. "It'll be six silvers for ya all to enter Kirnos, and another twelve when you exit."

"That's too much!" Teysb exclaimed, before a single glare from Feroy reminded him that he was supposed to keep quiet. Still, the guards really were asking for too much. Even if they managed to sell their whole cargo of two wagon loads of coal - which was far from guaranteed - they would get around twenty-three golds in total. If they were real merchants instead of guards doing the tasks of their baron, they would expect less than two golds of profit from this trip at most, which was just fifteen to twenty silver. This border tax was extortionate, even without the bribe being asked by the guards. However, he had forgotten just who was sitting next to him.

He continued watching the haggling with a frown, as Feroy shook his head in total dejection, perfectly playing the role of a trader who was down on his luck. "You are killing me here, man... and you know it! How would a poor merchant like me from such a pitiful village even have that much coin to spare...? Even if I manage to sell all my stock, my profits would still be lower than what you are asking as taxes."

Tesyb knew that it wasn't quite true, but he kept quiet and didn't interrupt Feroy, who gave a visible sigh before adding, "I might as well turn back right now, in that case. I'll still be saving money that way..."

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The standing guard frowned and looked at his partner, who seemed to be thinking about it, before giving a curt nod. The standing guard began, "Tell ya what, ya seem like a good fellow who's been dealt a bad hand of soylent in life. Just for ya, we are willing to waive off a full silver of the taxes. That's five silver you need to pay to enter through the gates."

Feroy gave a sigh full of despair. "No, no... that barely helps me at all! I just don't have that much coin to spare... Make it two silvers in total for the entry, and I might be able to do it."

"Ya mus' be kidding..." the guard stared at them. "We need to give four silvers just to the baron! We'd have to pay from our pockets if ya give that little as taxes!"

Feroy tilted his head. "Just four? Didn't you just ask for six silvers? You both wouldn't be trying to extort an innocent merchant, would you? I've got to complain to the baron in that case..."

The standing guard looked nervous now, and wiped his forehead, while the one who had been sitting until now walked towards them, and glared at his partner. The earlier guard tried to say something, but the new guard told him to shut up before he looked at them and gave a pleasant smile which somehow still seemed full of venom. "There is no need for that, not that a common merchant like you would ever be able to get an audience with Baron Farodas or even the young master. This idiot just keeps forgetting about that raise in the tax last week. Anyway, let's make it four silvers and five coppers. That's final!"

Feroy sighed. "The best I can do is four silvers and two coppers. That would still leave me with barely anything as profit. Any higher, and I'll just have to turn around my wagons."

The new guard remained quiet for a while while glaring at his partner, before he nodded. "It's a deal, but you gotta give the coins right now. No credits or extensions for you to give it when you return."

Feroy took a visibly deep breath, like he was parting with his firstborn, and put a hand inside his fur coat to get the coins, before counting them very slowly. Eventually, when it seemed like the guard was getting too annoyed and was probably thinking of denying them entry anyway, Feroy very slowly extended his hands towards the guard, putting the coins in his fat hands.

The guard confirmed the amount himself, before he looked at them. "You can enter now, but don't forget, it will be double of this when you exit. No more discounts on that."

"Can't help taking a loss on this trip, I guess," Feroy muttered in a low voice, which was still loud enough for the guards to hear clearly. "I do need to clear my stock of coal anyway." Then the ex-mercenary looked at Tesyb and pointed ahead.

Not wanting to stay any longer near these corrupt and greedy guards, Tesyb touched the whip to the sides of the horses, which started moving once again. The second wagon followed them as well, and then they were inside the gates of Kirnos.

Once they had moved far enough inside on the snow-covered path, Tesyb whispered towards Feroy, "Why'd you show us as so poor? Wouldn't that be bad for trading here, if local merchants find out that we don't have any coin to pay for the fish we need to buy?"

The ex-mercenary looked all around them with sharp eyes, before he replied, "They only need to see our coin at the moment of purchase, even if these idiot guards blab about us when they go to the local

alehouse to get drunk after duty. Either way, we need them to think that we are penniless and don't have anything worth stealing. It probably won't help much, but if Torhan's bandits have regular contacts with the local merchants, we need all the luck we can get to show us and Tiranat as poor, just so they don't get any ideas of raiding us again any time soon."

"Oh..." Tesyb gave an understanding nod, not having thought that far ahead. Putting it in the back of his mind for now, he gazed at their surroundings. The narrow snow covered path they had been travelling on passed between huts and shacks on both sides, with hardly any people outside at this time, even though it wasn't night yet. Unlike the fat guards at the gates, these people looked like they barely got anything to eat. The few children they saw were huddling in the corners of their parents' shacks, instead of running and playing around like they should be.

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Their wagons kept moving on that street for a while, as they followed a few people carrying small satchels after confirming from some locals about the location of the marketplace. The sound of the ocean kept getting louder, until they turned left at an intersection, and entered what had to be the marketplace of Kirnos. Even though the ground was covered with a few inches of snow, it wasn't difficult to tell from the sudden change in the sound of wagon wheels moving on the ground that just like Cinran, this marketplace also had cobblestone streets here, unlike the muddy ground in Tiranat.

While the path they had come from mostly had huts and shacks on both sides with barely any wooden houses, inside the marketplace there were only wooden buildings, most of them being two stories high. Looking around, he realized that this marketplace was bigger than he had expected, with the sea - no, the ocean - in front of them only a short distance away. In front of them, towards the ocean, he saw some straight wooden platforms extending into the water, with a real ship with sails anchored there!

On both sides of them there was a curved row of wooden shops and vendors surrounding the marketplace so that the area formed the same shape as half of a round wooden plate he ate from, with the ocean providing the straight boundary in the middle of that half circle. However, unlike the rest of the village, there were quite a few people here, with a cacophony of sounds surrounding them. Unlike guards wearing fur coats at the gates, these people were only dressed in a peasant's clothing, their gaunt faces and hungry looks betraying the foodgrain situation in the village.

"Let's stop here," Feroy ordered.

Tesyb nodded, and seeing some other wagons parked near the central area, he moved their own wagon closer to them and stopped the horses, with the second wagon doing the same next to them.

Feroy jumped down from his seat and tied the scabbard to his waist again, and called up all the guards. "Tesyb and I will go and take a look around the place to see if we can find someone who wants to buy coal from us." He gestured to the other two guards. "You two, stay here and keep an eye on our wagons." Once they had nodded, Feroy looked back at Tesyb, "Try to see if anyone is selling smoked fish, but don't ask about the prices. Leave that for me. You go left, and I'll take the right. We'll meet right here after taking a round of the marketplace." Helpuscontinuebyreadingatthesource:MV2LEMPYR.

With that, the ex-mercenary was off between the throng of people, so Tesyb turned around as well, and started moving towards the left. As he walked, he heard a variety of sounds around him, as he kept moving next to the shops on the ground floor of the two story wooden houses. Many of the shopkeepers were shouting that their earthenware was the best, while pointing at the clay pots kept on the wooden counters of their shops.

Tesyb wondered which of these shops had contacts with Torhan's bandits. Or maybe it was all of them?

Further ahead around that half circle, he also saw some shopkeepers selling wheat. He kept moving ahead and eventually he reached right at the coast where the ocean met the land only a short distance away. This was the first time he was seeing such a huge amount of water in one place, so he just stood there for a while, gazing at the setting sun in front of him while realising that he had probably never seen a more beautiful sight in his life. Hues of orange, red, purple, and pink blended seamlessly in the sky at the horizon, while being reflected off the surface of the ocean, creating a breathtaking scene, despite the incessant squawking of the seagulls near the only ship in vicinity.

Suddenly he realised that it had stopped snowing, making him come back to the present. He cleared his mind of the wonderful scenery in the west, and made a right turn to continue walking parallel to the sea line. He thought that he heard someone calling the wooden platform next to that ship as a pier, but he wasn't sure.

A few people - sailors - were loading a few crates on the ship through a plank connecting the pier with the ship. Many of them must contain smoked fish, but there was also a lot of pottery which was well-covered in straw padding being loaded as well, likely to be sold in the bigger markets like Ulriga. On his right side, some traders were selling freshly caught fish, while further ahead some small vendors were even offering roasted fish as well on their carts. It made him salivate for a moment, before he remembered he had no coin to buy it anyway. Soon, he reached the central path dividing the marketplace, and turned right once again towards their wagon waiting ahead.

However, one thing that he had noticed was that despite all the activity and the crowd milling around in the marketplace, nearly no one seemed to be buying anything. There was a dejectedness in the air despite all the hustle and bustle, which wasn't very different from what was common in Tiranat a few months ago, if only done at a larger scale. Kirnos was a bigger village than his own, from what he had been told.

Soon, he reached their wagons and saw that Feroy was already there waiting for him.

Chapter 215 Nobility

"Great, you are here," the ex-mercenary said when Tesyb reached there. "You find anything on that side?"

Tesyb shook his head, making sure that no passersby were walking nearby. "Mostly grain and pottery sellers on that side. There is some freshly caught fish, but that won't be of any use to us since it would probably rot before we reached Tiranat. There were some cart vendors selling roasted fish too, but that was only a small quantity for the visitors to the marketplace, not nearly enough to sell it wholesale. Also, nobody would be buying coal from us on that side."

"Hmm..." Feroy nodded, while tightening his fur coat. "Well, I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that I've found a merchant who has enough smoked fish in stock that we can fill a single wagon bed with them." He pointed towards the pier where crates were still being loaded on that ship. "He had a lot more in stock earlier, but most of it was loaded in that ship you see out there. Nobody in this village is going to buy smoked fish anyway. The bad news is that nobody is willing to buy coal on this side either."

"What about that merchant who smokes fish?" one of the other guards asked. "Wouldn't he buy coal from us?"

"No, smoking meat or fish is done on wood fire only, never on coal," Feroy answered. "That merchant has a special permission from the local baron - named the Baron Farodas - to cut trees from the forests to use for smoking the fish, in return for a hefty share of his profits, of course. The merchant was already grumbling about it, even to a stranger like me."

"That's still good for us, isn't it?" the other guard asked. "If we somehow find a way to sell the coal, we can buy all the smoked fish he has remaining with him. We can even return again on another trip to buy more smoked fish from him!"

Feroy exhaled. "It's not that easy. Meat is always costlier than grain. Filling a single wagon with grain - which is selling for above five gold per sack here - will cost us more than fifty gold. But if we buy enough smoked fish just to fill a single wagon, it will cost us seventy eight gold, even before any taxes on it."

"That's..." Tesyb didn't know what to say. Even selling their full load of coal wouldn't get them anywhere near that amount. Was this trip already wasted then?

Feroy looked around them carefully, and waited until a local woman had passed far away from them until there was nobody else to overhear. "Sir Duvas has given me some extra gold, since he knew that we won't get enough coin to buy fish even if we sold the coal, but that still won't be enough for us to buy even a single wagon load of smoked fish."

"What should we do then?" one of the guards asked worriedly. "We can't return empty-handed..."

"I have some ideas for tomorrow," Feroy commented. "That merchant was complaining quite a lot about the baron's share in his profits. I think there might be some way for us to make a deal here. He also has a warehouse near the northern gate of the village, where he is willing to let us stay for the night for a small price. We have been out in the open under constant snowfall for nearly two days now, so spending a night indoors will do us good. Let's go there for now, and tomorrow we'll see what can be done about selling our coal and buying smoked fish."

Tesyb nodded, while another guard looked wistfully at a particular establishment near the eastern entrance of the marketplace from where they had come from, which was a lot busier than the other shops. "Can't we have a single round in that alehouse there before we leave?"

Feroy snorted. "You aren't the only one to see that place. You have no idea how much I would like some ale too, but we are on duty until we return back to Tiranat, so there will be no ale for any of us. Because of the presence of so many pottery sellers here, we know by now that Torhan's bandits come regularly to this village. Maybe some of them are here right now. We just can't take a risk of any kind. Let's go."

Tesyb and the other guards nodded, as he looked towards the path exiting the marketplace from the north. Many people seemed to be huddling under the overhang of shacks in the cold, seemingly not having any place to live. Some street urchins were also running nearby, looking like they hadn't eaten in

days. Suddenly, they stopped and looked at them without saying words, their hungry eyes doing all the pleading.

Tesyb's heart ached to see those children like this. As much as he wanted to help them, he simply didn't have any coins in his pockets anyway. He knew that if these children didn't manage to steal something from one of the vendors, they would go hungry once again. Then he steeled his heart. He had to focus on his current task, and looked at Feroy for permission to send them away.

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However, the ex-mercenary seemed to be gazing at the kids for a moment, before he ordered one of the guards to give a few baked biscuits and some dried meat jerky to them.

As soon as the urchins saw food, their eyes lit up. "Thank ya, mister!" Once the guard had given the food in their hands, the kids immediately gave another thanks and ran a little distance away, probably fearful that their food would be taken back from them. It didn't take long for the kids to finish what they had been given, and they began looking at them once again.

"Alright, let's go now," Feroy ordered.

Just as they were going to climb on the seats of their wagons, they saw some commotion at the western entrance of the marketplace.

"Wait!" Feroy instructed, while putting his hand on the hilt of his sword. "We are already standing out in this place in our fur coats, so let's wait for a moment to see what it is before we exit, instead of making others give the wrong idea that we are running away from something."

Tesyb got ready to draw his sword at a moment's notice as well, while looking towards the southern entrance with his muscles tensed.

It didn't take long before they saw a small group of people riding on horses slowly as they entered the marketplace from that side. Craning his neck upwards, Tesyb saw that the man leading the small group was very, very well dressed, just like a noble would be. His fur coat was quite unlike the ones they were wearing themselves, and even had some golden trimmings decorating the coat.

He looked young, likely in his early twenties, and had flowing blonde hair as well as an ornately decorated scabbard on his side. His round face and large girth easily proved that unlike the commoners of Kirnos who looked underfed, this guy had no shortage of food. Behind the man, there were four other men riding slowly on horses, but they were dressed normally, although they still had fur coats and a sword each. These must be the personal guards of that young man.

Not wanting to make a scene of leaving at the same time this noble had entered, they kept standing near their wagon, while Tesyb noticed that all of the locals had stopped where they were with their heads bowed low. There was a hush over the marketplace as the noble and his retinue circled the marketplace while passing next to the shops. Each of the nearby locals, including any shopkeepers and vendors immediately bowed deeply to the man, while offering a sample of their wares to him. The young noble gave a satisfied smile to each, as he took a roasted fish from a vendor without paying anything for it, and chewed on it while leering at any young woman he saw near him.

"Who is this bastard?" Tesyb muttered under his breath. Was he the Baron of Kirnos? No, he couldn't be. From what Feroy had heard from that grumbling merchant, the baron was supposed to be much older.

"He's young master Lanidas, the only son of the baron Farodas. Better stay clear of him, ya'll."

"What...?" Surprised at the childish voice coming from right next to him, Tesyb looked to his side and saw the same two street urchins standing nearby while trying to hide behind their wagons. When did they come here?

"You kids know about the guy?" Feroy asked in a low voice.

The boy who must not even be ten years old, gave a frown. "Everyone knows about him here. He comes here every evening and takes free food from everyone."

The girl who seemed to be only a few years older than the boy added with a shiver, "He always asks any lone woman he sees in the marketplace to come with him to his manor. I hide under a wagon with my friends when he comes here."

Tesyb immediately realized that he already hated the guy, even though he hadn't even known about him a few moments ago. They kept watching the young master as he made his round and turned in their direction. It must not have taken long for that bastard to realise that they were new here, and he immediately turned his horse towards them.

"You guys better bow to him, since you can't hide under the wagon like us." Once again Tesyb had heard the voice of the boy from nearby, although he couldn't see the kids anymore. Were they already hiding under the wagons?

Soon, the young noble reached in front of them and stopped, not caring to get off from his horse as he stared down at them for a while. Feroy gave a deep bow to the man, and following his lead Tesyb and the other two guards did the same.

"You people seem new here..." the young man grinned, "but good to see that you know your places." Spitting out the fish bone he had been chewing on earlier to his side, the man continued, "Consider yourself lucky. You have the pleasure of meeting nobility on your first day here."

"It's an honour to meet you, milord," Feroy replied with a straight face as he stood up.

Lanidas tilted his head while still sitting on his horse. "Where are you all coming from?"

Chapter 216 Young Master Lanidas

"I'm a small merchant coming from Tiranat," Feroy answered smoothly. "The other three men with me are guards I hired for the journey."

"Your wagons seem to be quite full..." Lanidas remarked. "What do you deal in?"

Feroy immediately pulled back the oilcloth covering one of the wagons. "I've come here to sell coal, of course."

"Good, good, we needed that coal. Did you pay the entry taxes at the gates?"

"Of course, milord," Feroy answered. "We paid the full tax of four silvers and two coppers, with a promise to pay the double of it as the exit taxes when we leave."

Lanidas paused for a moment as he smoothed his lustrous hair. "Four silvers and two coppers... you say?" Without waiting for a reply, he added with a smirk, "Didn't the gate guards tell you that the taxes were tripled recently for those who aren't locals? That means you need to pay twelve silvers for entry in Kirnos, and just above twenty four silvers for exiting, for a total of thirty-six silvers. You must have already heard from others that I am a very generous man, so I'll gladly waive off the coppers from the tax."

Feroy's face showed a mix of surprise and anger, but it lasted for such a short moment that even Tesyb wasn't sure if he had just imagined it. The ex-mercenary gave a big smile. "Your generosity knows no bounds, milord! The residents of Kirnos are lucky to have you as their Lord."

Tesyb bristled in anger at the greedy noble, while somehow managing to keep his hand away from his scabbard. Wouldn't paying that amount wipe out all of their coins? How could Feroy agree to it that easily? What's even the point of the wagons being accompanied by trained guards if they had to give into the predatory whims of others!

Then he remembered just where he was standing. He wasn't in Tiranat anymore with the benevolent Lord Kivamus as its ruler. This was Lanidas' own village, or his father's anyway, and they couldn't possibly win in a battle against the local guards and escape with their wagons. If they tried anything which went against this bastard's orders, most likely they would either be killed or put in a prison permanently. So it was probably a smart move by Feroy not to protest their treatment, no matter how unfair it was.

"They are indeed lucky," Lanidas grinned. "It still means that you are short on taxes and I can't let you leave my village before you pay the full amount. In fact, it's better if you provide the full amount right now including the exit tax, just to prevent any issues later. The gate guards seem to be quite forgetful these days..." He added, "Don't worry, I'll provide you an escort free of cost when you leave Kirnos to confirm to the gate guards that you have paid your taxes."

Feroy gave a dejected sigh. "As much as I'd love to pay your generous taxes, I just don't have that much coin on me, milord. We have just arrived and I haven't even been able to sell my stock of coal yet."

By now, a lot of locals including many merchants had gathered around them to see what was happening, with Lanidas seemingly enjoying everyone's attention to his honeyed words.

Lanidas smirked with a pointed gaze at their wagons. "We had bought a few wagon loads of coal from Tiranat before the winter, but we are running low on it these days, so you have come to Kirnos at the right time." The young master smirked at the gathered people from atop his horse, gesturing more locals to come closer. "Don't you see, my dear villagers, just how generous I am!" He looked back at Feroy. "That's why, I'll accept payment in kind too."

"Of course you will," Feroy muttered in a barely audible voice. "Well, in that case, I am willing to pay the taxes with my coal."

"Perfect!" Young master Lanidas grinned. "Like I said, our manor needs a lot of coal for the rest of winter, so I'll buy all of your stock. I'll make the payment for it after deducting what you owe as taxes. If you manage to travel to Kirnos again in the future, especially before the winter ends, I will gladly buy all the coal you can bring to me."

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Tesyb was furious now. The son of the baron had publicly claimed that he would buy coal from them in the future, which meant while they would be ensured to sell at least a few more wagon loads of coal in Kirnos in future trips, they would likely remain at a loss after paying these ridiculous taxes, and there was nothing they could do about it. He hadn't really travelled outside Tiranat in his life, apart from the trips to Cinran before the winter, so until now, he didn't have a first hand idea of just how greedy and ruthless nobles could be in this kingdom. It only emphasised just how unique Lord Kivamus and his viewpoints were, that he had been so generous with the villagers of Tiranat.

Feroy nodded slowly. "That works for me. This time I can sell a single wagon load for twenty-four gold, so it will be forty-eight gold for all our coal."

"What?" Lanidas exclaimed. "That's preposterous! I had paid twelve gold for a wagon load of coal last time!"

Tesyb was staring at Feroy, wondering what game he was playing this time. He was hardly up-to-date with the prices of everything, but from what he remembered, Pydaso hadn't even paid twelve gold for a single wagon load. Feroy had seemingly just doubled their selling price to deal with the absurd tripling of taxes.

Feroy gave a shrug. "Can't help it, milord. The prices of everything are high these days. I bought my stock of coal at twenty-two gold per wagon load. I have to sell it at twenty-five gold just to break even after paying these taxes, although I have sadly accepted that I simply won't be making any profit on this trip." The ex-mercenary gestured to one of the guards. "Tie up the oil cloth again, we have to travel to the manor of Lord Lanidas' father."

Lanidas glared at Feroy, his nose flaring in anger, at the blatant mention that it wasn't his own manor just yet. It was still his father Farodas who was the baron of Kirnos, not him. Some of the nearby viewers seemed to be smirking, although a single glare by Lanidas was enough to make them look downwards again.

Feroy looked at the young master again. "However, you have been so generous with us so far, so to return the favour, I'll waive off five silvers from the price of each wagon load of coal."

Tesyb looked at the ex-mercenary in wonder. The man had guts, there was no doubt about it now, if there ever was. By giving a discount of five silvers per wagon - which was one gold coin, or a hundred coppers for both the wagons - he had also shown the people around them that he could afford to give a much bigger discount than the one Lanidas had given them on taxes, which was worth just a few coppers. This was another way he had managed to show himself, and by extension Tiranat, as being a lot more generous than the greedy nobles of Kirnos.

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Lanidas had also made a mistake in telling everyone gathered here that their manor needed to buy all of their coal, which meant he couldn't back away now which would risk showing him, and by extension the baron of Kirnos, as being too poor to afford to purchase coal from a small merchant after already promising to buy all their stock.

Tesyb realised that it was a dangerous game which Feroy was playing here, but short of confiscating all their cargo, there wasn't much this plump young master could do about it. A merchant was free to set his own prices in this kingdom, although the rates were always kept close to what his competitors were selling at, just to remain competitive. However it wasn't like there was any other coal merchant here to provide the much needed fuel to Lanidas' manor in this winter, nor would it be a good idea to confiscate their wagons in front of every merchant in the village for basically no good reason.

It wasn't hard to see the anger on Lanidas' face by now, however, if this tactic worked and they returned unharmed back to their homes, Feroy wouldn't just manage to break even after paying these absurd taxes, he would even be able to generate a decent profit from this trip! That would go a long way to buy the smoked fish they needed to feed Tiranat.

"Fine!" Lanidas spat out, while glaring at everyone around him. "That'll be forty-three gold for all your coal. Your due taxes are just above three gold, but I'll be generous once again and round it down to exactly three gold. That means you are owed forty gold for all your coal."

Feroy gave a pleasant smile. "Of course, milord. You are so brilliant, making the calculations that fast without even writing anything down!" He looked at the people surrounding them. "Let's give a round of applause to the generous young master Lanidas, the brilliant son of the Baron of Kirnos."

While the locals started clapping hesitantly, Tesyb's heart was beating loudly, fearing the ex-mercenary had gone too far in insulting the young master. He exchanged a quick look with the other two guards, and slowly shifted his hand towards his scabbard, just in case it came to the worst, with the other two doing the same.

Chapter 217 Mission

However, it seemed like the young master didn't want to order his guards to arrest or kill them in the middle of the market. Looking at the forced grin on the young master's face, Tesyb wasn't sure whether he didn't even understand the insult made by Feroy to him just a moment ago, or if he was just putting on a brave face, pretending he didn't understand.

Either way, Lanidas' tactic of gathering the locals to show his generosity had gone completely against him, and now he wouldn't just have to pay the double prices for coal, but he would be obliged to pay a similar price even in the future. By making this a memorable public spectacle, Feroy had also ensured that the baron wouldn't just put them in his jail once they exited the market place, since it would make the locals distrust the baron's son even more than they already did if he went back on his words so easily.

He still wasn't sure if the young master would buy more of their coal at these prices if they returned to Kirnos again in the future, but Lanidas had already claimed that he would do that in front of the locals, which might very well work in Tiranat's favor. Only time would tell if it really happened like that.

Glaring at everyone around him once again, Lanidas turned back to Feroy. "Follow us to the baron's manor! My servants will empty your wagons there, and you'll get your damned payment."

"Of course, milord," Feroy smiled smugly. "Guards, let's go!"

Following the order, Tesyb sat on the leading wagon next to Feroy, with the other two guards climbing on the seat of the second wagon. Lanidas turned around his horse, with his mounted guards behind him, and their wagons started following the young master.

As they left the marketplace, Tesyb looked at the locals, and saw many of them give knowing grins to them, including the two street urchins who were waving towards them. That easily confirmed just how despised Lanidas was in this place.

It was getting close to dark now but snowfall hadn't started again for now. Their wagons had been moving for a while on the southern path exiting the marketplace, which Tesyb had found out was also a cobblestone path, probably because it connected the marketplace to the baron's manor. Unlike the huts and shacks on the sides of the street coming from the east which they had entered Kirnos from, the southern street had much better dwellings, with nearly all of them being two story wooden houses.

Confirming that young master Lanidas and his retinue was far enough ahead of them that they wouldn't overhear him, Tesyb looked at Feroy. "Why did you try to provoke him so much? I understand you trying to make profits despite his greed so we can buy more smoked fish, but you didn't have to humiliate him like that in front of all the locals..." This chapter was first seen on

Feroy looked around them from the seat of their wagon for a moment confirming there wasn't anyone nearby, before he replied, "Trying to make a profit despite the circumstances being against you is always a good idea, but I also have a secret second mission given to me by Lord Kivamus. I didn't know whether I would get a chance to work on it so I didn't mention it to you all earlier."

Tesyb was very curious now. "What are you talking about?"

Feroy smirked. "We have already seen that there are many pottery merchants in the marketplace, which confirms that Torhan's bandits are regulars in this village, which can't happen without the blessing of the local baron here. That means the baron Farodas, and likely even his son Lanidas would have known about the first raid on Tiranat, and might even have taken a share of the spoils from Torhan."

"That's certainly possible," Tesyb whispered while trying not to remember the harsh days when he and his parents had to live in what remained of his burnt house, "but what does that have to do with you provoking the young master?"

"Here is where that secret mission comes in," Feroy replied in a low voice. "Lord Kivamus wants a lot more workers in Tiranat, which can only happen if people from nearby villages and towns start moving there, including those who are slaves. While we are simply not strong enough to provoke Cinran in any way - it is nearly ten times bigger than Tiranat, with a similarly big guard force including a lot of knights, not to mention Count Cinran hasn't done anything against Tiranat anyway - but Lord Kivamus considers Kirnos as fair game. It's speculation on my part, but most likely Baron Zoricus, who really wants to capture our village to get the coal mines to his name and increase his land holdings, had arranged for Levalo to assassinate our baron while also murdering the previous baron of Tiranat, without any knowledge of Count Cinran, who has bigger fish to fry with attacks from Binpaaz being a constant threat on Cinran."

"I can understand that," Tesyb replied. "So Lord Kivamus wants people from Kirnos to start moving to Tiranat? I can already see that Kirnos is a little bigger than Tiranat, although not by much. However, if we include the people who must be living in all the surrounding farms, there are probably enough people here who might be willing to move..."

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Feroy nodded while jerking his head towards the noble's retinue some distance away in front of them. "Indeed. Lanidas rarely pays for anything he buys in the marketplace, not to mention the absurd taxes his father takes, and the lining of his own pockets by further increasing our taxes by the young master means nobody is satisfied living under their rule. So, earlier in the marketplace, when I saw how disliked this young master was, I saw it as a good chance to make him show as even more greedy to the locals, which will further show them that life in Kirnos is very difficult under the current baron. Nobody likes paying taxes in the first place, but by tripling our taxes on his whim in front of everyone, Lanidas did half of our work for us anyway."

"That's true enough," Tesyb looked at the houses which had become even more lavish as they approached closer to the baron's manor, whose palisade wall they could already see in the distance by now, "but even if people want to move away from Kirnos so they wouldn't have to pay such taxes, why would they want to move to Tiranat?"

"I was getting to that," Feroy answered. "The grumbling fish merchant I had met with, told me a lot about just how dissatisfied people are here. They can't go to hunt in the nearby forests because the

baron has a monopoly on that, they can't farm in the winter anyway, and there isn't any construction work going on here. That means most of the people in Kirnos remain unemployed in the winter, which has led to many of them becoming homeless and barely having anything to eat - like we saw earlier. So I'll be... whispering in a few ears that there are lots of opportunities for available work in Tiranat, which will give the dissatisfied locals a new place where they can imagine a better future for themselves. After that, we can only hope that they are brave enough to decide that risking moving to a different village is still better than their children not getting anything to eat here."

Tesyb gave a slow nod thinking about it, as the young master waited ahead of them for the gates to be opened. Soon, they were inside the walls of the baron's manor, with Lanidas waiting for them on his horse.

The young master pointed to his right. "Our coal is stored in that storehouse. Tell your guards to take the wagons there so my servants can remove the coal." Then he glared at Feroy for a moment. "No merchant had come from Tiranat for months, and now someone like you comes here... I wonder if Tiranat got a new baron by now... Probably not," he gave the answer himself with a snort. "Which noble in his right mind would want to go to live in that cesspit anyway!"

Tesyb clenched his fists, but remained quiet. How dare this bastard make fun of his village like that!

Feroy waited for the baron to finish speaking, "In fact, milord, Tiranat does have a new baron now. Lord Kivamus Ralokaar - the third son of the Duke of Ulriga - is the one who rules over the barony of Tiranat now."

Lanidas looked so surprised that it seemed he had forgotten to breathe. "Just what are you talking about! What would a Duke's son be doing in that place!" He added with a glare, "It... it... doesn't make any sense! Has the Duke lost his mind!" Suddenly it seemed like all his anger had vanished and he looked a little fearful, "But if... if that's true... then I... at that time..." but he suddenly stopped speaking before he finished whatever he was going to say.

The ex-mercenary gave a lazy shrug. "I wouldn't know anything about the noble politics in Ulriga or why the Duke sent his son there, but it is indeed a son of the Duke who rules over Tiranat now."

The plump young master seemed to be thinking for a moment before he took a deep breath and scoffed. "Hah! If you are indeed right about this, then a pampered noble who's lived all his life in the luxurious Palace of Ulriga wouldn't even last the whole winter in that village! It seems Count Cinran will

have to look for a new baron again for that cesspit. Maybe I should try for it... not that there is anything worth having in that village apart from its coal, but we can always use more slaves in this manor..."

Tesyb was getting furious at the constant insults this bastard made about his home village and their baron. This spoiled young master had no idea about the lengths Lord Kivamus had gone to to make sure everyone in the village had food to eat and a roof over their heads. He was once again thinking about saying something in anger, but somehow Feroy was anticipating this, and gave him a harsh stare, making him shut his mouth immediately, even though that didn't do anything to reduce his anger.

Feroy looked back at the young master and smiled politely but didn't say anything either.

Eventually, Lanidas seemed to realise that he wouldn't get a rise from the ex-mercenary, so he began to turn around his horse, and added, "Come with me to the manor house and I'll settle your payment."

"By your order," Feroy gave a short bow after jumping down from his seat. "Tesyb, take care of everything here."

Tesyb took a deep breath to calm his mind and nodded, before he gestured to the guards on their other wagon behind him to move the wagons towards the storehouse, where a few servants were already waiting with shovels.

The skies had gotten fully dark by the time the servants finished their task, and he saw Feroy walking towards them from a three story wooden mansion in the distance where he had gone with the young master earlier.

"Come on, let's leave," Feroy ordered once he had reached closer.

They turned around their empty wagons, and started moving towards the manor gates again after taking their seats.

"So, did you...?" Tesyb whispered, hoping the ex-mercenary would understand his question about the payment. It wasn't a good idea to speak about such big amounts openly inside this manor. Who knew where the news might travel, especially with Torhan's bandits mingling around in this village.

Chapter 218 Speech

The ex-mercenary smirked and waited until they had exited the gates and moved some distance away from the gate guards before he whispered back, "Got the full amount, and even got to see the Baron Farodas scolding his son for making such a bad deal. He was quite angry that Lanidas had agreed to buy coal at the price I asked for, but the baron didn't want to lose face by refusing to pay that price which would only prove to outsiders that his own son was making deals without his permission."

"While I didn't know about your secret mission, Lord Kivamus would already be expecting you to do something about that," Tesyb grinned, "but even he wouldn't be expecting you to have gotten such a big profit from this trip!"

"True," Feroy shrugged, "but even with the extra gold I'd been given by sir Duvas, we'll still barely be able to buy enough to fill a single wagon with smoked fish, if that. If the market had enough grain for us, then I would have preferred to buy that for use as seeds in spring, but the merchants will immediately increase the price if they find out we want to buy it in a good quantity."

Tesyb frowned. "Wouldn't the merchants prefer to clear their stock?"

"In usual times, they would have, but right now they all know that the prices are only going to increase until the next crop comes in next year's autumn, so they don't mind holding on to their stock of grain for longer so that they can get an even better price in future. I'll still try to see if I can get that merchant to provide us with more smoked fish on credit." Feroy continued, "Anyway, it's already late, so let's go to the empty barn near the north gate where that fish merchant has promised us a place to sleep for the night."

~ Kivamus ~

"Milord, all the preparations for the feast are done," a servant reported after entering the manor hall.

"Great, I'll be there in a moment." Kivamus looked at the guard captain who had also come inside with the servant. "Have you gathered all the servants and guards together?"

Hudan nodded. "We have barred the gates of the manor, so the guards who were posted on duty there have already gathered near the training area in the southeast of the manor, but those who were posted at the village gates will have to remain at their posts, and two guards will be doing continuous patrols inside the village walls for tonight. I have still arranged for all of them to be replaced after an hour or so, so they can also enjoy the feast. You had also asked us not to send the hunters out once they arrived in the past few days, so by now we have most of the manor residents here - nearly all fifty of us - except for Feroy and the three guards accompanying him."

Kivamus smiled. "It's a good idea to change the guards at the village gates later," he replied while putting his fur coat around his shoulders. "Duvas, let's go. Gorsazo has already been out for a while."

The majordomo stood up as well, and followed him outside.

"Feroy would have loved to be here tonight," Hudan said, "especially since we are giving some ale to everyone this time."

"Yeah, but he was the best choice to lead the caravan to Kirnos," Duvas replied. "Let's hope he succeeds in all his tasks."

Kivamus nodded, remembering about telling the ex-mercenary to try to give hints to the people of Kirnos that Tiranat was willing to take in as many of them as they could. It had led to an argument with the majordomo about them being able to afford to feed them, but he had explained that such a decision wasn't going to be easy for any people there, and it would take many weeks or even months before any of them decided to move here. By that time winter would have ended and the northern road would become open once again, which meant they would be able to buy more grain to feed them.

It was certainly true that they were already very short on coin, and they did need to pay the taxes to the Count by that time, but with the hunters bringing in a lot of meat now, and the smokehouse working round the clock, they had slowly started to gather a small stockpile of smoked meat by now which could also be used to feed any newcomers. If Feroy was successful in bringing in smoked fish from Kirnos, it would make that task even easier, specially since the mineshafts in the coal mines were already being emptied of flood water now, which meant they could keep trading smoked fish in exchange for coal, assuming more workers arrived from Kirnos to work in the coal mines.

A labour shortage was their biggest problem right now. Any other problems could be dealt with as long as he had enough labourers to put to work.

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They exited the outer door of the manor house, and he saw the empty place in the south east of the manor being full of people even a few hours after sunset. With no new snowfall in the past couple of days, the ground only had a small layer of snow at this time inside the manor, even though a lot more snow was gathered outside the village walls in the forests where people weren't trampling over it all day.

The old majordomo stood next to him as he took a moment to look around at everything, while Hudan walked ahead towards a small gathering of guards. Like the previous time they had given a feast, they had put a few wooden tables close to the manor walls, on which a variety of dishes were kept in steaming pots, with a few maids standing behind the tables ready to start serving food.

Most of the braziers from around the manor had been gathered in this place in a rough circle, making the place inside the circle a lot warmer and feeling a lot livelier than usual. Many of them were even burning sawdust briquettes instead of coal. Lucem and Clarisa seemed to be playing a game of tag between the crowd, while Gorsazo seemed to be busy talking with Madam Helga in one corner. A few servants and stable grooms seemed to be guffawing at a joke one of them had just told, as another servant brought a barrel of water on a wheelbarrow before the others helped him to unload it near the serving tables.

Madam Nerida was taking a round of all the serving tables with a strict visage to confirm that all the preparations were done properly, while the long blonde haired Yufim seemed to be talking with Sryne nearby. Calubo and Hyola, about whom he was already sure that they liked each other a lot, were giggling together in one corner, while Kerel, who was a senior guard, seemed to be telling war stories from his past, making the nearby guards and servants look at him in awe.

The carpenters Darora and Taniok seemed to be busy talking to each other about exchanging their best ideas for wood crafting, while the huge blacksmith Cedoron was explaining about something new he was trying in his forge to Leah, who had already been living with him for a few months now. He wondered when they would get married. Father Edric was the one who officiated such occasions in the village, and a hopeful event like that would make a nice change of pace from the gloomy months in the recent past.

Kivamus gave a satisfied smile at looking at the high-spirited atmosphere inside the manor. "I'm glad we kept this feast tonight."

"It feels really good to see everyone so cheerful after so long," Duvas agreed. "It had become rare to see anyone smile in the months after the previous baron was murdered, but today it seems like all is good in the world somehow."

Soon, the manor residents started to notice that he had arrived, and it slowly became quieter and quieter, until everyone was looking at him with anticipation. The crowd slowly moved to form a semicircle in front of him, with the braziers burning in the empty spaces between them. With the delicious smell of the freshly prepared adzee meat coming from the serving tables, the manor had become festive looking after all despite everything they had gone through in the past.

"It's time, my lord," Duvas whispered gently. "It's time to you by the folks- at M\$V|L@EM-PYR&."

Still being completely unaccustomed to giving a speech in public, he nodded and gave a big smile to everyone to calm his nerves. "It hasn't been too long since I arrived here, but within this short time we have managed to do so much for the village. Everyone in Tiranat gets food thrice a day, every person has a roof over him in this winter, and there are enough opportunities for everyone to find work. Within a week from now, both of the village gates will be completed, and we will finally have strong walls surrounding and protecting the village from all the threats around us."

He continued, "The coal mines are already being made ready to start working again with the water wheel, and we have managed to reduce our coal consumption by using sawdust briquettes in place of them. This is far from a complete list, but either way, we have managed to accomplish so much in the last few months."

He gazed at the eyes of all the people listening carefully, "None of that would have been possible without you all. Whether you are a guard working at the gates, a maid cooking in the kitchens or a stable groom taking care of our cows, horses, chicken or nodors, all of your work is invaluable for the survival of Tiranat."

Many of the listeners grinned after hearing that, while he saw the kids looking back towards the serving tables repeatedly. Smiling towards them, he added, "Despite all the burning braziers, it's still cold outside, and a variety of food is waiting for you all, so I won't take too long or the food will go cold, but

before we begin the feast, let me say that while we have come long way from the difficult situation Tiranat was in just a few months ago, we still have a long way to go, and with the support of you all, Tiranat will get there!"

Immediately there was a loud roar from the gathered crowd, before some of the guards began to yell while stomping their boots and raising their swords high, "For Lord Kivamus we fight!"

Not wanting to be left behind, the servants and maids added to it while striking a few wooden bowls with spoons, "For Lord Kivamus we work hard!"

The two carpenters and the blacksmith looked at each other for a moment, before they raised their hammers and chisels high in the air, and bellowed, "For Lord Kivamus we build!"

Eventually, someone roared from the back of the crowd, "For the glory of Tiranat!"

Once again the crowd was enveloped in a series of cheers and roars as they began to chant the newly made slogans once again. Kivamus wondered if they had planned it already or if they had thought of it on the spot. Either way, it felt really good to him to see everyone united in such high spirits, so he raised both of his hands and joined the cheers as well, while Duvas clapped from nearby with a grin.

Eventually, when the hubbub had quieted down a little, Kivamus spread both his arms wide. "The feast is open!" he bellowed. "Enjoy the food everyone!"

Chapter 219 A Man In Need

The feast had been going on for more than an hour by now, probably even two hours. One by one everyone had taken the food in their wooden plates and bowls, before they began to eat and mingled with each other. Some of the guards had finished eating, and were showing some juggling tricks to the kids on one side to the awe of Lucem and Clarisa. A little outside the circle of the braziers, someone had brought a circular target which was used for archery practice and hung it on the outer wall of the manor. A few guards including Yufim, Hyola and even Cedoron were having a dart throwing competition, although they were using knives instead of darts.

The guards who had been on duty at the village gates and patrols had also been replaced by others, so everyone got a chance to eat.

While most of the others had been eating while standing, there were also a few benches kept on a side for those who needed to sit. A sturdy table had been kept on one side and covered with a tablecloth - although it looked heavily repaired - for him and his advisors. That is where Kivamus was currently sitting with Duvas on his side, while Gorsazo and Hudan sat on the other side of the table after finishing their meals.

"The feast turned out to be a success, I'd say," Duvas remarked while looking at the festive atmosphere.

Hudan nodded. "The last feast didn't leave many good memories for us with the battle with Nokozal's bandits, even though we eventually won." He snorted, "It's nice for a change that a feast was completed without any attacks on the village this time!"

Gorsazo agreed, "Indeed. It was a good idea to give everyone a chance to relax and forget about any worries. The kids seem to be enjoying it the most."

Kivamus laughed looking at Lucem and Clarisa who were watching the knife throwing competition with awe. "That they are." The most up-to-date version is on M(VLEMPY)R.

Suddenly he heard what he had been waiting for, before everyone had to return indoors. The temple bells were ringing! Unlike the daytime when they rang for the same count as the time of the day, this time they were ringing continuously.

On a short visit to the temple in the past, he had seen the sundial built on the southern wooden wall of the temple which was used to tell time and ring the temple bells every hour. That was good enough during the daytime, but there was no good way to tell time in the dark. That's why earlier in the day, he had told a servant to provide their only hour glass to Father Edric in the temple, so that they could keep track of the hours even in the night for this special occasion. He had also sent a request to father Edric to ring the bells at around midnight, and it had finally happened.

He had told the manor residents that tonight the temple bell will ring for the first time in Tiranat during night, and that is what will mark the beginning of the New Year. It had been unusual for them to think that the New Year should begin in the middle of the night and not from the start of the next day, but Kivamus had insisted on this point, and declared that the new year will begin when the temple bell rings in the night. He had also sent a few servants and told the guards going on patrol to spread that news in the village as well, so they wouldn't be alarmed at the bells ringing in the night.

However, being completely unaccustomed to hearing the bell at this time, nearly everyone in the crowd stopped doing whatever they had been busy in, moving their heads with a surprised expression towards the west where the temple was located.

Standing up from the bench he had been sitting on, Kivamus took the lead, and exclaimed loudly, "Happy New Year, to all of you!"

That broke the reverie of the crowd, and they all erupted in cheers and everyone started giving wishes of Happy New Year to others around them.

"I wish you a very happy New Year as well," the majordomo said, before Hudan and Gorsazo repeated the same.

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Kivamus grinned. "Thank you, and I wish the same to you all! Let's hope this year goes even better for Tiranat!"

~ Tesyb ~

It was morning of the next day, and he and the other guards were waiting inside the empty storehouse of the fish merchant near the north gate of Kirnos, while Feroy was talking with the merchant in hushed voices in a corner. Their plan was to leave soon, so that they could reach Tiranat by tomorrow evening. Snowfall had started once again in the night, and it had become bitterly cold by now. They did know about the feast they had missed in the manor in Tiranat, but hopefully someone would have saved some adzee meat for them.

Soon, Feroy walked back towards them. "I've made a deal to buy enough fish to fill both our wagons, although more than half of it is on credit. Start loading it up."

As they began walking towards the barrels kept on one side of the storehouse, one of the guards asked in confusion, "There is barely enough fish here to fill half a wagon!"

"I'll explain later," Feroy said, "just load up everything here fast, then we are leaving from the eastern gate of Kirnos."

Tesyb frowned. "From the eastern gate, not from the northern gate right outside the storehouse?"

Feroy smirked. "Later."

Soon, they had loaded up all the smoked fish on a wagon, and after climbing on their seats, they moved around their wagons on the snowy dirt path outside the storehouse and turned south towards the marketplace, as Tesyb glanced back towards the northern gate which was only a short distance away from them. The merchant was riding a horse along with his own guard and he would soon exit through the northern gate, while their own wagon would have to cross the whole village to exit from the eastern gate. Wouldn't it have been faster to exit from here? He wondered why Feroy wanted them to take the long way.

Tesyb saw the merchant grumbling as he handed over some coins to the guards and exited the gate, before their own wagons turned around a bend in the street while travelling towards the marketplace. Reaching there, they turned towards the east and followed the snow-covered path towards the eastern gates, when they suddenly heard the sound of a child crying.

Feroy immediately told them to stop the wagons, and jumped out from the seat with Tesyb following him, and the other two guards waiting at the wagon. It didn't take long until they found the source. Just behind a hut - which was tied with a rope surrounding it thoroughly so nobody could enter it - on a small alley next to the main street, there was a man in his thirties trying to calm a child who couldn't be more than a few years old. As they watched for a moment, the toddler seemed to have gotten too tired from crying by now, and fell silent, probably sleeping now.

Looking up at them, the man glared. "Why are you all here again! What more does the baron want from me...? I have nothing more left to give!"

Tesyb was confused for a moment, before he realised that the man must be confusing him with the guards of the baron of Kirnos with their fur coats and swords making them look quite similar.

"We don't work for the young master Lanidas, or his father," Feroy explained. "We are from Tiranat in the east, and I heard your child's cries. Is there any way we can help?"

The man looked at them in suspicion for a moment before he sighed. "I thought you were here to ask for more taxes from me..." He looked wistfully at the hut next to him. "This used to be my home in the past, but I couldn't pay taxes a few months ago, so the baron's guards threw me out of my home as punishment."

He looked at the toddler in his arms with regret. "We don't even have a place to live in this winter... My wife died during childbirth, and after we were thrown out of our home, I did my best to feed my son from what little I earned to prevent him getting sick," he added with his eyes wet, "but it seems like this winter will take him from me as well."

It seemed like Feroy didn't have to take more than a moment to think before he removed a small leather pouch from one of his pockets. Inside that were a bunch of folded leaves which had been sealed with small wooden needles - which were actually thin twigs - seemingly containing something within their folds. From the size of Feroy's pouch, it looked like it contained a lot more such folded leaves earlier and only the last few were left by now. Tesyb thought about why it would be so, while also wondering what they contained inside.

Finally, the ex-mercenary carefully removed the last few of those folded leaves and gave them to the man, who took them with hesitation.

"What is this thing...?" the man asked with confusion as he opened one of those leaves to look inside.

Chapter 220 Medicine

"This is a medicine..." Feroy explained, pointing at the reddish powder inside the folded leaf, "something which will heal your child. Just give a small pinch of the powder inside these leaves to your son with some water, twice a day. You will see improvements by this evening, and your son should hopefully be fine in a few days."

"This... is this witchcraft?" the man asked with fear, before he looked down. "It doesn't matter though... I will take any chance I need to save my child's life."

"There is no such thing as witchcraft!" Tesyb gave the answer.

The man still looked reluctant. "What is it even made of?"

Tesyb was going to tell that it was somehow made from losuvil, even though he had no idea how Lord Kivamus had managed to turn the leaves into the reddish powder, but Feroy put a hand on his shoulder and shook his head.

The ex-mercenary looked at the other man. "I don't know the full details about that, but I can guarantee that I have seen it work wonders on people who are sick. This medicine is only made in Tiranat, where a lot of people are already migrating to find work and housing - including free housing for those who can't afford it and free food for those who are unable to work - whether through sickness or injury. Nobody goes to sleep on an empty stomach in Tiranat, nor does anyone have to brave the cold nights in the open. Not anymore."

The man's eyebrows seemed to have vanished into his hairline. "Free food... and free housing..." He shook his head, before looking at them in wonder. "That sounds... impossible!"

Feroy shrugged. "I'm not lying about anything to you, and you are free to come to Tiranat and check it out yourself. Anyway, we need to leave now. Just follow my instructions, and your son will start running around in a couple of days." The ex-mercenary reached into another pocket and brought out some more biscuits and dried meat and provided it to the man. "This should help you to feed your son for a while."

The man just stared at them for a moment before he gave a thankful nod. "I will do exactly as you say. If my son survives, I will be in your debt for life!"

"No need for that," Feroy assured him. "I hope the Goddess saves your son's life - with this medicine's power, of course."

With that, they turned around, and started walking back towards their wagon.

"I didn't know you had brought that... medicine with you," Tesyb commented.

Feroy shrugged. "I already told you that I had a second mission given to me by Lord Kivamus."

"So that's why you were out for most of the night yesterday..." Tesyb muttered. "Why didn't you give some of our smoked fish to the man?"

"That's different," Feroy replied. "It is our job to buy as much smoked fish as we can at the lowest price, and we can't take anything from that to give to locals. What I gave to the man was from our own share of the food rations. That is ours to use as we wish, even though I believe Lord Kivamus would have understood if we had to use some smoked fish for the second mission he gave me." This text was acquired from M|V|LOEMPYR.

Tesyb nodded understandingly, as they climbed the seats on their wagon. Their wagons began moving again until they reached the guards at the eastern gate. Feroy talked with them for a while to explain that he had already paid the exit taxes, but they didn't believe him. The young master hadn't provided them an escort to explain it to the guards after all, probably because he knew that he had been fooled so expertly by Feroy. Eventually, one of the guards on watch duty mounted his horse and rode towards the south to confirm it from someone at the baron's manor.

It took a while for him to return, but eventually the guards at watch duty grudgingly accepted that the taxes had already been paid. Tesyb even heard them grumbling about the young master taking an opportunity to earn some coin from them.

Finally, the wagons started moving again, and they exited the village of Kirnos from the eastern gates. Once they were far enough away from the gates that the gate guards couldn't see them anymore, Feroy saw a path going towards north between two farms, and ordered them to turn their wagons around before they started travelling towards the north-west. Eventually they reached the path exiting Kirnos from the north, and waited for a while until the merchant and his guards found them on their horses. The merchant began complaining once again about the greedy guards and the predatory nobles, but he looked glad to see that they had arrived there.

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They kept travelling north with them for probably close to an hour before he saw a few huts in the distance. Soon they stopped near the huts which he found to be smokehouses - just like the one Lord Kivamus had made recently in Tiranat - and the merchant began talking to the workers who were already there to load up all the fish which had already been smoked into waiting barrels. Feroy jumped down from the wagon to talk to the merchant, while the other guards also helped in loading the fish.

Once everything had been loaded and both of their wagons were full and covered with an oilcloth tied over the wagon beds, Feroy gave a wave to the merchant, and they turned their wagon back to the path they had come from, so they could return to their homes through the road going east.

Being very curious by now, Tesyb looked at the ex-mercenary who was sitting next to him on the seat. "Why did we load fish here? What about the taxes for this sale? Wouldn't the baron's guards find out about it? How did the merchant even agree to give you anything on credit?"

"Calm down," Feroy said, "I'll explain everything. The baron's guards rarely come here because they don't suspect the merchant of selling smoked fish right here. Who will buy it from him here in the forest?" He snorted, "Certainly not the bears and adzees living here! The locals don't buy any smoked fish anyway, so it is sold to visiting ships which can only dock inside Kirnos near the marketplace, like you saw yesterday. Anyway, by exiting from the east the guards wouldn't suspect us of going to meet the merchant at his smokehouses. They would believe we were going directly towards Tiranat, but this way, the merchant avoided the taxes he needs to pay on every sale, and in return he gave a good discount to us."

"That's... genius!" Tesyb exclaimed.

Feroy chuckled. "As for giving us a wagon load of fish on credit, let's just say we found a common ground after both of us had been extorted by the young master. I have made a deal with him to return here by the time winter ends, when we will pay the pending amount to him, and will load up any more fish he has smoked by then by directly coming to his smokehouses. We will still have to enter the village to sell any coal, and for that we'll also have to pay the entry and exit taxes, but it still benefits us because the taxes which the merchant doesn't have to give to the baron, he passes to us as a discount, while he's also glad that he can fool the young master in a way Lanidas or the baron would never find out. Anyway, there aren't that many cargo ships coming here these days to buy fish, so he was more than happy to have found a regular customer in us, so taking a small risk and giving us some fish on credit was just him extending goodwill to us."

"This trip has gone much better than I thought..." Tesyb said with a grin. "I can't wait to reach Tiranat and tell Lord Kivamus about it!"

"It is very much possible that the young master Lanidas will increase the entry taxes for us a lot more when we come here the next time," Feroy explained. "He doesn't seem like a guy who will accept defeat too easily, and it might very well make it impractical to sell coal here, but it's still possible that Baron Farodas will prevent him from doing anything like that so the rest of the merchants don't rise up against

him. He did seem like a man who wouldn't like to lose face by denying his son's promise to buy more coal from us." He shrugged, "Well, only time will tell how it goes."

Tesyb nodded in understanding as they finally reached the road connecting Kirnos to Tiranat, before resuming their journey towards their home village.

~ Kivamus ~

In the evening of the first day of the new year, Kivamus had just exited the manor hall and was going towards the training ground where the feast was held yesterday night. It had started snowing again, and this time it didn't seem like it would stop any time soon. Still, he wanted to take a look around the manor, so he had decided to go outside despite the snowfall, his fur coat being invaluable in this weather. Hudan and Duvas were walking alongside him, while Gorsazo had gone to teach in the longhouse blocks at this time.

Reaching close to the training ground, he saw with satisfaction that Yufim - who was their best archer - was teaching other guards and even the manor servants and grooms about archery. By now, they had nearly a dozen warbows in the manor - compared to just two of them when he had arrived in this village - which meant they could provide two of them to each of the hunting groups, while still retaining enough in the manor for use in an emergency like a bandit raid or wild beast attack.

That's why Hudan had ordered Yufim to use any free time between his hunting trips to teach any interested manor residents about how to shoot an arrow better. It would take a long time for anyone to become competent in it - if they ever did that at all - but that wasn't his target anyway, especially since they were going to have a lot more crossbows in the future. All they needed was to make sure that if it came to the worst, even the other manor residents would be able to help out any frontline swordsmen and spearman from a distance in a battle - just in case.

It was also easy to see that all the manor guards were quite fit now after more than two months of regular training by Hudan. Kivamus had also seen such effects in his own body, and perhaps even the start of some muscles, since he was also spending some time training with the guards. The original Kivamus likely never had seen any muscles in his flabby body anyway.

However, despite trying to learn swordsmanship from Hudan with a wooden sword everyday, that was something that simply didn't come naturally to him no matter how much he tried, and he wasn't sure if he would ever become competent in it.

He sighed. Ah, well, it probably didn't matter. Once they had enough crossbows in the manor, he would probably keep one of them for himself, and he would be a far better shot with that instead of using his weak sword fighting skill in case he had to fend for himself.

Looking to the right side of the training ground, he saw the maid Leah walking towards the servants' hall. Being curious about how her disagreement with Madam Nerida was resolved, he asked Duvas about it.